

Syria and Libya’s contributions to the evolution of the Turkish “forward defence” doctrine

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Executive Summary

In the last decade, there have been considerable changes in Turkey's regional policies, especially in terms of the increasing use of hard power. Such changes are largely in response to regional rivalry, refugee flow from Syria and the revival of Kurdish issues, as well as strained relations with Turkey's traditional allies, such as the United States and the European Union, among other factors. In the first decade of its rule, the AKP government moved away from Turkey's traditional approach to foreign policy by adopting soft power in its relations with the states in the Middle East region. However, following the Arab Spring, and especially 2016, the AKP government embraced a "forward defence" doctrine, reminiscent of the security policies of the 1990s.

At the end of the Cold War, Turkey reoriented its defence posture around a security-oriented approach due to its geostrategic location. This defence posture was based on the belief that Turkey has an unstable but strategically important location and hence needs powerful armed forces to employ hard power to protect its interests and security. Naturally, security threat perceptions reached their peak in Turkish foreign policy and Turkey came to the brink of using military force against several states such as Greece, Cyprus and Syria. Modernisation of armed forces and development of national defence industry were among the policies adopted during this era.

The forward defence doctrine is key to Turkey's policy in Syria and Libya. Given the dominant role played by Turkey in Syria, AKP has intensified its military activities beyond the Syrian border with the aim of preventing the expansion of the YPG and advance of the Syrian army into Idlib, which would trigger a large influx of refugees. Maritime disputes between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean intertwined with geopolitical tensions and rivalry between Turkey and its regional rivals such as France, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. In response to its regional isolation and to block these developments, Turkey signed two Memoranda of Understanding, on maritime delimitation and on security cooperation, with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya.

The recent shift in Turkey's security policy is in line with the basic principles of the AKP government's grand strategy, which seeks to reposition Turkey as a central state in the international and regional system.

Introduction

The 2010–2011 Arab Spring was a major turning point for Turkey’s defence policies. When the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AK Party or AKP) came to power in 2002, it improved Turkey’s relations with the regional states, while reducing the political influence of the military. Despite its close relations with regional states, Turkey also welcomed the potential for change in the region following the 2010–2011 uprisings and supported the political transformation it envisaged. However, the expected transformation did not materialise, and Turkey found itself surrounded by numerous multi-layered security threats and uncertainties, and forced to reassess its policies.

Turkey’s assertive defence posture manifests itself in its forward bases and cross-border operations in the north of Iraq and Syria, other forward bases in Somalia and Qatar, and lastly extending towards Libya. After 2011 and especially 2016, the AKP government began to rely on a forward defence doctrine in security policies. The resurgence of this stance, which includes deterrence and the use of hard force, shows that old behavioural patterns and security threat perceptions are ingrained.

This policy brief addresses the ongoing debate among political analysts who question the course of Turkish defence policy, and how it is being shaped by military interventions in Syria and Libya. It argues that there have been important changes in Turkey’s security policy since the Arab uprisings of 2010–2011, which have also led to a securitisation and militarisation of its foreign policy towards neighbouring regions. In a sense, such a security policy and threat perceptions resemble those of the 1990s.

This revival of the forward defence doctrine is largely associated with the political parties and actors with whom the AKP collaborated to rule the country after 2015. It is claimed that the influence of Kemalist or nationalist actors (Ulusalcılar) has led to militarised foreign policy and the involvement of Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) in foreign policy practices. This brief argues that the recent adaptation of the forward defence doctrine is the AKP’s response to the changing structural conditions after 2011 within the framework of its grand strategy, which aims to reposition Turkey in the regional and global system.

Historical Background: Security Doctrine 1990–2002

This debate is not new for Turkey’s decision-makers. In fact, the “Turkey’s defence begins beyond its border” policy can be traced back to the 1990s, when Turkey tried to redefine its position and security strategies in the regional and international system after the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, Turkey’s defence and security policy was determined by its NATO membership, which followed a status-quo-oriented and defensive security doctrine. Turkey guarded NATO’s Southern Flank and took part in its missions, exercises, and operations.

In the post-Cold War era, Turkey sought a new role for itself, and its decision-makers again turned their attention to Turkey’s geostrategic position, but this time with respect to its location amidst areas of potential instability, but also connecting important geostrategic locations. Redefining Turkey’s position for its Western allies from a wing state to an island of stability and the Eurasian belt were major components of the traditional discourse on security. Turkish politicians, as well as military elites, portrayed Turkey as an important Western ally, especially

in the European security structure, due to its connections to the Middle East, Balkans and Caucasus, and surrounding environment as the areas of instability, citing the conflicts that erupted in the Caucasus, the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute over Nagorno-Karabagh region in the east, the Bosnian crisis in the west and disputes in the Middle East in the south. For instance, the White Paper (*Beyaz Kitap*) published by Turkey's Ministry of National Defence in 2000 locates Turkey at crossroads of:

- “The Middle East and the Caspian Basin, which have the most important oil reserves in the world,
- The Mediterranean Basin, which is at the intersection of important sea lines of communication,
- The Black Sea Basin and the Turkish Straits, which have always maintained their importance in history,
- The Balkans, which have undergone structural changes as the result of the break up of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Yugoslavia, and
- The centre of the geography composed of Caucasia, which has abundant natural resources as well as ethnic conflicts, and Central Asia.”¹

Turkey's policymakers predicted that Turkey would rise as a strong regional actor and contribute to the security of Europe in this unstable region. Turgut Özal, a former prime minister and president, on many occasions declared that “The 21st century will be the century of the Turks”.² On the other hand, policy-makers also portray the country as under serious threat posed by the challenges brought by its hostile environment, which doubled the internal security threats and that should be seen as a security threat by its Western allies.

The redefinition and broadening of Turkey's security agenda also shaped concerns about domestic threats and hence its security doctrine and strategies during the first decade of the post-cold War period. These threat perceptions are reflected in the National Security Policy Document (or Red Book), one of the significant documents³ outlining national security policy determined by the National Security Council (NSC), together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Intelligence Organisation. The NSC, which was established by the 1961 constitution, with amendments in 1971, 1982 and 1983, became a military-dominated body responsible for the national security and defence policy.⁴ The Red Book was modified in 1992

¹ The White Paper (Beyaz Kitap), 2000, Section Two: Turkey's Geopolitical, Geostrategic and Ecostrategic Importance, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154907/Turkey_2000eng.pdf (accessed on 15 January 2021).

² Mülakatlarla Türk Dış Politikası: Cilt 3, ed by Habibe Özdal, Osman Bahadır Dinçer, Mehmet Yegin, USAK Yay No.44, 2010, p. 222.

³ The other one is the National Military Strategic Concept (NMSC; Milli Askeri Stratejik Konsept, MASK) prepared by the chief of general staff.

⁴ This platform was established by the 1961 constitution, adopted one year after the coup d'état, and the 1971 and 1980 coups gave the general staff more power over civilians in the NSC. According to the 1961 constitution, the NSC had the power to convey its opinion to the council of ministers; after 1971 amendments, the NSC gained the power to make policy recommendation; and in the 1982 constitution the council of ministers had to give priority to the NSC's policy recommendations. The amendments in 1983 made the NSC the responsible body for the national security and defence policy. The national security policy has been outlined by two significant documents, which defined the security threats and policies.

and 1997 to lay out the security issues in Turkey's agenda. In 1992, separatism and terrorism and in 1997 regressive Islamism (irtica) and Kurdish separatism were identified as internal threats.⁵ In particular, internal threats to territorial integrity have become the main determinant of security policies.

Elements of national security in this era were determined by fear of abandonment, fear of losing territory and geographical determinism, according to Bilgin.⁶ The forward defence doctrine, together with the concept of deterrence, became the pillars of Turkey's military strategy. In 1990, at the Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (CSBM) Military Doctrine Seminar in Vienna, General Necip Torumtay⁷ said that Turkey adopted "NATO's strategy of forward defence and flexible defence" to reach the objectives of 1) preserving the independence and the unity of the country; 2) contributing to the lessening of international tension; 3) preventing security threats by using deterrence and use of force; and 4) benefiting from collective security systems.⁸ By the mid-1990s, Chief of General Staff General Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu (1998–2002) introduced the "active deterrence" concept (with a new concept and institutional military design in the north of Iraq) and boosted the role of Turkey's military in bilateral relations by signing security and military training cooperation agreements.⁹ The concept of forward defence remained one of the main pillars of security policy into the 2000s.¹⁰

Implications of Forward Defence in the 1990s

Forward defence as a security doctrine set some long-term trends for Turkey's military strategy. Together with deterrence, it reinforced four trends in Turkey's security setting: the modernisation of the TAF; increased spending on armaments; support for the national defence sector; and the increasing use of military power in foreign policy. Kıvrıkoğlu called it a necessary modernisation programme that would provide strategic mobility and operational capabilities in security threats beyond Turkey's borders. The modernisation of the TAF was accompanied by a steady increase in Turkey's military spending. In 1992, then Chief of General Staff General Doğan Güreş stated, "The stronger the armed forces of a country, the stronger the foreign policy will be",¹¹ and set out the TAF's position on the relationship between foreign policy and military power. In 1995, a new defence and military procurement

⁵ Pınar Bilgin, "Turkey's changing security discourses: The challenge of globalisation", *European Journal of Political Research* 44(1): 175–201, 2005, 187–188.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁷ Former Chief of General Staff who resigned in reaction to 8th President Turgut Özal's decision regarding Turkey's military involvement in the Iraq war in 1990.

⁸ Statement by Necip Torumtay at the CBSM Military Doctrine Seminar, Vienna, 19 January 1990. Published in the *fpi Quarterly "Foreign Policy"*, Vol 15, Nos 1–2.

⁹ Military cooperation and training agreements were signed with Mali and Mauritania for the first time during Kıvrıkoğlu's Chief of Staff era.

¹⁰ White Paper 2000 identified four pillars of Turkish military strategy: deterrence; military contribution to crisis management and intervention in crises; forward defense; and collective security. Section One.

¹¹ D. Değer, "Marmaris'in İkinci Paşası", *Cumhuriyet*, 18 Eylül 1994, <https://www.cumhuriyetarsivi.com/katalog/192/sayfa/1994/9/18/8.xhtml> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

plan was prepared, and a modernisation budget of about US\$150 billion over 25 years was allocated in 1998.¹² The lion's share of these investments was directed towards the modernisation of air and land forces in the sums of US\$65 million and US\$60 million, respectively. For example, since 1994, tanker aircraft joined the TAF as part of this policy, with the aim of expanding the range of the air force.

Table 1. Military Expenditures of Turkey per year (\$ Million)

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
5315.4	5670.7	6157.9	7075.1	5293.2	6606.2	7512.1	7792.0	8781.0	9951.8

Source: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

Turkey's increased military spending in this period was entwined with the third long-term trend in Turkey's military strategy of supporting the national defence sector and in that regard technology transfer. Turkey's armament policy was also aimed at the development of the domestic defence industry, and included setting conditions in the budget, such as the participation of domestic producers, issuance of export licences and political restrictions, and planned purchases. The most salient example of this policy was the Öncel I¹³ and Öncel II¹⁴ projects. TUSAŞ Aerospace Industries (TAI) produced 152 F-16s between 1987 and 1995 under Öncel I and 80 F-16s between 1995 and 1999 under Öncel II. Within the scope of Öncel II, TAI also completed the production of 46 F-16s for Egypt as part of an agreement between Egypt and the United States.¹⁵ The Modern Tank Project was initiated in 1996 to meet the modern main battle tank requirement of the Land Forces Command, followed by the "Leopard 1 Upgrade" and "M60 Modernisation" projects in 2000 to meet the intermediate generation tank requirement of the Land Forces Command.

Another significant foreign policy trend was that the TAF came to the forefront in practice and the effective use of military power. In an attempt to relocate its role within the Western security architecture, TAF had increasingly participated in international peace-keeping operations. Turkey's proactive participation in international crisis management operations was seen as a strategy to guarantee its role in Western security structures, but it also helped Turkey to develop its operational capabilities.

Table 2. Peace support activities to which the Turkish Armed Forces contributed (1990-1999)¹⁶

No	Name of the operation	Period
1	The UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNOSOM)	2 January 1993 and 22 February 1994

¹² Baskın Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası 2. Cilt: 1980–2001: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular*.

¹³ Tusas Catalogue, <https://www.tusas.com/urun/f-16-oncel-i> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

¹⁴ Tusas Catalogue, <https://www.tusas.com/urun/fl6-oncel-ii> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

¹⁵ Tusas Catalogue, <https://www.tusas.com/urun/misir-f-16-programi> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

¹⁶ The data is collected from the website of TAF and NATO.

2	UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) – NATO Implementation Force (IFOR)/NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR)	4 August 1993, and 31 December 1995
3	Operation Sharp Guard	13 July 1992 and 2 October 1996
4	The Operation “Deny Flight”/ “Deliberate Forge”/ “Joint Guardian”	12 April 1993 and 21 December 1995
5	The Operation “ALBA”	16 April–1 August 1997
6	Kosovo Force (NATO KFOR)	1999 (ongoing)
7	NATO Standing Naval Task Force (SNF)	1992 (ongoing)

Source: TAF and NATO

In the 1990s, the TAF began to carry out operations in Iraq more assertively to counter domestic threats brought by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). In 1992, it launched the second largest cross-border military operation since the 1974 military intervention in Cyprus, and deployed around 15,000 air force, army and gendarmerie personnel for operations in northern Iraq.¹⁷ In 1995, the TAF launched another cross-border operation called Operation Çelik-1, which deployed approximately 35,000 troops, followed by a series of multi-brigade operations in 1997. Between 1983 and 1990, the TAF launched just three major cross-border counter-terrorism operations for, whereas, during the 1990s, it carried out 42 in total. The majority of these operations consisted of hot pursuit and air operations targeting the PKK camps from operation centres located inside Turkey. Turkey declared that any unilateral action by Greece to extend its territorial waters was a *casus belli* in 1995, and it came close to a military confrontation with Greece in 1996, as it did with Syria in 1998. Furthermore, Turkey also threatened Cyprus with military action if Russian S-300 missiles were stationed on the island in 1997. During this time, Turkey also adopted the ‘Two-and-a-Half War’ concept, an ability to fight simultaneously on two fronts against two states and engage in counter-terrorism operations against the PKK.¹⁸ This concept was introduced in 1994 by Şükrü Elekdağ, a retired ambassador and former deputy undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who advised the government that Turkey’s defence strategy needed to be capable of waging war against Greece at the west and Syria in the south, as well as the PKK at home.¹⁹

¹⁷ Can Kasapoğlu, Soner Çağaptay, Turkey’s Military Presence in Iraq: A Complex Strategic Deterrent, The Washington Institute, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-military-presence-iraq-complex-strategic-deterrent> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

¹⁸ Can Kasapoğlu, Turkey’s Growing Military Expeditionary Posture, Jamestown, <https://jamestown.org/program/turkeys-growing-military-expeditionary-posture/> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

¹⁹ Fikret Bila, İki Buçuk Savaş, 7 June 1999, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/fikret-bila/iki-bucuk-savas-5247515> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

AKP's "Forward Defence" Turn

The dramatic changes in Turkish foreign policy and strategy under Turkey's ruling AKP during the first decade of the 2000s are in sharp contrast to that of its immediate past. Security policy had been revised and reformulated during the early years of the AKP government, but the traditional approach to security considerations and shift from hard power to soft power in foreign policymaking was inconsistent, and Turkey began the return to a security-oriented foreign policy, resecuritisation of the Kurdish questions and relations with neighbouring countries.

Today, the revival of security concerns similar to the pre-AKP era and similar policy formulations raised the question of whether Turkey's recent steps in the region and new assertive security policies are reflecting the revival of the traditional Turkish state mindset, as a consequence of new alliance reconfiguration between AKP and nationalists, namely Eurasianist and The Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – MHP) since 2015. This argument implies that there is a convergence between AKP's foreign policy doctrine Strategic Depth and the traditional security principles of the Republic. Furthermore, AKP rapprochement with Vatan Partisi and MHP since 2015 also opens the door for the representatives of these two political and ideological parties to influence and shape the foreign and security policy decision-making process. Such an argument also suggests that the core and defining element of AKP's foreign and security policies manifested as Strategic Depth and Central State doctrines are soft power and that AKP made a U-turn in its foreign policy by adopting hard power.

The debates over these arguments became more profound when Turkey declared its Mavi Vatan policy in response to a maritime dispute with Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. Retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, the originator of the concept of the "Blue Homeland", a term first coined in 2006, and Admiral Cihat Yaycı, the leading figure behind the Turkey–Libya maritime delimitation agreement, are seen as the masterminds behind the new policies.²⁰ Within their Eurasianist paradigm, Turkey should redefine its role and place in the changing world by shifting its geopolitical camp and forging new alliances with rising Asian powers Russia and China, and Iran.²¹ The concept of the Blue Homeland has been used at all official levels from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Defence, from President Erdoğan to oppositional party leaders. In 2019, the Turkish Naval Command conducted the Blue Homeland-2019 naval exercise with 103 military vessels in the Black Sea, Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean simultaneously to show its operational capability²², and a second Blue Homeland naval exercise was held between the 25th of February and 7th of March

²⁰ İlhan Uzgel, "Mavi Vatan ve Türkiye'nin yeni güvenlik doktrini", *Gazete Duvar*, 2020

Cem Gürdeniz (2019). "Mavi Vatan doktrinleşirken...". *Veryansın TV*.

Cihat Yaycı (Bahar 2012). "Doğu Akdeniz'de Deniz Yetki Alanlarının Paylaşılması Sorunu ve Türkiye". *Bilge Strateji*, Cilt: 4, Sayı: 6.

Kemal İnat, and M. Ataman, B. Duran (2020), "Doğu Akdeniz ve Türkiye'nin Hakları". *SETA Yayınları*.

²¹ "Perinçek'ten 'Türkiye NATO'dan çıkacak, ŞİÖ'ye üye olacak' vaadi", *Sputnik*, 20 May 2018; "Vatan Partisi Genel Başkanı Doğu Perinçek: 'Türkiye-Rusya eksenli çözüm modeli oluştu'", *Aydınlık*, 11 December 2020.

²² "In pictures: Turkish navy drill billed to contribute to NATO goals", *TRT World*, 1 March 2019.

of 2021 in the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean with the participation of 82 warships, 17 naval aviation assets, amphibious marine forces, Turkish Air Force units, and special operations teams.²³ President Erdoğan personally gave credit to Admiral Cihat Yaycı for his contribution to the Turkey–Libya maritime deal in December 2019²⁴, before Yaycı resigned after being demoted in May 2020.²⁵

The AKP government’s grand strategy aims to reposition Turkey in the international and regional system. This aim is conceptualised with the “Central State” doctrine, which attributes order-building agency to Turkey due to its unique historical, cultural and geographical position.²⁶ While this mindset in foreign policy represents a paradigm shift from the traditional interpretation of Turkey’s geostrategic location as a bridge country, a connecting belt between different geographic locations,²⁷ this goal can only be realised with Turkey’s strategic autonomy, which means reducing its dependency on its Western allies at the policy implementation level. In the early years of AKP, Davutoglu listed five operational principles forming the core of Ankara’s policy of positioning Turkey as a central power: the balance between security and democracy; zero problems towards neighbours; proactive and pre-emptive peace diplomacy; multi-dimensional foreign policy; and rhythmic diplomacy.²⁸ Consequently, hard power lost its place as an instrument in foreign policy, and the forward defence doctrine of the previous period was also dropped, replaced by active diplomacy and soft power instruments. This doctrinal change also transformed Turkey’s threat perceptions. Rapprochements with countries such as Greece, Syria, Armenia and Iran replaced the military crises of the 1990s. De-securitisation of the Kurdish issue and political Islam domestically was another aspect of the early years of AKP’s security policy.

Nevertheless, holistic discourse transformation in domestic and foreign security policies after 2011, but predominantly after 2015, indicates a transformation that is compatible with the basic principles of AKP’s grand strategy, rather than a radical break. Indeed, this transformation was triggered by Turkey’s strategic consideration that the Arab Spring break-up in 2010–2011 in the region would lead to a new regional structure compatible with its adopted vision. However, such developments in the region, especially in Syria, Egypt and Libya, did not materialise. The border security concerns, the threat perception towards the revived PKK in Syria and Iraq, ISIS’s increasing power in the region alongside the Syrian refugee crisis and dispute over the Eastern Mediterranean not only triggered a dramatic change in Turkey’s foreign policy but also exacerbated its increasing isolation and deteriorating

²³ “Turkish Navy wraps out Blue Homeland 2021 exercise”, Naval News, 7 March 2021.

²⁴ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Türkiye Attığı Adımlardan Kesinlikle Geri Dönmeyecektir”, Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB), News, 22 December 2019.

²⁵ Tümamiral Cihat Yaycı istifa etti!, Sözcü, 21 May 2020, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/son-dakika-tumamiral-cihat-yayci-istifa-etti-5821127/> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

²⁶ Ahmet Davutoğlu, Türkiye merkez ülke olmalı, Radikal, 26 February 2004, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/yorum/turkiye-merkez-ulke-olmali-702116/> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

²⁷ “Türkiye Köprü Değil, Merkez Ülke”, Haberler, 21 September 2012, <https://www.haberler.com/disisleri-bakani-davutoglu-kanada-da-3954318-haberi/> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

²⁸ Ahmet Davutoglu, “Turkey’s Zero Problems Foreign Policy”, in Foreign Policy, 20 May 2010.

relations with its traditional Western allies and regional states. Furthermore, changing global and regional order with the impact of both the Arab Spring and the US military withdrawal from the region led to new security restructuring and new alliance blocs in the region, which translated to Turkey's context as becoming part of the regional polarisation and rivalry.

Despite these difficulties, the AKP government preserved the core principles of its foreign policy and implemented adjustments rather than radical revisions. These adjustments, mainly in defence policy and foreign policy instruments, are compatible with the vision of Turkey's central role in the region. The revival of forward defence and deterrence policies were neither declared nor outlined in written official documents, as was the case in the former era, but leading AKP figures stated that the shifting regional security environment required new security and defence strategy. In April 2012, president Abdullah Gül, in his speech to a group of ranking officers at the War Academy in Istanbul, suggested that Turkey needed to revise its defence concept, and acquire the strategy and skills that would be able to direct developments beyond its borders in order to act as a "virtuous power" that combines diplomatic activism and military preparation in one of the most turbulent regions in the world.²⁹ In 2016, Erdoğan himself stated that Turkey needed a new security strategy that would meet the security threats "wherever they nest".³⁰

Moreover, the new defence policy based on forward defence and deterrence has become possible with two important domestic transformations: the advancement in Turkey's military capabilities and the changing nature of civil-military relations. The dynamics of civil-military relations underwent a thorough transformation during the AKP government, bringing civilian control, and the adaptation of the presidential system furthermore changed the domestic decision-making structure drastically compared to the parliamentary system. As a result, the military, on one hand, lost its privileges of 'shaping' foreign policy in its guardian role in the previous era, but, on the other hand, it became a prominent actor in 'conducting' the foreign policy and new defence policy under civilian control. Thus, while Turkey is using hard power in foreign policy, the danger of TAF regaining and consolidating its political power has been eliminated.

TAF has increased its material capabilities thanks to the military modernisation programme and domestic procurement of weapons, part of the reorganisation of the national defence industry, which can be traced back to the mid-1970s. The SIPRI 2019 Report³¹ released in 2020 states that Turkey's arms imports decreased by 48 percent between 2015 and 2019 compared to the period between 2010 and 2014, even though TAF engaged in armed conflicts inside and outside the country in this period, as a result of the policy to minimise defence dependency on external sources. The military modernisation programme was announced in

²⁹ Virtuous power new defense doctrine: Turkish president, Hürriyet Daily News, 6 April 2012, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/virtuous-power-new-defense-doctrine-turkish-president-17784> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

Uzaktan İzlemeyiz, Milliyet, 6 April 2012, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/uzaktan-izlemeyiz-1524510> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

³⁰ Erdoğan yeni güvenlik stratejisini açıkladı: Sorunları kapıya dayanmadan çözeceğiz, BBC, 19 October 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/37703106> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

³¹ SIPRI Report Trends in International Arms Transfers 2019, by Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Diego Lopes Da Silva, Nan Tian and Siemon T. Wezeman, March 2020.

1996 in order to acquire high-technology equipment to upgrade older systems and for Turkey to become self-sufficient in terms of military technology.³² Consequently, the number and the share of the military systems and weapons in TAF inventory has been increasing over the past 10 years. According to Ismail Demir, the head of the Presidency of Defense Industries (Savunma Sanayii Başkanlığı – SSB), Turkey has managed to reduce its external dependency in defence industry to around 35 percent today from around 80 percent in 2002.³³ Five Turkish defence industry companies, namely ASELSAN, STM, ROKETSAN, TUSAŞ and BMC, are listed in *Defense News*' ranking of top 100 global defence companies for 2020.³⁴

During the 1990s and 2000s, NATO continued to be the cornerstone of Turkish defence and security policy and NATO has kept its crucial place following Turkey's restructuring of its defence and security policies. In parallel to this, Turkey adopted an active role in NATO's out-of-area operations. Turkey participated proactively in similar UN military operations. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Turkey contributed its air, ground and naval forces to 26 separate NATO, UN and other international coalitions' joint security governance efforts. See Tables 2, 3 and 4 for previous and current peace support operations.³⁵

Table 3. Peace support activities to which TAF contributed Since 2000³⁶

No	Name of the operation	Period
6	Operations “Essential Harvest”, “Amber Fox”, “Allied Harmony”, “Concordia” and “Proxima”	August 2001–15 December 2005
7	UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC)	30 July–30 November 2006
8	UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS)	25 April 2005 and 27 July 2010
9	NATO Training Mission Iraq (NTM-I)	2004 and 2011.
10	NATO Operation Unified Protector (OUP)	29 March–31 October 2011
11	UN-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID)	2006–2011
12	NATO Operation Ocean Shield (OOS)	2008–15 December 2016
13	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)	2012–2015

³² Interview with Retired Gen. General Metin Okçu, “Tanklarımızın ömrü on yıl”, *Milliyet*, 10 March 2000.

³³ Ali Bakeer, Testing the Turkey-Qatar military partnership, *The New Arab*, 25 February 2019

³⁴ *Defense News*, Top 100 for 2020, <https://people.defensenews.com/top-100/> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

³⁵ The data is collected from the website of TAF and NATO.

³⁶ The data is collected from the website of TAF and NATO.

14	Operation Active Endeavour	2015
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Table 4. Ongoing peace support activities to which TAF contributes³⁷

EU Operation Althea	2004
Kosovo Force (NATO KFOR)	1999
United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)	2011
Contributions of Turkey to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM)	2002
UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)	2006
United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM)	2015
Combined Task Force 150/151 (CTF 150/151)	2018
Operation Sea Guardian (OSG)	2016
NATO Standing Naval Task Force (SNF)	1992
Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative	2014
Konya Forward Operating Base Support to NATO Airborne Early Warning & Control (NAEW&C) Force	1983
NATO Mission Iraq (NMI)	2018

Transformative Impact of Syrian Civil War over Turkey

The improvement in relations with Syria under AKP governments between 2002 and 2011 was considered a major success in Turkish foreign policy. During this era, Turkey held joint cabinet meetings with Syria, mutually abolished visas, and mediated indirect talks between Damascus and Israel until the December 2008 Operation Cast Lead. Therefore, when the Arab Spring broke out in Syria, Turkey's decision to support regime change in the country had high risks of losing the economic and political gains obtained in previous years with the "zero problems with neighbours" policy. Still, the decision-makers at the time predicted that Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, would not withstand the popular pressure. The initial response to the crisis in Syria was to persuade Assad to make reforms in order to meet the demands of the protests. In March 2011, Erdoğan said that he had already talked to Assad in person twice, advised him to adopt economic, political and social reforms, and sent Turkey's intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, to Syria.³⁸ When it became clear that Assad was not willing to reform and step down, Turkey changed its Syria policy dramatically and engaged to organise Syrian

³⁷ The data is collected from the website of TAF and NATO.

³⁸ Erdoğan reform tavsiye etti, Milliyet, 29 March 2011, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/erdogan-reform-tavsiye-etti-17397264> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

opposition to topple Assad. However, Assad holds on to power with the support provided by Russia and Iran, despite losing territorial control of some areas.

Turkey's Syria policy was considered of paramount interest in terms of its impact on Turkey's national security. The first security issue arising from Syria is the refugee crisis. As shown in Table 5, the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey has increased over the years. As of 17 February 2021, according to statistics from the Directorate General of Migration Management (Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü – GİGM), there are seven shelter centres in five provinces – Adana, Kilis, Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye and Hatay – hosting a total of 58,204 Syrian refugees.³⁹ The population of Syrians increased rapidly as the civil war continued and shelter centres became inadequate. Consequently, the majority of Syrians, a total of 3,596,863, are no longer settled in camps but scattered throughout the country.⁴⁰ Therefore, Turkey is prioritising efforts, mainly by delaying a military solution, in Idlib to stop a refugee exodus. Turkish officials have stated repeatedly that Turkey cannot handle more refugees, whereas Syrian troops have been launching operations to move into the Idlib area, which will force out about a million refugees in the direction of Turkey.

Table 5. Syrians Under Temporary Protection in Turkey (GİGM, 2020)⁴¹

Year	Number of Syrian Refugees
2012	14,237
2013	224,655
2014	1,519,286
2015	2,503,549
2016	2,834,441
2017	3,426,786
2018	3,623,192
2019	3,576,370
2020	3,641,370
2021	3,655,067

The People's Protection Units' (YPG) control inside Syrian territory presents another security issue for Turkey, which has defined the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed group, the YPG, as terrorist organisations. It has also identified PYD control over a vast connected territory in Syria as a national security threat. The situation became even more complicated for Turkey when the YPG allied with the United States and the European Union

³⁹ GİGM, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

(EU) in the fight against ISIS. The US administration's decision to ally with YPG, which Turkey defines as a local branch of PKK, is another concern. Turkey considers US–YPG alliances as a long-term regional strategy, which in turn has triggered its long-term regional threat perception in the post-ISIS scenarios. As a result of this cooperation, PYD/YPG was able to gain control of the area northeast of the Euphrates. As a response, Turkey launched the 'Euphrates Shield' (2016–2017) and 'Olive Branch' (2018), and 'Operation Peace Spring' (2019), to clear the area to the west of the Euphrates both of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) and the YPG. These dynamics led to a policy shift with military assertiveness towards "a more realistic and pragmatic one in 2016, which was manifested in the Syrian civil war".⁴²

These operations manifest Turkey's strategic aim to avoid a repetition of the armed conflicts in urban settlements, guerrilla warfare, and terrorist attacks during the 1990s. Turkey is convinced that cross-border military counter-terrorism operations of the 1990s, which were mostly limited to the air force and sometimes small ground troops in the framework of hot pursuit, are not effective. As a result, starting from a conceptual change in the operation inside Iraq and then in Syria, Turkey's military engagement began to employ forward bases to counter terrorism and other threats beyond its soils and borders.

Turkey's military engagement in Syria also marked a reversal of Turkey's unilateral military actions. Compared to the previous era where the operations were limited to the hot pursuit and target-specific air operations, the operations in Syria mainly aim to control a defined area. Three of the operations in Syria were designed as counter-terrorism operations, which took control of certain locations. For example, with Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, TAF first took control of the Jarablus-Sajur area; then it expanded towards the Çobanbey (Rai) and Dabiq axis; and it advanced further towards the Dabiq – Al-Bab region, before finally capturing Al-Bab.⁴³ At the end of the operation, Turkey had created a 90 km by 40 km safe zone in the north of Syria.⁴⁴ The 58-day Olive Branch Operation began with the military incursion from two fronts, namely Gülbaba village near Kilis and Azez, east of Afrin. In the first nine days of the operation, the villages surrounding Afrin were captured, then TAF and Allied Syrian military forces took control of the Barsaya Mountain followed by Afrin two months later.⁴⁵

⁴² Muhittin Ataman and Çağatay Özdemir, "Turkey's Syrian Policy: Shifting Priorities, Constant Objectives", December 2018, *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi* 5(2).

⁴³ Fırat Kalkanı Harekatı, <https://www.stratejikortak.com/2020/08/firat-kalkani-harekat.html> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

⁴⁴ Armağan Kuloğlu, Rakkayı Bırak Afrin'e Bak, *Yeniçağ*, 31 December 2016, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/rakkayi-birak-afrine-bak-41090yy.htm> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

⁴⁵ 5 soruda Türkiye'nin Afrin'e yönelik Zeytin Dalı Harekatı, BBC, 21 January 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-42766283> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

Table 6. Turkey's Military Operations in Syria

Operation	Area	Target	Major Part	Framework	Aim
Euphrates Shield	Al-Bab region	ISIS	FSA	Unilateral	Territorial Control
Olive Branch	Afrin region	PKK/ PYD	FSA	Unilateral	Territorial Control
Peace Spring	Region between Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad	PKK/PYD	SNA	Unilateral	Territorial Control
Spring Shield	Idlib region	Syrian Army	SNA	Unilateral	Territorial Control

Turkey's assertive defence posture is to transfer military know-how from Syria to Libya. The combat record of new military assets in Syria is high due to the series of operations launched by the Turkish military forces, and these new systems and items gained success on the battlefield in Syria.

In addition to the success of Turkey's techno-nationalism end products on the battlefield, Turkey also obtained a significant level of experience in hybrid warfare in Syria, together with the establishment of the network of proxies. These new military capabilities have been seen as a way to address Turkey's conventional military weaknesses in the changing nature of modern warfare, while developing strategic military know-how that can be transferred to other disputes that Turkey is engaged in to change the balance of power on the ground as it did in Libya.

A New Battle for Turkey: Libya

While Turkey's intervention in Libya has shaped the domestic and international dynamics of Libya's conflict, this new policy also represents an important turning point in the transformation of Turkish foreign policy and security doctrine. It shows that Libya is one of the focal points of Turkish foreign policy and is accepted as a field of struggle with regional rivals. This new policy brings more hard power projection and foreign policy engagement that was militarised in wider geography by defining the defence boundaries beyond the conventional Turkish foreign influence. It takes as its premise that the AKP adopted a new foreign policy approach that aims to expand the sphere of Turkish influence towards the western Mediterranean as well as Libya through the Libyan crisis. This new policy asserts that Turkey is not able to protect its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean by only focusing on the power dynamics in this area. Turkey believes its successful involvement in the Libyan crisis will help it to reach its domestic and regional goals.

Table 7. Turkey's policy in Syria and Libya

	Syria	Libya
National security threat perception	Flow of migration YPG-PKK issue Extremist terrorist groups targeting Turkey	No
Territorial control	Turkish-controlled areas of Syria, safe zone	No
Turkish military presence	Forward bases Counter-terrorism Air and ground forces as combat forces	Advisory Military training activities Joint military bases Naval Forces
Proxy network	Supporting friendly Syrian military groups	Involvement of Syrian fighters
Warfare techniques	Hybrid warfare Regular warfare	Hybrid warfare No Turkish combat forces

AKP's Libya policy aims to overcome Turkey's isolation from regional power reconfigurations in the Mediterranean, due to the deteriorated the rupture of Turkish relations with regional actors such as Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Syria, as well as deteriorated relations with Western allies such as the EU, EU member states and the United States. The AKP government's new foreign policy strategy includes military power projection, reaching out to new countries for long-term economic relations and forming new alliances. For the first time, the NSC's statement referred to the "Mediterranean" instead of "Eastern Mediterranean", which also reveals this new understanding.⁴⁶

One of the most crucial regional developments was the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in Cairo in January 2019 with the participation of Israel, Italy, Palestine, Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, and Greece. When Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also considered, the inference can be made that, with the participation of supporting actors in the aforementioned group, a regional bloc has emerged against Turkey's stated positions. In addition to the joint military exercises of Israel and the GASC, the fact that the UAE was included in Greece's Air Force exercise (called "Iniohos") confirms this argument. Turkey's main aim is to show clearly that the maritime boundary delimitation issue

⁴⁶ NSC June 2020 Meeting Statement, <https://www.mgk.gov.tr/index.php/30-ocak-2020-tarihli-toplanti> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

in the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be settled without its consent, and its long-term strategy is to set new negotiation rules to resolve the issue.

Another strategic aim is to reach out to Africa. Turkey has had significant interest in Africa since 2013, but with a focus on soft power for more than a decade. Following Turkey's support of the Somalian government in 2011, its presence in the country has grown, and it opened the largest overseas Turkish embassy in Mogadishu in 2016, followed by a military base in September 2017. It is clear Turkey wishes to establish a military presence on the continent, as, in addition to geopolitical motivations, it offers a new regional market for the Turkish defence industry, and Turkey is eager to forge new defence cooperation agreements with the African states. A defence industry cooperation agreement with Côte d'Ivoire signed in 2016 was approved by the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Turkish parliament on 5 February 2020.⁴⁷ Similar defence industry cooperation agreements, which allow technical visits and personnel exchanges between institutions and companies, were signed with Chad, Sudan and Uganda, among other African states. In addition to these agreements, Turkey signed military cooperation agreements with Niger, just after Libya.⁴⁸ Exports of Turkish military drones have been increasing; TAI and private defence companies have long aimed to penetrate the emerging North African and African markets. In 2020, Tunisia agreed the sale of armed Anka drones with TAI and Turkey achieved a 4.44 percent share of Morocco's arms import.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The changing dynamics of the war and the balance of power in Libya and Syria necessitate the formation of a new framework for conflict resolution. However, the competition in Syria and Libya continues to accelerate. These circumstances, together with Turkey's highly militarised posture in defence strategies, present four main challenges for Turkey.

Turkey is currently engaged in several armed conflicts from the Caucasus to the Mediterranean, and the Turkish military's engagement in the region has expanded greatly, which raises the issues of *overstretching* and *sustainability*, especially in the current economic situation. Operational sustainability is another significant challenge. Although Turkey is regarded as one of the biggest armies in terms of its personnel and military equipment, engaging in more than one armed conflict necessitates operational decisions over the deployment of the personnel.

"Oversecuritisation" of foreign policy is another concern that has been voiced by many inside and outside Turkey, with a growing perception that Turkey is facing serious difficulties in translating military gains into diplomatic ones, as its diplomatic muscles have been weak. Military overparticipation and oversecuritisation may reduce the role of civic engagement in

⁴⁷ MFA, Relations between Turkey and Côte d'Ivoire, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-cote.en.mfa> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

⁴⁸ Turkey forges military pact with Niger, Libya's neighbour, MEMO, 25 July 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200725-analysis-turkey-forges-military-pact-with-niger-libyas-neighbour/> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

⁴⁹ Turkey's TAI sells six Anka-S drones to Tunisia, Defense News, 16 March 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2020/03/16/turkeys-tai-sells-six-anka-s-drones-to-tunisia/> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

conflict resolution and jeopardise long-term national interest. Potential counter-balancing acts risk further isolation and military escalation for Turkey.

These limitations should not be treated as automatic weaknesses, which can lead to setbacks in Turkey's policy implementation. On the contrary, they may force Turkey to reorient its foreign policy to ensure its long-term sustainability. Hence it is more realistic for the United States and the EU to prioritise conflict de-escalation and prevention measures and mechanisms. While this policy may increase Turkey's leverage on the ground, it may also narrow room for diplomatic manoeuvre. Given the dominant military role played by Turkey both in Syria and Libya, the United States and Europe should focus on how to strengthen multilateral frameworks, which can facilitate diplomacy in dispute resolution.