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Beyond Turkey's 'zero problems' policy
Motives, means and impact of the interventions in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus

Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, but especially after the failed *coup d'état* in 2016, Turkey's foreign policy has shifted from 'zero problems' to the pursuit of strategic depth and autonomy in its neighbourhood. In 2020, Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus became three theatres for Ankara's new hard-power tactics, a policy that may well be here to stay (at least until the elections in 2023). This policy brief explores the strategic motives, the means of intervention and the impact of Turkish operations in these three conflict areas. While Turkey's strategic considerations, modalities and consequences vary greatly from case to case, certain parallels can be drawn. They reveal an overall pattern of a much more assertive Turkey that is increasingly willing to deploy a combination of political and military means to secure its strategic objectives in its immediate neighbourhood.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Turkey's foreign policy has shifted 180 degrees: moving from the doctrine of 'zero problems with neighbours'[1] to a growing reliance on military means to pursue its goals. This shift has thrust President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan into conflicts across the region. In 2020 alone, he launched Operation Spring Shield (Syria), sent troops to support the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya and

helped to tip the scales in favour of its ally Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh). With these military interventions, Ankara has put itself in a position to exert influence over the course of the conflicts, while making diplomatic and economic gains on the side. At the same time, its decisions have aggravated the already fragile relationship with traditional allies within the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and contributed to Turkey's further isolation from its Western partners.

Since all indications are that Turkey will continue to maintain a foothold in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh – until at least the elections in 2023 – this policy brief analyses Ankara's strategies in the three theatres of conflict. It is divided into three sections. The first section analyses

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1   The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes the doctrine as 'a slogan summarizing Turkey's expectations with regards to her relations with neighbouring countries. Turkey wants to eliminate all the problems for her relations with neighbours or at least to minimize them as much as possible': "Policy of zero problems with our neighbors", Republic of Turkey: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Turkey's involvement

Turkey's foreign policy turn since 2011, and the motives behind it. The second section explores: i) the strategic motives; ii) the means of intervention; and iii) the impact of the Turkish operations in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.[2] Finally, the third section reflects on the similarities and overlaps in the Turkish approach and identifies parallels that can be drawn.

From 'zero problems' to conflict

Turkey's involvement in the conflicts in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus do not stand in isolation, but can be seen as part of a broader trend in Turkey's foreign policy. For decades, this was largely in line with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's '*peace at home, peace in the world (Yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh)*' and, later

on, Ahmet Davutoğlu's '*zero problems with neighbors*' prescript.[3] The focus: transforming the neighbourhood into a cooperation basis through the use of soft power, cultural links and economic interdependence.[4] The principle has long served as the fundamental basis of Turkey's domestic and foreign policies, with President Erdoğan building trade and diplomatic ties across the region.[5] As of 2010-2011, however, with the Arab uprisings and especially after the *coup d'état* attempt in 2016, important changes can be discerned in Turkey's foreign policy – slowly coalescing into a more assertive approach and with growing reliance on military means to pursue its goals. Everything indicates that this is not because (or not *just* because) President Erdoğan is driven by an ideological outlook, but rather because of a set of strategic drivers characterised by (geo)political, economic and security interests.

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2   The case studies on Libya and Syria are based on: Erwin van Veen, "Turkeys' interventions in its near abroad: the case of Idlib", The Clingendael Institute, published 6 September 2021 and Engin Yüksel, "Turkey's interventions on its near abroad: the case of Libya", The Clingendael Institute, published 16 September 2021.

3   "Interview by Mr. Ahmet Davugoğlu published in AUC Cairo Review (Egypt) on 12 March 2012", Republic of Turkey: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

4   "Policy of zero problems with our neighbors", Republic of Turkey: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

5   Ayla Jean Yackley, "How Turkey militarized its foreign policy", *Politico*, published 15 October 2020.

A *first* driver is related to internal affairs in Turkey, and more specifically the aim to deflect attention from certain developments in the country. Heads of state have often been tempted to divert attention from problems at home with foreign policy projects.[6] In their recent work, Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş draw similar parallels to Turkey and note that 'a close look at the timing suggests they [Turkey's recent military operations in Syria, Iraq and Libya] occurred when economic and political crises broke out at home'.[7] For instance, Operation Euphrates Shield began directly after the failed coup of July 2016, and Operation Peace Spring in 2019 was carried out after the government's failure in the Istanbul municipal elections. However, it is worth mentioning that the benefits of a diversionary foreign policy rarely last and a 'short-term political boost' is often the best possible outcome;[8] Turkey is no exception. Against the background of a national currency crisis, a sharp recession and growing discontent regarding Covid-19 measures, public support for Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been sliding steadily. In October 2021, support for the AKP was estimated at 23%, which is the lowest percentage since the establish-ment of the party.[9] In other words, last year's military interventions have not led to a long-term increase in, or even stabilisation of, popularity for the Turkish president.

While the first driver is largely internal in nature, the *second* driver is related to Turkey's external affairs, namely its desire for strategic autonomy in the wider region. Underpinned by a deeply held belief inside Turkey that the global balance of power is shifting – causing the retreat of the West, a weakening of existing multilateral institutions and the emergence of new power blocs – President

Erdoğan and his government have been looking for ways to play a more autonomous role in its conflict-ridden neighbourhood. In this balancing act, Ankara has been focusing on initiating flexible alliances, including with Russia, while trying to reduce geopolitical dependency on the West.

Over the years, Russia became the dominant military force in the region, while Turkey's former allies chose to take a different course. President Donald Trump pulled most of the US troops out of Syria in 2019, while the EU remained largely indifferent – except for its concerns about flows of refugees. This became particularly clear in 2020, when Turkey requested NATO's support in Idlib and called for an Article 4 meeting of the alliance, which was already the third time it had invoked this article in response to the crisis in Syria. While NATO members expressed full solidarity,[10] they did not provide Ankara with meaningful military support. Finally, there is one other event that should be mentioned here, which is Turkey's perception of the European Union's 'weak' response to the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016. Many people in Turkey feel that the country narrowly escaped a disaster on the 15 July, but the European Union seemed more concerned with the treatment of the coup perpetrators than with the victims.[11] İbrahim Kalın, chief advisor to President Erdoğan, wrote an article a month after the coup entitled '*Turkey: Brussels, you've got a problem*', in which he stated that '*the failed coup attempt in Turkey marked a turning point […] for relations with the country and Brussels. The European Union portrays itself as a guardian of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, but its weak response […] was disappointing.*'[12]

Against this background, Turkey's foreign policy under President Erdoğan made the shift from soft power and (economic) interdependence to an assertive quest for

6   Dominic Tierny, "The Risks of Foreign Policy as Political Distraction", *The Atlantic*, published 15 June 2017.

7   Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, "Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?", *International Affairs*, volume 97, issue 4 (July 2021): 1099.

8   Tierny, 'The Risks of Foreign Policy as Political Distraction'.

9   "Son anket: AKP ve MHP'de dikkat çeken çöküş", Cumhuriyet.

10   "Statements by the Secretary General after Article 4 consultations", North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), published 28 February 2020.

11   Joost Lagendijk, "How to deal with post-coup Turkey?", Heinrich Böll Stiftung, published 19 September 2016.

12   Ibrahim Kalin, "Turkey: Brussels, you've got a problem", *Politico*, published 18 August 2016.

autonomy in which violence is not shunned and relations with the EU and Turkey's NATO allies are seen as being of secondary importance. Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh became the theatres for Turkey's new hard-power policies, with 2020 as pivotal year.

Syria: Ankara's shifting priorities

Strategic motives

Of the three countries, Syria is the only one directly bordering Turkey, meaning that problems in that country have a direct spillover effect into Turkey itself.[13] Therefore, at the start of the uprisings in Syria in spring 2011, several Turkish delegations attempted to convince the Assad regime to halt its crackdown on the protests, while Ankara, at the same time, hosted the slowly forming Syrian opposition movement in Istanbul.[14] Both actions seem contradictory at first. Why appease the conflict *and* accommodate potential successors at the same time? The actions, however, are better understood in light of President Erdoğan's main strategic objective with Syria at that point in time, namely: instigating governance reform that included the political representation of the Muslim Brotherhood, while refraining from coercion through dialogue with the Assad regime. But the Assad regime, with Iranian support, rejected this, leading Turkey to recalibrate its approach. From that moment on, Ankara aimed to coerce the Assad regime into concessions or even to effect its overthrow by deploying a mix of economic measures, such as imposing sanctions, increasing its support for the Free Syrian Army and beginning to provide tacit support to extremist groups fighting Assad.[15]

In 2015, Turkey's priorities shifted; this was related to the gains made by the YPG (People's Protection Units) along the Syrian-Turkish border.[16] At that point in time, the YPG had managed to build up a track record as a reliable military partner to the US in northern Syria in its war against the Islamic State (ISIS) and began to make advances into areas that traditionally did not have a Kurdish majority. Along with the success of the pro-Kurdish party HDP in the June 2015 elections back home[17] and the failure of Ankara's negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Kurdish issue rose to the top of Turkey's agenda. It prompted President Erdoğan to adopt a new key priority towards Syria, namely obstructing the advent of a self-governing Kurdish region in the country. This decision led to a number of Turkish military operations in Syria, such as Operation Olive Branch (2018) and Operation Peace Spring (2019).

Finally, Turkey's third strategic objective goes beyond its anti-Assad or anti-YPG approach: it aims to have a say on Syria's future when the time comes for a political solution. From the beginning of the conflict, however, the key players, namely Russia, Iran and Turkey have been far from aligned on the matter, making consensus difficult. Russia and Iran, on the one hand, view Syria as a client state and are fighting alongside the regime to restore its authority and control. Turkey, on the other hand, faces most of the externalities produced, such as radicalisation and people fleeing, and therefore opposes the regime. By late 2019, the situation slowly became untenable. Despite the existence of the Astana agreements (2017) and the subsequent Sochi memorandum (2018),[18] in which Turkey and Russia agreed to work towards de-escalating the fighting in Idlib and creating a demilitarised zone, regime

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13 In an interview, Erdoğan stated that from Turkey's point of view the Syrian crisis was almost an internal problem. Source: "Syria unrest: Turkey presses Assad to end crackdown", BBC News, published 9 August 2011.

14 Tim Manhoff, *Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria* (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung), 6.

15 Sever, A., 'Regional Power Role and Intervention: The Turkish Case Over Syria in the 2000s', in: *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 2020, 7(2):143-164.

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16 Erwin van Veen and Engin Yüksel, "Too big for its boots: Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2002 to 2018", Clingendael Institute, published in July 2018.

17 The HDP gained 12% of the votes, which ultimately denied the AKP a majority. Source: Constanze Letsch and Ian Traynor, "Turkey election: ruling party loses majority as pro-Kurdish HDP gains seats", *The Guardian*, published 7 June 2015.

18 The Astana agreements of May and September 2017 created de-escalation areas in Syria. The Sochi memorandum (September 2018) was focused on stabilisation of the situation in the Idlib de-escalation area between Turkey and Russia.

and Russian forces started to increase pressure on the opposition-held province Idlib, including on the 12 Turkish observation posts. The other three de-escalation areas[19] had already been brought back under regime control, leaving Idlib as the 'last bastion of the revolution' to be conquered. The consequences: huge numbers of civilians fled north towards the Turkish border.

Yet, it was not until February 2020 that Ankara began its counter-offensive operation 'Spring Shield' and rapidly transformed northern Idlib into a Turkish protectorate with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on its side. With this move, Ankara managed to effectively halt the Syrian regime's offensive into Idlib province. This partly met its first strategic objective, countering Assad, but also brought long-existing tensions between Russia, Iran and Turkey into the open. The opposing positions about Syria's future could be reconciled as long as they were premised on the implicit understanding that Turkish-held areas would eventually be returned to Damascus. Operation Spring Shield showed that this assumption would not hold in the short term, simply because interests were too divergent – and to some extent still are. With its military presence in Idlib, Turkey sought, among other things, to avoid another massive inflow of Syrian refugees (and extremist foreign fighters) into the country. Giving up on the province and handing it back to Assad would inevitably lead to that feared scenario.

Toolkit and impact

Before Operation Spring Shield, Turkey's toolkit consisted of a mix of diplomacy, light military force and under-the-radar dialogue with HTS. This changed with the start of the military operation. During the peak of the operation, Turkish deployment reached up to about 10,000 military personnel[20] and between 10,000-15,000 Free Syrian

Army fighters, used as auxiliary forces. In addition, it made use of artillery and multiple rocket launcher systems, air defence systems, KORAL electronic warfare systems and, particularly effective, armed drones. Along with the 'surprise factor' and the speed with which Ankara acted, in a very short time span, it managed to achieve local military superiority over regime, Iranian and Russian-supported forces, as well as parts of the HTS, in Idlib province on the ground and in the air. A few days later, President Erdoğan and President Putin agreed, among others, to a new ceasefire in that area. This prevented a direct clash between Turkish and Russian military forces, halted a further Turkish advance towards the city of Hama and gave Turkey control over a small buffer area in the form of northern Idlib.

Seen from a conflict prevention and mitigation perspective, the short-term impact of Operation Spring Shield can be considered as positive. Ankara stopped the regime advance in its tracks and created a new, though fragile, balance between Turkey and Russia. Turkey itself benefited from the fact that it managed to both expand and consolidate the territory it either directly or indirectly controlled inside Syria. However, assessment of the medium-term impact of the intervention shows a less clear picture. The intervention put an end to the original Astana process, which can no longer function as a diplomatic platform to work towards a negotiated resolution of the Syrian conflict. In addition, the consolidation of the divergent interests concerning the territorial integrity of Syria is a development that will most likely prolong the Syrian conflict.

Libya: geopolitical and geo-economic considerations

Strategic motives

Like Syria, Libya was one of the countries affected by the Arab Spring, where the population demanded reform of the dictatorial government of Muammar Gaddafi and where the situation eventually led to a civil war. But in contrast to Damascus, Gaddafi's regime was viewed by Ankara as a key partner and a vital foreign policy interest. Not only was Libya among the few countries to support

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19 East Ghouta, parts of Homs governorate and parts of Daraa and Quneitra governorates close to the Jordanian-Syrian border.

20 Including light-infantry, commando, armoured and mechanised battalions; Fırtına artillery and multiple rocket launcher systems; HAWK, Korkut, Hisar and Atılgan air defence systems; Koral Electronic Warfare systems and, especially effective, armed drones (Bayraktar TB2 and Anka-S).

the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus in 1974, from the 1980s onwards economic activity between the two countries had grown significantly. Libya turned out to be a lucrative market for Turkish businessmen and by early 2011, Turkish companies had over 20 billion dollars of outstanding projects in the country.[21] Mainly for those reasons, President Erdoğan was initially not in favour of the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011, let alone the subsequent NATO operation against the Libyan regime; although he did eventually decide to join after US insistence.[22]

With the start of the second Libyan civil war in 2014, Ankara's approach towards Libya changed. The reticent attitude slowly faded, and Turkey began supporting military proponents of political Islam and revolutionary factions in Tripolitania that united under the Government of National Accord (GNA). In addition, it decided to host several media institutions and political figures opposed to Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) – the Russia/UAE-backed opponent of the GNA. Yet, it should probably be mentioned that at that point in time, Ankara's involvement was relatively limited and did not reflect a well thought-out policy.[23] That came only after the frontal assault by the LNA on Tripoli in April 2019, after which Ankara changed course. It added direct military assistance to its support for GNA, and on 2 January 2020 the Turkish parliament officially approved a military intervention in Libya.[24]

Turkish support for the GNA, as well as its increased engagement after 2014, can be explained by several drivers. First, Ankara was seeking to expand its strategic depth in North Africa. In his influential book, *Strategic Depth* (2001), former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, proposed a new geo-strategy for Turkey, calling for an active engagement with all regional systems in Turkey's neighbourhood. Libya was placed at the outer edge of Turkey's near abroad – called 'near continent basin', which, he argued, should be at the heart of Ankara's geopolitical strategies and calculations, together with its 'near land' and 'near sea basins'.[25] Twenty years later, Davutoğlu's view is still widely shared in Ankara, a view in which Libya has become even more relevant as an ally after Turkish influence in Tunisia and Egypt diminished in 2013.

Related to the above, another motive can be identified, namely the wish to safeguard Turkey's commercial interests in Libya. As mentioned earlier, Turkish companies had over 20 billion dollars of outstanding contractual projects in Libya in 2011. Deciding to stay out of the conflict would bear the risk of losing grip on the (future of the) country, as well as its economic obligations towards Turkish companies. In addition, securing a presence in Libya could also serve as an economic gateway to other parts of Africa; such was the idea. Turkish interest in Africa's market is expected to keep growing over the coming decades[26] and in 2020 President Erdoğan announced that Turkey seeks to increase the trade volume with Africa in the near future to 50 billion dollars.[27]

Finally, Turkey's third motive is to secure its place in the 'great game' in the Eastern Mediterranean. Since geological surveys confirmed the existence of stockpiles of technically recoverable oil and gas, the Mediterranean region is subject to disputes over the demarcation of maritime borders. In January 2019, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece,

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21 Graham Fuller, *Turkey and the Arab Spring: Leadership in the Middle East* (Vancouver: Bozorg, 2014), 197.

22 Called Operation Unified Protector (OUP). OUP concluded on 31 October 2011. Source: "NATO and Libya (Archived)", North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), published 9 September 2015.

23 Jalel Harchaoui, "Why Turkey intervened in Libya", Foreign Policy Research Institute, published December 2020, 2.

24 Ibid.

25 In the book, Turkey's near abroad consists of 'near land', 'near sea' and 'near continent' areas. The near-land areas include the Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus regions. The near-sea area consists of the Black Sea, Adriatic, the Eastern Mediterranean, [Arabian/Persian] Gulf and Caspian Sea. Davutoğlu, A. *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001, p. 132.

26 Harchaoui, 'Why Turkey intervened in Libya'.

27 "We will increase our trade volume with African countries to \$50 billion", Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, published 26 January 2020.

Israel and Jordan created an Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) to discuss the extraction and use of natural gas – excluding Turkey.[28] The Tripoli government was the only internationally recognised government nearby that Ankara could invoke as embracing its interpretation of territorial water conventions.[29] The GNA, on other side, had no other choice than to accept Turkey's military and political patronage, once the LNA launched its offensive. It led to both blocs signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in November 2019, declaring a 16-nautical mile-wide corridor from southwest Turkey to northeast Libya as an exclusive economic zone (EEZ).[30] With this deal, Ankara sent a signal to other coastal states in the region that the 'great gas game' will not be played without its consent.

Toolkit and impact

Between roughly 2014 and 2019, Ankara followed two tracks: it provided training for GNA-linked forces in Turkey (about 3,000 Libyan forces) and secretly supplied them with arms and ammunitions, while leaving the overall command to the GNA-aligned forces.[31] From mid-2019, this started to change. Ankara gradually took up a more active role by establishing greater command and control over GNA-forces and responded positively to the GNA's request for military assistance. However, only *after* both parties signed the MoU in November, did Turkey shift from indirect support to direct military assistance and start to deploy troops, modern weapon systems and mercenaries.[32] More specifically, it sent a few hundred Turkish military personnel to Libya, provided armed drone systems, air defence systems, electronic warfare systems, various

armoured army platforms, types of howitzers and tactical missiles.[33] Ankara, furthermore, deployed between 2,000 and 8,000 Syrian mercenaries to strengthen GNA-forces.[34]

Ultimately, the Turkish military intervention of 2019 turned the tide of war in favour of the GNA by reversing the LNA's offensive in June 2020; fulfilling Ankara's initial goals. Since then, Turkey has sought to institutionalise its military cooperation with the GNA. Such facilities, once created, would put Turkish military power projection into northern Africa on a more permanent footing.

South Caucasus: regional arm-wrestling with Russia

Strategic motives

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is of a different nature than the conflicts in Syria and Libya, if only because it is not related to, nor is it a consequence of, the Arab uprisings. In fact, the roots of the conflict go back to the interplay between regional competition of the Russian and Ottoman empires for influence in the South Caucasus on the one hand, and long-held animosities and cycles of violence between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azeri on the other. This was temporarily halted when the Soviet Union consolidated control over the South Caucasus and granted autonomous status to Nagorno-Karabakh within the borders of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. However, when the Soviet Union began crumbling in the late 1980s, the fighting and mutual ethnic cleansing that had been halted for decades flared up and escalated into an

28 "Overview", East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF).

29 Harchaoui, "Why Turkey intervened in Libya".

30 "Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of National Accord-State of Libya on Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean", United Nations, published November 2019.

31 Harchaoui, "Why Turkey intervened in Libya".

32 Engin Yüksel, 'Turkey's approach to proxy war in the Middle East and North Africa', *Security and Defence Quarterly*, Vol. 31., pp. 145-147.

33 Bayraktar TB2 and Anka-S, HAWKS MIM-23 medium-range and KORKUT low altitude/very short-range, MILKAR-3A3 V/UHF, T-155 FIRTINA and BORAN and TRG-300 TIGER. Source: Erman Atak and Stefano Marcuzzi, *The Sultan and the Czar: Erdogan and Putin's game-changing policies in Libya* (NATO, 2020) and Metin Gürcan, "Could Fragile cease-fire lead to peace in Libya?", *Al Monitor*, published 12 January 2020.

34 Murat Aslan, "SETA panel on Turkey's Libya policy and the future of the Libyan crisis", published January 2020.

all-out war in 1994. The Armenian-supported forces of Nagorno-Karabakh managed to take control of the area and several districts around it. Turkey took sides by supporting Azerbaijan – fuelled both by its close cultural and historical ties with the country as well as its historical prevailing anti-Armenian sentiment – and for that reason, did not become an important player in the conflict resolution at the time.

Then, in the nearly three decades that followed the ceasefire, the power balance shifted significantly in favour of Azerbaijan. While Armenia enjoyed the upper hand in the 1990s due to its superior military, Azerbaijan has enjoyed a sustained period of economic growth due to its rich oil and gas resources. And after three decades of steadily growing investment in its military, Azerbaijan was able to spend over six times more on defence than Armenia, thereby also putting Yerevan's overall state budget under considerable strain.[35] In September 2020, after years of frustration with the stalled negotiations, Azerbaijan eventually opted to make use of its newfound military strength and started a military operation, in which it was supported by Turkey. This proved to be surprisingly effective: in a matter of weeks, the Azerbaijani army not only recaptured the seven districts around Nagorno-Karabakh that had been occupied by Armenia since 1994, but it also recaptured a sizable part of Nagorno-Karabakh itself – including the symbolically and strategically crucial fortress city of Shushi/Shusha.

Both prior and during the 2020 war, Turkey supported Azerbaijan more assertively and openly than it had done in the previous three decades. At least three underlying strategic interests lie at the heart of Turkey's (more) proactive support.

First of all, Turkey often cites its strong brotherly ties with Azerbaijan as justification for its support. Both countries build upon

ethnic, linguistic, economic and geographic factors, and the mantra 'one nation, two states' is frequently used.[36] However, there is more to it. Azerbaijan's rich energy resources and its geographic position as the only country in the South Caucasus with access to the Caspian Sea and beyond to the energy-rich and Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia make it an important geopolitical and economic partner for Turkey. Furthermore, the relationship has shown to be lucrative in terms of the many arms deals concluded between Turkey and Azerbaijan;[37] all reasons to keep Baku close.

Second, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict presented an opportunity for Turkey to influence and alter the regional status quo in that region to its advantage. By further tipping the scales in the already shifting power balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the favour of its ally in Baku, Turkey transformed itself into one of the major players in the negotiations over a solution to the conflict. This Turkish position is strengthened even further by keeping Western actors out and by reducing the importance of the official co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group; in particular, the US and France are seen by Ankara and Baku as too supportive of Armenia.[38]

Third, Nagorno-Karabakh is part of a broader power struggle between Turkey and Russia in the broader Black Sea and Levant regions. The two actors have been both competing and coordinating with each other in Syria, Libya and the Black Sea as well in a pattern that has been dubbed 'adversarial

35 Sam Bhutia, 'Armenia-Azerbaijan: Who's the Big Defense Spender?', *Eurasianet*, 28 October 2019. See also Svante E. Cornell, *The International Politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: The Original "Frozen Conflict" and European Security*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

36 "Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh after 44 Days: the Token of the Turkish-Azerbaijani brotherhood", Presidency's Directorate of Communications, published in 2021.

37 Azerbaijan bought $77m worth of arms from Turkey a month before fighting broke out in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, with Turkish arms sales to Baku increasing sixfold this year, according to export data. Source: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/azerbaijan-bought-77-million-worth-turkish-arms-month-fighting.

38 Daria Isachenko, "Turkey–Russia Partnership in the War over Nagorno-Karabakh," German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), published November 2020.

collaboration'.[39] Azerbaijan's dominance over Armenia offered Turkey a welcome opportunity to add a bargaining chip in its ongoing negotiations with Russia in other theatres, such as Syria. It should probably be noted that the relationship, however, is not symmetrical and Erdoğan knew in advance he could not eclipse Putin's influence in the South Caucasus.

Toolkit and impact

From the moment that the Soviet Union collapsed and Azerbaijan became an independent state in 1991, Ankara started to actively support the Azerbaijani military. This started with the training for Azerbaijan's armed forces, and eventually resulted in Azerbaijan's participation in Turkish military exercises. Turkish military support, however, was not only limited to training and joint exercises. Ankara also supplied Baku, in all likelihood, with Syrian mercenaries[40] as well as critical weapon systems and military technology. Just before the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, arms sales surged. Turkish military exports to Azerbaijan amounted to 77 million dollars in the month before fighting broke out, and by October 2020 the Turkish-Azerbaijani military exports had increased sixfold throughout the year compared to the same period in 2019. Among these

exports was the Bayraktar TB2 drone, which according to Azerbaijani officials was instrumental in their military victory – and set Western military analysts thinking about the effectiveness of such weapon systems.[41]

When the culminating tensions escalated in September 2020, Ankara was quick to also offer political support. Arguing that the official mediators of the OSCE Minsk Group had been unsuccessful in resolving the conflict, Erdoğan stated that it was 'time to end the crisis in the region, which started with the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. The region will once again see peace after Armenia immediately withdraws from the Azerbaijani lands it is occupying' and that Turkey will 'continue to stand […] with Azerbaijan with all its resources and heart'.[42] In its official post-war government publication, Turkey stressed how all its officials made statements in support of Azerbaijan in public and in international organisations, which helped shield Azerbaijan from international pressure to cease and desist.[43]

Looking at the Turkish impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Ankara had not been able to fully 'cash in' on its support to Azerbaijan. Once Azerbaijan has made its crucial gains, Russia seized the initiative and, after some procrastination, it was President Putin who personally enforced the truce between Azerbaijan and Armenia, stationing almost 2,000 Russian 'peacekeepers' in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as along the Lachin Corridor that connects it to Armenia.[44]

39 Borrowed from science, the term 'adversarial collaboration' denotes experiments conducted by people who disagree on an issue to resolve or reduce their differences. In the present context, it is employed to describe Russia and Turkey opting to experiment with a collaborative relationship at the expense of other actors. […] The strategy emerged as a result of the improvisation and political calculations of the Kremlin and the Presidential Palace in Ankara. Source: Güney Yildiz, "Turkish-Russian Adversarial Collaboration in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh", SWP, published 24 March 2021.

40 Turkey came under international criticism after sustained media reporting that it was gathering extremist groups in Syria and deploying them to Nagorno-Karabakh. These reports were denied by Turkey and Azerbaijan but corroborated by several governments, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. Source: "Beantwoording vragen van de leden Van Helvert, Omtzigt (beiden CDA) en Voordewind (ChristenUnie) over de inzet van Syrische rebellen door Turkije in oorlog om Nagorno-Karabach," Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, published 2 November 2020.

41 Gustav Gressel, 'Military lessons from Nagorno-Karabakh: Reason for Europe to worry', ECFR Commentary, 24 November 2020.

42 Reuters Staff, "Turkey's Erdogan says Armenia must withdraw from Azerbaijani lands," Reuters, published 28 September 2020.

43 Presidency's Directorate of Communications, 'Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh'.

44 The Russian military deployment consists of consisting of 1,960 armed (with firearms) troops, 90 armoured vehicles, and 380 motor vehicles and units of special equipment. These soldiers will stay for (at least) five years and have been deployed simultaneously to the withdrawal of Armenian soldiers. Source: "Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, published 10 November 2020.

Erdoğan expressed the intention to join this Russian peacekeeping force but was swiftly rebuffed by Russia. As a compromise a Joint Russian-Turkish Monitoring Centre (housing 60 Russian and 60 Turkish troops) was established, with a mandate to support the much larger Russian peacekeeping mission.

Conclusion

Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, but especially after the 2016 *coup d'état*, Turkey's foreign policy has shifted from 'zero problems' to the pursuit of 'strategic depth' and autonomy in its neighbourhood. This new, assertive approach is accompanied by a growing reliance on military means, causing Turkey to clash with traditional allies, such as the EU and NATO. Overall, at least two driving forces lie at the heart of Ankara's new foreign policy approach, namely:

- the aim to deflect attention from certain developments in the country – a national currency crisis, a sharp recession and growing discontent regarding Covid-19 measures
- the desire for strategic autonomy in the wider region (and trying to reduce its dependency on the West).

In 2020, Syria (Idlib), Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh became the theatres for Ankara's new hard-power tactics. And as it seems Turkey has no intention of leaving within the foreseeable future (at least until the elections in 2023), what parallels can be drawn?

As for *strategic motives*, 'safety concerns' (Idlib), 'geopolitical interests' (Libya and Azerbaijan) and 'economic interests' (Azerbaijan and Libya) predominated. With its military interventions, Turkey opted to shape the course of events – such as avoiding a new inflow of Syrian refugees into Turkey – and also to ensure it would have a seat at the negotiating table when the future of Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh would be decided. Especially in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, geopolitical interests are high;

for instance in the case of Libya, the Turkish presence forces the Eastern Mediterranean gas coalition into accommodating Turkish interests. Turkey does not want to give up that privileged position.

Looking at the *means of intervention*, Ankara has followed a similar track in all three conflicts. At first, in the run-up to the military interventions, Ankara provided assistance for either the army or the opposition groups forces – depending on which side it supported. For example, with regard to Syria, it supported the Free Syrian Army and provided tacit support to extremist groups fighting Assad, early on in the process. Support for Azerbaijan goes back to 1991, when Ankara began to actively develop the Azerbaijani military through training and joint exercises. Second, and during the actual military interventions, Ankara deployed its own troops and allegedly also made use of Syrian mercenaries. Furthermore, it strategically supplied its allies with a variety of Turkish-made weapon systems such as armed drones that proved to make a crucial difference on the battlefield.

Finally, for the *impact*, the results are mixed. In all three conflicts, Ankara achieved most of its short-term objectives and legitimised a strong position for itself in Syria and Libya – for the time being. In Azerbaijan, however, Turkey was unable to fully capitalise on Azerbaijan's victory and has obtained neither formal mediator status or a role as military peacekeeper, both of which have been monopolised by the Russian Federation. It remains to be seen what the exact medium-term impact of Ankara's involvement in the region will be, but it is not yet a done deal for Turkey. Military presence is still contested in all three areas, and Turkey has not been able to take full control of the situation on the ground.

The shift away from 'zero problems' may therefore have increased Ankara's influence in the short term, but it remains to be seen if it can consolidate this presence and convert it into long-term strategic influence.

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