



Strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy: Defense or offense?

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ABSTRACT

Although the study of secondary state behavior has increasing scholarly attention, existing studies suffer from a serious defect: privileging defensive over offensive behaviors. This is mainly due to the problems of status-quo-bias and anarchy-centrism engulfing the discipline of International Relations. This leads scholars either to ignore offensive state behaviors or treat them as aberration. This could be corrected if the struggle for autonomy is taken as the primary motive behind state behaviors. Defensive and offensive state behaviors, then, can be given equal treatment. Defensive state behaviors aim to maintain whereas offensive state behaviors seek to expand autonomy. Secondary states may display risky offensive behaviors to expand their autonomy. I shall examine this argument against the empirical evidence provided by Turkish foreign policy after 2016. I argue that the policy of strategic autonomy determines Turkish foreign policy and in the context of this policy Turkey follows a leash-slipping strategy to expand its autonomy.

Introduction

Turkish foreign policy has gradually shifted to pursue strategic autonomy since 2016. To be autonomous, in effect, is the main goal of all the states in international politics. In their struggle for autonomy, states either resist domination or aspire to dominate others. They strive to conduct their domestic and foreign policies independent from other states. Once that is achieved, they generally tend to look for influencing foreign and domestic policies of other states within their limits. If the struggle for autonomy is common to all in international politics, what does Turkey's policy of strategic autonomy specifically entail?

Looking at the statements of Turkey's policy-makers, the policy of strategic autonomy demonstrates that Turkey has decided to abandon its longtime strategy of bandwagoning the United States.¹ Following the usual pattern of security association between a great power and a secondary state, Turkey's strategy of bandwagoning was predicated on Turkey's commitment to U.S. leadership in international politics in return for security guarantees against the Soviets during the Cold War. After the Cold War, Turkey kept bandwagoning the United States for reasons ranging from benefiting from

U.S. hegemony to appeasing unbalanced U.S. power in the unipolar international system. Following the U.S. leadership has inevitably cost Turkey some of its autonomy. Turkish foreign policy, at least that which might have systemic effects, was to an extent bounded and conducted under the auspices of the United States. The strategy of bandwagoning, thus, rested on a “hegemonic bargain”² and produced asymmetric power relations and a degree of hierarchy between the two states rather than an “anarchic alliance.”³

This hierarchy has gradually pushed Turkey to jettison more of its autonomy. In response, Turkey has grown defiant more openly to hierarchy in its relations with the United States. After 2016, when Turkey hit by an attempted military coup and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) continued to carry out sensational terror attacks, Turkey’s defiance has clearly shown itself in its foreign policy discourse and practices.⁴ At the highest level, Turkey’s policy-makers complained that its Western allies did not stand on its side in its war on terror.⁵ Turkey’s growing distrust toward its Western allies and in particular dissatisfaction with asymmetric power relations with the United States peaked after 2016. Turkey decided to act alone and carried out a number of military operations against United States’ Kurdish allies in Syria and Iraq.⁶ It has declined to abide by Western policies toward Russia and remained neutral in its war against Ukraine.⁷ It has taken a contrarian diplomatic stance on matters which are crucial to the Western alliance such as Sweden’s bid to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) –Turkey eventually gave a green light to Sweden’s membership but made it conditional to close cooperation against the PKK.⁸ After starting to follow a more independent foreign policy, Turkey has faced economic, diplomatic and military sanctions yet they were not able to get Turkey caved.⁹ Turkey’s resistance to U.S. hierarchy has become continuous and the trademark of its current foreign policy.¹⁰ Basically, Turkey displays a clear dissatisfaction with the existing international order and the degree of autonomy that the strategy of bandwagoning allots to Turkey.¹¹ Turkey seems to be adamant about drawing an alternative path for itself to diminish not only its security dependence on the U.S.-led Western alliance that it has been a part of since 1952 –when Turkey officially became a member of NATO– but also its overarching strategic framework that has limited its vision and position within the international system.¹²

Indeed, the will to abandon the long-standing strategy of bandwagoning the United States constitutes a historical shift in Turkish foreign policy. Turkish foreign policy has traditionally swung between isolationism and bandwagoning the Western powers since 1920s.¹³ Both strategies figure as defensive that Turkey acted with caution and moderation which amount to sustain autonomy at hand and international status quo. The crux of this shift is that Turkey decided to switch from defense to offense in its struggle for autonomy. This includes determining national interests independent from the West and leaving aside the traditional mode of behavior shaped by acting with caution and moderation.¹⁴ Isolationism and bandwagoning were defensive strategies that could be adopted by a satisfied state to maintain the amount of autonomy at hand. Currently, Turkey has grown to be a dissatisfied state and seeks not so much safeguarding the amount of autonomy it enjoys as expanding it to the level that will enable Turkey to pursue its policies more independently. But which strategy does

Turkey, as a dissatisfied secondary state, follow to reach to the goal of strategic autonomy?

The dominant view in the literature on secondary states and their strategies is that secondary states tend to adopt bandwagoning or balancing against great powers.¹⁵ This view has been recently challenged by studies which assert that secondary states also employ the strategy of hedging in their struggle for autonomy as they have to confront the great powers, especially those which are in their region, or in a unipolar international system whose leading power is in decline.¹⁶ Hedging diverges from those strategies in the sense that states tend to “cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids to choose one side at the obvious expense of another” when they face “a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality.”¹⁷ They either play the great powers against each other in their capacity or multiply their sources of security by engaging with two or more great powers at the same time to diminish dependence and avoid sacrificing their autonomy.¹⁸ States tend to deploy hedging mainly to manage and minimize potential security risks rather than responding to direct threats. The strategy of hedging, therefore, is mainly of defensive nature. There are studies which point out that Turkey implements the strategy of hedging in an international environment where its neighbor Russia gets more powerful and pursues a more assertive foreign policy.¹⁹ Some others argue that Turkey have adopted the strategy of hedging as its Western allies lose power and appetite to be involved in the region and therefore have become less dependable to provide security as a result of the rise of the Eurasian pole, which includes mainly China, Russia and Iran. Like many countries in the region, as they contend, Turkey has responded to the emergence of a multipolar international system by engaging Russia and China.²⁰ There are also other studies which allege that Turkey plays Russia and the United States off against each other to be able to navigate through the risky waters as a secondary state.²¹

However, Turkey’s growing autonomous foreign policy behavior cannot fully be comprehended from the perspective of hedging. It fails to grasp that Turkey has also intensified its engagement with the secondary states in its region. The focus on regionalization has consistently increased its weight in Turkey’s foreign policy menu in the last two decades.²² The main objective of regionalization seems to go beyond hedging the security risks caused by the ongoing international power transition. Turkey appears to struggle to establish itself as a regional leader within a more integrated regional order and accordingly erect another pole in the international system rather than merely limiting itself with averting the security risks by playing the Western and Eurasian powers off against each other.²³ This study, thus, offers that secondary states, especially those with an imperial past, like Turkey, may have a fourth option alongside bandwagoning, balancing, and hedging. This is the strategy of leash-slipping. Leash-slipping involves an attempt to build another pole or great power in the international system without confronting the great power(s) of the system with arms in order to expand autonomy.²⁴ Turkey’s policy of strategic autonomy is, then, adopted to make Turkey into another great power in the international system by implementing the strategy of leash-slipping.²⁵

This study aims to rectify two problems in the existing literature on secondary state behavior. The first one is the problem of status-quo bias. As noted, the literature is

dominated by studies that almost unequivocally ascribe defensive strategies to secondary states.²⁶ They tend to see the world solely through the perspective of a satisfied status quo state. Throughout this paper it is argued that secondary states may also pursue offensive strategies as they grow dissatisfied with the existing status quo. The second problem is negligence of hierarchy in inter-state relations due to the problem of anarchy-centrism in the discipline of International Relations.²⁷ The growing hierarchy literature has shown that hierarchy as an international structure and a form of inter-state relations is as common as anarchy.²⁸ This is because power asymmetry and hierarchy as its natural result are facts of international political life.²⁹ The anarchy-centrism, alas, leads the studies on secondary state behavior to misinterpret offensive strategies by equating them to imperialism.³⁰ Pursuing an offensive strategy does not have to amount to imperialism. Hence, instead of viewing international politics as either anarchy or empire, we should appreciate the fact that there are intermediary forms and gradually mounting degrees of hierarchy in between those poles.³¹ Imperialism resides at the extreme end of anarchy-hierarchy continuum since it is almost impossible to achieve such a degree of power concentration required to establish an empire. We generally observe cases of power concentration which can establish hierarchy that is short of empire in inter-state relations.³² On the other hand, anarchy is located at the opposite end of the continuum which mainly refers to inter-state relations based ideally on pure equality. This is unrealistic since concentration of power in some states is inevitable and emergence of degrees of hierarchy in inter-state relations due to unequal distribution of power is a natural phenomenon of international political life.

This analysis proceeds as follows. To make the strategy of leash-slipping more comprehensible, the next section discusses the centrality of the struggle for autonomy in international politics and the rival strategies that are put forward for maintaining or expanding it. It argues that the struggle for autonomy is the overarching goal of all the states in international politics. On that basis, it further asserts that states are generically divided into two types: Satisfied and dissatisfied.³³ Satisfied states are content with the amount of autonomy they hold under the existing international order and thus deploy defensive strategies to keep the status quo whereas dissatisfied states follow offensive strategies to revise the system or their relations to other states to expand their autonomy. Leash-slipping is one of the offensive strategies adopted by dissatisfied secondary states. The following part offers a brief history of Turkish foreign policy by tracing the strategies it has pursued in its struggle for autonomy. It argues that Turkey was a satisfied status quo power until the 1990s. The goal of maintaining autonomy weighed heavier in the 1923–90 period. To maintain autonomy, it implemented the strategy of isolationism till the start of the Second World War in 1939. It switched to the strategy of neutrality during the war (1939–45) and then to the strategy of bandwagoning as the Cold War (1945–90) started. After the Cold War, Turkey gradually became estranged from the United States, so much so that it attempted at different times to employ strategies other than bandwagoning like soft-balancing.³⁴ It also intended to put into practice various leash-slipping strategies, albeit half-heartedly, in order to expand its autonomy. They all failed at different stages of implementation. The policy of strategic autonomy has initiated another round of implementing leash-slipping strategy after 2016. The latest leash-slipping strategy, however, differs significantly from the previous ones with

respect to political determination of the Turkish policy-makers and the methods they adopted in its implementation. The concluding part discusses the obstacles before Turkey's latest attempt to pursue leash-slipping strategy in order to expand its autonomy.

The struggle for autonomy and rival strategies

Realists argue that survival is the primary goal of all the states in international politics.³⁵ Other goals such as conquering the world or desiring to be left alone remain secondary.³⁶ All of these competing goals, in effect, could be brought under the category of autonomy. They all refer to the struggle for autonomy in different ways. The struggle for autonomy serves as the common basis for all the goals that states may have. Survival corresponds to resistance to domination whereas the goal of conquering the world is an aspiration to dominate others. The desire to be left alone, on the other hand, amounts to rejecting domination and not aspiring to dominate others. Survival and the desire to be left alone are defensive goals which pinpoint to safeguarding the autonomy at hand. The goal of conquering the world, in contrast, signifies the desire to expand one's autonomy to the extent of dominating others. In short, while these three goals may appear to be qualitatively distinct because they are categorized according to the order of priority and serve different ends at the first glance, a closer look reveals that they are qualitatively similar because they all contribute to the same end and there is not an order of priority among them. Autonomy is the overarching goal. Putting these seemingly opposite goals on a common basis of autonomy spares us reducing international politics to the study of maintaining international anarchy. In that case the study of international politics could be reduced to a one-dimensional endeavor, which keeps much of what takes place in the international system away from our sight. By placing struggle for autonomy at the center, we can overcome the problems of anarchy-centrism and status-quo bias and embrace both dimensions of international politics: Resisting domination (anarchy) and aspiring to dominate (hierarchy).³⁷

The struggle for survival is also claimed to illustrate the normal and widespread state behavior whereas the goal of conquering the world is viewed as an exception and a rare state behavior. Hence, it is suggested that theory should focus on states' struggle for survival and maintaining anarchy and accordingly spare its energy to study how the balance of power mechanism prevents attempts to conquer the world.³⁸ By taking the struggle for survival as the normal and widespread state behavior, one may contradict himself by claiming that the balance of power is central to international politics. This is because in order for the balance of power to be the most significant aspect of international politics, we need attempts to conquer the world.³⁹ The *raison d'être* of the balance of power is the presence of a counter force, an imperial or hegemonic power embarking on conquering the world. Thus, it requires an opposite mechanism or strategy which is as normal and widespread as itself. This strategy is risk-acceptant aggression.⁴⁰ It involves formation of an offensive coalition or a revisionist alliance to dominate the others. It is put to use by imperial powers in an attempt to overthrow the status quo by reversing the power relations between the states and conquer the world. It is within the scope of international politics and it is

as widespread as the balance of power.⁴¹ Yet the theory based on the struggle for survival leaves it in the dark.

Mechanisms or strategies other than the balance of power, thus, have to be included in theory. An international relations theory only illustrating the state behavior that is focused on resistance to domination or maintaining the status quo could hardly be comprehensive. Theory also has to include offensive state behaviors such as revising the status quo and scramble to conquer the world. Theory does not have to be only a theory about defensive, satisfied and status quo states but also a theory about offensive, dissatisfied and revisionist states.⁴² Indeed, only can a theory focusing on the interplay between these opposite forces – resisting domination and aspiring to dominate – entirely illustrate what takes place in international politics and make better predictions about its future direction.⁴³ The theory is also supposed to shed light on change as much as reproduction of international order. The theory, therefore, has to allow that there are two generic types of states in the international system based on their position vis-à-vis the existing order or the distribution of power: Satisfied status quo state and dissatisfied revisionist state.⁴⁴ The presence of two types of state with qualitatively similar but politically opposing goals – maintain or expand autonomy – illustrates the fact that the struggle for autonomy, not survival, is the basic goal of the states in international politics.

Another contending issue is how to measure autonomy. What is the minimum and maximum amount of autonomy that a state can attain? This amounts to asking how to define the weakest and strongest state with regards to the amount of autonomy that they possess in international politics. The weakest state is the one that physically exists and has the legal status of being a separate political entity but not politically independent. This is a very weak state which is incapable of deciding its own domestic and foreign policies. Those policies are determined in the custody of another state. This state figures as a “quasi-sovereign state” with a very low agency.⁴⁵ A stronger state as to the amount of autonomy is the one only whose foreign policies are shaped or limited by an outside power. This state can stand on its own feet since it can project power and authority inside its borders without outside interferences but cannot project power outside its borders. It has to abide by the limits drawn by other states in the foreign policy realm. As this weakness coupled with the presence of great powers around, this state fails to shape its foreign policy independently. It appears as a “small state” with very limited amount of autonomy.⁴⁶ This is followed by a state which can decide both its own domestic and foreign policies. This state can project power both inside and outside its borders but due to having limited capabilities it is unable to penetrate other states. Its limited capabilities only suffice to prevent other states’ attempts to penetrate. It is a “middle-power” with a moderate amount of autonomy.⁴⁷ After this point one can see a state that is capable of influencing foreign and domestic policies of other states. This state can project power outside its borders to the extent of penetrating other states. However, some of these states can only keep their neighbors in their region under their influence. These are regional hegemons.⁴⁸ They are highly autonomous in a regional context. Beyond the regional hegemons we have global powers which can project power globally and thus are able to determine foreign and domestic policies of states outside their own region. These states have the highest amount of autonomy in the system.⁴⁹

To give an example, initially domestic and foreign policies of the United States were shaped by European colonial powers. The United States was not even an independent political entity. Starting from the late eighteenth century, the United States first gained its independence and established itself as a free sovereign state. It was able to control its domestic politics. Then, it expanded its autonomy by excluding the European powers from the continent after the 1820s. It was now able to determine its foreign policies independently. As the end of the nineteenth century approached, the United States became a regional hegemon which had expanded its territories and had been able to influence politics of neighboring states. Nevertheless, up to this point, the United States was a defensive satisfied state at the global level which was following the strategy of isolationism in the international system.⁵⁰ As the twentieth century rolled on, the United States has begun to involve in international politics outside its region, including the European continent. In time, it set out to play an important role not only over foreign policies but also domestic policies of the European states. After the Second World War, this was intensified and the United States brought Europe and also the states and regions such as the Middle East which were once European colonies under its hierarchy.⁵¹ This was facilitated by two world wars which consumed European powers. Capitalizing on the power vacuum in the system the United States became an offensive dissatisfied state which embarked on expanding its autonomy. As a result, the U.S.-led liberal international order replaced the Eurocentric compartmentalized and hierarchical international order with separate European and extra-European zones.⁵² In about two centuries the United States has evolved from being a state with a limited amount of autonomy to one with a maximum amount of autonomy, a global power. It has become the sole great power of the international system in the 1990s which was capable of projecting power globally.⁵³

Strategies pursued by the states in their struggle for autonomy could be divided into two categories: Defensive and offensive. Defensive strategies are deployed to retain the autonomy at hand. Offensive strategies, in contrast, are put to use to expand the existing autonomy. Defensive strategies are followed to sustain the status quo whereas offensive strategies are implemented to change the status quo.⁵⁴ When autonomy of status quo states is threatened by a revisionist state, first of all, these states decide whether they will confront the threatening state or not. If status quo states decide to confront, they will deploy the strategy of balancing. Status quo states join their forces and try to arrest the revisionist threat. If not, status quo states will act alone and put forth a number of low-profile strategies such as buck-passing or defensive bandwag-
oning. Buck-passing is a defensive strategy by which states wait for other states to shoulder the burden of containing the revisionist threat. Status quo states may at best provide weapons and money to the state which will confront the enemy. The strategy of defensive bandwagoning, on the other hand, dictates to appease the revisionist threat by submitting to its will. Status quo states believe if they act in a conciliatory way by extending concessions, the revisionist state might be appeased and the loss will be limited.⁵⁵ Secondly, status quo states decide whether they confront the revisionist state by resorting to arms or not. If status quo states are resolved to stop the revisionist state by forming a military alliance, they will follow the strategy of balancing. status quo states establish a defensive military alliance to contain revisionism. If status quo states believe they can stop the revisionist state without resorting to arms, they will

deploy the strategy of soft balancing. Soft balancing aims to deter the revisionist state by resorting to international law, diplomacy, and similar institutional mechanisms.⁵⁶ The status quo states try to stifle revisionism by softening it through institutional mechanisms, if that does not work, they will resort to the strategy of containment by subjecting the revisionist state to economic sanctions, threatening the revisionist state to exclude from the international society or by playing its public off against its ruling elite.⁵⁷

In contrast, when a state wants to expand its autonomy, it decides, first of all, whether to pose a direct military challenge to the status quo or not. If a state decides to do so, it will deploy the strategy of risk-acceptant aggression, which is adopted by states that are ready to take unlimited risks to revise the existing international order.⁵⁸ The state believes that it has enough military and economic capabilities to change the status quo. Moreover, the state expects its revisionism will attract opportunistic followers in the system which will increase the chances to change the order.⁵⁹ The state also believes that some of the status quo powers may be brought into the revisionist fold or rendered neutral in the process. The divide-and-conquer tactics will bring down the status quo alliance easier and faster than expected.⁶⁰ If a state decides not to pose a direct military challenge to the status quo, it will put forward other strategies such as economic pre-balancing and leash-slipping.⁶¹ Economic pre-balancing is an offensive strategy which seeks to change the status quo in an indirect way. The state which follows this strategy, first, hides its revisionist intentions and engages in an extensive economic program for swift material capacity increase. It seeks to give an impression that its rise is peaceful and not a challenge to the status quo.⁶² After its economy reaches to a certain level of development, it starts to turn its economic power into a military power. At the same time, it gradually discloses its revisionist intentions and starts a direct and military challenge to the status quo. Another strategy that is employed to change the status quo in an indirect way is leash-slipping. The state pursuing the strategy of leash-slipping knows very well that it does not have enough material capability to counterbalance and pose a direct military challenge to the status quo. It is aware that a large balancing bloc will automatically emerge and easily crush its military power and economic infrastructure. The strategy of leash-slipping involves a series of self-strengthening reforms both inside and outside the borders to establish a pole – concentration of power to establish another great power – in the system without posing a direct military challenge to the status quo powers.⁶³ It is an attempt to expand autonomy indirectly and without drawing much attention although states pursuing leash-slipping do not fear being attacked by the status quo powers. Its main difference from the strategy of economic pre-balancing is that leash-slipping involves political maneuvers such as developing close cooperation with other states to build up a new political entity. Leash-slipping is expected to put forth a sizable “new” political entity to increase the number of poles within the international system.⁶⁴ How can a state achieve this?

Christopher Layne discusses three cases of leash-slipping in the second part of the twentieth century when the system was initially bipolar and then shifted to unipolarity after the collapse of the Eastern bloc.⁶⁵ Dismayed with the loss of its great power status and thus vast amount of autonomy after two world wars, the Great Britain embarked on building up a third geopolitical force in the fledgling bipolar system in

the period of 1945–50. As a dissatisfied and revisionist state, it sought to protect its imperial interests in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Egypt, and establish coordination with Western European and the commonwealth countries.⁶⁶ Similarly, France in the 1960s under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle strived to turn France into a nuclear power, strengthen the French-German alliance and carve out a common security policy among the Western European countries. President De Gaulle thought these policies would establish Europe around France as a third geopolitical force in the system and revive Europe's past grandeur by expanding its autonomy in the face of two non-European and continent-size great powers.⁶⁷ In the 1990s, despite the disappearance of Soviet threat, the European Union (EU) member states accelerated the Union's expansion and political and military integration of the continent. They decided to form a common foreign and security policy which would be supported by its own military power and develop a united European defense industry to reduce dependence on the United States. The EU countries accordingly declared European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) in 1999 to carry out these political objectives.⁶⁸ By following a leash-slipping strategy, Britain toyed with the idea of building up an "international" state, France a "regional" state, and the EU a "continental" state. Leash-slipping combines internal balancing efforts like developing an independent and robust defense industry and becoming a nuclear power and external balancing efforts like joining forces with neighboring or kin states. These were believed to result in formation of a sizable and stronger new political entity. All of these attempts were a response to the rise of continent-size states such as the United States and the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century. They all believed that they could sustain or expand their autonomy by building up states with a similar size and material capacity. And all of these "super" states were thought to suffice to produce another pole in the system to expand their autonomy.

These are the strategies which are put forward to actively maintain autonomy at hand when faced with a revisionist threat or seek to expand autonomy as dissatisfaction with the status quo grows after having rapid growth and capability increase or suffering status-inconsistency after losing great power status. Defensive strategies are followed by status quo powers which hold a privileged place in the system. They strive to keep their extensive autonomy and continue to dominate other states. Thus, defensive strategies, including the balance of power, are deployed not only to sustain survival but also to keep an established hegemony. Offensive strategies, on the other hand, are followed by revisionist states which are dissatisfied with the amount of autonomy they have and seek to expand it. Revisionist states may want to counterbalance and overturn an established hegemony or seek to upgrade to a better position to dominate others. However, a third category of states are those that do not hold a privileged position in the system and yet look quite satisfied. These states endeavor to follow the strategy of isolationism or neutrality depending on the international conditions. As noted above, some states tend to isolate themselves in the international system. Isolationist states desire to be left alone and believe that balance of power among great powers will be sufficient to sustain their autonomy. Thus, they display a foreign policy behavior which is expected to keep them out of international conflicts. The strategy of neutrality, however, is somewhat different from isolationism. States following neutrality are involved in international conflicts. As polarization and tension surges in the

international system, isolationist states are inevitably drawn into conflicts. However, despite they get involved, they resist to take a side in those conflicts. They get involved but take pains to remain neutral. Neutrality is, therefore, the default strategy of an isolationist state in times of international instability and polarization. It tends to act like isolationism and neutrality is its permanent and official foreign policy choices. It is neither in the category of status quo state in the sense of occupying a privileged place in the system nor a revisionist state with ambitious goals. It neither aspires to dominate nor consent to be dominated. It does not welcome foreign interventions in the formation and implementation of its domestic and foreign policies, nor does it seek to bring other countries under their influence.

In sum, the struggle for autonomy lies at the center of international politics. It is the main goal of all the states, regardless if they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the standing order. The struggle for autonomy perspective enables us to cover behaviors of the status quo, revisionist, and isolationist states. Autonomy is relative and has a zero-sum characteristic. An increase in one's autonomy amounts to decline in others'. States have to be constantly vigilant and watch out for the steps of other states in order to maintain or expand their autonomy. Autonomy is also gradual. States are placed in the system and possess a certain amount of autonomy accordingly. There are global powers, regional hegemons and other states based on the degree of autonomy they have. Autonomy of a state may rise and fall. For instance, a regional hegemon may evolve into a global power or vice versa. States resort to two types of strategy – defensive and offensive – in their struggle for autonomy. Both strategies may be divided into two alternative types, those involving a direct military confrontation and an indirect nonmilitary struggle. Balancing stands out as the major defensive strategy involving direct military confrontation whereas buck-passing, soft balancing and containment appear to be the prominent defensive strategies evading direct military confrontation. The strategy of risk-acceptant aggression is the leading offensive strategy that involves direct military confrontation whereas leash-slipping and economic pre-balancing figure as important offensive strategies that avoid direct military confrontation. Isolationism and neutrality are also highly resorted defensive strategies especially by secondary states seeking to avoid all types of confrontation.

Turkey as a status quo power

Turkey followed the strategy of isolationism from the Lausanne Peace Treaty, which established Turkey as a sovereign nation-state, in 1923 to the start of the World War II in 1939. Isolationism was an ideal strategy for a newly independent state which needed to spend its energy on consolidating the political regime inside the national borders in a period of international stability. Indeed, the international system had been divided into the status quo and revisionist powers from the 1890s onwards. Turkey joined the revisionist bloc, with the hope of expelling European colonial powers from its sphere of influence and restoring the lost territories, under the leadership of the German Empire during World War I, 1914–18.⁶⁹ Alas, the revisionist camp lost the war. Turkey came under military occupation for about a 4-year time period. It had taken a big risk to expand its autonomy by bandwagoning revisionist Germany. But as a result, it had squandered the remainder of its autonomy. After independence,

Turkey simply wanted to be left alone and acted as a satisfied state with a moderate amount of autonomy it attained after signing the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty.⁷⁰ The strategy of isolationism aimed to produce a state which was capable of determining its domestic and foreign policy independently and not indulging in extending autonomy by subjugating other states in its region. Turkey took pains to show that isolationism was its permanent and official strategy as epitomized by the motto of “peace at home, peace in the world.”⁷¹ This was, in fact, not an easy decision for a state which had been an empire for about six centuries and had an entrenched imperial state tradition.

In the 1940s, revisionist Germany knocked on Turkey’s door once again to make the same offer it had made almost three decades prior. It promised Turkey an opportunity to expand its autonomy in return for bandwagoning Germany. The Great Britain and the United States, on the other hand, insistently invited Turkey to be a part of the balancing bloc and share the burden of stopping German offense.⁷² Turkey did not take a side in the second round of the revisionist challenge led by Germany in the 1940s. It neither wanted to take the same risk once again nor share the burden of stopping Germany. In any event, Turkey’s material capacity was very limited since it had been militarily and economically devastated after World War I and had not been able to recover then. Thus, it sought to hide as long as it was possible, and when that strategy was no longer viable, it switched to the strategy of neutrality.⁷³ It negotiated both sides in order not to take a side and struggled to contribute to keep the balance of power between the belligerent blocs. Turkey’s main concern throughout the war was that Germany’s destruction would produce an unbalanced Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. Turkey was able to follow neutrality due to the fact that German threat against Turkey was not immediate and the Soviets were occupied with countering German offense. It simply tried to gain time and was very successful in doing that. It declared war against Germany just two months before World War II ended. It was tactical, yet gave the early signals of abandoning the strategy of isolationism.

Indeed, political realities – the rise of Soviet Empire and the emergence of a new round of international conflict between the West and the East – that prevailed in the postwar period prevented Turkey from living up to the ideal of neither isolationism nor neutrality. The collapse of Germany created a huge power vacuum in Eastern Europe. This power vacuum left the Soviets unbalanced and enabled it to intensify its aggressive revisionist policies in the region.⁷⁴ This structural factor encouraged the Soviets, alongside other variables such as its historically imperialist geopolitics and expansionist communist ideology, to embark on expanding its autonomy at the expense of its neighbors. Turkey was one of its main targets. Turkey could not stand alone against the Soviets because of a large power imbalance. Turkey needed military assistance from other states to maintain its autonomy. This materialized in the form of bandwagoning the United States at a cost. Turkey had to give up some part of its autonomy to the United States not to lose more of it to the Soviets. The Soviets demanded Turkey to bequeath the lands in the northeast – the provinces of Kars and Ardahan which had been left to Turkey in 1921 – and to switch to joint control of the Straits, both the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, in order to control the Black Sea.⁷⁵ Facing overt Soviet threat of occupation, Turkey had no option but to jump into the U.S. wagon. It chose to be on the side of the great power, which was far away and

less demanding, instead of a neighboring great power whose threat was enormous and immediate.⁷⁶

This dependence on the United States intensified and gained an institutional character as the latter embarked on containing the Soviets by declaring the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and initiating the Marshall Plan in 1948. The United States included Turkey into its plan to uplift European states to be able to resist the Soviet expansion on the continent. Turkey's integration into the Western alliance system was completed after it entered the NATO in 1952. Turkey finally attained sufficient security guarantees to be able to sustain at least its sovereign independence and territorial integrity.⁷⁷ The price of U.S. security guarantees was a loss of a certain degree of autonomy. The United States drew the limits within which Turkey's foreign policies and also to an extent its domestic policies had to be kept. For instance, approaching the Soviet Union or viewing it and its communist ideology as the potential friend did not go unpunished. For instance, the ruling Democrat Party (DP) government planned a trip to talk for getting financial aid from the Soviet Union months before it was toppled by a military coup in May 1960.⁷⁸ The United States, which had a number of military bases and installations and active military personnel around 20,000 in Turkey, gave a tacit approval to the coup by preferring to keep silent.⁷⁹ Turkey was allowed to pursue foreign and domestic policies freely as long as they did not contradict the U.S. national interests, which were mainly shaped by the war against communism. When Turkey crossed the line, as exemplified by Turkey's Cyprus policy in 1964, 1967 and 1974, it was punished.⁸⁰ Turkey was blamed for destabilization and weakening the cohesion of the Western alliance by fueling an intra-alliance fight with Greece which had also strong influence over foreign policy decision-makers in Washington *via* its ethnic diaspora. Turkey was openly warned by the Johnson government that the United States would not protect Turkey against a Soviet invasion if it did not stop its assertive Cyprus policy in 1964 and suffered an arms embargo after Turkey invaded the island in 1974 as a result.⁸¹ At times, the United States acted unilaterally and put Turkey into harm's way. The Cuban missile crisis in 1961, which was perceived by Turkey as a Cuba-for-Turkey tradeoff and led a disappointment, was a perfect example.⁸² In the meantime, NATO's strategy change from massive nuclear retaliation to flexible response to counter an attack by the communist bloc raised suspicions in Turkey that the United States might easily jettison Turkish sovereignty to gain time in a conflict with the Soviet Union.⁸³ Tensions rose and fell throughout the Cold War, especially in the period of 1960–80, yet Turkey desperately kept sticking to the strategy of bandwagoning the United States in the face of persisting Soviet threat of occupation and infiltration, particularly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

In sum, Turkey made isolationism its main strategy to maintain its limited autonomy in the period of 1923–39. It had to switch to the strategy of neutrality as international stability was upset and tensions grew and forced all the states to take a side during World War II. However, Turkish decision-makers resisted pressures successfully till the end of the war. Turkey could follow those defensive and low-profile strategies –isolationism and neutrality– due to standing balance of power between Germany and the Soviets in the Eastern Europe. Collapse of Germany at the end of the Second World War left a power vacuum in the region and that paved the way for intensification of Russian revisionism. Turkey was one of the immediate targets of this revisionist and

expansionist power. Lacking the capacity to balance against the Soviets alone, Turkey faced a dilemma – either abiding by Soviet demands and becoming one of its satellite states or lose some part of its autonomy in return for joining the Western alliance under the U.S. leadership – and eventually decided to ask help from the United States. U.S. decision-makers decided to include Turkey into their plan to revive Europe to contain the Soviets. Thus, starting from the late 1940s, Turkey started to bandwagon the United States. It received military and economic aid and security guarantees from the United States in return for sharing its sovereignty by allowing the United States to establish military bases and use its territories in times of war and following the U.S. lead in its war against communism. This unavoidably cost Turkey some part of its autonomy. Since its alternative was being reduced to a Soviet satellite, Turkey opted for a lesser evil. Despite periodical tensions, Turkey continued to keep bandwagoning the United States until 1990s.

The revisionist Turkey and its leash-slipping strategies

The tension in the United States-Turkey relations did not subside after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even worse, it dramatically escalated as bipolarity gave way to unipolarity under U.S. leadership. The reason was mounting aggressive unilateralism in U.S. foreign policy. The United States acted in a way to disregard national interests of its allies more frequently and freely because the United States did not have to fear to lose its allies to another great power in the absence of a great power like the Soviet Union that would threaten its bid for hegemony.⁸⁴ Nor did it have to worry that former Soviet allies might form a balancing alliance against the United States because they lacked material capabilities and will to do so.⁸⁵ Not many of those states were directly and negatively influenced by rising U.S. unilateralism. Turkey was one of the countries that U.S. unilateralism harmed most because the United States focused on the larger Middle East where Turkey is located. Besides, disappearance of the Soviet threat diminished Turkey's need for security guarantees provided by the United States. This made Turkey more sensitive about its national interests and reluctant to relinquish its autonomy. Washington's critical stance toward Turkey's democratic performance especially with regards to the Kurdish minority exacerbated the tensions.⁸⁶ The United States became more vocal regarding condemning undemocratic practices of its allies, especially human rights violations, after the common enemy vanished. U.S. aggressive unilateralism and its goal to make the world safe for democracy by regime change constituted a new international strategy: liberal hegemony.⁸⁷ The policy of liberal hegemony replaced the war on communism and shaped the international system in the 1990s. The policy of liberal hegemony poisoned the United States-Turkey relations. Turkey started to question its long-held strategy of bandwagoning the United States.⁸⁸

The first target of liberal hegemony in the region was Iraq. The United States invaded Iraq in 1991, which came after Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Turkey supported the Operation Desert Storm, which was authorized by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 678 of November 1990 in order to expel the Iraqi forces from Kuwait, by opening its airspace and military bases for the use of international coalition led by the United States. However, this operation changed the situation in Iraq and led to the emergence of a Kurdish autonomous region in the northern part

of the country. This got the alarm bells ringing in Ankara, especially regarding the fact that the United States supported the formation of a united Kurdish entity in Northern Iraq to counterweight the regime in Baghdad. Turkey feared that this might pave the way for an independent Kurdish state. This might directly threaten Turkey with a loss of territory and unleashing unrest and terror inside the borders by triggering PKK activism and separatism, which had already accelerated after a safe zone in Northern Iraq was established to protect the Kurdish civilians from the Baghdad regime.⁸⁹ The 1990s, indeed, were one of the bloodiest and most violent decades in modern Turkey's history. Clashes between Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the PKK caused a death toll of over 30,000 in the period of 1993–98.⁹⁰ Combining with disappearance of Soviet threat, which was the *raison d'être* of Turkey's abandonment of the strategy of neutrality and jumping into the U.S. wagon after 1945, U.S. unilateralism gradually induced Turkey to question its long-held strategy of bandwagoning. As noted, intensifying U.S. critique of the Turkish regime of not abiding by democratic principles and making U.S. military and economic aid and sales conditional to Turkey's human rights record also played a part in starting this questioning, especially within the Turkish military.⁹¹ One of the outcomes of Ankara's growing distrust of the United States was Turkey's refusal to allow the United States to use Incirlik military base in order to put pressure on the Baghdad regime to cooperate with the United Nations (UN) arms inspectors in 1998. Turkey considered reducing its dependence on the United States and backing it up with political projects that promised to end its long-lasting estrangement with its surrounding regions and placed Turkey's integration with those regions at the center of its foreign policy. This was definitely buttressed by the rising importance of the regional dimension of international politics as global rivalries disappeared.⁹² These alternative projects indicated a radical strategy change. They were a sign of a leash-slipping strategy. Among those projects the most prominent was to integrate Turkey into the emerging European continental state (pan-Europeanism).⁹³ Another project was filling the power vacuum in the Caucasus and Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union by strengthening Turkey's ties and cooperation with the Turkic world (pan-Turkism).⁹⁴ The participants believed it would lay the foundations for a regional state which could create a new geopolitical force in the system. The third one considered approaching the Muslim world by emphasizing common Islamic identity. This envisaged creating an Islamic super polity to facilitate political unity of the Muslim world as a separate geopolitical force in the system (pan-Islamism).⁹⁵ The last one required Turkey's integration with the ex-Ottoman regions to reconstruct a neo-Ottoman regional order, mainly in the Balkans and the Middle East (neo-Ottomanism).⁹⁶ Yet none of them, especially the latter two, passed the stage of soul-searching or was put into practice. Turkey's entrenched moderate and cautious foreign policy culture based on the Kemalist isolationist model of "fortress Turkey" at the state level closed the doors to those assertive foreign policies.⁹⁷

These political projects were completely swept aside after Turkey, like other states in the system, came under intense U.S. pressure with the declaration of Bush doctrine, which was issued in response to the September 11, 2001, attacks on civilian targets on American soil. States were compelled to line up with the United States in its war on terror. The global issues once again became prevalent over the regional ones in foreign policy making. The Bush government issued a warning that those resisting to

act in accordance with the United States would be considered an enemy force and a supporter of terrorism.⁹⁸ Many states recognized that the United States had a right to self-defense against terror attacks but they were concerned that this might be used as a pretext to expand U.S. interests at their expense.⁹⁹ These concerns proved right with the U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003. This gave a new tint to the policy of liberal hegemony that the United States would easily augment its aggressive unilateralism and tightened its grip on other states in the system. In this tense atmosphere, Turkey had nothing but to keep bandwagoning the United States, this time not to get security guarantee against a third country but to appease the United States which was now the primary threat to Turkey's autonomy in the sense that the United States restricted Turkey's freedom of action in international politics more than any other state by imposing its own foreign policy agenda. In the context of Bush doctrine, by getting majority of its allies backing through activating the Article V of NATO, the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Turkey supported United States' war on terror with the hope of convincing the Western world to recognize its own war on terror against the PKK and joined the international coalition to support the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda along with many European countries. However, Turkey opposed U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, alongside many other states including France which was a NATO country and a permanent member of UNSC, because Turkey thought that it would destabilize the region by causing refugee flows and harm Iraq's territorial integrity. In order to prevent the operation within its limits, Turkey struggled desperately to convince Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to take steps to appease the United States and had diplomatic meetings with other regional states to act in coordination. Having sour memories of the outcomes of the Gulf War in 1991, which cost Turkey a lot both militarily and economically, Turkey did not allow the United States to deploy its forces to open a northern front against Iraq in March 2003.¹⁰⁰ This caused a shock in Washington and American officials openly stated their disappointment. For instance, the U.S. deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz asked Turkey to accept its mistake and apologize to the United States for the decision.¹⁰¹ However, under intensifying pressures, Turkey had to allow the U.S. jets to use the Turkish airspace in the following weeks.¹⁰² This move was partially motivated by Turkey's desire to take a part in the operation to have some control over Northern Iraq, but the U.S. officials opposed Turkey's deployment of its troops in Northern Iraq. In short, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 escalated the instability in the region, deepened Turkey's fears of losing national unity and territorial integrity and furthered its alienation from the United States.¹⁰³ The so-called hood incident, which took place in the city of Suleymaniye in Northern Iraq in June 2003 where 11 members of the Turkish Special Forces who were on duty in the region detained, hooded and interrogated by the U.S. forces for 60 h, deteriorated the inter-state relations and demonstrated that the Turkish and U.S. soldiers now might confront each other.¹⁰⁴ In order to overturn its waning influence and balance the United States in the region, Turkey started to conduct cross-border operations in Northern Iraq against the PKK. For instance, in February 2008, around 10,000 Turkish troops crossed the Turkish-Iraqi border for a week-long operation against the PKK, whose attacks became much more frequent in the 2006–07 period.¹⁰⁵ United States' pursuit of aggressive unilateralism for regime and territory change in foreign policy persisted in the following years.

Turkey's security concerns and fears of declining autonomy reached to the highest levels (see below).

U.S. determination to pursue the policy of liberal hegemony drove Turkey once again to seek ways to diminish its security dependence on the United States in the mid-2000s. This search for a new direction in foreign policy gave way to three political projects which represented alternative leash-slipping strategies. The first one proposed to rejuvenate the long-held idea of integrating Turkey into an emerging European continental state by "Europeanizing" Turkey's foreign policy.¹⁰⁶ The second one suggested that Turkey had to turn its face to the East, increase its cooperation with the Eurasian powers and become a part of the emerging power bloc in Asia.¹⁰⁷ The third one propounded that Turkey had to enhance its cooperation with the states in its vicinity, especially those in the Balkans, Caucasus, and the Middle East.¹⁰⁸ The national boundaries separating Anatolia from these three regions were thought to lose their significance as shared historical-civilizational identity and interests revived, which was dubbed as normalization of history, in the process of intensifying interactions.¹⁰⁹ Turkey was able to put the third leash-slipping strategy into practice under the umbrella concept of "zero problems with the neighbors."¹¹⁰ This strategy guided foreign policy for 3 years. Turkey embarked on to stabilize the region and improve the inter-state relations. It had also sought to convince its neighbors to democratize by opening room for participatory politics.¹¹¹ Those policies were put into practice for a new and integrated regional order. Turkey recommended an evolutionary path to achieve integration and prepare the ground for a large-scale regional political entity in the long run in the region. The 2010 Arab revolts ruined this policy. Whereas Turkey planned a step by step move toward democratic regimes and a new regional order, the societal opposition to authoritarian regimes posed a revolutionary challenge to their ruling elite. The region automatically divided into reformist and status quo blocs. Turkey and Qatar constituted the reformist bloc whereas states such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt were in the status quo bloc.¹¹² The region plunged into a wave of instability and bloody clashes and Turkey found itself in a desperate situation of having to choose a side. Turkey sided with the democratization forces. This led Turkey to a loss of contact with the regimes that were in control of political and military power in the region and to opening a new chapter Turkish foreign policy, which was dubbed "valuable loneliness."¹¹³ Extra-regional powers, especially the United States, also played a disruptive role in the struggle between authoritarian and democratization forces. The United States followed the policy of liberal hegemony and supported the democratization forces that sought to topple the authoritarian regimes.¹¹⁴ This was clearly indicated by President Barak Obama in a historic speech given on 19 May 2011. He stated that "America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator" and "the United States of America welcomes change that advances self-determination and opportunity."¹¹⁵ Turkey, since it sided with the democratization forces, followed the United States to change the authoritarian regimes. However, Turkey mistakenly thought that enormous U.S. material capability and coercive measures were essential for the success of democratization in the region. Nor could Turkey predict that the United States might change its foreign policy objective from regime change to fight against the ISIS during the Arab Spring. Turkey also miscalculated the capacity of democratization forces which were easily stopped and

crushed by the regime forces, particularly in Egypt and Syria. After all, the majority of the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East survived the Arab Spring.¹¹⁶ Besides, in the states where the regime change was successful or the regime was crippled, stable democratic regimes did not emerge. A wave of chaos followed during and after the Arab Spring. The emerging power vacuum created a fertile ground for terrorist organizations. The ISIS emerged and channeled the reformist energy into radicalism and violence.¹¹⁷ Turkey was one of its targets. The ISIS and the YPG (the Syrian branch of the PKK), which did not want to miss the opportunity to create a sphere of influence in northern Syria, started to attack Turkey. Chaos spiraled inside the country and reached its climax in the years of 2015–16.¹¹⁸ Both the ISIS and the YPG charged the borders and organized suicide attacks against the civilians inside on Turkey's territory. In the midst of expanding chaos, the United States abandoned the failed policy of regime change in Syria and took a defensive status quo position instead. The United States began to focus on crushing the ISIS.¹¹⁹ As of 2016, Turkey found itself alone in its fight against terrorist groups and Syrian Armed Forces, further complicated by the Russian forces' advances into the spots that the United States had abandoned in Syria.¹²⁰

The series of failed regime change attempts in the last two decades finally precipitated the United States to question its foreign policy objective of liberal hegemony and gradually shifted to the strategy of containing China, Russia, and Iran.¹²¹ There was now an immediate danger to U.S. supremacy in the system as indicated in *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2017): "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity."¹²² Accordingly, the United States has switched from expanding to maintaining its autonomy, more specifically its hegemonic position within the system.¹²³ In accordance with this critical policy change, the United States started the process of withdrawing its troops from the Middle East without achieving any substantial success after a 20-year occupation. The U.S. forces finally left Afghanistan and Iraq in the second half of 2021.¹²⁴ This policy change was a response to the fading of the unipolar international system and its replacement by an emerging polarization between the United States and the China-Russia axis.¹²⁵ The United States once again has begun to coerce its NATO allies to acknowledge the China-Russia axis as a shared threat, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, distance themselves from Russia and China, and play a more active role in confronting them¹²⁶ Almost all the allies agreed to a degree to confront the Chinese-Russian axis.¹²⁷ Disappointed with United States' Syrian policy and support for the YPG, Turkey for the first time since 1952 openly and decisively refused to bandwagon the United States.¹²⁸ This definitely does not amount to Turkey having sided with the emerging China-Russian axis, which is hardly possible considering Turkey to be a member of the NATO. Yet, Turkey declared its intention to pursue the policy of strategic autonomy with the price of being subjected to U.S. diplomatic threats and military and economic sanctions.¹²⁹ Neither it means to remain neutral between the two blocs. Turkey started to pursue a new leash-slipping strategy which aims to create the Turkish axis or another geopolitical force in the system. Turkey wants, like many other regional powers, a multipolar international system where power is diffused and autonomy of regional powers increases.¹³⁰

The recent leash-slipping strategy requires improving national defense industry and developing military cooperation with the neighbors in surrounding regions. The previous leash-slipping strategies had taken the soft power first approach by laying economic and cultural interactions as the basis of inter-state cooperation. The recent leash-slipping strategy, in contrast, takes the hard power first approach by developing a national defense industry for diminishing the country's security dependence on the United States, making use of new weapons for setting cooperative relations with the neighbors, and providing military assistance to those states that need to confront challenges to their national security. Even though the military dimension takes precedence in developing cooperation, it does not directly and overtly confront the United States or other power in the region. It is not an attempt to form a balance against a particular state or a group of states, but it is an attempt to create a concerted power and therefore another pole or great power in the system.

For that purpose, Turkey has embarked on improving its national defense industry. Turkey's share in total global import of weapons diminished from 2.4 to 1.3% whereas its share in total global export of weapons rose 0.5% in the years between 2018 and 2022.¹³¹ In comparison with the previous four-year period (2014–18), Turkey's military imports fell 49% while its military exports increased 69% between 2018–22.¹³² Turkey occupied the seventh place in the list of countries that import military equipment from the United States in 2018. Turkey fell to the 27th place in that list as of 2022.¹³³ Turkey could only produce 20% of its own military equipment in 2004. It was able to produce 68% of it in 2018. This increased to 80% in 2022.¹³⁴ Turkish defense industry was running 194 projects in 2008. This number has increased to over 750 in 2022.¹³⁵ The total budget of those projects was \$19 billion in 2008, and rose to \$75 billion in 2022.¹³⁶ These numbers indicate that Turkey has been moving fast to end its security dependence on the United States by producing domestically and developing its national defense industry. These developments, on the other hand, have facilitated Turkey to attract allies in the system. By using the leverage created by Turkey's increasing military capacity, Turkey helped Qatar to break away from the diplomatic blockade launched by its neighbors in the Gulf region in 2017.¹³⁷ It helped the Libyan central government to save itself from a coup in 2019 and facilitated the government's security in the aftermath.¹³⁸ In 2020, it helped Azerbaijan in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War to recover the territories lost three decades ago.¹³⁹ Starting from 2016, despite insistent protests by the U.S, Turkey has launched a number of military operations in northern Syria to mainly arrest YPG's progress and push it back from the Turkish borders.¹⁴⁰ Turkey has also increased its military presence abroad. So far, it has set up military bases in Qatar and Somalia.¹⁴¹ It has deployed troops to Syria, Iraq, and Libya and seeks to expand its military presence in these countries.¹⁴² In order to boost its material capacity and reduce its energy dependence, Turkey also embarked on aggressive drilling in the Black Sea and the East Mediterranean with the hope of discovering sources of fossil fuels.¹⁴³ It has achieved a limited success on this matter so far.

Moreover, Turkey had fallen out with the states such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt that sought to maintain the status quo in the region after the Arab revolts and ensuing regional and inter-state crises. This caused Turkey's partial isolation in the region. These countries had also sought to contain Turkey in cooperation with Greece,

France, and Israel after relations worsened due to energy competition and the struggle over Libya.¹⁴⁴ After a decade-long cold war, in 2021 Turkey has started to take decisive steps to normalize the relations with these regional states in order to end its isolation in the region and break the anti-Turkey alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁴⁵ Starting the normalization process was a precondition for Turkey to be able to pursue a leash-slipping strategy. The leash-slipping strategy naturally gets states to prioritize the relations with the states in their surrounding regions over the relations with great powers. Indeed, despite their considerable differences, all the leash-slipping strategies that Turkey strived to implement in the last three decades gave priority to relations with the states in its surrounding regions.¹⁴⁶ Turkey's desire for normalizing relations has been reciprocated by the Arab states in the region. This was mainly due to the decline of U.S. hegemony and its repercussions in the Middle East. The United States, in fact, has not completely withdrawn from the region. However, it has significantly reduced its security commitments to the Middle East states. Especially those Arab states whose security dependence on the United States is very high have started to look for alternative policies. They have not abandoned the United States. They have just deployed policies to reduce their security dependence on the United States. To that end, they have taken two important steps that give precedence to the local-regional dimension. First, they have initiated the process of solving inter-Arab differences by ending the blockade against Qatar and readmitting Syria to the Arab League.¹⁴⁷ Second, they decided to normalize the relations with non-Arab states – Turkey and Iran – in the region.¹⁴⁸ Alongside these policies, they started to put more emphasis on internal balancing by taking decisive steps to improve their own defense industry.¹⁴⁹ This was accompanied by attempts to develop close relations with other great powers of the system – China and Russia.¹⁵⁰ Overall, the regional dimension and relations have become critical for all the states in the region under new international conditions and this strengthened Turkey's hand in pursuing the strategy of leash-slipping. In addition to the Middle East, Turkey has also played an active role in rejuvenating regionalism among the Turkic states.¹⁵¹ The Organization of Turkic States plays a pivotal role in this respect. It is an attempt to turn those scattered Turkic states in the Caucasus and Central Asia into a rather loose political union, or in other words to produce an “international state” out of the multiplicity of ethnically Turkic states. Indeed, one of the goals of this organization is to get the member states to take a common stance in international political issues.

In sum, Turkey welcomed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet, this created an unbalanced U.S. power in the system. The United States grew interventionist and aggressively unilateral, especially in the Middle East. The policy of liberal hegemony that the United States deployed after the Cold War meant Turkey had to look for alternative strategies. Starting from the 1990s, Turkey has sought to pursue various leash-slipping strategies alongside other strategies such as soft balancing and hedging in its struggle for autonomy. All these leash-slipping strategies were revisionist and aimed to extend autonomy by building a new center of power in the system. The first wave in the 1990s was never put into action. The second wave in the 2000s was implemented until the start of the Arab revolts. The third wave has started after 2016 and is still running its course. All the leash-slipping strategies Turkey deployed have given priority to regionalism, which encapsulates policies of integrating Turkey into

its surrounding regions including the Middle East, the Balkans, and Caucasus and the Central Asia. The first wave failed, *inter alia*, because the United States compelled its allies to take a stance in the global war on terror. This stemmed the rising tide of regionalism. The second wave, on the other hand, was doomed because the Middle East region entered into a deep instability after the Arab revolts. Turkey could not handle the crisis skillfully and made serious strategic mistakes. The third wave has had difficult times especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The war united most U.S. allies, although Turkey chose to abstain from the coalition and declared that it would not bandwagon the United States anymore. This may usher a new era in Turkish foreign policy, if Turkey can sustain and consolidate the policy of strategic autonomy.

Conclusions

Strategic autonomy appears to be Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine. There are competing accounts of this policy. The first one asserts that the policy marks a shift in Turkish foreign policy from abandoning the liberal West as an alliance partner to embracing the authoritarian East.¹⁵² The second one argues that the policy serves Turkey to manage current international instability and polarization *via* strategy of hedging.¹⁵³ The third account highlights Turkey's desire to bring back the regional imperial system.¹⁵⁴ This analysis offers an alternative account of the policy of strategic autonomy by arguing that it involves Turkey's attempt to expand its autonomy by implementing a leash-slipping strategy.

Turkey has attempted to pursue the strategy of leash-slipping several times since the end of the Cold War because it was not satisfied with the amount of autonomy that bandwagoning the United States supplied, especially after the United States employed the policy of liberal hegemony. Turkey was critical of U.S. invasions for regime and territory change in the neighboring countries in the Middle East, of subversive impacts on Turkey's national security, and of meddling into its domestic politics.¹⁵⁵ Thus, Turkey wanted to increase its autonomy by reducing its dependence on the United States. Turkey believed the strategy of leash-slipping would bring it more autonomy. The Turkish case shows that the struggle for autonomy lies at the center of international politics. It is its overarching goal. It provides a common ground for all the goals that states can struggle for –survival, conquering the world, and the desire to be left alone. The goals of survival and the desire to be left alone are pursued by satisfied states to maintain the amount of autonomy they have. They are status quo powers. The goal of conquering the world, on the other hand, is put to use by dissatisfied states which seek to expand their autonomy. They are revisionist powers.

To maintain or expand their autonomy, states resort to various strategies. Satisfied states deploy defensive strategies to stem revisionism in the system. Hard balancing is a prominent defensive strategy. Neutrality, soft balancing, hedging, and defensive bandwagoning are other defensive strategies. Dissatisfied states pursue offensive strategies to change the status quo. Risk-acceptant aggression, economic pre-balancing and leash-slipping are primary offensive strategies. Turkey remained a status quo power for a long time. The strategy of isolationism and neutrality determined Turkey's foreign policy in the interwar period (1923–45). Turkey followed the strategy of bandwagoning

the United States during the Cold War (1945–90). Dismayed with U.S. policy of liberal hegemony, Turkey has become a revisionist power in the post-Cold War era and attempted to switch to the strategy of leash-slipping several times. All of those attempts have involved distinct forms of regionalism to establish a larger polity and thus another geopolitical force in the global international system. The first two of those three attempts failed for various reasons.

Turkey has started to implement a leash-slipping strategy for the third time after a wave of turbulence engulfed its domestic politics and foreign policy in 2016. This move came about when Turkey started to question the reliability of its Western allies more seriously than ever.¹⁵⁶ The relations plummeted to historical lows. Turkish officials declared that having strategic autonomy has become a vital issue.¹⁵⁷ This puts the recent leash-slipping strategy apart from the previous ones. As the degree of alienation with the Western world peaked, Turkey has become more adamant about the pursuit of the leash-slipping strategy to diminish its security dependence on the United States. It also diverges from the previous cases with regard to the prominence of the hard power first approach. The previous attempts largely relied on the soft power first approach. Turkey believed that developing cultural and economic interactions would create a path that would bring in time political and military integration. The latest attempt gives priority to the use of hard power.

Will the latest attempt fail, too? The rate of success of leash-slipping is very low because it is adopted by states which are in a very disadvantageous position. They lack material capacity to meet their high political ambitions. They aspire to erect another geopolitical force in the international system within the possible shortest time. They look for short-cuts to bridge the power gap with the great power(s) of the system. They implement self-strengthening reforms but place precedent on convincing other states to join forces to build a state-like international entity to be able to put forth another pole in the system. They struggle to lead the process of pooling states' power capacities and expect to turn them into a united political and military power. They are different from the states opting to follow the strategy of economic pre-balancing. The strategy of economic pre-balancing requires states to be forbearing. They reap the reward of their efforts after a long-time toiling. However, states employing the strategy of economic pre-balancing give priority to self-strengthening reforms, especially to economic and administrative undertakings. Economic pre-balancing figures as a strategy that puts a premium on self-reliance. Thus, its basic advantage over the leash-slipping strategy is that states pursuing economic pre-balancing have significant control over the capacity building process.

States seeking to implement the leash-slipping strategy lack that degree of control over capacity building and therefore have to overcome three important obstacles. They are all related to coalition-building. The first one is to find partners that share similar goals and are ready to cooperate. For instance, De Gaulle's France in the 1960s failed to convince Germany to work for an autonomous and powerful Europe. The second one is to attract follower states with relatively limited power capacity and ready to accept emerging hierarchy within the coalition. The Great Britain, for example, did not get positive signals from its ex-colonies in its attempt to erect another pole in the system in the early years of the Cold War. The third one is to preempt the divide-and-conquer tactics deployed by the status quo power(s) to preclude the revisionist coalition

to emerge. The United States played a subversive role in all the cases that European states put forth in the second half of the twentieth-century. The United States employed policies ranging from diplomatic pressures to divide-and-rule tactics to hamper those European states to establish themselves as a geopolitical third force.¹⁵⁸ The Great Britain in the late 1940s, France throughout the 1960s and the EU in the 1990s did not get the desired results.

Turkey faces similar problems in its current attempt to pursue the leash-slipping strategy. First of all, Turkey does not have partners sharing similar goals that are ready to cooperate. Turkey's position in its surrounding regions can be compared to Germany's position in Europe. Its call for strategic autonomy has caused suspicion and evoked past memories of the empire. Besides, regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have their own agendas to expand autonomy. Iran and Saudi Arabia seek to expand their autonomy respectively by building coalitions based on sectarian and ethnic ties. In the absence of opportunities for cooperation among the regional powers, the presence of a large power imbalance in a particular state's favor might increase chances for regional integration, like German unification under the Prussian leadership in mid-nineteenth century. However, none of these countries, including Turkey, is strong enough to enforce others for regional integration. They are rather in a position to balance each other. Secondly, follower states in general look for security guarantees and economic aids. Turkey has started to attract some of the regional states by providing military support. Nevertheless, its military power is still limited compared not only with the global powers but also with the regional powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia. This situation causes follower states to act cautiously and to keep multiple partners which could also be a source of military support. Moreover, nor does Turkey have economic capacity to attract follower states by supplying cheap credits, economic aids and extending privileges to access its markets. Finally, extra-regional powers such as the United States and Russia (and recently China) actively operate in the region. They have confronted Turkey in various fronts such as Syria and Libya and played a subversive role in Turkey's attempt to expand its influence by building coalitions in the region.

The main predicament of the state implementing the strategy of leash-slipping is then to have limited material capacity to pursue highly ambitious political goals. This state seeks to expand its autonomy by erecting another geopolitical force in the system. Yet it does not have the required means to accomplish that goal. One of the ways to overcome this predicament may be to find and apply the best tactics. For instance, Victoria Tin-bor Hui discusses how a relatively weaker state (Qin) at the margins conquered the whole Chinese states system. Qin was able to create a unified Chinese Empire not because it was materially superior but it applied the best tactics to overcome the countervailing mechanisms of balance of power and rising costs of expansion.¹⁵⁹ Thus, it is key for Turkey or any state pursuing the strategy of leash-slipping is to find and apply the best tactics. Only can the states overcome material capacity disadvantages by compensating it with the best tactics.

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