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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Explaining the Role of Intervening Variables in Turkey's Foreign Policy Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to offer a neoclassical realist analytical framework to identify the influence of agent-structure interplay on Turkey's foreign policy behavior during JDP-led governments. The main argument is that the adjustments in Turkish behaviors between 2003 to date, analyzed by most scholars starting from the systemic or domestic level alone, could be better explained intertwining the explanans. Considering four intervening variables – national role conception, decision-making model, perception of strategic environment and orientation towards the regional order – this article discusses Turkey's shift from a wary isolationist attitude to a wary interventionist one. The last two decades of Turkey's foreign policy will be analyzed to show why the neoclassical realist analytical lens is particularly useful to grab the different determinants that have affected Turkish foreign policy behavior.

KEYWORDS: Turkey; Foreign Policy; Neoclassical Realism; Intervening Variables; Foreign Policy Executive; National Role Conception.

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1. Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, most observers have suggested that the line between domestic and international politics is not just blurry but it is quickly disappearing because of globalization (Kaarbo 2015). Some have called it ‘intermestic’, combining the words to indicate the intertwine of issues and interests. Among them, Baghat Korany who retains that intermestic is ‘a reflection of creeping globalization, characterized by the retreat of exclusive state sovereignty, and the rise instead of the intensity of societal interconnectedness and speedy circulation of ideas, but without wiping out the impact of local features’ (Korany 2013, 83). Such interpretation results particularly useful in understanding the Middle East as a ‘penetrated system’ composed of several distinct levels - the global environment, the interstate environment, the trans-state environment, and the domestic environment – exposed to a high rate of influence by external actors (Brown 1984, 3-5). Turkey is one of the regional actors whose foreign policy has changed most in the last two decades, switching from a cautious and wary approach to the region to an active and interventionist one. The transformation of Turkish foreign policy (TFP) behavior has been proved to be particularly affected by the local-global nexus (Keyman & Gumuscu 2014).

In the following pages, the article tries to expand the existing studies on TFP behavior under the Justice and Development Party (JDP) governments applying a neoclassical realist analytical framework to identify the concurrent influence of certain domestic constraints and priorities. It seeks to offer an interpretation of Turkey’s strategic adjustment during the last two decades, one that explicitly combines the material and ideational entwined factors in the manner suggested by neoclassical realism. The neoclassical realism evokes some intuitions of classical realism to integrate and better specify the structural theory of neorealism.¹ The article’s purpose is to improve the dominant neorealist and constructivist analysis of TFP and thereby demonstrate the value of neoclassical realist interpretation. The article seeks to show how the realist perspective does not deny the relevance of the non-material dimension

¹ For an in-depth analysis see (Wivel 2005).

of power, but rather includes them as intervening variables useful to expand the explanatory or explicative factors.

The main research question that this paper attempts to answer is what are the factors that have driven the shifts in TFP? By using data from interviews and fieldwork across the region the article aims to demonstrate the salience of the so-called intervening variables, such as the foreign policy executives (FPE) perception of the surrounding international and regional environment.

The article presents the analysis in three distinct sections. The first section introduces the main tenets of the Neoclassical realism, the theoretical framework within which the research is developed. After a brief overview of the main traits of the traditional TFP before JDP, the second section proceeds with the case study highlighting the strategy change implemented by the first JDP-led governments. Thereafter, the analysis examines the factors that led to the change in TFP behavior between 2003 and 2019. Dividing the timescale into three distinct periods - 2003-09; 2010-14 and 2015-19 -, the research outlines the intertwine among international, regional, domestic, and individual variables that have driven Turkish behaviors. Finally, in the last section, the implications of the Turkey case are examined for what they reveal about the nexus between domestic and foreign policy. The main argument is that the adjustments in TFP could be better explained including in the analysis some state-level variables, specifically related to leaders or foreign policy executive (FPE) – such as perception/threat assessment, national role, and decision-making process – and their interactions with the external environment. Therefore, for each section, three-images or levels related to Turkish foreign policy have been considered: individual (foreign policy executive and leadership); state (domestic concerns and institutional framework); and external environment (regional and international).

2. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

As ‘an emerging school of foreign policy’ neoclassical realism (NCR) is among the newest branches of realist school that wrought by a very productive theoretical debate within International Relations (IR) field (Taliaferro, Lobell & Ripsman

2009, 3-4). Over the last two decades, the NCR, whose purpose is to study the foreign policy of the states, without claims to explain broad systemic patterns of recurring outcomes, has become one of the most widespread approaches to the study of international relations.² Yet, as well as constructivists, neoclassical realists consider that ideas matter – ideology, threat assessment, leaders perceptions -, this is why James (2009, 259) argued that NCR is ‘realist-inspired constructivism’. The core principles of neorealism on state, relative power and the primacy of the anarchical material structure are largely shared by neoclassical realists. The overall argument is that systemic factors are the most important to explain international developments over time (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell 2016). In other words, this approach maintains that relative power – resources and capabilities – of the state is the main causal variable of state actions. At the same time, NCR has distanced itself from neorealism because it does not consider anarchy as an independent causal force but, rather, as a permissive condition that gives states considerable latitude in defining their security interests. Neoclassical realists believe that systemic effects on state’s behaviour vary and are indirect (Wohlforth 2008). While it emerges that the system gives incentives to state actors, it is not immediate its involvement in determining their behaviour (Rathbun 2008, 305). Indeed, there is not ‘an immediate or perfect ‘transmission belt’ between structural pressures and the formation of foreign policy behaviours, as the state cannot always directly respond to international incentives’ (Rose 1998, 146; Schweller 2004, 164-166).³

The central tenets of NCR are that foreign policy is the result of international structure, domestic influences, and a complex relation between the two. Similar to the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), in the NCR the decision-making unit (be it a leader, a small group, or a coalition of actors) is a funnel through which other factors are transmitted and interpreted (Kaarbo 2015, 206). Emphasising the role of state-

² In contrast to other scholars (Rose 1998; Wohlforth 2008) who consider the NCR as an alternative theory to neorealism, this article assumes neorealism and neoclassical realism as complementary.

³ The scholars that pursue the neoclassical realist approach argue that the domestic factors are placed in the middle, as mediating or intervening variables, as a nexus between the independent variable (relative power) and the dependent variable (foreign policy outcomes).

level factors, strategic assessment, and policymakers' perception, NCR offers a two-level theory of foreign policy (Putnam 1988).⁴ Indeed, if the external environment of a state determines the kind of challenges – threats and opportunities - it faces, how the state responds to them varies according to internal factors, notably the level of state formation, the social composition of ruling coalitions, the elite threat perceptions and the capacity of institutions to mobilize power (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2014).

Some studies have paid a lot of emphasis on the role of individuals in foreign policy choices.⁵ Although it is not possible to say that those choices are solely the result of individual 'human agency' (Jensen 1982) it is also necessary to consider the personal characteristics of the leader, especially in the present-day Middle East. Within the Middle East political environment, the leaders' role, their personality, leadership style, beliefs, and convictions take on greater importance in the foreign policy decision-making process. As pointed out by Hermann et al. (2001), the Middle East, with politics being heavily autocratic, without institutional and/or bureaucratic constraints, provide optimum conditions for the expression of the leaders' personality to the extent of making them 'predominant' in the decision-making process. Neoclassical realists recurring topic is the relationship between state leaders or FPE and the people.⁶ From NCR perspective, state leaders or FPE exist at the intersection of the international and the domestic with their charge of perceptions and misperceptions (Lobell 2009). Several neoclassical realists have developed the notion of state power to better explain the link between state leaders and society. Such concept refers to 'the portion of (total) national power the government can extract for its purposes and the relative ability to extract and mobilize resources from domestic society within a certain geopolitical setting' (Zakaria 1998, 10). Consequently, state leaders need to

⁴ As Putnam (1988) two level game approach also NCR takes into consideration international and domestic levels of analysis, but there is no ideological closeness.

⁵ See for example (Hermann 1980; Kaarbo 1997; Rosati 2000; Keller 2005; Grove 2007).

⁶ This argument is echoed by the classic realism that considers the qualities of leadership and the bond of the leadership with society as an important factor in understanding the ability of state leaders to pursue a rational foreign policy. See for example Morgenthau (1948).

secure public support in order to mobilize necessary resources for their foreign policies as well as to safeguard their own positions and their ability to govern.⁷

The ideational factors such as ideology and nationalism are particularly useful, mainly when the security in the international system is scarce, because they can play an instrumental role in helping a state's leadership extract, mobilize and direct societal resources and cultivate support among its power base (Taliaferro, Lobell & Ripsman 2009). The great limit of NCR is that it does not provide enough information to predict national strategic choices.

2.1. The methodological approach

Following the JDP's rise to power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy has changed apace, drawing the attention of many IR scholars. Several of them argue that Turkey has adopted a more assertive policy in the surrounding regions thanks to greater self-confidence and capability. Due to the neorealist theoretical approach that these scholars have adopted, many of the studies have overlooked the numerous transformations that have occurred within the Anatolian country. As a result, part of the extant literature on TFP has disregarded the main context in which foreign policy decisions are taken (Hale 2000; Candar & Graham 2001; Yalvag 2012). On the other hand, following the constructivist approach few scholars have pointed out the importance of the ideational factor without considering the saliency of state's relative power in terms of resources and capabilities (Sözen 2010; Atalay 2013; Keyman & Gumuscu 2014; Bilgin & Bilgic 2011).

However, both approaches present some limits, because they don't comprehend the uninterrupted twine between external and internal factors that have influenced Turkey's foreign policy behaviours in the last two decades. In other words, for this case study neorealist' and constructivist's analytical approach prove to be not completely suitable in analyzing the intermestic dimension in which Turkey have been operating since the beginning of the JDP era. For this reason, drawing into dualist interpretation of the nexus between domestic and international politics, this article

⁷ For more in-depth analysis, see (Schweller 2004; Taliaferro 2006).

aims to show why the neoclassical realist analytical lens is particularly useful, by arguing that TFP outputs are not only a result of bargaining between domestic and international constraints but it also reflects a shift in variables related to the intrastate level. What makes the NCR particularly suitable to analyse Turkey's foreign behaviours is its explanatory power, locating causal properties at both structural and unit levels.⁸ It is common for multi-level analysis theories to consider foreign policy making as a process based on the sum of external factors and internal constraints, quantitatively referred to as $P = E+D$. The neoclassical theory, on the other hand, considers the formulation of foreign policy as a correlation of external factors as affected by, or in the function of, some internal intervening factors, $P = E(D)$.⁹

Following this latter formula, the case study is operationalized by using a process-tracing method, as a form of within-case analysis, which attempts to trace the links between possible causes and observed outcomes (Bennett 2010; Beach & Pedersen 2013). For each of the three periods considered - 2003-09; 2010-14; 2015-19 - the article introduces some observable implications regarding the causal mechanism and the type of policy outcome to be expected. The article argues that process-tracing allows us to shed light on the causal mechanism that brought to a policy change. Considering four intervening variables – national role conception, decision-making model, orientation towards the regional order, and perception of the strategic environment – this article highlights the foreign policy behavior adopted and the policy tools used by Turkey to pursue its strategic interests. Further, the research discusses that it is possible to formulate some hypotheses about the orientation towards the regional system as well as about the general attitude or foreign policy behaviors.

In the next sections, the article assesses the validity of such a hypothesis using qualitative material, mainly academics articles, information from official institutions websites and reports from agencies and think tanks. In addition to second sources, the analysis has been integrated by data from interviews conducted over two years of research in Turkey (2017-19).

⁸ The NCR could not be consider a reductionist theory of international politics, but, rather as a multi-level analysis because it consider all three Waltz images individual, domestic and international.

⁹ See (Smith, Hadfield & Dunne 2012).

Table 1. Intervening variables

Time	Na- tional Role Con- ception	Deci- sion- Making Model	Percep- tion of Strategic Environ- ment	Orienta- tion	Fp Behav- iour	Fp Tools
pre- 2002^a	Buffer state	Bureau- cratic model (high mili- tary)	Threaten- ing	Status quo	Wary- isola- tionist	Hard Power
2002- 09	Bridge state	Bureau- cratic model (low mili- tary)	Permissive	Revisionist	Proac- tive	Soft Power
2010- 14	Central or Hub state	Narrow circle	Permissive (‘11-‘12) & Restraining (‘13-‘14)	Revisionist	Asser- tive	Soft Power + Hard Power
2015- 19	Buffer state	Leader domi- nant model	Threaten- ing	Status quo	Inter- ven- tionist	Hard Power

^aThe table reflects the intervening variables considered in the case study, highlighted the shifts in perceptions and behaviors among Turkish FPE between 2002-19.

Source: author's elaboration

3. The awakening: from status quo to the accomodationist approach (2003-2009)

After the 2002 victory election, the JDP policy-makers began to revitalize Turkey's role in the international sphere. The shift of decision-making power gradually away from the military has brought up new elite with completely different backgrounds and identities. As a consequence, FPE perceptions of constraints and opportunities drastically changed compared to the previous decades. The surrounding, global and regional environment, previously perceived as a potential threat to national security and stability, it became a playground in which the ambitions of the new FPE could be nurtured (Öktem, Karli & Kadioglu 2012). Specifically, the post-9/11 international system offered an unprecedented opportunity for Ankara to play a more autonomous and ambitious policy in the surrounding regions. As a consequence, the JDP government's foreign policy doctrine was outlined for an active engagement with all regional systems through a multi-dimensional approach.¹⁰

Between 2003-2009 the reshaping of Middle Eastern balances offered to the Ankara government the opportunity for a more assertive approach with a revisionist orientation towards the regional system. The conjunctural determinants led to a rapid change in Turkey's national role conception, modifying what Aydin (2004) called 'structural variables'.¹¹ This shift proved one of the classic realism principles that states with greater power resources – wealth, population, size, social and historical coherence – are more likely to have a pro-active foreign policy (Walt 1987).

In the post 2003, a firm incentive from the system for Turkey's rising role in the regional politics, came from the endorsement and support of the US.¹²

¹⁰ One of the main signs of the "multidimensional" approach was the handling of the EU accession process; despite Turkish leaders' commitment to make Turkey a full member of the EU, this was not seen as an alternative to regional integration in the Middle East and growing economic cooperation with the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

¹¹ According to Mustafa Aydin structural 'static' variables are continuous and relatively static and can exert long-term influence over the determination of foreign policy goals. Structural variables include geographic position, historical experiences and cultural background, together with national stereotypes, images of other nations and continuing economic provision (Aydin 2004, 119-121).

¹² If during the 1990s Turkey was not in the position to play this role continuously due to both national and regional constraints, with the new millennium the rapid economic growth and the political stability tied to the one-party government created the suitable conditions for Turkey to take advantage of the structural incentives.

According to the Bush administration the soft Sunni's green of Turkey appeared to be a perfect match to counterbalance the rising Shia's green wave of Iran. Turkey's FPE adopted a more regionally-oriented foreign policy without doubting the traditional pro-Western projection. This new approach sets the stage for a scholars and analysts' debate on Turkey's 'shift of axis', that is, the erosion of Turkey's predominantly Western orientation (Zalewski 2010; Bagdonas 2012; Başer 2015). Even though Turkish FPE firmly denied arguments to that effect, Turkish foreign policy undoubtedly took an autonomous course, that diverged or converged with Western partners time by time (Yorulmazlar & Turhan 2015).

The different attitude towards the Palestinian–Israeli dispute¹³ was illustrative of a more autonomous regional policy. Among the domestic determinants of this new orientation, the rising business elite takes on relevance. The group of Turkish traders and entrepreneurs, mainly from within the Anatolian interior cities, represented a steaming force in Turkey's engagement with all segments of its neighborhood, particularly the Middle East and Africa (Özdemir & Serin 2016). The internationalization of Anatolian capitalism, arose as a key non-state actor in Turkey's external diversification, supporting the idea of Turkey as a trading state (Kirişçi 2009) and as a bridge between the West and the East (Öniş & Yılmaz 2009).

3.1. Davutoğlu's vision and the neo-ottoman belief

The growing JDP's autonomy in domestic and foreign policy spheres paved the way for Ankara's firmer moves towards an integrated Middle Eastern order (Yorulmazlar & Turhan 2015). The shift – from status quo to revisionist orientation – was determined also by profound changes within the FPE. From the JDP first mandate, leading government figures began recruiting a separate group of advisers in the realm of foreign affairs. Until that moment, the Turkish foreign policy decision-making process was bureaucratized and highly militarized, with a significant number of high-ranking decision-makers from or related to the military sector (Uzgel 2003).

¹³ Turkey's increasing distance from Israel in the 2000s, and its rhetoric in support of the Palestinians, represented a relevant change that has led to a shift on the perceptions of the country in the Middle East.

The initiatives promoted by the emerging FPEs were, therefore, often constrained by the different attitudes of the former bureaucratic and diplomatic establishment.

However, this period coincided with a general de-securitization of both foreign and domestic policy, thanks to the reforms implemented within the framework of the EU accession process. The decline of the political power of the military has allowed the civil government to adopt a less securitized and more autonomous approach to foreign policy (Göksel 2016). The brief honeymoon with the EU, especially among Western observers, fostered the idea of the Turkish model as a mix of secular institutions, moderate Islam, democracy, and globalization. The improvement of relations with the EU continued until 2008 when the government's approach towards the EU membership process gradually changed. Another factor related to the de-securitization of the domestic policy was the opening of a space for a political solution of the Kurdish issue (Ozcelik 2006). The domestic's transformations created favorable conditions for the change of approach in regional policy.

Turkish involvement in the region was driven by a new strategy commonly known as zero problems with neighbors.¹⁴ Even though the Arab uprisings in general, and the Syria stalemate in particular, have shown all the limits and the weaknesses of the zero-problem strategy, with no doubts it represented a break, or a shift, with the traditional one (Chiriatti & Donelli 2015). Indeed, although since the second half of the 1980s there have been many efforts to (re)establish ties with the region (Laçiner 2009), Turkey's attitude changed with the JDPs rise. The regional agenda of the first two JDP governments witnessed a more confident Turkey that was able to pursue leadership ambitions in the Middle East (Ozkececi-Taner 2017).

The idea of Turkey to shape the regional order according to its preferences and to put itself at the center was a logical evolution of its historical role (Saraçoğlu & Demirkol 2015). The new national role conception of the Turkish FPEs was aiming

¹⁴ The 'zero problems' derived by the former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's strategic depth doctrine that brought the country to adopt a new agenda to reposition Turkey from the periphery of international relations to the center, minimizing the troubles in the neighboring regions.

to enlarge Turkey's influence in the neighboring regions reasserting its Ottoman-Islamic legacy (Ozkececi-Taner 2017).

During this phase, the Turkish strategic vision was based on the perception of Turkey as a potential regional great power and the possibility of acquiring a more important role in the international arena (Haugom 2019, 10). The process of reformulation of the country's identity and international role was underpinned by recurrent and growing neo-ottomans rhetoric. As noted by constructivist theory, identity building is always supported by a narrative that ensures biographical continuity making any changes seem natural. For Turkish FPEs, neo-ottomanism as a kind of supra-state identity seemed useful both to counterpose the pervasive autonomy claims within its borders – Kurdish issue – and to strengthen trans-state relations by recalling historical and cultural ties with the Middle East and the Balkans people (Yavuz 2016).

Simultaneously, Turkey launched a series of initiatives to mediate the main regional disputes to prove its commitment to acting as a cooperative builder in the region. Exploiting the principle of pro-active and pre-emptive peace diplomacy, Ankara tested its diplomatic tools in conflict situations, operating as a mediator in sensitive areas such as the Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the Middle East (Israel-Syria, Syria-Saudi Arabia).

From perspective of the nexus between international and domestic politics, this period reflects a dualist approach. Indeed, there were both strong international and domestic incentives to adopt a more active and less securitized FP behaviour. The JDP rise resulted in a harsh criticism of the traditional 'status quo' agenda, that has been replaced by a new spectrum of mix (more) soft and (less) hard security issues. In this period, as illustrated in Table 1, Turkey started to adopt a revisionist orientation toward the regional order and a pro-active FP behavior. This attitude was induced by the perception of the strategic environment as a permissive one.

3. The resilience of TFP (2010-2014)

In the early 2010s, especially with the blast of the Syrian civil war and the military coup in Egypt (2013), Turkish assertive behavior in regional policy was challenged by serious security threats. The transformed regional environment led Turkey's FPEs to redefine their priorities, keeping an eye on the turmoil that was agitating the whole region - internal wars, failed states, and human tragedies - (Keyman 2016). The Middle East is more a system of territorial states than a system of nation-states in which multiple levels of identity – substate, state and supra-state – coexist (Kienle 1990).

Thus, as pointed out by Noble (2008), the regional states could be better represented as a set of interconnected organisms, rather than as responding to the realist's impenetrable 'billiard balls'. Therefore, when a democratic wave erupted in Tunisia all regional states started to feel exposed to such turmoil. Following Obama's administration strategy of the 'pivot to Asia', the strategic engagement of the US in the region gradually diminished, leaving room for maneuver to other great powers such as Russia and China. This systemic incentive, combined with the regional dynamics, drove Turkey as well as other regional powers such as Iran to engage in a more assertive behavior in regional affairs (Hazbun 2018; Gürzel & Ersoy 2020). In other words, the new international geostrategic order directed towards a post-Western one (Stuenkel 2016), and the dramatic changes in the regional power balances provided to Turkish FPEs a strategic environment even more permissive, that has been considered by NCRs scholars as an important variable to explain foreign policy decision making (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell 2016).

Although the external environment had shaped the structural conditions for the formulation of a new policy, were mainly the unit-level factors (intervening variables) that determined Turkish actions. Specifically, to better understand Turkey's behavior after the 2011 Arab upheavals, it should be considered the JDP's ideological frame and the strengthening of its power in the domestic sphere. The JDP is a post-Islamist party with a powerful religious-conservative core (Robins 2007; Duran 2010). Many among its members share a background within the ranks of the Islamist

Outlook Movement, which policy has traditionally been close to Islamist movements in the region. Among the most influential FPE, there was Ahmet Davutoglu, who since the 1990s upheld the idea that Turkey should have supported the Islamic political movements in the region. According to him, the region's authoritarian regimes would sooner or later collapse, paving the way for Islamist movements.¹⁵ The opportunity showed up in 2011 with the violent unrest that crossed almost all Middle Eastern countries. A feeling shared in those months by several international analysts, who viewed Turkey as a viable model for the Arab world.¹⁶

With so many challenges, Turkish FPEs have faced a kind of ethics versus interest dilemma, resulted in an ambiguous behavior. As shown by some studies, at the outbreak of the uprisings despite the JDP government's discourse had embraced the shift towards democracy in the region (values-oriented), this was not followed by concrete support for the opposition movements. This ambiguous attitude was evident in the reluctance shown towards intervention in Libya (interest-oriented).¹⁷ Initially, Turkish FPEs perceived the uprisings as a positive dynamic that would make the regional environment more permissive. This interpretation was inspired by the belief that the so-called Arab Spring would boost Turkey's rise as a global power through the institutionalization of a favorable regional order. As a result, Turkey increased its commitment to the many regional disputes triggered, or simply exacerbated, by the 2011 wave of instability. Besides, because Ankara had no particular interests in regime continuity in either Tunisia or Egypt, the JDP leadership sustained the popular formula 'let the people decide' (Robin 2013; Göksel 2015). Strengthened by its third term victory election (June 2011) JDP's government started pursuing more pro-Islamists policies in its regional agenda.¹⁸ For a while, when the Ennahda Party in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt seemed to be conquering the government, Davutoğlu's and Erdogan's ambitions of Turkey's leading the Middle East

¹⁵ In his book *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World* (1994), Davutoğlu provided an 'Islamic alternative' to the 'modernist paradigm' that was shaping the international order up to that date.

¹⁶ Rohde, David. 'Trust Tunisia.' Reuters, October 24, 2011.

¹⁷ See for example (Aras and Akarçeşme 2011; Öniş 2012; Altunışık 2013; Yakış 2014).

¹⁸ Turkey gave its staunch support to Palestine's Hamas, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Tunisia's Ennahda, as well as to the militant Islamist groups within the Free Syrian Army in Syria.

into a new era of 'civilizational awakening' seemed to have taken its first crucial steps (Gürzel & Ersoy 2020).

The JDP assumed an unprecedented level of assertiveness in the neighborhood, which led to a complete transformation in the principles of Turkey's actions towards the Middle East, driven by a strong revisionist, almost revolutionary, orientation of the regional system.¹⁹ Some JDP officials' thought this would have represented a key to overcome the issue of the claimed 'incompatibility' of Islam and democracy²⁰ and to the reshuffle of regional balances. The return of the demonstration of compatibility would have reinforced Turkey's case for EU membership. Turkey, indeed, was playing a leading role in shifting the normative framework in favor of 'universal' values in the Islamic world (Yorulmazlar & Turhan 2015). The assertive approach to regional issues was dictated by an excess of optimism. The Turkish EFPs, above all Davutoglu and Erdogan, were subject to a so-called positive illusions (Johnson 2004). The overconfidence led them to overestimate their abilities to drive or even handle regional turmoil (Renshon and Renshon 2008). It was during the Libyan crisis and the beginning of the Syrian civil-war that Turkish FPE eventually faced the actual structural constraints and chances produced by the uprisings. Initially, Turkey encouraged a dialogue among the different sides in the Syrian context. It quickly emerged how there was no support for this approach from both regional and extra-regional powers, and eventually, Turkish behavior alienated the Syrian people's sympathy. As a consequence, Turkey adopted a more assertive policy, presenting an undeniable contrast with the former decade. This active engagement in the Syrian crisis has been well marked by Erdoğan's statement that 'Syria is Turkey's internal affair'. Since then, Turkey's policy towards Syria has been guided by humanitarian and ethical determinants and by *realpolitik*.

¹⁹ Ahmet Davutoglu speech, 'Büyük Restorasyon: Kadim'den Küreselleşmeye Yeni Siyaset Anlayışımız', Konulu Konferans Diyarbakır, March 15, 2013. URL: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-ahmet-davutoglu_nun-diyarbakir-dicle-universitesinde-verdigi_buyuk-restorasyon_kadim_den-kuresellesmeye-yeni.tr.mfa

²⁰ Abdullah Gul speech, "Cumhurbaşkanı Gül 'Harp Akademileri'nde: "Türkiye 'Erdemli Güç' Olarak Hareket Etmeli", Turkish Journal, April 6, 2012. URL: <http://www.turkishjournal.com/2012/04/06/cumhurbaskani-gul-harp-akademilerinde-turkiye-erdemli-guc-olarak-hareket-etmeli/>

3.1. New priorities at home, new policies abroad

The Arab upheavals have curbed or eliminated some key elements and principles of the new foreign policy strategy formulated by the JDP. The endure of the Syrian crisis has been the turning point because it has shown the limits of an independent and multi-dimensional foreign policy in the Middle East (Hinnebusch 2015; Chiriatti & Donelli 2015). A final blow to the 'zero problems' policy and its founding principles has been given by the domestic developments. The so-called Gezi Park protests and their aftermaths became emblematic of the failure of the balance between democracy and security in Turkey, raising new doubts about Turkey's ambitions to act as a role model to the Muslim Arab states. Furthermore, the rift between the Gülen movement and JDP also has exacerbated the domestic political climate, creating a rift within some institutions and amongst FPEs (Salt 2015).

Once the Arab upheavals have eroded the structure of regional fragile balance, Turkish ability to reframe its assertive foreign policy completely dropt. According to Diodato, this outcome is imputable to the FPE, since the state was incapable to understand that foreign policies of states are dialectics of inter-subjective relations and not a pre-given format that society cannot change (Diodato 2016, 32).²¹ Therefore, although the regional sub-system had provided Turkey with chances to prove its democratic credentials, the events did not follow the path hoped by Turkish FPEs and international observers. Moreover, the crisis of the Westphalian system within the region gave non-state actors many opportunities to fill the power vacuum. Particularly, two militias groups had a profound impact on Turkish security: the People's Protection Units (YPG), a PKK-affiliated Kurdish militia in Syria, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a radical Islamic movement. When the ISIL militants sieged Kobani (2014), Ankara had to face a dilemma. In the first stages of the clashes, Turkey did not allow the Kurdish fighters from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to pass through its borders to support the YPG militias, regardless of the many pressures coming from the international community. The event has

²¹ On this issue see also (Teschke & Cemgil 2014).

shown a contradiction inherent in the new Ankara's policy towards the regional events, namely the clash between self-interest and higher ideals.

Since 2011 also the national role conception and the narrative behind the Turkish foreign policy agenda have changed a lot. If the idea of Turkey as a model for other region's countries has been damaged by few domestic developments, Turkish discourse assumed a more ideational tone, focusing on the role of Turkey as a global humanitarian actor and emerging donor country. Turkey has become one of the key "global humanitarian actors of world politics" (Bayer & Keyman 2012). This discourse reflects a teleological, even utopian understanding of world affairs. Turkey's narrative adopted a new missionary approach according to which Turkey plays a historical role of leader or hegemonic country not only in the region but of a wider Muslim community (ummah) as well demonstrated by the Turkey's humanitarian response to Rohingya's crisis.²² Such a missionary approach to foreign policy reflected some peculiar Turkish socio-political dynamics. When the JDP's third term started in 2011, the Kemalist influence over the media, judiciary, and military was already marginalized (Kuru 2012). Indeed, since the 2009 Turkey has witnessed a gradual process of JDP-ization of the political system and institutions, along with the rise of the concept of a 'New Turkey' (*Yeni Türkiye*).²³ Meanwhile, an early reshuffle had also begun within the ruling party. The figure of Erdogan was becoming ever more dominant and the internal voices of dissent were gradually dispelled. There was, therefore, a twofold trend; if on the one hand, the country was going through a phase of JDP-ization, on the other hand, the JDP was increasingly Erdoganized (Yilmaz & Bashirov 2018). Inevitably, these two closely intertwined internal dynamics began to affect also the TFP behavior, centralizing decision-making power in the hands of the Prime Minister and his inner circle of advisers. At the same time, the rhetoric behind

²² Simon P. Watmough, 'Turkey, the Rohingya crisis and Erdoğan's ambitions to be a global Muslim leader', *The Conversation*, September 13, 2017. URL: <http://theconversation.com/turkey-the-rohingya-crisis-and-erdogans-ambitions-to-be-a-global-muslim-leader-83854>. For an in-depth analysis of the Turkey's humanitarian dimension see (Gilley 2015; Donelli 2017).

²³ The concept of a 'New Turkey' has been used to refer to the widely held opinion, both in Turkey and in the Western world, according to which the JDP's coming to power in 2002 had started a whole new era in Turkish political history (Alaranta 2015, 10). For a more in-depth analysis see (İnsel 2014; Yilmaz 2017; Aydıntaşbaş 2020).

the Turkish agenda began to fuel the image of Turkey as the main patron of all Muslims. The change of perception of the surrounding environment from permissive to restrictive and internal developments did not change the revisionist approach to the region, favoring the adoption of a more assertive policy. The Turkish FPEs, driven by an excess of optimism, increased their involvement in the domestic dynamics of the countries experienced by the protests.

5. The retreat: the wary aggressive attitude (2015-2019)

Even if leaders and domestic forces determine what the state wishes or tries to do, it is the systemic level that determines what it can do. Indeed, over the years, mainly systemic determinants obliged Ankara to alter its revisionist soft-power oriented policy towards the region. Specifically, the Libyan and Syrian crisis have shown to Turkish FPEs that ‘a cautious ‘wait and see’ approach was not a viable option’ (Keyman 2016). The uprisings gave new impetus to the regional power struggle. Three regional power’s blocs, led by Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia competed to shape the post-Arab Spring regional order and have affected the internal struggle for power within the countries that were experiencing uprisings. However, as the Syrian conflict deepened into intractable civil war, the Ankara government seemed to be ineffectual in controlling the turmoil within its borders and much less bid for regional leadership (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2014). Moreover, Turkish FPE “miscalculated the Islamist movements political chances in the post-2011 democratic wave, over-assessed Turkey’s power and influence, and did not predict the reactions of other regional and global actors” (Yeşilyurt 2017, 76). In other words, the Arab upheavals and Turkish inability to handle the Syrian crisis with diplomatic tools have jeopardized Turkey’s ambition to be a leading country. Ankara’s over-activism has resulted in a growing number of threats to its security along the Southern border. Moreover, the different approaches pursued by Russia and the West have further convoluted the post-Arab Spring geopolitical environment.

The developments on Turkish Southern border have made Turkey’s status more unstable and they have influenced Turkish FPE orientation towards neighbors

(Donelli 2018). These latter were increasingly as potential enemies - as during the pre-JDP era. Meanwhile, the perception of threat coming from the extra-regional powers (US, Russia, and EU countries) has increased, as they were considered as producers of instability within Turkey. The 'order maker' role in the region asserted by Davutoğlu proved to be too optimistic as shown by the worsening of the Syrian civil war. These circumstances have also driven to another change in the Turkish national role conception, from the idea of a 'central country' to the one of Turkey as an isolated country²⁴ with a buffer role. Similarly, to the Cold War period, Turkey perceives itself as a buffer state. This current conception is security-driven and based on the notion of containment and status quo orientation. As underlined by Keyman (2016, 2280) 'the current Turkey's buffer identity has three subtexts: (1) to contain refugees in Turkey; (2) to contain the ISIL problem in the MENA region, mainly in Syria and Iraq; and (3) to balance Iran's regional hegemonic aspirations'. This shift is a double backward step towards a position akin to the pre-JDP era.

The international and regional context that had previously created a permissive environment had changed, reducing the Turkish room for maneuver. Domestic constraints also increased. Firstly, the discontent for democratic backsliding (Tansel 2018). Secondly, the warfare between the Turkish authority and Gülen movement within state institutions, blast in the failed coup attempt in mid-2016. Thirdly, the large number of attacks by terrorist groups such as ISIL and TAK (a PKK offshoot) in Turkish cities. Finally, the disappointing results of the June 2015 general elections in which JDP saw its majority fading away, forcing the government to reshuffle political alliances. The events depicted above, indicate how the domestic level is currently characterized by growing challenges to JDP's role and depict the rising polarization among different social and political communities in the country. Several transformations also involved the TFP decision-making process where Erdoğan has taken the primary role, leaving a limited position to Davutoğlu's circle (Kuru 2015). Alongside, Turkey had to left aside its ambition to become a 'city upon a hill' in the Middle

²⁴ Ragıp Soylu, "Turkish public believes Turkey has no friends - but Turks", in Middle East Eye, January 17, 2020. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkish-public-believes-turkey-has-no-friends-but-turks%20poll-says> [accessed 25/9/2020].

East, in line with Davutoğlu's grand vision, and embraced a more pragmatic and less ideological FP behavior in regional competition. Since 2015, Turkey's strategy has followed a greater alignment with Russian positions on some issues, through a compartmentalized approach (Özertem 2017).²⁵ The trilateral cooperation with Iran (so-called Astana process), aiming to reach a sustainable ceasefire in Syria, represented a milestone in this new path of Turkey-Russia relations.

Turkey's decision to adopt a pragmatic approach vis-a-vis Russia resulted from a multiplicity of factors: a. the development of the Syrian crisis with the American support for the YPG militia against the ISIL²⁶, and the Russia's direct military intervention in support of the Assad regime; b. the Western criticism of the JDP government in the aftermath of Gezi Park protests; c. the personal relationships between the two leaders, Erdogan and Putin, further improved following the 2016 failed coup; d. finally, the emergence of a new strategic culture among the Turkish FPEs, the Eurasianism. The rise of the Eurasianist perspective, not new in TFP, is related to the power struggle within FPEs to fill the vacuum left by the wave of arrests of Gülenist affiliated. Among the factions that have acquired more influence is the so-called Perinçek group²⁷. The group, which revolves around the leader of the arch-secularist and ultranationalist Patriotic Party, Doğu Perinçek, is known for its staunchly secular, isolationist, socialist, anti-US, anti-West, pro-Russian and Eurasianist characteristics²⁸.

²⁵ The two states the two countries mainly kept security and defense concerns outside bilateral cooperation.

²⁶ AA.VV., "Turkey's Erdogan denounces US support for Syrian Kurds", BBC online, February 10, 2016. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35541003> [accessed 20/9/2020]; Amanda Sloat, "The US played down Turkey's concerns about Syrian Kurdish forces. That couldn't last", Brookings Online, October 9, 2019. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/10/09/the-us-played-down-turkeys-concerns-about-syrian-kurdish-forces-that-couldnt-last/> [accessed 20/9/2020].

²⁷ Murat Yetkin, "Ankara kulislerinde ürperten senaryo", *Hürriyet*, December 6, 2016. URL: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/murat-yetkin/ankara-kulislerinde-urperden-senaryo-40300264> [accessed 20/9/2020].

²⁸ For an in-depth analysis, see (Akcali & Perinçek 2009; Colakoğlu 2019).

5.1. *Back to the securitized model*

The increasing number of threats (real or simply perceived) in the neighborhood led to a switch in FP behavior and the tools used with a growing commitment to the hard power. The escalating frictions with the traditional Western allies - EU countries, the US - (Haugom 2019) and the increase in regional competition with the deterioration of relations with the Saudi-led bloc (Hazbun 2018; Cannon & Donelli 2020) contributed to change the Turkish FPEs' perception of the surrounding environment from restraining to threatening. As a consequence, Turkey has adopted a more securitized FP in which the hard power regained supremacy over soft power. The increasing use of military means has come together with a clear doctrine of pre-emptive action, which is called 'Erdoğan doctrine'.²⁹ The core idea of this new security approach is that facing a wide range of external problems and threats, Turkey must adopt preventive policies. This doctrine recalled the 2002 G.W. Bush National Security Strategy of 'pre-emption', defined as pre-emptive and preventive action.

The first and clear outcome of such a new pre-emptive approach was the military intervention in northern Syria launched in August 2016 (Euphrates Shield)³⁰. Yet, in January 2018 Turkey launched another military operation (Olive Branch) in the Afrin region, followed by the Operation Peace-Spring (October 2019) in order to prevent the consolidation of the Kurdish militia position and to create a safe zone on the border. Besides operations across the Syrian border, Turkey has launched several actions on the northern Iraq (Claw Eagle, Claw Tiger operations), as well as support to the UN- recognised GNA Libyan government led by Fayez al-Sarraj in Tripoli. The unilateral acts carried out by Turkey, to which has been added the East-Med dispute, have put the country in direct clash with the US and other NATO allies' interest. As underlined by Altunisik (2020), these dynamics are parts of a new Turkish

²⁹ Metin Gurcan, "Turkey's new 'Erdogan Doctrine'", *Al Monitor*, November 4, 2016. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/turkey-wants-use-its-hard-power-solve-regional-problems.html> [accessed 23/9/2020]; Burhanettin Duran, "Turkey's New Security Concept", *Daily Sabah*, October 26, 2016. URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2016/10/26/turkeys-new-security-concept> [accessed 23/9/2020].

³⁰ The military operation, ended in March 2017, had the aim to oppose the ISIL advance and to prevent the constitution of an independent Kurdish state in Syria.

“game of balancing” between the Western states (mainly the US) and Russia, aiming to increase Turkey’s room for maneuver.

The domestic variable that contributed to the shift in FP behaviour was the transition to the presidential system. Within the new Turkish institutional system, FP decisions should be taken by a multiplicity of entities coordinated among each other by an extensive set of consultative structures and mechanisms. At the top of these structures, there is the President of the Republic, who is the main authority in foreign policy decision-making (Duran & Miş 2018). The consultative roles belong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Committee for Security and Foreign Policy, the National Security Council (NSC), the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), the formally appointed advisors of the President and the various connections of the President outside the Presidency (so-called informal advisors), as well as the Turkish Army in a role of external influence (Strand & Neset 2019). Beyond the institutional framework, in practice, FP decisions are taken by the President and a small circle of formal and informal advisors — including the Minister of National Defense, Hulusi Akar, the Head of National Intelligence, Hakan Fidan, and Special Adviser to the President, Ibrahim Kalin (Haugom 2019, 214). In other words, although from an institutional point of view the Turkish structure evokes the political process model (Hilsman 1990) or the inter-branch politics one (Qingshan 1992), in essence, the current Turkey’s foreign policy decision-making process is more like the leader-dominant model (Kaarbo 1997).

The institutional shift has allowed President Erdoğan to give his imprint, both formal and substantial, to foreign policy. President Erdoğan increasing ‘one-man’ rule has been observed in almost all aspects of Turkish politics, including FP within which has increased the relevance of the personal (idiosyncratic) characteristics. As well pointed out by Dawisha (1988), the idiosyncratic variable usually occurred in regimes where power is personalized and concentrated, especially in time of fluidity or crises. The leader-dominant model has driven Erdoğan to use FP as an instrument to expand and energize his domestic constituency (Kesgin 2020). The securitized approach and the rising chauvinistic rhetoric have provided the ground for

a new political alliance (so-called People Alliance) between the JDP and the ultra-nationalist MHP party (Altunısık 2020). The ideological turn towards hard-liner nationalism in government policy has reinforced the promotion of a more interventionist and security-focused FP especially regarding regional disputes (Ulgen 2018). An example of how the current Turkish approach prioritizes domestic politics over foreign policy is visible in the decision of opening military bases abroad. Indeed, the establishment of a military base in Qatar in 2015, the first-ever Turkish outpost abroad, and the one that Ankara opened in Somalia (2017)³¹ would paint a new picture of success in the domestic sphere, reinforcing the idea that Turkey's new foreign policy is alive and well (Aras & Akpınar 2017).

An unusual aspect of this new deal in FP is that the new concept of pre-emptive action is being discussed a lot in Turkish media. It seems that the government is working to generate support from the Turkish public, by promoting the doctrine of pre-emption and cross-borders operation as the sole method to combat the threats. As underlined by Kardaş, 'the strategy involves concepts such as the effective use of military force beyond borders when needed, the possible disregard of traditional alliance relations and taking unilateral action independent by the US and NATO'.³² As did by the Kemalist establishment in the pre-JDP era, to foster public support, the Ankara government has used a rhetoric that beats the old Turkish fears, namely a hidden project of Western powers to establish a new regional system - an updated version of the Sèvres Treaty -³³ and the territorial integrity threatened by Kurdish claims (Kaliber & Kaliber 2019). Such discourse was also evident in the first few weeks after the mid-2016 failed coup attempt when high government officials accused the US and Europe of supporting the coup plotters.³⁴

³¹ For an in-depth analysis see (Rossiter & Cannon 2019).

³² Saban Kardaş quoted by Metin Gurcan, 'Turkey's new "Erdogan Doctrine"', *Al-Monitor*, November 4, 2016. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/turkey-wants-use-its-hard-power-solve-regional-problems.html> [accessed 23/10/2019].

³³ AA.VV., "Başkan Erdoğan: Sevr'in ters yüz edilmesi var, Sabah, 15 December 2019. URL: <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2019/12/15/baskan-erdogan-sevrin-tersyuz-edilmesi-var>.

³⁴ Adam Withnall and Samuel Osborne, 'Erdogan blames 'foreign powers' for coup and says West is supporting terrorism', *Independent*, August 2, 2016. URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-coup-latest-news-blames-us-west-terrorism-gulen-a7168271.html> [accessed 23/10/2019].

Since 2015, Turkish gamble policy has driven to the military involvement in a multiplicity of crises from which Ankara has trouble to get out (in addition to Syria and Iraq also Libya), the overuse of economic and human resources, the escalation of tensions with several NATO allies (France, Netherlands, US), and the general isolation in the region and beyond. Yet, 'Turkey's ambitious policy based on supporting Sunni Islamist groups was interpreted as a sectarian approach' (Yeşilyurt 2017, 74) by Western countries who started to see Turkey as a destabilizing force in the region.³⁵ At the same time, Ankara's activism and growing support for the Muslim Brotherhood caused a harsh vigorous reaction from other regional players, the so-called Arab Quartet. As pointed out by Aras and Akpınar (2017) the Gulf crisis (2017) has further demonstrated Turkey's declining ability to bring parties to the table in the region.

6. Conclusion

As depicted above, Turkey's relative power has proved to be insufficient to shape post-Arab Spring political balances. The analysis of this case study has shown how Turkey is an example of a state in which domestic politics, international politics, and leadership style were and still are inter-penetrated because each of these domains has shown a limited degree of autonomous development. After almost sixty years in which following the Kemalist motto 'peace at home, peace in the world' international politics influenced TFP, the rising and consolidation of JDP governments have paved the way to almost thirteen years in which domestic and international politics equally have been influenced FP through a nested game.

After June 2015, this tendency seems to overturn again towards a more status-quo oriented FP, posing the national security at the core of its approach. Such trend corroborates the theory according to which during a period of high polarization within society, the ruling elite aims to keep its power and to preserve the status quo (Hinnebusch 2014), therefore it raises the level of threats to the state and consequently securitized not only its FP but also several domestic political issues. The focus on national security and the use of hard power tools links the Kemalist past to the

³⁵ For an exhaustive analysis on this issue see also (Ayata 2015).

current years. Especially, Turkey's regional policy has come 'full circle as the discourses and policies of the 1990s, focusing on threats, zero-sum mentality and mistrust, have returned' (Altunısik 2020, 17). However, there are differences between the two periods. Whether in the pre-JDP era, TFP was characterized by a wary and isolationist attitude, nowadays Turkey pursues its strategic goals through interventionist behavior.

Besides the substantial ideological differences between the Kemalist and the current TFP, a key element concerning the different decision-making models. From a bureaucratic politics model to a leader dominant one. The centralization of executive power in leader's hand has increased the significance of the idiosyncratic or individual variable. A dynamic that is not at all new in Turkish politics³⁶ but which is bound to be influenced by the personality and style of the leader in charge.

NCR approach allowed to take into account among the unit-level variables also the impact of strategic ideas, leaders perceptions, and national role by considering them as intertwining ideational variables. What changed in the case study is also the perception of the surrounding international and domestic environment or to better say about the structural and internal inputs: from being considered as incentives and opportunities, they became restraints and even threats. While the general orientation towards neighbors and great powers has swung from friend/patron to enemy/threat, domestic dynamics such as the Kurdish question and the social polarization (secular-conservative/center-peripheries), that represent two 'bottom-up' issues (from domestic to international), have determined significantly TFP.

³⁶ See for example (Kesgin 2013).

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