

## NATO, Turkey and Kremlin in international context

### Weakening transatlantic links? Re-assessing Turkey-NATO relations in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is an in-depth contextualization, focusing on the main events that marked the relationship between Turkey and NATO after the Cold War, prior to investigating the new coordinates of the relationship between Ankara and NATO that followed the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is focused on the very recent developments that took place between March 2020 and March 2021, with the intention to identify the new objectives of the Turkish foreign policy and their impact on the ties with NATO. In the theoretical section I present the implications of the implementation by the political establishment in Ankara of the so-called 'Neo-Ottoman' ideology. This section will highlight the implications that this ideology has on the Ankara-NATO relationship. The study relies mainly on qualitative data including document analysis and official statements issued by the Turkish Government and NATO member states officials during analysed period.

**Keywords:** Turkey, NATO, COVID-19, foreign policy, tensions, crisis.

#### INTRODUCTION

Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952 has been mainly driven by an increasing Soviet threat to the Turkish state that required containment. The security umbrella provided by NATO to Turkey prompted the Kremlin to moderate its aggressive rhetoric against Ankara, an approach that favored a stable regional security climate. The context favored a steady improvement in the Ankara-Moscow bilateral relations, both in the 1952-1991 period and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These developments, corroborated with the new post-Cold War world order, have led to a deterioration of the relationship between NATO and Turkey and to the emergence of tensions between the two sides on a series of regional geopolitical dossiers.

After the end of the cold War, the Russian Federation, the successor of the USSR, a former strategic enemy of Turkey, no longer posed a threat to the security of the Turkish state. Moreover, with few exceptions, the new global order and the regional security climate gave Turkey the opportunity to get involved in collaborative projects with the Russian Federation, the successor to the USSR. Still under NATO's security umbrella, after the end of the Cold War, the economic power of the Turkish state increased considerably. Following the takeover of political power by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), in 2002, Turkey's interest in increasing influence in the former regions controlled by the Ottoman Empire has grown considerably. Under such conditions, the actions and policies of the political establishment in Ankara often contradicted those of NATO, which led to escalating tensions between Ankara and its allies.

The research concentrates on the process that alienated Turkey and determined the country's leadership to challenge some NATO policies and interests in recent decades. The main assumption

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of our argument is that the tensions between NATO and Turkey have been mainly generated by the neo-Ottoman policies promoted by the political establishment in Ankara and as a result of the intensification of cooperation in strategic areas with the Russian Federation. The research highlights the main elements that led to the deterioration of the relationship between Turkey and NATO after the end of the Cold War. However, the focus of the study is on the changes in relations between Ankara and the Alliance in the context of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, between March 2020 and March 2021.

The first section of the article will deal with a short literature review regarding the so-called 'Neo-Ottoman' ideology and how Turkey's foreign policy was discussed in scholarly debates. In this section I will present the evolution of the concept throughout history and the way it impacted the transatlantic links.

The second section aims at developing the main arguments and bringing evidence to test the theoretical model. It is divided into two parts – firstly, it presents in a chronological approach the main political actions that generated tensions between NATO and Turkey, secondly, it analyses the main foreign policy decisions of the Turkish state in the context of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and how they affected the relationship between Ankara and NATO. The goal is thus to show whether there are elements of continuity between previous tendencies of conflict among Turkey and its NATO allies, to there are new challenges brought by the pandemic and its political outcomes in particular. the goal is thus to show whether there are elements of continuity between previous tendencies of conflict among Turkey and its NATO allies, to there are new challenges brought by the pandemic and its political outcomes in particular.

The final section of the article will refer to the evidence discussed, with the main focus on formulating a set of policy recommendations on overcoming the challenges that have the potential to alter the ties between Turkey and NATO.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In this section, I intend to highlight the implications of neo-Ottomanism in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. I will present the consequences of the support provided by the Turkish elites and people for this ideology. I will pay particular attention to how these developments have impacted the foreign policy of the Turkish state, highlighting the processes that have led to the departure of Ankara's political establishment from NATO policies and interests. In order to understand the extent and implications that Neo-Ottomanism currently has in Turkey's foreign policy, I will briefly present the underlying principles of the ideology, the elements that represented the foundation of it and how it has evolved over time.

Especially in the last decade, neo-Ottomanism was the main concept used to explain developments in the foreign policy of the Turkish state. After the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took over power in Turkey in 2002, an increasing number of international relations specialist considered Turkish state domestic politics as one with neo-Ottoman attributes. In the last decade, the conceptual of neo-Ottomanism has been studied both by academia and specialists from other fields. A relatively small number of analysts stressed out that the concept was born long before the AKP took power. However, most specialists associated the neo-Ottoman foreign policy of the Turkish state with the decisions taken by the Erdogan-Davutoglu tandem.

Ömer Taspinar believes that in some respects Turkish foreign policy is neo-Ottoman. However, the author argues Ankara uses very different instruments and practices compared to those used by the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, Taspinar points out that neo-Ottomanism is only a means by which Turkey seeks to strengthen its political, hegemonic and

cultural hegemon status in the region<sup>2</sup>. Rasim Özgür Dönmez believes that neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy is aimed at promoting Islamic solidarity and creating an alternative to the global order of Western origin. Dönmez also emphasizes Islam and the Islamic world are key elements that favor consolidation of the idea that Turkey plays a civilizational role in global politics<sup>3</sup>. Soner Cagaptay also argues that a thorough analysis of the foreign policy of Ankara's political establishment reveals its Islamist guidelines. Meanwhile, Cagaptay imagines the Ottoman Empire as a liberal rather than an Islamist-oriented entity. At the same time, the author believes the AKP's foreign policy is not neo-Ottoman and only Islamist<sup>4</sup>.

According to Edward Wastnidge, in the weak version Neo-Ottomanism as Islamism is seen as an antidote to excesses of Kemalism, with its militant secularism, nationalism, and Westernization. Neo-Ottomanism thus is seen as a corrective to these excesses, emphasizing and positively valuing Turkey's position between East and West. Thus, Turkey's foreign policy re-orientation away from Europe and toward the Middle East and North Africa is portrayed not as a 'turning away' from the 'West,' but as an appropriate re-balancing of its historical responsibilities and contemporary regional interests<sup>5</sup>.

Neo-Ottomanism is a concept born from the official ideologies and practices of the Ottoman Empire<sup>6</sup>. According to M. Hakan Yavuz, Neo-Ottomanism resorts to a wide, profound complex of stylistic connotations conducive to the project of memory and nostalgia. It is a term that is designed to comprise a set of ideas and norms about the self of Turkey and its world view. Thus neo-Ottomanism does not simply regulate Turkey's foreign and domestic politics as a set of ideals, values, ethics, and norms; more importantly, the holistic set constitutes the essential definition of how Turkey defines itself. Neo-Ottomanism is about constructing a new 'national' identity and translating it into foreign policy by using historical, cultural, and religious ties to former Ottoman territories. The purpose of neo-Ottomanism in foreign policy is to eliminate economic borders between the Balkan states, the Caucasus and the Middle East, in order to facilitate the exchange of goods, ideas and intensify the movement of people<sup>7</sup>.

Neo-Ottomanism gained supporters immediately after World War II, a period in which secular nationalist ideology promoted by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk began to have fewer and fewer adherents. On the other hand, there has been observed a revival of Islam and the beginning of the re-Islamization of Turkey and Turkish society. However, Neo-Ottomanism emerged as an ideology and political practice during the 1980s, one of the Turkish political leaders who contributed to the assertion of ideology being Turgut Özal, former prime minister and president of the Turkish state. During Turgut

<sup>2</sup> Ömer Taspinar, "Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism, Turkey's Middle East Policies", *Carnegie Papers*, September 2008, pp. 1-3, accessed March 26, 2021, online available at [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10\\_taspinar\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Rasim Özgür Dönmez, "Nationalism in Turkey under Justice and Development Party Rule: The Logic of Masculinist Protection", *Turkish Studies*, 2015, pp. 554-571.

<sup>4</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "The AKP's Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of "Neo-Ottomanism""", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, accessed March 26, 2021, online available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/akps-foreign-policy-misnomer-neo-ottomanism>.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Wastnidge, "Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Re-assessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Politics", *Middle East Critique*, Open University, UK, 28(1) pp. 7-28.

<sup>6</sup> Ivaylo Hristov, "Neo-Ottomanism – Emergence, Ideology and Political Doctrine", *Social Evolution & History*, Vol. 18 No. 1, 'Uchitel' Publishing House accessed, March 2019, accessed March 26, 2021, online available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333342321\\_Neo-Ottomanism\\_-Emergence\\_Ideology\\_and\\_Political Doctrine](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333342321_Neo-Ottomanism_-Emergence_Ideology_and_Political Doctrine), pp. 140-148.

<sup>7</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, "Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision", *Die Welt des Islams*, November 2016, pp. 442-454, accessed March 26, 2021, online available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311927268\\_Social\\_and\\_Intellectual\\_Origins\\_of\\_Neo-Ottomanism\\_Searching\\_for\\_a\\_Post-National\\_Vision](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311927268_Social_and_Intellectual_Origins_of_Neo-Ottomanism_Searching_for_a_Post-National_Vision).

Özal's term as president, the Turkish intelligentsia launched a debate on the need for Ankara to increase its involvement in resolving issues of Muslim minorities in the former territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire. simultaneously with this approach, Turgut Özal promoted the Westward orientation of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy<sup>8</sup>.

Necmettin Erbakan, a former Prime Minister of Turkey also played a significant role in promoting Neo-Ottomanism. Erbakan founded in 1983 the Welfare Party, which was one of the main ideological platforms for promoting Islam in Turkey. It should be mentioned that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began his political career as a member of the Welfare Party and having a political approach similar to that of Erbakan. The 1995 municipal elections represented a turning point in the Islamisation of society and the state. The pro-Islamic WP's successes (Erdoğan was then elected as the mayor of Istanbul), and the eventual forming of a coalition government, redirected the country from the path of the Kemalist system to the work-in-progress project of the New Turkey. As a result of his radical Islamist attitudes and his incitement to religious hatred, in 1999 Erdoğan was imprisoned for a period of 10 months. Despite this fact, in In 2001, the current president of turkey founded the Justice and Development Party, a moderately conservative political party, whose leadership later supported him to become president<sup>9</sup>.â

During 2001, Ahmet Davutoğlu, one of Erdoğan's main confidants, published the book 'Stratejik Derinlik' (Strategic Depth), a work that unofficially became 'the Bible' of neo-Ottomanism.<sup>10</sup>. In the book earlier mentioned (having the subheading 'Turkey's place in international relations'), Ahmet Davutoğlu summarized the essence of the large-scale geopolitical strategy of the Turkish state. As Erdoğan's long-term foreign policy advisor, Ahmet Davutoğlu advocated diversifying Turkey's geopolitical options by creating Turkish zones of influence in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. On the day of his appointment Davutoglu asserted that Turkey's influence in "its region" will continue to grow: Turkey had an "order-instituting role" in the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus, he declared, quite apart from its links with the West<sup>11</sup>. In his book, Davutoğlu asserted that Turkey has become a key country, emerging from its position of serving as a forward base for NATO during the Cold War. By using its geopolitical and geostrategic position, Turkey can become a regional as well as a global actor. As part of this vision, the government has pursued a policy of ending its long-term hostilities with its neighbors, mainly in the Middle East, which the Ottoman Turks had once ruled<sup>12</sup>. According to Ivaylo Hristov, even though Turkey has so far adhered to the global policy of the United States and NATO, the country has set its own strategic goals alongside the promotion of its Euro-Atlantic interests. The emergence of Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey after the Cold War was due to the fact that Turkey's real economic and military power was disproportionate to the country's negligible rights to decision-making in the event of international conflicts. It was before Ahmet Davutoglu wrote 'Strategic Depth' that the Turkish political elite showed signs it would no longer submit to its subordinate role<sup>13</sup>.

*For Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's road to progress lies in its past." As the Turkish foreign minister, he spoke openly about the reorientation of his country's foreign policy in a November 2009*

<sup>8</sup> Ivaylo Hristov, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-148.

<sup>9</sup> M. Hakan Yavu *op. cit.z, op. cit.*, pp. 457.

<sup>10</sup> Ivaylo Hristov, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-149.

<sup>11</sup> Srdja Trifkovic, "Turkey as a Regional Power: Neo-Ottomanism in action", p. 83, *Politea*, January 2011, pp. 83, accessed March 31, 2021, online available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315649301\\_Turkey\\_as\\_aRegional\\_Power\\_Neo-Ottomanism\\_in\\_action](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315649301_Turkey_as_aRegional_Power_Neo-Ottomanism_in_action).

<sup>12</sup> Lale Sarıbrahimoglu, "Davutoglu Promoting "Strategic Depth" in Turkish Foreign Policy", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 6 Issue: 89, May 08, 2009, accessed March 31, 2021, online available at <https://jamestown.org/program/davutoglu-promoting-strategic-depth-in-turkish-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ivaylo Hristov, *op.cit.* pp. 145-146.

*speech to AKP members: The Ottoman Empire left a legacy. They call us ‘neo-Ottomans’. Yes, we are ‘new Ottomans’. We are forced to deal with neighboring countries. And we even go to Africa. The great powers are dismayed by that. His name became synonymous with neo-Ottomanism<sup>14</sup>.*

The shift from the USA and its European allies, interpreted as ‘Neo-Ottomanist policy’ by the West, has been more visible especially after the Arab Spring. Moreover, starting from 2014 Turkey’s foreign policy started to resemble a policy of ‘splendid isolation’ in reaction to mounting regional problems. AKP foreign policy is more pro-Islamic and pro-Arab, signaling a shift from its traditional western orientation<sup>15</sup>. Since the AKP came to power the Army has been neutered, confirming the old warning of the Turkish top brass that ‘democratization’ would mean Islamization. To the dismay of its Westernized secular elite, Turkey has reasserted its Ottoman and Muslim legacy with a vengeance<sup>16</sup>.

President Erdoğan contends that Turkey should become a key player in the international arena for its geostrategic location and also for its historical significance as the successor of the Ottoman Empire. He seeks to apply cultural and religious affinities and the past common history of the Ottoman Empire to the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East in order to promote Turkey’s influence. Despite the fact that its critics labeled the new vision of Turkey’s foreign policy as the ‘Neo-Ottomanism’, Erdoğan and his party in a reply to his critics always said that his policy is not to restore the past but to consolidate the current position for the purpose for a new collective goal and which is ‘New Turkey’ and not ‘Neo-Ottomanism’. In June 2020, President Erdoğan stated that Turkey has the right to protect its national interests and the current circumstances (such as the Libya Crisis, border disputes with Syria and Iraq, Kurdish insurgencies, presence of foreign forces in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, volatility in the Arabian Peninsula and deterioration of relations with Israel on Palestine and Syrian issues and future of 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Southern Turkey), all have forced Turkey to be assertive as a regional power.<sup>17</sup>

Key reasons that favored the emergence of the Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey are: the ideological transformation in the Turkish society; the gradual collapse of the bi-polar political system; the revival of the Cyprus crisis and aggression from Greece; the refusal of Turkey’s membership application in the EU; European indifference shown to the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims and Kurdish rise in South-East Turkey. For the last four years, Turkey has consolidated its position to successfully face relatively current volatile international circumstances and its internal developments such as growing economy; large population; military strength; strong state tradition; active diplomacy and national identity<sup>18</sup>. According to Srdja Trifkovic, Today’s Turkey is a regional power of considerable importance which bases its strategy on the concept of neo-Ottomanism, while denying its existence. Neo-Ottoman Turkey’s interests and aspirations no longer coincide with those of the US or Europe,

<sup>14</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, “Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision”, *Die Welt des Islams*, November 2016, pp. 451, accessed March 26, 2021, online available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311927268\\_Social\\_and\\_Intellectual\\_Origins\\_of\\_Neo-Ottomanism\\_Searching\\_for\\_a\\_Post-National\\_Vision](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311927268_Social_and_Intellectual_Origins_of_Neo-Ottomanism_Searching_for_a_Post-National_Vision).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 459.

<sup>16</sup> Srdja Trifkovic, “Turkey as a Regional Power: Neo-Ottomanism in action”, *Politea*, January 2011, pp. 83, accessed March 31, 2021, online available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315649301\\_Turkey\\_as\\_aRegional\\_power\\_Neo-Ottomanism\\_in\\_action](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315649301_Turkey_as_aRegional_power_Neo-Ottomanism_in_action).

<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Iqbal, *The Emergence of Turkey as a Regional Power and the Neo-Ottomanism*, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, August 25, 2020, pp. 15-17, accessed March 27, 2021, online available at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3680333](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3680333).

<sup>18</sup> Mohammad Iqbal, *The Emergence of Turkey as a Regional Power and the Neo-Ottomanism*, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, August 25, 2020, pp. 13-16, accessed March 27, 2021, online available at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3680333](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3680333).

and they are diametrically opposed to the interests of the traditionally Orthodox Christian nations in the Balkans<sup>19</sup>.

In terms of methodology, taking into consideration that we perform a chronological analysis, the data used are mainly qualitative and include official documents and statements analysis. This research aims to analyze the main foreign policy decisions of the Turkish state after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which I placed them in antithesis with the foreign policy decisions taken by the political establishment in Ankara after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 2. THE DYNAMICS OF TURKEY-NATO DURING AKP REGIME

After the end of the Cold War, which led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin posed a much lower threat to Turkey's national security. These developments, coupled with Turkey's growing regional aspirations and desire for strategic autonomy, have led Ankara's political establishment to gradually distance itself from the West. The most pressing issue for Turkey's national security is the Kurdish issue, a subject that is often causing tension between Ankara and Washington, as a result of US support for the Kurdish Movement.

The first notable differences between Turkey and the West in terms of foreign policy were visible in 2003, in the context of the Iraq War, when the Turkish Parliament refused to allow the US Armed Forces to use Turkish bases and transit Turkish territory with about 60,000 troops<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, during the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, Turkey banned two US hospital ships, the USNS Comfort and the Mercy, from entering the Black Sea basin through the Bosphorus Strait. Ankara officials say they have resorted to such a decision in order not to favor the escalation of tensions between NATO and the Russian Federation. Another subsidiary reason for making this decision was the Turkish political establishment's desire to increase Turkey's regional influence by acting as a mediator in the Russian-Georgian conflict<sup>21</sup>. The NATO-Turkey relationship has been tested again after the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU, following the fact that Ankara, as a NATO member, refused to exchange strategic information with the EU. Moreover, Ankara blocked the participation of the Republic of Cyprus in the EU missions which involved the use of NATO's military infrastructure. The combative attitude of the Turkish political establishment led to further complications, as the Republic of Cyprus blocked the EU - Turkey Security Agreement on the exchange of classified material as well as Turkey's accession to the European Defense Agency. As a result of these developments, the EU-NATO cooperation has been slowed down, especially in matters related to the defense field<sup>22</sup>.

Through its NATO membership, Turkey constitutes a veto player in the inter-institutional relations between the EU and NATO and engages in boundary-testing strategy using active diplomacy, entangling diplomacy, and issue-linkage bargaining. Turkey engages in boundary challenging through strategic non-cooperation and inter-institutional balancing against the EU. The veto gives Turkey a voice against the EU and helps Turkey pursue long-term interests, such as

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<sup>19</sup> Srdja Trifkovic, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> *Turkey rejects U.S. troop proposal*, March 2, 2003, accessed April 05, 2021, online available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/03/01/sprj.irq.main/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, International Crisis Group, Europe Report N°250, June 28, 2018, pp. 14, accessed April 05, 2021, online available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/250-russia-and-turkey-black-sea-and-south-caucasus>.

<sup>22</sup> Turkey blocked EU-NATO partnership programs, Nordic Monitor, January 07, 2020, accessed April 05, 2021, online available at <https://nordicmonitor.com/2020/01/turkey-blocked-eu-nato-partnership-programs/>.

increasing its leverage against the EU in its accession negotiations, resolving the Cyprus problem to its advantage<sup>23</sup>.

Since 2009, the tensions between Turkey and the West have intensified, especially as a result of the different ways of perceiving regional threats. The relationship between the West and Turkey deteriorated amid differences of opinion on subjects like the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict. The AKP leadership has repeatedly denounced the destabilizing nature of US operations in the vicinity of Turkish territory, especially the Obama administration's support for the YPG/PYD in Syria. Moreover, the insecurity of the AKP regime has been augmented by the anti-governmental large-scale protests organised on the Turkish territory and by the failed coup attempt of July 2016. All these developments, both internal and external, led to a 'radical reset' in Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu's 'win-win' approach has been replaced by a security-oriented vision<sup>24</sup>. Despite the fact that over time NATO policies and strategies have been the backbone of the Turkish state's foreign policy, in recent years a considerable part of the Turkish society and elites manifests attitudes opposable to the NATO policies and interests. In the context of differences in the approach of the regional threats in the case of Turkey and other NATO countries, the support expressed by the Turkish population for NATO has decreased considerably. The attitude of Turkish elites and citizens was influenced by the dissonant attitudes shown by the Ankara political establishment towards NATO. Although the Turkish officials have shown their devotion to NATO, they have often resorted to prioritizing national interests in the region, to the detriment of transatlantic interests. Simultaneously, the Turkish political establishment made efforts to increase Turkey's influence in NATO and to determine the strategic agenda of the Alliance.<sup>25</sup>.

*The "Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perceptions" survey conducted by Istanbul's Kadir Has University in April 2020 found that 70 percent of the Turkish respondents see the US as a threat to Turkey's security. Meanwhile, just 55% of the respondents see the Russian Federation as a threat to Turkey's security<sup>26</sup>.*

A factor that contributed in a substantial way to the deterioration of the relations between Ankara and between Ankara and the Euro-Atlantic partners was the positioning of the American establishment in the context of the failed coup attempt of July 2016. The AKP leadership has accused the Euro-Atlantic partners for not showing their support for the Erdoğan regime and for reacting reacted late to the events that took place in Turkey. The AKP leadership also accused the Obama administration of backing the US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen who was denounced by Turkey as the mastermind of the July 2016 coup attempt<sup>27</sup>. In opposition to the West, the Kremlin has expressed support for the Erdoğan regime and the Russian publications, including The Moscow Times, have published articles stating that the Russian state has provided Turkish armed forces with information

<sup>23</sup> Oya Dursun-Özkanca, "The Turkish Veto over the EU–NATO Security Exchange", in *Turkey–West Relations: The Politics of Intra-alliance Opposition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, pp. 63-82.

<sup>24</sup> Didem Buhari Gulmez, "The resilience of the US–Turkey alliance: divergent threat perceptions and worldviews", *Contemporary Politics*, June 09, 2020, pp. 481, accessed April 05, 2020, online available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777038?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

<sup>25</sup> Saban Kardas, "Turkey on NATO's Role in the MENA: Perspectives from a "Central Country""", *Carnegie Europe*, 2012, pp. 2, accessed April 05, 2021, online available at [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kardas\\_Brief.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kardas_Brief.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perceptions Survey 2020 Results Announced, June 17, 2020, accessed April 05, 2021, online available at <https://www.khas.edu.tr/en/node/6098>.

<sup>27</sup> William Hale, "The Turkish Military in Politics, and the Attempted Coup of 15-16 July 2016", *Contemporary Research in Economics and Social Sciences* Vol.: 2 Issue: 1, Year: 2018, pp. 07-41, accessed April 09, 2021, online available at <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/515869>.

about the ongoing coup<sup>28</sup>. The Kremlin's support for the Erdoğan regime has contributed considerably to the rapprochement between the Russian Federation and Turkey and to the intensification of the bilateral ties, which reached an all-time low following the military downing of a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 fighter jet in November 2015. The resumption of bilateral relations between the Russian Federation and Turkey has contributed to a considerable extent to the intensification of negotiations in the military field, which led to Turkey's decision to purchase the S-400 Triumph air defense system produced by the Russian Federation<sup>29</sup>. Turkey's decision was motivated by the fact that the US did not agree to provide the Turkish army with the Patriot defense system, as the conditions imposed by Ankara, including technology transfer, were not feasible<sup>30</sup>.

The tensions that characterized the relationship between Turkey and NATO after the July 2016 coup attempt and intensifying Russian-Turkish bilateral cooperation determined the Turkish political establishment to resort to decisions in opposition to NATO policies and interests. Specifically, Ankara has expressed opposition to Allied efforts to block the Russian Federation's actions in Ukraine and to strengthen the security of the Eastern Flank of NATO. The rapprochement between Turkey and the Russian Federation since the end of June 2016 made the creation of the Black Sea Flotilla difficult, because Ankara did not agree with the US proposal. The lack of interest manifested by the Turkish leaders on this matter is one of the reasons why the declaration of the NATO Summit in Warsaw (2016) did not refer to the creation of the Black Sea Flotilla. The text of the declaration was limited to emphasizing the strategic importance of the Black Sea and the need to strengthen NATO's presence in the Black Sea<sup>31</sup>.

During 2017, tensions between Turkey and NATO erupted again, amid the decision of Germany and the Netherlands not to allow the participation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in electoral rallies on their national. The purpose of the meetings to be carried out by the Turkish President on European territory was to persuade the Turkish communities in Germany and the Netherlands to take part in a referendum designed to confer more prerogatives to the President of Turkey<sup>32</sup>. Amid diplomatic disputes with Germany and the Netherlands, the Turkish officials have resorted to blocking military exercises and other types of activities that NATO supposed to carry out with Austria<sup>33</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that Turkey also blocked other NATO initiatives. For example, Turkey was the only NATO member state to block the Eagle Defender plan during the NATO Summit in London (2019). Turkey's move was of major gravity, as the Eagle Defender plan was designed to defend Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in the event of military aggression planned by the

<sup>28</sup> Russia Warned, "Turkish Government About Imminent Coup – Reports", *The Moscow Times*, July 21, 2016, accessed April 05, 2021, online available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/07/21/russia-warned-turkey-about-imminent-coup-a54674>.

<sup>29</sup> Tuvan Gumrukcu and Ece Toksabay, *Turkey, Russia sign deal on supply of S-400 missiles*, December 29, 2017, accessed April 22, 2021, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles-idUSKBN1EN0T5>.

<sup>30</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok, *Turkey Rejects Latest U.S. Offer to Sell Patriot Missiles*, March 01, 2019, accessed April 22, 2021, online available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-01/turkey-said-to-reject-latest-u-s-offer-to-sell-patriot-missiles>.

<sup>31</sup> Samir Puri, *Romania: Black Sea Security and NATO's South-Eastern Frontline*, King's College London, Department of War Studies, pp. 9, accessed 06 April 2021, online available at <https://www.spf.org/projects/upload/Romania%2C%20Black%20Sea%20Security%20and%20NATO%20South-Eastern%20Frontline%20Puri%29.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Turkey rallies row: Germany and Netherlands harden stance, March 12, 2017, accessed April 05, 2021, online available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39251216>.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Körkemeier and Shadia Nasralla, *Turkey blocks some cooperation with NATO partners as EU row escalates*, March 15, 2017, accessed April 09, 2021, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-referendum-nato-idUSKBN16M2OR>.

Russian Federation. Ankara has expressed its readiness to vote the Eagle Defender plan only if NATO would have recognized YPG as a terrorist organization. Despite the fact that the Eagle Defender plan had no implications for Ankara's strategies in Syria, but for the security of NATO borders, Turkish officials agreed to vote on the implementation of the plan only during 2020, after difficult and lengthy discussions with representatives of the NATO Member States<sup>34</sup>.

Since 2019, the tensions between NATO and Turkey have intensified, following Turkey's reception of the S-400 Triumph air defense system. NATO member states, led by the United States, have expressed their concerns about the risks that the Russian-made system could pose to the military installations of the Alliance. Washington has vehemently protested against the Turkish state's decision, drawing attention to the fact that through the S-400 Triumph system the Russian Federation could be able to collect information about NATO military installations and generate security risks. In this context, the US excluded Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program and refused to deliver this type of aircraft to the Turkish air forces<sup>35</sup>.

The examples presented in this section highlight a gradual increase in tensions between NATO and Turkey after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This tendency has been favored in particular by the diminishing danger posed by the Russian state, the successor to the Soviet Union, and by the growing interests of the Ankara establishment in strengthening its regional and global influence. Under the auspices of the NATO security umbrella and as a member state of the Alliance, Turkey has exploited the veto power held within the organization to influence strategic decisions. By blocking certain NATO initiatives, many of them with no implications for the security of the Turkish state, the Turkish politicians tried to promote their own agenda, aiming to persuade member states to support other projects of interest to Ankara.

It is important to note that the tensions between NATO and Turkey have intensified especially after the AKP took power in Turkey, a political party aimed at strengthening Recep Tayyip Erdogan's power. The controversial policies of the AKP and the difficult cooperation of the party leadership with the US and the EU have contributed to a substantial extent to the strained relations between Ankara and NATO.

Based on the chronological analysis of the dynamics of relations between Turkey and NATO, in the following sections of this article, I will investigate the main domestic and foreign policy decisions of the Turkish state taken in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis will focus on investigating how the political establishment in Ankara built its domestic and foreign policy strategy and to which extent it caused tensions in the relationship between Ankara and NATO.

### **3. THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT IS EXPLOITING THE CRISIS GENERATED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO STRENGTHEN ITS INFLUENCE INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY**

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic favored a plethora of challenges for a large number of states around the globe. The impact of the crisis and its repercussions vary from country to country, depending to a substantial extent on how the authorities react<sup>36</sup>. Ranked 8th in the world<sup>37</sup>, Turkey

<sup>34</sup> NATO puts defense plan for Poland, Baltics into action, officials say, July 02, 2020, accessed January 11, 2021, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-baltics-turkey-idUSKBN24320B>.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. removing Turkey from F-35 program after its Russian missile defense purchase, July 17, 2019, accessed April 11, 2021, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-turkey-security-f35-idUSKCN1UC2GL>.

<sup>36</sup> Mihaela Daciana Nătean, Mihai Daniel Aniței, "Reshaping European and national security in a post COVID – 19 context", *Acta Marisiensis, Seria Oeconomica*, 2019, vol II, pp. 49-64

<sup>37</sup> Coronavirus Cases, Worldometer, accessed April 10, 2021, online available at <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

is among the states most affected by the pandemic, totaling about 3.7 million infections and 33,500 deaths since the beginning of the crisis. In this context, Turkish public opinion has criticized the AKP government for its handling of the crisis. Amid declining popularity of political party led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP leadership has sought to exploit the pandemic crisis to increase its popularity among the electorate and to promote its regional expansion and hegemonic agendas. In order to materialize these objectives, the political establishment in Ankara resorted to a plethora of tools and strategies. For example, Ankara resorted to the so-called 'aid diplomacy', which consisted in providing medical equipment to some states affected by the pandemic. However, at the same time Turkey took some disruptive actions, which had the character of damaging the relationship with the Euro-Atlantic partners: (1) the Turkish Government deliberately favored a new migrant crisis in order to force Euro-Atlantic partners to provide military support to Turkish armed forces deployed in Syria; (2) Ankara launched military operations against the Kurds located in the northern part of Syria; (3) Turkey signed a controversial energy deal with Libya under which it has (4) resorted to maritime exploration in the territorial waters of Greece and Cyprus<sup>38</sup>.

Concerning the 'aid diplomacy', in the early days of the pandemic, the Turkish government sent medical equipment to several states affected by the medical crisis. The humanitarian action targeted two categories of states and was launched under the slogan 'Humanity first'. The first category includes states in which Turkey intends to consolidate its influence (Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, South Africa, Afghanistan etc.). The second category includes states with which Turkey intended to improve its bilateral relationship (Israel, US, United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria etc.). The humanitarian action launched by Turkey was aimed at promoting the hegemonic agenda and improving the relationship with the West. Nevertheless, it was also an initiative that came at a time when Ankara's world-wide reputation is quite low. It was part of the narrative which targeted the domestic audience by reinforcing the claim that Turkey handled the crisis better than many advanced countries. Simultaneously, it was intending to enhance the country's public image and prestige globally, thus reconstructing the 'soft power'<sup>39</sup>. During the humanitarian action, Turkey has sent humanitarian aid to more than 150 states<sup>40</sup>.

Despite humanitarian action aimed at improving relations with Euro-Atlantic partners during the Covid-19 pandemic, disruptive actions to which Ankara resorted near its borders has deteriorated the relations with NATO member states. A first example is an inappropriate way in which Turkey has approached the conflict in Syria. At the beginning of 2020, tensions between the Turkish and Russian armed forces deployed in northwestern Syria escalated and the Russian attacks resulted in the killing of 33 Turkish soldiers<sup>41</sup>. In this context, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that 'Ankara expects concrete support from all its allies in the fight that Turkey has been carrying out alone'. Moreover, the Turkish President asked NATO to provide support to Turkey on the battlefield, sending a list of 10 requests, among them greater air support on the Turkish-Syrian border, more reconnaissance aircraft, surveillance drones, more ships in the eastern Mediterranean etc.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Noora Al-Habsi, "The Covid-19 impact on Turkey's domestic & foreign policies", *TRENDS Research & Advisory*, June 09, 2020, accessed April 10, 2021, online available at <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/3206/>.

<sup>39</sup> E. Gülsen, "Nationalism and the Response of Turkey to COVID-19 Pandemic", *Chin. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 6, 2021, pp. 40–62, accessed April 22, 2021, online available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41111-020-00166-x#citeas>.

<sup>40</sup> Eralp Yarar, "Turkey's medical aid campaign during pandemic embodies humanitarian foreign policy", *News Analysis*, Istanbul, December 31, 2020, accessed April 12, 2021, online available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/turkeys-medical-aid-campaign-during-pandemic-embody-humanitarian-foreign-policy>.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Marcus, *Syria war: Alarm after 33 Turkish soldiers killed in attack in Idlib*, February 28, 2020, accessed April 04, 2021, online available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51667717>.

<sup>42</sup> Erdogan demands 'concrete support' from EU, NATO over Syria, Al Jazeera, News Agencies, March 09, 2020, accessed April 14, 2021, online available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/9/erdogan-demands-concrete-support-from-eu-nato-over-syria>.

Moreover, in order to persuade the Allies to provide military support to the Turkish state in Syria, the Turkish authorities facilitated the movement of several thousand Syrian refugees to the borders with Greece, ignoring the risk posed by the possibility of Covid-19 spreading. In this context, several news agencies in Turkey exaggerated the exodus of Syrian refugees to the Greek border. The purpose of the media operation was to create an augmented image of the phenomenon and to create the impression that the new migrant crisis is comparable to that of 2015.<sup>43</sup>

Another relevant topic in the economics of the relationship between Turkey and NATO is how the two sides handle the Kurdish question. Although it has been launched shortly before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Turkish military offensive against the Kurds in northwestern Syria has strained relations between Ankara and NATO. In this context, Washington, the main partner and provider of logistical support to the Kurds, has vehemently protested the Turkish offensive and threatened to impose economic sanctions on Turkey. As retaliation, during NATO 2019 London Summit, Turkey was the only NATO member state that blocked the Eagle Defender plan, designed to defend Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the event of a Russian attack. Ankara instructed its NATO envoy not to sign off on the plan, demanding the alliance recognize the YPG as a terrorist organization. The plan for the Baltic States and Poland, drawn up at their request after Russian Federation annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, had no direct bearing on Turkey's strategy in Syria. Turkey approved the Eagle Defender plan in July 2020, but it has not allowed NATO military chiefs to put it into action.<sup>44</sup>

Simultaneously with the ongoing operations in Syria, during 2020 Turkey resorted to disruptive actions aimed at capturing energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, which led to strained relations with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, but also with NATO states such as France or regional actors like Egypt.

The genesis of the Greco-Turkish maritime disputes dates as far back as the founding periods of the two states and has traditionally taken the form of a frozen conflict, with occasional flare-ups. Maritime disputes between the two states are mainly generated by three topics: the disagreement over the territorial waters of Greece and the ownership of some Aegean islands and islets; the boundaries of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean; the unresolved nature of the Cyprus crisis. The conflict between Turkey and Greece has re-ignited in the context of the signing by the Ankara Government of a memorandum of understanding in the energy field with Libya's U.N.-recognized Government of National Agreement (GNA). The above-mentioned agreement, named the Delimitation of Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean Sea and signed in November 2019, was aimed to demarcate the maritime borders between Turkey and Libya. By the above-mentioned agreement, the two states established the EZZ perimeter between them, a process in which Greece's sovereignty was blatantly violated. The Turkish-Libyan agreement did not consider several Greek territories, including the Crete and Rhodes islands, whose EEZ overlaps with the EEZ established by Turkey and Libya. In retaliation, in August 2020 Greece signed an agreement with Egypt to delimit the EEZ between their countries<sup>45</sup>.

In addition to these actions, in 2020 Ankara sent maritime research vessels into the EEZ of Greece and Cyprus, which further strained relations between Ankara and Athens<sup>46</sup>. Turkey's

<sup>43</sup> Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Patrick Kingsley, *Turkey, Pressing E.U. for Help in Syria, Threatens to Open Borders to Refugees*, February 28, 2020, accessed April 14, 2021, online available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/world/europe/turkey-refugees-Greece-erdogan.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Robin Emmott and John Irish, *Turkey still blocking defence plan for Poland, Baltics, NATO envoys say*, June 17, 2020, accessed 14 April, 2020, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-france-turkey-plans-idUSKBN23O1TN>.

<sup>45</sup> Hacer Baser, "Egypt, Greece sign maritime demarcation deal", *Anadolu Agency*, August 06, 2020, accessed April 16, 2021, online available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/egypt-greece-sign-maritime-demarcation-deal/1933927>.

<sup>46</sup> It was formed in the context of the 1974 Turkish invasion of the island of Cyprus.

assertive actions in Eastern Mediterranean have taken the form of a geopolitical confrontation that has drawn into conflict states such as Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates. By redefining maritime boundaries through a deal with Libya's Government of National Accord and by conducting gas drilling operations in contested areas off Cyprus and Greece, Turkey is challenging the Eastern Mediterranean order. Moreover, Ankara is seeking to negotiate new rules in the region on the basis of one fait accompli after another. In this context, the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavusoglu stated in May 2020: "Turkey is here. You have to work with Turkey."<sup>47</sup>

As a form of protest against Turkey's decision to send exploration ships in the Eastern Mediterranean, in August 2020 Greece and the United Arab Emirates conducted military drills on the island of Crete<sup>48</sup>. Moreover, Turkey's actions in the eastern Mediterranean and the conflict between Ankara and Athens have prompted other NATO and EU member states to intervene in the conflict. Thus, in the context of escalating tensions between Greece and Turkey and the possibility of Ankara resorting to military action, France has increased its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>49</sup>. Moreover, French President Emmanuel Macron called on Turkey to halt oil and gas exploration in the disputed waters in that area. France has become the most vocal European power supporting the Greek-Cypriot position, the attitude is also caused by the tensions between Ankara and Paris in Libya, where the two states support different sides and have divergent interests<sup>50</sup>. It is also worth mentioning that the aggressive attitude of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean has caused concern among other states in the region. Thus, during November and December 2020, the United Arab Emirates, Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt and France participated for the first time in history to the MEDUSA military drills, organized mainly to persuade Turkey to abandon its aggressive attitudes<sup>51</sup>.

Another controversial decision taken by the Turkish government in 2020 is to transform the Hagia Sophia mosque from the museum into a Muslim place of worship. The Hagia Sophia was built as a cathedral during the Christian Byzantine Empire and converted into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. In 1934, modern Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk ordered it be turned into a museum. However, during June 2020 Turkey's highest administrative court, the Council of State, cancelled Ataturk's decision, arguing that the building had been registered as a mosque in its property deeds. Experts see Erdogan's move to turn Hagia Sophia back into a mosque as an attempt to galvanize his conservative and nationalist base amid economic uncertainty exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>52</sup>. On July 24, 2020, Muslim prayers have been held in the iconic Hagia Sophia for the first time in 86 years. It should be noted that president

<sup>47</sup> Marc Pierini, "Emerging From the Pandemic, Turkey Rolls Out a More Assertive Foreign Policy", June 03, 2020, *Carnegie Europe*, accessed April 16, 2021, online available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/06/03/emerging-from-pandemic-turkey-rolls-out-more-assertive-foreign-policy-pub-81963>.

<sup>48</sup> "UAE to send F-16s to Crete for training with Greek military amid tensions with Turkey", *Al-Monitor*, August 21, 2020, accessed April 16, 2021, online available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/08/uae-f16-crete-greece-turkey-eastern-mediterranean.html>.

<sup>49</sup> "Turkey threatens Greece over disputed Mediterranean territorial claims", *Deutsche Welle*, September 05, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-threatens-greece-over-disputed-mediterranean-territorial-claims/a-54828554>.

<sup>50</sup> France sends jets and ships to tense east Mediterranean, August 13, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53767792>.

<sup>51</sup> "Egypt, Greece, Cyprus launch Medusa 10 training exercise in Mediterranean", *Egypt State Information Service*, December 02, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/153226/Egypt%2CGreece%2C-Cyprus-launch-Medusa-10-training-exercise-in-Mediterranean?lang=en-us>.

<sup>52</sup> Burcin Gercek and Gokan Gunes, *As Erdogan joins Hagia Sophia Muslim prayers, '2nd conquest of Istanbul' hailed*, July 26, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-erdogan-joins-hagia-sophia-muslim-prayers-2nd-conquest-of-istanbul-hailed/>.

Erdogan, accompanied by cabinet minister and other top officials, attended to the religious ceremony<sup>53</sup>.

In Karabekir Akkoyunlu's<sup>54</sup> understanding, the Turkish government's decision to turn Hagia Sophia into a Muslim place of worship and President Erdogan's participation in the first religious ceremony is tantamount to a second symbolic conquest of Constantinople. The date chosen for the religious ceremony is not a coincidental one, because represents the 97th anniversary of the Treaty of Laussane, an agreement that according to in Erdogan's understanding should be amended. In addition to the territorial losses suffered by Turkey since the 1923 Treaty of Laussane was signed, the agreement was the document that allowed the Ataturk regime to turn Hagia Sophia into a museum. It should also be noted that the day of the religious ceremony coincided with the anniversary of the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution of 1908, which marked the short-lived victory of Ottomanism against the absolutist rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II, the tragic hero of Turkey's Islamists<sup>55</sup>.

In the aftermath of Erdogan regime's decision to reconvert Hagia Sophia into a Muslim place of worship, the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, representing more than 500 million Christians, urged Turkey's President reverse his move<sup>56</sup>. The leader of Russia's Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, also reacted and declared that calls to convert Istanbul's Hagia Sophia into a mosque posed a threat to Christianity<sup>57</sup>. Moreover, the United States and Greece and Christian church leaders urged Turkey to maintain Hagia Sophia's status as a museum. For its part, Pope Francis declared he was hurt by Turkey's decision to make Istanbul's Hagia Sophia museum a mosque, the head of the Catholic Church being the latest religious leader to condemn the move<sup>58</sup>. According to UNESCO, countries must notify the United Nation's cultural body of any changes in the status of a site, triggering a review by its World Heritage Committee if need be. Given that Turkey did not act accordingly, UNESCO stated its World Heritage Committee would review Hagia Sophia's status after Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan declared the ancient monument in Istanbul a mosque again. UNESCO said that decision raised questions about the impact on its universal value as a site of importance transcending borders and generations, which is necessary to be included on its coveted list of World Heritage sites<sup>59</sup>.

The European Union also reacted in the context of Ankara's decision to alter the status of Hagia Sophia. According to Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union, the 27 EU foreign ministers declared that they "condemned the decision to convert such an emblematic monument as the Hagia Sophia". The EU's foreign affairs chief also stated that "Turkey's decision will inevitably fuel the mistrust, promote renewed division between religious communities and undermine our efforts at dialogue and cooperation"<sup>60</sup>. Erdogan rejects global criticism over Hagia

<sup>53</sup> Muslim prayers in Hagia Sophia for first time in 86 years, July 24, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/24/muslim-prayers-in-hagia-sophia-for-first-time-in-86-years>.

<sup>54</sup> Karabekir Akkoyunlu is a visiting scholar at the International Relations Institute, University of São Paulo, and a research associate of the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz.

<sup>55</sup> Karabekir Akkoyunlu, *The defeat of the 'real' neo-Ottomanists*, Open Democracy, August 05, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/defeat-real-neo-ottomanists/>.

<sup>56</sup> Hagia Sophia: World Council of Churches appeals to Turkey on mosque decision, July 11, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53375739>.

<sup>57</sup> Russian church leader says calls to turn Hagia Sophia into mosque threaten Christianity, July 06, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-museum-russia-idUSKBN2471C7>.

<sup>58</sup> Pope 'very pained' by decision to turn Istanbul's Hagia Sophia museum into mosque, July 12, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-museum-verdict-pope-idUSKCN24D0CG>.

<sup>59</sup> UNESCO statement on Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, July 10, 2020, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-statement-hagia-sophia-istanbul>.

<sup>60</sup> EU ministers chide Turkey over Hagia Sophia, July 13, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, online available at <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-hagia-sophia-european-union/a-54165074>.

Sophia decision, saying it represented his country's will to use its "sovereign rights". The president went ahead with the plan despite appeals from NATO ally the United States and from Russia, with which Ankara has forged close relations in recent years. Amid the loss of political capital in the context of the mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic, the decision on Hagia Sofia has helped increase popular support for the Erdogan regime. As Ozgur Unluhisarcikli (Ankara director of the German Marshall Fund) emphasized, the move would win hearts and minds at home as most Turks favor such a decision for religious or nationalist sentiments<sup>61</sup>.

#### **4. TURKEY IS BUYING ANTI-COVID 19 VACCINES FROM THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND CHINA, NATO'S STRATEGIC ENEMIES**

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a series of challenges for all countries of the world, the way the authorities are applying the measures to combat and limit the spread of the virus is vital for the protection of society. Despite the major health crisis, there is no common strategy for vaccination policy worldwide. In this context, the Russian Federation and China are working to strengthen global influence by selling or donating vaccines to several categories of states. In general, states that accept vaccines produced in the Russian Federation and China have a close relationship with the political establishment in Moscow and Beijing. Given the global coverage of Russian and Chinese vaccine exports, the vaccine diplomacy strategy performed by the two countries is meant to undermine the West's influence and provide an alternative to it<sup>62</sup>. The majority of the political leaders have chosen vaccine providers based on the strategic interests of their states. At the same time, given that Western vaccine suppliers did not honor orders in a timely manner, several states shifted to Russian and Chinese suppliers.

As for the case of Turkey, as I mentioned earlier, this state is among the most affected countries in the world by the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the fact that Turkey is a NATO member state and EU candidate state, Ankara has concluded several agreements with China and the Russian Federation for the acquisition and domestic production of vaccines against Covid-19. Meanwhile, the number of vaccines ordered from Western suppliers is in negligible amount. Turkey has ordered 50 million doses of CoronaVac from China, a vaccine against Covid-19 produced by the Chinese company Sinovac<sup>63</sup>.

Turkey also cooperates in the health field with the Russian Federation. Turkish company VisCoran İlac Sanayii AS Turkey signed an agreement with the Russian side in August 2020 to start the transfer procedures for the production of Sputnik V vaccine on Turkish territory.<sup>64</sup>. While the Ankara political establishment has signed substantial contracts with China and the Russian Federation, the numbers of vaccines ordered from Western companies are relatively modest, with Ankara ordering 4.5 million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.<sup>65</sup>. It should be noted that Turkey is not the only NATO member state that has purchased vaccines against Covid-19 from China and the

<sup>61</sup> Erdogan rejects global criticism over Hagia Sophia decision, July 11, 2020, accessed April 20, 2021, online available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/7/11/erdogan-rejects-global-criticism-over-hagia-sophia-decision>.

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Smith, *Russia and China are beating the U.S. at vaccine diplomacy, experts say*, April 02, 2021, accessed April 19, 2021, online available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-china-are-beating-u-s-vaccine-diplomacy-experts-say-n1262742>.

<sup>63</sup> Turkey says it aims to produce Russia's Sputnik V vaccine at home, December 29, 2020, accessed April 20, 2021, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-turkey-russia-int-idUSKBN2930YU>.

<sup>64</sup> Murat Birinci, *Firm signs deal to produce Sputnik V vaccine in Turkey*, January 26, 2021, accessed April 20, 2021, online available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/firm-signs-deal-to-produce-sputnik-v-vaccine-in-turkey/2122770>.

<sup>65</sup> Gözde Bayar, *Turkey to receive 4.5M doses of Pfizer vaccine this month*, March 18, 2021, accessed April 20, 2021, online available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/turkey-to-receive-45m-doses-of-pfizer-vaccine-this-month/2179702>.

Russian Federation. Due to the inability of Western companies to deliver the promised vaccine quantities on time, NATO countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have opted for vaccines produced in China and the Russian Federation<sup>66</sup>, despite the fact that these types of vaccine have not been approved by the European Medicines Agency.

The diplomacy of the vaccine used by the Russian Federation and China is a considerable challenge for NATO unity, given that the Allies do not resort to unitary policies in times of crisis. Although vaccine diplomacy is not considered a major threat to NATO security, it is worth mentioning that this is just one of a plethora of strategies used by China and the Russian Federation to generate cleavages among NATO Member States. Moscow and Beijing are exploiting all situations that have the potential to cause ruptures within the Alliance, these not being limited only to the medical field. The strategies also aimed at initiating projects and offering alternatives to the Western initiatives in the military and energy fields. As for the case of Turkey, is eloquent the interest of the Russian Federation to offer the Turkish state alternatives to NATO, especially in the military field.

The topic of increased co-operation of Turkey with the Russian Federation and China, is being discussed by a large number of international relations specialists. However, this issue risks taking up public attention, as it does not pay attention to topics such as the Turkish adventurism in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's increasingly reckless foreign policy is on full display - from weaponizing refugees to extort the European Union to exporting mercenary Jihadist fighters to Libya. These are hardly the actions of a responsible regional power, much less a key member of the NATO alliance<sup>67</sup>.

## **5. THE DECISION MADE BY THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT TO BUY THE RUSSIAN-MADE S-400 TRIUMPH MISSILES DEFENSE SYSTEM AND THE CONTROVERSIES REGARDING THE ACTIVATION OF THE SYSTEM**

Turkey's decision to purchase a Russian-made S-400 Triumph air defense system and the delivery of the first two batteries in 2019 has strained relations between Ankara and NATO. The Allies expressed their concern about the security risks posed by the S-400 Triumph to the NATO military installations, in particular the fact that Moscow could use the system to collect intelligence about NATO equipment and activities.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, the NATO Member States emphasized that there is no possibility to integrate the S-400 Triumph system into NATO's military infrastructure. From all the NATO member states, the US was the most disturbed by Russian-Turkish military cooperation. Turkey's decision to acquire the S-400 triumph system led the US government to exclude in July 2019 Turkey from the F-35 Lightning II jet program and to impose economic sanctions<sup>69</sup>.

Although Turkey was supposed to activate the S-400 Triumph in April 2020, the political establishment in Ankara has delayed the decision, claiming that this is not possible due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the fact that Ankara postponed the activation of the S-400 Triumph system,

<sup>66</sup> Tim Gosling, "Russia and China Are Exploiting Europe's Vaccine Shortfalls", *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2021, accessed April 20, 2021, online available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/russia-china-vaccine-diplomacy-slovakia-europe-eu-slow-rollout/>.

<sup>67</sup> Marwa Maziad and Jake Sotiriadis, *Turkey's Dangerous New Exports: Pan-Islamist, Neo-Ottoman Visions and Regional Instability*, April 21, 2020, accessed April 20, 2021, online available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-dangerous-new-exports-pan-islamist-neo-ottoman-visions-and-regional>.

<sup>68</sup> Amanda Macias, *U.S. sanctions Turkey over purchase of Russian S-400 missile system*, December 14, 2020, accessed April 20, 2020, online available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/14/us-sanctions-turkey-over-russian-s400.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Keşvelioğlu Abdullah et. al., *Turkey's Procurement of the S-400 System: An Explainer*, Trt World Research Centre, London, August 2019.

the US government triggered in December 2020 the 231 section of the CAATSA sanctions mechanism (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act), imposing sanctions on the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries<sup>70</sup>. The sanctions are imposed on any person determined to have knowingly engaged in a significant transaction with a person that is a part of, or operates for or on behalf of, the defense or intelligence sectors of the Government of the Russian Federation. The US decision to sanction Turkey has a precedent, with Washington imposing similar sanctions against China in 2018, following Beijing's acquisition of the Russian S-400 Triumph system and another military equipment of Russian origin.

It should be noted that following the US activation of the 231 section of the CAATSA mechanism, there has been a change of rhetoric among the Turkish establishment. Turkish officials have agreed not to permanently activate the Russian-origin system, in order to avoid jeopardizing relations with Washington. In this regard, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar stated that Turkey is not planning to integrate S-400s into the NATO military infrastructure. At the same time, the Turkish official stressed that his country is willing to activate the S-400 Triumph system only in the event that the Turkish territory is in danger. Hulusi Akar made an analogy with the situation in Greece, which has the Russian air defense system S-300, but which is activated only in case of imminent danger<sup>71</sup>. However, the decision of the Turkish political establishment to postpone the activation of the system and the desire to resume talks with the US is based on the following reasons: (1) the air defense provided by the Russian S-400 Triumph system is limited, because it does not cover the entire Turkish territory; (2) a possible US decision to impose additional economic sanctions would destabilize Turkey's economy, given that it is already severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic; (3) the activation by the US of the 231 section of the CAATSA sanctions mechanism affects the Turkish armaments industry, because the US no longer supplies spare parts for military equipment of American origin. This affects Turkey's combat capability in the conflict in Syria; (4) the concern that Washington will provide additional support for the YPG in Syria.

It is important to note that Turkish officials were the ones who took the initiative to contact Washington to resolve the crisis generated by Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 Triumph system. However, the Biden administration ignored Ankara's demands. Despite Ankara's openness to dialogue and determination to resolve the S-400 affair, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said this is only possible if the US refuses to support YPG. The fact that the Biden administration intends to put even more pressure on Turkey is evidenced by the controversy over the US political establishment's recourse to formal recognition of the Armenian Genocide<sup>72</sup>.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As historical events show, the foreign policy of the Turkish state and its relationship with NATO has been profoundly influenced by the global order and regional security climate. Despite the fact that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Republic of Turkey, promoted secularism and a pro-Western attitude, the neo-Ottoman ideology began to have more and more

<sup>70</sup> CAATSA Section 231 "Imposition of Sanctions on Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries", U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Greece, Fact Sheet, Office of the Spokesperson, December 14, 2020, accessed April 20, 2021, online available at <https://gr.usembassy.gov/caatsa-section-231-imposition-of-sanctions-on-turkish-presidency-of-defense-industries/>.

<sup>71</sup> Umut Uras, *Analysis: Turkey's new S-400 proposal offers olive branch to US*, February 10, 2021, accessed April 21, 2021, online available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/10/turkey-proposes-model-to-resolve-s-400-dispute-with-us>.

<sup>72</sup> Humeyra Pamuk, Trevor Hunnicutt and Arshad Mohammed, *Biden expected to recognize massacre of Armenians as genocide*, April 22, 2021, accessed April 23, 2021, online available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/biden-expected-recognize-massacre-armenians-genocide-wsj-2021-04-22/>.

sympathizers, especially after World War II. However, the political establishment in Ankara tried to keep neo-Ottoman ideas off the spectrum of foreign policy, but after the coming to power of AKP this rhetoric changed substantially. In the AKP regime Turkey's foreign policy has undergone substantial changes, which has led to a gradual strain on relations between Ankara and NATO. Regarding the nature of the relationship between Turkey and NATO in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the general conclusion that emerges from the events analyzed is that Turkey has exploited the context to promote its hegemonic and expansionist agenda. Turkey's attitude has led to strained relations with the several NATO Member States, which have resorted to reprisals against the Turkish state: imposing economic sanctions, organizing military exercises in the vicinity of Turkish territory, concluding agreements against Turkish interests some of the Mediterranean riparian countries etc. In order to stabilize relations between Turkey and NATO, I assume that the following decisions must be taken:

**(1) *Turkey's abandonment of exploration and drilling activities in the continental shelf of the Mediterranean Sea***

Given that the Turkish economy is in dire need of hydrocarbon resources for domestic and industrial consumption, it is unlikely that Turkey will give up its disruptive actions in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, if the dialogue between Ankara and Athens will be maintained at acceptable levels, the adjudication before the International Court of Justice would be the optimal decision for the resolution of the Greek-Turkish conflict. As evidenced by the existing casuistry, the international law of the sea could be as flexible as necessary to reach agreements.

**(2) *The US acceptance of Ankara's proposals to discuss the S-400 affair***

Turkey's decision to postpone the activation of the S-400 Triumph system and its openness to dialogue with Washington may help ease tensions between Ankara and NATO over the S-400 affair. However, there is a possibility that Turkey's openness to dialogue to be relatively tardy, as the Biden administration has initiated several mechanisms to put pressure on the Ankara government. However, the crisis between Turkey and NATO can be resolved if the NATO Member States accept that Turkey will only temporarily activate the system, just in the event of imminent threats to the security of the Turkish state. Such a solution is not unprecedented, being applied to the S-300 air defense system owned by Greece. At the same time, the identification of a compromise solution and the supplementation by NATO of the airspace defense systems of Turkey could lead in the long run to the decrease of Ankara's interest in the military installations of the Russian Federation.

**(3) *Finding a common solution by the US and Turkey to manage the conflict in Syria***

The Kurdish issue is a matter of terrorist importance to Turkey, both in terms of territorial integrity and the danger posed by the terrorist threat. Thus, it is very unlikely that Turkey will abandon its actions against the YPG in Syria. The US mediation of negotiations between Ankara and the representatives of the Kurds, culminating in the establishment of red lines could lead to a de-escalation of the situation.

As for the tensions between Turkey and the Russian Federation, a possible involvement of Washington in supporting Turkey would lead to an increased NATO influence in the region and to avoidance of a new exodus of war refugees to Europe's borders.

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