

TÜRKİYE'S UAV DIPLOMACY AS A GEOPOLITICAL INSTRUMENT: A POST-2020 NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR ASSESSMENT

BİR JEOPOLİTİK ARAÇ OLARAK TÜRKİYE'NİN İHA DİPLOMASİSİ: 2020 DAĞLIK KARABAĞ SAVAŞI SONRASI BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords

*Turkish Foreign Policy,
Diplomacy, Geopolitics, UAV,
Nagorno Karabakh*

Jel Codes:

F50, F51, F59

Article History:

Received: 6 May 2026

Received in revised form:

13 June 2026

Accepted: 17 June 2026

MAKALE BİLGİSİ

Anahtar Kelimeler

*Türk Dış Politikası, Diplomasi,
Jeopolitik, İHA, Dağlık Karabağ*

Jel Kodları:

F50, F51, F59

Makale Geçmişi:

Başvuru Tarihi: 6 Mayıs 2026

Düzeltilme Tarihi: 13 Haziran 2026

Kabul Tarihi: 17 Haziran 2026

ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, Türkiye has transformed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs/UCAVs) into a key instrument of foreign policy and geopolitical influence alongside the rapid development of its defence industry. This study analyses the impact of Türkiye's defence industrial capacity on foreign policy through the case of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Using a qualitative case study approach, it examines how Türkiye's provision of UCAV-based military support to Azerbaijan influenced both the course of the conflict and regional power dynamics in the South Caucasus. The findings indicate that the operational effectiveness of Turkish-made UCAVs, particularly the Bayraktar TB2, significantly strengthened Azerbaijan's military capabilities by degrading Armenian defensive systems and contributing to battlefield superiority. This demonstrates that Türkiye has moved beyond the role of a conventional defence supplier and has become an actor capable of influencing regional geopolitical balances. Moreover, the post-war expansion of defence exports suggests that Türkiye's UAV-based foreign policy has contributed to the emergence of an alternative military-technological power centre in the international system. In conclusion, Türkiye's defence industry-oriented foreign policy instruments not only generate military outcomes but also play a critical role in reshaping regional geopolitical order and redefining power projection in contemporary international relations.

ÖZET

Türkiye son yirmi yılda savunma sanayiindeki gelişmelere paralel olarak insansız hava araçlarını (İHA/SİHA) dış politika ve jeopolitik etki üretiminde önemli bir araç haline getirmiştir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin savunma sanayii kapasitesinin dış politika üzerindeki artan etkisini 2020 Dağlık Karabağ Savaşı örneği üzerinden analiz etmektedir. Çalışmada nitel vaka analizi yöntemi kullanılarak Türkiye'nin savaş sırasında Azerbaycan'a sağladığı SİHA temelli askeri desteğin hem çatışmanın seyrini hem de Güney Kafkasya'daki bölgesel güç dengelerini nasıl dönüştürdüğü incelenmektedir. Bulgular, özellikle Bayraktar TB2 gibi Türk yapımı SİHA'ların savaş alanında sağladığı operasyonel üstünlüğün Azerbaycan'ın askeri kapasitesini belirgin şekilde artırdığını ve Ermenistan'ın savunma sistemlerini etkisiz hale getirdiğini göstermektedir. Bu durum, Türkiye'nin yalnızca bir savunma tedarikçisi değil, aynı zamanda bölgesel jeopolitik dengeleri etkileyen bir aktör haline geldiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca savaş sonrası artan savunma ihracatı, Türkiye'nin İHA/SİHA temelli dış politika yaklaşımının uluslararası sistemde alternatif bir askeri-teknolojik güç merkezi oluşturmaya katkı sağlamıştır. Sonuç olarak çalışma, Türkiye'nin savunma sanayii odaklı dış politika araçlarının yalnızca askeri sonuçlar üretmekle kalmadığını, aynı zamanda bölgesel jeopolitik düzenin yeniden şekillenmesinde ve güç projeksiyonunun yeniden tanımlanmasında kritik bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Atf vermek için / To cite: Torun, B. A. (2026). Türkiye's UAV diplomacy as a geopolitical instrument: A post-2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war assessment. *Dumlupınar Üniversitesi İİBF Dergisi*, 17, 97-108 DOI: 10.58627/dpuiibf.1945599



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Türkiye's foreign policy has historically been shaped by its alignment with traditional alliances, particularly with the United States and NATO, alongside a sustained emphasis on regional stability in both the Middle East and Europe. In the twenty-first century, however, Ankara has sought to recalibrate its international role by leveraging its rapidly expanding defence industry not only to enhance national security but also as an instrument for shaping regional and global power configurations. The development of indigenous military technologies—including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and armed unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs)—has significantly altered the balance of power across multiple conflict zones, positioning Türkiye as an increasingly influential actor in contemporary military and diplomatic affairs.

One of the most striking manifestations of Türkiye's evolving foreign policy is its involvement in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In this conflict, Türkiye's military support to Azerbaijan—most notably the deployment of armed UCAVs such as the Bayraktar TB2—played a decisive role in shifting the outcome in Baku's favor. This involvement not only highlighted Türkiye's expanding military capabilities but also underscored how its defence industry has emerged as a significant instrument of soft power and diplomacy. Through the strategic export of advanced military technologies, Türkiye not only deepened its alliance with Azerbaijan but also expanded its influence in the South Caucasus, a region traditionally dominated by Russia.

The concept of UAV diplomacy can be situated within the broader literature on defence diplomacy. Cottey and Forster (2004: 6) define defence diplomacy as the peacetime cooperative use of armed forces and defence-related institutions as instruments of foreign and security policy. While traditional forms of defence diplomacy have primarily relied on military cooperation, training programmes, arms transfers, and institutional engagement, recent technological developments have expanded the range of tools available to states. In this context, UAV diplomacy may be understood as a contemporary form of defence diplomacy in which domestically produced unmanned systems function not only as military assets but also as instruments of political influence, strategic partnership-building, and geopolitical leverage. The export and operational deployment of Turkish-made UAVs and UCAVs illustrate how defence-industrial capabilities can be integrated into broader diplomatic and foreign policy strategies.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative case study design focusing on the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War as a critical single-case example. The case was selected because it represents one of the clearest instances in which indigenous defence-industrial capabilities were translated into measurable geopolitical outcomes through the operational use of military technology. The analysis draws upon a wide range of secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, official government statements, defence industry data, and international trade statistics. In addition, quantitative data on global UCAV transfers and exports, particularly the CNAS Drone Proliferation Dataset (Campbell, 2024), are utilised to complement the qualitative analysis and to contextualise Türkiye's growing position within the global defence market. By combining process-oriented qualitative analysis with quantitative indicators of defence-industrial expansion, the study seeks to examine both the military and geopolitical dimensions of Türkiye's UAV diplomacy. Although the study relies primarily on secondary sources, the integration of official statements and quantitative defence-industry data helps strengthen the empirical basis of the analysis. Future research may further enhance the robustness of these findings through the incorporation of military doctrines, official defence policy documents, and more extensive longitudinal datasets on arms transfers and defence exports.

This study is informed by the theoretical insights of neoclassical realism, a perspective that emerged as a response to the limitations of structural realism in explaining variations in foreign policy behaviour. While structural realism emphasizes the distribution of capabilities across the international system and assumes that states facing similar systemic pressures are likely to exhibit similar patterns of behaviour (Waltz, 1979), neoclassical realists argue that foreign policy outcomes cannot be derived directly from systemic conditions alone. Instead, the effects of international constraints and opportunities are mediated by domestic factors such as state institutions, elite perceptions, and state capacity, which shape how governments assess threats, define strategic alternatives, and mobilize resources for foreign policy implementation (Taliaferro et al., 2009: 2–3). As Rose (1998: 146) argues, the scope and objectives of a state's foreign policy are determined primarily by its position within the international system and, above all, by its relative material power capabilities. However, the influence of those capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables operating at the unit level. Consequently, neoclassical realism seeks to bridge the gap between systemic explanations of international politics and the domestic processes through which states formulate and implement foreign policy.

From this perspective, Türkiye's defence industry can be conceptualized as a critical intervening variable linking material capabilities to foreign policy outcomes. Neoclassical realists emphasize that states differ not only in the resources they possess but also in their ability to extract, mobilize, and convert those resources into effective instruments of statecraft (Ripsman et al., 2016: 24). Consequently, foreign policy behaviour is shaped not merely by shifts in the international balance of power but also by the institutional and technological capacities that enable states to translate material capabilities into external influence. In the Turkish case, the development of an indigenous defence industry has significantly enhanced the state's capacity to transform economic, technological, and military resources into geopolitical leverage (Kasapoğlu & Kırdemir, 2018: 19). The expansion of domestic UAV and UCAV production has not only reduced dependence on foreign suppliers but has also provided Ankara with new instruments through which it can pursue strategic autonomy, project power beyond its borders, and deepen its influence in strategically significant regions. Accordingly, this study treats defence-industrial capacity as a key domestic intervening variable through which systemic opportunities and material capabilities are translated into foreign policy outcomes. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War therefore offers a particularly valuable case for examining how indigenous military technology can shape regional power dynamics and enhance a state's geopolitical influence.

Guided by a neoclassical realist perspective, this study is centred on the following research question: how has the rise of Türkiye's defence industry—particularly through the export of armed UCAVs—shaped its foreign policy, especially in the context of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War? It seeks to assess the extent to which the expansion of Türkiye's defence sector has reconfigured its diplomatic strategies, with particular attention to the role of military technology in influencing outcomes in regional conflicts. In addressing this question, the study argues that Türkiye's defence industry—most notably through the export of UCAVs and other advanced military systems—has significantly enhanced its geopolitical leverage. By providing Azerbaijan with critical military support via UCAVs, Türkiye not only influenced the trajectory of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict but also consolidated its position as an emerging regional power. This form of defence-driven diplomacy has enabled Türkiye to project influence in the South Caucasus, challenge the predominance of traditional actors such as Russia, and recalibrate the regional balance of power in favour of its allies. Accordingly, the capacity to export and operationalize cutting-edge military technologies has become a central pillar of Türkiye's foreign policy, aimed at expanding its sphere of influence and reinforcing its strategic autonomy.

The article is structured around three main sections. The first examines the evolution of Türkiye's defence industry, tracing its transformation from dependence on foreign military suppliers to a more self-sufficient producer of advanced defence technologies. This section provides the historical and technological context necessary to understand both the trajectory of Türkiye's defence sector and its growing role in shaping foreign policy. The second section focuses on Türkiye's strategic involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh War, analysing its military support to Azerbaijan and the operational use of UCAVs on the battlefield. It highlights how these capabilities contributed to altering the dynamics of the conflict and reinforced Türkiye's emerging model of defence-driven engagement. The final section explores the broader geopolitical implications of Türkiye's defence-oriented foreign policy. It evaluates how Türkiye's actions in the South Caucasus—particularly its support for Azerbaijan—have affected its relations with other regional actors such as Russia, Iran, and Armenia, while also assessing how these developments have influenced Türkiye's positioning within the wider landscape of international diplomacy.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TÜRKİYE'S DEFENCE INDUSTRY

The origins of Türkiye's defence industry can be traced back to the establishment of the Military Factories General Directorate in 1921. This was followed in 1924 by the creation of ammunition plants and maintenance workshops at the Gölçük shipyard. In 1926, Tayyare ve Motor Türk A.Ş. was founded, and by 1944, aircraft engine production had commenced at a newly established factory in Ankara. A major milestone in the institutionalisation of the defence sector came with the establishment of the Machinery and Chemical Industry Corporation (MKEK) on 8 March 1950, which consolidated military production facilities under a single organisational framework (Yeşilyurt & Yeşilyurt, 2019: 3). Despite these early efforts, the development of a domestic defence industry was adversely affected in the post-Second World War period. Increasing levels of foreign military assistance, coupled with the defence policy orientation that emerged following Türkiye's accession to NATO, contributed to a growing reliance on external suppliers and constrained the growth of indigenous capabilities (Pınar, 2018: 2350; Özlü, 2019: 82).

Türkiye's defence strategy, shaped by its NATO membership and the exigencies of the Cold War, relied heavily on arms imports from the United States and European countries to sustain a modern military force. This import-dependent model, which persisted until the 1970s, was reassessed in parallel with emerging efforts to pursue greater autonomy in Turkish foreign policy. A key turning point in this reassessment was the arms embargo imposed following Türkiye's 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation. The embargo, implemented by the United States—Türkiye's principal ally within NATO—prompted Ankara to reconsider its

reliance on external suppliers and to formulate a new National Defence Doctrine (Erhan & Arat, 2009: 674–675).

In response, Türkiye began to explore alternative procurement strategies while simultaneously seeking to establish a more self-sufficient defence industrial base (Şen & Özveren, 2024: 36). This strategic shift was also reflected in Article IV of the 1980 Defence and Economic Cooperation Agreement (DECA) signed with the United States. Under this provision, the United States committed to supporting efforts aimed at developing the domestic production, maintenance, repair, and modernisation of defence equipment in Türkiye, while also encouraging reciprocal trade in future defence acquisitions (Erhan & Arat, 2009: 712).

Between 1974 and 1983, several cornerstone institutions of Türkiye's defence industry were established, including ASELSAN (Military Electronics Industry), HAVELSAN (Air Electronics Industry), and Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAŞ) (Yılmaztürk, 2023: 146). These developments marked the early stages of a more institutionalised and nationally oriented defence production ecosystem. Further consolidation occurred in 1985 with the establishment of the Defence Industry Development and Support Administration (SaGeB), tasked with promoting domestic innovation, facilitating technology transfer, and managing defence procurement contracts. In 1989, a legal reorganisation transformed SaGeB into the Undersecretariat for Defence Industries (SSM), thereby strengthening the institutional framework governing the sector. Within this evolving structure, a policy priority was established whereby the needs of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) would, wherever feasible and subject to cost considerations, be met through domestic production (Küçükoğlu, 2023: 25–26). Complementing these institutional reforms, the creation of the Turkish Land, Air, and Naval Forces Foundations following the U.S. arms embargo—and their subsequent unification in 1987 under the Turkish Armed Forces Foundation—represented a significant step in mobilising national resources for the development of an indigenous defence industry (Pinar, 2018: 2350).

Although incremental progress was achieved in domestic defence production throughout the 1980s and 1990s, more substantive advances in the development of Türkiye's defence industry did not materialise until the 2000s. Despite the earlier institutional and policy efforts outlined above, the sector remained largely dependent on foreign technology and production partnerships during this period (Erhan et al., 2022, p. 152). Within this framework, companies such as ASELSAN and Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAŞ) emerged as central actors, primarily focusing on the domestic production of smaller-scale and relatively less complex military systems.

A decisive turning point for Türkiye's defence industry came in the 2000s, a period marked by a growing emphasis on strategic autonomy in military capabilities. Recognising both the limitations of foreign arms procurement and the potential for geopolitical friction with traditional defence partners, the Turkish government began to invest heavily in research and development (R&D) aimed at advancing indigenous military technologies. This shift was reflected in the Ninth Development Plan (2007–2013), published in 2006, which acknowledged ongoing efforts to increase the share of domestic inputs in the defence sector, while also underlining the persistence of significant external dependence (Resmî Gazete, 2006: 34).

The plan articulated a comprehensive vision for the defence industry, identifying as a core objective the development of a nationally sustained, secure, and stable defence production capacity based on domestic resources. It further emphasised the need to cultivate the technological and managerial capabilities required for a competitive, flexible, and self-reliant defence industry, integrated with the broader national industrial base and open to international cooperation (Resmî Gazete, 2006: 80).

In the early 2000s, Türkiye elevated the development of indigenous UAVs to a strategic priority to achieve its broader objective of reducing external dependence in the defence sector. Ankara's prioritisation of UAV and robotic warfare technologies signified more than a conventional process of military modernisation or localisation of defence production. As will be further demonstrated in the subsequent sections, for Turkish decision-makers and defence industry elites, these technological initiatives also represented a form of geopolitical projection and strategic ambition (Kasapoğlu & Kirdemir, 2018: 19). Within this context, the Bayraktar Mini UAV programme—initiated in 2005 through a partnership between Kalekalıp and Baykar Makina—marked a foundational step in Türkiye's indigenous UAV development trajectory. By 2007, this system had entered the inventory of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), becoming one of the first domestically produced UAV platforms in operational use. In the same period, additional mini and light-class UAV systems, such as the Malazgirt, were also developed and deployed by the TAF (Kınık & Çelik, 2021: 178). While these early systems appear relatively rudimentary when compared to contemporary UAV technologies, their significance lies in the fact that they represented the first fully indigenous, ground-up UAV platforms integrated into Türkiye's military inventory. As such, they constitute a critical milestone in the evolution of the country's defence technological base and its subsequent rise in unmanned aerial warfare capabilities (Bayraktar, 2022: 277).

Türkiye's defence industry breakthrough was significantly enabled by the transition from surveillance and reconnaissance-focused UAVs to armed UCAVs capable of conducting offensive operations and delivering precision strikes. Within this

transformation, the Bayraktar TB2—developed by Baykar, with production accelerated in 2012 and flight testing completed in 2014—emerged as one of the most consequential platforms. Deliveries to the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) began in 2014, and the system was subsequently weaponised in 2015. From that point onwards, the Bayraktar TB2 was initially deployed in counter-terrorism operations aimed at securing Türkiye's borders. It was later employed in cross-border military operations conducted in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Equipped with capabilities for real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), as well as high-precision target acquisition and strike functions, the TB2 rapidly evolved into one of the most operationally effective assets within the TAF inventory. Its ability to provide continuous battlefield awareness while simultaneously executing precision engagements significantly enhanced Türkiye's operational flexibility and tactical reach in asymmetric and expeditionary warfare environments.

Following Türkiye's military operations against YPG forces in northern Syria in 2019, the country faced new restrictions on arms exports imposed by several NATO allies. This trend intensified after Türkiye's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defence system in 2017, which ultimately led to its removal from the F-35 fighter jet programme in 2020 under the framework of the U.S. Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). In the same year, and in direct relation to the case study of the Nagorno-Karabakh War examined in this research, Canada imposed restrictions on the export of electro-optical and targeting systems to Türkiye following reports of its support to Azerbaijan through Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs (International Crisis Group, 2023: 5).

Collectively, these embargoes, sanctions, and export restrictions contributed to reinforcing Türkiye's domestic incentives for localisation in the defence sector. Rather than constraining its ambitions, external pressure appears to have accelerated investment in indigenous platforms such as the Bayraktar TB2 and related systems. When compared over time, the scale of transformation becomes evident: between 2002 and 2020, the number of defence industry projects increased from 66 to 762, the number of active defence companies rose from 560 to 2,050, and the domestic content ratio in defence production increased from 20% to 69% (Bayraklı, 2025: 134–135). This trajectory indicates that external constraints and geopolitical frictions have paradoxically functioned as catalysts for the deepening of Türkiye's defence industrial base, reinforcing its pursuit of strategic autonomy in military technology production.

Alongside efforts to increase localisation, Türkiye also pursued strategies aimed at minimising vulnerability to external constraints by diversifying production, expanding its supplier base, and deepening cooperation with international partners. One of the clearest examples of this approach is the 2019 joint production agreement signed with Ukraine. Under this arrangement, Ukraine not only became a purchaser of Bayraktar TB2 systems but also agreed to the establishment of a production facility in Kyiv for engines used in TB2 platforms as well as other Turkish-made UCAVs. The facility was also designed to provide maintenance and repair services for Ukraine's expanding UAV fleet (Rossiter & Cannon, 2022: 219).

The increasingly advanced strike capabilities of the TB2 system were subsequently tested across multiple operational theatres. Among the most prominent cases was the renewed outbreak of hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in September 2020. This conflict constituted one of the most significant real-world demonstrations of the operational effectiveness of Turkish-made UCAVs, particularly the Bayraktar TB2, under conditions of high-intensity conventional warfare. From a neoclassical realist perspective, the evolution of Türkiye's indigenous defence industry represents more than a process of military modernization. The growing capacity to design, produce, and export advanced military technologies enhanced the state's ability to convert material resources into foreign policy instruments. In this sense, defence-industrial development functioned as a key intervening variable linking Türkiye's broader power capabilities to its external behaviour. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War provides an opportunity to observe how these newly acquired capabilities were translated into concrete geopolitical outcomes.

2. TÜRKİYE'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR

The origins of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be traced back to the late Soviet period, particularly the 1980s, when signs of the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) became increasingly visible. This period was characterised by the intensification of ethnic and religious tensions, alongside the emergence of border disputes that generated broader regional security concerns. Within this context, the dispute between the Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region became progressively more acute (Pokalova, 2015: 73).

As ethnic nationalist movements gained momentum across various parts of the USSR, Nagorno-Karabakh emerged as one of the most prominent flashpoints. Although the region was formally located within the borders of Azerbaijan, it was predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians. The demand for unification with Armenia by the local Armenian-majority administration effectively triggered the escalation of tensions and laid the groundwork for armed confrontation. On 2 September

1991, the self-proclaimed authorities declared independence, announcing the establishment of the so-called “Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh.” This unilateral declaration marked the formal beginning of a new phase of conflict, which soon escalated into the First Nagorno-Karabakh War between 1992 and 1994.

The war concluded with a ceasefire agreement signed in 1994 in Bishkek. However, rather than resolving the dispute, the agreement effectively “frozen” the conflict, leaving approximately 20% of Azerbaijan’s internationally recognised territory under Armenian control. Despite numerous bilateral negotiations and international mediation efforts, particularly under the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, no durable political settlement was achieved. As a result, the region remained in a protracted state of frozen conflict for more than three decades (Pokalova, 2015: 74–75).

At a time when the Soviet Union was still intact, Türkiye adopted a policy of non-involvement in the conflict. It maintained a restrained stance when Soviet forces entered Baku in January 1990 and similarly refrained from responding to Armenian attacks targeting Nakhchivan. The dominant position of the Turkish government at the time was that these developments constituted an internal matter of the Soviet Union (İşyar, 2006: 243). Throughout the 1990s, Türkiye’s ability to engage more actively with the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was further constrained by its own domestic and regional challenges. The decade was characterised by recurring economic difficulties, political instability, civil-military tensions, and sustained counter-terrorism operations. These overlapping internal pressures significantly limited Ankara’s capacity to pursue a more assertive foreign policy in the South Caucasus, thereby reinforcing its relatively passive posture toward the evolving conflict.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which broke out in the autumn of 2020, is recorded as a large-scale armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia that lasted for approximately 44 days and directly reshaped the territorial status quo of the region. The hostilities began on 27 September 2020 with a wide-ranging Azerbaijani military offensive into Nagorno-Karabakh and continued until 10 November 2020, when a Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement was signed (Erickson, 2023). During this period, significant portions of Nagorno-Karabakh came under Azerbaijani control, effectively bringing an end to nearly three decades of Armenian occupation.

Several interrelated factors shaped the trajectory of the conflict. One of the most consequential developments was Russia’s position during the war. Contrary to expectations, Moscow refrained from directly supporting Armenia, and Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov explicitly stated that Russia did not have a binding obligation to intervene in Nagorno-Karabakh under the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This clarification effectively strengthened Azerbaijan’s diplomatic position and constituted one of the key external factors influencing the outcome of the conflict (Chirciu, 2020). However, beyond these diplomatic and political dynamics, the role of Turkish-made UCAVs and associated military technologies proved decisive both at the operational and strategic levels of the war. Their deployment significantly altered battlefield dynamics and contributed to shaping the overall balance of military advantage in favour of Azerbaijan.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, the significance of the conflict extends beyond battlefield developments alone. While shifts in the regional balance of power created opportunities for greater Turkish involvement, the extent to which Türkiye was able to capitalize on those opportunities depended on its capacity to convert material resources into effective foreign policy instruments. In this regard, the expansion of the domestic defence industry and the development of indigenous UCAV capabilities can be understood as critical intervening variables that enabled Ankara to translate broader power capabilities into concrete strategic outcomes. The Nagorno-Karabakh War therefore provides an important case through which the relationship between defence-industrial capacity and geopolitical influence can be observed in practice.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War represents one of the most tangible manifestations of the historically rooted “one nation, two states” relationship between Türkiye and Azerbaijan. In this context, Türkiye’s diplomatic and political support for Azerbaijan was redefined through a more explicit military and strategic dimension, as key instruments of the Turkish defence industry were effectively integrated into the Azerbaijani operational theatre. The mountainous geography of the conflict zone, which limited the manoeuvrability of conventional manned combat aircraft, created favourable conditions for the sustained operational use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and armed UCAVs, capable of remaining airborne for extended periods at medium altitude (Köker, 2020). In particular, the extensive deployment of Bayraktar TB2 systems played a decisive role in enabling Azerbaijan to establish air superiority, thereby significantly enhancing its overall operational effectiveness.

The integration of the TB2 platform into Azerbaijan’s force structure—combining intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and precision strike capabilities—proved critical in shifting the battlefield balance. These systems systematically targeted and neutralised Armenian air defence assets, armoured vehicles, artillery positions, and radar installations, thereby degrading the adversary’s defensive capacity (Kofman, 2020). At the early stages of the conflict, Armenian air defence systems and early warning radars were reportedly neutralised using loitering munitions, rendering ground forces increasingly vulnerable to

subsequent UCAV strikes.

Equipped with precision-guided munitions such as the Roketsan-produced MAM-L, the Bayraktar TB2 was employed in high-precision strike missions that enabled the identification and destruction of multiple strategic targets (Kınık & Çelik, 2021: 182–183). Following their earlier operational use in Syria and Libya, the performance of Turkish UCAVs in Nagorno-Karabakh led a growing number of analysts to characterise them as a “gamechanger” in the evolution of contemporary warfare (Rossiter & Cannon, 2022: 222; Erickson, 2023: 227; Bastian, 2024: 1). This assessment was further reinforced by Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev, who stated during the conflict that “Türkiye’s drones strengthened the Azerbaijani army, created significant opportunities for us, and helped us reduce our losses” (Nordic Monitor, 2020).

Reactions within European institutions to Türkiye’s role in the war further illustrate the complex diplomatic environment surrounding the conflict. Certain political groups in the European Parliament called on the European Union to act in response to Türkiye’s involvement. However, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell responded by emphasising continued engagement, stating that the EU would “continue working with Türkiye in the resolution of conflicts and the cessation of hostilities” (Turan, 2020). This response reflected a broader reluctance within the EU to adopt a confrontational stance, while simultaneously acknowledging Türkiye’s growing relevance in regional security dynamics.

At the same time, Russia’s position—limited largely to mediation rather than direct intervention—did not translate into open opposition to Türkiye’s stance. This absence of explicit resistance from Moscow provided Ankara with a significant strategic advantage in managing its regional posture. In this context, it is also important to note that the broader international legal framework, particularly United Nations resolutions affirming the illegality of the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, played a reinforcing role in shaping the legitimacy discourse surrounding the conflict (Hwang & Song, 2022: 450). Taken together, both the cautious support or restraint of key international actors and the absence of direct confrontation with Russia contributed to transforming the Nagorno-Karabakh War into a *de facto* testing ground for Türkiye’s emerging UAV diplomacy. The operational use of Turkish-made UCAVs in a real combat environment allowed Ankara to demonstrate the effectiveness of its defence technologies under high-intensity warfare conditions. This process generated significant geopolitical outcomes for Türkiye, consolidating its position as an increasingly influential actor in regional security affairs and reinforcing the strategic utility of its defence-industrial capabilities in foreign policy projection. Consistent with neoclassical realist expectations, the conflict demonstrated how defence-industrial capacity functioned as a key intervening variable between Türkiye’s growing material capabilities and its ability to generate tangible geopolitical outcomes.

3. THE GEOPOLITICAL OUTCOMES OF TÜRKİYE’S UAV DIPLOMACY

Türkiye’s increasing focus on UAV and UCAV technologies in recent years should be understood as part of a broader strategic transformation aimed at enhancing military autonomy and projecting power through technological capabilities. This shift has, on the one hand, reduced Türkiye’s dependence on foreign suppliers for critical defence systems, while on the other hand generating a new sphere of influence in which military technology is increasingly integrated with foreign policy and diplomatic practice.

In particular, the international visibility and operational performance of domestically produced UCAVs—characterised by high precision, operational flexibility, and relatively low cost—have significantly enhanced Türkiye’s ability to employ these systems as instruments of foreign policy (Hwang & Song, 2022: 450). This development has enabled Ankara to move beyond conventional defence procurement and enter a domain in which military technology functions not only as a tool of warfare, but also as a mechanism of diplomatic leverage and geopolitical influence.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, this transformation illustrates how domestic capabilities can mediate the relationship between material power and foreign policy outcomes. Rather than treating military technology merely as a reflection of national power, neoclassical realism draws attention to the state’s ability to mobilise and operationalise strategic resources in pursuit of external objectives (Ripsman et al., 2016). In this regard, Türkiye’s defence-industrial capacity has functioned as an intervening variable that has enabled Ankara to convert its growing economic and technological resources into concrete instruments of influence. The international diffusion of Turkish-made UAVs and UCAVs therefore represents not only an expansion of defence exports but also a mechanism through which Türkiye has sought to enhance its strategic autonomy, strengthen regional partnerships, and expand its geopolitical reach. Sales of unmanned combat aerial vehicles to countries such as Azerbaijan, Qatar, and Ukraine have strengthened Türkiye’s military-technological ties with key regional partners (Bakır, 2019: 132). These defence-industrial relationships have contributed to the expansion of Türkiye’s influence across strategically significant regions, including the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus. In this regard, UAV diplomacy has emerged as a complementary—and in certain cases increasingly central—mechanism alongside traditional diplomatic tools, at times even

surpassing them in terms of strategic impact.

The most tangible and significant geopolitical outcome of Türkiye's UAV diplomacy has been the qualitative deepening of its relations with Azerbaijan. Consistent with neoclassical realist expectations, the most tangible geopolitical outcome of Türkiye's UAV diplomacy has been the qualitative deepening of its relations with Azerbaijan, demonstrating how domestically generated military-technological capabilities can be translated into regional influence and strategic partnerships. The historically, culturally, and politically close ties between Türkiye and Azerbaijan evolved into a more advanced form of military-strategic partnership during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Türkiye's provision of military technology support to Azerbaijan—most notably the deployment of Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs—contributed to Azerbaijan's attainment of a decisive battlefield advantage. This development effectively positioned Türkiye as Azerbaijan's primary security partner in the South Caucasus (Khan, 2021: 31–32). At a broader level, these dynamics also contributed to a partial reconfiguration of regional power balances.

From Russia's perspective, the Nagorno-Karabakh War represented a critical juncture in which its traditionally dominant influence in the South Caucasus was increasingly subjected to contestation. Historically, Russia had maintained its status as the principal regional power through its military and political leverage over Armenia. However, Türkiye's active support for Azerbaijan introduced a new layer of complexity into this established balance. In this context, it is also important to acknowledge that the pro-Western orientation of Nikol Pashinyan's government in Yerevan and its attempts to partially distance itself from Moscow's strategic orbit constituted an additional contributing factor (Askerov & Ibadoghlu, 2023: 248).

Although Russia ultimately played a central role in mediating the ceasefire agreement of November 2020, the operational effectiveness of Turkish-made UCAVs during the conflict raised broader questions regarding the performance of Russian-origin military systems. This development highlighted Türkiye's growing technological and military capabilities and signalled its increasing ability to project influence within the South Caucasus, a region traditionally regarded as part of Russia's strategic sphere of interest (Yavuz & Huseynov, 2020: 110).

Another important reflection of Türkiye's UAV diplomacy emerges in the context of its relations with Iran. Prior to the war, Iran—alongside Russia—was among the key regional actors shaping the balance of power in the South Caucasus. However, the post-war environment suggests a gradual erosion of this position. The new regional configuration, in which Türkiye and Azerbaijan have become more prominent actors, has contributed to the emergence of a more multipolar and fluid regional order (Azizi & Isachenko, 2023: 3). Although a direct confrontation between Iran and Türkiye appears unlikely, Tehran's efforts to adapt to the evolving balance of power have nevertheless contributed to the persistence of underlying geopolitical tensions between the two countries. In this sense, Türkiye's expanding influence through UAV diplomacy indirectly intersects with Iran's regional calculations and strategic sensitivities.

UAV diplomacy has also produced notable implications for Türkiye's relations with NATO. While Türkiye remains a formal member of the Alliance, it has increasingly pursued a more autonomous trajectory in the field of defence industrial development. In particular, the export of military technologies to active conflict zones has been met with caution by several NATO allies. Türkiye's use of UCAVs during the Nagorno-Karabakh War, alongside its military support for Azerbaijan, made visible the tension between Ankara's pursuit of strategic autonomy and NATO's collective security framework. This dynamic indicates that Türkiye's role within the Alliance is gradually acquiring a more independent—and at times partially divergent—character (Pénzváltó, 2025: 13).

The growing international demand for Turkish UAV systems has emerged as another key factor expanding Türkiye's geopolitical sphere of influence. The ability of Türkiye to offer advanced defence products—particularly UAV and UCAV systems—at comparatively lower costs than their Western counterparts has positioned it as an alternative supplier to established defence exporters such as the United States, China, and Russia. This development has been especially significant for states that face political restrictions in their defence cooperation with Western countries or that seek more flexible and less conditional forms of military partnership. In this context, Türkiye has become an increasingly attractive partner in the global defence market.

Indeed, prior to the Nagorno-Karabakh War, Baykar had exported only six Bayraktar TB2 systems in 2019. Following the war, however, exports expanded dramatically, with more than 500 Bayraktar TB2 units sold to 32 countries (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2023). In addition, the Akıncı UCAV, which entered service in August 2021, has been procured by nine countries, further consolidating its position as one of the flagship platforms of Türkiye's defence industry (Bayraklı, 2025: 54). According to the 2022 report of the Turkish Exporters Assembly (Türkiye İhracatçılar Meclisi), exports from the defence and aerospace sector increased by 66.3% between 2020 and 2021, ranking second among all industrial sectors in terms of export growth (Türkiye İhracatçılar Meclisi, 2022: 64). This sharp increase underscores the

extent to which UAV systems have become a driving force behind Türkiye's defence industrial expansion and its broader geopolitical outreach.

Table 1. *UCAV Suppliers (1995–2023)*

All Armed Drone Suppliers, 1995–2023	
Supplier	Total Number of Armed Drone Transfers
 Turkey	47
 China	34
 United States	12
 Iran	8
 Israel	6
 South Africa	3
 United Arab Emirates	3
 Belarus	1
 Russia	1

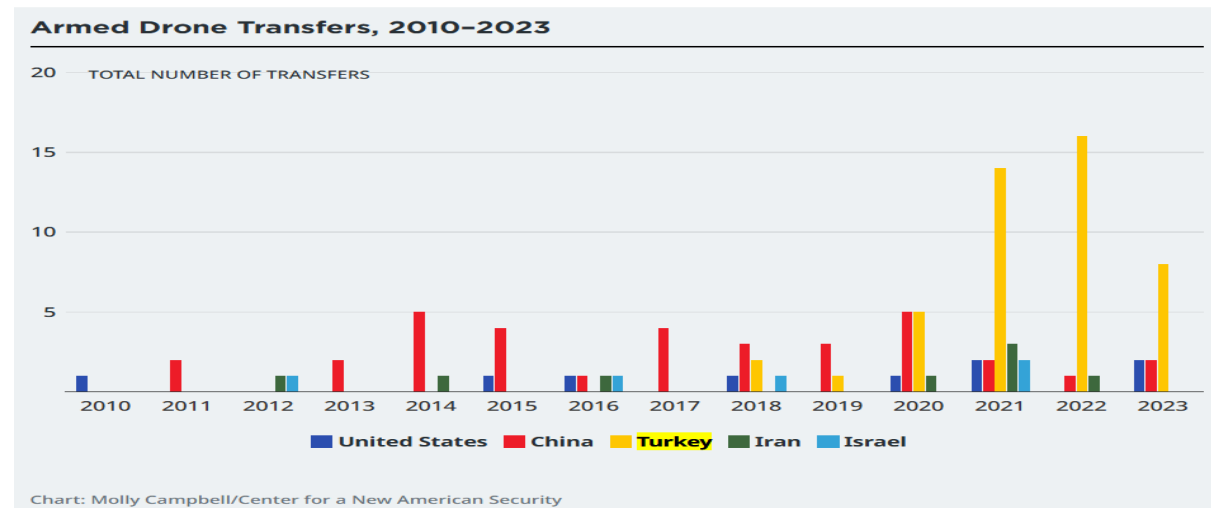
Table: Molly Campbell/Center for a New American Security

Kaynak: Campbell, M. (2024, 10 Eylül). Drone Proliferation Dataset. Center for a New American Security. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/drone-proliferation-dataset>

Molly Campbell, in her study on the global proliferation of UAVs, places particular emphasis on Türkiye. Through Campbell's analysis, it is possible to examine Türkiye's increasingly prominent role in the defence industry, particularly within the UAV/UCAV sector in recent years.

As shown in Table 1, when global UCAV suppliers are analysed for the 1995–2023 period, Türkiye ranks first with 47 recorded sales, ahead of major global powers such as China and the United States. Table 2, which illustrates Türkiye's sectoral development, is particularly significant for understanding the effects of the case study examined in this research—the Nagorno-Karabakh War. As indicated in Table 2, which covers global UCAV sales between 2010 and 2023, Türkiye moved into a more competitive position during the Nagorno-Karabakh War period within a market largely dominated by China and subsequently emerged as one of the leading actors in this field in the following years (Campbell, 2024).

Table 2. *UCAV Sales (2010–2023)*



Kaynak: Campbell, M. (2024, 10 Eylül). Drone Proliferation Dataset. Center for a New American Security. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/drone-proliferation-dataset>

Overall, Türkiye's UAV diplomacy clearly reflects the increasing salience of military technology in contemporary international relations, particularly in shaping foreign policy-making processes and enhancing power projection capabilities. Türkiye's emergence as a domestic producer and exporter of UAVs and UCAVs demonstrates that military technology has evolved beyond a tool of defence and security provision, becoming instead a strategic instrument for generating geopolitical influence. In this regard, Türkiye's experience points to an emerging paradigm in which modern warfare and diplomacy are increasingly shaped by technology-intensive instruments, asymmetric power capabilities, and the strategic utilisation of defence industrial capacity within international relations.

4. CONCLUSION

Türkiye's emergence as a salient actor in global geopolitical competition has been significantly shaped by the expansion and maturation of its defence industrial capacity. Rather than constituting a mere technological upgrade in military capability, the development of Türkiye's UAV and UCAV programmes reflects a broader strategic reorientation in which defence technology has become an instrument of foreign policy, influence projection, and limited-power balancing. In this context, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War stands as a critical inflection point, demonstrating how Türkiye effectively integrated unmanned systems into its external policy toolkit to shape battlefield outcomes, consolidate strategic partnerships, and expand its regional presence in the South Caucasus.

Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan during the conflict did not merely contribute to a shift in military balance on the ground; it also reinforced Ankara's position as an indispensable regional security actor. By enabling Azerbaijan to achieve operational superiority through UAV-enabled warfare, Türkiye indirectly challenged Russia's historically dominant role in the region and exposed the growing permeability of Moscow's traditional sphere of influence. However, this development should not be interpreted as a zero-sum displacement of Russian power, but rather as the emergence of a more contested and multi-layered regional order in which technological capability has become a key determinant of influence.

The implications of Türkiye's UAV diplomacy extend well beyond the South Caucasus. The operational performance of Turkish UCAVs in Nagorno-Karabakh significantly enhanced their global visibility, contributing to a rapid expansion of defence exports and positioning Türkiye as an alternative supplier in the international arms market. In the post-2020 period, states across Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia increasingly turned to Turkish platforms such as the Bayraktar TB2, reflecting both cost-effectiveness and perceived battlefield effectiveness (Çelik, 2025). This expansion has not only generated economic returns but has also functioned as a form of geopolitical leverage, enabling Türkiye to embed itself within emerging security networks across multiple regions.

At the same time, the increasing centrality of defence exports in Türkiye's foreign policy toolkit introduces structural constraints and strategic dilemmas. While UAV diplomacy has facilitated deeper ties with partners such as Azerbaijan and expanded Türkiye's strategic reach, it has also contributed to a more complex positioning within NATO and vis-à-vis Russia. This reflects a broader tension between strategic autonomy and alliance embeddedness, where the pursuit of independent technological capability simultaneously enhances influence and generates friction within established security architectures.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, the findings of this study suggest that shifts in foreign policy influence cannot be explained solely through changes in the distribution of power at the systemic level. Rather, the Turkish case demonstrates how domestic capabilities condition the extent to which material resources can be converted into effective foreign policy instruments. The development of an indigenous defence industry enabled Türkiye not only to reduce external dependencies but also to transform technological capacity into diplomatic influence, military effectiveness, and geopolitical leverage. In this sense, defence-industrial capacity functioned as a critical intervening variable between Türkiye's growing material capabilities and the foreign policy outcomes observed in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Ultimately, the Turkish case illustrates how domestically generated technological and defence-industrial capabilities can enhance a state's ability to pursue strategic autonomy and project influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood, reflecting Türkiye's broader ambition to reposition itself as a pivotal middle power with regional and selective global reach. The lessons of the Nagorno-Karabakh War underscore the transformative role of military technology in twenty-first-century geopolitics, where unmanned systems increasingly function not only as tools of warfare but also as instruments of diplomatic signalling and structural influence. Beyond its immediate impact on regional conflicts, Türkiye's UAV diplomacy may contribute to longer-term transformations in patterns of security cooperation, defence procurement, and geopolitical influence. As unmanned technologies become increasingly central to military modernisation efforts worldwide, states capable of producing and exporting such systems are likely to acquire greater strategic flexibility and political leverage within the international system. In this respect, Türkiye's experience may represent an early example of how defence-industrial innovation can generate enduring geopolitical effects that extend well beyond the battlefield. As Türkiye continues to innovate and expand its defence export portfolio, its role in

shaping regional security environments and contributing to the reconfiguration of global power relations is likely to further increase, reinforcing the centrality of technology-driven diplomacy in contemporary international relations.

AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

Declarations of Research and Publication Ethics: This study has been prepared in accordance with scientific research and publication ethics.

Ethics Committee Approval: Since this research does not include analyzes that require ethics committee approval, it does not require ethics committee approval.

Author Contributions: The author has done all the work alone.

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest arising from the study for the author or third parties.

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