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A Three-level Analysis of Turkey's Crisis with the U.S.-led Order¹

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ABSTRACT *Starting in 2013, Turkish-American relations have been undergoing one of the deepest and most alarming crises since the 1940s. Ankara, a NATO member and U.S. ally for more than six decades, not only defies U.S. interests in the Middle East, as in the cases of Iran and Syria, it also works with Russia on many strategic issues, such as buying high-tech weapons, building a nuclear power plant, and negotiating the Syrian crisis. In order to explain why Turkey, as a subordinate actor in the U.S.-led order, pursues policies that are incongruent with U.S. interests, this paper employs a hierarchy approach in order to identify when and why subordinate states challenge the lead state and its rules and dictates.*

Starting in 2013, Turkey experienced its deepest and most alarming crisis with the U.S.-led order, leading *The New York Times'* editorial board to issue an open warning: "Turkey has prospered as a NATO member. That means it is likely to be the big loser if it forsakes the West for, say, closer ties with Russia."² In June 2018, 44 members of the House of Representatives warned U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis in a letter saying that Turkey, "in addition to its threats against the United States, ... has made a common practice of aggressively targeting U.S. allies, while aiding and abetting our adversaries."³ Although many pundits

and policymakers embraced Turkey's shift of axis as an explanation for the recent crisis,⁴ the prophetic, exit-oriented debate that surrounds this explanation is misleading for three simple reasons. First, history proves that such debates have poor predictability power. For example, Turkey's crisis with the U.S. in the 1970s triggered a similar debate,⁵ but Turkey remained within the U.S.-led order. Second, the exit-oriented debate overshadows Turkey's search for greater autonomy within the U.S.-led order. Finally, such a conceptualization of Turkey's crisis with the U.S. is value-laden, simply because it constructs Turkey as inferior against the superior West.⁶

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Given the fact that the YPG is the Syrian branch of the PKK, a terrorist organization targeting Turkey's unity, Ankara perceived the U.S.-YPG collaboration as an existential threat to its own security

Unlike shift-focused analyses, this paper primarily asks the following question: why does Turkey, as a subordinate actor in the U.S.-led order, pursue policies that are incongruent with U.S. interests? To provide a comprehensive answer to this crisis-focused question, the paper is divided into two main sections. The first section will attempt to explain why Turkey's current crisis with the U.S.-led order is unique and worthy of study. The second section will debate potential reasons behind Turkey's challenging behaviors toward the rules and dictates of the U.S.-led order. Finally, the concluding part focuses on the 'shift of axis' debates and elucidates why Turkey is likely to remain within the U.S.-led order.

A Short Story of the Crisis

In its almost 70-year history, the initial contract establishing a hierarchical relation between Turkey and the U.S. has survived many crises, ranging from the U.S. arms embargo on Turkey in 1975, to Turkey's rejection of the March 1, 2003 motion which

would have given the U.S. the right to use Turkish territories for the invasion of Iraq.⁷ Both Turkey and the U.S. took some appeasing steps after these crises in order to save the initial contract, mostly because both sides continued to gain from the hierarchical relation. While the U.S.-led order provided numerous benefits to Turkey, such as cheaper security, continuing economic/military aid, the delivery of bail-outs in harsh economic conditions, a respected status in the West, and political advantages in its relations with the neighboring countries, the U.S. in return gained a great deal from Turkey, anchoring the U.S.-led order's eastern flank and hosting military airbases central to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

The sustainability of the hierarchical relation between the U.S. and Turkey, however, has faced grave and mounting challenges since the early 2010s. Although Ankara disrupted the U.S. sanctions over Iran by being the major buyer of Iranian oil and gas, and paying for these purchases through the export of gold to Iran, Turkey continued to be a strategic ally of the U.S. in the Syrian crisis until late 2013. However, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was a turning point. On the one hand, the Western media and American policymakers implicitly accused the Turkish government of supporting radical groups in Syria, including ISIS. On the other, the U.S. declared the YPG (the People's Protection Units) as its tactical ally in the war against ISIS and started to generously arm the group with high-tech weapons.⁸



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The 2016 July coup attempt, which left more than 250 dead, represents the tipping point in Turkey's relations with its NATO partners.¹⁰ The Turkish government implicitly accused the U.S. of being behind the coup¹¹ and demanded the immediate extradition to Turkey of Fetullah Gülen, the main culprit of the coup, from his mansion in Pennsylvania. Washington, however, did not choose appeasement; it rather criticized the measures taken against Gülen's followers who had established themselves within Turkey's state bureaucracy, and condemned Turkey's "authoritarian slide."¹²

Although the Turkish government waited for Donald Trump's presidency with a hope for change, the

U.S. both continued its policy of not extraditing Gülen, and resumed an inflammatory court case centered on Iranian-born Turkish citizen Reza Zarrab. Zarrab is charged with being engaged in trade with Iran in a scheme to avoid U.S. sanctions, allegedly assisted by the Turkish state. The Turkish government perceived the case as a political operation aimed at punishing the top leaders of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AK Party), including President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As the court case unfolded in New York, Turkish courts, in October 2017, arrested two members of the U.S. consular staff on suspicion of links to the 2016 coup attempt. Washington immediately suspended visa services in Turkey, and the latter responded in kind. Although both countries resumed full visa services after a three-month standoff, relations further soured when Turkey started its Olive Branch Operation against the YPG in Janu-

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and U.S. President Donald Trump holds a joint press conference in Washington D.C. on November 13, 2019.

HALİL SAĞIRKAYA / AA Photo

ary 2018. Given the U.S.’ tactical alliance with the YPG, the Olive Branch Operation in Afrin, Syria, turned into a sort of proxy war between Turkey and the U.S.

While the crisis between Turkey and the U.S. has grown deeper, Ankara’s relations with Russia have dramatically improved, despite a one-year break after the downing of a Russian jet by a Turkish warplane on November 24, 2015 in the Syrian war theater. Growing economic relations between Ankara and Moscow had already risen to the level of ‘strategic partnership’ in 2010 with the signing of a pact to build Turkey’s first nuclear power plant.¹³ However, this partnership was overshadowed by diverging policies in the Syrian crisis for a long time. After the 2016 July bloody coup attempt, Turkey not only started to work together with Russia in the Syrian crisis, it also signed an accord for Moscow to supply Ankara with S-400 surface-to-air missile batteries. The last step

alarmed Turkey’s NATO partners, hitting the headline in the West as “the clearest sign of Turkey’s pivot toward Russia and away from NATO and the West.”¹⁴ In short, Turkey is challenging the U.S. position in many areas: in its prominent role in the resolution of the Syrian crisis, its purchase of high-technology weapons from a rival hierarchy, its relations with Iran, its recognition of the YPG as a terrorist movement, its contestation of the future of Fetullah Gülen, and so forth. Despite these myriad disagreements, Ankara has never questioned the value of the NATO Alliance, nor declared an intention to shift to rival hierarchical orders.

Understanding the Crisis

The following section explores why the Turkish state is challenging its great power patron, the U.S., in the international system. Accordingly, it sorts out three main clusters of expla-

Figure 1: Hypotheses about Challenging Behaviors of Subordinates¹⁵

Levels	No	Explanations
System-level	H1a	In a unipolar system, challenge is less likely
	H1b	In a multi- or bipolar system, challenge is more likely
	H1c	Challenge of subordinates close to a rival great power is less likely
State-level	H2a	The greater the improvement in material capacities, the greater the likelihood that subordinates will challenge
	H2b	If the importance of hierarchy decreases for domestic politics, challenge is more likely
	H2c	Democratic countries are less prone to posing risky challenges to the lead state
Individual-level	H3a	Leaders with a grandiose vision are more likely to challenge
	H3b	Freedom from domestic constraints increases the likelihood of a grandiose leaders’ challenge
	H3c	Grandiose leaders surrounded by like-minded advisors are more likely to challenge

nations by focusing on three different levels of analysis: system (H1), state (H2), and individual (H3) respectively. Each cluster includes three potential causes.

For almost two decades after the Cold War, the U.S. maintained a near monopoly on the use of force in regions around Turkey, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.¹⁶ This U.S.-led order continuously expanded against Russian interests until the closing years of the first decade of the 2000s. Russia countered the U.S. influence first in Georgia by using military power against pro-Western political actors there in 2008. Russia's military intervention into Georgia encapsulated its desire to proclaim its comeback on the world stage as a competitor against U.S. primacy.¹⁷ Moscow continued to follow an "assertive" and "competitive" strategy both in Ukraine and in Syria to prevent further damage to Russia's "regional leadership."¹⁸ Thanks to the U.S. retrenchment, and the weakening of U.S. credibility after President Barack Obama's "failure to reinforce America's 'red line' in Syria," Russia gained a more assertive footprint in the Middle East.¹⁹ Another sign of Russia's return as a great power balancer (alternative hierarchical center) is the recent expansion of Moscow-led economic organizations. By using its asymmetrical power capabilities, Russia put pressure over many neighboring countries to join such organizations as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union.²⁰ In addition to its military and economic influence, Moscow promoted "counter-norms"

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against U.S.-promoted norms such as democracy and human rights.²¹ Those counter-norms not only consolidate a Russia-led 'counter order,' they also attract potential subordinates.

The military engagements and increasing influence of Russia in the region around Turkey affected Ankara's strategic choices in three dramatic ways. First, unlike the unipolar system of the 1990s and the following decade (H1a), Turkey now has a potential great power balancer while the U.S. thus demands more certainty about and control over Turkey's behavior (H1b). This situation makes Ankara more opportunistic and therefore defiant toward the wishes of the U.S., particularly regarding the future of Syria. Second, the theoretical premise holds that the rise of a potential competitor will likely lead to a more favorable bargain for subordinates if they have no substitute in their region for the interests of the lead state.²² Therefore, NATO allies, "alarmed at a resurgent Russia," to use the words of former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson,²³ will likely give way to compromises, leading to the rise of Ankara's autonomy, in order to keep Turkey

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in the continued hierarchy (H1b). Third, Russia is the giant neighbor of Turkey through the Black Sea (H1c). Countries that are more threatened by a contiguous great power are more likely to subordinate themselves to an out-of-area great power.²⁴ This was the case for Turkey after the Second World War. Although today's Russia does not pose any direct threat to Turkey, its assertive record in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria has already fomented fear of uncertainties, making Ankara very cautious about a possible slide to the Russia-led order.

But what differentiates Ankara from other similarly situated countries such as Greece in utilizing the rise of a potential balancer for a better deal with the U.S.-led order? At the state level, Turkey has experienced two essential changes since the early 2000s. First, the material capacities of Turkey improved dramatically, making Ankara more independent from the U.S.-led order (H2a). If secondary states trade their sovereignty for security, improvements in their material

capacity will change the conditions under which the initial bargaining took place. Consequently, the secondary state with a better self-help capacity will either attempt to increase its autonomy within the existing hierarchical order or choose to behave free from the rules of that order. If the improvement of material capacity makes the subordinate a new great power, it will demand more autonomy without the need for a balancer.²⁵ However, if there is improvement but not enough to become a great power, the subordinate will likely challenge the hegemon only when a great power balancer is around (H1b). The latter has been the case for post-2013 Turkey, simply because dramatic increases in its material capacities resulted in 'status inconsistency,' that is, a difference between the status that is attributed by the U.S. and the status that is actually deserved.²⁶

In parallel with the rise of Russian engagement, improvement in Turkey's material capacity throughout the first decade of the 2000s clearly resulted in dissatisfaction in Ankara over its ascribed status, and laid the foundations for a more assertive foreign policy.²⁷ In the aftermath of the 2001 crisis, the Turkish economy performed well in comparison to its own historical standards, its success epitomized in the increase of GDP from \$200 billion in 2001 to \$950 billion in 2013, according to World Bank data. Although Turkey's military expenditure increased from \$7 billion in 2001 to \$19 billion in 2013, the real game changer was the rise in Turkey's investment in its indigenous

defense industry.²⁸ The U.S. arms embargo on Turkey in 1974 was a turning point. The U.S. was supplying “over 90 percent of Turkey’s military equipment” at the time,²⁹ and therefore Ankara decided to invest in an indigenous defense industry in order to act independently in protecting its interests in Cyprus, and to decrease its susceptibility to arms embargoes. Although Turkey had established the foundation of its future indigenous defense industry during the 1980s, the AK Party rule witnessed a dramatic improvement in it. The rate at which Turkey’s defense industry met Ankara’s procurement requirements rose from 24 percent in 2012 to 64 percent in 2016.³⁰ Consequently, improvements in Turkey’s military capacity made two military operations in Syria more efficacious, the first against ISIS in 2016-2017, and the second against the YPG in early 2018.

Since the late Ottoman period, the Turkish people had internalized a perception that their country is ‘behind’ the West, and that it is inevitable to embrace Western judgment.³¹ In other words, an active residue or sediment of Turkey’s centuries-long experience with the West not only functions within its present, it also continues to shape the perception of the ruling elite and ordinary people (H2b). However, the credibility of the U.S.-led hierarchy in Turkey is currently being challenged by its changing function in its domestic power setting. This is the second essential change at the state level. Until the AK Party’s coming to power in 2002, Turkey’s cordial relation with the West was more than a

simple security pact; it was rather an integral part of domestic legitimacy politics. Here Turkey’s Westernization policy, as a “strategic resource” that actors could mobilize in pursuit of diverse goals,³² played a key role in rendering the founding ideology of the state, Kemalism, to be preferred and privileged. After being crushed in 1997 by the Turkish Armed Forces, the self-appointed guardian of the state ideology, Turkey’s political Islamists transformed their anti-Western language and came to power again in 2002. In its first years in power, the AK Party rendered Turkey’s EU accession process an instrumental tool in delegitimizing the tutelage power of the state bureaucracy over elected politicians. After the AK Party knocked down the guardians of the old regime, including the Turkish Armed Forces in the early 2010s, the necessity of close relations with the West diminished, lost its appeal and function for power holders in Turkey. Not surprisingly, when U.S. officials increasingly criticized Turkey’s cooperation with non-Western powers such as Russia and pressured to demonstrate its commitment to Western partnership and prove its role as a reliable ally throughout the 2010s, the AK Party government used this criticism as an opportunity to consolidate its own power and marginalize its political rivals and the dissident social classes.³³

Although “populist majoritarianism” has increasingly dominated daily politics, Turkey still maintains the formal institutions of a procedural democracy, such as free elections, and political parties.³⁴ Although the

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (L) and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence (R) have a meeting at the Presidential Complex in the capital Ankara, Turkey on October 17, 2019.

MURAT KULA / AA Photo



AK Party capitalizes on anti-U.S. sentiments and searches for soulmates in emerging non-Western orders,³⁵ oppositional parties exist, and the Kemalist secular ideology is still a broad-based opposition movement in Turkey. It is necessary, therefore, to underline that any serious challenge to the U.S.-led order, coupled with economic and political crises, is likely to increase the audience cost for the AK Party in the upcoming elections (H2c). For example, foreign policy troubles and a stalling economy played an important role in the 2019 municipality elections, wherein the AK Party lost two of Turkey's biggest cities, Istanbul and Ankara. Furthermore, because grand strategic choices are risky and costly, the AK Party is unlikely to relinquish the benefits of the U.S.-led system and renounce the U.S.-led hierarchical order. Although ideological divergence between the

U.S.-led order and the new rulers of Turkey increases the likelihood of challenge (H2b), Turkey's overall democratic system makes the AK Party extremely cautious about putting its benefits from the U.S.-led order at risk (H2c). Turkey's economic integration with the West has generated an indispensable wealth.

For decades, two important dynamics have shaped Turkish politics. First, the Turkish Armed Forces exercised a tutelary power over elected politicians. Second, most of the governments were coalitions and short-lived, increasing advisors' influence over political leaders. Erdoğan, an exceptionally charismatic leader, not only rendered the hitherto impregnable institutions of the Kemalist regime submissive (H3b), he also built a 15-year political experience, making all of the potential advisors unfledged in state

affairs (H3c). In addition, two critical developments have made Erdoğan stand outside his own party and overcome “strong institutions” such as the parliament and the cabinet. While the domestic political turmoil after 2013 eliminated Erdoğan’s potential balancers within the party, including the former President Abdullah Gül, and former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, the 2017 constitutional reform enlarged the power of the presidency against other elected state institutions (H3b). Given the fact that the role of leaders is “most visible when international hierarchies are first emerging or when actors are transitioning from one hierarchy to another,”³⁶ Erdoğan’s image has played a significant role in Turkey’s mounting crisis with the U.S. and will likely matter a great deal in Turkey’s future within the U.S.-led order (H3a).

Bariş Kesgin, in his data-driven studies analyzing Erdoğan’s interviews and press conference responses, finds that Erdoğan has a personality that focuses “on taking advantage of opportunities,”³⁷ and that he “respects constraints.”³⁸ Another recent operational-code-based study of Erdoğan’s personality also finds that he “pursues shared interests by following flexible strategies and shuns brinkmanship as much as possible.”³⁹ Throughout the post-2013 crisis with the U.S.-led order, Erdoğan has used opportunities to advance Turkey’s autonomy within the U.S.-led hierarchical order, but has never given the final verdict, i.e. he has never initiated an exit from it. In other words, Erdoğan has followed a strategy of ‘two steps forward one

Throughout the post-2013 crisis with the U.S.-led order, Erdoğan has used opportunities to advance Turkey’s autonomy within the U.S.-led hierarchical order

step back’ through which he has been able to increase Turkey’s autonomy without risking its secure position in world politics. For example, in September 2013, Turkey made a tentative agreement to purchase a \$3.4 billion long-range missile defense system from a Chinese company and cancelled this agreement in November 2015 after harsh reactions from its NATO allies. During the S-400 crisis, Erdoğan also pushed the limits of Turkey’s NATO allies, but never questioned Turkey’s place in NATO.

Conclusion

To evaluate the above arguments, we have a mixed inference about the causes of Turkey’s crisis with the U.S.-led order. While H1b, H2a (partly), H2b, H3a (partly), H3b and H3c are causal dynamics behind Ankara’s challenging behaviors against the U.S., H1c, H2a (partly), H2c, and H3a (partly) mitigate the magnitude of those behaviors. Therefore, we are currently witnessing significant challenges by Turkey against U.S. interests together with many compromising steps. Throughout the crisis, Turkey’s

ruling leaders, for example, never questioned Turkey's place in NATO, the main military alliance of the U.S.-led order. In May 2019, Erdoğan overtly stated that Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile defense systems does not mean that Ankara is seeking "alternatives" in its relations with the West.⁴⁰ Turkey also compromised about Andrew Brunson, an American clergyman who had been in Turkish custody for two years, when the crisis in relations peaked after the Trump administration's economic sanctions against Turkey in 2018.

What can we say about the popular question: will Turkey exit from the U.S.-led order? To start with, it should be noted that while systemic variables make Turkey more opportunistic and demanding within the U.S.-led order, they also keep Turkey within this order. If Washington offers a better deal, making Turkey, say, more autonomous in dealing with the PKK and its branches in the Middle East, and solving Turkey's recognition problem,⁴¹ an out-of-area patron (the U.S.) would be preferable to a contiguous one (Russia).⁴² Although recent improvements in Turkey's material capacity motivate Ankara to behave more opportunistically, these improvements have not made Turkey powerful enough to exit from the U.S.-led order without being a subordinate in a different hierarchical order. This leaves Ankara with a tough question, namely whether Russia's engagement in the region has a future. While Russia is strong enough in military power, its economy will likely fall short in financing its asser-

tive ambitions.⁴³ Domestic variables also support the 'no future shift' argument for Turkey. In a democratic country where the opposition is on the alert, the ruling party will likely avoid taking risky and costly steps, and opt to continue to exploit opportunities without making any grand strategic choice. Moreover, the image of Erdoğan supports such an inference. ■

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41. Ankara not only fails to attain the recognition it desires from the US-led order (it is perpetually labeled as authoritarian), it has also been ostracized (the PKK, the main threat of Turkish state, and its branches have gained legitimacy in the West). As Suzuki argues, a state might withdraw from some aspect of the existing hierarchical order because it views its rules as unjust and sees very little stake (and even threat) in maintaining it. See, Suzuki, "'Delinquent Gangs' in International System Hierarchy," p. 227.

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