

# Turkey's Grand Strategy and the Great Powers

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**ABSTRACT** *How compatible is Turkey's grand strategy with the grand strategies of global great powers? This article briefly summarizes principles of Turkish grand strategy, both from a descriptive and normative point of view, and then proceeds to outline and compare the grand strategies of five great powers that are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). While there are some observable conflicts between Turkey and the French, Russian, and American proxies in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus, there are no outstanding militarized conflicts between Turkey and the British proxies. China is also positioned against Turkey in several international conflicts including Syria, and the intense persecution of Turkic Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang adds another dimension of latent Chinese-Turkish conflicts. The article provisionally concludes that the Turkish grand strategy seems to be most compatible, or least incompatible, with the British grand strategy, followed by the U.S. grand strategy, among the five permanent members of the UNSC, whereas Turkish and French and especially Russian grand strategies seem particularly incompatible.*

**Keywords:** Grand Strategy, China, France, Russia, Turkey, UK, U.S., Syria

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## Introduction: Compatible and Incompatible Visions of Grand Strategy

Scholarly debates on Turkey's grand strategy have finally begun. A special issue on Turkey's grand strategy published by the academic periodical of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2020, which includes five different grand strategic proposals,<sup>1</sup> followed by other academic articles and op-eds discussing different aspects of Turkey's grand strategy from descriptive and normative vantage points, and the TRT World Forum 2021 devoted to the theme of "Power and Paradox: Understanding Grand Strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,"<sup>2</sup> are indicative of the rapidly rising interest on this subject. Despite this recent scholarly efflorescence, comparative analyses of grand strategies that include Turkey are still very rare. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, there is not a single study of the compatibility of Turkish grand strategy and the grand strategies of multiple great powers. This article attempts to address this lacuna by reviewing the grand strategies of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) with an eye to gauging their degree of compatibility or incompatibility with Turkey's grand strategic priorities.

Such an endeavor might be criticized as being unfeasible due to the uncertainty and the changing nature of the grand strategies of both Turkey and the great powers, since comparing two grand strategies that are both subject to change and uncertainty is unlikely to generate conclusions that are reliable in the long-term. This is a valid criticism since the grand strategies that will be compared are themselves ever-changing, and furthermore, different political actors in each country may have (and often do have) somewhat different views on their country's grand strategy. Despite these uncertainties and domestic disagreements over grand strategy in almost every country including Turkey, there is sufficient evidence from the foreign policy behaviors of the five great powers that make up the UNSC, to sketch the preliminary outlines of their grand strategies 30 years after the end of the Cold War. Likewise, there are sufficient descriptive and normative sketches of Turkey's grand strategy that allow us to conduct a preliminary assessment of its compatibility with the grand strategies of the great powers.

It must be emphasized from the outset, nonetheless, that the American, British, French, Russian, and Turkish grand strategies are all contested with different viewpoints found among both practitioners and scholars, and many domestic actors often disagree with aspects of their countries' grand strategies based on deep partisan, ideological, and factional differences. This is not only limited to the six countries discussed in this article either. For example, among many member states of the EU and NATO, including Bulgaria, Greece, Germany, and Italy, there are significant political parties and leaders who advocate closer geopolitical ties with Russia, and withdrawing from and even dismantling NATO, and yet these countries continue to be part of the North

Atlantic Alliance and participate in many of its missions despite such vociferous domestic opposition.<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, it is possible to suggest that the scholarship on grand strategy combines descriptive and normative dimensions since different theoretical assumptions about international politics and different conceptualizations of countries' material 'hard' and nonmaterial 'soft' power capabilities are likely to generate different grand strategic assessments and recommendations. This article is similar to the scholarship on grand strategy in that it combines both descriptive and normative elements in providing both analyses and prescriptions on Turkey's grand strategy.

## **No immediate neighbor of Turkey, with the partial exception of Iran, can pose an existential threat to Turkey**

### **Turkish Grand Strategy**

The primary imperative of Turkey's grand strategy should be to keep great powers' militaries out of its immediate neighbors and to establish a 'neighborly core' in which no neighbor poses a significant military threat.<sup>4</sup> This is not the official grand strategy of Turkey since Turkey does not have an official grand strategy, but rather the current author's prescriptive (normative) formulation of what Turkey's grand strategy should be, based on Turkey's foreign and security policies since the end of the Cold War. In other words, it is a grand strategic proposal based on broadly realist assumptions, but it is also based on how Turkish political and security elites reacted to the developments in Turkey's geopolitical environment in the three decades since the end of the Cold War, if not much earlier.

This primary imperative is based on an assessment of Turkey's neighbors' latent and actual power capabilities from a neorealist point of view. Such an assessment reveals that Turkey's military and economic power is unrivaled among its immediate neighbors with the partial exception of Iran.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, no immediate neighbor of Turkey, with the partial exception of Iran, can pose an existential threat to Turkey. However, if a great power's military occupies and is stationed in one of Turkey's neighbors, then the presence of such a great power's occupation forces in Turkey's immediate neighborhood does pose a potential threat to Turkey's national security. The fact that four of Turkey's eight immediate neighbors have been occupied in part or entirety by one or more of the five great powers that make up the UNSC demonstrates that such a dire prospect is not a nightmarish conspiracy theory but rather the geopolitical reality that Turkey has been facing since the end of the Cold War. From the foregoing, I concluded that 'Turkey's position has to be that of the 'third power' buttressing the independence and territorial integrity of the countries in its

## All the other great powers' grand strategies, as well as that of Turkey, will have to take into account the U.S. grand strategy

by Russian (Georgia, Syria, and through its Armenian proxies, Azerbaijan), American (Iraq and Syria), British (Iraq), and French (Syria) military forces. Only after military interventions by these great powers and their proxies occurred, despite Turkey's objections and to the detriment of Turkey's vital interests, did Turkey also conduct (in Iraq and Syria) or support (in Azerbaijan) limited military interventions to secure its borders or to restore the *status quo ante*. In contrast, the neighbors of Turkey's immediate neighbors (Turkey's 'periphery') include some middle and great powers that approach or surpass Turkey's military and economic capacity, most importantly Russia, but also Israel and Italy in their military and economic power (including nuclear energy), and which may pose a military threat to Turkey if they approach Turkey's borders. Therefore, the Turkish grand strategy should also aim to keep these potentially threatening countries in its periphery away from Turkey's immediate borders. In short, both Turkey's foreign policy behavior and an assessment of military and economic capabilities in Turkey's immediate neighborhood support the proposition that keeping great powers' militaries out of its immediate neighborhood is the primary imperative of Turkish grand strategy. To achieve this goal, not only should Turkey strive to keep the great powers' (e.g., Russia and the U.S.) militaries out of its immediate neighbors, but it should also balance against Iran, and keep potentially threatening powers in its 'periphery' such as Russia, Israel, and Italy sufficiently far away from its immediate borders.

How compatible are Turkey's grand strategic priorities with the grand strategies of the great powers in the international system? Relatedly, which great power, if any, has interests and priorities that are broadly compatible with such a Turkish grand strategy? Which great power is the most likely ally and which great power is the least likely ally (or most likely adversary) for Turkey's grand strategy? In other words, which great power is more likely not to militarily intervene and occupy Turkey's immediate neighbors to the detriment of Turkey's vital national interests, and might even ally with Turkey to counter Iranian and Russian expansion among Turkey's immediate neighbors? Along these lines, which great power might be supportive of Turkey's efforts in critical areas of conflict such as Syria, the South Caucasus, and Libya? One must attempt to sketch the broad outlines of the five great powers' grand strategies to gauge their compatibility or incompatibility with Turkey's grand strategic priorities as such, which I attempt to do in the next five sections.

neighborhood that are being partitioned and destroyed in proxy wars.<sup>6</sup>

Turkey's attitude toward the occupation of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iraq, and Syria has been consistent with this principle in the sense that Turkey vociferously objected to the interventions in these countries

## U.S. Grand Strategy and Turkey's Priorities

Any discussion of comparative grand strategy must begin with a discussion of U.S. grand strategy both because the scholarship on grand strategy, in general, is asymmetrically focused on and most refined in the discussion of the U.S. case, and also because of the U.S. preponderance in both economic and military power. Most strikingly, U.S. defense spending is still three times more than that of China, its nearest competitor, and U.S. defense spending is also much more than the total defense spending of the other four members of the UNSC (China, France, Russia, and the UK) combined.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, all the other great powers' grand strategies, as well as that of Turkey, will have to take into account the U.S. grand strategy. More specifically, to what extent does U.S. grand strategy support or threaten (or is neutral) vis-à-vis changes in the relative power position of other great and middle powers such as France, Iran, Israel, and Turkey?

What is the grand strategy of the U.S. thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, its primary peer competitor during the Cold War? As in almost any country examined in this article and beyond, there have also been “competing visions for U.S. grand strategy.”<sup>8</sup> The grand strategic options that have been offered and discussed in scholarly debates for the U.S. include neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security, and primacy.<sup>9</sup> The debate understandably focused on the structure of the international system, and primarily, on whether and how unipolarity may be preserved.<sup>10</sup> Realists did not expect unipolarity to last indefinitely, but they thought that skillful foreign and security policies might prolong the unipolar moment than would the alternatives.<sup>11</sup> In a notable contribution, Nuno Monteiro argued that “in a nuclear world, unipolarity has the potential to be durable,” but “that a unipolar world is not peaceful,” and that “the United States’ interests are best served by a grand strategy of defensive accommodation, which combines a military strategy aimed at maintaining the international status quo –what [he calls] defensive dominance– with an economic strategy that makes room for accommodating the interests of rising major powers.”<sup>12</sup> Such defensive accommodation or defensive dominance falls somewhere between selective engagement and primacy.

Which powers are the primary challengers to the U.S.-led international status quo as such? Typically, the answer to this question would include the great power that is the closest and the most likely peer competitor of the U.S., which would be China both in terms of economic and military power at present, at least from a realist point of view. However, if one distinguishes between the balance of power and balance of threat approaches within realism, it is theoretically possible that the second most powerful state in the international system may not necessarily be the most threatening one for the unipolar power. Re-

President of Turkey Erdoğan attended the 74<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly Meeting and spoke on the competing vision of Turkey's alliances under the slogan, "The World Is Bigger than Five," in New York, on September 24, 2019.

ERÇİN TOP / AA



alists think that the U.S. should focus on maintaining its hegemony in North America (or more broadly in the Americas) and preventing the emergence of another regional hegemon elsewhere in the world.<sup>13</sup> However, not every region is equally significant for amassing military and economic power. Specifically, East Asia and Europe are the only regions of the world where the cumulative economic and military power of the regional states are comparable to that of the U.S.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars also add the Middle East, or more specifically the Gulf as the third region of significance, not because it hosts any globally significant military or economic powers but because it is (or at least used to be, prior to fracking and other developments in the energy sector) the source of much of the world's oil resources. From a realist point of view, the U.S. is expected to forestall the hegemonic attempts of any power that seeks to dominate East Asia, Europe, and arguably also the Middle East.

The key question for the U.S., then, is whether there is any power capable of dominating East Asia, Europe, and/or the Middle East at present or in the foreseeable future. The answer, in my view, is rather straightforward if one focuses on military, economic, and demographic sources of power. China is unrivaled in terms of its economic, demographic, and military power in East Asia. Chinese military spending is five times that of the Japanese and South Korean defense spending, the two countries that come closest to China in East Asia.<sup>15</sup> In terms of purchasing power parity, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is also almost five times that of Japan, its closest competitor in East Asia.<sup>16</sup> Finally, in terms of demographic power, the Chinese population is roughly 11

times that of the Japanese population, which is the second-most populous nation in East Asia.<sup>17</sup> In short, China has the economic, demographic, and military capability to dominate East Asia.

When we turn to Europe, Russia appears as the leading military power in terms of defense spending,<sup>18</sup> but especially if one considers its nuclear

arsenal and other components of military strength, Russia appears as the leading military power by a long margin. According to a popular index of military power, Russia is ranked second globally in terms of military power, whereas the other two European states in the top ten are France and the United Kingdom, which are ranked 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, respectively.<sup>19</sup> Russia also has the largest population in Europe by a large margin, and Germany, and Turkey trail behind with almost half of Russia's population. On the other hand, Russia's economy is second to Germany's in terms of purchasing power parity, but in terms of GDP in current prices, Russia only ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in Europe after Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy.<sup>20</sup> In short, Russia combines the strongest military and the largest population in Europe with one of the top economies, and this combination makes Russia the most likely hegemon in Europe but the distribution of power in Europe is not as asymmetric as one observes in East Asia, since France, Germany, Italy, and the UK have economies that are comparable if not even larger than Russia's, combined with formidable militaries that rank in the top 15, and populations that are between two-fifths to one-half that of Russia's. Thus, a combination of three or all four of these European powers should be able to successfully balance against Russia. However, there are influential political parties or factions in France in particular, but also in Germany and Italy, which oppose NATO or any other anti-Russian alliance, and instead favor a rapprochement if not an outright alliance with Russia.<sup>21</sup>

There is no single country in the Middle East that has a clear superiority in the combination of military, economic, and demographic indicators necessary to become an aspiring regional hegemon. In terms of GDP at current prices, Iran has the largest economy followed by Saudi Arabia in second place, and Turkey in third place. In terms of GDP in power purchasing power parity, Turkey has the largest economy followed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran. In terms of defense expenditure, Saudi Arabia leads all the countries in the region by a large margin followed by Israel, and Turkey in second and third place, respectively. In terms of demographic power, Egypt leads by a large margin with a population of over 100 million people, followed by Iran (85 million) and Tur-

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## The most immediate theater and the challenging testing ground for the compatibility of the grand strategies of Turkey and the U.S. is Syria

the equivalent of China or even Russia, namely, a state that is most likely to be the regional hegemon. Moreover, the five notable regional powers mentioned above are not even aligned in a way that would generate a hegemonic ‘bloc’ but rather split into three groups of mutual hostility: Turkey and Iran have been in a proxy war over Syria (among other conflicts), whereas Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia oppose both Iran and Turkey, and have been engaged in proxy wars over Libya and Yemen, in addition to Syria. Moreover, even the relatively non-adversarial relations between Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are not sufficiently amicable to be identified as an ‘alliance.’ If any one of these five regional powers attempted to become a regional hegemon, any combination of two of the other four powers would likely be sufficient to successfully counter and forestall such an attempt.

Given the distribution of power within East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, it is very puzzling that the U.S. militarily intervened, not just once but at least four times in three different Middle Eastern countries (Iraq in 1991 and 2003; Afghanistan in 2001; Syria in 2015), the region that is least likely to generate a hegemon. These interventions in the Middle East, which were mostly “unnecessary wars,”<sup>23</sup> drained U.S. resources that could have been otherwise used for containing China and Russia, or could have been spent on domestic programs in the U.S. This grand strategic diversion and squandering of U.S. power in Iraq, in particular, has been attributed to the baneful influence of the Israel lobby, made up of powerful interest groups including Christian Zionists, which successfully convinced the U.S. foreign policymakers that American and Israeli interests in the Middle East are almost identical.<sup>24</sup> In retrospect, the U.S. military interventions in the Middle East appear as a devastating diversion that distracted the U.S. from focusing on its rising peer competitor, China, instead of squandering hundreds of billions of dollars along with its prestige in the Muslim world due to its conduct in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>25</sup>

30 years after the end of the Cold War, and after 20 years of diversionary wars in the Middle East since 2001, the U.S. finally seems to be on track to focus on containing China as the centerpiece of its new grand strategy. This shift in U.S. grand strategy also broadly coincides with the failure of the liberal international order, and the transition from a unipolar to multipolar

key (84 million). In terms of nuclear power, Israel is clearly the only nuclear military power in the Middle East. Finally, according to the global firepower index, Turkey ranks 11<sup>th</sup> in the world followed by Egypt 13<sup>th</sup>, Iran 14<sup>th</sup>, Saudi Arabia 17<sup>th</sup>, and Israel 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the Middle East does not have

world order, both of which may have occurred no later than 2016.<sup>26</sup> Arguably Barack Obama's pivot to Asia was already an early attempt at containing China, but it failed disastrously while also provoking China to become more aggressive and to continue to "close the gap in military capabilities with the U.S."<sup>27</sup> It was under Donald Trump, however, that the containment of China became the top priority for the U.S., and the U.S.-Chinese relations became more adversarial than they have been in many decades. The current President Joe Biden may have surprised some and disappointed others when he continued and furthered the policies seeking to contain China, most obviously with the AUKUS security pact between Australia, the UK, and the U.S., which China condemned as "extremely irresponsible,"<sup>28</sup> and which also provoked protests from France.<sup>29</sup> In the November/December 2021 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, which may be indicative of the new orientation in the U.S. foreign policy establishment, major scholars of grand strategy and international relations voiced their opinion that the rivalry between the U.S. and China is inevitable,<sup>30</sup> and that a new Cold War between these two great powers has begun,<sup>31</sup> which is more likely to turn into a military conflict than the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup>

How compatible is Turkey's grand strategy with the new U.S. grand strategy aiming to prevent China from becoming the regional hegemon in East Asia? A grand strategy of defensive accommodation or defensive dominance is eminently compatible with the interests of Turkey as a rising middle power, as long as the U.S. chooses to 'accommodate' Turkish interests, rather than seeking to contain and antagonize Turkey. Contradicting a grand strategy of defensive accommodation of rising middle powers, however, some U.S. military strategists such as Michael Robert Hickok<sup>33</sup> and Edward Erickson<sup>34</sup> depicted Turkey as a 'rising hegemon' in the Middle East as early as 2000 if not even earlier. If Turkey is a rising regional hegemon, then it can be defined as a danger to the U.S. interests that needs to be 'contained' just as China in East Asia or Russia in Europe. However, as I summarized above, Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia each have sources of economic, military, and/or demographic power that are comparable or even superior to Turkey's, and therefore the argument that Turkey is the rising regional hegemon of the Middle East is misguided in so far as it contradicts the balance of power on the ground. It should be emphasized that this miscalculation and the resulting fear of Turkey as a regional hegemon among some U.S. policymakers predates the AK Party governments (Hickok published 'Hegemon Rising' in 2000), and thus, demonstrates that the ongoing crises of Turkish-U.S. relations are not primarily about a specific leader or party such as Erdoğan and the AK Party, but about deeper misconceptions and miscalculations that go back to the 1990s. The coup attempt in July 2016 and its aftermath represented a significant negative turning point for U.S.-Turkish relations as the U.S. appeared to be almost hedging between the coup plotters and the democratically elected government in Turkey.<sup>35</sup> Turkey

is mostly unrivaled among its immediate neighbors only, but if we consider the Middle East as a regional system, Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, have economic, demographic, and military powers that are comparable to Turkey. It is almost impossible for Turkey to exert hegemonic control over the 'Arab heartland' or the sea routes connecting the oil-rich Arab states to the outside world through Oman, Yemen, or the Suez Canal in Egypt. However, it can contain the Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini bloc's influence through Turkish military presence in Qatar and Somalia, in addition to prospective positions in Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan, among others.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Turkish and U.S. grand strategies are eminently compatible if the U.S. accommodates a rising Turkey, which inhabits a region with other powerful regional actors such as Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

Apart from the question of China, a very important secondary question is whether the U.S. will also seek to restrain and roll back Russian expansion and influence in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Regardless of whether the goal is to contain only China, or also Russia, such a new U.S. grand strategy based on containment can be considered as a shift from 'primacy' and 'cooperative security' toward 'selective engagement.' Since resources are scarce, at least in relative terms, such a Sinocentric shift will almost certainly entail de-prioritization and withdrawal from the Middle East and possibly also from Eastern Europe and even Western Europe, once again depending on whether containing Russia is also a priority. In the latter scenario, Turkish grand strategy is almost entirely compatible with U.S. grand strategy since Turkey is already actively seeking to limit and even roll back Russian proxies and influence in Syria (i.e., Assad Administration in Southwestern Syria), in Libya (i.e., Haftar's forces in Eastern Libya), Caucasus (i.e., Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh), and in Ukraine (i.e., Russian occupation of Crimea and Russian-supported insurgency in Donbas). Thus, withdrawal of U.S. military from these regions deemed tertiary for U.S. interests, and instead, U.S. support for Turkey in regional disputes to counter and limit Russian and Iranian influence, could work and points to inherent compatibility between the new U.S. grand strategy of withdrawal and the Turkish grand strategy of having a neighborhood free of great powers' militaries.

The most immediate theater and the challenging testing ground for the compatibility of the grand strategies of Turkey and the U.S. is Syria. If the U.S. forces withdraw from Northeastern Syria in agreement with and in support of Turkish-supported indigenous Syrian forces (Free Syrian Army/Syrian National Army), then this would satisfy the Turkish grand strategic imperative of not having the military forces of any great powers stationed in its immediate neighbors. If, however, the U.S. military turns over northeast Syria to the Russian-back Assad regime as part of its withdrawal, then a very hostile great power (Russia) and its local proxy would be lodged right across from Tur-

key's borders. Moreover, if the U.S. withdraws while leaving YPG-PYD intact under Russian-Assad protection in Northern Syria, this will strengthen the impression that the U.S. is seeking to 'contain' Turkey, which would only make sense if the U.S. perceived Turkey as a hostile adversary. Thus, the way in which the U.S. withdraws from Syria will likely be the litmus test of the compatibility of Turkish and U.S. grand strategic priorities.

In partial conclusion, Turkish and U.S. priorities in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe broadly overlap in their common interest to contain and push back the expansion and consolidation of Iranian and Russian influence, and to prevent either one from becoming a regional hegemon. Turkish grand strategy is also compatible with a U.S. grand strategy in containing China since Turkey is the home to the largest Uyghur diaspora in the world, a Turkic Muslim minority that is severely repressed by the Communist regime in China. The primary economic and strategic partners of China in the Middle East and Eurasia, such as Iran and Russia, and China's economic partners such as the United Arab Emirates, are also adversaries of Turkey, and in that sense, too, Turkish priorities are not incompatible but rather fundamentally compatible with containing and rolling back Chinese expansion.



**Russia wants to maintain its global market share as the second-largest arms exporter after the U.S.**

## **Russian Grand Strategy and Turkey's Priorities**

Post-Soviet Russian foreign policy was in flux during the early 1990s. It should be noted, however, that there was a significant change in Russian foreign policy already in the mid-1990s. Andre Kozyrev, who was the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation between 1992 and 1996, represented a Euro-Atlanticist and broadly western orientation. However, Kozyrev's approach was criticized as a capitulation to the West, and by 1996, Kozyrev was replaced by Yevgeny Primakov, who represented a more Eurasianist and anti-western foreign policy orientation. Considered as one of the most likely successors of Boris Yeltsin, Primakov was outmaneuvered by the handpicked successor of Yeltsin, at the time a relatively unknown Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) –and formerly KGB– operative named Vladimir Putin, who was first appointed by Yeltsin as the Prime Minister, and with Yeltsin's unexpected resignation on December 31, 1999, became the acting President of Russia. Russian foreign policy under Putin represented more of continuity with Primakov's as Russia continued a policy of balancing against the U.S. and the western alliance (i.e., NATO) in general, rather than seeking membership in, or acting together with, the western alliance.



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other leaders pose for a family photograph within the G20 Leaders' Summit in Rome, Italy on October 30, 2021.

Turkish Presidency / MURAT ÇETİNMUHURDAR / AA

There are several observable patterns of Russian foreign policy since the late 1990s that provide us with sufficient reference points to discern the main contours of Russian grand strategy. First, Russia is against the expansion of NATO, which is seen as an anti-Russian organization.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the admission of several post-Communist Eastern European and especially post-Soviet Baltic states into NATO caused major problems between Russia and the western alliance. Second, Russia is against the U.S. and NATO placing missiles in Eastern European countries. More specifically, the U.S. had a plan for a 'missile shield' in Eastern Europe, originally with interceptors in Poland, and radars in the Czech Republic, but the missile defense ground site was eventually built in Romania.<sup>38</sup> Third, Russia seeks to preserve its influence over all the post-Soviet states that are sometimes referred to as the 'Near Abroad' in Russia. While Baltic states are probably permanently 'lost' for Russia as they joined EU and NATO, Russia maintains significant influence over the remaining post-Soviet states. Russia supports breakaway 'republics' in Azerbaijan (Nagorno Karabakh), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Moldova (Transnistria), and Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk). These breakaway republics are used as leverage and threat by Moscow to coerce the central governments to follow a more pro-Russian policy.

Fourth, Russia seeks to maintain its status as the primary provider of energy to Europe as well as being the primary transit route for Central Asian energy going to Europe. It is well known that Russia uses natural gas to punish and reward the countries that it considers within its sphere of influence such as Be-

## **The Russian military occupation of Turkey's neighbors is a fundamental and almost insurmountable obstacle to the formation of any kind of Russian-Turkish axis**

larus and Ukraine. For a very long time, Russia opposed the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline because it would create an alternative route for transferring Azerbaijani and potentially all Caspian oil to Turkish and European markets that bypassed Russia.

Fifth, Russia wants to maintain its global market share as the second-largest arms exporter after the U.S. After oil and gas, arms sales constitute the most important category of Russian exports. The top customers of Russian weapons are China and India, but many others including NATO members such as Greece and Turkey also purchase Russian arms. Sixth, Russia opposes a unilateral world order. Putin's speech in Munich in 2007, which was echoed by President Medvedev's speech in Berlin in 2008, underlined this point more than a decade ago. Russia opposed the Iraq War in 2003, which was probably the most emblematic and devastating symptom of U.S. unilateralism ran amok, and in opposing the Iraq War, Russia found common ground with and support from a wide array of NATO members such as France, Germany, and Turkey. Together with China and a few Central Asian states, Russia established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a counterweight to U.S.-led security alliances. Seventh, and although relatively underemphasized but nonetheless very important, Russia opposes any effort, actor, and country that seeks to promote and restore the independence of Chechnya. For example, Chechen dissidents in exile were murdered in Berlin,<sup>39</sup> Dubai,<sup>40</sup> İstanbul,<sup>41</sup> Sweden,<sup>42</sup> and Vienna.<sup>43</sup> Eighth, Russia opposed both the so-called 'Color Revolutions' and the Arab revolutions, also known as the 'Arab Spring,' and beyond simply opposing these revolutions, Russia actively and militarily intervened in many instances to suppress and defeat these revolutionary uprisings.

How compatible is Turkey's grand strategy with Russia's grand strategy? Russia is the great power that has its military forces in three of Turkey's immediate neighbors, namely, in Syria, Georgia, and the Nagorno Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Moreover, as a fourth such case of significance, one might consider the heavily militarized Crimea under Russian occupation as a naval neighbor of Turkey as well. Not only that there are Russian military forces in these four countries, but in all four cases the Russian military is fighting against actors that Turkey sees as the legitimate authorities in these territories: Governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine, as well as the provisional Syrian government in North Syria. Thus, Russian military presence conflicts with the

key imperative of Turkish grand strategy: Not to have any of the great powers' militaries occupying or stationed in Turkey's immediate neighbors. At a minimum, the withdrawal of Russian forces from Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Syria, and preferably also from Ukraine, would be the necessary first step for Turkish and Russian grand strategies to be compatible, which seems unlikely in the near future. These fundamental incompatibilities do not prevent Russia and Turkey from pursuing limited cooperation<sup>44</sup> in different fields, but as I previously argued on these pages, the Russian military occupation of Turkey's neighbors is a fundamental and almost insurmountable obstacle to the formation of any kind of "Russian-Turkish axis."<sup>45</sup>

## French Grand Strategy and Turkey's Priorities

French grand strategy went through an important transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, indicated most symbolically by France's return to the NATO military command structure under President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009,<sup>46</sup> which a leading analyst of French grand strategy interpreted as a shift from a grand strategy of 'grandeur' that prevailed since Charles de Gaulle to a grand strategy of 'liberal engagement.'<sup>47</sup> President Charles de Gaulle pulled France out of NATO's military command 43 years before, in 1966, "and evicted U.S. military bases from French soil."<sup>48</sup> Gaullist grand strategy of 'grandeur' was maintained across the deep ideological and partisan divide in French politics, such that socialist French president François Mitterrand oversaw the meteoric rise in French nuclear weapons from 80 in 1983 to 592 in 1994, despite campaigning against nuclear weapons in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>49</sup> The shared goal to which Mitterrand also subscribed was to keep France geopolitically independent and 'third military power' in the world.<sup>50</sup> The turn to 'liberal engagement' through NATO has not been fully embraced across the political spectrum and has been criticized by high profile political figures right and left,<sup>51</sup> and supporters of this new grand strategy are also called French neoconservatives or Occidentalists.<sup>52</sup> Bearing in mind these deep disagreements over French grand strategy between Gaullist 'grandeur' and the more recent neoconservative-Occidentalist 'liberal engagement,' it is still possible to examine the compatibility of French grand strategy with Turkish priorities.

How compatible is Turkey's grand strategy with France's grand strategy? France, similar to the U.S., maintains a small number of troops, about 200, in Northern Syria in support of the PYD-YPG, which violates the first principle of Turkish grand strategy regarding the inadmissibility of great powers' military intervention in and occupation of Turkey's immediate neighbors.<sup>53</sup> Making matters worse, these French troops remain in Northeast Syria in support of the PYD-YPG, the Syrian branch of a terrorist organization, PKK, which killed thousands of civilians and security personnel in Turkey. Furthermore,

these French troops remained amidst U.S. withdrawal,<sup>54</sup> which is part of the French effort to gain a “foothold in northeast Syria.”<sup>55</sup> The incompatibility of French and Turkish priorities is not limited to Syria either. In Libya, France has been the main and unabashed supporter of Khalifa Haftar, who waged a rebellion against Libya’s UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, and committed war crimes, and caused significant civilian casualties. Third, France has been vocal in its support of the Russian-backed occupation of Azerbaijan’s Nagorno Karabakh. Thus, France has been de facto allied with Russia both in the Armenian-Azerbaijani and Libyan conflicts, while also abetting the Russian-Iranian attacks on the Turkish-supported provisional Syrian government in northwest Syria through French support for the YPG-PYD.

## **French troops remain in Northeast Syria in support of the PYD-YPG, the Syrian branch of a terrorist organization, PKK, which killed thousands of civilians and security personnel in Turkey**

Fourth, the French government’s particularly cozy relationship with the Egyptian military dictatorship and the United Arab Emirates, the latter being implicated in financing the failed military coup in Turkey in July 2016, as well as continuing to fund the ‘Gülenist’ coup plotters in exile, are all interpreted as France’s attacks against Muslim-majority democracies whether in Turkey, Egypt, or elsewhere. Fifth and relatedly, French conflicts with Algeria, an ally of Turkey growing in its significance, as well as the draconian and repressive measures against the French Muslim minority, which is the largest Muslim minority in the western world, also cause considerable stress in Turkish-French relations. On the other hand, as late as in François Hollande’s presidency, France and Turkey adopted a remarkably similar anti-authoritarian discourse vis-à-vis Syria and were both seemingly committed to the removal of the Assad regime, through a direct military intervention if necessary. For example, it was revealed that President Hollande was prevented by the U.S. President Obama from initiating an almost imminent military intervention against the Assad regime in the wake of the infamous chemical weapons attack during the summer of 2013.<sup>56</sup> In other words, while France under President Hollande appeared committed to the removal of the Assad regime, and was committed to striking Assad’s forces in August 2013, France under Macron was actively supporting an entity that collaborates with (to say the least) the Assad regime by 2019. According to the thought-provoking claim of late professor Beril Dedeoğlu, who also briefly served as Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2015, ISIS deliberately targeted France and Turkey, the two countries that were most openly committed to the removal of the Assad regime.<sup>57</sup> Thus, as late as in 2013-2015, there was a possibility of a French-Turkish joint military intervention to remove the Assad regime in Syria, demonstrating significant compat-

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as well as the Armenian occupation of Nagorno Karabakh, the contradictions between the grand strategic objectives of France and Turkey, do not appear as insurmountable as in the case of Russia and Turkey.

ibility of French-Turkish strategic objectives, at least under President Hollande, and before the devastating ISIS attacks forced both French and Turkish governments to focus on ISIS terrorism rather than the removal of the Assad regime. In partial conclusion, despite the presence of a few hundred French troops in northeast Syria, and the diplomatic and military support that France extends to Khalifa Haftar in Libya,

### British Grand Strategy and Turkey’s Priorities

Britain’s grand strategy went through major transformations, which were mostly necessitated, as in the case of France, by continental and global changes in the distribution of power that put Britain in an increasingly weaker position. Perhaps most importantly, British policymakers “moved from a situation where they could shape the strategic environment to one where they have had to adapt to it, working more closely with coalitions and allies to preserve Britain’s influence.”<sup>58</sup> Lessons of history weigh heavily on British grand strategic thinking. “Liddell Hart felt Britain, despite military victories in 1918 and 1945, had failed in its grand strategy; its position in 1919, and in 1950, was far weaker than it had been in 1900.”<sup>59</sup> In fact, “after 1945, Britain was evidently dependent on the U.S. and it was ‘impossible for Britain to reshape the post-war world, evident in the severe blow it suffered in the Suez crisis of 1956.’<sup>60</sup> The ‘trauma’ of the Suez crisis ran deep, as Britain was forced to withdraw from the Suez despite the military victory, as the U.S. was ‘angered,’ French allies of Britain were ‘appalled,’ and the “Commonwealth, with the exception of Australia, condemned British actions.”<sup>61</sup> Losing the grand strategic game despite military victories, then, maybe a recurrent theme that consolidated the more cautious approach of the British policymakers at present. Another similar lesson of history involved the costs of empire since Britain was forced to decolonize its vast empire, the largest in history, in great part due to the increasing costs of maintaining it.

Britain always had a conditional and tenuous relationship with the European Community (later EU), which were officially and institutionally severed with the Brexit in 2016. Instead, Britain’s special relationship with the U.S., and its

allies in the Commonwealth such as Australia, provide a different and much more global horizon for British grand strategy. Such a diverse network based in great part on bilateral ties also allows for greater pragmatism and a more transactional approach to achieve limited objectives rather than joining cumbersome alliances, which were “not a favored option for British governments until the Cold War, because of concerns about a loss of freedom of action.”<sup>62</sup> For example, the British decision to join forces with the U.S. and Australia to establish AUKUS security pact to contain China, which infuriated not only China but also France, may have been more difficult to implement and justify if the UK had remained in the EU.

How compatible is Turkey's grand strategy with the United Kingdom's grand strategy? The UK withdrew its troops from Iraq already in 2009, and although UK troops contributed to the multinational force fighting ISIS in Syria, there are no British troops deployed on a permanent basis in Syria. Thus, unlike Russia, France, and the U.S., Britain does not have semi-permanent military forces occupying Turkey's immediate neighbors. Furthermore, among the UNSC member states, the UK appears to be the most sympathetic and supportive of the Syrian opposition, which is primarily backed by Turkey. Moreover, the UK has been in favor of the removal of the Assad regime. Also unusual among the UNSC member states, the UK has been particularly wary of the YPG-PYD, and there have been cases where British citizens who fought alongside YPG-PYD were prosecuted upon their return to the United Kingdom,<sup>63</sup> although the charges were dropped<sup>64</sup> and they were not found guilty.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, Brexit has also been interpreted as opening new avenues of bilateral cooperation between Britain and Turkey.<sup>66</sup> As Jonathan Fenton-Harvey argued, “[c]ompared to other powerful western states, the UK is clearly the closest and most receptive ally of Turkey, which creates the framework for them to establish an even stronger alliance.”<sup>67</sup> An important motivation for Turkish-UK cooperation, both historically and at present, is to contain Russian expansion in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe.

## Chinese Grand Strategy and Turkey's Priorities

Wang Jisi, a leading Chinese scholar of grand strategy draws attention to the “combination of the internal uprising and external invasion” as a recurrent historical pattern and persistent fear of the Chinese leadership at present.<sup>68</sup> What are such major ‘internal’ threats to Chinese interests that are supported by foreign powers? Jisi mentions three that are particularly prominent and also well-known in the international arena: supporting Taiwan's separation, sympathy for the [Tibetan leader] Dalai Lama and Uyghur separatists.<sup>69</sup> It bears emphasis that “the issue of Taiwan, which Beijing considers to be an integral part of China's territory is the only ‘foreign policy issue’ officially identified ‘as

one of the country's core interests."<sup>70</sup> Chinese hardliners "argue[d] that China's current approach to foreign relations is far too soft; Mao's tit-for-tat manner is touted as a better model" and "China should try to find strategic allies among countries that seem defiant toward the West, such as Iran, North Korea, and Russia."<sup>71</sup> Writing in 2011, Wang Jisi summed up the two major shortcomings of this hardliner view: "Few countries, if any, would want to join China in an anti-U.S. alliance. And it would seriously hold back China's economic development to antagonize the country's largest trading [partner]."<sup>72</sup> Instead, "an alternative school of thought favors Deng's teaching of *tao Guang yang hui*, or keeping a low profile in international affairs."<sup>73</sup>

In the ten years since Jisi's seminal article on Chinese grand strategy was published, however, China abandoned its "low profile in international affairs" and was arguably forced to assume a much more assertive and prominent role that appears aggressive to many countries in its immediate neighborhood and around the world. The change of leadership from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping may also be a symptom, or a partial cause, of this transformation. Domestically, the shocking and intensifying repression of the Turkic Muslim Uyghur minority, who constitute the largest ethnoreligious group that has been subjected to mass internment since European Jews under the Nazi regime, may be considered as an indicator of the hardliner's ascendancy.<sup>74</sup> In foreign policy, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) made headlines and was almost universally perceived as China's political-economic attempt to envelop and shape the world in accordance with its global ambitions. As an American scholar analyzing China under Xi Jinping maintained, "recent leadership and policy statements and their explicit linkage to historical patterns suggest that China may well have the most forthright grand strategy of any major power today."<sup>75</sup> Among other goals, Xi Jinping declared that "China's complete reunification" by "resolving the Taiwan question" will be achieved by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.<sup>76</sup> While for China, 'the fourteen countries contiguous to China on land' are 'irreplaceably important' and constitute the 'inside ring' of highest priority for national security, the launching of BRI was preceded by the grand strategist Wang Jisi's proposal of a "March West... into Eurasia."<sup>77</sup> These developments suggest that not only Central Asia but also West Asia may be China's next major target in expanding its influence.

How compatible is Turkey's grand strategy with China's grand strategy? It is somewhat more difficult to determine the compatibility of Chinese grand strategy with Turkish priorities because China's geopolitical and military engagements and preferences in Turkey's immediate neighborhood may not be readily apparent at first. Moreover, China's preferences in Turkey's neighborhood may be subject to more radical changes as China's influence has been expanding more rapidly than any other UNSC member state. Despite these

shortcomings, two aspects of the Chinese grand strategy appear to contradict Turkey's interests. First, the westward expansion of China's sphere of influence covers not only Central Asia, an important albeit secondary region for Turkish grand strategy, but it also arguably includes Iran and Iranian proxies, erstwhile threats for Turkish grand strategy,

within the emergent Sinocentric geopolitical network in West Asia. China's consistent stance in the UNSC in support of the Assad regime in Syria is but one of the many manifestations of this alignment. Secondly, China's severe repression of the Turkic Muslim Uyghur minority concerns Turkey since a critical component of Turkey's soft power, a secondary but still important component of its grand strategy, is to be the protector of and speaker for Muslim minorities facing persecution around the world.<sup>78</sup> Turkey's rapprochement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has attracted considerable attention especially after 2016, but the analysts are almost unanimous in concluding that China is unlikely to consider Turkey as a trustworthy potential ally, especially in light of their disagreements over the plight of the Uyghurs.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, while there is a significant pro-Russian Turkish Eurasianist group<sup>80</sup> that self-identifies as such, there is no pro-Chinese group of comparable significance. In sum, Turkish and Chinese grand strategies appear to be mostly incompatible with several conflicts ranging from Xinjiang to Syria, where the two countries hold opposite views.

## **China is unlikely to consider Turkey as a trustworthy potential ally, especially in light of their disagreements over the plight of the Uyghurs**

### **Concluding Remarks: Compatible and Competing Visions of Grand Strategy between Turkey and the Great Powers**

This brief comparative analysis of British, Chinese, French, Russian, Turkish, and U.S. grand strategies and foreign policy behavior yields a preliminary classification of 'grand strategic compatibility' as represented in Table 1. Turkish grand strategy seems particularly incompatible with the Russian grand strategy in light of the ongoing and recent military conflicts over Azerbaijan, Georgia, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, where Turkey and Russia have been openly supporting opposing parties. Many other simmering political conflicts (e.g., in Bosnia-Herzegovina) may be added to this long list. Most importantly, the presence of the Russian military as a semi-permanent occupation force in several of Turkey's immediate neighbors is the main cause of Turkish-Russian incompatibility. France and the U.S. likewise keep military forces right across the Turkish-Syrian border in support of the YPG-PYD, which is also a key obstacle in forging a compatible grand strategic relationship. On the other hand, Turkey shares the U.S. objective of limiting Russian, Iranian, and Chinese ex-

pansion in Eurasia and the Middle East, and thus, in terms of balancing threats at a global scale, Turkish and U.S. grand strategies are broadly compatible.

**Table 1:** Spectrum of Grand Strategic Compatibility between Turkey and the Great Powers

	-Very Incompatible-	-Mostly Incompatible	+Mostly Compatible	+Very Compatible+
U. S.			<b>x</b>	
Russia	<b>x</b>			
France		<b>x</b>		
UK				<b>x</b>
China		<b>x</b>		

*Source: Compiled by the author*

French grand strategy is much more incompatible with Turkey’s priorities because French foreign policy behavior does not indicate a genuine commitment to contain Russian influence in the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Middle East, or North Africa. In contrast, France is de facto allied with Russia in the Caucasus (e.g., Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict) and Libya, and its favored proxy in Syria, YPG-PYD, abets the Assad regime’s offensives against the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, while also negotiating with the Assad regime for the long-term. The AUKUS row demonstrates that France might also not be committed to containing the expansion of Chinese influence either. In short, there are incompatibilities between French and Turkish grand strategic objectives at multiple levels. Among the five UNSC member states examined, the UK’s grand strategic objectives and foreign policy behavior appear most compatible with the Turkish grand strategic objectives and priorities. The UK does not actively occupy any of Turkey’s neighbors at present, and it does not support and is actually rather critical of the YPG-PYD, while also being sympathetic and supportive of the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition. Brexit opened yet other avenues for Turkish-British cooperation. Moreover, although all members of the UNSC have been accused of war crimes against some Muslim groups as well as other forms of persecution of Muslims domestically, the more egregious recent crimes are attributed to Russia in Chechnya, the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan, France in West Africa and at home, and China in Xinjiang, while Britain does not face a comparable allegation. At the systemic level, too, Britain appears to be the most committed among members of the western alliance to the containment of Russia in the Caucasus, Middle East, East Mediterranean, and Eastern Europe, and as such, demonstrates broad compatibility with Turkey’s grand strategic interests.

Are we headed toward a British-Turkish alliance or even the reconstitution of a broader and firmer Anglo-American-Turkish alliance? If we limit our focus to the five great powers with permanent membership in the UNSC, British-Turkish and Anglo-American-Turkish alliances or alignments appear much more likely than Chinese-Turkish, French-Turkish, let alone Russian-Turkish al-

liance formation. However, a competing vision of Turkey's alliances can be summed up in the slogan, "the world is bigger than five," coined and popularized by Turkey as an explicit challenge to five permanent members of the UNSC.<sup>81</sup> This points to Turkey's aspiration to forge an alternative network of alliances that is independent of and challenging to the five great powers examined in this article, and as such, resembles similar aspirations by the Non-Aligned Movement and G77 during the Cold War in particular.<sup>82</sup> Turkey's amicable relations with numerous middle and small powers across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America underpin such a vision. Turkey might also seek to pursue both visions in tandem, connecting one or more of the old great powers with a number of emergent great powers and middle powers. ■

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