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Mustafa Kutlay & Ziya Öniş

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Understanding oscillations in Turkish foreign policy: pathways to unusual middle power activism

Mustafa Kutlay[a] and Ziya Öniş[b]

[a]Department of International Politics, City University of London, London, UK; [b]Department of International Relations, Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey

ABSTRACT

The conventional literature on the role of middle powers emphasises the importance of soft power, niche diplomacy and coalition building. This article explores a case of unusual middle power activism with a focus on recent Turkish foreign policy behaviour. It demonstrates how the interaction of domestic politics and external dynamics produced an unusual degree of foreign policy activism, going well beyond conventional middle power behaviour, with the government increasingly employing coercive diplomacy and militaristic methods. We demonstrate that unusual middle power activism in a shifting international order yielded 'populist dividends' to the ruling elite in the short run but led to a 'triple governance crisis' in the economy, politics and foreign policy, with each element feeding into the others in a path-dependent fashion.

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Introduction

Global power shifts constitute one of the big debates in contemporary politics. The bulk of the research aims to explain how the relative decline of US hegemony and the emergence of non-Western great powers are likely to reshape the nature of cooperation and conflict in the international system. Although perspectives on the resilience and accommodative capacity of the rule-based multilateral framework diverge significantly, it appears the current international order is in the midst of significant transformation, putting enormous strain on states' established alliance patterns and foreign policy preferences.[1] This article focuses on Turkey as a significant and increasingly coercive middle power in the context of a shifting international order.

Middle powers strive hard to carve out an autonomous role in contemporary international politics (Cooper and Flemes 2013; Gilley and O'Neil 2014). Global transformations, Ikenberry points out, are likely to 'give weaker and secondary states more options [...] for manoeuvring and bargaining' (Ikenberry 2016, 34). However, power transitions at the international level can be dangerous for middle powers, calling for prudence and self-restraint in their foreign policy behaviour. Middle powers are expected to act in a way that matches their material

CONTACT Mustafa Kutlay Mustafa.kutlay@city.ac.uk
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capabilities – as benign regional or global actors capitalising on their soft power capabilities. They are inclined to pursue multilateral diplomacy, target niche areas in global governance, build alliances in foreign affairs, and act as 'good international citizens' (Cooper 2018, 598–599; Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993, 19) and 'helpful fixers' (Græger 2019, 95) within the international order.

Not all middle powers fit into this template, though. To address the unusual foreign policy behaviour of certain middle powers, we need to analyse systemic opportunity structures in conjunction with domestic political dislocations because, as Colgan and Keohane (2017, 36) assert, 'today's crucial foreign policy challenges arise less from problems between countries than from domestic politics within them'. With the emphasis moving away from structural constraints towards the 'power of agency' (Cooper 2018, 597), some middle powers are motivated to go beyond niche diplomacy and soft power, and their authoritarian populist governments are more inclined to justify their confrontational stance on the grounds of national interests, security concerns and independence.[2] The 'populist dividend', as we dub it, further blurs the traditional boundaries between external and internal spheres of politics, as the former becomes an extension of the latter for political elites to boost their popular legitimacy and electoral support.[3] Stated differently, democratic backsliding at home is likely to be coupled with and pave the way for an assertive foreign policy style with unanticipated long-term strategic costs, creating a vicious cycle with the interaction of external and domestic dynamics.

We substantiate this argument by drawing on the Turkish case. Turkey's foreign policy orientation has gradually shifted since the Arab upheavals. Traditionally, a Western-anchored middle power mostly using cautious activism, Turkey has become a more interventionist actor through assertive military engagement and coercive diplomacy (Kutlay and Öniş 2021; Öniş and Kutlay 2017). Given its geographical position, Turkey has been very affected by global power shifts and the associated regional geopolitical turmoil and power vacuums. The country is torn between its traditional alignments with the West and new possibilities to align non-Western global powers like Russia and China. Also, the authoritarian populist turn in politics has been more dramatic in Turkey than in several other states (Öniş 2015; Somer 2016). According to the V-Dem Institute (2021), Turkey was one of the top three 'autocratising countries' in the world between 2010 and 2020. This dual transformation at the external–domestic nexus informed a gradual but path-dependent change in foreign policy behaviour over the 2010s that has become increasingly assertive, unilateralist and anti-Western. Furthermore, Turkey is an unusual middle power in terms of its military capabilities, traditionally strong and expanding rapidly in recent years (Bağcı and Kurç 2017; Kurç 2017), laying the foundations for a coercive turn in foreign policy behaviour. Turkey's historical legacy and present-day manifestation of 'neo-Ottoman' sentiments also extend the national conception of its role well beyond that of a traditional middle power (Danforth 2016; Hintz 2018).This kind of unusual middle power activism helped the fortunes of an authoritarian populist government by bolstering nationalist sentiment and capitalising on short-term populist dividends. However, its longer term consequences have been more adverse.

This article contributes to the debate from a political economy perspective. The literature explains the dramatic turn in Turkish foreign policy by pointing to growing regional security concerns.[4] Yet the security-centred literature does not explain Turkey's unilateralist and assertive foreign policy stance, wherein the country goes beyond its material power capacity.

Stated differently, even though geopolitical debates shed light on the emergent security risks for middle powers associated with power transitions in the international system, we argue a thorough engagement with political regime dynamics in Turkish politics over the last decade is necessary to explain why Turkey embraced a full-fledged coercive foreign policy behaviour. We suggest a self-reinforcing relationship between domestic politics and assertive foreign policy behaviour. Political-economic challenges of the AKP government constituted the main drivers of the coercive foreign policy stance, as the government sought to capitalise on populist dividends and diversionary foreign policy. Meanwhile, the assertive foreign policy style exacerbated political economy challenges at home, resulting in a 'triple governance crisis'.

Note that this article does not aim to develop a framework on middle powers. Nor do we aim to problematise Turkey's middle power credentials, as an established literature conceptualises Turkey as a middle power in global politics (Ongur and Zengin 2016; Öniş and Kutlay 2017; Dal and Kurşun 2016). Rather, we attempt to solve an empirical puzzle and explain Turkey's paradoxical foreign policy behaviour – that goes beyond moderate autonomy-seeking compatible with its material power capacity. With this, the article contributes to the research on middle powers in a shifting international order. It argues that the 'stabiliser' and 'system supporting' role attributed to traditional middle powers (such as Australia and Canada) does not hold for certain emerging middle powers, especially in the Global South. A promising research agenda accounts for the diverging foreign policy behaviours of middle powers and explores the role of the domestic illiberal turn in this divergence.[5] This article contributes to the debate by drawing on the Turkish case. We suggest domestic political concerns are likely to inform unusual middle power activism in an interactive way with global power shifts – leading to awkward trade-offs and sub-optimal equilibrium.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses Turkey's transition from a soft-power-oriented regional actor to a more assertive military power in the face of major shifts in the US-led liberal international order. The third section explores how Turkey's search for new alignments to counter-balance Western actors and to carve out a more independent policy space in regional and international politics resulted in isolationism in Turkish foreign policy. The fourth section demonstrates how domestic politics and foreign policy behaviour interacted in the Turkish case. It traces Turkey's drift towards a 'triple governance crisis' at the domestic–external nexus. The final section concludes the article.

Turkish foreign policy in flux: pathways to unusual middle power activism

Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) has ruled the country since November 2002. Erdoğan's grip was consolidated to an extent previously unknown in Turkish politics, especially with the transition to a hyper-presidential system in June 2018. The early years of the AKP were characterised by a foreign policy approach based on soft power instruments, utilising cultural proximity and regional economic engagement.[6] The motto of the Turkish policymakers in this period was 'zero problems with neighbours', formulated by Ahmet Davutoğlu as advisor to the government (2003–2009), subsequently Foreign Minister (2009–2014) and Prime Minister (2014–2016). The anchor for pre-2011 Turkish foreign policy was the Western alliance, with strong commitment to the European Union (EU) membership process (Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci 2015; Öniş 2014). Despite certain problems with Western actors, as a 'good

citizen' of liberal international order, Turkey expanded relations with its broad neighbourhood, including Eurasia, the Middle East and the Balkans. The Middle East, in particular, became a focal point of foreign policy initiatives, as Turkey strove to position itself as a proactive 'benign regional power', capitalising on its geopolitical identity as an interlocutor between West and East (Öniş and Kutlay 2013; Keyman and Gümüşçü 2014). At the same time, Turkish foreign policy extended beyond the confines of the immediate neighbourhood to a global middle power role, based on economic engagement, developmental assistance and impartial mediation of disagreements, such as the stalemate over nuclear proliferation between Iran and the West and the perennial Arab–Israel conflict over Palestine (Bayer and Keyman 2012; Levaggi and Yilmaz 2019).

Certain elements of Turkish foreign policy based on soft power credentials continued post-2011. Turkey displayed a significant humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis by hosting around 3.7 million Syrian refugees, according to official figures, in August 2021. As part of its niche diplomacy, its continued role as a humanitarian actor included helping the least developed countries in Africa, such as Somalia and Sudan. The official development aid increased spectacularly over the last two decades, reaching $8.5 billion (Figure 1), making it among the top donor countries in terms of national incomes. Furthermore, Turkey demonstrated noticeable activism by hosting the G-20 summit in 2015 and participating in G-20 meetings throughout the decade. Turkey also became a member of MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Australia) – a sub-group formed by middle powers within the G-20 (Schiavon and Domínguez 2016).

The elements of continuity notwithstanding, Turkey's foreign policy behaviour took a paradigmatic turn post-2011. Turkish foreign policy during the past decade has been characterised by a growing degree of unilateral activism and, towards the end of the decade, by the active use or threat of military force beyond its borders. The Turkish military launched

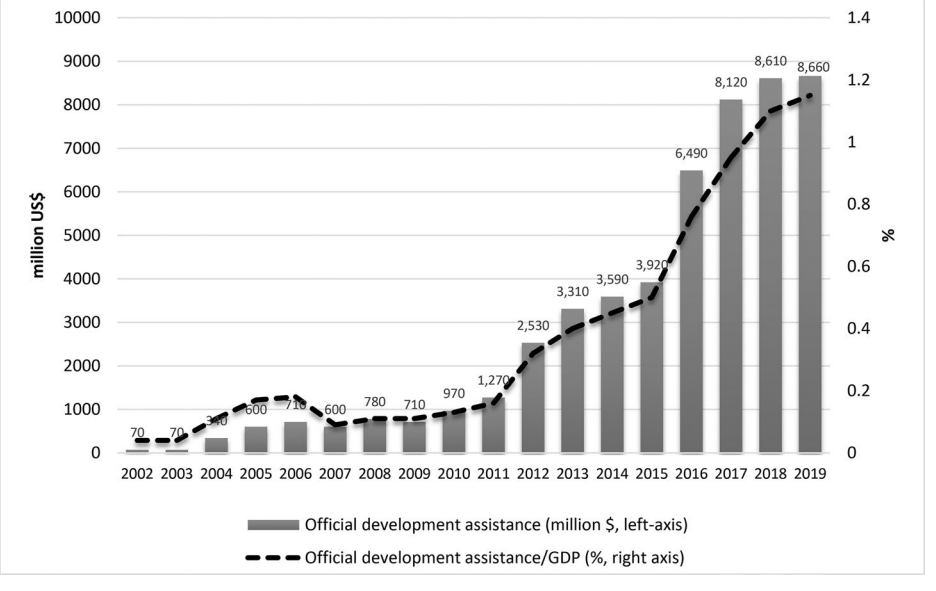


Figure 1. Turkey's official development aid (2002–2019). GDP: Gross Domestic Product.
Source: Presidency of Turkey, Presidency of Strategy and Budget.

several cross-border operations in conflict zones in its region, including Syria (since 2016) and Libya (since 2019). Turkey was involved in the Nagorno–Karabakh (2020) conflict by providing drone support to Azerbaijan and opened military bases in Qatar (2015) and Somalia (2017). The paradigm shift became particularly evident in the context of the Middle East, with the Arab upheavals, which started promisingly but lost momentum in later phases. Until then, Turkish foreign policy in the region was based on a mixture of economic interdependence and diplomatic initiatives, as the country tried to capitalise on cultural affinity based on religion and historical ties (Öniş 2011, 2014). The Turkish government showed no interest in interfering in the sovereign space of its neighbours.

With the Arab upheavals, however, the government presented itself as 'the leading advocate of democracy across the Middle East' (Aktürk 2017, 88). Although the broad thrust towards democratisation was understandable, the Turkish approach became increasingly interventionist, forcing regime change, re-ordering regional power hierarchies and abandoning the long-established principle of non-interventionism.

The ruling elite interpreted the tectonic shifts as an opportunity to upgrade Turkey's status in international politics. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu argued, 'A new Middle East is about to born. We [Turkey] will be the owner, pioneer, and the servant of the new Middle East' (Davutoglu 2012). Accordingly, in Syria, Turkey became an ardent supporter of regime change. Given Turkey–Syria rapprochement in the early AKP era, the Turkish government first tried to convince Bashar al-Assad to undertake democratic reforms. When this approach failed, and an international intervention in Syria was vetoed by the United Nations (UN) Security Council in February 2012, 'Turkey chose to pursue a regime change strategy on its own and actively supported the opposition' (Tür 2019, 46).

A similar style of interventionism appeared in Egypt. Turkey had supported President Mohamed Morsi, elected by popular vote following the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Hence, the government strongly opposed Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's 2013 military coup, which overthrew the democratically elected president (Özpek and Yaşar 2018, 210). The government unequivocally took the side of the Muslim Brotherhood in post-military coup Egypt. In the words of a former senior diplomat, the AKP government, especially President Erdoğan, believed Sisi would 'be removed from office within 3–4 months and [thus] continued to pursue pro-Muslim Brotherhood policies'.[7] Because of 'overconfidence', as one interviewee put it,[8] Turkey forsook middle power caution in times of tangled power transitions and projected the image of not only an interventionist, but also a sectarian power, siding with Sunni Muslim groups in the perennial sectarian divide in the Middle East (Öniş 2014, 205).

As the democratisation impulse in the Arab world faded, and state failures followed one another, the Turkish government's position shifted from direct support for the promotion of democracy to the protection of its own security interests. Turkey extended its military operations into Syria as a means of dealing with its domestic terrorism problem associated with the militant wing of the Kurdish separatist movement, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), by targeting what was considered its extension in Syria – the Democratic Union Party/People's Protection Units (PYD-YPG). The security threats posed by armed factions of Syrian Kurds replaced regime change in Syria as the overriding concern for the Turkish security establishment. Turkey launched a series of military operations in Syria – Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018), Operation Peace Spring (2019), and Operation Spring Shield (2020) – some of which took place without proper coordination with transatlantic allies. Not surprisingly, as Turkey is

perceived to be taking sides in conflicts, its claim to be an impartial regional power has lost credibility.

In brief, Turkish foreign policy behaviour in recent years is paradoxical: steps taken by the government have stretched far beyond the country's material capabilities and obvious security concerns. We argue this assertive behaviour can only be explained by taking a close look at the interaction of domestic politics and external dynamics.

First, profound power transformations have been taking place at the international level, especially the emergence of non-Western global powers, epitomised by the growing strength of Russia and China, at a time when key Western states are seeing a decline in their international status. These striking power transitions have been accentuated by the fragmentation of the transatlantic alliance, creating power vacuums in the Middle East and beyond. Turkey has been dramatically affected by the dislocations in the liberal international order (Kutlay and Öniş 2021) and the rise of new centres of power, tilting the balance towards alignment with non-democratic states. The dramatic reversal of the Arab upheavals has created new policy space for middle powers and led to the return of geopolitics, along with the proliferation of non-state armed groups.[9]

Second, in the domestic political context, Turkey has experienced unprecedented domestic reshuffling over the past decade. In a stage-by-stage process, the political regime was transformed from electoral democracy to authoritarianism,[10] and the country became a striking example of the recent right-wing authoritarian populist wave. Erdoğan, backed by the new conservative political-economic elites, gradually expanded his control of Turkey's political system, culminating with the transition to a hyper-centralised presidential system in 2018. It is important to note that the authoritarian-populist turn and severe democratic backsliding was conditioned and, in fact, enabled by the profound shifts in and declining allure of liberal international order. These political shifts, in turn, pushed Turkish foreign policy in a more assertive and interventionist direction to capitalise on the populist dividend – a point we explore in the fourth section.

From multi-dimensional foreign policy with a firm anchor to isolationism

The previous section established that the balance in Turkish foreign policy has been tilting steadily towards coercive diplomacy. This unusual middle power activism, as stated, comes with disengagement from the traditional Western allies and rapprochement with non-Western powers. In Erdoğan's mind-set, membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation – a club of authoritarian states – constitutes an attractive alternative to EU membership. That said, the government tries to maintain ties with the West on transactionalist terms decoupled from common values and norms. Despite adverse political developments and an apparent lack of mutual trust in recent years, the EU remains Turkey's primary trading partner and main source of foreign direct investment (see below). Moreover, despite major swings in Russia's direction, Turkey does not show any inclination to leave The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The lack of a consistent strategy leaves Turkish foreign policy in an awkward situation; the country finds itself trying to balance global powers against one another. Turkish foreign policy no longer enjoys a firm foundation; this, in turn, places Turkey at the epicentre of great power rivalries without robust safeguards. This section substantiates this point before explaining the logic behind the puzzling behaviour in recent Turkish foreign policy in the fourth section.

Turkey's growing emphasis on autonomy-seeking has a strong Russian dimension. The nature of bilateral ties changed significantly over the last decade; however, unlike Turkey's partnership with the West, the Russian–Turkish partnership does not have a strong institutional basis. It has been driven by the personal affinity of two like-minded leaders, Erdoğan and Putin.[11] From the Russian perspective, there is an obvious incentive to expand collaboration with Turkey. In addition to the economic benefits of trade, investment and energy deals, Russia is interested in fragmenting the NATO alliance as part of its counter-hegemonic strategy of re-establishing itself as a major power, following the collapse of communism and the humiliations of the early post-communist era (Mearsheimer 2019, 22–23; Sakwa 2017). Russia is also interested in strengthening its position and weakening American power in Syria and the broader Middle East. In that respect, closer partnership with key regional players like Turkey is instrumental. However, again from the Russian point of view, bilateral relations fall short of being 'strategic' as long as Turkey remains in NATO. The aircraft incident in November 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 attack aircraft near the Turkey–Syria border, illustrated the precarious nature of the Turkish–Russian alliance. Following the downing of the Russian jet, the relationship came to a standstill (Baev and Kirişçi 2017). Russia imposed a set of sanctions on Turkey, and it took months to restore bilateral relations, especially before the failed coup attempt in July 2016 (Köstem 2018).

Turkey–Russia cooperation, in its present form, falls short of a strategic partnership able to enhance Turkey's autonomous policy space vis-à-vis Western powers. Instead, the asymmetric nature of the partnership places Turkey in a vulnerable position in several ways. To start with, there is an obvious problem of scale. Russia is a major power, with strategic resources and military capabilities, despite its lopsided economic structure and weak growth performance. Turkey is a middle power with a more limited ability to exert influence in its surrounding regions. From the Turkish perspective, placing Russia at the centre of its foreign policy at the expense of rule-based multilateral transatlantic partnership is likely to increase Turkey's dependence and cause further isolation.

The purchase of S-400 surface-to-air defence missiles in 2017 is an example of Turkey trying to punch above its weight and playing off global actors against one another in its quest for autonomy. From the Russian perspective, cutting a deal with Turkey for the S-400 missile system was a win. It was a lucrative financial deal and sent a signal to the NATO alliance by undermining the commitment of a key member state. From Turkey's perspective, however, the cost–benefit balance is less clear. The decision to purchase the missile system from Russia backfired in terms of relations with the US and other NATO members, as Turkey was removed from the F-35 aircraft programme. The value of purchasing the S-400 missile system to handle Turkey's immediate security interests is also dubious.[12] If the main threat is the al-Assad regime in Syria, and the regime is closely linked to Russia, can Turkey use the S-400 system against it? If the main threat is the Western bloc, logically, this requires a complete overhaul of Turkey's decades-long strategy of membership in the transatlantic alliance. Perhaps the real motive was to gain Russian consent to maintain a military presence in Syria for an extended period. The S-400 deal, in any case, is a striking example of an inconsistent and rudderless foreign policy of an aspiring middle power.

Turkey's relations with the US and the NATO allies further deteriorated following Turkey's 'Operation Peace Spring' in northern Syria in October 2019. Turkey took advantage of US President Trump's decision to withdraw American troops from the Kurdish-controlled areas of Northern Syria and launched a unilateral offensive with the objective of establishing a

'safe zone' in Syria. In addition, Syrian refugees in Turkey were increasingly seen as a source of tension in domestic politics, and they could be resettled in the newly created safe zone. Whilst a detailed analysis of the 'Operation Peace Spring' is beyond the scope of this article, the episode had major implications supporting our main argument as the strong linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy behaviour is particularly relevant in this context. Turkey's military offensive in Syria came at a time when the new presidential system appeared to be losing popularity at home. The results of the 2019 local elections in major metropolitan areas signalled a swing towards political opposition. The newly instituted presidential system was confronted with serious challenges in terms of reactivating growth and employment after a currency crisis in summer 2018. The government's popularity also appeared to be progressively undermined by growing difficulties accommodating and integrating Syrian refugees. Although the military offensive, on paper, appeared to be driven by underlying security concerns, it was also a means of diverting attention away from domestic political concerns and shoring up government popularity. The opposition proved to be quite passive; rather than criticising the military offensive, it chose to go along with the government's heavily nationalistic and security-based rhetoric. As a result, a strongly nationalistic foreign policy paid dividends once again on the domestic front.

Turkey's unilateral interventions in Syria to deal with its long-standing Kurdish conflict, whilst welcomed by large segments of society on the domestic front, resulted in its isolation internationally. 'Operation Peace Spring' received harsh international criticism from NATO, as the Kurdish-led forces had been loyal allies of the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State (ISIS). In the wake of the operation, the White House press secretary also stated: 'The United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the operation' (quoted in Tan and Turak 2019). Whilst the military operation might have met Turkey's short-term security objectives, it is not at all certain that it helped resolve Turkey's perennial Kurdish problem in the long term. In fact, Russia and Iran emerged as the winners of Turkey's military operation. The vacuum left by the retreat of the American forces in Northern Syria meant Russia was in a much stronger position to shape the future of the country and the geopolitics of the Middle East. Another major implication of Russia's stronger presence in Syria and the Middle East is that Turkey's fortunes and security interests in the region are more dependent on Russian actions. Turkey's ability to maintain a long-term presence in Northern Syria is likely to be hampered by its growing dependence on Russia, coupled with its strong linkage with the al-Assad regime. Overall, the operation was a success in terms of the government's domestic popularity but was achieved at the expense of international isolation.

Another striking case concerns gas explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey was excluded from a broad coalition formed by Cyprus, Egypt and Israel to drill for energy resources. Turkey decided to start drilling activities alone, something the EU considered 'interference with Cyprus' exclusive economic zone' (Baczynska 2019). Turkey's attempts met with stiff resistance from EU member states, with no evidence of support from Russia. The EU also threatened to launch a series of measures (Council of the EU 2019).

The fact that Turkey's unilateral moves backed by a projection of its military power did not receive Russian support is also worth noting. Russia is not happy with the active involvement of a significant regional actor like Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean where it is in direct competition with Western powers. From the Russian perspective, Turkey's unilateral activism appears incompatible with its own geopolitical interests and the broader stability of the region. The fact that Russia has strong ties with Southern Cyprus is another

consideration, suggesting Russian interests do not coincide with Turkish ones in the Eastern Mediterranean context.

The election of Joe Biden to the American presidency in November 2020 presents a formidable challenge to Turkish foreign policy. Biden is committed to multilateralism, democratic governance and the transatlantic alliance, thus severely constraining the possibility for independent policy action. Erdoğan and former US President Trump, two nationalist populist leaders with similar styles, could manage their conflicts through personal interaction. This avenue is no longer open to Erdoğan. Already in the early period of Biden's presidency, Turkey faces serious sanctions over the S-400 missiles, and the decision to exclude Turkey from the F-35 programme has been ratified. Given Turkey's continued economic and security dependence on the West, Erdoğan is increasingly forced to make U-turns in his foreign policy behaviour to please the American President (Çağaptay et al. 2021). This, however, may undermine relations with Russia. A good example came in the early months of 2021 in the context of the Russia–Ukraine crisis. Turkey supported Ukraine's NATO membership, no doubt with the intention of pleasing the American establishment. Yet this move triggered a strong negative reaction from Russia, leading to the cancellation of flights between the two countries, allegedly due to COVID-19 measures. This had negative implications for Turkey, as the country was counting on revenues from Russian tourists in its post-COVID recovery. Tensions with Russia were exacerbated by the sale of domestically produced drones to Ukraine (and later to a NATO member, Poland). The sale was motivated by economic factors in the face of a deepening crisis at home. Drones also constitute a symbol of strength and independence for the Turkish government. Yet the sale caused conflict with the country's main Eastern partner.

The Nagorno–Karabagh war involving Armenia and Azerbaijan between September and November 2020 is a further illustration of Turkey's precarious position in the Turkey–Russia–USA–EU quadrangle. Turkey actively supported Azerbaijan, notably in the form of domestically manufactured drones. This played a decisive role in tilting the balance in Azerbaijan's favour and helped it secure a victory in a short space of time. Turkey's involvement strengthened the already strong bilateral ties with Azerbaijan and created a populist dividend at home, even generating a positive response from key elements of the opposition, thereby diverting attention from difficult domestic problems.

Yet once again, Turkey's actions were not welcomed by certain Western capitals. At the same time, Russia saw itself as the sole regional hegemonic power in Eurasia and thus was not pleased by Turkey's intrusion. Putin held subsequent peace talks with the leaders of the two nations involved in the conflict, Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan. Turkey was not invited to the trilateral meeting. Meanwhile, in Libya, Turkey's active military presence has been hotly contested by France and the US; ironically, Russia and Turkey have also been on opposite sides in Libya. Turkey committed itself to the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), whilst Russian-backed mercenaries supported rival forces in the east of the country.

The latest episode in the Turkey–Russia–USA–EU quadrangle involved the NATO Summit in June 2021. The meeting brought Erdoğan and Biden together for the first time since Biden's election. During the meeting, no agreement was reached over the S-400 missile system. One of the issues that came up was the desire of the US to withdraw from Afghanistan; Turkey was willing to play a forward security role in Afghanistan by protecting Kabul Airport. Although the plans are shelved at the time of writing because of the haphazard withdrawal

of the US from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's unexpectedly swift takeover, this was certainly done to please the US, whilst refraining from making concessions on more substantive issues, such as the S-400 missile system. Nevertheless, Turkey's desire to please the US and NATO partners by agreeing to play an active role in Afghanistan disturbed several regional actors, underscoring the precarious nature of Turkey's foreign policy behaviour.

This diverse set of examples illustrates the dangers of overactivism backed by frequent use or threat of military force in the absence of a clear foreign policy orientation. The impact on the domestic audience could be positive, at least for a while, but the longer term implications are not so positive, including further isolation with no visible geopolitical gains. Furthermore, it brings about significant political economy challenges, a point we demonstrate in detail below.

Triple governance crisis: linkages between domestic politics, foreign policy and the economy

We argue that the oscillations in Turkish foreign policy need to be analysed in conjunction with the political economy stalemates in the domestic realm. More specifically, Turkey's assertive foreign policy style is informed by political-economic crises at home. The AKP government adopted coercive foreign policy behaviour to capitalise on populist dividends and divert attention from domestic governance failures. However, at the same time, this aggressive foreign policy stance magnified existing crises in a path-dependent way and paved the way for a full-blown *triple governance crisis* combining authoritarian populism, economic stagnation and foreign policy stalemates. This section analyses the political economy of this vicious cycle, looking closely at the external–domestic nexus. The unusual foreign policy activism undermined the performance of the Turkish economy through two main mechanisms: (1) the exaggerated and unnecessary cost of security provision in Turkish foreign policy; (2) the growing country risk and its adverse repercussions.

First, Turkey's recent foreign policy behaviour increased the cost of security provision. The S-400 missile deal with Russia, covered in the previous section, is a striking example. Turkey, as a NATO member, signed a deal with Russia to purchase S-400 missiles for $2.5 billion. Although the Turkish government declared that the agreement also contained a 'technology transfer' component (Haberturk 2019), there is no indication that Russia guaranteed technology transfer and joint production as part of the deal. It remains unclear what kind of security threat was eliminated with the purchase of the S-400 missiles, and the cost of the deal was exorbitant – once opportunity cost is also taken into account. In addition to the cost of the missiles, Turkey was sanctioned by the US and removed from the F-35 fighter jet programme. Altogether this has cost Turkey at least $10 billion.[13] Furthermore, Turkey's S-400 move negatively affected the decades-long institutional security ties with NATO members, leaving the country more exposed to Russian influence. As a former senior Turkish diplomat commented, 'The Turkish diplomatic community could not solve the logic behind S-400 deal'.[14] The growing rift and trust problems between Turkey and its Western partners also led to Turkey's isolation from the transatlantic bloc. A recent European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) survey concluded (Dennison and Puglierin 2021, 14–15):

> Turkey is the only country that more Europeans see as an adversary than a necessary partner. Given that Turkey is a NATO member – unlike China, Russia, India, and Japan, all of which Europeans consider less threatening – this finding is quite worrying. Only 25 per cent of Europeans see Turkey as a necessary partner, and only 4 per cent see it as an ally with shared values and interests. In Germany, 41 per cent of respondents consider Turkey an adversary.

Second, experts on political risk analysis highlight geopolitical risks and increasing political uncertainty in times of global power shifts as a major concern for investors (Rice and Zegart 2018, 29–33). Turkey clearly fits into this category. Several mid-range countries have developed hedging strategies and restraint policies to mitigate the effects of growing uncertainty and anxiety on their national economies. In the Turkish case, however, unusual foreign policy activism over the last decade amplified economic fragilities.

In the first two terms of its rule, the AKP government managed to create a macroeconomic environment conducive to stable growth. In current prices, the gross domestic product (GDP) increased from US$238 to US$934 billion; GDP per capita reached US$12,127, up from US$3660. Thanks to a measured foreign policy style and domestic reform activism, combined with favourable global liquidity conditions, Turkey attracted significant foreign direct investment (Figure 2).

In the late AKP era, however, there was a marked deterioration in the quality of economic governance – partly as an outcome of poor foreign policy decisions. The unilateral foreign policy moves mentioned previously exacerbated Turkey's country risk. According to Eurasia Group (2021), a leading political risk analysis company, Turkey was one of the 'top 10 risks in 2021':

> As geopolitical pressures drive Turkey's financial risk premium higher, the odds of a balance-of-payments crisis will rise, making Ankara look more like the economic basket case that it was in the 1990s than the emerging-market darling Erdogan led until the 2010s.

Turkey has already experienced the adverse effects of its adventurous foreign policy. Figure 2 shows the amount and quality of foreign direct investment in the Turkish economy has declined significantly. The inflows declined, and the share of real estate purchases increased over total inward direct investment, not a good sign in terms of the long-term contribution of foreign investments in Turkey's overall economic productivity and technology transfer.



Figure 2. Foreign direct investment inflows (left) and share of real estate (right). GDP: Gross Domestic Product. Source: Electronic Data Delivery System (EVDS), Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey; YASED foreign direct investment reports, various years.

Although it is not possible to determine the exact weight of geopolitical factors in Turkey's worsening foreign direct investment performance, the increasing country risk premium helps explain why Turkey has become a less preferred investment destination for foreign companies. A senior representative of TUSIAD, the largest business association in Turkey, expressed the economic costs of Turkey's assertive foreign policy as follows: 'The oscillations in foreign policy results in huge costs for Turkey in the economic realm. Playing great powers against one another and ad hoc policies bring about heavy trade losses [for Turkish companies]'.[15]

Foreign policy risks also accrue in currency crises, and this is particularly applicable to Turkey. Figure 3 shows the Turkish lira significantly depreciated vis-à-vis the US dollar over the last five years, after remaining stable for a long time after the arrival of the AKP government in 2002 – with 1 US dollar remaining below 2 Turkish liras. Interestingly, the currency fluctuations since 2016 have mostly been associated with Turkey's foreign policy stalemates in addition to sub-optimal monetary policy decisions taken by the government. For instance, a head-on clash with the US in summer 2018 led the US to impose sanctions on Turkey (see below). The Turkish lira lost almost 30% of its value in dollar terms. As the Turkish lira slid, Erdoğan expressed his dismay:

> You [the US] act on one side as a strategic partner, but on the other, you fire bullets into the foot of your strategic partner. We are together in NATO and then you seek to stab your strategic partner in the back. (quoted in BBC 2018)

Whilst Turkey has so far avoided a large-scale sudden-stop crisis involving a major collapse with reversal of foreign capital inflows, it finds itself in a difficult situation of slow growth, high inflation and chronic unemployment (Öniş and Kutlay 2021). Turkey's per capita income (in current prices), after increasing to US$12,127 in the first two terms of the AKP rule, declined below US$9000 in 2020. In the adverse economic environment, frequent currency fluctuations associated with foreign policy stalemates pushed Turkish corporations to the brink. Rather than adopting a more prudent foreign policy style and rule-based economic governance, the government relied on 'financial engineering', spending the Central Bank reserves – estimated

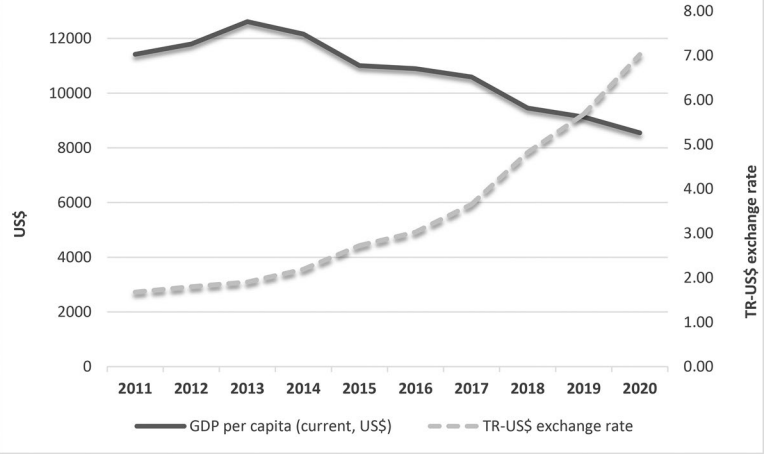


Figure 3. GDP per capita and exchange rate: value of 1 US$ vis-à-vis Turkish lira.
Source: Electronic Data Delivery System (EVDS), Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey. GDP per capita figures from World Bank database.

to be around US$128 billion – through unconventional methods to protect the value of the Turkish lira.[16] The situation was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, serious questions emerged about economic sustainability, with attention drawn to the possibility of a full-fledged economic crisis for the first time since the AKP came to power.

To explain what was happening and why, we highlight the linkage between Turkey's on-going governance crisis and foreign policy behaviour. The government did not follow the usual path to recalibrate its foreign policy through restrained diplomatic initiatives and coalition-building efforts, as expected of conventional middle powers. Instead, it explicitly blamed external actors, notably the US, for waging an 'economic war' on Turkey (Öniş and Kutlay 2021, 516) and concealed main causes of the poor economic performance like the weakness of the rule of law, ineffective domestic governance, and highly risky foreign policy moves. The main (and now familiar) motive was to exploit short-term populist dividends through maximalist foreign policy rhetoric and divert public attention from a deteriorating economic situation at home. This diversionary policy worked in that it mobilised a domestic audience at a time when anti-Western sentiment was at its height in Turkey. Rather than adopting a conciliatory tone, the government pursued an anti-Western and anti-International Monetary Fund (IMF) stance throughout the currency crisis (Daily Sabah 2018).

This strategy was detrimental in the long run because of the shaky foundations of Turkish political economy. A serious attempt was made to tap financial resources from non-Western sources, such as China, Russia and Qatar. However, the loans fell considerably short of the amount required.[17] This shows that Turkey's growing rapprochement with Russia and other non-Western powers is unlikely to reduce its dependence on the West because of Turkey's lopsided economic structure. As savings fall short of investments and trade competitiveness remains weak, the current account deficit constitutes a major problem in the Turkish economy. Foreign capital inflows are critical in boosting investments and sustaining economic growth. The West remains the main source of inward capital flows and sustainable trade. The EU–US share in Turkey's total trade is more than 50%, and it is almost 70% in inward foreign direct investment stock (Table 1). Moreover, bilateral trade relations with the West are balanced; Turkey's export/import ratio with the EU–US axis hovered around 95% in 2020, compared to 15% with Russia and 14% with China (Kutlay and Öniş 2021, 1098). As Turkey is an energy-dependent country and imports 52% of its natural gas from Russia (Erşen and Çelikpala 2019, 586), along with massive trade deficits, the Russia–China axis accounts for most of Turkey's current account deficit – again, mostly financed by Western capital. The

Table 1. Turkey's selected macroeconomic indicators and the share of the West.

	2002	2008	2012	2014	2016	2018	2019
GDP (current US$)	238	764	934	859	863	766	761
GDP per capita (current US$)	3660	10,851	12,127	10,985	10,863	9631	9127
Current account deficit (% of GDP)	−0.3	−5.1	−5.5	−4.1	−3.1	−2.8	0.9
FDI flows (US$, billion)	0.6	14.8	10.8	8.6	7.6	6.7	5.9
EU–US share in total trade (%)	57	43	42	46	51	51	42
EU–US share in FDI stock (%)	92	84	82	79	74	68	68

Source: World Bank Development Indicators: GDP and GDP per capita figures are in current prices; decimals in the bottom two rows are rounded to the closest whole numbers. Data in the final two rows are from Turkish Statistical Institute.
GDP: Gross Domestic Product; FDI: Foreign Direct Investment; EU: European Union; US: United States.

increasing country risk premium, however, makes financing options unwarrantedly high, especially given Western stakeholders' trust and predictability issues with Turkey.

The triple governance crisis and its relations with Turkey's inconsistent and oscillating foreign policy behaviour illustrate how an aggressive quest for more autonomous space in the face of systemic power transitions is likely to undermine national capabilities. Indeed, the short-term populist gains acquired by shifting the blame to foreigners may disappear over time, as the effects of the economic crisis are felt by larger segments of the population. The 2019 municipal elections in Turkey resulted in the clear victory of the opposition. These results elucidate the limits of the populist rhetoric and aggressive foreign policy stance in an environment of widespread economic hardship, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

The foreign policy style in this context goes beyond balance of power politics. Instead, it has been used as an instrument to sustain the popularity of the AKP regime. This, in turn, points to a vicious cycle in the Turkish context where a fragile presidential system, weak economic governance and oscillations in foreign policy behaviour tend to reinforce one another. Foreign policy moves divert attention away from domestic political-economic failures. Yet the returns are increasingly reduced at a time of severe economic hardship, as they feed into a growing governance crisis in a path-dependent fashion.

Conclusions

The liberal international order is under pressure, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. The rise of non-Western powers and political-economic setbacks in advanced Western countries reintroduced conflicts between the great powers (Paul 2016, 3). The initial optimism about non-Western great powers' willingness to socialise within liberal international order – especially China and Russia – and the accommodative capacity of the existing system gradually gave way to concerns over growing rivalries and clashes of norms. In this turbulent era, middle powers are considered instrumental players able to stabilise the existing system or 'at least slow its erosion' (Paris 2019, 1). Traditional middle powers such as Canada and Australia are frequently highlighted in this context. However, the systemic transformation in the international order is also associated with democratic backsliding in several countries.

Drawing on the Turkish case, we argue Turkey's foreign policy behaviour cannot be divorced from the interactions of domestic politics and external dynamics. Turkey's relentless quest for a more autonomous space predicated on nationalism and unilateralism initially generated widespread domestic political support for the government. But the short-term populist payoff was counter-balanced by long-term adverse consequences. Turkey entered a vicious cycle whereby assertive foreign policy and weak economic governance under a highly centralised presidential system reinforced one another to generate a sub-optimal equilibrium. The government increasingly used assertive foreign policy to divert attention from domestic political-economic governance failures. However, this diversionary strategy exacerbated Turkey's problems, triggering a triple governance crisis, with political, economic and foreign policy realms feeding into each other.

Although a systematic comparative analysis is beyond the scope of this article, comparing middle powers in the Global South might reveal how they (should) manage the

transition to multipolarity and at the same time maintain alliances with major Western powers. The Turkish case suggests two possibilities. First, middle powers are likely to assume greater flexibility to sign up with alternative foreign policy options. For instance, Jordaan (2010) shows how South Africa 'has gone from being a good international citizen to defending a number of authoritarian regimes'. Also, Schoeman (2015) discusses how South Africa has placed itself as an 'emerging power', pursuing more active foreign policy in a shifting international order. However, middle powers may overestimate the autonomous policy space available for them in times of great power rivalries. In the Turkish case, the limits imposed by the growing presence of Russia in Syria on Turkey's regional leadership aspirations and the shrinking scope for Turkish policymakers indicate the return of geopolitical rivalries. Anchorless foreign policy may prove prohibitive for middle powers, as seeking autonomy by swinging in the direction of an alternative hierarchical order may result in new forms of security and economic dependence on competing global powers simultaneously.

Second, the window of opportunity opened by global power transitions cannot entirely explain the ambitious foreign policy behaviour of certain middle powers, given the clear mismatch between their material power capacity and their foreign policy aspirations. We need to take a closer look at the domestic politics to account for this paradox. In a comparative article, for instance, Grzywacz and Gawrycki (2021) analyse the 'authoritarian turn of middle powers' by examining the continuity and change in Indonesia's and Brazil's middle power behaviour. They suggest 'a state embedded within a consensus-oriented domestic political context is less likely to introduce changes than a state embedded within conflict-oriented domestic political context' (Grzywacz and Gawrycki 2021, 14). The Turkish case illustrates how authoritarian populist leaders can use assertive foreign policy to build and maintain popular support at home in a polarised domestic context. Admittedly, the surge in authoritarian populism has diverse roots. Moreover, the weakening of democratic capitalism in the liberal world and the rise of authoritarian capitalism are increasingly informing the incentive structures of leaders elsewhere by providing certain exit routes, as exemplified in Turkish foreign policy. However, short-term populist dividends are frequently counterbalanced by adverse consequences in the medium term; states face isolationism abroad and intertwined governance crises at home. In the Turkish case, a strong anti-Western stance initially appealed to national sentiment and garnered public support. Over time, however, it has become a sub-optimal strategy with significant opportunity cost. More specifically, it has undermined the governance capacity of the Turkish state, especially as Turkey is bound to the West with multi-layered financial and security ties.

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Notes on contributors

Mustafa Kutlay is Senior Lecturer in the Department of International Politics at City University of London, United Kingdom. He works on comparative politics, political economy, politics of development in the Global South, emerging powers, political risk analysis and politics of economic crises. His articles have appeared in *International Affairs*, *Government and Opposition*, *Third World Quarterly*, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* and *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, inter alia.

Ziya Öniş is Professor of international political economy at Koç University in Istanbul. He is the former Director of both the Center for Research on Globalization, Peace and Democratic Governance (GLODEM) and the Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Koç University. His recent research focuses on the global financial crisis and its implications for future patterns of globalisation, southern varieties of capitalism, the political economy of Turkey during the AKP era, democratisation and new patterns of authoritarianism in emerging powers, and debates on the future of the emerging international order. His articles have been published in *Review of International Political Economy*, *New Political Economy*, *Governance*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Comparative Politics*, *Government and Opposition*, *Development and Change*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Democratization* and *Political Science Quarterly*, inter alia.

Notes

1. On the shifts in international order, see Acharya (2018); Hurrell (2018); Stuenkel (2016).
2. For a discussion, see Græger (2019).
3. On the relationship between populism and foreign policy behaviour, Plagemann and Destradi (2019).
4. On the role of regional security challenges, see Dal (2016); Oğuzlu (2020).
5. For further discussion based on different case studies see Græger (2019); Grzywacz and Gawrycki (2021). For a nuanced conceptual discussion on middle power behaviour, distinguishing between 'middle power roles' and 'middle power status', see Karim (2018).
6. In an earlier article, we conceptualise this foreign policy behaviour as 'logic of interdependence'. For an analysis of the shifts in Turkish foreign policy over the last two decades, see Kutlay and Öniş (2021). The present article builds upon and represents a natural extension of the article above.
7. Interview with senior former diplomat, 2021.
8. Ibid.
9. On the emerging stateness problems in the Middle East, see Fawcett (2017).
10. For different conceptualisations of Turkey's democratic backsliding, see, among others, Esen and Gumuscu (2016); Öktem and Akkoyunlu (2016); Somer (2016); Akçay (2021); Tuğal (2021).
11. Interview with senior former diplomat, 2021.
12. Interview with security and defense policy expert, 2021.
13. Ibid.
14. Interview with former senior Turkish diplomat, 2021.
15. Interview with senior TUSIAD representative, 2021.
16. Interview with former senior Central Bank bureaucrat, 2021.
17. Interview with senior former bureaucrat and current politician, 2021. Turkey's relations with China assume a critical role in this context. For an in-depth analysis of Turkey–China relations, see Öniş and Yalıkun (2021).

ORCID

Mustafa Kutlay https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4942-1001
Ziya Öniş https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0129-2944

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