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The Political Economy of Turkish Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Erdogan's rising authoritarian tendencies at home coincided with the hardening of his positions in the country's foreign relations. From Libya to Syria to Greece to Iraq to Azerbaijan, and yes, even to Israel, Turkey's actions have been at least controversial and have also led to increased tensions with Cyprus, Egypt and Greece over the EastMed maritime zones, but also with faraway geopolitical players. The article tries to explore the material foundations of current Turkey's assertive foreign policy, focusing on the main country's economic indicators, defence capabilities and defence economics. By comparing Turkey's economic potential and defence capabilities with regional players but also with some other middle or even great powers such as England, France, Italy and Russia, the analysis shows that Turkey's aggressive international behaviour is not only the outcome of a new nationalist rhetoric but is based on some facts and data that should not be overlooked.

Introduction

The words of Mearsheimer¹ 'What money is to economics, power is to international relations' encapsulate the importance of power in the international arena. Evidently, delving into a thorough analysis of the term 'power' is well beyond our scope here. The literature on 'power' that has firstly been shaped centuries ago and is still being shaped today, is voluminous. Consequently, attempting a survey of it in the context of the present paper will probably prove to be a futile endeavour. For our purposes here, it suffices to note that projection of power, on a global or regional level, stems from the increasing comparative power vis-à-vis other actors in the system. In what follows, we concentrate our analysis on some of the main determinants of power. Specifically, we focus on the material foundations on which power is based. Indeed, in the relevant literature, measures of power focus on the underlying resources that constitute the foundations of a nation's power, specifically, wealth and military assets.

Especially, political realists have conceptualized power as an entity; as intrinsic to tangible things such as the military, wealth, and geography. From this conception, international relations developed into a discipline focused on material resources and the states that controlled them. The conception of power as a relationship of influence reinforced the discipline's commitment to materiality, because it conceived of influence

in terms of an actor's capacity to alter the material costs and benefits of compliance.² As stressed by Kennedy³ Great Powers have always been great economic powers. In a similar vein, Gilpin⁴ notes that changes in the relative economic strength of states affect the balance of power between them and drive their geopolitical and geo-economic ambitions. For instance, given the China's growth rates, the expansion of trade and investment, the rise of an entrepreneurial class and its significant impact on particular countries, regional political economies and ultimately the world, the rising and expanding geopolitical aspirations of China is a representative contemporary example of the nexus between economic power and the emerging of such ambitions. In this case, they are driven by China's rapidly growing economy compared to the West's feeble economic growth over the past decades.⁵ Due to these differential growth rates it is estimated that around 2030 the Chinese GDP will overtake the GDP of the USA⁶ with the concomitant effect on the international system.⁷ Also, the academic turned-politician Ahmet Davutoglu, who is considered to have designed the foundations of the new Turkish foreign policy for the 21st century in his book, *The Strategic Depth. Turkey's International Position* (Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu. Küre Yayınları, 2001) embraced Karl Haushofer's thesis that Germany had to expand and seek a 'vital space' (Lebensraum) that was indispensable to its economy and its growing population,⁸ to justify an impending Turkish expansion. As widely known, Davutoglu conceptualized Turkey's modern strategic vision as the pursue of a proactive policy commensurate to its historic and geographic depth, which is amplified by its Ottoman legacy. To achieve that aim, Turkey should capitalize on its soft power potential consisting of its historic and cultural links with all the regions which it belongs to, as well as its democratic institutions and thriving market economy. Turkey should put aside the militaristic image and promote instead conflict resolution, regional economic cooperation which would obviate the need for regional intervention of great powers.

As a matter of fact, Turkey subsumes in the category of countries that are expected to play an important role in the 21st century world politics not least because its economy. In his book *The next 100 years. A forecast for the 21st century*, Friedman predicted based on an analysis of the Turkish economy that the 21st century will see the rise of Turkey as a major power. According to him, historically, Turkey has been the most successful centre of power in the Muslim world. Despite various domestic problems and contemporary fiscal and currency crises, Turkey is not only a major modern economy, but it is by far the largest economy in the region—much larger than Iran, and perhaps the only modern economy in the entire Muslim world. Most important, it is strategically located between Europe, the Middle East, and Russia.⁹

These facts seem to have engendered a highly assertive foreign policy. Turkish foreign policy followed the radicalization of its domestic affairs from 2013 onwards. At this year Erdogan government started applying more conservative and Islamist policies in the country that hardened in subsequent years.¹⁰ From touting Ahmet Davutoglu's dogma of no friction with any neighbours, it has gone on to do just the opposite—and not just with its neighbours, but also with faraway geopolitical players. These policies escalated even further after the failed coup in July 2016, when Erdogan took absolute control over his party and his government moved to purge more than

170,000 public servants from their offices including army and police officers, teachers, bureaucrats, doctors, academics and many others because of their alleged links with the masterminds of the coup attempt.¹¹

The material foundations of Turkey's current assertive policy

Ahead of 2023, the year the Republic of Turkey is poised to celebrate its centennial anniversary, the country can be proud of an array of achievements both domestically and abroad, in economic and military terms drawing strength from its central geographical location, profound historical experience as well as young and educated population. With a total of 246 diplomatic and consular missions, Turkey has spawned the fifth largest global diplomatic network. A member of NATO, G20, member of almost all European institutions including among many others the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and even though a problematic one, an accession candidate to the EU, Turkey has developed a globally extensive network of cooperation including High Level Cooperation Councils with over 25 countries, trilateral or other multilateral regional formations, as well as 20 Free Trade Agreements. Within the G20, Turkey has been promoting a significant humanitarian-development nexus, spending only in 2018 8.6 billion USD of humanitarian assistance with a slight increase (+1.6%) in both bilateral and multilateral aid according the preliminary OECD data for the year 2019.¹² Thanks to an array of neo-liberal policies followed by the Justice and Development Party after its rise to power in the early 2000s, Erdogan managed to win over large-scale national capital's support for its foreign policy vision.¹³

As noted above, power is invariably measured in terms of resources with most studies focusing on economic wealth and military assets.¹⁴ The former is the foundation on which the latter rests since it provides the resources that finance military strength. In 2019 Turkey's GDP was estimated at \$760.9 bil. As noted by Gökay (2021) in his comprehensive analysis of Turkish economic performance and accomplishments, Turkey is undoubtedly a significant and important rising middle power and a key regional player in the global system. Turkey's GDP is by far the largest in the East Mediterranean region. The GDP of the other main actors in the region is as follows: Israel \$394.7 bil., Egypt \$302.3 bil. and \$209.9 bil. in the case of Greece.¹⁵ We opted to focus the comparative analysis of Turkey with these other three major actors in the South-East Mediterranean region. All are important geopolitical entities that affect interregional relations and strategic balances. We also included Cyprus given its importance in the unfolding competition between Turkey and the other Eastern Mediterranean countries, which increased in recent years due to the discovery of natural gas in its Exclusive Economic Zone (henceforth EEZ). Libya and Syria are undoubtedly important entities in geopolitical terms, but both are plagued by prolonged internal strife and civil war that severely limits their capacity to act as important independent players in the region's unfolding power game. Albeit to a lesser extent, the same applies in the case of Lebanon. Hence, these countries are not included in the comparative analysis that follows.

Allowing for the inevitable yearly fluctuations, the Turkish economy has on average exhibited brisk growth rates over the past decades. As a result of its geographical location, rapid industrialization and broader economic transformation, it has emerged as a major commercial, financial and industrial centre in the greater region benefiting from the on-

going long-term global shifts and trends that create the fertile ground for the emergence of medium-sized regional powers.¹⁶ Its impressive economic growth performance over the past decades has invariably exceeded the world average and was systematically much higher compared to that of other major global powers (Table 1). For example, during 2000–19 the average annual growth rate of the Turkish economy was 4.9% compared to a world average of 3.8%. As can be seen in the relevant table, the difference in growth rates is even greater and more impressive when compared to middle powers such as Italy (0.4%), Spain (1.8%), France (1.4%), UK (1.8%). It is this economic performance that forms the foundations of Turkey’s emergence as an important and key player in the greater East Mediterranean region. Indeed, the growth rate of Turkey’s GDP during the last decades was the highest among the East Mediterranean countries (Table 1). As it can be seen, over the last two decades (2000–19) the average annual growth rate for Turkey was 4.9% followed by Egypt’s 4.4% and Israel’s 3.6%.

Because of these differential growth rates, Turkey’s economic imprint in the region has steadily increased in importance over the years. This is evident in the year snapshots presented in Table 2. The shares (%) for each country *ith* represent its economic weight relative to the total GDP of all five states included in the group (Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Turkey) presented in the table: GDP_{ith}/GDP_{group} . For our purposes here, let us treat the groups’ GDP as a rough approximation of the region’s total GDP.

As plainly evident from the visual inspection of Table 2, over the past decades Turkey’s economy has increased its relative economic size vis-à-vis the rest of the countries. Its share in the region’s approximate total GDP has increased from 41.8% in 1980 to 58.2%

Table 1. Average GDP growth rates (%).

	1990–99	2000–09	2010–19	2000–19
Cyprus	4.9	3.8	1.4	2.6
Egypt	4.1	5.0	3.9	4.4
Greece	2.1	2.8	–2.1	0.4
Israel	5.6	3.5	3.8	3.6
Lebanon	6.8	5.0	1.2	3.1
Libya	0.5	2.2	4.6	3.4
Syria	5.7	4.4	-	-
Turkey	4.0	4.0	5.9	4.9
Russia	–5.1	5.5	2.1	3.8
UK	2.3	1.8	1.8	1.8
France	2.0	1.5	1.4	1.4
Italy	1.5	0.5	0.3	0.4
Spain	2.8	2.6	1.1	1.8
EU average	2.1	1.7	1.7	1.7
World average	3.1	3.9	3.7	3.8

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook and authors’ calculations

Table 2. Country shares in the group’s total GDP.

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2019
Cyprus	1.2%	1.6%	1.7%	1.7%	1.3%
Egypt	9.1%	11.5%	12.4%	14.1%	13.9%
Greece	35.2%	26.0%	22.8%	19.3%	11.9%
Israel	12.7%	12.7%	15.8%	15.0%	14.7%
Turkey	41.8%	48.1%	47.4%	50.0%	58.2%

Source: Authors’ calculations using the World Bank’s *World Development Indicators* database. The GDP series used to calculate the shares was expressed in constant 2010 US\$

Table 3. Comparative qualitative macroeconomic indicators.

	High-technology exports (% of manufactured exports)			Manufacturing, value added (% of GDP)					R&D expenditure (% of GDP)		
	2008	2019	Average 2008– 19	1995	2000	2010	2018	Average 2000– 18	2005	2018	Average 2005– 18
Cyprus	32.0	19.9	21.5	9.5	8.1	5.1	5.3	5.7	0.37	0.56	0.46
Egypt	1.0	2.3	0.9	16.3	18.0	16.1	16.2	16.6	0.24	0.72	0.50
Greece	11.1	12.5	11.7	11.0	9.5	7.2	9.6	8.7	0.58	1.18	0.78
Israel	17.1	23.1	20.7	16.0	16.8	14.3	12.0	14.2	4.05	4.95	4.29
Turkey	1.9	3.0	2.4	22.6	18.7	15.1	19.0	16.8	0.57	0.96*	0.80

* Data for 2017

by 2019. However, it should be noted here that simply looking at the absolute size of the economy in terms of total GDP, does not bring to the forth important qualitative dimensions that determine a country's actual economic strength and prowess.¹⁷ Table 3 is an attempt to encapsulate this qualitative dimension in a comparative perspective for the countries in the East Mediterranean region discussed here. To this effect, three macroeconomic indicators are presented: the value added of manufacturing as a share of GDP, high-technology exports as a share of total manufactured exports and R&D expenditure as a share of GDP. All reflect the industrial and technological development of the economy. Due to the inevitable data availability constraints the time periods for which the three indicators are presented in Table 3 are not similar.¹⁸ From the data of Table 3, it is evident that Israel emerges as the economy with the highest technological development as this is reflected both in the high-technology exports as a share of total manufactured exports. The average share during 2008–19 is 20.7%. In comparison, this share for Turkey is 2.4% despite the fact that in terms of manufacturing value added as a share of GDP, Turkey's share is slightly higher: 16.8% on average during 2000–18 compared to Israel's 14.2% for the same period. The same significant difference is observed in terms of R&D expenditures. Higher levels of technological development spill-over and positively affect the military sector. Both in terms of its operation and capabilities as well as through the defence industry that produces technologically more advanced systems that act as military strength multipliers, offsetting the quantitative advantage of an antagonistic state since the boost the technological and capital intensity of the armed forces especially in the context of network-centric warfare.¹⁹ Table 4

The growing Turkish economy has resulted not only in higher per capita income but has also allowed the allocation of more resources to the build-up of its military strength. In 2019 Turkey's military spending was \$20,796 mil., a small fraction higher than Israel's \$20,102 mil. that was the second highest in the region. The third and fourth largest defence budgets in 2019 were those of Greece and Egypt amounting to \$5,732 mil. and \$3,105 mil. respectively.²⁰ Essentially, military expenditures are the costs of producing military power. The annual defence budget represents a state's outlays to purchase the inputs that are used in the production of military capabilities and strength. Given the primarily strategic nature of such expenditure, its levels and fluctuation over time to a large extent reflects changes in the international system and the global and/or regional security environment. Spending on defence and military capabilities is a pivotal tool of internal balancing for deterrence and/or coercive use. That is to either protect and/or advance national interests. As Arvanitidis and Kollias

Table 4. Change in military spending (Milex change %) and average military expenditure as a share of GDP (Milex/GDP).

	1990–2019		2010–19	
	Milex Change (%)	Milex/GDP	Milex Change (%)	Milex/GDP
Cyprus	−42,4%	3,0%	−3,4%	1,9%
Greece	−4,2%	3,0%	−22,5%	2,7%
Egypt	8,0%	2,4%	−20,2%	2,1%
Israel	66,3%	7,2%	29,7%	6,0%
Turkey	154,9%	2,9%	85,9%	2,5%
USA	15,0%	4,0%	−15,4%	3,9%
China	1114,5%	2,0%	85,1%	1,9%
Russia	37,8%	3,8%	30,4%	3,8%
France	−2,5%	2,1%	3,5%	2,0%
Italy	−5,7%	1,6%	−10,6%	1,5%
Spain	0,1%	1,6%	−7,1%	1,4%
UK	−10,8%	2,4%	−15,3%	2,1%

Source: SIPRI and authors' calculations

have noted,²¹ it can be tentatively postulated that, *ceteris paribus*, the higher the level of such spending the greater the quantity of military capabilities produced and possessed by a country. Hence, states with larger defence budgets produce and have at their disposal more military capabilities and assets vis-à-vis countries with lower defence spending.

Turkey systematically increased its military spending, over the past decades, pursuing an ambitious military build-up programme. During 1990–2019, the average annual change in its defence budget was 4.1%. The corresponding average for the USA was 0.5%, for China 9.2%, for Russia 2.5% while powers such as for example France, Italy, Spain and the UK their corresponding averages were −0.1%, −0.2%, 0.2% and −0.3% respectively. Compared to other regional players, the average annual growth rate in the defence budgets during 1990–2019 for Israel was 2.3%, for Egypt 0.4%, for Greece 0.3% and for Cyprus 2.1%. Focusing on the last ten years (i.e., 2010–19) during which Turkey has increased and reinforced its military presence throughout the greater region,²² the average annual increase was 6.5% compared to 2.7% for Israel, −4.5% for Greece, −2% for Egypt and 0.6% for Cyprus. As a result, compared to 1990 Turkish military spending in 2019 was 154.9% higher. Compared to 2010, in 2019 it was higher by 85.9%, a change comparable only with the increase in China's military spending (85.1%). Indeed, compared to other major powers such as France, Italy, Spain and the UK the increase in Turkey's military expenditure is exponentially higher. It reflects the ambitious policy of strengthening its hard power and military capabilities that are a prerequisite for pursuing its assertive policy and military presence in the greater region. As also can be seen in the Table 3, the increase is by far the highest among the countries that make up our group. Israel is the only other country with a positive change in defence spending during 2010–19 (29.7%), whereas in all the other three countries a reduction is recorded: −22.5% for Greece, −20.2% for Egypt, −3.4% for Cyprus.

In broad terms, allowing for the inevitable annual fluctuations, the growth of Turkey's military spending has on average been similar to its GDP growth rate. During 1990–2019, the average annual GDP growth rate was 4.6% and the corresponding growth rate for military expenditures was 4.1%. Indeed, in recent years the growth rate of such expenditures was appreciably higher than the GDP growth recorded. In 2018 military spending

increased in real terms by 26.9% while GDP by 3%. Similarly, despite the slow-down in economic growth (0.9% in 2019), defence spending grew by 5.8%. Given that military spending is driven by strategic factors, it would appear that the economic recession afflicting Turkey over the past couple of years has not brought a corresponding reduction in defence spending.

Due to the differential change in defence spending, Turkey's military expenditure has steadily increased not only in absolute terms but also in relative. As presented in Table 5, the share of Turkey's military spending in the group's total has significantly increased. From 27.3% in 1990 to 41.5% in 2019. One could very cautiously argue that higher military spending is associated with a greater number of military assets and capabilities. However, as it has been cautioned,²³ such an argumentation implicitly assumes that all countries use with the same efficiency the resources allocated to defence and have the same organizational and administrative competences and efficiency. Clearly, this is not the case.

In terms of capabilities, Turkey's total armed forces are the second largest in the region²⁴: Egypt 438,500; Turkey 355,200; Israel 169,500; Greece 143,850 and Cyprus 15,000.²⁵ In terms of numbers, Turkey's fleet is the largest among the five countries of our group. Currently, it operates twenty principal surface combatants compared to thirteen by Greece and ten by Egypt. Its naval forces also include twelve submarines while Egypt's navy operates six, Greece's eleven and Israel's five. Turkey's air force operates a total of 310 fighter-planes, Egypt's 584, Greece's 230 and Israel 354. Turkey is currently pursuing an extensive recapitalization programme for its armed forces that includes an amphibious assault ship/light aircraft carrier²⁶ currently in the final stages of construction and sea trials.²⁷ This recapitalization programme is supported by a strong and steadily growing domestic defence industrial capability. Over the past decades, Turkey has systematically invested in the development of an indigenous defence industry. The import substitution efforts that aimed to reduce dependence on foreign suppliers date back to the late 1970's (Ayres, 1983). Since then, the Turkish defence industry has steadily grown in terms of turnover and technological sophistication.²⁸ Among many others, it produces domestically developed drones, a wide range of wheeled and tracked armoured vehicles, propelled and guided ammunitions and missiles, light and heavy infantry weapons, surface vessels such as frigates and corvettes. Two of its domestic defence manufacturers feature in SIPRI's top 100 defence industries 2019 ranking.²⁹

Apart from meeting domestic capital equipment needs, the Turkish defence manufacturers have emerged as a major supplier of arms systems in the international arms market. The initial spark for the Development of the Turkish defence industry was the US arms embargo that was imposed on Turkey from 1974 until 1978 as a consequence of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Turkey's exclusion from arms selling markets underscored the need for self-sufficiency in weapons and military supplies although the roots of such

Table 5. Country shares in the group's total military spending.

	1990	2000	2010	2019
Cyprus	2.4%	1.3%	1.1%	0.8%
Greece	20.1%	21.9%	19.3%	11.4%
Egypt	9.6%	8.6%	10.1%	6.2%
Israel	40.5%	33.8%	40.4%	40.1%
Turkey	27.3%	34.5%	29.1%	41.5%

Source: Authors' calculations using SIPRI's data

an effort date back to the 1960s.³¹ This is witnessed by Turkey's New Defence Concept, designed in the 1970s with a view to diversify its arms supplies and hence to make Turkey less dependent militarily on the US in the wake of the embargo. At the same time, Ankara proceeded vigorously into building ties with the other Soviet Bloc countries as well, which later evolved into close military cooperation.³²

Apart from it, using Turkish Armed Forces' inventory of Western weaponry as models, Turkish engineers have developed indigenous weaponry. Some prominent and well-known examples are the national infantry rifle, called the MPT-76, similar to the M16, its own Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) system, the Milgem Ship, the Altay Tank, the ATAK Helicopter, the ANKA and Bayraktar Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, the Hürkuş Training Aircraft, the Gökürk 1 Surveillance Satellite, the New Type Patrol Boats, the Rapid Intervention Boats, the Mine Protected Vehicles and Air and Missile Defence Systems. As it can be seen in Table 6, Turkey has improved its position as an arms exporter. For the 2010–19 decade, it ranks as the 16th larger arms exporter globally.³³ On the regional level, its ranking as an arms exporter is second to that of Israel, ranked as the 9th largest arms exporter during the same period. The domestic production of defence inputs has greatly enhanced Turkey's ability to follow a more assertive policy in the in the greater region. This includes a growing military presence abroad that includes participation in international military missions as well as national military presence in countries such as Somalia, Qatar, Syria, Libya and the occupied northern part of Cyprus.³⁴

Meanwhile the armed low-cost drones made by Turkey are reshaping battlefields and geopolitics. The Turkish drones are built with affordable digital technology, which notably wrecked tanks and other armoured vehicles as well as air-defence systems in wars in Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan. Turkey is not only developing an armoury of international standing, but also is poised to join the circle of the world's pre-eminent military powers in the next few years. The construction of a light aircraft carrier as a supra-regional operational platform serves this goal. The idea of the 'blue fatherland' and the vision of transforming the Turkish coastal navy into a powerful ocean-going fleet serve as motivation to do so. At the heart of this plan is the construction of the landing helicopter dock TCG Anadolu. With a length of almost 231 metres, a height of 58 metres, and a displacement between 24,660 and 27,436 tons, the TCG Anadolu will be the largest warship ever built in Turkey. The TCG Anadolu is expected to be the world's first drone carrier. Plans call for 30 to 50 drones to be used for spying, surveillance, identifying targets, or for armed attacks.³⁵

Moreover, Turkey has the second-largest standing armed forces in NATO, with more soldiers (639,000 military, paramilitary and civilian personnel), tanks (3,200), armoured fighting vehicles (9,500), artillery (2,400) and military aircraft (1,067 fighter jets, attack helicopters and transports) than Germany, France or the United Kingdom. Turkey's navy

Table 6. Rank in terms of arms exports³⁰.

	1990–99	2000–09	2010–19	2000–19
Cyprus	-	-	-	-
Egypt	43	-	47	-
Greece	40	49	48	-
Israel	12	7	9	8
Turkey	-	25	16	16

comprises 194 ships, mostly frigates, corvettes and coastal gunships but including 12 submarines Turkey controls the Bosphorus Straits, Marmara Sea and Dardanelles Straits between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, giving it the capability to contain Russia's powerful Black Sea Fleet. Moreover, backed by Qatar, Turkey proceeded into a dazzling 'blue-water expansion' mirrored in the ongoing construction of coastal military installations in Sudan on the Red Sea and in Somalia on the Arabian Sea, a quasi Turkish 'string of pearls'. In this manner Turkey accomplished a spectacular strategic maritime power projection, directly challenging the power of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates alliance. Moreover, the country has remarkably improved its maritime warfare capabilities.³⁶

Last but not least, the year 2020 marked the ascendance of Turkey as a 'drone superpower'. This rise was by no means peaceful and comes as a result of various confrontations by Turkish proxies in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars by mainly by the successful usage of the Bayraktar TB2 UAV by Azeri forces in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.³⁷

Turkey's current assertive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean: an assessment

Considering Keynes' observation that '*the great events of history are often due to secular changes in the growth of population and other fundamental economic causes . . .*',³⁸ we can extrapolate that Turkey's assertive and coercive policy is supported by the differential growth performance to its real or imagined competitors, recorded over the past decades vis-à-vis other regional actors. In particular the years 2018–2020 marked a watershed for Turkey's assertive foreign policy in the wider Eastern Mediterranean region. Apart from the obvious effort by Erdogan to shift attention away from domestic problems to foreign initiatives, the country's foreign policy became heavily militarized in an attempt to affirm Ankara's power in its near abroad and fuel a fiercely nationalist narrative. The build-up of the Turkish navy and the simultaneous conduct of naval military drills in three theatres, the Aegean, the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean not only demonstrated Turkish military planners' intention to establish Turkey as the predominant naval force in the region but also served the aim of show force and power projection.³⁹

Since Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt and Greece have been for years stumbled into a clash over competing claims on offshore energy exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, most of the analysts have speculated that the recent geopolitical storm was about energy. It is true that Turkey believes it is being treated unfairly by its neighbours and resents what it perceives as its exclusion from talks on energy discoveries. Turkey has not defined its EEZ with its neighbours and fully disputes theirs.⁴⁰ To counterbalance it, Erdogan has been following gunboat diplomacy in the region, trying to erect barriers to the looming Israel-Cyprus-Egypt energy collaboration and disrupting the natural gas and crude oil exploration in the Cypriot territorial waters. However, contrary to the commonly hold perception, is not the existence of valuable offshore energy resources that has prompted Turkey's aggression.

First of all, it should be clear that an increasingly globalized economy allows states to buy the necessary goods, and consequently free trade decreases the need and the incentive to extend direct political control over them. Moreover, especially with regard to modern industrial capacity, direct (or imperial) control over economic resources does not result in the accumulation of wealth and power.⁴¹

Furthermore, despite the widespread euphoria about the natural endowment of the region, the East Med gas 'bonanza' is rather overestimated. The gas deposits, for those believing that they even could drastically alter the EU's energy security in the short to medium term, remain, apart from the Tamar and Zohr fields, so far largely undeveloped and exploration proceeds slowly, because there is no available export route for the large volumes of gas that could be produced. Given that the gas exports from the area, in the best-case scenario, would reach the amount of 50 bcm in the next years, probably long time after 2025, and that the EU market consumes more than 400 bcm/y, this perception is rather misguided. Greece's, Cyprus' and Israel's ratification of the agreement to build the East Med Pipeline, designed to ship Israeli and Cypriot gas to Greece and on to Western Europe coincided almost simultaneously with Chevron's \$5bn deal for Noble Energy, one of the region's leading operators. However, the 10bn m³/yr pipeline, 1,300 km of the total 1,900 km of which would be offshore, making it among the longest undersea gas links in the world, has been so far for economic and technical reasons more of a pipedream than a realistic pipeline project. In the post-covid world there will be tough competition with other existing and potential gas suppliers to Europe, ranging from Norway to Russia to Algeria to Azerbaijan to Libya—and, in the case of LNG imports, exporters more globally. To make matters worse, the EU is moving towards pursuing a strategy of very deep decarbonization, and even carbon neutrality by 2050.⁴²

Consequently, it was not the discovery of new energy resources that has enabled or facilitated multilateral regional political and defence cooperation between Israel-Greece and Cyprus, but the opposite occurred. The various forms of cooperation or strategic partnerships came about for other reasons and the energy dimension either was added later or was utilized in order to dress up the real nature of the rapprochement. Both the escalation of all the regional ethnic and political conflicts and the establishment of new alliances in the region have little to do with energy resources and emerged after certain political incidents had taken place, as was the case with the termination of the Israel-Turkish strategic partnership and the rise of General El-Sisi in Egypt.⁴³

The existing gas finds also are insufficient to cover Turkey's gigantic domestic energy needs. Located strategically between two continents, Turkey has had a desire of becoming an international physical hub and transit corridor for natural gas, while at the same time improving its own energy security.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this ambition can be perfectly satisfied with the TANAN-TAP and the Turkstream pipelines. Project extensions to expand deliverability further into Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary are underway. Turkey's new gas discovery in the Black Sea, though it is too early to talk about its importance and economic value, further contributes to the aim of transforming Turkey into a regional energy hub.⁴⁵

Regarding Turkey's claims on the Cypriot gas, it is noteworthy, that the Cyprus Republic has already offered Turkish Cypriots a share of gas revenues as a way to fairly divide revenue from the natural gas deposits thought to lie off the coast of Cyprus and de-

escalate tensions with Turkey, if Ankara ever recognizes Nicosia's energy exploration rights. Beyond that, the prospects for resuming exploration in Cyprus' Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ) and development of discovered assets is not only affected by Turkish aggression but inevitably also by the challenging global situation and the crisis engulfing the oil and gas industry. It is well-known that in times of crisis energy companies are giving priority to the development of large, easy to produce, easy to export, oil and gas fields, with low production costs and low risk, and high profitability and the Cypriot fields do not subsume in this category.

The crisis around the Greek island of Kastellorizo in Summer 2020 that nearly brought Greece and Turkey to the brink of a war, was also not about energy. It is true that Turkey deployed energy exploration ships along with its naval escort to search for oil and natural gas in waters near Kastellorizo disputing Greece's sovereign rights in a potential future proclaimed EEZ. This particular region, however, has not proved energy resources and has not been mapped out by the big energy companies as an area of interest. Turkish Petroleum, the state-owned company that has been undertaking the drilling work, does not have the expertise to analyse the seismographic data it is collecting. It certainly does not have the capital to bring any gas it finds into production. Turkey's drilling activity appears not to be designed to find oil and gas but to stir up trouble and compel the rest of the East Mediterranean to bow to its leadership on energy matters.⁴⁶

In November 2019, Turkey submitted to the United Nations a series of claims to Exclusive Economic Zones in the Eastern Mediterranean that are in conflict with Greek claims to the same areas—including a sea zone extending west of the South-Eastern Aegean island of Rhodes and south of Crete which were rejected by Greece as legally unfounded, incorrect arbitrary and violating Greece's sovereignty. In the same month, Turkey signed a bilateral agreement with Libya on maritime boundaries in exchange for a security pact involving military trainers and advisers as well as deliveries of equipment that further aggravated its relations with Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt. The agreement is controversial⁴⁷ and drew condemnation by Greece⁴⁸ and other countries, including the rival Tobruk-based government led by the Libyan House of Representatives and Khalifa Haftar, the European Union, United States, Russia, Egypt, Cyprus, Malta, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Serbia, Israel, Syria, Bahrein, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the Arab League, as a violation of the International Law of the Sea and the article 8 of the Skhirat Agreement which prohibits the Libyan Prime Minister from solely clinching international deals without consent of all the cabinet members. Beyond the legal complications, such a move, as it has been repeatedly stated by Egyptian media, has added to the instability in Libya and increased the potential threat of terrorist activity spilling over into Libya's eastern neighbour. For Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates the agreement is not only a violation of UNCLOS and of previous understandings between rival Libyan parties, but also reflective of the broader regional struggle between advocates and opponents of political Islam. For Turkey, however, which together with Qatar supports the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli, was a diplomatic success.⁴⁹

The signing of the memorandum was followed by some actions undertaken in the Qatar-‘Northern Cyprus’⁵⁰-Libya line in December according to the geo-strategic concept of ‘there is no defending a line, but rather a whole area is to be defended’, as Mehmet Kancı labelled it in his article in the Turkish government-controlled Anadolu press agency in December 2019.⁵¹ Turkey’s new geostrategy highlights its large area of ‘defense’, extending from Qatar to the Libyan capital of Tripoli, cutting across the island of Cyprus in the middle of the line. This large geopolitical area is formed at one end by the *Mediterranean Shield*, which covers the west and south of the island of Crete, and at the other by the headquarters of the Turkey-Qatar *Combined Joint Force Command* overlooking the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, which is covered by the entire world and especially by energy markets. At the southernmost end of this area is the Somali Turkish Task Force Command in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia on the Indian Ocean coast.

In this regard, Turkey’s massive air and sea deliveries of armaments to Libya’s Government of National Accord unsurprisingly continued despite Ankara’s commitment at the January 2020 Berlin Conference to stop delivering arms to all parties in the conflict and an arms embargo unanimously approved by the UN Security Council. This situation ended in several incidents at sea. Unlike earlier regional endeavours, this particular Libyan scheme is bringing Turkey to face too many powers, and the outcomes are hard to predict. Turkey is probably taking its odds, flexing its muscles but at a very high price.⁵²

In recent years, Turkish politicians, on various occasions, have been repeatedly claiming that, after the end of the Gaddafi regime, Greece ‘has usurped’ 39,000 square kilometres of Libya’s continental shelf, between the North Africa coast and the large island of Crete, as its own naval zone. In July 2020, France and Austria have called for sanctions against Turkey, such as the termination of the Turkey’s EU accession talks. In the same context the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council convened and agreed for a framework of sanctions to be prepared for use in the event Turkey attempts any violations of Greece’s sovereign rights, while Athens threatened to invoke the Mutual Defence Clause (Article 42) of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty for military assistance. On the same trajectory, in August 2020, a Turkish naval deployment to support research and drilling activities in contested waters in the Eastern Mediterranean led to a major incident with a Greek frigate, followed by NATO efforts to establish a deconfliction mechanism between Athens and Ankara. A collision between Greek and Turkish frigates on August 12th was the worst confrontation between the two NATO allies since a face-off on an uninhabited island in 1996 that nearly led to war. According to the German press, it was Merkel’s last-minute intervention that prevented a crisis between Greece and Turkey.

The obvious trigger of the Turkish actions was the Greek-Egyptian maritime agreement partially demarcating the EEZs between the two countries signed on 6 August 2020. Almost simultaneously, in a highly politically controversial move, Turkey initiated explorations in the Cypriot EEZ on behalf of ‘Northern Cyprus’. It is worth mentioning that Ankara has repeatedly engaged in direct military action against foreign companies, conducting exploration activities in Cyprus’ EEZ, seriously disrupting exploration works, by continuously reserving critical areas for naval exercises. In early 2018 for example, Turkish warships obstructed exploration in block 3 by preventing a Saipem rig hired by

Eni from drilling by threatening to use force. Greek Cypriot authorities have been denouncing this Turkish naval action as an illegal use of force and a violation of the Republic of Cyprus' sovereign rights.⁵³

During his visit in Northern Cyprus, in July 2021, Erdogan announced the partial opening Varosha, the abandoned southern quarter of Famagusta, for settlement under Turkish control. Varosha is perhaps the quintessential embodiment of the Cyprus problem. Varosha used to be one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world before the Turkish military invasion of 1974. Since then, it remained a ghostly collection of derelict high-rise hotels and residences in a military zone which nobody has been allowed to enter. The 1979 High Level Agreement stipulated that the resettlement of Varosha was a unified Cypriot priority, that both sides were open to such acts of goodwill, and that the United Nations should play a role in the resolution to the Cyprus problem. As United Nations resolutions call for Varosha to be handed over to UN administration and to allow people to return to their homes, the US, EU and the UN security council condemned the announcement.⁵⁴ Apparently, Erdogan intends to grant this area to AKP-friendly businessmen for economic development.

Ankara's attention moved southward to Syria, when the Syrian civil war appeared to provide a historic opportunity to the Kurds living there to establish an autonomous Kurdish state in northern Syria. At that time, Turkey was seeking to achieve simultaneously two goals in Syria: to overthrow Syria's regime and to convince Syrian Kurds to join the armed opposition struggle there. However, Ankara's calls for the establishment of a security buffer zone and international (NATO) support for military intervention received positive responses from the West.⁵⁵ Eventually, in 2019, Ankara decided to invade in northeast Syria against the Syrian Kurds.⁵⁶ According to the Amnesty International, Turkish military forces and a coalition of Turkey-backed Syrian armed groups have displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians, during the offensive into northeast Syria.⁵⁷

As Şaban Kardaş very aptly argued, Turkey's moves do not take place in vacuum: their increasing frequency can be placed in the context of an assertive strategic orientation, centred on the militarization of foreign policy instruments and a coercive diplomacy that relies on a credible threat that eventually rests on material capabilities and the will to employ them.⁵⁸ Thus, in our opinion, the main driver of Turkish assertive strategy was not the failure of Turkey's regional engagements or its growing isolation, assumed by some analysts, but the application of a rather hegemonic geo-strategic conception, which sees any attempts of international cooperation in the region that do not take Ankara's interests into account, as hostile.

Turkey has so far refused to participate in all regional multilateral schemes such as the Cairo-based EastMed Gas Forum launched in 2019 and signed by several Mediterranean countries in September 2020. While energy lies at the heart of the forum, there are also broader geostrategic procedures that led to its establishment, reflecting the common perceptions of the countries involved of the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean to their national security and became the first example to bring Israel together with Arab countries. Within that forum, which serves as the umbrella for cooperation and dialogue on the development of gas resources in the region, Turkey, that has serious legitimate

claims in the hydrocarbons of the region due to its long shores, could gain significant benefits from the exploitation of the EastMed energy reserves if those would be ever monetized.

Last but not least, it is meanwhile well-known and well-reported in the international press that Turkey's unprecedented military assistance to Azerbaijan empowered Baku to achieve a resounding victory in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, changing the geopolitical rules of the game in the South Caucasus, enhancing Turkey's ability to project its influence in Central Asia. The November 2020 ceasefire agreement created a corridor through Armenia connecting the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan to the rest of Azerbaijan—providing Turkey, which shares a border with Nakhichevan, with direct connectivity with Azerbaijan and access across the Caspian to all of Turkic Central Asia.

Concluding remarks

The article has addressed Turkey's recent coercive diplomacy and assertive strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean. It argues that Ankara's military involvement in conflict, the deployment of its navy to support its seismic surveys, disrupting or thwarting other players' drilling efforts, incendiary comments pinpointing at revisionist aspirations and frequent use of threats against its real or imagined regional adversaries are not random or erratic moves but actions that can be explained by certain strategic considerations.

Examining Turkey's economic performance and military capabilities vis-à-vis its neighbours, we maintain that these coercive strategies have robust material foundations and it is not the result of a self-complacent rhetoric or just a deflection manoeuvre from domestic problems that shape Turkey's conspicuous assertive/coercive behaviour in the wide eastern Mediterranean region. Such policies have followed a rather steady pattern and cannot be seen only as a response to current developments such as the discovery of energy resources. As a consequence, we argue that Turkey's policy of invariably boosting militarization of its foreign policy agency will not change after Erdogan's dethroning.

The growth rate of Turkey's GDP was the highest among the South-East Mediterranean countries. Because of the differential growth rates, Turkey's economic imprint in the region has steadily increased in importance over the years. Examining more qualitative macroeconomic indicators such as the value added of manufacturing as a share of GDP, high-technology exports as a share of total manufactured exports and research and development spending as a share of GDP, Turkey has also outperformed other regional powers but still lags behind countries such as Israel.

The growing Turkish economy has resulted not only in higher per capita income but has also allowed the allocation of more resources to the build-up of its military strength that also exceeds that of its neighbours. Turkey systematically increased its military spending, over the past decades, pursuing an ambitious military build-up program. Due to the differential change in defence spending, Turkey's military expenditure has steadily increased not only in absolute but also in relative terms. Apart from meeting domestic capital equipment needs, the Turkish defence manufacturers have emerged as a major supplier of arms systems in the international arms market. Turkey's coercive diplomacy relies on the militarization of foreign policy instruments and its material capabilities. Against this background, the current disconcerting

state of the Turkish economy might cause domestic uncertainties in the short-term but in the long-run will not affect in a fundamental way Turkey's behaviour in the international and regional arena.

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