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Navigating a contested hierarchy: competing strategies of Japan and Türkiye in the US-led order

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ABSTRACT

The US-led hierarchical order has come under increasing strain as the United States has shifted from a relatively restrained provider of international order towards a more unilateral and transactional posture, generating uncertainty among its allies. These pressures have been compounded by the rise of China and Russia, which provide alternative centres of power for some states while posing strategic threats to others. States traditionally dependent on the United States have consequently recalibrated their strategies. Two contrasting responses are high-intensity hedging and leash-slipping. Both employ similar means but pursue different ends. High-intensity hedging reinforces dependence on the United States by enhancing a state's strategic value, whereas leash-slipping seeks greater autonomy by loosening dependence without exiting the alliance. This divergence raises a central question: why do states adopt different strategies within the same hierarchical order? This study addresses this puzzle through a three-level framework and a comparative analysis of Japan and Türkiye.

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Introduction

The post-war international order has combined the formal legal equality of states with hierarchical relationships in which secondary states accept constraints on their strategic autonomy in exchange for security and other benefits from the United States (Ikenberry 2001, 4; Lake 2018). This hegemonic bargain has come under increasing strain as the United States has shifted from a relatively restrained provider of international order towards a more coercive, unilateral, and transactional posture, generating growing pressures and concerns among its allies (Stokes 2018; Cooley and Nexon 2020; Haass 2021; Pesu and Sinkkonen 2024; Walt 2026). The rise of China and Russia and the transition towards a more multipolar international system have further eroded the structural foundations of US predominance and weakened the credibility of US leadership (Lim and John Ikenberry 2023). Consequently, states within the US-led hierarchy have increasingly sought to recalibrate their relations with the United States in response to the changing dynamics of the hierarchy, adopting divergent strategies (Silove 2018).

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Two prominent among these strategies are high-intensity hedging and leash-slipping (Lobell et al. 2015, 147). Both strategies employ similar means of enhancing state power, including building indigenous capabilities, diversifying security partnerships, and strengthening the state's regional position. However, they differ in their ultimate objectives for leveraging enhanced state power. States pursuing high-intensity hedging seek to enhance their strategic value to the hegemon by contributing more to the alliance, thereby making themselves indispensable allies within the existing hierarchy (Chijiwa 2026). In doing so, they reinforce their strategic dependence on the United States by aligning their foreign policy closely with US strategic directives. States pursuing leash-slipping, by contrast, seek to expand strategic autonomy by strengthening their capabilities and broadening their room for manoeuvre while loosening their dependence on the United States without fully exiting the alliance, thereby increasingly determining and pursuing their own strategic directives (Taş Yetim and Hazar 2023; Taş Yetim and Çağlayan 2026). Thus, although the two strategies may employ similar means, they pursue fundamentally different ends: high-intensity hedging seeks to reinforce the alliance and sustain the existing hierarchy, whereas leash-slipping seeks to loosen hierarchical dependence and expand the state's autonomy both within and beyond the alliance.

This study explains variation in states' strategies within the US-led hierarchy through the interplay of structural, domestic, and individual-level factors, drawing on neoclassical realist theory of international politics, which holds that neither domestic nor international pressures determine outcomes on their own; rather, outcomes emerge from the interaction between structure and agency (Ripsman et al. 2016, 4). Structural conditions, which vary across regions depending on the type and level of US engagement and the presence of a rising regional power or threat, create different degrees of systemic pressure towards strategic dependence or greater autonomy. Leaders, in turn, determine how states respond to these pressures, depending on both their leadership characteristics and strategic orientation – that is, whether they seek to reinforce strategic dependence or pursue greater autonomy and, if so, which strategy they adopt. Domestic factors, such as material capabilities, the regime's political-cultural dependence on the hegemon, and the degree of decision-making centralization, function as enabling or constraining conditions that shape the feasibility of these strategic choices (Taliaferro 2006). Importantly, however, domestic conditions are not static constraints: they may subsequently be reshaped through the implementation of the strategies they initially enable or constrain. In this sense, strategic choices can generate feedback effects that alter the domestic conditions underlying future strategic choices.

Japan and Türkiye are selected as a structured comparison because both are secondary states embedded in the US-led hierarchy and face a common structural transformation marked by growing US unilateralism and transactionalism. However, the regional manifestations of this transformation differ: US strategic engagement remains deeper in East Asia, where Japan also faces the significant external challenge posed by China, whereas Türkiye operates in a more fluid regional environment characterized by competing great and regional powers. Thus, the cases do not share identical structural conditions but face a broadly similar transformation of the US-led hierarchy while varying in the intensity and regional context of these pressures. This combination provides leverage for examining how leadership orientations and domestic conditions mediate structural pressures

and contribute to divergent strategies: Japan's high-intensity hedging and Türkiye's leash-slipping.

Divergent strategies for navigating a contested hierarchy

The strategy adopted by a subordinate state in response to changes in hierarchical relations is shaped by two primary independent variables: structural conditions and leadership. The interplay between these two variables therefore determines the variation in the strategies states adopt to navigate the contested hierarchy. At the structural level, one key factor is the patron state's degree of engagement with the region in which the subordinate state is located, which serves as a condition of structural imperative for secondary states to pursue strategic autonomy (Walt 1997, 159). A great power can adopt four primary strategic postures vis-à-vis a specific region along a spectrum ranging from high engagement to total detachment – deep engagement (Craig et al. 2013; Norrlof and Wohlforth 2019) (either consensual and stabilizing, or predatory and coercive Lanoszka 2013, 383), offshore balancing (Brands 2016a; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016), retrenchment (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012/13; Brands 2016a), and strategic disengagement (Posen and Ross 1996/1997; Dueck 2004) – each defined by varying levels of material commitment and diplomatic-institutional engagement that directly dictate the structural imperative for subordinate secondary states to pursue strategic autonomy.

Under a consensual, deeply engaged hegemon, the imperative for autonomy remains low, leading secondary states to free-ride on security commitments and adopt low-intensity hedging, which is typically employed by secondary states operating in stable, secure, and predictable geopolitical environments characterized by an ironclad security umbrella provided by a hegemon and the absence of an immediate, aggressive regional predator (Plümber and Neumayer 2015; Ikenberry 2016). Conversely, a predatory hegemon drives a high imperative for autonomy, splitting secondary state strategies between desperate leash-slipping (Waltz 2012) and a latent hedging posture characterized by extensive performative compliance masks hiding a quiet, long-term accumulation of industrial and technological infrastructure (Goldstein 2001; Foot 2006). As the great power shifts towards offshore balancing or retrenchment, the structural imperative for autonomy declines, particularly when the hegemon acts coercively. At the same time, reduced engagement by the hegemon encourages regional challengers with the potential to become local hegemons to more aggressively fill the emerging power vacuum through intensified leash-slipping. Meanwhile, other regional states, facing abandonment, respond with high-intensity hedging – combining increased defence burden-sharing and intra-regional balancing coalitions with deep economic ties to the rising regional power to preserve the status quo (Press-Barnathan 2006; Mead 2014; Charalambides 2022). Or else, they may pressure the hegemon to increase its engagement in the region, enhance their material capabilities, and form balancing coalitions against the rising regional power rather than pursuing engagement (Silove 2016).

Finally, when the hegemon pursues complete strategic disengagement, structural permissiveness and the imperative for strategic autonomy reach their highest levels. Faced with an emerging power vacuum, secondary states with the potential to become regional hegemons are likely to pursue offensive strategies aimed at establishing spheres of influence within their respective regions (Allison 2020). Other secondary states, facing

abandonment, by contrast, undergo rapid strategic adaptation, initially engaging in high-intensity hedging by seeking to attract an alternative external great power to the region (Zhou 2025). Should such efforts fail, they may resort to more desperate forms of strategic adaptation, including desperate leash-slipping through rapid internal balancing and the pursuit of nuclear deterrent capabilities (Hobbs and Moran 2025), or latent hedging, to ensure their security and survival in an increasingly unconstrained regional environment (Meijer and Brooks 2021; Wertheim 2025).

Another important structural variable is the presence of a strong regional power, which shapes the structural imperative for strategic autonomy. Once a regional power becomes sufficiently strong, it often seeks to establish an exclusive buffer zone, or sphere of influence, around its borders to exclude external great powers (Suslov 2018). Under such conditions, local states lose much of their freedom to determine their own alignments. The regional power may prohibit them from joining external military alliances or hosting foreign military bases. Moreover, to ensure compliance, it may intervene directly in the domestic politics of subordinate states by supporting compliant elites, financing political actors, or undermining democratic institutions to keep local governments aligned with its interests (Stronski and Homes 2019). For subordinate states, these dynamics substantially heighten the structural imperative for strategic autonomy (Ross 2006, 359; Helwig 2023, 58). In this case, local states' strategic options for pursuing autonomy tend to narrow to three main choices. The first is a strategy of high-intensity hedging, involving the invitation of a global hegemon into the region as a balancing force (Jacimovic et al. 2023). If this strategy fails, states are compelled to resort to more desperate forms of leash-slipping, intensive balancing or to adopt latent hedging strategies (Lundestad 1986; Kuik 2016; Koga 2016; Fatton 2018).

At the individual level, leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping a subordinate state's strategy aimed at reducing dependence on the hierarchy. Although decision-makers operate within the constraints of structural and domestic factors, they still possess agency to influence political outcomes based on their belief systems or personal characteristics (Hermann 1980; Walker and Schafer 2006). Leadership acts as the agent of change that navigates domestic and structural constraints by defining both the will and direction of reducing dependence on the hierarchy. This helps explain why the foreign policies of different states may vary significantly – even under similar structural conditions – or why a single state's foreign policy can shift over time as leadership changes (Hudson 2005).

Consequently, when a state is led by a transformational leader who values strategic autonomy and seeks a more prominent role in the international system, it is more likely to pursue a more costly strategy aimed at reducing dependence on the hierarchy, such as leash-slipping (Byman and Pollack 2001). They are motivated by long-term legacy, national greatness, and absolute sovereignty rather than short-term stability. Leash-slipping requires extracting substantial resources from domestic society to build independent capabilities, and a transformational leader possesses the political capital, charisma, and will to persuade – or compel – the public to bear these costs by 'appealing their higher ideals and moral values' (Nye 2006, 163; Kizilkaya et al. 2023).

However, a transformational leader need not necessarily be hierarchy-rejecting (Liff and Lipscy 2022). A leader may have a clear vision of changing his country's strategic role and actively seek to reshape the institutions through which foreign policy is made while simultaneously pursuing an alliance-reinforcing strategy, thereby reflecting a pragmatic

approach to strategic change (Jain 2026). Thus, leadership style and strategic orientation are analytically distinct: a leader can adopt a transformational style while maintaining a hierarchy-reinforcing strategic orientation. This type of leadership tends to pursue high-intensity hedging, undertaking significant strategic and institutional transformations while maintaining a broadly status quo–oriented strategic orientation towards the hierarchic alliance (Naidu and Ishida 2022).

In contrast, when such leadership is absent and leadership is transactional, the subordinate state is less likely to pursue strategic autonomy, instead opting for low-intensity hedging within the existing hierarchy (Nagy 2017, 231). This is because transactional leadership generally exerts a weaker motivational force, as transactional leaders tend to appeal primarily to the self-interests of their followers (Nye 2006, 163). Low-intensity hedging is the ultimate bureaucratic compromise: it allows the state to incrementally manage its vulnerabilities and diversify its risks without provoking a crisis, without over-allocating national wealth to massive military build-ups, and without disrupting the comfortable status quo (Kuik 2016).

At the domestic level, three factors – material capacity, regime security and legitimacy, and decision-making centralization – act as enabling or constraining conditions through which leadership translates structural pressures into policy. First, transformational leadership, whether hierarchy-rejecting or alliance-reinforcing, seeks to enhance material capacity, either to reduce dependence on the hegemon or to strengthen the state's contribution to the existing hierarchy (Dobson 2017; Haugom 2019). Second, a hierarchy-rejecting transformational leadership seeks to reduce regime dependence on the patron and strengthen a distinct national identity, thereby creating domestic foundations for strategic autonomy (Kaya et al. 2020). By contrast, an alliance-reinforcing transformational leadership preserves dependence on the hegemon and does not seek to cultivate a distinct national identity, instead using domestic transformation to reinforce the existing hierarchy (Wirth 2015). A transactional leadership likewise preserves the existing pattern of regime dependence and national identification (Yılmaz and Bilgin 2006). Finally, transformational leaders, regardless of their orientation towards the hierarchy, pursue greater decision-making centralization to implement and sustain domestic transformation, whereas transactional leaders generally preserve existing patterns of political authority rather than undertaking significant centralization (Oren and Brummer 2020; Sayari and Taşkın 2026).

Japan

After the Cold War, Japan, under largely transactional leadership, continued to pursue low-hedging strategy, which had been effective from the normalization of Sino–Japanese relations in 1972, because until the early 2010s structural conditions in the region did not significantly change. Although regional threats – particularly China's gradual rise and North Korea's nuclearization – were becoming more pronounced, the US security umbrella in East Asia was still widely perceived as sufficiently credible to prevent a major regional destabilization (Mochizuki 2007). As an engaged and benevolent global patron, the United States continued to provide a strong security guarantee despite its primary focus on security theatres in the Middle East and Europe. Consequently, the structural imperative for Japan to take high-stakes strategic risks or pursue greater

strategic autonomy remained limited. Japan was therefore able to continue 'free-riding' on US security commitments while relying on cautious diplomacy to manage its regional environment. It pursued deep economic engagement with China while simultaneously encouraging China's integration into regional institutions and frameworks, with the aim of shaping its behaviour and moderating the strategic consequences of its rise (Matsuda 2012).

Not only was the structural imperative for strategic autonomy low, but domestic- and individual-level factors also constrained Japan's pursuit of greater strategic autonomy. Even if Japan had pursued strategic autonomy, the ruling elite would have encountered these constraints and would have had to actively address them, provided they possessed the vision of transforming Japan into a self-reliant state. At the domestic level, although Japan was an economically advanced state and widely recognized as a great power by virtue of being the world's second-largest economy, its limited military deterrent capabilities meant that it remained closer to a secondary power in security terms (Drifte 1996). This condition was largely shaped by a pacifist political culture that constrained the development of autonomous military capabilities (Izumikawa 2010). Moreover, Japan continued to depend on the United States not only for security but also for the legitimacy of its political regime (Tamaki 2020). During the rule of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), particularly under Yukio Hatoyama's premiership (2009–2010), there was a deliberate attempt to cultivate a more independent, 'Asianist' political identity. This vision sought to draw Japan closer to its East Asian neighbours – especially China – and promote the creation of an 'East Asian Community' as a means of balancing Japan's heavy dependence on the United States. However, the initiative failed to gain lasting political traction, leaving Japan firmly anchored in its Western-oriented political tradition and its alliance with the United States (Sneider 2011). Additionally, despite being governed predominantly by single-party rule, Japan's political system remained relatively pluralistic and decentralized under its standing constitution. Although the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) maintained a near-monopoly on political power from 1955 onward under the so-called '1955 System,' Japan's governance model was never characterized by a highly centralized or executive-dominated structure. Instead, political authority was fragmented across multiple institutions and actors, creating numerous veto points that constrained decisive policy change (Mochizuki and O'Hanlon 1998, 132). These domestic factors prevented Japan from becoming a 'normal state' – that is, one that relied on its own capabilities for national security – and reinforced its preference for low-intensity hedging (Hughes et al. 2021).

At the individual level, Japan largely lacked transformational leadership capable of articulating and implementing a more independent foreign policy. Apart from Shinzo Abe's first term as prime minister (2006–2007) (Envall 2011, 150), most leaders remained committed to the Yoshida Doctrine – the foundational post-war grand strategy formulated by Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida in the 1950s, which prioritized economic recovery, reliance on the United States for security, and minimal military expenditure in exchange for adopting the US stance on international politics (Samuels 2006, 112). Japan also suffered from chronic executive instability between 1990 and 2012 (Schoff 2007, 85). Prime ministers typically operated with limited personal influence and short political time horizons, as leadership turnover was frequent. The country became associated with a 'revolving door' of prime ministers, reflecting high leadership turnover,

with many incumbents serving terms of only one to two years. A notable exception was Junichiro Koizumi, who served for five years (2001–2006), providing a rare period of political continuity amid an otherwise unstable leadership environment. However, Koizumi's foreign policy remained firmly anchored in the US–Japan alliance rather than in the pursuit of greater strategic autonomy. Following the September 11 attacks, he strengthened security cooperation with Washington by dispatching the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to the Indian Ocean and Iraq. These deployments represented a notable departure from Japan's traditional post-war restraint and challenged long-standing political norms against overseas military operations. However, his foreign policy was not directed towards achieving strategic autonomy but was instead a reactive response to US criticisms of Japan as a free-rider (Buszynski 2006, 95). Successive administrations were further constrained by divided cabinets, competing advisory networks, and risk-averse bureaucracies. As a result, political leaders were often transactional in nature, lacking the authority, political capital, and time necessary to challenge the Yoshida Doctrine or pursue a more autonomous strategic course. These individual-level constraints reinforced Japan's cautious foreign policy orientation and contributed to its continued reliance on a low-intensity hedging strategy until 2012 (Sakaki 2025).

In the early 2010s, structural conditions in the region began to change. President Barack Obama introduced the 'Pivot to Asia,' marking a major strategic shift in US foreign policy. The strategy aimed to redirect American diplomatic, economic, and military resources towards the Asia-Pacific to counter China's rising influence and capitalize on the region's growing economic importance (Lieberthal 2011). This policy shift intensified after Donald Trump came to power in 2016, accompanied by a further reduction in US military commitments in the Middle East and Europe. Under the Trump administration, particularly in its second term, the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific increasingly became the primary focus of US foreign policy (White House 2025). Thus, the US strategic posture shifted towards deep engagement in East Asia, fundamentally altering the regional strategic environment. This development coincided with strengthened US security commitments but was also marked by a more transactional approach to alliance management during the Trump presidency (O'Shea and Maslow 2021). As a result, allies, including Japan, experienced increased perceptions of vulnerability and began to recalibrate their strategies towards greater self-reliance or increased burden-sharing to sustain the hierarchy.

Another major factor reshaping the regional order was the transformation of China's grand strategy. Under Xi Jinping (2013–present), China formally abandoned the doctrine of 'peaceful rise' and adopted a far more assertive, nationalistic, and proactive foreign policy. This transition marked a shift from passively reassuring the international community to actively challenging the US-led international order and expanding Chinese influence across multiple fronts, particularly in East Asia (Tsang and Cheung 2021). This trend was further reinforced by the fact that, in 2010, China overtook Japan as the world's second-largest economy, fundamentally altering Japan's strategic calculations and foreign policy priorities (Barboza 2010). Moreover, tensions escalated over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012 when Japan nationalized several of the disputed islands, prompting China to establish regular maritime and aerial patrols in the surrounding territorial waters and airspace (Fravel 2016). The Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute demonstrated to Japanese policymakers that economic interdependence and diplomatic engagement

were no longer sufficient to deter an increasingly powerful and assertive China. Consequently, by the beginning of the 2010s, Japan faced mounting pressure to reconsider its long-standing strategy of low-intensity hedging.

In response to these structural changes in the region, Japan gradually shifted from low-intensity hedging, which had been effective from the normalization of Sino–Japanese relations in 1972 until 2012, to high-intensity hedging. Under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012–2020), whose leadership exhibited many transformational characteristics, Japan shifted its grand strategy from a passive, post-war defensive posture towards a significantly more proactive and assertive foreign and economic policy (Liff and Lipscy 2022). Abe steered Japan towards a more active role in great-power politics by strengthening the US alliance and promoting regional partnerships such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) among the United States, Japan, Australia, and India to counterbalance China (Hornung 2021).

As noted, Japan's domestic conditions were not conducive to a high-intensity hedging strategy. Consequently, Abe embarked on a series of major institutional reforms aimed at reducing these domestic constraints and enabling a more assertive strategic posture (Lind and Ueki 2021; CSIS 2022). These reforms included the establishment of Japan's first National Security Council (NSC) in 2013 to centralize foreign and security policymaking; the reinterpretation of Article 9 of the constitution in 2014 to permit 'collective self-defense,' thereby allowing Japan to defend allies under attack; the relaxation of strict post-war restrictions on arms exports to enable the co-development and transfer of military equipment; and the adoption of the doctrine of 'proactive pacifism,' which transformed Japan's military from a strictly domestic defence force into a more active contributor to regional stability (Liff 2018).

During the transitional period between the end of Shinzo Abe's second premiership in 2020 and the rise of Sanae Takaichi in 2025, Japan was governed by Prime Ministers Yoshihide Suga (2020–2021) and Fumio Kishida (2021–2024). Although this period lacked the highly personalized and transformative leadership that characterized Abe's tenure, Japan's strategy did not revert to the more passive approach of the 1990–2012 era. Instead, the centralized national security architecture established under Abe became increasingly institutionalized, enabling his successors to sustain and deepen Japan's high-intensity hedging strategy in response to China's growing assertiveness. For instance, Japan decisively broke with its long-standing, self-imposed norm of limiting defence spending to approximately 1% of GDP, committing to increase defence expenditure to 2% of GDP by 2027 (Johnson 2022). Japan also decided to acquire 'counterstrike capabilities,' including long-range standoff missiles such as US-made Tomahawk cruise missiles and upgraded domestically produced Type-12 missiles (Nikkei Asia 2023). This marked a significant departure from Japan's traditionally exclusive focus on territorial defence, enhancing its ability to deter potential adversaries by threatening retaliation against hostile military targets. It also formalized the Quad into a regular, leader-level summit mechanism. Besides, Japan signed Reciprocal Access Agreements (RAAs) with Australia and the United Kingdom, creating an increasingly interconnected network of security partnerships that could, in principle, complement its strategic dependence on the United States (Johnson and Dominguez 2023). Japan further advanced a historic diplomatic rapprochement with South Korea, culminating in the 2023 Camp David Summit, which strengthened trilateral coordination among Japan, South Korea, and

the United States through enhanced intelligence-sharing and security cooperation aimed at counterbalancing threats from China and North Korea (Johnson 2023). As a result, strategic adaptation became less dependent on individual leadership and more embedded within Japan's evolving security institutions and policy framework (Hughes et al. 2021; Liff 2023).

After the conservative and ultranationalist Sanae Takaichi came to power in late 2025, Japan has intensified its high-hedging strategy by keeping the United States deeply engaged in the region while assuming greater responsibility for its own security as an alliance partner (McCurry 2025). This shift reflects a transition from the institutionalized, managerial form of high-intensity hedging that characterized the Suga and Kishida eras (2020–2025) towards a more assertive, personalized, and ideologically driven variant. As a transformational leader, Sanae Takaichi has prioritized internal balancing and the expansion of security partnerships with regional states and strengthen its capacity to counter China's rising power. Accordingly, Japan has pursued a more explicitly anti-China foreign policy, including a firmer stance on Taiwan (Johnson 2026), deeper cooperation with partners such as Australia and the Philippines (The Japan Times 2026; Dominguez and; Johnson 2026), and increased investment in military capabilities and defence spending (Nikkei Asia 2023; Gale 2026). To support this high-hedging strategy, Japan has also begun to reconsider key domestic constraints, most notably through proposals to revise Article 9 of its Constitution by adding a clause explicitly recognizing the SDF as a constitutional military (Semans 2026). The leadership has also advanced a major overhaul of Japan's intelligence architecture, aiming to consolidate fragmented information-gathering networks into a more centralized system (Sidhu 2026).

Türkiye

In the unipolar international system of the post–Cold War era, the growing unilateralism and coerciveness of US foreign policy placed increasing pressure on Türkiye as US regional interventions increasingly diverged from Turkish security interests (Oğuzlu 2012, 159). Türkiye was reluctant to fully support United States' regional initiatives because US-led regime-change policies threatened to destabilize its southern borders and potentially strengthen Kurdish separatist movements in northern Iraq (Müftüler-Bac 2006, 62). This development strained bilateral relations and led to growing questions about the future of the alliance (Cagaptay and Parris 2003; Cagaptay 2004).

Confronted with a growing structural imperative for greater strategic autonomy, Türkiye underwent a major political transformation in the early 2000s, as a new civilian elite emerged and consolidated power by challenging and ultimately displacing the long-standing political supremacy of the military bureaucracy, which had previously constrained civilian political authority (Aydınlı 2012). Although transformational in its political orientation, this new elite did not initially pursue a hierarchy-rejecting objective. Instead, constrained by Türkiye's subordinate position within the US-led hierarchy, limited material capabilities, and prevailing unfavourable domestic conditions, it adopted a latent hedging strategy (Çınar 2018). This latent hedging strategy entailed a transformative agenda in domestic and regional politics while ensuring that these transformations remained broadly

compatible with the US-led hierarchy, including by balancing Türkiye's Western orientation through closer engagement with the European Union, particularly until the late 2000s (Oğuzlu 2010).

In the domestic sphere, the ruling elite sought to strengthen Türkiye's military-industrial base through greater indigenization and expanded military capabilities, with a watershed moment occurring at the May 2004 Defense Industry Executive Committee (SSIK) meeting, when it abruptly cancelled approximately $11 billion in planned off-the-shelf foreign military procurement contracts (Hürriyet 2004). Between 2004 and 2016, Türkiye substantially expanded its indigenous defence-industrial capacity, with domestic production rising from roughly 20–25% to 60% of military requirements (Demir 2020, 37), defence-industry turnover increasing more than fourfold (Demir 2020, 37), and defence exports growing from $248 million to $1.9 billion (Republic of Türkiye, Undersecretariat for Defence Industries SSM 2018, 30). This industrial expansion was accompanied by a significant increase in Türkiye's military capacity. Between 2004 and 2016, the Turkish Armed Forces shifted from a static Cold War-era border-defence posture towards a more flexible, expeditionary capability for counterterrorism and cross-border operations, culminating in Operation Euphrates Shield in late 2016, which marked a major unilateral cross-border operation and demonstrated Türkiye's increasingly indigenous military capabilities in combat (Yeşiltaş 2020).

Institutionally, the transformative ruling elite took its first major step towards centralizing political authority and weakening bureaucratic veto points through the 2007 constitutional referendum, which amended the governance structure to provide for the direct popular election of the president (The New York Times 2007). This was followed by another constitutional referendum in September 2010 that reduced the bureaucracy's role as a veto player, further widening the divide between religiously minded and secular segments of society over Türkiye's national identity (Villelabeitia, Ibon. 2010). To overcome this ideational rift, which had persisted since the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, the political elite initiated an early process of identity transformation by promoting a civilizational and historical discourse that gradually decoupled domestic political culture from a purely Western-centric identity. At this stage, however, this discourse did not directly challenge the Western orientation; rather, it sought to synthesize it with emerging localized narratives (ÖÖniş 2007). Nevertheless, as the regime's long-term political survival became increasingly dependent on identity transformation, these localized elements gradually gained greater prominence (Duran 2013, 92). To reinforce these structural changes with societal cohesion, Türkiye launched the Kurdish 'Democratic Opening,' attempting to politically integrate historically excluded ethnic groups to boost national unity, minimize domestic vulnerabilities, and maximize the state's extraction capacity (Aktürk 2018).

Regionally, Türkiye sought to expand its strategic room for manoeuvre through intensified diplomatic, economic, and political engagement with the Middle East, prompting concerns among some observers about a potential 'shift of axis' away from the West (Öniş 2011). Türkiye promoted multilateral diplomacy over Iraq, deepened economic and political relations with Syria and Iran, mediated between Israel and Syria, assumed a more active role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and sought to position itself as a regional mediator during the Arab Spring (Khan 2015). These initiatives diversified Türkiye's external relationships and enhanced its regional influence while initially

remaining compatible with continued participation in the US-led hierarchic order, thereby constituting an important component of its latent hedging strategy (Park 2015).

To reconcile its autonomy-seeking policies and growing regional activism with the structural imperative of maintaining the support of its unipolar patron, the ruling elite sought to demonstrate Türkiye's value as a reliable NATO ally through several high-stakes strategic collaborations with the United States between 2004 and 2016 (Zanotti 2011). For instance, following US hegemonic pushback against Türkiye's independent Iran policy in 2010, Ankara's authorization of a NATO early-warning radar at Kürecik in September 2011 functioned as an act of hegemonic compliance, reaffirming Türkiye's subordinate position within the US-led hierarchy despite opposition from Iran (Reuters 2011). Similarly, as the Syrian crisis unfolded in 2011, the ruling elite initially aligned its regional posture directly with the Obama administration's objectives, hosting the anti-Assad political opposition and collaborating directly with the CIA under covert logistics programmes to support moderate rebel factions (Hosenball 2012). Even as structural frictions intensified towards the end of this period, the ruling elite executed a major act of hegemonic compliance in July 2015 by formally granting the US military direct operational access to Incirlik Air Base, a decision that drastically reduced flight times and supercharged the efficiency of the coalition air campaign against ISIS (Yeginsu and Cooper 2015). Together, these instances of robust outward compliance provided Türkiye with the vital diplomatic cover and time it needed to quietly build up its domestic filters under its latent hedging strategy.

However, 2016 marked a watershed in Türkiye's strategy, as the ruling elite shifted towards a hierarchy-rejecting transformational leadership orientation, moving Türkiye from latent hedging towards leash-slipping (Dudlak 2026). The domestic turmoil that had intensified after the Gezi protests in 2013 was partially alleviated following the ruling party's electoral victory in November 2015 (Henley and Shaheen 2015), while the failed coup attempt in July 2016 heightened concerns about regime security and the US policy in Syria intensified security anxieties under the US-led hierarchy (Nakhoul and Yackley 2016). No longer bound by the constraints of outward compliance, the ruling elite mobilized Türkiye's accumulated domestic filters.

It launched its first major unilateral, cross-border military interventions in Syria, thereby directly challenging US regional preferences while deploying newly field-tested indigenous defence platforms such as the Bayraktar TB2 UAV (Akca 2020). This military breakout was subsequently institutionalized through the 2017 constitutional referendum, which formalized a highly centralized executive presidential system, thereby reducing domestic veto points further and enhancing the executive's capacity to make strategic decisions (Kingsley 2017). It also reinforced a shift towards a localized identity – the so-called 'local and national' identity (Taş 2022). This transformation profoundly reshaped the country's ideological landscape, helped mobilize public support in the face of mounting external pressures following the adoption of leash-slipping, and sought to reduce political and cultural dependence on the United States, which has become one of the principal 'others' in the construction of this new identity (BÜnlü Bilgiç 2025). These domestic changes were accompanied by a bold multi-vector diplomatic reorientation, culminating in the landmark 2017 agreement to acquire the Russian S-400 air defence system (Gumrukcu and Toksabay 2017). Indeed, Russia's reluctance to exert significant pressure on Türkiye also facilitated Türkiye's pursuit of a leash-slipping strategy, as

Moscow was primarily preoccupied with countering what it perceived as Western encroachment within its post-Cold War sphere of influence (Suchkov 2020).

The structural transition from latent hedging to full-scale leash-slipping was further accelerated by a series of critical defence, energy, and diplomatic manoeuvres that solidified Türkiye's operational detachment from the Western orbit (Süsler 2025). Beyond the battlefield in Syria, this strategic shift manifested in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Türkiye's ruling elite discarded its previous restraint by deploying indigenous seismic research vessels like the *Oruç Reis*, escorted by the Turkish Navy, to aggressively assert its maritime borders through the 'Blue Homeland' (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine, directly challenging the geopolitical alignments of both the United States and its European allies (Reuters 2020). In the energy domain, the ruling elite leveraged its geographical positioning to deepen its multi-vector alignment with Russia, formalizing the construction of the Turk Stream gas pipeline and breaking ground on the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant – the country's first nuclear facility, entirely built and operated by Russia's Rosatom – effectively diversifying its strategic dependencies away Western-dominated energy and infrastructure networks (Reuters 2023). Simultaneously, the state's newly centralized executive command restructured its financial apparatus to withstand the ensuing hegemonic blowback, shifting towards local-currency trading mechanisms with China, Russia, and Iran to insulate the domestic economy from US treasury sanctions and tariff threats (Bardavid 2017; Turkey, Russia, Iran, 2018). These cases collectively demonstrate that the post-2016 transition was not merely a localized military response but rather a comprehensive, multi-theatre activation of the domestic capacities accumulated during the latent hedging era, aimed at reducing the constraining effects of the structural leash imposed by the US-led hierarchy.

The United States reacted to Türkiye's assertive strategic shift with a combination of structural retaliation, institutional exclusion, and diplomatic pressure, marking the highest point of friction in the history of the bilateral alliance. The defining blow occurred in July 2019, when the United States officially expelled Türkiye from the multi-nation F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme and cancelled the delivery of over one hundred fifth-generation fighter jets in direct response to Türkiye's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defence system (Ali and Stewart 2019). This institutional decoupling was further codified in December 2020, when the United States invoked the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), placing targeted sanctions on Türkiye's Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB) and its top leadership (US Department of State 2020). Beyond defence-industrial punishments, the United States repeatedly leveraged economic statecraft to discipline its junior ally. This was most vividly demonstrated in August 2018 when President Donald Trump doubled steel and aluminium tariffs on Türkiye to secure the release of an American pastor Andrew Brunson, triggering a severe currency crisis that tested the resilience of Türkiye's domestic financial filters (BBC 2018).

Despite sustained pressure from the United States, Türkiye's ruling elite continued to expand country's material capabilities after 2016, particularly in the defence-industrial domain, in support of its leash-slipping strategy. First, driven by aggressive import-substitution policies – further accelerated by Western restrictions on critical technologies such as drone optical sensors and jet engines – the localization rate in the defence sector, as stated by the head of Undersecretariat for Defense Industries (SSM), increased from

approximately 60% in 2016 to around 80% by 2026 (Milliyet 2026). Second, defence exports expanded dramatically. Having stood at $1.68 billion in 2016, exports benefited from extensive field-testing of Turkish systems in active conflict zones, including Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine, which substantially increased international demand (Rossiter and Cannon 2022). According to the Türkiye Exporters Assembly's report, defence and aerospace exports increased from $7.1 billion in 2024 to a record $10.05 billion in 2025, further strengthening Türkiye's position as one of the world's leading arms exporters (TIM 2025). Third, the defence-industrial ecosystem grew to encompass more than 4,000 companies, driving total sector turnover from $5.9 billion in 2016 to over $20 billion in 2026 (Defense Here 2026). This industrial expansion was supported by a significant increase in state investment, with Türkiye's overall defence budget rising to approximately $27.3 billion and prioritizing domestic research and development, advanced missile programmes, and emerging space capabilities (Yaylalı 2026). Finally, the active defence project portfolio expanded from roughly 550 projects in 2016 to more than 1,400 institutionalized projects, with a combined financial value exceeding $100 billion in 2026, compared to approximately $35 billion a decade earlier (Kaya 2026).

The adoption of both latent hedging after 2004 and, more specifically, a leash-slipping strategy after 2016 was facilitated by the rise of an increasingly transformational leadership that has governed the country for nearly two and a half decades and whose political objectives have evolved from pursuing incremental adjustments to seeking major change in foreign policy (Özkan and Özel 2026). This transformational leadership has been characterized by an anti-institutional orientation and a preference for personalistic politics within the state (Öztürk and Reilly 2024). This populist orientation was partly driven by the fact that the bureaucratic elite had historically exercised excessive influence in Turkish politics, often functioning as an ultimate veto player (Heper 1985). These populist tendencies have manifested in policies aimed at centralizing power and reducing the influence of domestic veto players in order to facilitate bold and rapid decision-making in response to the growing structural imperatives for autonomy, particularly after 2016. In foreign policy, this leadership style is reflected in an assertive orientation that seeks greater strategic autonomy by revising existing international arrangements, as illustrated by Türkiye's signing of the Mecca Defense Pact with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and its pursuit of initiatives such as 'Terror-Free Türkiye, Terror-Free Region' to strengthen sovereignty at home, promote regional stability, and enhance Türkiye's influence and status in global affairs (Ülgül 2019; Sofos 2025, 1; TRT World 2026; Reuters 2026).

Despite punitive measures and pressures such as CAATSA sanctions, the United States' strategic posture remained paradoxically constrained, largely because of its reduced regional engagement following 2011. Although periodic crises necessitated renewed involvement, the United States generally remained reluctant to reverse its broader trajectory of strategic retrenchment. Acknowledging Türkiye's irreplaceable geopolitical position on NATO's southeastern flank and its critical role in balancing Russian influence in the Black Sea, the United States refrained from a full diplomatic rupture and instead engaged Türkiye as a volatile, transactional partner rather than as a stable and fully integrated subordinate ally (Spicer and Gumrukcu 2024; Celiker and Tekin 2025).

Moreover, when the United States sought to weaponize its structural leverage through measures such as CAATSA sanctions and Türkiye's exclusion from the F-35 programme, the effectiveness of this coercive strategy proved limited. By that point, Türkiye had already crossed an important threshold in defence-industrial development. Rapid growth in defence exports, expanding domestic investment, and the maturation of a broad indigenous defence ecosystem enabled Türkiye to increasingly substitute foreign suppliers with domestic firms and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). As a result, Türkiye was able to absorb much of the economic cost associated with pursuing a more autonomous regional foreign policy, thereby reducing the constraining effects of US pressure (Gotev 2020).

Conclusions

The choice of strategy for navigating the contested US-led hierarchy depends on the interaction of structural, domestic, and individual-level factors. Based on the interplay of these factors, states have pursued different strategies in navigating the contested US-led order. Japan has adopted high-intensity hedging after 2012 and Türkiye has embraced leash-slipping after 2016. If the United States increases its engagement in line with its pivot to Asia and increasing Chinese aggressiveness, Japan will likely continue to pursue high-intensity hedging. The weakening constraints of domestic politics may no longer be sufficient to prevent Japan from pursuing a hard-intensity hedging (Teraoka and Sahashi 2024). Alongside the institutionalization of a new perspective on foreign policy in domestic politics, Japan's new Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi appears to provide transformational leadership aimed at further reducing domestic constraints in ways more conducive to pursuing a more costly strategy.

Türkiye's transformational ruling elite may further intensify its current leash-slipping strategy if the United States continues to reduce or adopt a more coercive posture towards the Middle East, while Türkiye continues to expand its material capabilities, preserve favourable domestic conditions under the existing political order, and cultivate more effective strategic partnerships (Balcı 2019; Meng 2026). Under such circumstances, Türkiye could gradually evolve into a regional great power with a growing capacity for extra-regional and even global power projection.

However, Türkiye's economic base continues to exhibit many of the vulnerabilities associated with a secondary or middle-power state, constituting a persistent constraint on its grand strategic ambitions. Should Türkiye fail to narrow the capability gap with the United States and other great powers because of economic difficulties or adverse domestic political developments, while simultaneously confronting a more assertive Russia as a regional threat, it may shift towards a high-intensity hedging strategy in the coming years. In this scenario, high-intensity hedging between Russia and the West could emerge as Türkiye's dominant strategic posture, replacing its previous reliance on strategic autonomy-seeking behaviour as the principal mechanism for managing external threats and strategic uncertainty (Kara 2024).

This study contributes to hierarchy studies and to research on secondary state strategies in navigating the contested US-led order in several ways. First, while hierarchy studies have largely focused on why hierarchies are established and how they are sustained, they have paid comparatively less attention to how such orders unravel. This

study addresses that gap by examining the processes through which hierarchical orders become contested.

Second, existing research often relies on single-case analyses rather than systematic comparisons of how secondary states respond to contested hierarchies. This study provides a comparative analysis of secondary state strategies in navigating hierarchical erosion.

Finally, the literature on secondary state behaviour tends to emphasize either structural or domestic political explanations in isolation. By contrast, this study argues that a more comprehensive understanding requires examining how structural and domestic factors interact. It therefore advances a neoclassical realist framework that integrates these levels of analysis to explain how different combinations of structural constraints and domestic conditions shape divergent strategic responses.

Author contributions

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