

FROM SYRIA TO UKRAINE: TÜRKİYE’S SEARCH FOR AUTONOMOUS FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE AK PARTY ERA

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Abstract

Türkiye’s foreign policy has experienced a significant transformation during the AK Party era, and evolved from a soft power-oriented and Western-aligned approach into a more assertive and autonomy-seeking posture. While close cooperation with Western actors, particularly the U.S. and the EU, played a decisive role in shaping Turkish foreign policy in the early 2000s, the subsequent period has witnessed strategic shifts such as diversification of regional and global partnerships and increasing autonomy through selective challenges to existing alliance norms.

This article argues that the recent evolution of Turkish foreign policy reflects a context-dependent search for autonomy under the influence of both structural changes in the international system, bilateral relationships with major global powers, particularly the U.S. and Russia, and domestic political dynamics. Türkiye’s pursuit of autonomy represents an effort to expand its room to maneuver rather than signaling a complete rupture from Western alliances. The study qualitatively analyzes the evolving dynamics of Turkish foreign policy, examines the underlying reasons for this turn toward autonomy and highlights the constraints that limit the sustainability of autonomous foreign policy behavior.

The empirical analysis draws on key cases such as Syria, Libya, the Second Karabakh War, and the ongoing Russia–Ukraine War, and illustrate how autonomy has been exercised selectively across different policy arenas. The article offers a balanced assessment of autonomy in Turkish foreign policy as a strategic orientation shaped by both opportunities and constraints.

Keywords: Turkish Foreign Policy, Autonomous, Türkiye, AK Party, Capabilities, Political Will

JEL Codes: F50, F51

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of strategic autonomy has increased its prominence and popularity in recent years. It is of crucial importance for middle powers due to their roles under the conditions of a multipolar international order. This trend can be observed among the actors in diverse regions such as Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Global South. The European Union's (EU) emphasis on strategic autonomy has also promoted the widespread use of the concept and contributed to a growing body of scholarly debate on autonomy in foreign policy approaches and strategies.

Türkiye represents an important case as a middle power actively pursuing autonomy in its foreign policy decisions and actions. Turkish foreign policy has experienced a great and comprehensive transformation under the rule of AK Party (the Justice and Development Party) governments. Throughout this period, Türkiye's increasing reliance on hard power instruments, changing security doctrine, and growing assertiveness in regional affairs were the prominent elements of this recent transformation. Among them, the most significant development has been the rise of a more autonomous foreign policy orientation. Domestic political transformations and external factors, such as the evolving policies of global actors and structural changes in the regional and international context, have played equally important roles in Türkiye's pursuit of autonomy in foreign policy.

Türkiye's relations with key global powers deserve particular attention to analyze the growing autonomy in Turkish foreign policy. In this respect, the fluctuations of bilateral relations with the U.S. and Russia come into prominence due to their decisive role in shaping its foreign policy orientation. While the existing literature extensively discusses Türkiye's regional activism and its occasional divergence from traditional Western allies, there remains limited analytical work that conceptualizes these developments explicitly through the lens of foreign policy autonomy. This article addresses this gap by examining the underlying reasons for its increasing foreign policy autonomy through the shifting dynamics in its interactions with these actors. It also underlines that Türkiye's expanding regional influence and its growing capacity to translate political will into strategic action reflect a broader transformation in its foreign policy behavior rather than isolated policy choices.

This article analyzes the evolution of increasing autonomy in Turkish foreign policy by concentrating on the developments since the early 2000s. The central research problem is how and to what extent Turkish foreign policy has shifted toward a more autonomous orientation under changing domestic, regional, and systemic conditions. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to evaluate Türkiye's shifting foreign policy within the broader discourse on autonomy by addressing the roles of domestic political dynamics, regional power balances, and systemic constraints. The article argues that Turkish foreign policy has

gradually reduced its dependence on traditional Western allies while simultaneously increasing its influence in regional and global affairs, albeit within certain structural and political limitations.

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design to examine the evolution of Turkish foreign policy toward a more autonomous orientation. The analysis is based on a systematic examination of key foreign policy domains and bilateral relationships, particularly Türkiye's interactions with the U.S. and Russia, rather than advancing a normative or prescriptive assessment. The article employs a case-based and process-oriented approach and focuses on cases where shifts in autonomy have become most visible. These cases are selected to identify patterns, strategic orientations, and recurring dynamics that characterize Türkiye's contemporary foreign policy behavior instead of establishing causal generalizations. The article aims to provide a systematic analytical reading of Turkish foreign policy practices.

AUTONOMY IN FOREIGN POLICY

This section puts forward the definitions and key elements of autonomy in terms of foreign policy since the article focuses on its application within foreign policy analysis. After the incorporation of “strategic autonomy” into EU discourse in recent years, the concept has gained renewed importance. It has taken part in the EU agenda in the context of the EU's attempts “to recalibrate its foreign policy strategy and translate strategic objectives into concrete actions” (Marillas, 2021, pp. 3–4). Parallel to this view, this study conceptualizes autonomy as a foreign policy approach that emphasizes a state's capacity to make independent decisions, diversify its partnerships, and act according to its national interests. In that definition, diversifying partnerships refers to a behavior of autonomous actors or the way of using autonomy in foreign policy while the other components directly underscore the intrinsic qualities of the concept.

The term *autonomy*, etymologically, derives from the idea of “the ability of the self to live by its laws” (Tocci, 2021, p. 8). In terms of foreign policy, autonomy refers to an actor's capacity to formulate and implement policies following its own rules, values, norms, and strategic priorities. It requires the ability to make sovereign decisions in foreign affairs and to act upon them without dependence on the capabilities or consent of third parties (Marillas, 2021, p. 11). In this study, the concept of autonomy is treated as an analytical category rather than a normative objective, allowing for an assessment of both its opportunities and structural limitations.

At its core, autonomous foreign policy entails both independent decision-making mechanisms and the material, institutional, and strategic resources to implement those decisions effectively. It also involves the capacity to pursue national interests while engaging with the international system. As Giacalone (2012,

p. 341) and Grevi (2020, p. 8) note, “the opposite of autonomy is sheer dependence,” underscoring that the absence of dependency is a fundamental condition for pursuing an autonomous foreign policy.

However, “autonomy is always relative”, not absolute, since it is shaped by shifting power dynamics, evolving alliances, and changing geopolitical contexts (Lippert et al., 2019, p. 5). Therefore, it should be understood as a dynamic process or strategic objective, rather than a fixed status. Domestic political stability and internal cohesion also play critical roles in enabling autonomy as its internal foundation.

Importantly, autonomy should not be equated with isolationism or the rejection of alliances. Rather, it implies *strategic independence* (Grevi, 2020, p. 6). While mainstream International Relations (IR) theories often associate autonomy with material capabilities, contemporary perspectives underscore its multidimensional character.

The Concept of Autonomy in IR Theories

The concept of autonomy in foreign policy has been interpreted through various perspectives within IR theories, which have divergent views about power, agency, and the international system. From a realist perspective, particularly within neorealism, autonomy is defined in terms of material capabilities. It claims that states rely on their resources to ensure survival under the anarchic structure of the international system. Waltz (1979) conceptualizes foreign policy autonomy as a function of a state’s relative power. Thus, he offers little room for the agency of small and middle powers compared to great powers in shaping independent foreign policies.

Liberal theories emphasize the enabling role of international institutions and economic interdependence in expanding autonomy. For Keohane (1984), a rule-based international order can empower less powerful states by providing certain mechanisms. Liberal approaches present autonomy as a product of both internal and external factors by involving domestic factors. They also highlight the significance of institutional pluralism.

Constructivist scholars have an ideational perspective, and they define autonomy as a socially constructed process influenced by state identities, values, and norms by rejecting its fixed and material definition. Wendt (1992) argues that the construction of shared meanings and the interactions among actors can shape the possibilities for autonomous action in international affairs.

On the other hand, critical and postcolonial approaches completely problematize the notion of autonomy. Scholars argue that the concept is embedded in historically produced power structures and

normative hierarchies (Tickner, 2003; Agathangelou and Ling, 2004). These approaches question the neutrality of autonomy and emphasize the limiting impacts of colonial legacies, global capitalism, and systemic inequality on the policies of Global South states.

These diverse theoretical interpretations show that there is no unanimously accepted definition of autonomy within the IR literature. Therefore, an analysis of autonomous foreign policy requires a comprehensive conceptual framework that benefits from multiple theoretical insights.

Features and Elements of Autonomous Foreign Policy

An autonomous foreign policy is the outcome of deliberate and strategic decisions made by political actors rather than a natural phenomenon. It means that political will constitutes a foundational element in the pursuit of autonomy. This orientation requires a proactive and intentional stance. In some cases, actors may deliberately avoid autonomous behavior due to strategic calculations or prevailing regional and international dynamics. However, political will alone is insufficient; autonomy must also be underpinned by capabilities, referring to the resources and institutional capacity to transform decisions into effective action, in addition to the ability to decide (Anghel et al., 2020, p. 3).

These capabilities involve both hard and soft power elements, although hard power often plays a more prominent role in enabling autonomous behavior. Additionally, the domestic institutional framework, including effective governance structures and decision-making mechanisms, is crucial to operationalizing autonomy. Capabilities, in this sense, refer not only to the possession of power resources but also to an actor's ability to convert those resources into tangible influence in international affairs (Groitl, 2022, p. 50).

In summary, political will is essential for initiating autonomous foreign policy decisions, while capabilities are necessary for their implementation. As argued, autonomy must be supported by “the capacity to act that must be backed by credible armed forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so” (Fiott, 2022, p. 12; Helwig, 2021, p. 15).

Finally, the international context plays a critical role in shaping the feasibility of an autonomous foreign policy. For instance, states are often compelled to align with larger powers or blocs in a bipolar international system, while strategic opportunities for autonomy tend to expand in a more multipolar international environment. As a result, an autonomous foreign policy emerges as a combination of political will, capabilities, and a favorable international context. These three elements refer to the required conditions for pursuing an autonomous foreign policy. Similarly, Kutlay and Öniş (2021, p. 1089) conceptualize the

emergence of autonomous foreign policy as a product of the interplay of “willingness of political agents, domestic material capabilities, and strategic opportunities.”

Autonomous Foreign Policy: Political Will + Capabilities + Favorable International Context

In terms of IR theories, this analysis seems closer to a neorealist perspective due to the primacy of the roles and actions of states, the attributed importance to capabilities, particularly elements of hard power, and the decisiveness of the international context on the actions and behaviors of the actors. It leaves little room for the liberals' rule-based international order and international organizations. However, involving the impacts of domestic factors indicates the presence of a minor aspect of the liberal view. Furthermore, reshaping of interests, particularly in the relations with the global actors, and the changeable features and identities of actors as a result of interaction provide a constructivist tone in the analysis. Consequently, the article contains predominantly neorealist and, to some extent, constructivist and liberal elements.

In the international system, not all actors possess the requisite conditions to pursue an autonomous foreign policy. While international context produces shared constraints and opportunities for all states, the ability to translate these into autonomous action is ultimately determined by two key internal variables: political will and capabilities. In other words, while the international environment may open or close strategic space, an actor's potential for autonomy is shaped primarily by its domestic resources and leadership decisions. However, the realization of this potential depends on the structural dynamics of the international system. As Hurrell et al. (2000, p. 6) argue, global powers tend to inherently meet the conditions for autonomy, having a broader range of foreign policy options and greater capacity. In contrast, small states generally face severe constraints in exercising foreign policy autonomy due to limited political, economic, and military capabilities. Therefore, autonomous foreign policy is subject to debate in the context of middle or regional powers, since these states may possess such capabilities only partially, and they fulfill the necessary conditions to a certain extent in different contexts. Their ability to act independently hinges on the availability of contextual windows of opportunity.

This article examines Turkish foreign policy as a case study situated within the grey zone of middle-power diplomacy. It also investigates the impacts of changes in the international context on the room for maneuver available to regional actors, and the roles of domestic factors in using these opportunities. Thus, the case of Türkiye offers a valuable tool to evaluate the relationship between agency and structure in shaping autonomous foreign policy behavior.

As shown in Table 1, middle powers or regional actors can be categorized into four groups based on their political will and capabilities, by excluding the influence of the international context. It classifies the

actors according to the extent to which they meet the core prerequisites of autonomy. This typology assumes that middle and regional powers are *potential* candidates for pursuing an autonomous foreign policy.

Table 1: Classification of actors in terms of autonomy criteria²

	Political Will (-)	Political Will (+)
Capabilities (-)	Status quo supporter	Incompetent aspirant
Capabilities (+)	Voluntary engagement	Autonomous

The first category includes states that lack both political will and the necessary capabilities to pursue an autonomous foreign policy in a particular period. These states can be described as *status quo supporters*, regardless of whether they benefit from or are fully satisfied with the international order. This position may stem from internal structural constraints, domestic political instability, or a relative decline in national power.

The second group comprises actors that possess the material and institutional capabilities necessary for autonomy but lack the political will to pursue it. These states may adopt a deliberately restrained foreign policy, often due to a historically internalized preference. In such cases, foreign policy priorities such as the desire for regional stability, economic integration, or alliance benefits supersede the pursuit of independent strategic action. This orientation may be termed *voluntary engagement*. For instance, the incentive of EU membership has historically played this role for several European states.

However, it is important to distinguish between voluntary alignments and those resulting from external coercion or systemic pressures. Some states may find themselves forced to align with dominant powers or blocs due to geopolitical constraints, security dependencies, or economic vulnerabilities. While these alignments may resemble voluntary engagement in form, they lack the essential element of strategic choice and must be understood within their specific structural and historical contexts. As a result, the absence of political will remains a decisive factor preventing many middle or regional powers from adopting an autonomous foreign policy stance.

Conversely, capabilities form the structural foundation upon which the political will for autonomy can be meaningfully exercised. In an international system where global powers continue to dominate the existing order, middle powers or regional actors cannot pursue autonomous foreign policies without possessing a sufficient degree of hard power. In this sense, foreign policy autonomy necessitates a minimum

² The table was created by the author.

threshold of material resources that enable a state to assert influence, defend its interests, and deal with complex regional and global dynamics.

States that claim to pursue autonomy without having the essential capabilities fall into the third category, and can be described as *incompetent aspirants*. These are actors whose foreign policy rhetoric and ambitions are not matched by the strategic or material capacity to support them. When such states operate under complex and uncertain conditions without the strategic elements to compensate for capability gaps, the discrepancy between their foreign policy ambitions and actual capacities may lead to severe consequences. Confrontations with regional or global actors under these circumstances may result in catastrophic outcomes for their populations, undermining both national and regional stability.

In conclusion, the combination of political will and material capabilities constitutes the necessary condition for a viable autonomous foreign policy. Achieving this convergence makes the international context the final determinant. A favorable global environment, such as a fluid or multipolar system offering room for maneuver, serves as the external enabling condition.

The following sections will apply this analytical framework to an examination of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party era, with particular attention to the interactions among political will, capabilities, and shifting international conditions in shaping Türkiye's pursuit of autonomy. They examine the case of Turkish foreign policy through three interrelated dimensions: alliance relations, regional power balances, and decision-making autonomy.

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE PRE-AK PARTY AND AK PARTY PERIODS

Prominence of Western Alignment in Turkish Foreign Policy Before the AK Party Era

The early decades of the Republic witnessed the prominence and decisive impact of security concerns in Türkiye's foreign policy behavior. This approach has been characterized by scholars as a form of "defensive nationalism" (Baudner, 2014, p. 80). After the World War II, the perceived Soviet threat and the victory of the Western liberal order prompted Türkiye to align itself with the Western bloc. The Truman Doctrine and Marshall Aid served as foundational instruments in establishing Türkiye's initial ties with Western powers.

During the Democrat Party era, Türkiye pursued a Western-dependent foreign policy, driven by both internal and external factors such as economic necessities, the Soviet threat, the bipolar international system, and the victory of the Western powers (Aydın, 2000, pp. 106–110). These dynamics collectively compelled

Türkiye to deepen its integration with the Western alliance. Türkiye's relationship with the U.S. formed the backbone of its Western-oriented and dependent foreign policy. In the following decades, this close alignment was often described as a strategic partnership or strategic alliance. During this period, U.S. foreign policy actions had a dominant influence on Turkish foreign policy. This orientation was further institutionalized through Türkiye's membership in key Western organizations such as the OECD and NATO (Müftüler-Baç, 2017, p. 119). As Bilge-Criss (2012, p. 1) argues, Türkiye's accession to NATO was a result of a long-term strategic choice aimed at institutionalizing its Western alignment rather than a response to immediate Soviet threats. Throughout the Cold War, Türkiye operated as a committed member of the Western bloc. Yilmaz and Bilgin (2005/2006, p. 57) underscore the role of ideational factors during the Cold War and show that Türkiye's "Western" identity was produced through the discourses of state elites. The historical consolidation of Western influence over Turkish foreign policy is one of the factors that surprised many Western observers due to the recent shift toward a more autonomous foreign policy approach.

During the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Johnson Letter constituted the first point that Turkish decision-makers felt the negative aspects of the asymmetrical nature of the Türkiye–U.S. relationship (Hale, 2000, pp. 149–150). They prompted Türkiye to reconsider the risks of overdependence and to seek greater diversification in its foreign policy engagements. Furthermore, the U.S. arms embargo, imposed against Türkiye's intervention in Cyprus in 1974, significantly strained bilateral relations.

Nonetheless, the deterioration in relations during the 1970s was partially reversed in the 1980s under Turgut Özal's leadership (Hale, 2000, pp. 164–165). Throughout the Cold War, converging strategic interests within the Western alliance often outweighed emerging points of divergence with the help of shared security concerns. The end of the Cold War not only consolidated U.S. global dominance but also opened up new spaces for maneuver, particularly for regional powers, including Türkiye, and enabled them to adopt more independent foreign policy strategies.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union after the Cold War generated power vacuums across several regions and changed the international order. In this context, Türkiye also found itself "in search of identity" during the early years of this period (Onis, 1995, p. 48). In this transitional period, Türkiye began to adopt a more active and assertive foreign policy, particularly in neighboring regions such as the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia, although its performance often fell short of initial expectations (Sayari, 2000, p. 170). The emergence of ethnonational conflicts in the Balkans and the establishment of Turkic Republics in the former Soviet space presented both opportunities and risks for Türkiye. During this period, Türkiye

aimed to benefit from these developments while maintaining its alignment with Western actors. In formulating its foreign policy toward Central Asia, Türkiye sought advice from Western actors, who supported the idea of promoting a “Turkish model” for the Turkic republics as a counterbalance to the Russian influence in the region (Balci & Liles, 2018, p. 12). During this period, Türkiye also participated in the Gulf War as a U.S. ally, and this move significantly elevated the importance of U.S.–Türkiye relations (Hale, 2000, p. 218).

Importantly, Türkiye's growing regional activism did not raise concern among Western powers, largely because it maintained close cooperation with them and remained aligned with broader Western interests. However, some domestic political challenges, such as a series of weak coalition governments and escalating PKK activities, negatively influenced the consistency and effectiveness of Türkiye's foreign policy initiatives (Hale, 2000, p. 192).

Broadly speaking, Türkiye's foreign policy actions remained largely aligned with U.S. strategic interests until the September 11 attacks, which marked a turning point in U.S. foreign policy. The Bush Administration's declaration of a “global war on terror” introduced new dilemmas for Türkiye (Keyman, 2010, pp. 8–9). While Türkiye supported the U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan, tensions emerged over the subsequent American initiative for a military operation in Iraq against the Saddam regime.

In sum, while Türkiye sought to capitalize on regional power vacuums and expand its activism in surrounding regions, these efforts were limited due to its capacity and geopolitical factors. Crucially, this activism did not amount to a fundamental departure from its Western-oriented foreign policy, which remained largely intact until the rise of the AK Party. At this critical juncture, Türkiye's stance on the Iraq War had significant implications for the implementation of the U.S. operation and the evolution of U.S.–Türkiye relations. The AK Party came to power in Türkiye at a pivotal moment for bilateral relations.

Turkish Foreign Policy during the AK Party Era

When the AK Party came to power in November 2002, it demonstrated an interest in pursuing a more proactive foreign policy, with EU membership positioned as the central strategic objective. Despite fluctuations in EU–Türkiye relations, this goal remained a consistent element of Türkiye's foreign policy agenda. Although there were notable disagreements and tensions with the U.S., particularly over the Second Iraq War, the early phase of the AK Party era largely reflected continuity with Türkiye's traditional pro-Western stance, primarily for strategic reasons (Oguzlu, 2020, p. 132). Any divergences with Western actors during this period were relatively limited in scope and impact.

Therefore, the first years of the AK Party era do not signify a radical departure from Türkiye's traditional foreign policy orientation. Rather, they marked the beginning of a dual-track approach: continued commitment to Western alliances on one hand, and an emerging pursuit of strategic autonomy on the other. Since relations with Western actors became increasingly strained, Türkiye intensified efforts to diversify its foreign policy alternatives through improving ties with neighboring countries and engaging more actively with non-Western global powers, particularly Russia.

This multidirectional shift in foreign policy was interpreted in various ways. Türkiye's growing regional activism and deepening ties with neighboring states were sometimes described as a form of "neo-Ottomanism", while the deterioration in relations with the West and rapprochement with non-Western actors were criticized in Western discourse as a "shift of axis" or "turning away from the West" (Kennedy & Dickenson, 2013, pp. 171–172). Some scholars also emphasized the role of ideational factors and identity, referring to a "neo-Ottoman worldview" as a basic principle in the AK Party's foreign policy (Yavuz, 2022, p. 659). Apart from that, alliance-centered studies offer a different and more nuanced perspective. For example, Buhari-Gulmez (2020, p. 485) argues that the resilience of the U.S.-Türkiye alliance lies in its institutional depth; thus, Türkiye's search for autonomy reflects an attempt to renegotiate the terms in the changing international system rather than breaking its alliances.

Despite the variations, the common point was the recognition of a transformation in Türkiye's traditionally pro-Western foreign policy orientation. This transformation was based on a transition toward a more multidirectional and independent strategy, driven by various factors, including Türkiye's economic growth, domestic stability, and increasing regional and global role during the 2000s (Aydin-Duzgit et al., 2025). Table 2 compares the main characteristics of Turkish foreign policy approaches before and during the AKP era, and highlights a qualitative shift in the understanding and practice of autonomy.

Recent scholarship increasingly underscores the role of domestic factors in shaping Türkiye's pursuit of autonomy in foreign policy. For instance, as Aran et al. (2026) argue, Türkiye's foreign policy and its pursuit of strategic autonomy can be explained through "deep entanglement of foreign policy with domestic politics". Yilmaz (2021) also conceptualizes Türkiye's foreign policy behavior as a form of strategic autonomy without abandoning existing institutional commitments. Therefore, the emergence of Türkiye's autonomous foreign policy can be regarded as a result of both internal and external factors.

Table 2: Comparison of Turkish foreign policy approaches before and during the AKP era

Dimension	Pre-AKP Period (Cold War& 90s)	AKP Era
General orientation	Western-oriented, security-driven	Multi-directional, flexible, and proactive
Alliance perception	NATO-centered, emphasis on compliance	Alliance engagement with increased autonomy
Decision-making structure	Institutional, military–bureaucratic dominance	Centralized, leadership-driven
Threat perception	Primarily Soviet Union / regional instability	Multiple threats (terrorism, regional crises, great power rivalry)
Regional engagement	Limited and cautious	Active and interventionist
Approach to autonomy	Highly constrained, subordinate to alliance cohesion	Expanding strategic autonomy
Meaning of autonomy	Avoidance of deviation from alliance norms	Expansion of diplomatic and strategic maneuverability
Relations with the West	Hierarchical and dependency-oriented	Negotiated, selective alignment

In terms of the external factors, the outbreak of the Arab Spring initiated a profound regional transformation in the Middle East and significantly influenced foreign policy approaches of all relevant actors. Among them, Türkiye was one of the most deeply affected countries. Until 2010, Middle Eastern states played a central role in Türkiye's soft power–based foreign policy, exemplified by its 'zero problems with neighbors' strategy. However, the rapidly changing political and security landscape made this approach increasingly unsustainable.

In response, Türkiye began to revise its foreign policy approach to comply with the new regional dynamics. The Syrian Civil War highlighted the limitations of relying solely on soft power for Türkiye. This period also marked a broader shift in Türkiye's perceived role in the region. According to Baudner (2014, p. 97), Türkiye's civilian power role between 2002 and 2005 evolved into a "regional power", which required hard power capabilities and ambitions of regional leadership, after 2010.

The Arab Spring also triggered a series of political, economic, and security challenges for Türkiye. These included the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, an escalation of terrorist attacks, a massive refugee influx, and a sharp decline in economic relations due to growing regional instability and the emergence of failed states (Keyman, 2017, p. 55). The intensification of security threats along Türkiye's southern borders resulted in a reprioritization of foreign policy objectives, among which national security came into prominence.

In sum, the Arab Spring and the changing dynamics in the Middle East negatively impacted Türkiye's strategic environment, leading to both structural and discursive shifts in its foreign policy. The following section will examine the evolution of Türkiye's relations with major global actors, particularly the U.S. and Russia, as part of its broader experience toward increased strategic autonomy during the AK Party era.

Türkiye's relations with the U.S. and NATO during the AK Party era

The AK Party government initially sought to maintain positive relations with the U.S.; however, the trajectory of bilateral relations was heavily shaped by Türkiye's stance during the U.S.-led operation in Iraq. The rejection of the March 1 Memorandum by the Turkish Parliament became a critical point and led to disappointment on the American side. As Özel (2011–12, p. 55) notes, the decision was perceived by the U.S. as “a betrayal by a long-standing ally”. Türkiye had convincing reasons for not offering full support for the U.S. operation, such as the unmet expectations following the First Gulf War, the absence of a UN Security Council resolution, and the growing wave of anti-American sentiment within Turkish public opinion (Erhan & Sivas, 2017, pp. 99–100). Türkiye's subsequent attempts to mitigate tensions fell short of meeting American expectations.

Tensions escalated further with the July 4 incident, also known as the ‘Hood Event’, during which U.S. forces detained Turkish soldiers and subjected them to humiliating treatment. The event significantly inflamed anti-American sentiment in Türkiye and deepened the diplomatic crisis.

Despite the positive atmosphere created by the election of Obama as the U.S. President and his more conciliatory messages towards the Islamic world, as well as the introduction of the concept of ‘model partnership’ for U.S.-Türkiye relations, the outbreak of the Arab Spring significantly altered the regional landscape, and the ensuing transformations had a profound impact on bilateral relations. As regional instability intensified, U.S. policies in the Middle East became increasingly influential in shaping the bilateral dynamic.

Before the Arab Spring, Türkiye's proactive and soft power-oriented foreign policy facilitated the strengthening of its economic and political relations with neighboring countries. During this period, Türkiye aspired to position itself both as a regional power and as the main partner of the U.S. in the region (Özel, 2011–12, p. 61). However, Türkiye also began to emerge as a “critical and questioning member of NATO” in the post-Cold War era (Oguzlu, 2012, p. 99). Consequently, the early signs of a relatively more autonomous foreign policy orientation began to surface even before the Arab Spring.

The Syrian Civil War emerged as a consequential development shaping U.S.–Türkiye relations. The Obama Administration adopted a strategy based on supporting local actors, most notably the PYD/YPG, against ISIS. However, Türkiye viewed the PYD/YPG as the Syrian offshoot of the PKK. Thus, the consolidation of PYD/YPG control near Türkiye's border was perceived in Ankara as a direct and existential security threat (Üstün, 2020, pp. 25–26). The continuation of U.S. support for the PYD/YPG became an enduring and contentious issue in bilateral relations. In contrast, Türkiye supported the Syrian opposition and the Free Syrian Army. Furthermore, similar policy divergences emerged in other regional contexts, such as Egypt and Libya. Among these cases, the U.S. policy in Syria provoked the deepest and most critical crisis in U.S.–Türkiye relations during the Obama era.

In addition to the divergent policies regarding the Arab Spring, the U.S. stance on the FETÖ (Gülenist) movement and the July 15 coup attempt constituted another major source of disappointment for Türkiye. The FETÖ movement was designated by Türkiye as a terrorist organization, and its perceived threat extended beyond a domestic problem due to its extensive transnational network, particularly in the U.S., African countries, and the Turkic Republics. Lack of expected strong support by the U.S. and European leaders also created disappointment in the Turkish government (Teksen, 2017, pp. 132–133). Moreover, Türkiye formally requested the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, yet this initiative also remained unmet during this period. Consequently, the U.S. response to the coup attempt and its reluctance to extradite Gülen became one of the two main unresolved problems, together with the support for PYD/ YPG in Syria, inherited by the Trump Administration.

The Trump era in U.S.–Türkiye relations was also marked by a series of recurring crises. In addition to the previous unresolved issues, a number of secondary disputes further strained bilateral ties, including the Pastor Brunson crisis, the Halkbank trial, and President Trump's public threats targeting the Turkish economy (Balci, 2019, pp. 15–16). Moreover, Trump's unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel directly contradicted Türkiye's long-standing position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Landler, 2017). Despite President Erdoğan's attempts through leadership diplomacy, Türkiye was subjected to CAATSA sanctions following its purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

In sum, the Trump Administration presided over a period dominated by a negative bilateral agenda. Nonetheless, both sides managed to sustain their relations by compartmentalizing contentious issues, thus avoiding a full rupture (Üstün, 2020, p. 23).

Crucially, this period also witnessed the increasing prominence of Türkiye's pursuit of a more autonomous foreign policy. Ankara began to implement its foreign policy priorities more assertively and independently. Türkiye's launch of four major military operations in Syria targeting both ISIS and PYD/YPG elements exemplified this shift. These operations reflected the growth of Türkiye's defense industry and its rising operational capacity required for an autonomous foreign policy orientation.

In conclusion, the AK Party era in Turkish foreign policy witnessed a series of crises and policy divergences in U.S.-Türkiye relations. The Arab Spring and the subsequent divergent policy preferences brought new problems into bilateral ties. In particular, U.S. support for the PYD/YPG in Syria and its response to the July 15 coup attempt emerged as critical points of contention in the recent period.

While Turkish foreign policy was largely Americanized or Western-dependent during the Cold War, the deterioration of relations with the U.S. and other Western actors after the Cold War contributed to Türkiye's shift toward a more autonomous foreign policy orientation. In this regard, external dynamics have been as influential as domestic political developments in driving the pursuit of autonomy in foreign policy. As a result, Türkiye's pursuit of autonomy in foreign policy can be considered a relational and context-dependent strategy under the influence of domestic political dynamics and systemic constraints.

Turkish-Russian relations during the AK Party era

Historically, the Soviet Union was perceived as the archenemy of the Republic of Türkiye, primarily due to the Soviet threat over the Turkish Straits and territorial ambitions concerning Türkiye's eastern provinces. This perceived threat served as the principal driving force behind Türkiye's decision to align itself with the Western bloc after the Second World War.

Although the end of the Cold War eliminated the ideological rivalry, the potential for Turkish-Russian cooperation in the 1990s remained largely unrealized due to geopolitical competition in regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia, divergent positions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and domestic security concerns within both countries (Balta, 2019, pp. 74–75).

Under Putin's leadership, Russia adopted a strategic foreign policy orientation aimed at reasserting influence in the post-Soviet space, while simultaneously cultivating pragmatic relations with Western actors. This shift, coupled with broader transformations within Türkiye and Russia, created a more conducive environment for bilateral engagement.

In the subsequent decade, both Türkiye and Russia encountered growing frictions with Western actors, and they intensified bilateral cooperation. By 2010, both countries had significantly enhanced their regional power projection capabilities, which created new opportunities for cooperation and risks for geopolitical rivalry. As Akturk (2019) argues, “the issue-specific variation in relations and exposures of divergent preferences parallel to the intensification of bilateral relations” have been the two characteristics and long-term trends in Turkish-Russian relations (p. 100). Consequently, the intensification of bilateral relations in the 2000s has generated a complex dynamic, defined by both convergence and divergence.

Until 2010, Russian–Turkish relations experienced notable improvements across political, economic, and cultural dimensions. However, the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the subsequent shifts in both countries’ foreign policy priorities introduced new challenges for bilateral relations. Among these, the Syrian Civil War constituted the most prominent source of divergence.

In the Syrian case, Russia supported the Assad regime, largely to avoid a “second Libya” scenario (Ruma & Çelikpala, 2019, pp. 68–69). In contrast, Türkiye adopted a stance favoring regime change in Syria, positioning itself on the opposite side. Although both states attempted to avoid direct military confrontation, their support for opposing factions laid the groundwork for growing strategic friction in subsequent years.

In addition to the Syrian conflict, other critical issues exacerbated tensions. Notably, Türkiye did not recognize Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea; instead, it reaffirmed its commitment to Ukraine’s territorial integrity and voiced concerns over the situation of the Crimean Tatars (Akturk, 2014, pp. 19–20).

The situation further escalated in 2015 when Russia expanded its direct military involvement in Syria, intensifying its aerial operations in the region. A major turning point came with the “jet crisis” in November 2015. It marked a severe deterioration in bilateral ties and inaugurated a new, more volatile phase in Russian–Turkish relations. The Putin Administration responded decisively to the jet crisis by implementing a series of punitive economic sanctions, which led to a near-total suspension of relations between the two countries, against Türkiye (Ersen, 2017, p. 85). Nevertheless, President Erdogan’s formal letter and President Putin’s immediate declaration of support after the failed coup attempt paved the way for the normalization of bilateral relations. Aktürk (2019) underscores the influence of the Gülenist movement (FETÖ), traditionally aligned with pro-American, anti-Russian, and anti-Iranian sentiments, on shaping Russia’s reaction to the attempted coup (pp. 103–104). The ensuing rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow subsequently facilitated Türkiye’s cross-border military interventions in northern Syria.

In the subsequent period, the issue of Idlib emerged as a significant source of friction between Türkiye and Russia. Nevertheless, both parties managed to reach provisional arrangements, most notably the Sochi Agreement of 2018, which temporarily de-escalated tensions. Diverging policies also became apparent in other regional theaters, particularly in Libya and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. In Libya, they supported the opposing sides. Similarly, during the Second Karabakh War, Türkiye's logistical and political support for Azerbaijan and the Pashinyan government's unmet expectations of a robust Russian response resulted in a decisive Azerbaijani victory (Shafiyev & Huseynov, 2020, p. 108).

Despite these geopolitical divergences, bilateral economic relations witnessed notable advancements, exemplified by large-scale projects such as the TurkStream natural gas pipeline and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant. However, this growing economic interdependence, particularly in the energy sector, has contributed to a structural trade imbalance favoring Russia (Balta, 2019, p. 82).

Türkiye's decision to procure the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system became another turning point in bilateral relations. While this move deepened military-technical cooperation between Ankara and Moscow, it created strong criticism from Western allies and strained Türkiye's relations within NATO. The impact of domestic political dynamics depending on the role of political authority and leadership can also be observed in this decision against the established alliance norms.

During the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye has pursued a policy of strategic balancing. While aligning with NATO's political stance, Ankara refrained from joining Western-led sanctions against Russia. Türkiye's neutral stance and policy of balance throughout the Russia-Ukraine War not only facilitated the continuation of dialogue between Western actors and Russia without fully committing to a bloc but also significantly contributed to the emergence of concrete initiatives such as the *grain corridor agreement*, which is of critical importance for global food security (Saricicek & Ozturk, 2024, p. 246). During the Trump Administration, Türkiye also hosted negotiations between the Ukrainian and Russian delegations (Istanbul talks, 2025). Although these talks have not produced significant outcomes yet, Türkiye continues to play a constructive role between the two sides and contributes to efforts toward a resolution.

In sum, despite recurring tensions and strategic divergences, Turkish-Russian relations have remained anchored in a pragmatic and cooperative framework, sustained by mutual interests and a shared willingness to compartmentalize disagreements.

Diverse cases, same outcome: Türkiye's pursuit of foreign policy autonomy

Turkish foreign policy has experienced a remarkable increase in autonomy during the AK Party era. The political crisis with the U.S. after the rejection of the March 1 Memorandum in 2003 was a turning point in that sense since it signaled the beginning of a more autonomous foreign policy orientation and Türkiye's search for alternative strategic partnerships.

The stagnation of Türkiye's EU accession process after 2005 became another critical factor contributing to the diversification of its foreign policy. It reduced the credibility of full integration with European institutions and encouraged Ankara to seek greater foreign policy autonomy beyond EU-centered framework. The 'zero problems with neighbors' doctrine emerged as a central pillar of Türkiye's soft power strategy in that period and led to improvements in its relations with the neighboring actors, particularly in the Middle East. This attitude symbolized its foreign policy stance in the pre-Arab Spring period.

Türkiye's policy toward Iran's nuclear program marked one of the best indicators of its increasingly autonomous foreign policy and its divergence from the positions of Western actors. In 2010, Türkiye and Brazil, as two non-permanent members of the UN Security Council, took the lead in a diplomatic initiative to negotiate a nuclear fuel swap agreement called the Tehran Declaration with Iran. After the failure of this initiative, both countries voted against the imposition of additional UN sanctions during the UN session. This case highlighted Türkiye's willingness to pursue independent diplomatic attempts and to position itself as a mediator rather than a passive follower of Western preferences. Consequently, the evolution of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party era went hand in hand with its pursuit of strategic autonomy and increasingly uneasy relations with Western actors.

The eruption of the Arab Spring brought about a profound regional transformation and posed significant challenges for both regional and global actors. While Türkiye initially adopted a normative stance by siding with the peaceful protestors in various cases, the military intervention in Egypt in July 2013 halted the momentum of political change in the region and triggered a deterioration in Turkish-Egyptian relations. Since Ankara sought to shape outcomes in its neighborhood rather than merely adapt to external developments, the Arab Spring pushed Türkiye to adopt a more autonomous and proactive regional policy.

The Syrian conflict represented the greatest challenge for Türkiye during the Arab Spring. After the failure of early diplomatic efforts, Ankara shifted its policy toward advocating for regime change and began supporting the Syrian opposition. More importantly, the emergence of PYD/YPG control in northern Syria created a direct security threat for Türkiye. The extensive support of the U.S. to the PYD/YPG deepened the problems between Washington and Ankara.

Russia's direct involvement in Syria, beginning in 2015, further complicated the regional balance and compelled Türkiye to recalibrate its foreign policy through pragmatic engagement and selective balancing. It also reinforced Türkiye's emphasis on autonomy within a highly constrained strategic environment. The intensification of Russian air operations led to the jet crisis and a brief but severe diplomatic rupture in bilateral relations. These developments underscored the divergent strategic priorities of Türkiye, the U.S., and Russia in Syria. Consequently, the Arab Spring, particularly the Syrian case, functioned as a catalyst for Türkiye's growing pursuit of autonomy.

The July 15 coup attempt signified another breaking point in Turkish politics and foreign policy. It intensified Türkiye's quest for foreign policy autonomy by deepening mistrust toward traditional Western powers and revealing the importance of independent decision-making in national security matters. After the failed coup attempt, Türkiye immediately launched cross-border military operations targeting both ISIS and PYD/YPG forces in northern Syria. These operations demonstrated the growing effectiveness of Türkiye's defense industry and the operational capacity of the Turkish Armed Forces. Their success strengthened the government's determination to pursue a more autonomous and assertive foreign policy approach.

Table 3: Key examples of foreign policy autonomy during the AKP era and their implications

Policy / Case	Type of Autonomy	Intended Impact	Observed Impact / Limitations
S-400 air defense system	Military-technological autonomy	Diversification of defense capabilities	Tensions with NATO, CAATSA sanctions
Cross-border operations in Syria	Security autonomy	Direct neutralization of perceived threats	Complex balancing with the US and Russia
Policy during the Russia-Ukraine war	Diplomatic autonomy	Strategic flexibility and mediation role	Increased maneuverability alongside sanction pressures
Eastern Mediterranean policy	Regional and energy autonomy	Protection of maritime jurisdiction claims	Tensions with the EU, risk of regional isolation
Defense industry localization	Strategic autonomy	Reduction of external dependency	Partial success, continued technological dependence

The combination of political will and improved hard power capabilities enabled Türkiye to pursue autonomy in foreign policy. Table 3 illustrates the main policy areas in which Turkey has sought to enhance its foreign policy autonomy during the AKP era. As Muftuler-Baç (2020) observes, Türkiye's increasing "emphasis on national survival, assertive policy implementation, and autonomous foreign policy choices"

signaled the emergence of a new foreign policy strategy which differed from its traditional pro-Western orientation (pp. 179–180).

The maritime delimitation agreement signed with the Libyan Government in November 2019 became a key example of this strategic reorientation. The accord represented a significant move to safeguard Türkiye's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. More importantly, Türkiye's logistical support to the GNA in Libya resulted in preventing the capture of Tripoli by General Haftar's forces. Against the substantial international backing for Haftar, Ankara's intervention constituted a bold strategic move and a clear indicator of its autonomous foreign policy orientation. Türkiye's deployment of advanced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) played a crucial role in altering the military balance on the ground and underscored the growing effectiveness of its defense capabilities. This military engagement also reflected Türkiye's broader response to its exclusion from regional energy cooperation mechanisms, particularly the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (İpek & Gür, 2021, p. 254).

Similarly, during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Türkiye provided explicit political and logistical support to Azerbaijan and contributed significantly to Baku's military success. Turkish-manufactured UAVs demonstrated their battlefield effectiveness again in this case. They collectively reinforced Türkiye's position as a rising drone power and a capable regional actor. As Martins et al. (2023) note, advancements in Türkiye's defense industry have served as a force multiplier and as a strategic enabler of its pursuit of foreign policy autonomy and enhanced hard power projection.

On the other hand, Türkiye's foreign policy is constrained by a number of structural and domestic factors despite its growing emphasis on autonomy. First, Türkiye, as a middle power, cannot dictate its rules or policies particularly in the cases of the involvement of global actors due to its level of hard power capabilities. Second, economic vulnerabilities and economic interdependence pose a limit on independent foreign policy choices, particularly in periods of domestic economic stress (Yilmaz, 2021). Third, alliance structures such as reliance on NATO and U.S.-Türkiye alliance continue to shape the boundaries of Türkiye's autonomy (Buhari-Gulmez, 2020, p. 485). Fourth, domestic political considerations like centralization of decision-making may lead to long-term constraints. Finally, systemic constraints like intensification of great power competition may narrow the room to maneuver for the middle powers. They collectively show that Türkiye's pursuit of foreign policy autonomy should be considered a context-dependent strategy shaped by domestic and external factors rather than a linear or unlimited process.

ANALYSES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Throughout the AK Party era, Turkish foreign policy has consistently maintained a proactive character. Türkiye's increasing diplomatic and strategic activism in its neighboring regions has generated both opportunities for cooperation and sources of friction with regional and global actors. Starting with the early years, the rise of Türkiye's economic capacity, political influence, and increasing relations enabled it to pursue a more prominent regional role and to make autonomous policy choices.

Türkiye's increasing involvement in regional affairs has significantly reshaped its bilateral and multilateral relationships. The initial momentum in EU–Türkiye relations gave way to stagnation and mutual distrust in the later period. Similarly, Türkiye's relations with the U.S. faced different crises. Conversely, Ankara has improved its relations with other global actors, particularly Russia, despite the presence of geopolitical rivalries and competing strategic interests. These changing dynamics exemplify the complex and multifaceted nature of Turkish foreign policy.

Türkiye's evolving relations with global actors and its increasingly assertive foreign policy actions led to scholarly debates over whether Turkish foreign policy reflects a pursuit of autonomy during the AK Party era. This article argues that Türkiye's foreign policy behavior under the AK Party reflected a deliberate attempt to achieve greater autonomy. External factors have played a role as critical as domestic transformations in shaping foreign policy decisions in that process.

Türkiye's foreign policy approach included efforts to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships, improve relations with regional and global actors, and maintain a balancing strategy in its ties with major powers. Its dependence on Western alliances in the previous periods has led some observers to interpret this shift as a departure from traditional alignments. However, each phase of Turkish foreign policy must be evaluated within its specific geopolitical and domestic context.

In this respect, Türkiye's foreign policy can be conceptualized as “autonomy through diversification”, which implies the multiplicity of pathways of achieving autonomy (Vigevani & Cepaluni, 2007, p. 1310). Ultimately, the convergence of domestic political transformation under the AK Party, shifting regional dynamics, and mounting tensions in its relations with global actors has led to the emergence of a more autonomous foreign policy approach.

The Arab Spring significantly reshaped the regional priorities of Turkish foreign policy. The negative trend, which started with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, continued with subsequent developments such as the U.S. support for the PYD/YPG in Syria and Washington's ambivalent response to the July 15 coup attempt

in Türkiye. Despite these challenges, both American and Turkish policymakers have demonstrated an ability to compartmentalize disagreements to sustain cooperation on critical regional issues. Nevertheless, the decrease in mutual trust has turned bilateral ties from a strategic partnership to a more pragmatic and interest-based relationship.

In contrast, Turkish–Russian relations have witnessed a consistent deepening throughout the AK Party era, except for a temporary rupture following the Russian jet crisis. Despite enduring geopolitical competition and often diverging strategic interests, both Ankara and Moscow could successfully manage crises and compartmentalize areas of contention.

Taken together, the parallel processes of deterioration in Türkiye's relations with its Western allies and its improving ties with Russia and other non-Western powers have contributed to a more diversified foreign policy environment for Ankara. Within this context, Türkiye's pursuit of autonomy has increasingly come to reflect a “geopolitical balancing act between different centers of power,” coupled with a growing emphasis on the deployment of hard power capabilities (Dalay & Keyman, 2021).

In sum, the transformation of Turkish foreign policy after the Arab Spring has been marked by a significant increase in autonomy. Türkiye's outstanding foreign policy initiatives, including successful military operations in northern Syria, its support for the GNA and the maritime delimitation agreement with Libya, its active backing of Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War, and its strategic balancing policy in the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict, reflected the rise of autonomy in foreign policy approach.

Türkiye has demonstrated both the political will and strategic determination to assert its national interests despite the criticisms of and friction with global powers. The rapid advancement of the domestic defense industry and the state's ability to manage economic pressures were two key factors enabling the implementation of this autonomous approach. Collectively, these developments have strengthened Türkiye's capacity to act independently in an increasingly multipolar international order.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

The author declares that all contributions to this manuscript were made solely by the author. The author also declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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