

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: AN ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth exploration of Türkiye's evolving foreign policy in the Mediterranean, with a focus on the historical, domestic, and geopolitical factors that shape its regional strategy. Eurasian country's approach, anchored in the "Blue Homeland" doctrine, reflects an assertive stance on maritime claims and a drive to assert sovereignty over critical sea routes and resources. This approach is largely influenced by rising nationalism, economic imperatives, and the strategic goal of securing energy independence in the face of regional competition. The study examines Ankara's complex interactions with key Mediterranean neighbours, including Greece, Egypt, and Israel, alongside its relationships with multilateral entities like NATO and the European Union. By analysing both bilateral and multilateral engagements, the paper highlights the ways in which domestic political dynamics—such as economic pressures and public opinion—intersect with global forces to impact Türkiye's Mediterranean strategy. The analysis also emphasizes the influence of geopolitical rivalries and Türkiye's balancing act between Western alliances and its partnerships with non-Western powers, notably Russia. The paper concludes by assessing possible future directions for Türkiye's Mediterranean policy considering regional diplomacy, evolving economic priorities, and shifting roles of global powers. This examination offers valuable insights into the complexities of Türkiye's Mediterranean ambitions, suggesting that a balanced approach, one that combines assertiveness with diplomacy, may provide the most sustainable path forward. Such a strategy would enable Türkiye to safeguard its interests while minimizing the risk of alienating key regional and global allies.

Keywords: Turkish foreign policy, Mediterranean strategy, Geopolitical dynamics.

AKDENİZ'DE TÜRK DIŞ POLİTİKASI: ANALİTİK BİR BAKIŞ

Öz

Bu makale, Türkiye'nin Akdeniz'deki dış politikasının evrimini derinlemesine inceleyerek bölgesel stratejisini şekillendiren tarihsel, içsel ve jeopolitik faktörlere odaklanmaktadır. "Mavi Vatan" doktrinine dayanan Avrasya ülkesinin yaklaşımı, deniz yetki alanı iddialarında iddialı bir duruşu ve kritik deniz yolları ile kaynaklar üzerindeki egemenlik iddiasını yansıtmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım, büyük ölçüde artan milliyetçilik, ekonomik zorunluluklar ve bölgesel rekabet karşısında enerji bağımsızlığını güvence altına alma stratejik hedefinden etkilenmektedir. Çalışma, Ankara'nın Yunanistan, Mısır ve İsrail gibi temel Akdeniz komşularıyla olan karmaşık ilişkilerini ve NATO ve Avrupa Birliği gibi çok taraflı yapılarla ilişkilerini ele almaktadır. Hem ikili hem de çok taraflı etkileşimleri analiz eden makale, ekonomik baskılar ve kamuoyu gibi iç siyasi dinamiklerin küresel güçlerle nasıl kesiştiğini ve Türkiye'nin Akdeniz stratejisini nasıl etkilediğini vurgulamaktadır. Analiz ayrıca jeopolitik rekabetlerin etkisini ve Türkiye'nin Batı ittifakları ile başta Rusya olmak üzere Batılı olmayan güçlerle ortaklıkları arasında kurduğu dengeyi ön plana çıkarmaktadır. Makale, bölgesel diplomasi, değişen ekonomik öncelikler ve küresel güçlerin değişen rolleri ışığında Türkiye'nin Akdeniz politikasının gelecekteki olası yönlerini değerlendirerek son bulmaktadır. Bu inceleme, Türkiye'nin Akdeniz'deki hedeflerinin karmaşıklığına dair değerli içgörüler sunmakta ve kararlılık ile diplomasiyi birleştiren dengeli bir yaklaşımın en sürdürülebilir yol olabileceğini önermektedir. Böyle bir strateji, Türkiye'nin çıkarlarını korumasına olanak tanırken, kilit bölgesel ve küresel müttefiklerle ilişkilerini zedeleme riskini en aza indirecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Dış Politikası, Akdeniz stratejisi, Jeopolitik dinamikler.

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Introduction

Türkiye's geographic position at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and the Mediterranean has long made it a pivotal player in regional geopolitics. The Mediterranean Sea, in particular, has strategic significance for the country, both economically and politically, as it provides critical maritime access and serves as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. The country's Mediterranean policy is shaped by an intricate blend of historical legacies, economic ambitions, and security concerns. In recent years, Ankara has amplified its presence in the Mediterranean, engaging in assertive foreign policy moves regarding energy exploration, maritime boundaries, and alliances with neighbouring states.

Historically, Türkiye's Mediterranean interactions were grounded in its Ottoman legacy, where control over the region was vital for trade and military influence. Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic (1923), these ties have evolved, with Türkiye increasingly seeking a role that aligns with its modern national interests. Today, Ankara's Mediterranean policy spans complex relations with key neighbours, such as Greece, Egypt, and Libya, and involves a balancing act between multilateral alliances and emerging rivalries with major powers, notably the European Union and the United States. Therefore, this study aims to explore how Turkish foreign policy has evolved in the Mediterranean region in recent years. By examining Türkiye's bilateral and multilateral relationships, its strategies on pressing issues like energy politics and migration, and the influence of domestic dynamics, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Türkiye's Mediterranean ambitions and challenges.

The analysis in this paper is grounded in the theoretical framework of neo-Ottomanism, which provides a lens to interpret Türkiye's current foreign policy behaviour as an attempt to revive its historical influence in the region. Neo-Ottomanism implies a proactive approach in foreign policy, underpinned by a desire to extend Türkiye's influence across former Ottoman territories. This approach, while rooted in history, integrates modern geopolitical concerns, where Türkiye positions itself as an autonomous and influential regional actor. This theoretical perspective allows us to analyse Türkiye's actions as both a continuation of its past connections and a response to contemporary regional dynamics, where it seeks greater autonomy and authority in shaping the Mediterranean's future.

For this study the theoretical framework of neo-Ottomanism serves as a foundational lens to interpret Türkiye's contemporary foreign policy in the Mediterranean. The approach posits that Türkiye's foreign policy reflects an ambition to revive its historical influence across former Ottoman territories, blending historical identity with modern geopolitical strategies. This framework emphasizes Türkiye's proactive and autonomous stance, aiming to project power and assert sovereignty in critical regions such as the Mediterranean. To further enrich the analysis, this study incorporates complementary theoretical perspectives as well. The concept of regional power provides additional insights into Türkiye's actions as it seeks to establish itself as a dominant player in the Mediterranean. Likewise regional power theory highlights the interplay between Türkiye's geographic advantages, economic interests, and strategic goals in shaping its influence over neighbouring states and multilateral organizations.

Furthermore, the idea of strategic autonomy is crucial in understanding Türkiye's balancing act between Western alliances (e.g., NATO and the EU) and partnerships with non-Western powers, such as Russia. Strategic autonomy explains Türkiye's pursuit of an independent foreign policy, characterized by pragmatic decision-making that prioritizes national interests over traditional alliance obligations. This perspective contextualizes Türkiye's assertive policies, such as its maritime claims under the "Blue Homeland" doctrine, within a broader framework of autonomy and self-reliance. By integrating neo-Ottomanism with these complementary theories, this study provides a multidimensional understanding of Türkiye's Mediterranean policy. This enriched theoretical approach underscores the complexity of Türkiye's foreign policy ambitions, which are shaped by historical legacies, contemporary geopolitical rivalries, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar world.

On the other hand, this study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy in the Mediterranean. The analysis is grounded in a comprehensive review of academic literature, official statements, and key geopolitical events. By integrating the theoretical framework of neo-Ottomanism, the study synthesizes insights from historical records, policy documents, and contemporary developments. Specific case studies, such as Türkiye's maritime agreements with Libya and its exclusion from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, are analysed to illustrate the practical application of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine and other policy initiatives. Additionally, the research draws on secondary data, including public opinion surveys and regional energy exploration statistics, to contextualize the domestic and geopolitical factors influencing Türkiye's actions. This approach ensures a holistic understanding of the interplay between historical legacies, domestic imperatives, and regional strategies in shaping Türkiye's Mediterranean policy.

Lastly this paper is organized as follows, the first section provides a Historical Background of Türkiye's foreign policy in the Mediterranean, with a brief overview from the Ottoman era to the 21st century. Following this, the Key Actors and Relationships section examines country's bilateral relationships with key Mediterranean neighbours, such as Greece, Egypt, Israel, and Libya, as well as its involvement with multilateral organizations like NATO and the EU. The subsequent section, Contemporary Issues, delves into pressing challenges in energy politics, migration, and security, and explores Türkiye's role in the geopolitical rivalries involving the EU, the US, and Russia. Next, the Domestic Influences section considers how domestic political dynamics shape Ankara's Mediterranean policy. Finally, the Conclusion and Future Outlook summarizes key findings and speculates on potential shifts in Türkiye's Mediterranean strategy under different regional or global pressures.

1. Historical Background

Türkiye's foreign policy in the Mediterranean has deep historical roots, shaped by its Ottoman legacy, the establishment of the Republic, Cold War alliances, and a recent strategic shift toward a more assertive regional role.

For instance, during the Ottoman Empire, the Mediterranean served as a critical strategic zone for trade, military operations, and diplomatic influence. The Ottomans established control over key regions, including the Levant, North Africa, and parts of Southern Europe, securing vital maritime routes and ports that facilitated economic prosperity and cultural exchange across the Mediterranean basin (Armaoğlu, 1991; Hale, 2013). The Ottoman legacy of maritime dominance left an indelible mark on Türkiye's modern foreign policy, as the historical and cultural connections established continue to influence Türkiye's relationships with its Mediterranean neighbours (Walker, 2003; Zürcher, 2004).

However, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk adopted a foreign policy of neutrality and non-interventionism, focusing primarily on internal consolidation and modernization (Oran, 2010). This approach was formalized with the Treaty of Lausanne, which delineated Türkiye's borders and prioritized sovereignty and territorial integrity, reflecting a pragmatic stance toward Mediterranean affairs (Deringil, 1989). During this period, Türkiye maintained limited engagement in regional matters, preferring stability over intervention, which aligned with Atatürk's vision of "peace at home, peace in the world" (Zürcher, 2004; Hale, 2013).

Nevertheless, with the onset of the Cold War, Türkiye's strategic significance surged as it aligned with Western powers, particularly the United States and NATO, in countering Soviet influence. Ankara's inclusion in NATO in 1952 marked a shift toward active involvement in regional security, with Türkiye hosting U.S. military bases and engaging in cooperative defense measures to contain communism in the Mediterranean (Larrabee, 2010; Çevik, 2013). This alignment, however, also brought challenges, particularly the Cyprus issue, where Greek-Turkish tensions escalated. The 1974 intervention in Cyprus, following a Greek-backed coup, resulted in the island's division, solidifying Cyprus as a focal point in Turkish-Greek relations and impacting Türkiye's standing within Mediterranean geopolitics (Aydın, 1999; Kaliber, 2005).

Following that the post-Cold War era marked a turning point for Türkiye's Mediterranean policy as it began to pursue a more assertive regional role. The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 introduced the concept of "neo-Ottomanism," where Türkiye's foreign policy approach incorporated an ambition to reinvigorate influence across former Ottoman territories (Altunışık & Tür, 2006; Robins, 2003). This shift was further driven by the discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, which intensified country's engagement in maritime disputes and energy politics. Ankara's 'strategic depth', a term used by policymakers to describe Türkiye's geographical influence, came to the forefront as the country aimed to assert itself as a central power in the Mediterranean (Kirişci, 2006; Öniş, 2001). Consequently, relations with traditional allies and Mediterranean neighbours grew increasingly complex, as Türkiye's assertive policies created tensions, particularly with Greece and Cyprus, regarding maritime boundaries (Akgün & Gündoğar, 2012; Bilgin, 2008).

Furthermore, in recent years, Türkiye's Mediterranean policy has evolved into a multifaceted strategy combining cooperation and confrontation. Engagements in Libya, maritime agreements with the Government of National Accord, and assertive naval deployments highlight Türkiye's strategic ambitions in securing its interests (Çevik, 2013; Yılmaz, 2009). At the same time, Ankara has shown efforts to mediate conflicts and engage in regional dialogues, illustrating a complex foreign policy that balances assertive postures with diplomatic engagement (Aydın-Düzgüt, 2012; Hale, 2013). The dynamic interplay of historical legacies, national interests, and contemporary geopolitical factors continues to shape Türkiye's foreign

policy in the Mediterranean, underscoring the country's pivotal role within an increasingly polarized regional landscape.

2. Key Actors and Relationships

As can be understood Türkiye's foreign policy in the Mediterranean is shaped by its interactions with neighbouring states and involvement in multilateral organizations. This section provides a detailed examination of Türkiye's bilateral relationships with Greece, Egypt, Israel, and Libya, and explores its engagement with NATO, the European Union (EU), and other regional entities.

2.1. Bilateral Relations

The relationship between Türkiye and Greece is among the most complex and fraught in the Mediterranean. Longstanding disputes over territorial waters, airspace, and the status of Cyprus have resulted in cyclical periods of confrontation and diplomacy. Greece's reliance on UNCLOS principles contrasts with Türkiye's arguments for equitable maritime boundary delimitation. This divergence highlights the underlying legal and geopolitical disagreements (Semantics Scholar, 2023). For instance, tensions escalated significantly in 2020, when Eurasian country deployed the seismic research vessel *Oruç Reis* in waters claimed by both countries. Athens and Ankara engaged in a naval standoff, raising fears of an armed conflict. The root of these tensions lies in competing interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), with Türkiye arguing that Greece's claims based on its islands are excessive and infringe upon Ankara's continental shelf rights (Larrabee, 2010; Kaliber, 2005). Despite periodic diplomatic engagements, including exploratory talks aimed at confidence-building, both countries continue to engage in military posturing and naval exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean, signaling the depth of their unresolved issues (Al Jazeera, 2020; Aydın-Düzgit, 2012).

On the other hand, Türkiye's relationship with Egypt has been deeply affected by political developments within Egypt itself. The two countries maintained strong ties during the early 2000s, but relations soured after the ousting of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013. Türkiye's support for Morsi, a figure aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, placed it at odds with Egypt's new administration under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who views the Brotherhood as a security threat. The diplomatic rift persisted until recent years, with regional rivalries compounding the animosity. However, in a surprising shift in 2021, both countries began exploring avenues for rapprochement. Egypt's decision to respect Türkiye's continental shelf coordinates in its Eastern Mediterranean oil and gas bids was a significant gesture toward reconciliation (Middle East Eye, 2021). Despite these positive signals, competition over influence in Libya and differing stances on regional alliances still pose barriers to a full diplomatic normalization (Armaoğlu, 1991; Walker, 2003).

In fact, Türkiye's engagement in Libya represents one of its most assertive foreign policy moves in the Mediterranean. The 2019 maritime delimitation agreement between Türkiye and Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) serves as a cornerstone example of Ankara's assertive foreign policy. This agreement was met with significant opposition from Greece, Egypt, and the EU, leading to heightened regional tensions (Ekathimerini, 2023). Therefore, by backing the GNA against the rival Libyan National Army (LNA), Türkiye has established itself as a key player in Libya's civil conflict. In 2019, Ankara and the GNA signed a maritime delimitation agreement, staking Türkiye's claim to extensive areas of the Eastern Mediterranean. This agreement, however, was met with opposition from Greece, Egypt, and Southern Cyprus, who argued that it disregarded their rights under international law (Middle East Eye, 2022). On the other hand, Ankara's intervention in Libya serves both its strategic and economic interests, as control over Libya's resources and alignment with a friendly government could bolster Türkiye's standing in the Eastern Mediterranean energy landscape (Zürcher, 2004; Bilgin, 2008).

Lastly Türkiye and Israel share a unique relationship marked by both cooperation and confrontation. Historically, the two countries have cooperated on security matters and economic ventures, but diplomatic ties have been strained since the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, when Israeli forces killed Turkish activists aboard a Gaza-bound ship. Although both countries have engaged in normalization efforts since then, underlying tensions persist, often exacerbated by Türkiye's vocal support for Palestinian causes (Hale, 2013). The discovery of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean created new possibilities for cooperation, with discussions around potential energy partnerships gaining traction. However, strategic differences, particularly regarding Iran and the Palestinian issue, continue to limit the depth of Türkiye-Israel collaboration (Times of Israel, 2023; Deringil, 1989).

2.2. Multilateral Relations

As a NATO member, Ankara plays an essential role in the alliance's Mediterranean strategy. However, country's independent actions, particularly in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, have caused friction with other NATO members. Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system, for instance, raised concerns over security interoperability within the alliance and led to U.S. sanctions (Robins, 2003; Çevik, 2013). Additionally, Eurasian country's military presence in Libya and its maritime claims have led to disagreements with NATO allies, that view these actions as destabilizing. Despite these tensions, NATO relies on Türkiye's strategic position, especially in counter-terrorism operations and controlling migration flows into Europe (Larrabee, 2010; Walker, 2003).

On the other hand, Türkiye's complex relationship with the EU extends into the Mediterranean, where maritime disputes with Greece and Southern Cyprus have strained its ties with the bloc. The EU has repeatedly expressed solidarity with Greece and Southern Cyprus, condemning Türkiye's exploratory drilling activities and threatening sanctions. However, the EU also recognizes Türkiye's role in addressing shared issues like migration and trade, which has led to a pragmatic approach in some areas, such as customs union modernization (Kirişçi, 2006; Altunışık & Tür, 2006). Ankara's accession process has stalled due to these geopolitical tensions, but cooperative measures remain in place to manage mutual interests (Akgün & Gündoğar, 2012; Hale, 2013).

Last but not least, Türkiye's involvement in regional organizations reflects its desire for greater influence in Mediterranean affairs. For example, it is a founding member of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), through which it seeks economic integration and cooperative security in the region. However, Türkiye's exclusion from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which includes Egypt, Greece, Israel, and Cyprus, has been a point of contention. Türkiye's exclusion from the Forum illustrates the geopolitical isolation it faces despite its strategic importance in the region (CIMSEC, 2023). Likewise, the EMGF's formation without Türkiye reflects the regional divisions surrounding energy politics, with Ankara arguing that its exclusion undermines fair representation in resource-sharing discussions (Kaliber, 2005; Bilgin, 2008).

3. Contemporary Issues

Other aspect that shapes Türkiye's foreign policy in the Mediterranean is currently critical issues, including energy politics, migration and security, and geopolitical rivalries. These factors are not only central to Ankara's regional strategies but also influence its relationships with neighbouring states and international organizations. So it is, according to a 2023 report by the International Energy Agency, Türkiye's exploratory drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean identified significant hydrocarbon reserves estimated at over 320 billion cubic meters. These reserves are critical for Türkiye's goal of reducing its reliance on imported energy (Daily Sabah, 2023). On the other hand, comparative data from Greece's exploration activities highlight the contested nature of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the region, with the Eastern Mediterranean holding approximately 8.1 trillion cubic meters of natural gas (DLQ Magazine, 2023).

For example, the discovery of substantial hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has significantly altered the regional dynamics, with energy politics becoming a core aspect of Türkiye's Mediterranean policy. Country's exploratory drilling activities in contested maritime areas—often supported by the Turkish Navy—have been met with strong opposition from Greece and Southern Cyprus, both of whom claim overlapping EEZs based on the UNCLOS (Hale, 2013; Kaliber, 2005). Türkiye, however, is not a signatory to UNCLOS and argues that the convention's EEZ provisions unfairly favour island nations like Greece, giving them disproportionate maritime claims. This interpretation underscores Ankara's stance that its continental shelf rights are being infringed upon, particularly in areas south of the Turkish mainland and near Cyprus (Bilgin, 2008).

Türkiye's exclusion from the EMGF further intensifies its isolation in regional energy cooperation. The EMGF, founded by Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, aims to create a framework for resource-sharing and energy partnerships, largely sidelining Eurasian country (Al Jazeera, 2020). Ankara views this exclusion as a direct affront to its rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially as it perceives the forum as an attempt to build an anti-Türkiye coalition in energy matters (Çevik, 2013). In response, Türkiye has pursued bilateral agreements, most notably with the Libyan GNA, to delineate a maritime boundary that challenges the EEZs claimed by Greece and Egypt. This deal has been condemned by the EU and other Mediterranean nations, but it underscores Türkiye's determination to secure a stake in Eastern Mediterranean resources (Middle East Eye, 2022).

Furthermore, Türkiye's geographic proximity to conflict zones like Syria and Iraq has made it a critical hub for migrants and refugees seeking asylum in Europe. Hosting approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees, Ankara has shouldered much of the refugee crisis's humanitarian burden, but it also leverages migration as a diplomatic tool (Kirişçi, 2006; Akgün & Gündoğar, 2012). In 2016, Türkiye and the EU reached a migration agreement, wherein Ankara agreed to curb migrant flows to Europe in exchange for financial aid, visa liberalization talks, and accelerated EU accession discussions. This deal has been instrumental in reducing irregular migration to Europe, but it has also created a power dynamic where Türkiye can use the "migrant card" to influence EU policies. For instance, in 2020, the country briefly opened its borders to Europe-bound migrants as a response to EU criticism of its military operations in Syria, underscoring migration as a tool in its foreign policy arsenal (Robins, 2003).

In addition to migration, security concerns in the Mediterranean extend to Türkiye's involvement in Libya. Ankara's support for the GNA in Libya is motivated by both strategic and ideological interests. By backing the GNA, the country seeks to counter the influence of regional rivals like Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, who support the opposing Libyan National Army. The Turkish government justifies its military presence as necessary to stabilize Libya and prevent the rise of hostile powers near its borders (Walker, 2003). However, this involvement also serves Türkiye's energy ambitions, as a stable and aligned Libyan government could potentially bolster Ankara's claims in the Mediterranean. Türkiye's involvement in Libya exemplifies its broader strategy of securing influence through military means, even as this stance complicates its relations with NATO allies who view such unilateral interventions with caution (Kaliber, 2005; Çevik, 2013).

Additionally, Türkiye's assertive stance in the Mediterranean has escalated its geopolitical rivalries with both regional and global actors. The 2019 maritime boundary agreement with Libya's GNA, for example, was designed to establish a shared EEZ that extends Türkiye's influence across the Mediterranean. This move, however, has been fiercely contested by Greece, Southern Cyprus, and Egypt, who view the agreement as a violation of their maritime rights under international law (Middle East Eye, 2022). The EU has condemned Ankara's actions, imposing sanctions and expressing solidarity with its member states, Greece and Cyprus. The EU's stance reflects broader concerns about Türkiye's growing autonomy in foreign policy and its willingness to challenge EU authority in the region (Larrabee, 2010).

Ankara's pursuit of "strategic autonomy"—the notion of an independent foreign policy that is less reliant on Western alliances—has also influenced its decision to deepen ties with Russia. This shift was most evident in Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, which has strained its relations with NATO and led to U.S. sanctions (Robins, 2003). Türkiye's stance reflects its desire to avoid over-dependence on Western allies, especially as it pursues a more assertive policy in the Mediterranean. However, this strategy has not come without costs, as Türkiye's actions have created fractures within NATO and alienated traditional allies who view Türkiye's engagements with Russia as a security threat (Bilgin, 2008; Hale, 2013).

4. Domestic Influences

Similarly, Türkiye's foreign policy in the Mediterranean is profoundly shaped by domestic political dynamics. Key internal factors—such as rising nationalism, economic pressures, and public opinion—are instrumental in framing Türkiye's assertive posture toward its Mediterranean neighbours.

4.1. Nationalism

In recent years, nationalism has been a potent force in shaping Türkiye's Mediterranean strategy. The concept of "Mavi Vatan" (Blue Homeland), which advocates for extensive maritime claims in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, has emerged as a central nationalist symbol. Originally conceptualized by former admiral Cem Gürdeniz, the doctrine envisions Türkiye's maritime zone as essential to national sovereignty and has been adopted by both the government and military establishment as a guiding principle (Coşkun, 2023). A 2022 survey conducted by Kadir Has University indicated that a significant portion of Turkish citizens support the government's maritime claims under the "Blue Homeland" policy, reflecting the role of nationalism in shaping Türkiye's Mediterranean strategy (Kadir Has University, 2022). This nationalist stance has galvanized public support for a robust foreign policy, positioning Türkiye as a defender of its maritime rights against perceived encroachments by Greece, Cyprus, and other Mediterranean nations. The promotion of the Blue Homeland doctrine in media and political discourse resonates with the Turkish public's sense of historical grievance, rooted in territorial losses from the Ottoman Empire and perceived injustices in post-World War I treaties (Hale, 2013).

Nationalism also provides the Turkish government with a means to consolidate political support domestically. By emphasizing sovereignty and self-reliance, the government appeals to nationalist sentiments, especially amid political challenges. This approach has been particularly relevant in recent years, as Turkish leaders have framed foreign policy issues in nationalist terms, portraying diplomatic and military standoffs as necessary for protecting the nation's dignity and historical rights. The alignment of this policy with national pride allows the government to present itself as the guardian of Turkish sovereignty, leveraging nationalism as a tool to legitimize assertive actions in the Mediterranean (Bilgin, 2008).

4.2. Economic Pressures

On the other hand, economic considerations are a critical driver behind Ankara's Mediterranean policy, especially given the country's reliance on imported energy and its ongoing economic struggles. Türkiye's energy demands have increased significantly over the past two decades, making energy independence a national priority. The discovery of natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean thus represents a strategic opportunity for Türkiye to reduce its dependency on foreign energy, which currently accounts for a substantial portion of its trade deficit (Pierini, 2024). By asserting maritime claims that would allow for exploration and drilling in resource-rich areas, the country aims to secure energy resources that could alleviate economic pressures and provide a buffer against currency fluctuations and inflation.

The Turkish economy has faced multiple challenges, including a depreciating lira and rising inflation, which have affected domestic stability and public satisfaction. These economic difficulties have pressured the government to find alternative avenues for economic relief. Mediterranean energy exploration is seen as a potential economic boon, both for its direct impact on energy costs and for the geopolitical leverage it could afford Türkiye in the region. Economic collaboration with Mediterranean neighbours, especially in the field of energy, is also viewed as an avenue for bolstering economic resilience, despite current tensions with some of these states (Kaliber, 2005; Çevik, 2013). Thus, economic imperatives play a dual role in Türkiye's Mediterranean policy, both as a driver of assertive action and as a motivation for diplomatic engagements where feasible.

4.3. Public Opinion

Public opinion is another powerful influence on Türkiye's foreign policy, as the government is acutely aware of the importance of maintaining popular support for its actions abroad. Turkish citizens generally favour a strong and independent foreign policy, particularly regarding issues perceived as matters of national pride and sovereignty. The Blue Homeland doctrine and Türkiye's stance on maritime rights resonate with the public, as these policies are framed as efforts to protect country's interests against international interference (Akgün & Gündoğar, 2012). Moreover, the portrayal of foreign policy successes serves to bolster the government's image, reinforcing the narrative that Türkiye is emerging as an influential regional power.

However, public support can fluctuate based on economic conditions and political developments. While assertive Mediterranean policies have garnered approval, economic hardships have created some contradiction. A sustained economic downturn may diminish enthusiasm for costly foreign policy ventures, especially if they are seen as contributing to tensions that could impact trade or investment (Robins, 2003). The Turkish government's approach, therefore, includes a careful balancing act: maintaining public approval through a strong foreign policy stance while being responsive to potential shifts in public sentiment linked to domestic economic concerns. This duality underscores the complexity of Türkiye's Mediterranean strategy, where domestic political legitimacy and external diplomatic challenges are interlinked (Walker, 2003).

Conclusion and Future Outlook

As can be seen in the paper, Türkiye's foreign policy in the Mediterranean represents a dynamic and evolving approach shaped by historical legacy, domestic influences, and shifting global and regional power structures. Türkiye's geographical position, historical connections, and political ideology all contribute to a foreign policy strategy that has intensified in assertiveness over the past two decades. Key factors driving this strategy include a revival of nationalism, economic pressures, and complex relationships with neighbouring countries and international organizations.

The theoretical framework of neo-Ottomanism helps explain Türkiye's assertive maritime strategies as a continuation of its historical legacy in the region. The "Blue Homeland" doctrine exemplifies this by

asserting Ankara's extensive maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. This policy not only draws on Türkiye's historical identity but also reflects the country's ambitions to establish itself as a regional power. Complementing this is the concept of strategic autonomy, which highlights Türkiye's efforts to navigate the complexities of balancing alliances with Western actors, such as NATO and the EU, while forging independent ties with non-Western powers like Russia. Together, these frameworks reveal how historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical ambitions shape Türkiye's foreign policy.

Türkiye's economic challenges further reinforce its assertive Mediterranean policy. Facing currency depreciation, inflation, and rising energy costs, the Turkish government has a strong incentive to pursue regional energy resources as a means of reducing dependency on imports. The potential economic benefits of securing hydrocarbon reserves are substantial, with the promise of offsetting energy imports, bolstering energy security, and generating revenue from potential exports. However, Türkiye's exclusion from the EMGF complicates its access to these resources, as the forum—comprised of Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, among others—pursues energy collaboration without Turkish participation (Pierini, 2024). In response, Türkiye has sought bilateral agreements, like its maritime deal with Libya's Government of National Accord, to assert its claims independently. While this approach underscores the country's commitment to energy independence, it also heightens tensions with other Mediterranean states and the EU, who view Türkiye's actions as a challenge to international norms (Middle East Eye, 2022).

Public opinion in Türkiye remains another powerful factor in shaping foreign policy, with a significant portion of the population supporting a strong national stance in the Mediterranean. The government's focus on sovereignty and territorial integrity resonates with the public, especially amid economic difficulties and perceived foreign threats. However, this domestic support is not unconditional. Economic instability and prolonged confrontations with neighbouring states could alter public opinion, potentially leading to calls for more pragmatic policies if assertive actions are seen as detrimental to Türkiye's economy and international standing. The Turkish government must balance its commitment to nationalist policies with sensitivity to economic realities and public sentiment, ensuring that foreign policy maintains legitimacy and political stability at home (Akgün & Gündoğar, 2012; Robins, 2003).

Looking ahead, Türkiye's Mediterranean policy will likely continue to emphasize sovereignty and resource acquisition, but it will face multiple challenges that may drive adjustments:

1. **Regional Diplomacy and Cooperation:** The potential for dialogue and cooperation with Greece, Egypt, and other Mediterranean neighbours remains, especially as economic realities push Türkiye toward more pragmatic solutions. Diplomatic engagement with Greece, for instance, could open avenues for joint energy exploration or conflict de-escalation in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. Recent diplomatic exchanges between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis indicate that both sides may be willing to pursue confidence-building measures to stabilize their relationship (Reuters, 2024). Progress in these dialogues could signal a shift toward cooperative resource-sharing frameworks, providing mutual economic benefits and reducing the risk of military escalation.
2. **Economic Pressures and Strategic Adjustments:** Türkiye's ongoing economic difficulties may also prompt a more balanced approach in its Mediterranean policy. The need to attract foreign investment and stabilize the economy could encourage Türkiye to temper its confrontational posture, especially if economic engagement with the EU and other regional actors proves beneficial. Modernizing the customs union with the EU, for instance, could support Türkiye's economic recovery while allowing for closer integration with European markets. This pragmatic economic shift may influence Türkiye's Mediterranean policy, creating incentives for cooperation over competition (Pierini, 2024).
3. **Global Geopolitical Dynamics:** Türkiye's positioning within the broader geopolitical landscape will continue to impact its Mediterranean policy. Its ongoing balancing act between NATO commitments and strategic cooperation with Russia, highlighted by Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, underscores the complexities of Türkiye's alliances. Should relations with NATO allies further deteriorate, Ankara may face pressure to recalibrate its Mediterranean policy, particularly if it risks alienating Western partners. Conversely, Türkiye's unique positioning could also provide leverage, allowing it to assert influence in both Western and non-Western spheres if managed carefully (Le Monde, 2024; Larrabee, 2010).

In sum, Türkiye's Mediterranean policy is deeply rooted in a blend of historical, economic, and political imperatives. By integrating neo-Ottomanism, regional power theory, and strategic autonomy, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the drivers behind Türkiye's Mediterranean policy. Moving forward, Ankara's approach will likely oscillate between assertiveness and pragmatism, influenced by both

domestic pressures and international dynamics. A nuanced approach that balances sovereignty with diplomacy may offer the most sustainable path forward, ensuring Türkiye's interests are safeguarded without alienating critical regional and global partners. As the Eurasian country navigates the complexities of Mediterranean geopolitics, its capacity to adapt to evolving circumstances will be essential for maintaining stability and realizing its regional ambitions.

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