

From Geopolitical Anxiety to Assertive Stance: The Historical Construction and Transformation of Turkish Naval Strategy

SERKAN BALKAN* and MURAT YEŞİLTAŞ**

* Sakarya University, Türkiye

ORCID No: 0000-0001-5070-9673

** Social Sciences University of Ankara, Türkiye

ORCID No: 0000-0002-1985-8504

ABSTRACT *This article traces the evolution of Türkiye's naval strategy from a defensive coastal-based concept to an assertive one within a broader geopolitical perspective. The shift began during the Cyprus crisis of the 1960s and was made possible by the Navy's desire to return to the seas. The "Toward Open Seas" strategy of the 1990s and the development of the Turkish defense industry in the 2000s under the AK Party government further enabled this shift. By 2015, the Navy had become more active and was mobilized under a comprehensive strategic reorientation, reflecting its expanded role beyond coastal defense. It examines the various contextual factors that have influenced the transformation of Türkiye's naval forces, including the intra-institutional context under the Turkish Armed Forces, the discursive context regarding dominant geopolitical narratives, and the geostrategic context concerning the operationalization of Turkish naval strategy. The article's main aim is to contribute to the existing literature on Türkiye's naval strategy by drawing on primary sources that have not yet been fully examined.*

Keywords: Turkish Naval Forces, Turkish Navy, The Republican Navy, Naval Strategy, Geopolitical Vision

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Introduction

The historical transformation of Türkiye's naval strategies and naval forces represents a crucial dimension of the country's development and geopolitical positioning, which has often been underrepresented in academic research. While foreign policy studies have garnered significant attention in analyzing Türkiye's global interactions and diplomatic maneuvers from a historical perspective, the role and evolution of the Turkish Navy offer unique insights into the nation's strategic culture and security dynamics. The complex fabric of Türkiye's naval history is intricately interwoven with elements of strategic culture, institutional developments, and geopolitical shifts in Türkiye's strategic landscape over the course of history. From its early encounters with the Byzantine Empire in the 11th century to its contemporary role as a significant naval power, Türkiye's journey through the seas has been a compelling narrative of adaptation, transformation, and strategic reorientation.

At the heart of this narrative stands Çaka Bey, the visionary founder of the Turkish Navy, whose encounter with the Byzantine Empire in 1081 marked the inception of a maritime legacy that endures to this day. This historical reference serves as a poignant reminder of Türkiye's enduring commitment to sea power, establishing a profound sense of historical continuity.¹ However, as we navigate the annals of time from 1081 to the present, we find that the assurance of historical continuity in both strategic and institutional culture has been far from straightforward. Intriguingly, the connection between the Seljuks and the Ottomans, two pivotal chapters in Turkish naval history, exhibits a certain fragility. It was only after the Ottoman Empire's conquest of the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1354 that a concerted effort towards naval strategy, with a predominant focus on the sea, was initiated.² The geographical imperatives, evolving geopolitical visions, and the necessity to traverse the sea between Anatolia and Europe laid the cornerstone for envisioning a formidable navy.

The strategic culture of the Ottoman-era Navy holds paramount significance. In this era, the Ottoman Empire ventured into the maritime domain, distinct from its land forces, creating a unique dichotomy with no hierarchical supremacy to the sultan or between the two forces. Key positions such as Admiral (*Derya Beyi*), Chief Admiral (*Kaptan-ı Derya*), and the First Lord of the Admiralty (*Bahriye Nazırı*) embodied the maritime leadership during various periods, distinct from the land-focused Minister of War (*Harbiye Nazırı*).³ This non-hierarchical relationship between naval and land forces persisted until the founding of the Turkish Republic. However, the early years of the Republic witnessed challenges in integrating the navy into the newly formed armed forces. The land forces, bolstered by hero generals from the War of Independence, held a strategic narrative centered on border integrity and homeland defense. The air force emerged as the second most crucial component, while limited

economic capacity hindered significant investments in the navy. Consequently, during the War of Independence, naval participation was constrained, and a mere 234 naval officers served in Anatolia during that period.⁴ This restrained the navy's integration into the armed forces' structure.

The trauma of territorial losses during the late Ottoman era cast a long shadow on the Republic's founders, shaping their future strategic outlook.⁵ This geopolitical trauma, extending beyond psychological impact, deeply influenced the Republic's strategic culture. Territorial integrity and border defense became paramount, sidelining the navy as a land-oriented military strategy took precedence. This perspective reverberated in foreign policy, with early Republican leaders emphasizing border agreements and territorial integrity.⁶ Subsequently, the Turkish navy's role was confined to a limiting and defensive doctrine, emphasizing mainly coastal defense. However, the Cyprus crisis in the 1960s marked a pivotal shift, leading Türkiye from a defensive to an assertive naval strategy. The naval forces, instrumental in the Cyprus Peace Operation in 1974, signaled Türkiye's return to the seas. The "Toward the Open Seas" strategy of the 1990s encapsulated this desire, and the 2000s witnessed the navy's active presence in distant waters, aligning with Türkiye's assertive foreign policy and the development of the Turkish defense industry. In 2015, the Turkish Navy experienced a resurgence, aligning with a more comprehensive strategic vision: "To be safe in the motherland, be strong at sea, to have a voice in the world, be present in all seas."⁷ This transformation extended beyond coastal defense, reflecting a broader geopolitical perspective.

This article embarks on a historical trajectory, shedding light on the evolution of naval strategy in Türkiye from the Republic's inception to the present. It scrutinizes this transformation through three distinct lenses: intra-strategic discourse, interdiscursive competition among the Turkish Armed Forces' institutional structures, and shifts in strategic discourse responding to Türkiye's evolving geopolitical landscape. The narrative unfolds in three historical epochs. First, from 1923 to 1949, Türkiye's naval strategy centered on coastal defense to safeguard territorial gains and integrity. Second, spanning from 1949 to 1991, marked an era of strategic awakening, emphasizing the Navy's role in reopening to the Black Sea and Mediterranean while maintaining coastal defense. The third phase, from 1991 to the present, witnessed a profound transformation towards a comprehensive naval strategy, characterized by an assertive posture and power projection capabilities.



The geographical imperatives, evolving geopolitical visions, and the necessity to traverse the sea between Anatolia and Europe laid the cornerstone for envisioning a formidable navy

This study not only offers fresh insights into the geopolitical narrative of Türkiye but also addresses two key weaknesses in the traditional approach to understanding Turkish naval strategy. It illuminates primary sources and analytical frameworks, enriching our understanding of institutional debates and the historical transformation of Türkiye's naval strategy. By doing so, it bridges gaps in Turkish strategic studies and strategic culture literature, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Türkiye's maritime evolution.

Geopolitical Anxiety: The Coastal Defense Era (1919-1949)

This era in the history of the Turkish naval strategy reflects the geopolitical anxieties regarding territorial integrity and the consolidation of the post-war geopolitical gains. The dominant strategic approach was to maintain the state's survival, ensured by land-based armed forces, and adapt to the international system's change. As a consequence of the dominant land force approach that stands on the principle of "isolation and security with no ambitions for territorial expansion,"⁸ the Turkish naval strategy was mainly limited to coastal defense aspects. There were three driving factors behind the adaptation and implementation of the defensive naval strategy.

First, regarding an intra-institutional debate on the role of the Turkish Navy within the organizational structure of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), two arguments were particularly significant. While the founders of the TAF were in favor of establishing the land forces as its central element, the proponents of the strategic superiority of air forces argued that the air force should be a strategic component of Türkiye's military power. Second, the dominant strategic narrative of "motherland" shaped the border protection strategy. The Navy could not secure its position as the primary force and strategic tool in defending territories of the motherland; therefore, it acted as an instrument to protect coastal regions against Türkiye's adversaries and external military intervention. This land-based defensive military concept undermined the role of naval forces. In fact, between 1919 and 1949, Türkiye's threat perception regarding the developments in neighboring regions triggered the adoption of a strategic orientation based on defending Türkiye's territorial integrity. The third driving factor was deepening geopolitical anxiety stemming from countries such as Greece and Italy adopting an expansionist policy toward Türkiye's surrounding seas.

Among the most critical elements in the formation of the strategic discourse during this era was the geopolitical environment that Türkiye found itself in after the First World War. The War of Independence and the struggle sparked by the invasion of mainland Türkiye by the Allies came to an end in 1922; however, threats present in the surrounding seas from the time of the Repub-

lic's formation continued to hamper national security. When the island of Cyprus was under British control, Italy reigned over the Dodecanese Islands. A large portion of the islands in the Aegean Sea fell under the dominion of Greece. İstanbul, under the International Commission's control, faced defense vulnerabilities. While on the Black Sea, along with looming Soviet Russian threats,⁹ Türkiye feared another invasion of Anatolia by Italy with the support of Greece.¹⁰

Due to the establishment of a defense-oriented navy, eliminating security problems in regional seas with diplomatic dialogue was considered the best solution

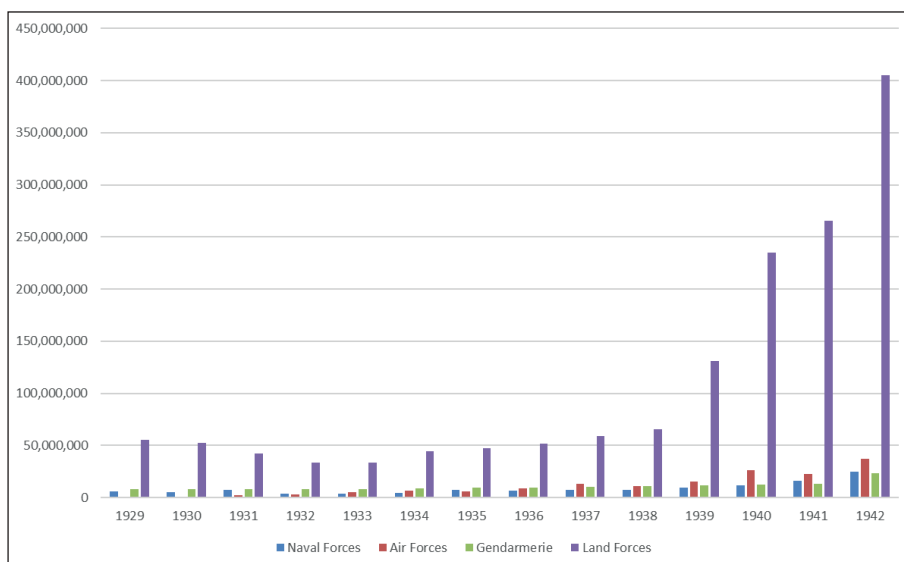
During this period, Italian Prime Minister Mussolini indicated that the Treaty of Lausanne, which was co-signed by Venizelos of Greece, put Greece at a disadvantage and insisted that the agreement be revised.¹¹ Simultaneously, Greece indicated to the British Consul in Athens that while they had no intention of returning to Asia or targeting İstanbul, the occupation of Eastern Thrace was a possibility.¹² As Türkiye's geopolitical worries intensified, Russia, Italy, and Greece became significant threats in the war game scenarios.¹³ In this atmosphere, Türkiye developed a strategy that prioritized the preservation of territorial integrity. Land forces were viewed as the fundamental component of military power, with the ability to handle all internal revolts, uprisings,¹⁴ and external challenges. Consequently, the defense of the homeland was primarily associated with the land forces.¹⁵

The rise of the Air Force further relegated the Navy to the background. The Air Power Guide (*Hava Kuvveti Rehberi*),¹⁶ which is the first written document on the role of the Air Force in military doctrine, was published in 1926 by the General Staff. According to the record, the army is the foundational power. The Air Force and Navy, which were considered auxiliaries, were also compared in the guide above. It is emphasized that since the Navy is restricted by the coast, it cannot move into the country's interior to conduct its duty; however, the Air Force can operate on both sea and land. The guide concluded that the Air Force was more important than the Navy.¹⁷ Another factor that affected the placement of the Air Force in the primary supportive role was the successful use of air power in the field. The riots that materialized during the initial years of the Republic prioritized the security of the eastern borders. During this period, the Air Force's usefulness in suppressing rebellions attracted the attention of the Republic's leaders. They saw the use of air power as a potentially helpful strategic element for handling revolts against the Republic.¹⁸

Atatürk, in particular, emphasized the Air Force's importance and stressed that it should always be kept alive in the eyes of the nation.¹⁹ Atatürk demanded an increase in aid to strengthen the air force²⁰ and stressed the importance of a

strong air force.²¹ The most striking example of the lack of support for the Navy during this period was a decision issued on December 12, 1925. It mandated the closure of the Naval Society and diverted all of its assets and income to the Air Society.²² Consequently, the appropriation levels of the land and air forces were high during this period. After 1932, the divergence of armed forces appropriations increased, wherein those earmarked for the Air Force and military police surpassed those for the Navy (Graph 1).²³

Graph 1: Military Spending (TL, 1929-1942)



Source: Ministry of Treasury and Finance²⁴

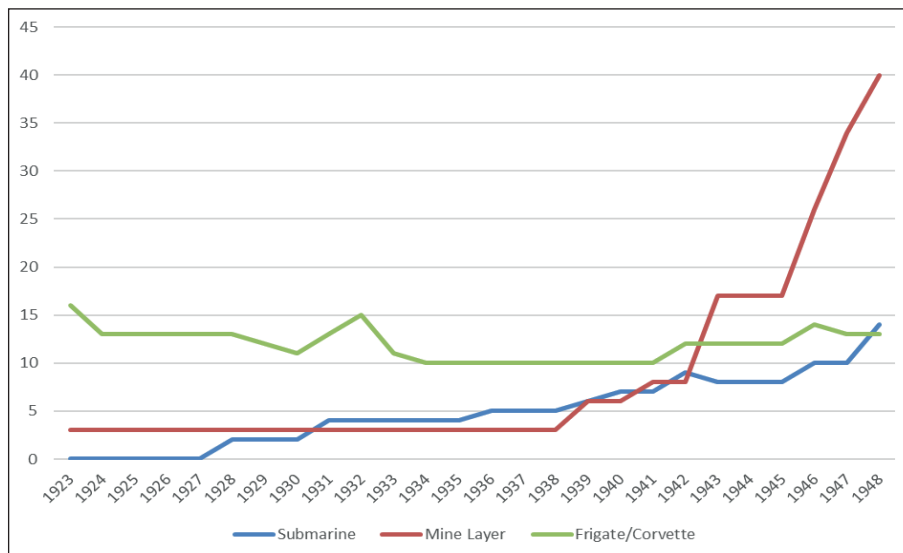
A comprehensive naval program was not considered in the national defense program for the projected naval budget. The first step was the planned procurement of some naval elements built around the defensive concept.²⁵ On November 1, 1924, in the opening session of the parliament, Atatürk noted that the Navy required fundamental and profound development but signaled that establishing a large navy would not be forthcoming and emphasized that it is necessary to avoid dreams that are beyond the sources of the country.²⁶ In this context, in tandem with the orientation towards defense, low-cost minelayers and submarines emerged as the two principal naval elements.

In this era, submarines were considered the primary weapons system that dominated the naval war.²⁷ Periscope sightings were used to detect them but their distance could only be estimated with the naked eye; this made submarines peerless naval tools. A weapon with the ability to battle underwater had not yet been discovered.²⁸ The ability to approach and fire a torpedo undetected and in daylight –which is a dominant feature of a submarine– and its ability to attack

every ship type elevated it above other types of vessels. These factors paved the way for small and economically constrained countries to consider using submarines as the most appropriate weapon for coastal defense.²⁹ In addition, submarines were the first vessels that were obtained by the Republic because, compared to the supply of large-tonnage destroyers, submarines were cheaper and easier to procure.

Along with submarines, mine layers emerged as another essential defense element.³⁰ From a maritime perspective, mines were considered sufficient weaponry to defend the Turkish Straits.³¹ Graph 2 depicts the number of submarines and mine layers procured after the founding of the Republic.

Graph 2: Vessel Numbers in Turkish Navy (1923-1949)



Source: *Turkish Naval Forces*³²

As seen in Graph 2, most vessels that were procured were minelayers and submarines during the initial years of the Republic. Consequently, the number of large tonnage vessels declined during the initial years, and their number did not increase significantly in the following years.

Due to the establishment of a defense-oriented navy, eliminating security problems in regional seas with diplomatic dialogue was considered the best solution. With this spirit, Türkiye signed the “Protocol on the Restraint of the Turkish-Greek Navies with Greece” on October 30, 1930.³³ According to the protocol, each country agreed that they would not place orders for new vessels without giving the other signatory six months prior notice. The Turkish Navy also signed a similar agreement with Russia on March 7, 1931.³⁴ Thus, Türkiye



TCG Anadolu, Türkiye's first amphibious assault ship and the first UCAV carrier in the world, entered the inventory of the Turkish Armed Forces on April 10, 2023.
DEFENCE INDUSTRY AGENCY / AA

avoided the race to build a Navy in the Aegean and Black Seas. However, the status quo in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea favored Greece and Russia. To counter the Italian threat in the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye signed the Nyon Agreement with Britain and France on September 14, 1937.³⁵ However, Türkiye did not accept the Mediterranean as its area of responsibility; it merely took responsibility for its territorial water. Subsequently, to not provoke Italy, Türkiye withdrew from the Eastern Mediterranean. Another development that directly and positively affected the protection of the surrounding seas was the sovereignty of the Straits, which was transferred to Türkiye in the wake of the Italian threat on July 20, 1936, with the Montreux Convention.³⁶ With the security of surrounding seas established through agreements, a small-scale Navy was used to secure the Straits. However, the responsibility for the Straits remained with the Land Forces Fortified Position Commands. The Navy maintained its passive defense position behind the Turkish Straits.

Within the scope of Türkiye's strategy regarding territorial integrity, drawing back from open seas and joining security agreements in surrounding seas without establishing a comprehensive navy, Greece began focusing on the sea to implement its expansionist policies. Türkiye's assumption of sovereignty for the Straits and the right to arm the islands around the Çanakkale Strait³⁷ encouraged revisionist policies in Greece. The "Naval Supremacy in the Aegean" doctrine was considered the guiding light of the Hellenic Navy and Greece had no intention of giving up on the doctrine.³⁸ When Türkiye was focusing on the Hatay question, which was slated for address at the League of Nations in September 1936,³⁹ Greece moved the border of the Aegean Sea's territorial waters from 3 to 6 miles on September 17, 1936. Consequently, the rate of international waters in the Aegean Sea fell from 75 percent to 49 percent; approximately one-half of the Sea became a part of Greek sovereignty.⁴⁰ While

the UK and Germany opposed Greece's move and didn't accept the limits of Greece's territorial waters,⁴¹ Türkiye did not react to preserve the friendship that marked the Balkan Entente and the Venizelos era.⁴² This development did not receive much attention in the documents of the period and failed to appear on the parliament's agenda.⁴³ However, it laid the groundwork for future issues between Türkiye and Greece. In 1964, Türkiye increased the distance of its territorial waters to 6 miles –an answer to the Greek advance 28 years later.⁴⁴ Despite this action, Türkiye was only able to increase its sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea by 1 percent.

With the Nyon Agreement, Türkiye promised to protect its territorial waters; however, with the emerging threat of the Second World War, the Navy was increasingly confined to the Marmara Sea. During the Second World War, the Navy was confined to the Marmara because of the heavy mines laid by Soviet ships in the Black Sea as well as German ships in the Aegean Sea and the waters around the Turkish Straits.⁴⁵ At this juncture, the Navy's primary duty was characterized by passive defense around the Turkish Straits in Marmara. As the security of the straits increased in importance during the Second World War, the British Naval Forces provided naval units and technical aid to Turkish naval forces.⁴⁶ In 1941, it provided net ships and supplies to defend the straits.⁴⁷ In addition, Britain helped Türkiye install acoustic early warning systems to prevent submarines from entering the straits.⁴⁸

In this situation, with a Navy that was increasingly confined to the Marmara Sea and focused on passive defense, the importance of the Air Force continued to grow. At the beginning of the Second World War, after the startling effect of airpower became apparent, the realization that the Navy would not overtake the Air Force had emerged. After airborne troops took Crete Island in 1941, it was postulated that the country may not need a Navy.⁴⁹ While the Turkish Air Force, founded in 1944 as an independent force, rose to the four-star level within the armed forces in 1947,⁵⁰ the Turkish Naval Forces continued to perform their duty in the Marmara connected to the General Staff at the level of a department. The Navy returned to the Mediterranean in 1946, Antalya in 1947, and Kuşadası in 1948, and traveled to İskenderun for the first time in 1949.⁵¹ However, apart from this, the Navy remained confined to the Marmara.⁵²

After the war, while the Navy was in the Marmara, in addition to the 1936 expansion of sovereignty over the Aegean Sea, Greece acquired Kastellorizo Island (Meis) with the Dodecanese Islands in the Paris Agreement of 1947 by strengthening its dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁵³ Greece filled a power vacuum in the surrounding waters resulting from the confinement of the Navy to the Marmara Sea and the passive defense of the area behind the Turkish Straits. Thus, Türkiye is a "sea country," passing the Dodecanese

Islands to Greece, and the lack of objection to this act left Türkiye's border security forever under threat.⁵⁴

Geopolitical Awareness and Strategic Necessity: Reopening to the Seas (1949-1991)

During the second period, which started after the Second World War, the Turkish naval strategy significantly changed with the structure of the international system shifting due to intra-institutional narratives and Türkiye's strategic threat perception. Under the new global system in which the U.S. and the Soviet Union were dominant powers, Greece was not perceived as the main threat; however, Soviet Russia, demanding a base at the Straits, was seen as an imminent threat. Therefore, against the backdrop of this threat from the North, Türkiye and Greece joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952 as allies. Under the NATO umbrella, it became clear that the areas of responsibility for the two countries and the makeup of their military forces were different. According to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) organizational structure, the Allied Forces Mediterranean Command took responsibility for the Mediterranean and assigned Greece responsibility for the Eastern Mediterranean, and Türkiye was given the responsibility of the Turkish Straits and the Black Sea.⁵⁵ Türkiye was considered a strategically important country, acting as a barrier between Russia and the Mediterranean. It was believed that neutral Türkiye would preserve the Russian dominance of the Black Sea and allow Russia to reach the Mediterranean. It was stressed that the Turkish Navy, especially its submarines, could contribute to Black Sea activities in the alliance. NATO believed that a small navy with support from the mainland could prevent Russia from leaving the Black Sea.⁵⁶ In contrast, Greece devised a strategy based on the islands. It aimed to protect the islands, driving the focus of Greece's naval power on landing craft.⁵⁷

According to the Montreux Convention, Türkiye was the only NATO country able to deploy submarines in the Black Sea. Aligning with NATO's force requirements, Türkiye was assigned submarines and defense ships to protect the Turkish Straits, whereas Greece was assigned 21 landing crafts.⁵⁸ In this manner, the Greek Naval Forces developed into a force capable of power projection; the structure of the Turkish Naval Forces remained defensive by focusing on protecting the straits against the Russian threat.

However, responsibility for the straits was removed from the Land Forces Fortified Position Commands and given to the independently founded Naval Forces Command in 1949. Despite the change in the organizational structure of the Navy, Türkiye's defense-focused strategy prevailed. Türkiye's strategic approach largely depended on NATO's geopolitical discourse. At this time,

the Eastern Mediterranean was not in the fore. Consequently, the Navy's strategy, in conjunction with NATO, developed from the passive defense of the straits to active protection in the Black Sea and beyond the Turkish Straits.⁵⁹

The idea that the Navy should be relieved of its strategic defensive orientation was introduced in 1959 by Fahri Korutürk, the chief of the Navy. He declared, "Our navy is a Sea of Marmara Navy. We can transform this Navy into a Mediterranean and a Black Sea Navy."⁶⁰ However, a shore-oriented strategic stance and a lack of defense industry capabilities prevented the achievement of these strategic objectives. Years later, Navy Rear Admiral Afif Büyüktuğrul noted that this was a mistake, saying: "We believed so completely in the Greek friendship established within the framework of the Balkan alliance, we did not expect Greece to return to Enosis politics. Even after joining NATO, we could not understand the efforts of Greece to claim the Aegean Sea and its airspace."⁶¹

It became evident that Türkiye understood this quite late after the events in Cyprus in 1963. After Türkiye signaled its ability to intervene in Cyprus, the arrival of the Johnson letter sent shock waves throughout the country. In this period, Türkiye was, from a geostrategic standpoint, concerned only with the North; however, the letter stated that if the Soviet Union intervened in Türkiye, NATO might choose to remain disinterested, and Türkiye would not be able to use the military supplies provided in the Cyprus conflict. After receiving this letter, Türkiye began considering an "independent naval policy" apart from NATO's and began understanding the need for a navy capable of projecting power.⁶²

Further, the second shock arrived with the April 29, 1965, edition of *Cumhuriyet* newspaper. An article in the paper revealed that the balance of power between the Turkish and Greek navies favored Greece.⁶³ After the publication of this news on May 4, 1965, Hasan Dinçer, on behalf of the Ministry of Defense, announced that there was an imbalance in terms of striking power between the Turkish and Greek navies and that to foster a strong navy Türkiye would have to establish a Naval Society.⁶⁴ Deputy Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel emphasized that Türkiye could not get the help it needed from the U.S. or NATO and that it would build enough landing ships for Cyprus using its resources.⁶⁵ Although it was mentioned in NATO's annual evaluation report that

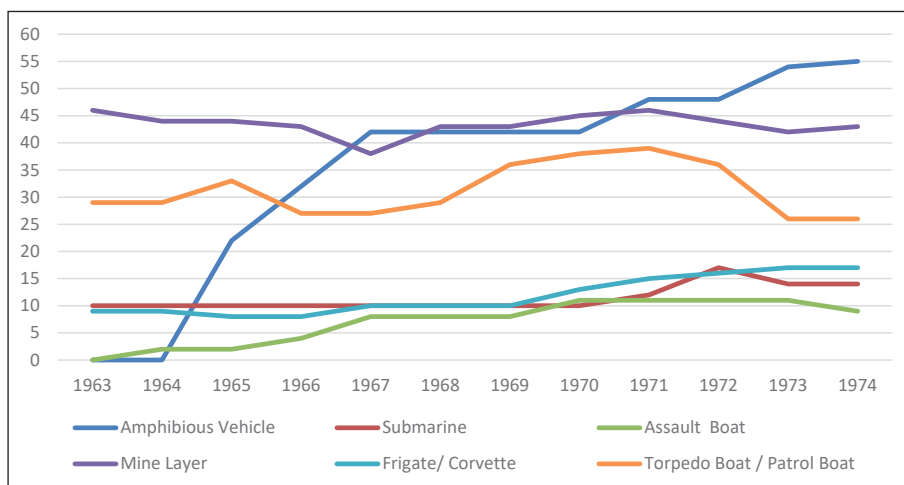
For the first time since the founding of the Republic, Türkiye's military-strategic discourse turned in favor of the Navy; from 1964 to 1974, and without preserving its prior form, the Turkish Navy could transform its organizational structure into one that was capable of projecting power

Türkiye would experience a sizeable decline in their platforms by 1963, which would negatively impact the effectiveness of the Turkish Navy,⁶⁶ Türkiye could not procure the desired vessels from any Allies.

On the other hand, aid given to Greece surpassed the assistance provided to Türkiye.⁶⁷ After experiencing continuous shocks, Türkiye launched the “Nation makes what others do not give” the campaign to obtain landing ships.⁶⁸ The Naval Society held its inaugural meeting in the salon where the Ottoman Naval Society held its first congress.⁶⁹ In the opening speech of the society, Deputy Prime Minister Demirel’s statement that “Maintaining world peace in the Eastern Mediterranean is tied to Türkiye’s maritime reputation, naval strength and breadth of naval power” led to a strategic awareness of naval power.⁷⁰ For the first time since the founding of the Republic, Türkiye’s military-strategic discourse turned in favor of the Navy; from 1964 to 1974, and without preserving its prior form, the Turkish Navy could transform its organizational structure into one that was capable of projecting power.

This new strategic stance was unswervingly reflected in the structure of the Navy. As seen in Graph 3, while the number of landing ships went from zero to 55 during this era, the number of frigates doubled. This rapid transformation of the Navy facilitated the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation and curbed Greece’s third attempt at expanding sovereignty through unification with Cyprus. This is how Türkiye was able to return to the Mediterranean.

Graph 3: The Transformation of the Turkish Navy (1964-1974)



Source: Turkish Naval Forces⁷¹

During this period, the Turkish Navy returned permanently to the Black Sea and later to the Mediterranean. Since naval air units were also included in

the Turkish Navy in 1972, it was transformed into a system capable of three-dimensional operations.⁷² In 1987, a second naval base was brought into service in Aksaz. With the construction of this advanced operation base, the Navy could mobilize in two separate operation areas for the first time. The idea of “Towards the Open Seas” began to take shape, and for the first time, the concept of forward presence was re-juvenated.⁷³ The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of a new geopolitical landscape where this idea could be put into practice.

This long-term naval strategy pursued by the Ottoman Empire could not be recreated during the Turkish Republic; however, it was believed that Türkiye required naval power with the capacity to support its foreign policy

Geopolitical Enlargement: Towards the Open Seas (1991-2023)

The third strategic transformation in the Turkish Naval Forces came with the end of the Cold War. The geopolitical fear dominating the early Republic and the institutional approach of relegating the Navy to the background began altering during this period. The importance of the Navy from a strategic position began to increase. The Navy became an integral component of Türkiye’s active foreign and military policies. In 1991, the new world order that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated the possibility of using the Navy in new areas. The dramatic shift in the structure of the international system as well as the change in Türkiye’s strategic priorities had a significant impact on the institutional perception of the Turkish Navy not only in the context of repositioning the Navy within the organizational structure of the TAF but also the implementation of military doctrine by centralizing the Navy as the central pillar. As a part of increasing strategic necessity and opportunities, the Navy published an official strategy document in 1997. Published under the headline “Towards the Open Seas” in the *Naval Forces Journal*, the paper was signed by Admiral Güven Erkaya, chief of the Naval Forces, and it was a turning point for the Turkish Naval Forces.⁷⁴

The strategy document, which defined the naval strategy of the 2000s, emphasized that while Türkiye could only fight in coastal waters up until the 1970s, it had become a force capable of projecting power during the Cyprus operation. However, currently, it functions on the level of “Sea Control.” From the perspective of Türkiye’s stability and security, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Aegean Sea are vital. Additionally, the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Gibraltar side of the Atlantic Ocean were also of interest to the Turkish Navy. For this reason, the Turkish Navy wanted to be present in the

The political desire for a strong navy gave the naval forces the opportunity they desired and provided a stage for them to operate that was hitherto unimaginable

said seas, keeping maritime transportation lanes open and actively participating in future operations in these waters under the leadership of the United Nations and NATO. This strategy emphasized that the structure of the Navy requires alteration and needs to be defined to participate in operations. With this new

force structure, Türkiye envisioned to control broader areas.⁷⁵ With the announcement of this strategy, named “*Deniz Kurdu-97*,” Türkiye performed the most significant naval exercise in the Republic’s history. Since then, the Eastern Mediterranean has become a focal point for the Turkish Navy. In addition, the Sea Power Symposium was held, where the future areas of operation were determined. The duties determined for the 2000s are enumerated as follows:

- (i) Providing security for sea transport in surrounding seas,
- (ii) Controlling the Eastern Mediterranean, Aegean Sea, and Black Sea,
- (iii) Maintaining leverage and strike capability in the regions required for national security policy,
- (iv) Contributing to peace in the world by participating in alliance and multinational coalition operations whenever and wherever national security policy is deemed necessary.⁷⁶

The strategy document underlined Türkiye’s multiregional geopolitical nature by tactically repositioning Türkiye, making its military doctrine assertive. It recalibrated Türkiye’s strategic reorientation toward the newly emerging strategic environment in the post-Cold War era. Thus, the Turkish Navy positioned itself as an inseparable component of Türkiye’s integrated strategic approach and emphasized that it would play a vital role in protecting Türkiye’s primary interests and security.⁷⁷ The Turkish Naval Forces should protect Türkiye’s vital interests by maintaining open sea lanes in the surrounding seas, the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Caspian Sea, and should actively participate in future operations in these areas under the leadership of the United Nations and NATO. A deterrent naval structure with power projecting capacity, high striking power, and the quest for taking part in international cooperation became a dominant strategic narrative under the reconstruction of the discourse of “peace at home, peace in the world.”⁷⁸ To attain these goals Turkish Navy aimed to (i) maintain power superiority in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, and (ii) construct a force structure in the Mediterranean and Black Seas that acts as a deterrent for countries with numerical superiority.⁷⁹

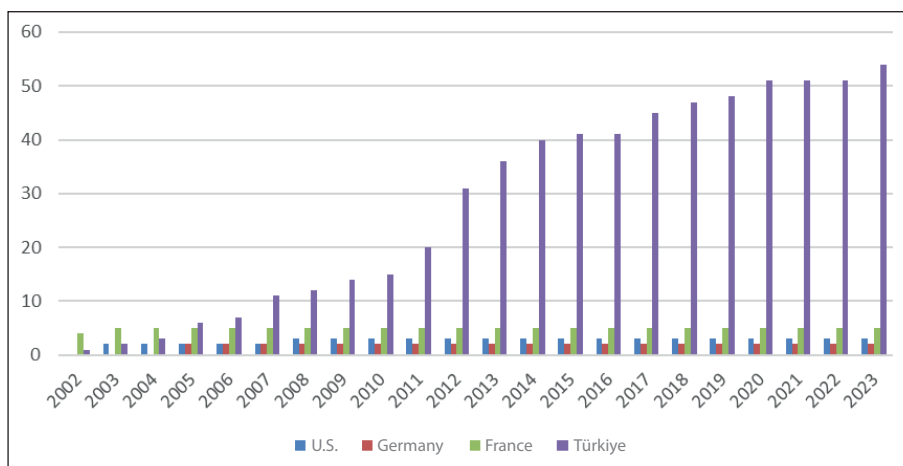
However, the Turkish Navy realized that there were some shortcomings in the implementation of this strategy. For example, the number of ships was insuf-

ficient to provide sea control and project power simultaneously. Eliminating these problems was prioritized in the 2000s.⁸⁰ In addition, there was a need for self-contained open-sea platforms capable of extended stays at sea. This strategic attitude made it necessary for Türkiye to reduce its foreign dependency on the defense industry and develop domestic software, hardware, and weapon systems.⁸¹

After 2001, Türkiye sought to play a more active role after a measurably different environment emerged in the Middle East. The discourse and strategy of the AK Party new foreign policy affected the emergence of this new role. Consequently, the reinterpretation of Türkiye's strategic culture as a solid historical thread, which supported the era's foreign policy declarations, was quite impactful. The new foreign policy discourse of the AK Party was decisive in creating this language. In the context of this new historical interpretation, the Ottoman Empire's evolution from an Anatolian principality to an empire that dominated three continents as well as the Black Sea, Aegean Sea, and Mediterranean Sea was a main focus. The Ottoman Empire maintained this dominance because it could reach nearby seas and sail to regional seas such as the Red Sea, Caspian Sea, and Indian Ocean.⁸²

This long-term naval strategy pursued by the Ottoman Empire could not be recreated during the Turkish Republic; however, it was believed that Türkiye required naval power with the capacity to support its foreign policy.⁸³ The dominant strategic narrative in the era underlined that it was an influential regional actor. It was necessary to pursue a policy that was of growing influence from the Aegean Sea to the Adriatic Sea, from Suez to the Red Sea, and from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. For this reason, it has emerged as a fundamental strategic attitude to pursue an assertive naval strategy.⁸⁴ This approach led to an intersection of the aims of the AK Party, which followed an active foreign policy, and the Navy, which wanted to sail the high seas. The political desire for a strong navy gave the naval forces the opportunity they desired and provided a stage for them to operate that was hitherto unimaginable.

One of the primary driving factors behind the implementation of the new naval strategy was the emergence of the new national defense industry, which ultimately realigned Türkiye's military power instruments within the entire geopolitical vision.⁸⁵ As part of the national defense industry policy shift, Türkiye initiated various large-scale indigenous ship projects and increased its naval power capacity. During this period, the procurement of ships from abroad ceased, and ship construction with local resources was prioritized. As problems of outward dependence shrank, issues related to deficiencies in the Navy were eliminated. As seen in Graph 4, from 2002 to 2023, 54 ships were built in Türkiye and brought into service. No ships were procured from abroad.

Graph 4: Ships in Service by Country of Origin between 2022 and 2020

Source: Turkish Naval Forces⁸⁶

The second distinctive feature of this period was an increase in the number of elements in the Navy and a desire to participate in the international operations outlined in the strategy document, which emerged as part of Türkiye's aim to change its regional power status. This desire and geopolitical goals increased the navy's assigned duties. In this context, along with regular yearly participation in the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG-2) and the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2 (SNMCMG-2), the Navy took part in Operation Active Endeavor in 2001.⁸⁷ They continued participating in the Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR). During this period, naval forces participated in:

- (i) Türkiye's 2004 Black Sea Harmonization initiative, launched with regional countries to ensure maritime security of the Black Sea,
- (ii) United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), created in 2005 to prevent the entry of banned weapons and materials into the ports of Lebanon,
- (iii) Since 2009, it has participated in the Combined Task Force (CTF-151) formed by the United Nations to prevent piracy against merchant ships in the Gulf of Aden,⁸⁸
- (iv) After the conversion of Operation Active Endeavor to Operation Sea Guardian on July 5, 2016, Türkiye became a country that contributes the most to Operation Sea Guardian.⁸⁹

In addition to the abovementioned international activities, it has also played an active role in establishing peace and stability in rapidly emerging crises. In this context:

- (i) The navy participated in NATO's Libya evacuation on February 21, 2011, based on the resolutions of the UNSC, for the evacuation of civilians

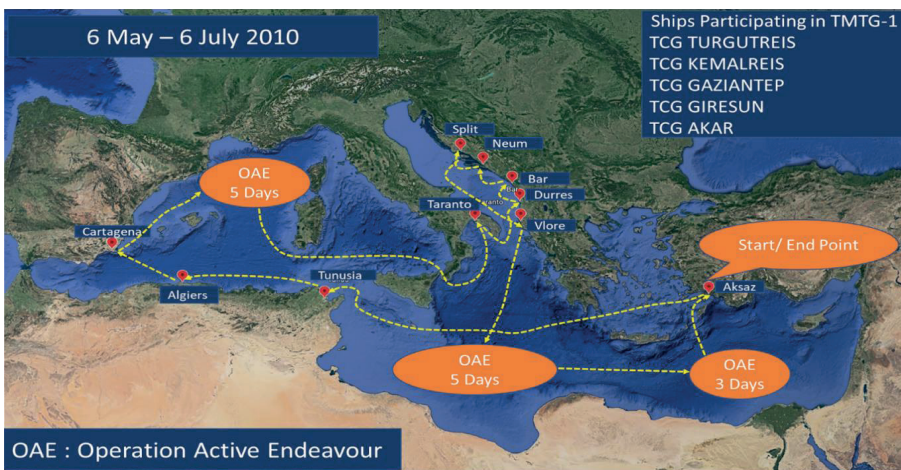
- trapped by internal instability and armed conflict,⁹⁰
- (ii) In July 2014, the navy escorted ships carrying chemical weapons in support of the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria,⁹¹
 - (iii) The navy participated in the mission to evacuate Turkish citizens after the conflict in Yemen in April 2015, deploying Turkish Naval Force elements 2,500 nautical miles away,⁹²
 - (iv) The Turkish Navy escorted a Turkish Red Crescent humanitarian aid mission to Yemen in June 2017 due to piracy and terrorism in the region.⁹³ Through their participation in more international missions, the Navy began to operate in the open seas and regional seas.

The elimination of dangers at the furthest distance from the homeland articulated in the new strategy and the establishment of maritime security in surrounding seas was compatible with the security doctrine articulated by President Erdoğan

Active Naval Diplomacy

Another issue defined in the strategy paper, the Turkish Maritime Task Group (TMTG), was formed for the first time to support the effective monitoring and protection of Türkiye's maritime interests. In this context, the first Mediterranean mission, which visited nine countries over two months, was carried out in 2010 with four frigates and one logistic support ship (Map 1). Consequently, the Republican Navy returned with its task group to the Mediterranean from where it had withdrawn and left its defense to the British and the French with the Nyon Agreement.

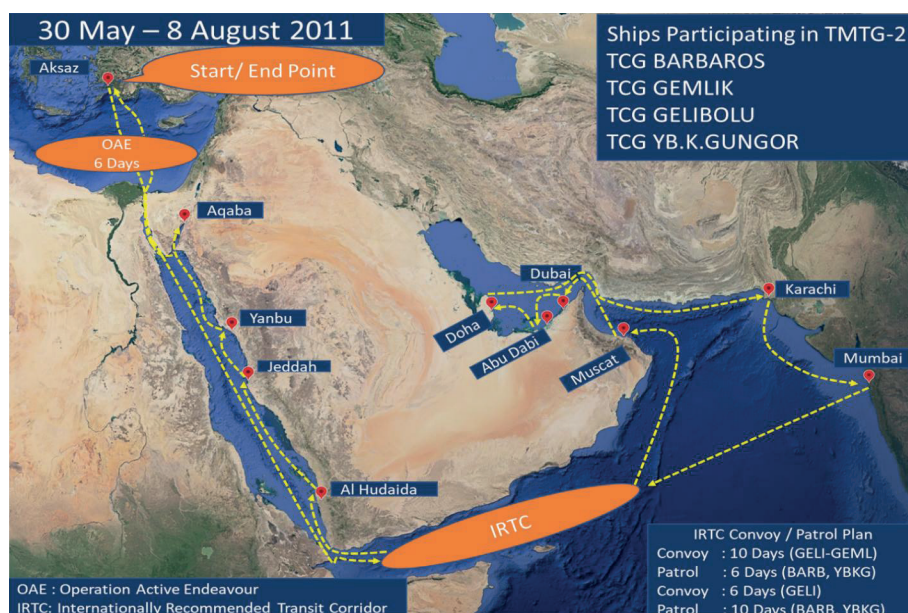
Map 1: Turkish Maritime Task Group (TMTG-1) Field of Duty



Source: Turkish Naval Forces Journal⁹⁴

In 2011, the second TMTG mission covering the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf was carried out over 70 days with three frigates and one logistic support ship (Map 2). During this mission, it also supported NATO's Operation Active Endeavor and the anti-piracy operations carried out by CTF-151.

Map 2: TMTG-2 Field of Duty

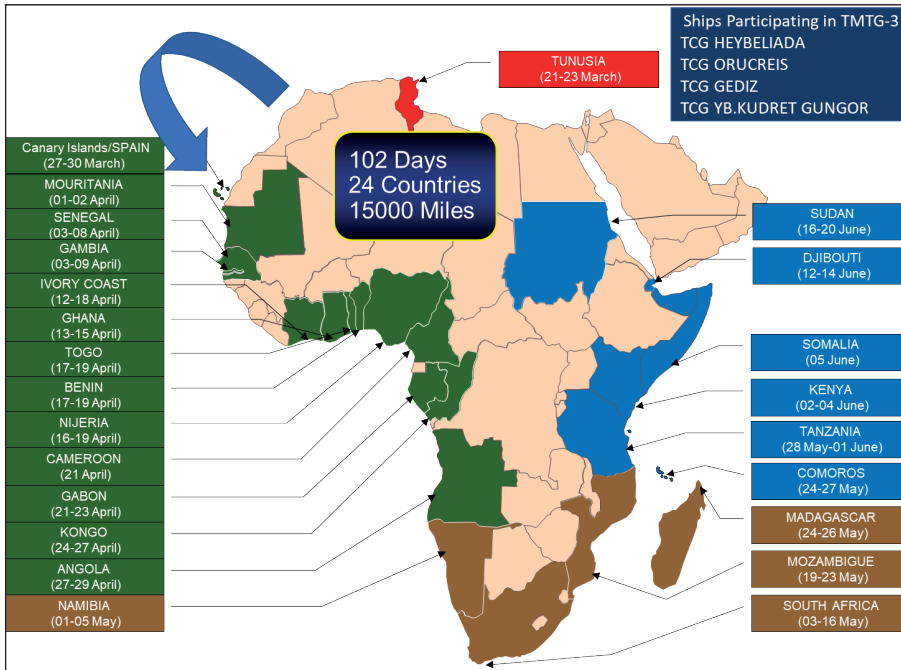


Source: Turkish Naval Forces Journal⁹⁵

The last TMTG mission ventured to Africa with two frigates, one corvette, and one offshore support ship. TMTG-3 spent 102 days between March 17 and June 27, 2014, sailing around the continent of Africa, including the North and West African coasts, the Gulf of Guinea, the Cape of Good Hope, and the coast of East Africa (Map 3). This task group was named Barbaros, who brought the Mediterranean under the Imperial Ottoman's sway with his naval victory at Preveza. Throughout the mission, 24 countries were visited, and approximately 15,000 miles traveled.⁹⁶

One of the essential tasks of the mission, firing guided missiles and artillery, was successfully carried out in the South Atlantic Ocean on May 13-14, 2014.⁹⁷ For the first time, missiles were fired so far from the mainland. While these activities were underway in the proximate basin, defined as the Marmara, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean, the White Storm-14 (*Beyaz Fırtına-14*) national exercise was carried out with 69 ships, 17 helicopters, and

Map 3: TMTG-3 Field of Duty



Source: Turkish Naval Forces Journal⁹⁸

3,951 personnel.⁹⁹ Thus, as of 2014, the Navy achieved the most expansive reach in 1,000 years of Turkish naval history, appearing simultaneously in the Baltic Sea, Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Black Sea. This period in Türkiye's naval history was named the second strongest period by the chief of the navy.¹⁰⁰

Open Sea Strategy

The objectives set forth in the Navy's 1997 strategy paper, driven by a steadily expanding geopolitical vision, were successfully realized. The Turkish Navy tested its limits by being simultaneously present in the Baltic Sea, Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Aegean Sea, and Black Sea. Eighteen years later, the Turkish Naval Forces published their second strategy paper with a robust geopolitical perspective. This was released as a booklet with the signature of the chief of the Navy. The vision of the naval forces was described as "To be safe in the motherland, be powerful at sea; to have a voice in the world, be present in all seas."¹⁰¹ The goals of this vision are: (i) to eliminate dangers facing the homeland from the furthest possible distance and (ii) to protect the rights in all seas, especially the regional waters of the Black Sea, Aegean Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean, was determined as the primary aim.

To fulfill these duties, it aimed to have a deterrent and modern Navy with the ability to maintain a presence for long periods in all seas within the sphere of influence and interest of a Turkish Naval Force.¹⁰² The Navy planned to attain the level of the Medium Global Force Projection Navy¹⁰³ with the addition of new platforms.¹⁰⁴

The elimination of dangers at the furthest distance from the homeland articulated in the new strategy and the establishment of maritime security in surrounding seas was compatible with the security doctrine articulated by President Erdoğan. He declared, “Problems beyond the borders will not have waited; they will be dealt with where they emerge.”¹⁰⁵ This new security understanding repositioned Türkiye as more prepared to intervene in its local basin and geography, focusing on deterrence and the ability to spend long periods beyond the borders.¹⁰⁶

The forces that quickly responded to Türkiye’s new and changing conception of security were the naval forces. However, the challenge to this new strategy with an increasing geopolitical imagination since the early 1990s came from Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCASC). On April 2, 2004, the one-sided declaration of an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean was announced by the GCASC. In addition, EEZ agreements were signed with Egypt on February 17, 2003, Lebanon on January 17, 2007, and Israel on December 17, 2010.¹⁰⁷ Some of these areas overlapped with the Turkish continental shelf. In addition to the EEZ announced by the GCASC, a map of the place where Greece was planning to announce an EEZ was published at the University of Seville for the first time. The map in question worried Türkiye and was seen as a step toward enclosing Türkiye to the Gulf of Antalya.¹⁰⁸ The area overlapped with Türkiye’s continental shelf, reducing Türkiye’s 189,000 km² maritime jurisdiction area to 41,000 km².¹⁰⁹ Greece’s union with Cyprus was prevented in the past. In 2006, with the acceptance of the GCASC as a representative of the island of Cyprus, it was admitted to the European Union; likewise, eventually, Greece also took its place in the same union. In this manner, the European Union became a tool for the maximalist claims of Greece and the GCASC in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Furthermore, in addition to the previously established increase in sovereignty in the Aegean Sea, Greece reaffirmed its desire to expand its territorial waters from 6 to 12 miles. Greece’s plan to increase its territorial waters was seen as a direct challenge to the strategy of the navy. In this manner, Greece would raise its right to sovereignty in the Aegean Sea from 44 percent to 72 percent; however, Türkiye’s sovereignty would increase by only 1 percent.¹¹⁰ For Türkiye, due to the closure of accessible areas in the Aegean Sea, the connection between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea would be severed, and the Turkish Navy would not be able to reach open seas without passing through Greek ter-

ritorial waters. Previously, the Turkish Assembly blocked this attempt by the *casus belli* decision on June 8, 1995.¹¹¹ However, with support from the European Union, the subject moved back to the agenda.

These developments worried the Turkish Naval Forces, which wanted to expand into open seas. With changes that meant blocking the Gulf of Antalya and severing sea lanes between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, the Turkish Naval Forces implemented the “Blue Homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine to prevent these developments. Although the name “Blue Homeland” was not used in the second strategy paper published in 2015, “protecting the sovereign rights, maritime interests, and interests of the Republic of Türkiye in the seas; ensuring maritime security in our surrounding seas, establishing a stable zone of security in Türkiye’s immediate vicinity, supporting the defense of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the protection of maritime rights and interests,” were put forth.¹¹² The maps used to describe “the security zone in surrounding seas: and the situation in those waters mentioned in the paper fully coincide with maps used to describe the Blue Homeland today. For this reason, the Blue Homeland doctrine is a part of the strategy proposed by the Turkish Naval Forces. For the Turkish Naval Forces to sail the open seas and protect Türkiye’s interests and rights in distant seas, securing the surrounding seas was essential. Consequently, the Blue Homeland doctrine was proposed as a part of the strategy for the surrounding seas to limit Greece’s maximalist political approach. As an indication of the country’s determination in this matter, the most comprehensive naval exercise in the history of the Republic, the Blue Homeland Naval Exercise, was held in three seas simultaneously in 2019.¹¹³ By defining the surrounding seas as its homeland and revealing that its border area of 460,000 km² is equal to half of Türkiye’s surface area, this land was introduced as a territory that the Navy would defend. In this manner, along with the idea that homeland defense begins at sea, the Navy gradually enhanced its position within the military doctrine. It took its place alongside land forces –which were seen as the mainline of homeland defense– as another fundamental force. From the time of the founding of the Republic, the Navy, with its increasing role in homeland defense, has been transformed from 23 platforms for a total of 48,000 tons to a structure with a roster of 182 ships of various types for a capacity of 260,000 tons as well as 50 aircraft, an amphibious marine infantry brigade, naval special operations teams, and 50,000 personnel capable of operations on three fronts.¹¹⁴ After the amphibious assault ship TCG Anadolu entered the service and with the new platforms entering the inventory in the coming years,¹¹⁵ the naval forces, which is the only force within the armed forces with the means and capability of carrying out above-water,

This transformation signifies Türkiye’s determination to assert its presence and safeguard its interests in the ever-evolving maritime domain

The Turkish Navy has evolved into a formidable entity, equipped with diverse platforms and capabilities, and has become a pivotal component supporting Türkiye's foreign policy objectives on the international stage

tion prompted by the Cyprus crisis, Türkiye's naval evolution is a testament to its ability to respond effectively to evolving geopolitical challenges. The significant findings discussed in this article showcase a remarkable shift from a limited focus on the defense of the Turkish Straits to a broader, more globally oriented-naval strategy. Türkiye's NATO membership in 1952 brought about a strategic reorientation, with the Navy tasked with guarding the Black Sea against the Soviet threat. However, it was the crucible of the Cyprus crisis that compelled Türkiye to redefine its naval capabilities, leading to the development of an assertive naval force capable of power projection.

The pivotal moment came with the Cyprus Peace Operation in 1974, signifying Türkiye's resolute return to the Mediterranean and marking a substantial shift in naval strategy. The introduction of the "Towards the Open Seas" doctrine further expanded the Navy's responsibilities, emphasizing the safeguarding of marine transport across a broader geographical range. This strategic shift, closely aligned with Türkiye's aspirations to become a global actor, saw the Navy actively participating in international missions and humanitarian efforts, in harmony with the nation's evolving foreign policy objectives under the AK Party government. Additionally, the emergence of the Blue Homeland doctrine, in response to regional challenges and expansionist policies of the regional actors, further underlines Türkiye's adaptability. This doctrine underscores the protection of Türkiye's interests and the rights of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in the surrounding seas. Table 1 shows the historic transformation of the Turkish Naval Strategy.

The overarching conclusion drawn from these findings is a testament to Türkiye's commitment to adapting to a changing global landscape. The Turkish Navy has evolved into a formidable entity, equipped with diverse platforms and capabilities, and has become a pivotal component supporting Türkiye's

underwater, air, and land operations, will become a high-mobility force capable of regional power projection and the critical element supporting Turkish foreign policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey through Türkiye's naval history presented in this article illuminates a captivating narrative of transformation and adaptation. From the early years of the Republic, when naval strategy was predominantly defensive and overshadowed by land forces, to the era of dynamic reorienta-

Table 1: The Historic Transformation of Turkish Naval Strategy

Era	Security/ Threat Perception	Role of the Navy	Structure of the Navy	Geopolitical Orientation	Doctrine
1919-1949: Foundational Debate	Territorial Integrity	Maritime Security	Coastal Defense Navy	Minimal, Defensive	None
1949-1991: Strategic Necessity	- Soviet Union - The Island of Cyprus/Eastern Mediterranean	- Maritime Security - Naval Warfare	Regional Force Projection Navy	- Sailing to the Black Sea - Sailing to the Mediterranean	NATO Procedures
1991-2023: Geopolitical Enlargement	- Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean - Regional Developments - Terrorism - Sea Lanes	- Maritime Security - Naval Warfare - Sea Control	Medium Global Force Projection Navy	- Effective Deterrence in Surrounding Sea Basin - Expand to the Open Seas - Presence in all Seas	Blue Homeland (<i>Mavi Vatan</i>)

foreign policy objectives on the international stage. This transformation signifies Türkiye's determination to assert its presence and safeguard its interests in the ever-evolving maritime domain. It is a testament to the nation's capacity to navigate complex challenges and reaffirm its role as a significant player in the international maritime arena. ■

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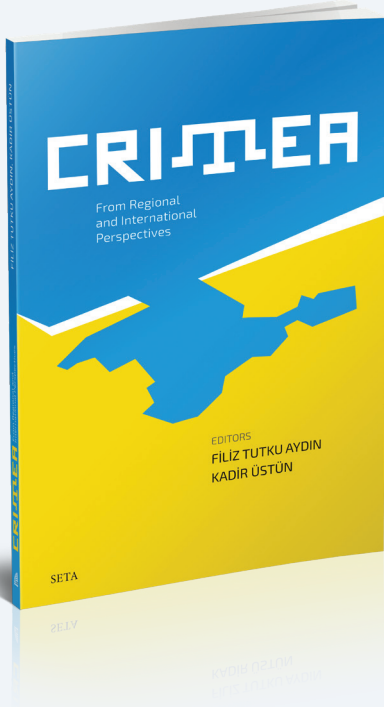
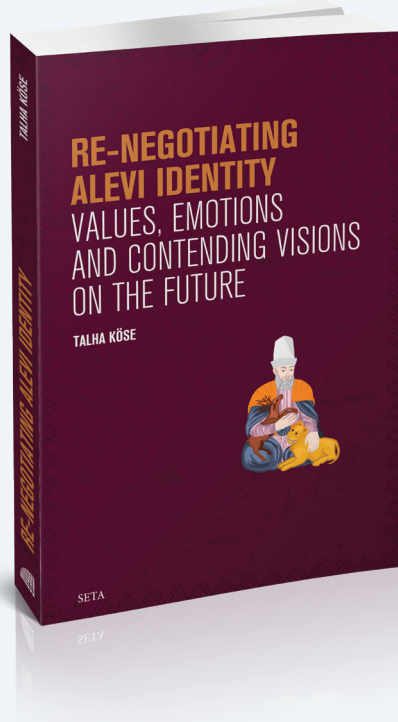
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