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PUSHBACK

The limits of power in Erdogan's Turkey

Jakob Lindgaard

This report is written by Jakob Lindgaard, Senior Analyst, DIIS,
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DIIS · Danish Institute for International Studies
Gl. Kalkbrænderi Vej 51A
DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark
Tel: +45 32 69 87 87
E-mail: diis@diis.dk
www.diis.dk

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a widespread perception in recent years that strongmen around the world are winning. Rising from both east and west of emergent geopolitical divides, from both left and right of political landscapes, strongmen have emerged from both outside and within democracies to challenge the liberal democratic order, challenge the open, globalised economy, and threaten the Western security architecture.

This DIIS Report takes a closer look at one of these strongmen, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The picture it paints, however, is not one of confidence and strength. Rather, Erdogan's rising strongman traits seem to be a function of the frustration that increasing pushback on both him and his Turkey entails. Initially invoking this pushback to his domestic advantage, his strongman responses have created increasing political and economic pushback especially from outside Turkey to challenge him and Turkey.

But there are also deeper forms of pushback working in the background, as it were, to contain and constrain Erdogan and Turkey. Besides a rehearsal of the immediate trajectory of overreach, pushback, and U-turns that has come to characterize Erdogan's Turkey in recent years, the report will touch on one type of structural and two types of geopolitical pushback that have come to contain and constrain both Erdogan and Turkey. The structural type of pushback is a series of inherent, systemic weaknesses of strongman autocratic systems that over time come to challenge the initial popularity of the strongman stance.

The first of the two geopolitical types of pushback pertain to long standing Turkish particulars as well as some traits of Turkey's status as a middle power with great power ambitions, brought out in this report through the case of Turkey's complicated NATO-membership. The second of the two geopolitical types of pushback is more contemporary. Here the report argues that the widespread perception that strongmen around the world are winning in an increasingly bi-, multi-, or a-polar world seems to come up against a less alarmist look at the facts. On this alternative view, the world is becoming increasingly unipolar, and the room for manoeuvre for a country such as Turkey is narrowing. This is especially true when it comes to economic strength, as the report argues, but also applies to other sources of strength.

The upshot of this pushback is what the report dubs a 'peaking power dilemma', a critical adaptation of the idea popularized in recent years of China entering a 'peaking power trap'. The peaking power dilemma is the idea that while defiant strongman traits initially are successful at rallying people around him and the flag against claimed pushback, they also seem to entail increasing levels of political, economic, and military pushback that will eventually begin to grate away at the strongman's ability to sustain power for both himself and his country. Especially as a faltering economy begins to bite. Pursuit of strongman appeals to a defiant nationalism is popular but comes at the expense of economic wealth (for the elite) and economic security (for the masses). Adopting a more conciliatory line towards the West in particular and a sounder economic policy will gain popularity from the potential return of economic strength but will come at the expense of popularity amongst the more defiant nationalists and their quest for independence.

It is in the increasingly frustrated responses to this dilemma that Erdogan's Turkey is an intractable and unpredictable challenge for NATO and the West. The report ends with a few examples of how this is.¹

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The Bad Guys Are Winning

A

The Atlantic

EST. 1857



How a new league
of autocrats
is outsmarting
the West

By Anne
Applebaum

Photo and description: This cover was originally published by The Atlantic and is republished here with The Atlantic's permission. Illustration by Oliver Munday, 2021.

INTRODUCTION

A striking illustration leads into Anne Applebaum's November 2021 article in *The Atlantic* called 'The Bad Guys are Winning'. It features a *Reservoir Dogs* style line-up, in which Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan figures prominently, next to China's Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin, Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko, and Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro (Applebaum 2021).² Based on interviews with Belarusian and Uyghur dissidents, Applebaum argues that a network of autocrats today – she refers to them as 'Autocrats Inc' – are successfully dialling back the late 20th century victory of liberal democracy across the world.

The autocrats are winning, so goes the argument, because they get support from an intricate international network that provides them with repressive methods, modern surveillance and influencing technology, financial support, and impunity from international law. They are winning because they are successful at tapping into a shared message that the US and other Western democracies are to blame for most all the ills in their countries, and that the West is weakened (especially after the 2008 financial crisis, the 2016 Brexit vote, the 2016 US election of Trump, and the messy 2021 exit from Afghanistan). They are also winning because the Western electorate, especially American voters, has grown weary of proactively supporting democracy through faltering 'forever wars' in the Middle East.

Erdogan figures in Applebaum's story as someone who has traversed a path from criticising China for committing 'genocide' against the Turkic and Muslim Uyghurs in his earlier, more democratic years to toning down the criticism of China and even signing a deportation agreement with China as he has grown more autocratic. As for other Muslim majority countries such as Pakistan, Saudi

Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, silence on China's repression of the Uyghur community has been a small price to pay for Erdogan to be on the winning 'Autocrats Inc' team.


Add to this picture the perception in Ankara,³ – and many other capitals across the world – that we have entered a new geopolitical reality where China in particular is on the rise and now constitutes a 'pacing challenge' to Western hegemony; where Russia is actively threatening the European security architecture and the Western-led world order; where a both aging and polarised post-Brexit Europe's influence in its neighbourhood is on the wane, and where the US is about to be consumed by yet another round of Trump-led internal bickering. In this new age, the EU is in no position to give Ankara homework or set up hurdles for Ankara to jump. China, Russia, and Gulf countries now all serve as alternative trade and investment partners, with no or few strings attached. Thus, the 'Autocrats Inc' is winning the perception game.

One could further add that the tendency of recent years towards 'autocratic normalisation' in the Middle East and North Africa also seems to have followed Applebaum's playbook. A common desire among the region's strongmen to preserve personal power and wealth has led most of them to leave proxy wars aside and forge regional franchises of Applebaum's 'Autocrats Inc', with Erdogan's Turkey as an active participant in this normalisation. Prior to the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, Erdogan had thus softened his former strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood against Sisi in Egypt, for Hamas against Netanyahu in Israel, for the Syrian Arab opposition against Assad in Syria, and for the Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi against Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, in favour of a normalisation with these regimes. In addition to the 2020 Abraham Accords, the 2021 Al-Ula agreement, and more, this normalisation would also seem to speak to Applebaum's point.

More generally, it seems that Erdogan's increasingly consolidated membership of 'Autocrats Inc' is part of a winning story for Erdogan. It is from this platform that he can push his regional ambitions through sales – no strings attached – of Turkish-made drones. It is from here that Erdogan's self-confident and muscular foreign policy can spread its hard power tentacles into South Caucasus, Iraq, Syria, and the East Med, and even as far as Libya, Somalia, and Qatar. It is from here that he can hold up NATO defence plans for the Baltics and Eastern Europe as he did in the autumn of 2019, or bargain hard to set standards for Sweden and the US to meet, over Sweden's membership application to NATO as he did in 2022–24 (see e.g. Koru 2023). It is from here he can befriend both Putin and Xi, even as NATO and other

Western geopolitical pressures mount on them. It is from here that he can speak out as a self-appointed leader of the so-called 'Global South' and complain that 'the world is bigger than five', referring to the UN Security Council's five permanent members. And it is from here that he has managed to win another round of elections in May 2023, against all odds.

This DIIS report does two things. First, like Applebaum, it widens the aperture on trying to understand what is driving Erdogan and Turkey to include not just the domestic context of Erdogan's person, Turkey's unique historical experience, and the tactics of contemporary domestic political manoeuvring, but also the ramifications of Turkey's interactions with the international environment as well as more general comparative, structural, and geopolitical drivers. This wider methodological field of view aims to encompass other drivers of Erdogan's Turkey, ones that narrower approaches to Turkey's domestic context perhaps sometimes miss. But it will still invoke a bottom-up approach to include attention to the domestic context that broader, generalist or geopolitical readings perhaps also sometimes miss.



The report presents a picture of Erdogan and Turkey that is driven more by a sense of loss and frustration in the face of various forms of pushback than by a sense of growing strength and confidence.

Second, unlike Applebaum, the report argues that Erdogan – much like Applebaum's other 'bad guys' – often presents Europe and the West with a series of challenges not because he is winning, but because he is losing. Or, more precisely, the report presents a picture of Erdogan and Turkey that is driven more by a sense of loss and frustration in the face of various forms of pushback than by a sense of growing strength and confidence, as it is often represented.⁴ This containing and constraining pushback takes several shapes and forms, ranging from pushback against Erdogan from domestic sources to international political and economic pushbacks on Erdogan and Turkey and both geopolitical and more structural forms of pushback. The report will outline how this is the case, mindful that it runs counter not only to Erdogan's May 2023 election victory and likely electoral success in the upcoming March 2024 local elections, but also to the expanded version of Applebaum's depiction outlined above. Each of the four chapters of the report will touch on one aspect of how and why this is.

In the first chapter the report will traverse recent developments in Erdogan's Turkey to get a sense of what, from a domestic perspective, has been driving Erdogan and Turkey. The chapter opens with what it will claim to be three recalcitrant myths about Erdogan's Turkey and go on to unfold an alternative view, focusing especially on how to unpack a key trajectory of overreach, pushback, and political U-turns in Erdogan's Turkey running from around 2011 up until the Gaza crisis and Turkey's 100th anniversary in October 2023, and Turkey's approval of Sweden's NATO application in January 2024. In the spirit of a wider aperture, this chapter will draw on some of the best representations of recent developments in Turkey, such as Gönül Tol's *Erdogan's War – A Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria* (Tol 2023), but also on a loose adaptation to the Turkish case of other sources such as Susan L. Shirk's *Overreach – How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise* (Shirk 2023) and Richard McGregor's *Xi Jinping: The Backlash* (McGregor 2019).

Then the report will address one type of structural and two types of geopolitical pushback that also work to contain and constrain both Erdogan and Turkey. The second chapter will introduce the structural type of pushback, a series of inherent, systemic weaknesses that seem to follow from the development of the initially popular authoritarian strongman-style of political system: under pressure, the strongman (always a him) will rally support 'around the flag', as it were, by tapping into nationalist imaginaries of internal and external enemies to divert attention and blame from (his own responsibility for) ills at home to get a boost of popularity and retain his waning power position. This allows him to expand on his autocratic tendencies – e.g. by clamping down on 'traitors' in the opposition – that will strengthen his position in the short term, but which will also subsequently weaken both him and the country in question. In an August 2023 article 'Looters with flags – how cynical leaders are whipping up nationalism to win and abuse power', *The Economist* draws on work done by the Economist Intelligence Unit to unfold how the former part of this claim applies to a series of strongmen nationalists around the world (*The Economist* 2023b). In his 2021 *Weak Strongman – The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, Timothy Frye unfolds how the latter part of this claim applies to Putin's Russia, including a few analogies to Erdogan's Turkey and other 'weak strongmen' (Frye 2021). Chapter 2 will adapt some of *The Economist's*, Frye's, and other similar findings to the case of Erdogan's Turkey.

In the third chapter, the report will introduce two partly overlapping lines of geopolitical pushback that make it difficult for both Erdogan and Turkey to achieve the dual aim of being both strong and independent at the same time. One line includes more constant domestic and regional factors such as internal polarisation,

a unique set of topline threat perceptions, a highly volatile immediate neighbourhood, a limited number of close friends, etc. (see e.g. Stratfor 2023). The other line is a more contemporary narrowing of the scope for Erdogan's Turkey's ability to invoke relations with Russia, China, or Gulf countries to gain larger degrees of the craved-for independence from the West in what this chapter will argue is an increasingly – not decreasingly – unipolar world. Again, in the spirit of a wider aperture, this chapter will draw on geopolitical discussions, including contributions such as Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth's April 2023 piece for *Foreign Affairs*, 'The Myth of Multipolarity – American Power's Staying Power' (Brooks & Wohlforth 2023).

Finally, the report will argue that this alternative picture of Erdogan's Turkey presents a different set of challenges (and opportunities) for Europe, NATO, and the West than what is often assumed. Here, for Erdogan's Turkey, the report will critically adapt the idea of a 'peaking power trap' popularised by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley in a series of articles and by their 2022 book *Danger Zone – The Coming Conflict with China* (Brands & Beckley 2021; 2022a; 2022b; and Brands 2022). The basic idea in this report is that Erdogan is facing not a peaking power trap, but an increasingly recalcitrant dilemma – dubbed the 'peaking power dilemma'. On the one hand, he gains popularity from tapping into a highly belligerent and widely shared Turkish nationalism that is primarily characterized by being steeply anti-Western. The trouble is that the assertive actions that tend to stem from this often isolates Turkey politically and militarily, just as it adds significant downward pressure on the Turkish economy. On the other hand, he can gain popularity from embracing policies that appear more accommodating towards especially the West, as this tends to strengthen the economy and bring Turkey out from political isolation. The trouble here is that this more pragmatic approach comes at the expense of the also popular Turkish nationalist policies, and its wished-for more independent or 'strategically autonomous' Turkey. The different set of challenges (and opportunities) for Europe stem from Erdogan's ever more difficult attempts at straddling both horns of this dilemma.

The report will address the most immediate objections to this perhaps contentious approach as they come up.




Photo and description: ID 2R0CGR9, Andy Soloman / Alamy Stock Photo. The display of banners and flags flying high against a blue sky in Antalya, Turkey.

OVERREACH AND PUSHBACK ON ERDOGAN

On 25 October 2023 Erdogan gave a speech to the members of the Turkish Parliament from his ruling AK Party (AKP) (*Reuters* 2023a). In the speech he referred to Hamas as a 'liberation movement' and strongly criticised Israel's reaction to the 7 October Hamas attack on Israel. He also called for a large rally in support of Gaza, to be held on the grounds of the old Atatürk airport in Istanbul on Saturday 28 October, on the eve of the centenary celebrations of the Turkish Republic on 29 October. In his Istanbul speech, Erdogan drew some parallels to Turkey's own struggle: 'We are not only condemning the massacre in Gaza, we are also defending our own independence and future', he said (*Turkey Recap* 2023c). In response to his question 'Who is behind PKK, YPG, FETÖ'⁵ the crowd shouted 'America', with Erdogan adding, 'There is also Israel ...' and 'We know very well the behind-the-scenes plots against our country from the European and American administrations.'

What to make of this outburst? A first thing to note is that this vitriol against Israel, the US, and Europe could seem to mark a policy U-turn for Erdogan's Turkey, following a period of relative calm and attempts at normalisation with the US and Europe following the May 2023 electoral victory, and an even longer trajectory of normalisation with Israel. In September Erdogan met with Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu for the first time ever (*Reuters* 2023b). Immediately following the 7 October Hamas attack Erdogan also called Israeli president, Isaac Herzog, to express his sympathy and initiated a flurry of diplomatic outreach to present himself and Turkey as a mediator in the conflict. Rumour even had it that Erdogan asked Hamas leaders to leave Turkey following the attack (*Middle East Eye* 2023).

To some, Erdogan's 25 and 28 October speeches simply marked an unsurprising return of Erdogan to his factory setting of political Islamism and his decade-old support for groups such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood (Ciddi 2023). To others, they reflected a penchant towards re-enactment of Turkey's strategic role as a regional – and global – power broker on behalf of the Muslim world, as when Ahmet Davutoglu, the former prime minister and author of the neo-Ottoman book par excellence, *Strategic Depth* (Davutoglu 2001), launched a video in direct support of Hamas on 16 October (Davutoglu 2023). Finally, others saw the U-turn as a return to the drive by Turkey in recent years towards a more muscular and expansionary foreign policy stance, such as when Erdogan's coalition partner, the ultranationalist MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, intimated on 22 October that Turkey could send military support to Hamas (*Duvarenglish* 2023).



This chapter unfolds an alternative framework that brings into view the cycles of overreach, pushback, and U-turns that have increasingly come to characterize Erdogan and Turkey.

This chapter seeks to unpack some of the main recent developments in Turkey to try and make sense of the development of Erdogan's and Turkey's response to the Gaza conflict, but also and more importantly to get an idea – from a primarily domestic perspective – of *how* policy U-turns such as this one on Gaza have come to characterise Erdogan and Turkey and *why* that is. It will begin with an outline of three imageries that are often invoked as explanatory frameworks and go on to unfold an alternative framework that brings into view the cycles of overreach, pushback, and U-turns that have increasingly come to characterize Erdogan and Turkey.⁶

THREE MYTHS ABOUT ERDOGAN'S TURKEY

The first of three imageries that often figure as convenient frameworks for explaining a given statement or action is the idea that Erdogan is a political Islamist at heart, that he is motivated by Sultan-style dreams (that have adverse ramifications for Turkish democracy and human rights), and that Turkey's foreign policy is neo-Ottoman in the sense that it presents Turkey as the protector of the Muslim world.

This is of course caricature. But it is nevertheless persistent in analyses of Turkey on several levels (See e.g. *BBC* 2023; *Bloomberg* 2015; *The Economist* 2013; 2015; 2023a; *Time* 2020; Colborne & Edwards 2018; Çagaptay 2017; 2019; 2021; Yavuz 2020; Ciddi 2023).

It holds some merit. Erdogan did rise to political prominence on the back of the resentment and victimhood that followed the pushback by Atatürk's secular heirs against the so-called 'reactionary' conservative Muslims, as the latter group rose to become a political challenge to the former in the 1980s and 90s. Erdogan's Refah Party mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, did praise the 1979 Iranian Revolution, did lobby for the separation of women and men on buses, and did have a chief ideologue for the party embedded with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Also, Erdogan did passionately read out an infamous poem by the acclaimed poet, Ziya Gökalp, that got him jailed for four months in 1998 and excluded from politics for five years: 'The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets, and the faithful our soldiers.'

It is also true that he did at that point compare democracy with a streetcar that you get on only to get off at your preferred destination. Following the military's ouster of Erbakan as prime minister in the 28 February 1997 so-called 'Post-Modern Coup', and Erdogan's 1998 jailing (for reading out the Gökalp poem at a political rally), Erdogan made his first major political U-turn to establish the more pro-democratic and pro-European AK Party, calling on the international scene for an 'alliance of civilizations' against the 'clash of civilizations' megatrend discourse of the day. Still claiming to lead an alternative, Muslim civilization, Erdogan as a 'Muslim democrat' also enjoyed the support of other groups downtrodden by the secular nationalists such as the, often conservatively Muslim, Kurds to move *Turkey Beyond Nationalism* as the 2006 edited volume by Hans-Lukas Kieser framed it (Kieser 2006).

It was only to be expected, so this imagery goes, that Erdogan would revert to his more assertively and conservatively Muslim self once he had managed to break the power of the secular nationalists in the Turkish military, judiciary, bureaucracy, and deep state, as he had largely managed to do by 2011. Winning the 2011 general election with almost 50% of the vote and heralded as a 'role model' for the Arab Spring, Erdogan made another U-turn from 'zero problems' to a more assertive version of Ahmet Davutoglu's neo-Ottoman 'Strategic Depth' foreign policy doctrine to support staunchly – and at times militantly – Sunni Muslim groups in the region such as the Ennahdha Party in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Gaza, and the militant Sunni opposition to Assad in Syria. At home he began talking openly about his willingness to 'raise a pious generation'. He restricted the sale of alcohol, rushed

through the so-called 4+4+4 school reform over the summer of 2012 to introduce courses on the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran into the public-school curriculum, massively expanded the scope of both the Diyanet (the Directorate of Religious Affairs) and the Imam Hatip religious school alternative to the regular public schools, and supported the crackdown on kissing in the Ankara Metro (*Hürriyet* 2013a).

Leaving what followed aside for now, this all goes to show that Erdogan has a factory setting for coming out in support of, for example, Hamas when the time is right. Other directions are merely tactical manoeuvres designed to gain or regain the sufficient strength needed to show his true colours. So, at least, according to this first imagery.

The second imagery that tends to guide the way we frame new statements and actions by Erdogan, his cabinet, and by the broader pro-AKP groups dovetails with the first. According to this second imagery, Erdogan has reversed Atatürk's pro-Western orientation, turned Turkey's back to the West and reoriented Turkey eastwards, understood at different times to be the Middle East, Eurasia, or Russia. Or, if not a complete reversal – as Turkey has represented itself of late – as a multi-aligned balancer or swing state (see e.g. Bechev 2022 and Çağaptay 2019; 2024 for the most sophisticated, comprehensive versions of this imagery).⁷

This imagery includes two key aspects. Firstly, it seems to adopt the view of Atatürk's Turkey popularised by Bernard Lewis' 1961 classic *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Lewis 1961) to the effect that Atatürk turned Turkey from its backward Muslim past towards a pro-Western, modernised, and secular future. Secondly, it involves the pervasive image that Erdogan has reversed this course.

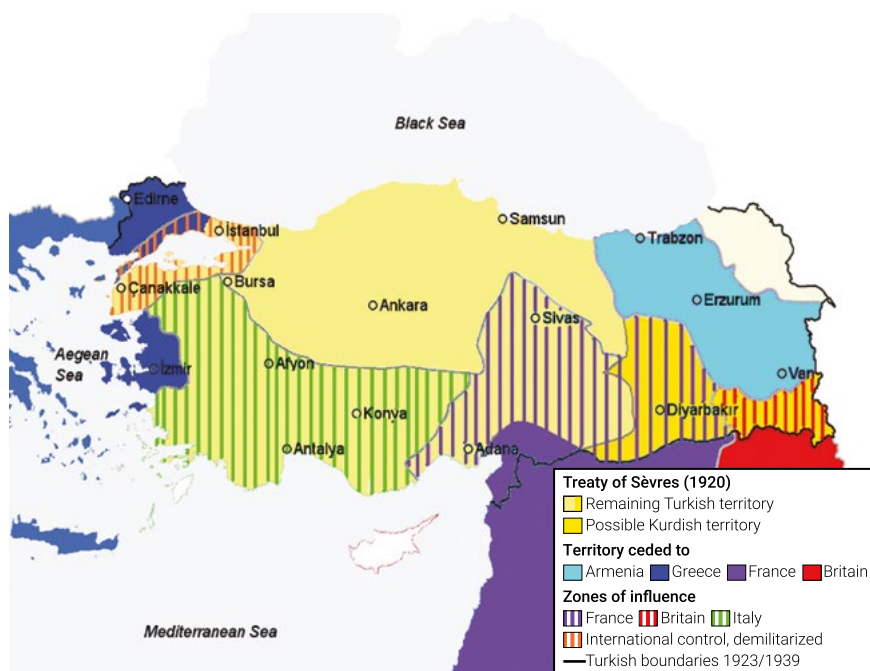
This brings us to the third imagery. This is the idea that Erdogan is a strong man in a strong land with a muscular foreign policy with both revisionist and expansionist goals. Maps representing Turkey's 'growing drone empire' (see e.g. Trissel & Çağaptay 2023), the expansion of Turkish embassies in Africa from around twelve in 2002 to forty-three in 2022, and the marked expansion of Turkey's military presence in the region (Aksoy, Cevik & Yasar 2022) often seem to support this point. As do researchers focusing on the rapid expansion of Turkey's defence industrial complex and willingness to use hard power in recent years (see e.g. Kasapoğlu 2017; 2020a, 2020b, 2022 and Bakir 2021a, 2021b). Apparent Turkish readiness in a revisionist vein to push the borders and boundaries set by the Treaty of Lausanne and the UNCLOS Law of the Sea in the Aegean Sea and Mediterranean also tend to be read in this light. As does Turkey's interest in establishing buffer zones in Syria and Iraq, and its highly proactive support for Azerbaijan in retaking the Nagorno Karabakh enclave in 2020 and 2023.

OVERREACH FOLLOWED BY PUSHBACK FROM AROUND 2013

The remainder of this chapter will begin to unfold the alternative reading of Erdogan and Turkey presented in this report. In this chapter the aperture is kept narrow, and the focus is on how to best understand Erdogan's actions in light of developments in Turkey from around 2011. As Gönül Tol does in her 2023 book *Erdogan's War – A Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria*, we will keep Erdogan's and Turkey's interactions with the world outside Turkey in view, but the focus here is on the domestic dynamics.

In this alternative reading, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk saved the Turkey-to-be from the complete implosion of the Sèvres Treaty that the last Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul had been forced to sign with the European Entente powers in 1920 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of the Sèvres Treaty of 1920



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Treaty_of_S%C3%A8vres#/media/File:Treaty_of_S%C3%A8vres_map_partitioning_Anatolia.png, 02-02-2024, 13.42

Having pushed back against the Sèvres scheme through the 1919–22 War of Independence and staked out what was to become the Turkey we know today, Atatürk set out to make Turkey strong again. Building on the demographic calamities and chaos of the day, Atatürk emulated the European strength that had

been the primary cause of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and rooted out the sources of weakness. And he did so to make Turkey strong again over and against the main architect of the Sèvres Treaty and main opponent in the War of Independence: Europe.

To Atatürk, Europe's strength was to be found in a triptych of superior military strength, nationalism, and Enlightenment thought. This was to be emulated. The sources of Turkey's weakness were also a triptych, consisting of separatists, minorities, and reactionary Muslims. To make Turkey strong again, these sources of weakness had to go, either through assimilation or suppression. The Sèvres Treaty grew to become a so-called 'Sèvres syndrome' whereby the European architects were seen as actively conspiring with (Kurdish) separatists and (Armenian and Greek) minorities as fifth column agents to keep Turkey weak and dependent.

Erdogan rose to fame in the post-Cold War period of the 1990s as a self-proclaimed victim of the pushback against the claimed reactionary, backward Islam that Atatürk's Kemalist heirs of the 1990s saw as the main threat both to the retention of their personal power and to a strong and independent Turkey. As the first of the three imageries above has it, this alternative reading supports that Erdogan was pushed to make a U-turn from his openly Islamist approach to avoid sharing the fate of his victimhood soulmates Adnan Menderes and Necmettin Erbakan, who had both tried and failed to take on the Kemalist elite before Erdogan.

This alternative also agrees that Erdogan and his conservative Muslim allies in the Gülen movement joined forces with the other conservatively Muslim groups to ride on the so-called 3rd democratic wave and civilisational discourse of the post-Cold War environment to invoke a pro-EU stance as a lever against the Kemalist, nationalist elite. Though many in the secular, nationalist camp were still pro-EU in the early 2000s (Carkoglu 2003), the author of this report also came across many in Turkey who, up through the 2000s, expressed an acute sense of weariness that Erdogan's AK party, the Gülen movement, and other conservatively Muslim groups only invoked EU in an instrumental fashion as a lever against them – and thus were more sceptical towards the EU.⁸

What the first two of the three persistent imageries tend to miss are the ramifications of the overreach that Erdogan's 2011 turn towards a more assertive support for conservative Sunni Islam in the region and at home had for Erdogan and Turkey. By 2013 Erdogan's then key advisor, Ibrahim Kalin, described Turkey's

regional standing as 'precious loneliness' (DW 2013). Overt support for groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas might have won Erdogan support on the Arab streets, but not amongst the Arab regimes. Except for Qatar, almost all Arab regimes consider Muslim Brotherhood groups and their ability to mobilise the masses against their regimes to be a serious threat, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring. Open support for the Hamas leadership also sent the Erdogan Government on a direct collision course with Israel. Finally, support for the militantly Sunni Islamist opposition groups in Syria was also met with pushback from international actors as different as Iran, Russia, and the West.

Furthermore, Erdogan faced significant pushback at home in 2013. Having faced a more repressive Sunni Muslim agenda, millions of Turks made Istanbul's Taksim Square and many more streets and squares across the country resemble Cairo's Tahrir square of 2010–11 in a show of defiance against Erdogan. If supportive of the Arab streets, Erdogan turned to crack down hard on Turkish streets. Happening at almost the same time as the military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Erdogan also began to vent a paranoia-driven conspiracy theory more actively to the effect that the West was conspiring against him and his Muslim Brotherhood friends behind the scenes.

Erdogan was also met with some of the first open pushback from within his AK party, with the two prominent co-founders of the AKP, Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arinc, openly supporting a more conciliatory line with the protesters. These years also marked the beginning of a violent end to the marriage of convenience between Erdogan and the Gülen Movement. A series of events most likely led the Gülen movement's people in the judiciary etc. to launch a damaging graft probe against close confidants and family of Erdogan on 17 and 25 December 2013. If 2011 led to overreach for Erdogan, he was met with considerable pushback in 2013.

THE 2015 U-TURN TO TAP INTO TURKISH NATIONALISM

Often overlooked, the December 2013 corruption probe against Erdogan is likely what led him, in January 2014, to turn to setting free hundreds of incarcerated high-profile Turkish nationalists. These nationalists had highly likely been tried and jailed by public prosecutors and judges from the Gülen movement for plotting to overthrow the AKP Government in two high-profile cases. Having spent most of his previous political life pushing back at secularist nationalist oppression, Erdogan now began to align himself with the secular nationalists.

In the run-up to the 2014 presidential elections in Turkey, the AKP aired an election video showing a secretive man – likely of Western background – dressed in a long black leather coat cutting down a massive Turkish flag, only for all sorts of Turks from across Turkey to rush to collectively to save the flag (AKP 2014). A nationalist call to rally around the flag does not get much clearer than this.

However, and to the dismay of the Turkish nationalists, Erdogan at this point was still negotiating with Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdish terror organisation, the PKK, in the so-called 'Settlement Process'. During the Kurdish spring Newroz festival of 2013, the left-secular Öcalan also had a letter read out loud, referring to the '1000 years of Turkish and Kurdish co-existence under Islam' in Turkey (*Hürriyet* 2013b). The prominent Kurdish politician, Selahattin Demirtas, and the pro-Kurdish political party (HDP), also refrained from officially supporting the 2013 Gezi demonstrations against Erdogan.

But this alliance between Erdogan and the Kurds was also in for a U-turn during these years. Partly frustrated, partly emboldened by developments following ISIS' autumn 2014 siege of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane, Demirtas and the Kurds refused to support Erdogan's plans for a super presidency. In an unfortunate convergence of events, the autumn of 2014 also marked a turn by the US towards more overtly supporting and working with the Syrian-Kurdish PYD/YPG groups against ISIS in Syria, groups considered in Turkey to be identical to the PKK. The Turkish nationalist suspicion that the US and the Kurds were working together to undermine Turkish national sovereignty gained significant ground in the Turkish political landscape, putting Erdogan's de facto alliance with the Kurds under pressure.

Consequently, the AKP lost its accustomed majority at the June 2015 general elections to the benefit of both the pro-Kurdish HDP and the Turkish ultranationalist MHP. Erdogan made his still most prominent U-turn to terminate the Settlement Process with the PKK, to crack down hard on the Kurdish rebellions across the Kurdish majority cities of south-eastern Turkey, to ally himself with the MHP, and, eventually, to regain his electoral majority in a November 2015 re-election on his newfound Turkish nationalist platform.

Demirtas was jailed in 2016 and the former chief architect of the neo-Ottoman foreign policy, Ahmet Davutoglu, was ousted in 2016. Islamist figures in Erdogan's inner circle were replaced with nationalist and more hard power figures from 2016 and onwards. The showdown with the former conservatively Muslim ally,

the Gülen Movement, came to a final head with the botched coup attempt of 15 July 2016. Binali Yıldırım, who had taken over as prime minister after Davutoğlu, introduced a U-turn in Turkey's Syria policy, away from support for the Sunni Islamist opposition to Assad to declared support for national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Syria (*Hürriyet* 2016). Turkish engagements in Syria and Iraq were henceforth to be seen as a forward defence of Turkish national security interests. When the Turkish army made the first of a series of incursions into Syria in August 2016 – also a first in its turn to a more proactive use of hard power as part of its foreign policy in the region – it thus marked the beginning of a turn to target the Kurdish YPG's separatist aims, and no longer take aim at Assad. This, moreover, opened the door to a partnership with Russia and Iran in Syria through the so-called Astana Trio.

MORE ATATÜRK THAN SULTAN ... AND FURTHER PUSHBACK

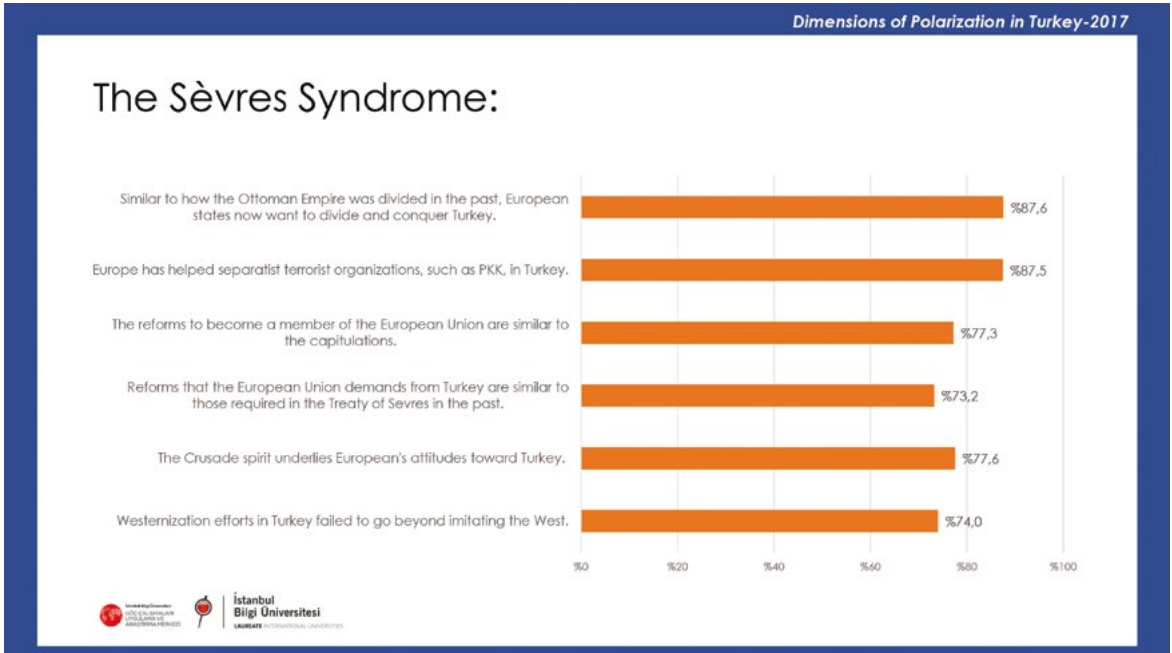
In sum, pushback at home and abroad on Erdoğan's post-2011 overreach forced him to make a U-turn and tap into the increasingly popular Turkish nationalist sentiments to retain power from around 2015. Turkey's Syria policy changed to reflect this fact, as did Turkey's foreign and security policy more generally.

Co-opting Turkish nationalism gave Erdoğan access to a much broader voter segment across the Turkish political landscape. Polling by Istanbul Bilgi University in 2017 (Figure 2), for example, showed more than 87% support for so-called 'Sèvres Syndrome' style questions to the effect that Europe was now out to 'divide and conquer' Turkey through support for 'terrorist organisations, such as the PKK', just as Europe had done in the past – illustrated by the Sèvres Treaty of 1920 (Bilgi 2018). Erdoğan began presenting himself in military garb, as a strong leader at the helm of a 'War of Independence 2.0' against the 'nefarious encirclement' of Turkey (TCCB 2020).

One of the Turkish nationalists that Erdoğan had freed in January 2014 became a regular on Turkish TV shows to promote the idea of 'Mavi Vatan', or 'Blue Homeland', the 200 nautical miles of seabed surrounding Turkey.⁹ This expanded the scope of the national sovereignty and territorial integrity to be defended – through a form of 'forward defence' – against attempts at containment by the West. The suggested 'buffer zones' in Syria and Iraq also counted as a form of forward defence against the number one separatist threat to Turkish national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the PKK (and its Western supporters in Syria

and Iraq). The revisionism that resulted from this is thus the result more of Turkish nationalism than of some neo-Ottoman scheme, of an expanded version of Atatürk's 'War of Independence' rather than some outward expansionary ploy into the region.

Figure 2. The Sèvres Syndrome



Source: Bilgi University, https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2018/02/06/dimensions-of-polarization-pt_Tz7XeBg.pdf,

Investment in the Turkish defence industry took off after 2015, with the stated purpose of making Turkey completely free from dependence on Western arms – through 'yerli ve milli' ('local and national') production of all sorts of weapons – often citing immunity against further US arms embargos on Turkey, like the one in 1975–78 following the 1974 Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus, as a reason. This rejuvenation of the Turkish defence industry was part of a more general shift from the use of 'soft power' to the use of 'hard power' as a key tool in the Turkish foreign policy toolbox. It was also a result of the above-outlined 2015 U-turn.

Erdogan's Turkey upped its support for Shia secular Azerbaijan on the grounds of being next of kin, or 'two states, one nation'. It strengthened its engagement in what was to be renamed the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and pursued

what could be referred to as a second and revamped pan-Turkic push into Central Asia (following the largely unsuccessful first push in the 1990's). Erdogan strengthened his relations with staunchly anti-Muslim, nationalist, strongman leaders such as Hungary's Victor Orban and Serbia's Aleksandar Vucic, and he strengthened Turkey's relationship with Putin's Russia. Tapping into the portrayals of Atatürkist Turkish nationalism after 2015, in particular the appeal to the so-called *ulusalcilik* or Eurasianist vein, made engagements with Russia easier than the often-strained deeper history of imperial wars might suggest (Kiniklioglu 2022). Not only had Lenin's Soviet Union supported Atatürk with both weapons and money to fuel Atatürk's war against the European powers, Atatürk's focus on the establishment of heavy industry in Turkey and the introduction of a 'statist' economy as one of the six Kemalist arrows formulated in the 1930s also reflected a closer relationship to Russia. This is not to suggest that Atatürk or the subsequent Kemalists of various stripes were ideologically drawn towards the Soviet Union. But it was a helpful partner to hedge against the West and make Turkey strong again.¹⁰

Although buying into rising anti-Western nationalism did see Erdogan regain some support at home, and though the turn to hard power on various levels was popular at home, pushback from outside Turkey only seemed to grow stronger. Western political pressure on the deteriorating state of democracy and human rights rose after Erdogan's responses to the summer 2013 Gezi demonstrations and December 2013 graft probe and took off after the sweeping crackdowns in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt. Befriending Orban, Vucic, and Putin also didn't help Erdogan in Western capitals. A rising number of anti-Turkish alliances in the East Med also pushed back against a more assertive Turkey there. But perhaps most seriously, pushback on Erdogan's popularity at home began to mount since a marked turn in 2013 from an upward economic trajectory to a downward one. Western states, investors, credit rating bureaus, countries, and organisations began to push back economically on Erdogan and Turkey during these years (the report will return to the structural underpinnings of this all-important economic aspect in the third chapter below). The economic downturn that begun then likely contributed significantly to the electoral loss of Istanbul and a series of other major Turkish cities in the March 2019 local elections. Like in 2015, Erdogan pushed for a rerun of the Istanbul elections, but this time he and the AKP lost by a much larger margin when this took place in June.

THE NOVEMBER 2020, MAY 2023, AND NOVEMBER 2023 U-TURNS

Shortly after the 2019 electoral losses, Erdogan's defiant path to regain domestic success came to include two events that were to create further pushback from the West in the following years: the reception of the first tranche of the Russian strategic surface-to-air missile defence system, S-400, in July 2019 and the 'Operation Peace Spring' (OPS) incursion into Kurdish-controlled north-eastern Syria in October 2019. In a sign of further Western investor flight, German Volkswagen decided to scrap its plans to build a large new assembly line in Turkey (*Reuters* 2020a). A further and steeper downward slide of US company credit ratings took a further toll on the Turkish Lira and made it more expensive for the Turkish Government to raise capital. Turkey was removed from the strategically highly valuable international programme to build and buy F-35 fighter jets. More generally, Western sanctions and restrictions over S-400, OPS, and further deterioration of human rights in Turkey added significant torsion to the mounting pushback on Erdogan's Turkey.

As briefly noted, Erdogan and Turkey were also losing out in the East Med. Already in February 2018, a Turkish warship had blocked a gas exploration vessel of the Italian energy giant, ENI, off the coast of Cyprus. This was an early sign of escalating tensions in the East Med, where Turkey increasingly came to feel contained by the members of the East Med Gas Forum (EMGF), especially when Cyprus partnered up with Israel and Egypt and the whole group planned to build a gas pipeline (EMGP) from the Egyptian and Israeli fields via Cyprus to Greece, circumventing longstanding Turkish geopolitical hopes of becoming the key energy hub for Europe. In late November 2019 Turkey signed two simultaneous MoUs with the GNU leadership in Tripoli, Libya. One tried to establish a maritime boundary between Turkey and Libya, thereby creating two vast Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ's) cutting across the EMGP. The other – and arguably as a quid pro quo for the first – was a Turkish promise of military support to the GNU in the raging Libyan civil war. This created further pushback when key members of the EMGF including Greece, Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia cooperated to isolate Turkey further in the region.

In November 2020 Erdogan made another U-turn and suspended his militarily assertive stance in the East Med, pulled back the contentious gas-exploration vessel, Oruc Reis, from the East Med, inaugurated the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (launched in June 2021), (temporarily) dropped the 'Erdoganomics' of keeping interest rates low despite rising inflation, and appointed a new financial team (at the expense of his son-in-law, Minister of Finance, Berat Albayrak). He also

dropped his anti-Saudi campaign over the October 2018 murder of Khashoggi in Istanbul and began to scale back his open support for groups such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. All this was done to avoid regional isolation and get on board with the tendency towards normalisation between Israel and the Arab regimes of the region, if not instituted then significantly accelerated by the August 2020 Abraham Accords.

Nationalist overreach had followed the neo-Ottoman overreach, and so too did a resultant pushback ... and then a subsequent U-turn, again born of frustration. But the 2020 U-turn was a less substantive, more tactical course correction of the economy and foreign policy to fend off the weaknesses that the pushback had both created and exposed. The Turkish nationalist gist remained, albeit in a toned-down fashion.

After about six months, Erdogan returned to Erdoganomics and the populist (and popular) monetary policy of low interest rates. Furthermore, he took on a difficult balancing act between diplomatic outreach to Greece, the EU, and the West – also as part of the new Antalya Diplomacy Forum – and the populist need to cater to the Turkish nationalist quest for a strong and independent Turkey. The autumn of 2022, for example, saw another steep downturn in relations with Greece, leading Erdogan to warn in December 2022 that the new Turkish short-range ballistic missile, Typhoon, could reach Athens (Stamouli 2022).

Erdogan's decision not to join Western sanctions on Putin's Russia following Russia's 24 February 2022 attack on Ukraine introduced a new, difficult balancing act, with Turkey charting a more independent course. Initially, weapons support for Ukraine and an active attempt to mediate in the conflict provided Erdogan with popularity at home and some impunity from the West. But as both tracks have petered out, the political and economic pressure on Turkey for its massive expansion of trade with Russia – including charges of facilitating dual-use products to Russia – has mounted (*Financial Times* 2023c).

Moreover, the Turkish economy continued its downturn with soaring inflation, a steep depreciation of the Turkish Lira, and a widening net deficit of foreign reserves. The Turkish nationalist rhetoric invoked to hold on the presidency in May 2023 thus came at the cost of having to ask for the postponement of payments of natural gas deliveries from Russia, the introduction of some capital controls, unprecedented expenses for the showering of the electorate with all sorts of gifts in the run-up to the election, etc. As part of the election, Erdogan claimed he would

stay on his infamously independent economic course. But following the election, he made another U-turn to adopt a pro-Western monetary policy, whilst also sending more conciliatory messages to the EU.

With each U-turn market trust in Erdogan's Turkey has eroded a little further, making any return to a promising economic future even more distant for the Turkish electorate. Thus, on 7 October 2023, as Hamas launched its attack on Israel, the Turkish electorate was feeling an increased economic strain from 60% inflation year on year, the increase of interest rates from 8.5% to 35% since May, and a 34% drop in the value of the Turkish Lira against the US dollar in one year. As the US ignored Erdogan's initial attempt at positioning himself as a mediator in the conflict and several more Islamist groups and politicians, largely ignored by Erdogan in recent years, came out in strong support for Hamas and Gaza, Erdogan made another U-turn and came out in direct support of Hamas and Gaza.

This most recent U-turn arguably allowed Erdogan to divert attention (and blame) from the Turkish electorate's economic woes and regain some legitimacy with the more outright Islamist segments. But it did not provide Erdogan and Turkey with a chair at the regional negotiation table, where he and Turkey want him to be. And it is unlikely to help him regain much trust in Europe and the US. Time will tell if his domestically popular support for Hamas and Gaza will incur another erosion of trust in the Turkish economy from outside Turkey. And if it will dampen the spirit of normalisation with both Israel and Arab regimes that are all highly suspicious of Hamas. Or if Erdogan will – again – be forced to tone down his support for Hamas and affiliate groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood to stay attractive to Western investors and Arab governments alike. But the balancing act is becoming increasingly strained. Fortunately for him, support for the Palestinian cause in Gaza enjoys widespread support both at home and abroad.

Born of frustration from overreach and pushback, Erdogan seems to be in for an even harder time at juggling between a domestically popular, anti-Western nationalism (and to some extent, Islamism), on the one hand, and pragmatic outreach to avoid political isolation and economic ruin on the other.



Photo and description: ID: 2240909181, Andie.NV, Shutterstock.com. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Press Conference in Bali. Indonesia, 16.11.22.


DILEMMAS OF A WEAK NATIONALIST STRONGMAN

There are at least three less immediate forms of pushback that contain and constrain Erdogan and Turkey. All three are contained implicitly in the structure of overreach, pushback, and U-turns outlined in the first chapter. This and the next chapter will try to make these three less immediate forms of pushback and their implications explicit. This chapter will adapt to the Turkish case how the very mechanisms with which a strongman obtains and retains power subsequently also turn to become sources of weakness for both him and his country.

WHEN WEAK STRONGMEN INVOKE NATIONALISM TO RETAIN POWER

In a 31 August 2023 article 'Looters with Flags', *The Economist* draws on a series of correlations done by The Economist Intelligence Unit to show, as their subtitle suggests, 'how cynical leaders are whipping up nationalism to win and abuse power' (*The Economist* 2023b). The gist is that nationalism is on the rise as a source of power retention for strongmen who are challenged in one way or the other, and that this invocation of nationalism correlates with a rise in corruption and fall in basic democratic rights.

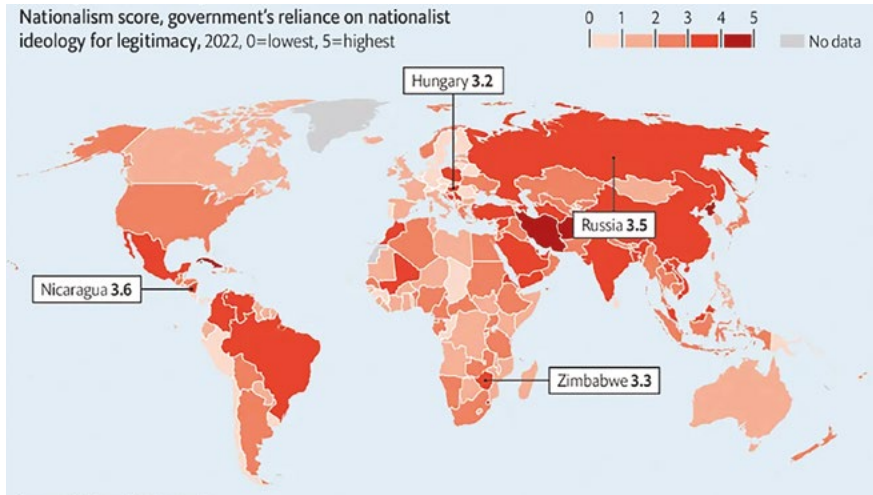
The article opens with the case of Kais Saied, Tunisia's president. After having enjoyed just 30% backing in a November 2022 poll, Saied launched a campaign to warn against Black Africans, claiming they were a demographic threat to Tunisia's Arab majority, and that they brought 'violence, crimes, and unacceptable practices to Tunisia'. In June 2023, following the campaign, Saied mustered 69% support in a fresh poll. Also, *The Economist* argues, it allowed Saied to deflect attention and blame for Tunisia's soaring inflation, his muzzling of the press and opposition, his purge of the judiciary, his shutting down of an anti-corruption watchdog, etc.



Playing to deep-seated instincts to protect one's tribe against claimed existential threats, journalists, judges, and opposition politicians are framed as internal traitors and agents of foreign powers.

Taking off from the Saied case, the article goes on to unfold how versions of nationalism are being invoked across the world by challenged strongmen to amass and abuse power. Colourful infographics purport to show how 'jingoism is on the march', and it is 'pretty much everywhere first.' (Figures 3 and 4). Playing to deep-seated instincts to protect one's tribe against claimed existential threats, journalists, judges, and opposition politicians are framed as internal traitors and agents of foreign powers. The West is often pitched as the main culprit, being accused of applying double standards and undermining the nation's traditional values, for example through supporting women's rights in Iran, and gay rights in Uganda. Claiming that a country is under attack from the West allows leaders such as Russia's Putin, Hungary's Orban, and Nicaragua's Ortega to boost lagging approval rates.

Figure 3. Pretty much everywhere first



Source: The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/08/31/how-cynical-leaders-are-whipping-up-nationalism-to-win-and-abuse-power>, 26-02-2024, 11.45

Figure 4. Jingoism on the march



Source: The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/08/31/how-cynical-leaders-are-whipping-up-nationalism-to-win-and-abuse-power>, 26-02-2024, 11.45

Building on those findings, the appeals to nationalism often come with a claim to be fighting corruption. Saied thus came to power on a platform to fight corruption (as did the Belarus strongman, Lukashenko, who rose to power as the chairman of an anti-corruption body). This is helpful for three reasons. First, it is likely to

garner popular support as it purports to protect the masses against a corrupt elite at home. Second, it is likely to grant you praise (or at least impunity) from the West. Third, it can be used to purge elements of the elite that constitute a threat to the strongman on the rise.

The trouble, as *The Economist* finds, is that there is a correlation between, in chronological succession, an increase in nationalism and a future rise of both autocracy and corruption. Claimed anti-corruption campaigns and campaigns against local traitors such as disloyal elites, critical journalists, judges and opposition politicians, and their foreign colluders erode checks on the strongman on the rise, making it easier for him to capture the state through rewarding kin and cronies in an increasingly corrupt clientelist system.

The question then is what, if anything, this tells us about Erdogan's Turkey? And how, if at all, this constitutes any form of pushback on Erdogan and Turkey? *The Economist's* findings only seem to suggest that nationalism is an apt tool for a strongman to invoke to retain power, and that invocation of nationalism will tend to foster further autocracy and corruption. As we saw in the first chapter, Erdogan did tap into Turkish nationalism to stem the pushback that confronted him from around 2013. The Turkish version of nationalism co-opted by Erdogan also seems to share many of the key features of the types highlighted by *The Economist*. Further, Turkey did experience its best-ever performance on the 2013 version of Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index coming in at number 53 out of 177 countries, after which Turkey's standing deteriorated to a placing as number 101 of 180 in 2022 (Transparency International 2023).

Erdogan did come to power on an anti-corruption ticket. Indeed, the 'AK' in the name 'AK Party' means 'white' or 'untainted', and the AKP logo is a light bulb that shines light on the corruption of the past. But levels of corruption are notoriously difficult to measure. If corruption at lower levels did seem to disappear at first under the AKP, the leaks of the December 2013 corruption allegations against Erdogan and his inner circle also suggested that higher-level corruption was already rampant at this stage. Many more examples have since left the impression that high-level corruption has become endemic in Erdogan's Turkey.¹¹ But the exact location, scope, and trajectory are difficult to gauge; not least since Erdogan's hard crackdown on those responsible for the December 2013 graft probes made it clear to everyone that allegations of corruption were a clear red line for the AKP Government.

What is clear, however, is that the years following the 2015 U-turn did see Turkey develop in the direction of a significantly more autocratic system. Freedom House, for instance, bumped Turkey down from 'Partly Free' in 2017 to 'Not Free' in 2018, where Turkey has remained since. And, to most observers – including Applebaum – this has strengthened Erdogan's hand, not weakened it.


THE LIMITS OF POWER IN ERDOGAN'S TURKEY

But it is a good question if the combination of nationalism, corruption, and autocracy is a recipe for strength. Having spent over 30 years studying Russia and compared this to developments of other modern autocracies – understood as forms of government that do not rest on free and fair elections – Timothy Frye thinks not. In his *Weak Strongman – The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (2021), Frye argues that what he dubs the 'personalistic' form of autocracy in Putin's Russia (as opposed to types led by a single party or the military) is not only key to understanding Putin's Russia; it also highlights how this particular type of government significantly constrains and weakens Putin and Russia.

Arguing that explanations that focus narrowly on either Putin's biography or Russia's unique history in many ways underdetermine a proper understanding of what drives Putin's Russia,¹² he goes on to unfold how a comparative approach focusing on the type of government is more helpful to understand Putin's Russia. Frye makes points of comparison to Erdogan's Turkey, Orban's Hungary, Chavez' and Maduro's Venezuela, etc. along the way, but these are not analysed in depth. The similarities, however, are striking:

A street-smart outsider (often) from a poor background comes to power in a dysfunctional democracy with a disorganised opposition experiencing either political or economic upheavals in a highly unequal, middle-income country, and rides to success and popularity on the back on an economic boom. As popularity is a key lever of power vis-à-vis both rebel elites and masses (as it makes the rebellious think twice about rebellion), the initial popularity is invoked to dismantle the power bases of the previous elite, and to begin to dismantle the courts, intimidate the free press, and discredit political opponents as traitors, terrorists, or foreign agents. Skilful at managing conflicts among new elites, the emerging strongman placates the loyalists in this new elite by allowing for their enrichment through corruption.

Anti-Western nationalism and a more assertive foreign policy are used to bolster legitimacy and popularity at home, and to discredit opponents and institutions as fifth-column stooges of Western conspiracies. They are also used to rally around the flag and other deeply felt parochial sources of identity and divert attention and blame for own responsibility for (increasing) problems at home. When the more assertive foreign policy abroad 'exceeds its grasp' (Frye 153) or overreaches (Shirk 2023) and is faced with pushback on the international stage, the language of 'containment' or of being a 'besieged fortress' (Frye 171) is often adopted at home to blame the West.



Anti-Western nationalism and a more assertive foreign policy are used to bolster legitimacy and popularity at home, and to discredit opponents and institutions as fifth-column stooges of Western conspiracies.

But even if this leaves the strongman largely unrivalled at home, Frye goes on to argue that it nevertheless leaves him weakened by a series of three limitations particular to personalist autocratic rule. First, while undermining institutions might be good for amassing power, it is bad for keeping it. Hollowing out institutional independence leaves the rising strongman with no backing if opposing elites manage to infiltrate these institutions, as was arguably the case with the Gülenists in Turkey. Weak institutions and a tendency towards political shifts on a whim create deep uncertainties that tend to spur capital flight and hinder long-term economic commitments. This has clearly also been part of the story behind the economic downturn in Turkey from around 2013.

Finally, weak institutions increase the feelings of vulnerability in the strongman, as there are no institutions to protect him in retirement. Comparative studies show, for example, that 70% of personalistic autocrats tend to leave office by 'irregular' means, and 80% thereof end up in jail, in exile, or dead within one year of leaving office (Frye 43). This feature also helps foster an increasingly narrow inner circle that tends toward consisting more of family and loyalists, and less on merit, raising the risk of bad decisions. Erdogan tried and failed to promote one son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, as an economics czar and possible successor. Now the talk is of another son-in-law, the politically completely untried, but popular, drone engineer, Selcuk Bayraktar (*Turkey Recap* 2023b; Karaveli 2023). Expanding on Frye here, this proclivity for loyalty also undermines meritocracy

and discourages speaking truth to power, encouraging what Susan Shirk in her book on Chinese overreach has referred to as 'mechanical overcompliance' (Shirk 2023).

The second source of weakness is the dual challenge of managing to stem threats from both the elite and the masses. This dilemma becomes particularly pronounced at times of economic downturn, as it becomes more difficult to both shower the masses with gifts and enrich the elites through fixed state contracts and other forms of corruption. Mass demonstrations that took down the Soviet Union, the so-called Colour Revolutions, and the Arab Spring often figure as sources of worry for personalistic autocrats. Having supported the demonstrations of the Arab Spring in 2011, Erdogan was reminded of this threat during the 2013 Gezi demonstration. Elite threats are often more difficult to gauge. There are several examples of severe intra-party infighting in the AKP. And the Gülenist factions of the elite likely staged both the damning graft probe against Erdogan in December 2013 and were likely in on the coup attempt of 15 July 2016. Popular and unruly politicians such as the former Minister of Interior, Suleyman Soylu, were replaced by loyalists and unknown technocrats following the May 2023 electoral victory. This dual threat is there for Erdogan as well and has become more difficult to address as the economy has faltered.

Though Erdogan did regain some popular support from his turn to nationalism in 2015, he also came to rely on repression as his primary tool of leadership. This is the third of Frye's sources of weakness in personalistic autocracies. Repression of the masses and rival members of the elite demands a boost of strength to security bodies. Turkey's police, gendarmerie, intelligence service, and army have all gotten a significant boost in recent years. But strong security bodies can also turn on the leader if the leadership of these security bodies – in the absence of strong and independent institutional backing – are cornered into a situation where the autocratic leader is a key liability for their ability to secure their own futures. Placating the military and intelligence services by bringing their leaderships into government, as Erdogan has done, thus enables Erdogan to co-opt the repressive tools thereof, but it also exposes him to the whims of the key home interests of these security bodies.¹³

It is beyond the scope of this brief report to unfold and discuss in more detail whether this brief application of Frye's points to the case of Turkey stands further scrutiny. The immediate similarities are, however, striking. Different from Applebaum and many observers today, tendencies towards the establishment of

strongman, personalistic autocracies, if immediately and apparently successful, could seem to introduce a significant structural pushback to the further strength and success of the strongman and these countries. The increasingly muscular foreign policy against foreign powers out to threaten a given country's national sovereignty that often come with strongman tendencies are likely to foster pushback from without. Also, as security hardliners and populist hawks tend to push into the innermost circles of leadership this tends to come at the expense of agents and drivers of economic reform and growth.

The report will now turn to present, in outline, two further sources of weakness and pushback facing Erdogan and Turkey, two so-called geopolitical forms of pushback.



Photo and description: ID PB4PXM, oxinoxi / Alamy Stock Photo. A cracked and fragile Turkish Flag.

TWO TYPES OF GEOPOLITICAL PUSHBACK

As described in the first chapter, Erdogan and Turkey has come up against pushback from both without and within, leading Erdogan to make several policy U-turns. The 2015 U-turn is still the most pronounced. As outlined in the previous chapter, this pushback has also at least accelerated the development of a system of government that at a minimum shares a series of key traits with the system Timothy Frye dubs a 'personalist autocracy', including the sources of weakness arguably inherent in this system. These sources of weakness act as a further form of pushback, in the background, as it were. This third chapter will unfold how this development and sources of weakness at home in this type of government meet a further series of constraining features, collectively dubbed here as 'geopolitical

pushback'. This chapter will outline two such types of geopolitical pushback. First, there are a set of recalcitrant sources of constraint on both Erdogan and Turkey that seem to stem from more constant features of Turkey's unique geography, history, and demographics. Secondly, and perhaps still somewhat controversial, there are a series of geopolitical constraints that stem from the fact – as it will be argued – that the room to manoeuvre in a hoped-for multipolar world is beginning to narrow again at present.

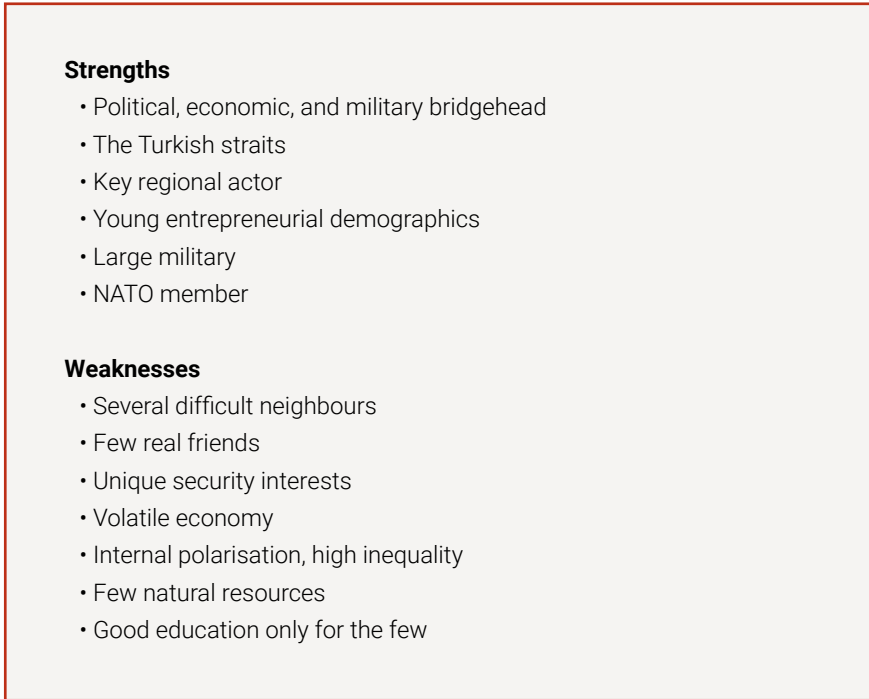
WHY TURKEY CANNOT BE STRONG AND INDEPENDENT AT THE SAME TIME

Turkey's geopolitical role after Russia's 24 February 2022 attack on Ukraine has become the subject of widespread discussion.¹⁴ Turkey is often mentioned as one of the so-called 'middle powers' or 'swing states' (Ünlühisarcıklı 2023) that now want to decide, rather than be told, what's in their interest in the rapidly changing geopolitical order. They want to be at the table (Krastev 2022), not on the menu; to be a player, not a pawn in an emerging great power stand-off. These swing states seem united by dissatisfaction with their marginalisation in world affairs. If less a cohesive movement than a shared desire for autonomy and distance, mid-sized powers play more sides off each other to avoid being engulfed by some new Cold War of two hegemons (*The Economist* 2023c). And to gain some modicum of independence by diversifying their dependencies.

Like India and Saudi Arabia, Turkey seems to have room to manoeuvre. It engages equally with China, Russia, and the West to prise out a space for its own unique interests in the middle, as it were (*Financial Times* 2023b). Turkey is particularly adept at leveraging Russia–US tensions (and China–US tensions) or hedging against getting dragged in (Kupchan 2023).

As a 2023 Stratfor analysis of *The Modern Geopolitics of Turkey* argues (Stratfor 2023), it is best for a so-called middle power like Turkey when the international geopolitical environment is fragmented, and the world is multipolar. Listing the geopolitical strengths and weaknesses that Stratfor and the other aforementioned contributions (in endnote 14) make, something like this simplified scheme emerges (Figure 5). As a middle power, Turkey is not strong enough to unilaterally impose its own policies and interests. But it is also not so weak that it can be forced into the orbit of another great power.

Figure 5. Select geopolitical strengths and weaknesses of Erdogan's Turkey



Sources: Stratfor 2023; Dalay 2023; Özel 2023; Basbugoglu & Korkut 2023; Aydintasbas & Shapiro 2023; Barkey 2023; Koru 2023; Pierini 2023; Robinson 2023; Alaranta et al. 2023; Shah 2009 & Schmid 2022

The problem for Erdogan's Turkey is that it struggles to be both strong and independent at the same time. As the first chapter outlined, Erdogan and Turkey have been met with two episodes of regional and international pushback in recent years. First, its assertive support for conservative Sunni Muslim populations and NGOs of the 2011 Arab Spring isolated Turkey in the region at the same time as a top-down imposition of conservative religious values at home – under the banner of wanting to 'raise a pious generation' – confronted Erdogan with significant pushback at home. For the West, Erdogan seemed to either tacitly approve or support some of the militantly Islamist groups in Syria that the West perceived as a threat. Moreover, Erdogan supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, even as it seemed to quickly turn an electoral victory into a subversion of the infant Egyptian democracy.

Secondly, as Erdogan U-turned to tap into Turkish nationalism and a type of 'forward defence' of the 'Mavi Vatan' (Blue Homeland) in the East Med, most other littoral states of the East Med (and the UAE and France, etc) teamed up in

the East Med Gas Forum (EMGF) and, through several new defence deals, isolated Turkey in its neighbourhood again between 2018-2020. Greece, for example, significantly strengthened its energy and defence ties with the UAE, Israel, France, and the US during these years as a hedge against Turkey.

If perhaps not subject to any overt pushback, Turkey's hedging stance on Russia since Russia's 24 February 2022 attack on Ukraine has not helped either, especially as Turkey's role as a mediator and facilitator of a grain deal between Russia and Ukraine has waned. The 2019 reception of the Russian S-400 strategic missile defence system was particularly costly. This got Turkey expelled from the F-35 programme that would have given Turkish defence companies billions of dollars in earnings for many years, would have provided the Turkish military industrial complex with valuable technological insights into high-end 5th generation fighter aircraft technology, and would have provided the Turkish air force with a massive regional advantage. Turkey has been highly constrained in the deployment of the S-400 system and has arguably only obtained the craved-for tech transfer to a very limited degree. Moreover, it led the US and others to outright sanction Turkish institutions and companies, e.g. under the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). If Erdogan's engagement with Putin since 24 February 2022 has been less costly, it has still left Turkish companies with sanctions over the re-shipping or selling of dual-use products to Russia, and it has hardly helped bolster trust between Turkey and the US.¹⁵




The problem for Erdogan's Turkey is that it struggles to be both strong and independent at the same time.

Except for Orban's Hungary, Erdogan has also failed to make any strong friends in NATO. Aside from the S-400 purchase and more generally Turkey's relationship with Russia, the Kurdish question has been the most taxing issue for Turkey–NATO relations since around 2015 (Serveta 2022). Turkey's October 2019 Operation Peace Spring into the Kurdish-controlled area of north-eastern Syria caused a series of new issues with those NATO members also participating in Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Turkey held up NATO defence plans for eastern Europe in the autumn of 2019, allegedly over whether to include the YPG in charge of the Kurdish-controlled area in north-eastern Syria as a terror group in NATO's internal terror threat assessments. This, in part, led Macron to make his infamous claim that NATO was 'brain dead'

(Reuters 2019a; 2019b). Also, Erdogan has won little praise in NATO for holding up Sweden's NATO membership application between May 2021 and January 2024, again primarily over claimed Swedish support for the YPG and other groups that Turkey sees as affiliated to the terror group, PKK (see Alaranta 2022).

Turkey's NATO membership since 1952 is telling as an example of Turkey's uneasy equation of geopolitical strengths and weaknesses. Having remained neutral during WWII, Turkey was in a weak position when Stalin likely threatened to take the Turkish Straits following the war (Isci 2023). This incentivised Turkey to volunteer to send troops to fight on the US side in Korea (in 1950), pushed it to hold its first real democratic elections (in 1950), and become a NATO member in 1952. US President Truman also wanted Turkey on board as the southern flank in the emerging Cold War against the Soviet Union and rising communist proclivities in Turkey. This simultaneous push and pull into NATO became a source of strength for Turkey.

Today, Turkey's NATO membership is one of its most valuable geopolitical assets. First, the strategic umbrella it provides is an ace in Erdogan's deck when he travels to both Moscow and Teheran for negotiations. Proactive military support for anti-Russian groups in Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Syria also would likely not have been possible save for the NATO protection. Second, it is key for Turkey to be in a powerful club that has Greece as a member. Otherwise, threats of military action against Greece would count as an outside threat to a NATO member (*Daily Sabah* 2022). Years of bitter, EU-related, experiences have shown Turkey the detrimental effects of being outside a strong club that has Greece as a member. Thirdly, as recent developments have amply shown, Turkey has made good use of its NATO membership as a tool to limit the diplomatic and military support for the PKK and affiliate groups (Levin 2023; Reuters 2009; 2019b).



Turkey's NATO membership since 1952 is telling as an example of Turkey's uneasy equation of geopolitical strengths and weaknesses.

Fourthly, Turkey has invoked its NATO membership as a lever in negotiations with both the EU and other non-NATO states, for example Austria (Lindgaard & Pieper 2020; NATO 2004). Fifthly, Turkey's NATO membership is – perhaps surprisingly – actually highly beneficial to the development of Turkey's own defence industry.

To be developed further in another DIIS Report, Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) is, for example, based on a joint venture from 1984 (until 2005) with Lockheed Martin and General Electric to build F-16 fighter jets (and the F-110 engines for the F-16s) in Turkey for the Turkish and Egyptian armies (Lockheed Martin 2005). Roketsan was established in 1988 under the European Stinger joint production project to co-produce Stinger missiles (GlobalSecurity.org 2023). Large parts of Turkey's current military technological knowhow stem from these joint ventures. Along with its ability to market its products as meeting NATO standards, this is a clear source of strength for Turkey. Finally, NATO provides Erdogan and Turkey a platform from where it can play a more prominent role at the centre stage of the new geopolitical landscape. It is a key source of pride for most, if not all, Turks – and hence a source of domestic popularity for Erdogan – to play a strong and independent role on the world stage. Recent-year NATO-summits count as apt examples here.



The more independent Turkey becomes, the weaker it also seems to get.

The trouble for Turkey is that its push for a more independent foreign and security policy increasingly brings Turkey into the crosshairs of its NATO allies. When Turkey invokes its NATO membership to gain impunity as it challenges others (for example Russia as was the case with the November 2015 shoot-down of a Russian jet on the border between Turkey and Syria) or when Turkish drone support for Ukraine led to the targeting of pro-Russia groups already in October 2021, it creates what Aaron Stein – building on classical alliance theory (e.g. Snyder 1990) – has referred to as 'Alliance Entrapment' (Stein 2021). It also nearly came to blows in July 2020 with France off the Libyan coast (*Reuters* 2020b). In another example, Turkish bombing dangerously near US bases and troops in Syria and Iraq led the US to eventually shoot down a Turkish drone over Syria in October 2023. (*Reuters* 2023e). NATO-on-NATO Incidents like these isolate Turkey within NATO. Other NATO members hardly rush to Turkey's aid when Erdogan calls.

But the problem for Turkey runs deeper than incidents like these suggest. For instance, Turkey's and NATO's top threat perceptions not only lack any overlap, what could be argued are Turkey's top four perceived threats include two NATO countries, and Turkey accuses NATO countries of aiding and abetting the other two perceived threats (See Figure 6). The US and Europe are often accused of conspiring with the

likes of the PKK, Greece, and FETÖ against Turkey (Gingeras 2023a; Reuters 2021). Latter-year strengthening of US–Greece defence ties as well as the US’ unwillingness to extradite Fetullah Gülen from the US to Turkey following the July 2016 coup attempt are also often read as American attempts to conspire against Turkey. Between around 50% (Turkuzlab 2020) and 72% (PEW 2017) of Turks recurrently point to the US as the biggest national threat to Turkey, well ahead of other perceived state-level threats (Figure 7). One of Turkey’s great challenges is that it seems to share the bulk of its perceived threats with no one else.

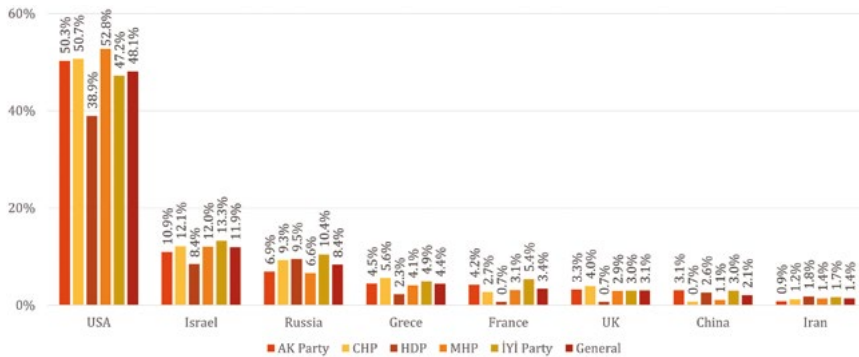
Figure 6. Turkey's and NATO's perceived top threats in recent years

Turkey	NATO
1. The PKK	1. Russia
2. Greece	2. China (not officially labelled a threat)
3. FETÖ (Gülenists)	3. ISIS & AQ
4. The US	

Source: Assessment based on polls, threat assessments, and security strategies in Turkey and NATO.

Conversely, other NATO members have expressed misgivings about Turkey’s claimed relationships with Russia, China, and militant Islamist groups in Syria. On Russia, questions have been raised on Turkey’s tripling of trade with Russia since 24 February 2022, a corresponding deepening of trade relations with a new MoU in August 2022, Turkey acting as a conduit for otherwise hard-to-get technologies and dual-use products that Russia needs, and more generally providing Putin with what looks like a geopolitical ally against Western attempts at containment (Gamio & Swanson 2022; Reuters 2022; 2023c). Back in 2020 Western countries also expressed misgivings about Turkey’s seemingly fast-tracked warming-up of relations with China, e.g. inviting both Huawei and ZTE to take on key roles in Turkey’s 5G mobile network infrastructure and inviting China to join a military exercise with Turkey (Tol 2020; Alemdaroglu & Tepe 2020; Erdemir & Kowalski 2020; Tavsan 2020; Stone 2020; Bloomberg 2020; Gurcan 2018; Atlı 2018). As part of Turkey’s attempt to secure tech transfer through its purchase of a strategic air defence system, Turkey also negotiated with China back in 2013 on buying a version of the Chinese HQ-9 system, to the dismay of the US. Also, the early years of the Syrian war saw repeated Western recriminations to the effect that Turkey was more or less actively supporting militant Islamist groups in Northern Syria, including the likes of Al Qaeda and ISIS (Reuters 2015; Landler et al. 2014).

Figure 7. The biggest threat to Turkey



Source: Turkuzlab 2020, SLIDE 64 of this: <https://www.turkuazlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Dimensions-of-Polarization-in-Turkey-2020.pdf> 16-06-2023, 14.19

All this grates away at mutual trust. Though about 50–60% of Turks normally respond to polling that continued NATO membership is a good idea, trust in NATO normally tabs in at around 9–15% (Bilgi 2018; *Daily Sabah* 2021). Trust in NATO members such as the USA and France comes in even lower than that, with trust in the US coming in at 2% and in France at 0% in a 2018 poll (Yahontov 2021). In January 2023, 92% of 50,000 people surveyed by the Turkish pro-government news agency, AA, also said ‘No’ to Swedish NATO membership (AA 2023). A trust deficit like this is hard to quantify, but clearly the assumption of bad faith in your counterpart is rarely a helpful point of departure for agreement or joint action. And the often-conspiratorial reasons for the trust deficit get confirmed quickly when NATO members are hesitant about providing air defence systems to Turkey in so-called §4 meetings in NATO or when US Raytheon or French-Italian Eurosam are reluctant to transfer their high-end technology to Turkey as part of a deal for Turkey to buy such high-end air defence systems (Townsend & Ellehuus 2019; Lindgaard et al. 2018).

In sum, further invocation of its NATO membership towards gaining further independence is likely to also weaken Turkey further. Not only has it made Turkey's NATO allies more reluctant to come out in defence of Turkey; it has also resulted in a number of sanctions and restrictions on sales of weapons to Turkey and more. The more independent Turkey becomes, the weaker it also seems to get. This is also – and perhaps especially – the case on the economy, to which the report now turns.

THE BAD GUYS ARE LOSING ... IN AN INCREASINGLY UNIPOLAR WORLD

The perhaps most consequential geopolitical pushback experienced by Erdogan's Turkey is on the economy. Overreach has been bad for business. So has the turn towards a more populist and nationalist form of government developed in conjunction with increasing autocratic tendencies. Unpredictability and arbitrary rule tend to cause capital flight, as the previous chapter also brought out as the inherent structural weakness facing Erdogan and Turkey. In addition to that, as has increasingly been the case, there seems to be no real contemporary alternative source of economic strength for Erdogan's Turkey than strong relations with Europe and the US. This section will unfold how that is and end by widening the aperture to argue that hedging for independence with countries such as Russia, China, and the Gulf countries not only comes with its own constraints on independence, but it is also no hedge in a balance for more independence from the West in a not decreasingly, but increasingly unipolar world. Even if Erdogan and the other members of Applebaum's 'Autocrats Inc' continuously seek to confirm voices from the West that we live in an increasingly multipolar world, facts rather than perceptions seem to suggest that something like the opposite is true – and increasingly so.


Like Putin in Timothy Frye's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey enjoyed an economic boom in the 2000s, the early (and more pro-European) years of Erdogan's rule. Building on the pre-AKP 2001 IMF deal to restructure Turkey's then faltering economy, recently deceased economy czar, Kemal Dervis, made it possible for an EU-oriented Erdogan to quadruple Turkey's GDP per capita between 2002 and 2013.

As indicated, three overlapping dynamics reversed this trajectory. The series of overreaches from around 2011, as outlined in the first chapter, cooled interest in expanding on official frameworks to deepen investment and trade ties with Turkey. This was the case for Europe and the US, but also for most, if not all, Gulf countries and the littoral states of the East Med. Plans in the EU to upgrade the 1995 customs union and to grant visa liberalisation to Turkey also stalled.

Second, the increasing autocratic tendencies added to the overreach, and worked to cool both international government and international business interest in Erdogan's Turkey. As Frye notes in his chapter on the foreign policy implications of increasingly autocratic systems, the ascent of security hardliners into the inner circles of the leader often comes at the expense of agents of economic reform, trade, and growth (Frye 2021, 165–66).¹⁶ This seems to be particularly true of

Erdogan's Turkey. The widespread and harsh crackdowns on demonstrators, the Gülenists, opposition media and politicians etc. since around 2013 not only saw agents of political reform and economic growth sidelined; the rise of security hardliners and financial populists also added to a cooling of EU sentiments on Turkey. Additionally, the changes led international traders, investors, and credit rating bureaus to gradually turn their backs on Turkey, as the risk profile of long-term economic commitments to Turkey grew more complicated. The deterioration of rule of law, increasing corruption, grey listing by the International Financial Action Taskforce (FATF), Erdoganomics, and an increasingly strained international environment due to Turkey's more independent and muscular foreign policy stance all added to the cooling.

All sorts of tariffs, sanctions, export restrictions, and designations of Turkish entities have added to the economic strain. It does seem to be the case that Erdogan's overreach and the vulnerability and uncertainty introduced with the increasingly autocratic tendencies are bad for business. Erdogan's foreign policy U-turns of November 2020 and May 2023 towards more pro-Western and pragmatic strands also seem to stem from a realisation that a more diplomatic foreign policy attitude is necessary to keep the Turkish economy from returning to a crisis scenario like that of 2001 mentioned above.



There is reason to think that pushback will increasingly arise from the realisation that the room to manoeuvre in the middle of some bipolar world or even as an independent resurging great power in some multipolar world is shrinking.

Thirdly, and perhaps more controversially, there is reason to think that pushback will increasingly arise from the realisation that the room to manoeuvre in the middle of some bipolar world or even as an independent resurging great power in some multipolar world is shrinking. How could this seem controversial? From the mid-2000s economic booms in countries such as Russia, China, and Turkey added to rising perceptions in these countries from around the time of the 2008 financial crisis in the West that the so-called unipolar moment of the post-Cold War era was coming to an end, and that the window was again opening for the resuscitation of dormant great power ambitions. Or at least opening for pushback against a weakening West, no longer in a position to dictate geopolitical developments. Putin's 2007 Munich speech against NATO's eastward expansion is a case in point. So is

Erdogan's recurrent stating that the world is 'bigger than five', a critique of the fact that there are merely five permanent members of the UN Security Council. So too is Xi's frequent recalling that the 'East is rising'. Add to this the rising internal problems of the West, best exemplified by the 2016 Brexit vote, the 2016 election of Donald Trump in the US, and the messy exit from Afghanistan in 2021, and the picture of a unipolar world can seem hard to sustain.

The trouble with this picture is that the facts are less worrying for the West than are the alarmist perceptions (Haass & Kupchan 2021). Moreover, the trends following Covid-19 and Ukraine makes the picture even less alarming. A brief look at key political, economic, technological, and military indicators makes this clear. Contrary to China and Russia, for instance, the US has a host of economically and militarily powerful friends across the world and no real foes in its immediate neighbourhood.¹⁷

Comparing official, nominal GDP figures,¹⁸ there is also no real match to the US alone, and even less so if the friends of the US are included in the picture.¹⁹ It has become clear in recent years that both China and Russia are increasingly struggling to change this picture. Likewise, it is also increasingly being argued (e.g. by Logan Wright in 'Hearing on China's Current Economy' (2023)) – if still not widely recognised – that China is not the pacing threat to the US it is still widely perceived to be. Also, talk in the context of an expanding BRICS and OPEC+ of the Chinese Renminbi or some other currency challenging the US dollar as the preferred currency for world trade or reserves also seems to come up against facts. According to the most recent IMF numbers, 2.45% of the world's foreign reserves are held in the Renminbi, and 58.9% in USD, 20% in Euros, 5.4% in Japanese Yen, and 4.9% in UK GBP (IMF 2023). Though China has tried to boost the share of world trade to be conducted in Renminbi through the issuance of Chinese loans under the Belt and Road initiative and bilateral trade with Russia to be conducted in Renminbi, the picture for world trade is still largely the same as the one for the reserves (Statista 2023). Continued current account surpluses, tight Chinese capital controls, and risks of sweeping arbitrary and untransparent political changes in monetary policy point to the unlikelihood that this picture will change significantly looking ahead.

The same overall picture holds true for technological capacity. As Brooks and Wohlforth convey, even if payments for Chinese intellectual property – an apt way to measure technological capacity – have risen from 1 BN USD in 2014 to 12 BN in 2021, the comparable number for the US in 2021 is 125 BN USD, 59 BN for Germany, and 47 BN for Japan. Also, US firms earn 53% of global profit shares in high-tech

sectors of 2,000 corporations compared across the world, with Japan coming in second at 7% and China third at 6%. (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2023). Though China seems to be technologically very strong within areas such as electric vehicles and batteries, the explosion of e.g. AI and other hi-tech companies in the US in recent years only seems to confirm this picture.

The contrast for relative military strength is even starker. On military spending, the US alone outspends China about 3 to 1, Russia 11 to 1, and has outspent them even more than that for many years. As Brooks and Wohlforth also argue, the contrast is starker still if military experience and quality are factored in. At a time where technology is of increasing importance in the military domain as well, this quality difference is likely to grow. So is the relative strength of the treaty alliances and other bi- and multilateral defence partnerships that the US vis-à-vis Russia and China will be a member of in the near future. Only a most extreme scenario of a US withdrawal from NATO under a possible future Trump administration would seriously change the relative balance of military power between the treaty alliances, if not completely upend the US advantage.

Further metrics only bring out this difference. As tallied by overseasbases.net, the US has between 750 and 800 overseas bases in some 80 different countries across the world. China has one confirmed overseas base in Djibouti, a country that also hosts military bases of Germany, Spain, Italy, France, the UK, Saudi Arabia, and the US (Yimer 2021, US Department of Defense 2023, XI). Numbers tallied by Swedish SIPRI also reveal a growing distance between the US and Europe on the one hand and Russia and China on the other on weapons exports (SIPRI 2023b). France even seems on track to overtake Russia as the world's second largest arms exporter (Thompson 2023). Developments within the top 100 arms producers in the world reveal a similar trend (*Defense News* 2023). Out of top-100 arms producers in 2023, measured according to revenue from weapons sales, 51 were American, four Chinese, and Zero Russian. Measured on total revenue, the difference is even starker.²⁰

Finally, demographic trends will also increasingly weigh down on China's and Russia's relative powers, with populations in China and Russia ageing significantly faster than the US and Europe.

There is of course infinitely more detail to this picture than this brief overview allows for. It naturally matters if the US decides to pursue a more isolationist and protectionist path, especially if Donald Trump is to return to the White House in

January 2025. This cannot be ruled out. The US retrenchment from the Middle East and North Africa to lead 'from afar' as it were, has already put on display what local pockets of power vacuum can entail. It has also led countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to try their hand at more assertive roles as self-proclaimed regional power brokers.

All that said, and returning to Erdogan's Turkey, Russia and China are no real match for Europe and the US as hedging partners for Turkey when it comes to gaining political, economic, and military strength. Europe is by far still Turkey's largest export destination and foreign investor. The ability of Erdogan's new financial team since the May 2023 U-turn to turn Turkey's economic downturn around hinges strongly on Erdogan's ability to re-establish trust in Turkey among European and US capitals (*Euronews* 2021, *Indytürk* 2021). The merits of his new financial team all trace back to their training and experience in the US. His October turn from a mediator to a steeply anti-Western critic of the European and US stance on the Gaza conflict, again aligning him with the Russian and Chinese stances on the conflict, will prove counterproductive to this effort. In the wording used in this report, the pursuit of a more independent and anti-Western course will again at least complicate the economic strength Turkey enjoyed around 2011, following several years of a pro-European stance.



Photo and description: ID 2318070103 okanozdemir, Shutterstock.com. TCG Anadolu (L400) warship and Baykar Bayraktar TB3 armed unmanned aerial vehicle SIHA in the inventory of the Turkish Navy. Istanbul Fatih, 27.05.23.

MORE PUSHBACK AHEAD

This report began with a brief outline of Erdogan's U-turn on the Gaza conflict of 7 October 2023, from an initial attempt at gaining a role as a neutral mediator to a more hardnosed support for Hamas and the Palestinians. Taken together, this coupled with the other U-turns unfolded in the first chapter, and a more general sense of unpredictability about Erdogan's Turkey illustrate just how elusive getting Erdogan's Turkey right can seem. Taking a closer look at the domestic and international pushback against Erdogan and Turkey from around 2013, and Erdogan's turn from around 2015 to tap into Turkish nationalism and its concomitant quest for independence from the West provided a first insight into the dynamics at play.

The second and third chapters took a step back to consider other dynamics underpinning these U-turns. The tendency towards the invocation of nationalism by strongmen in a bind, how this strengthens the strongman around an increasingly autocratic system in the short term, but also how this provides a further source of pushback from the inherent weaknesses in such a system in the longer term, was one such further dynamic. So too were the two types of pushback outlined in the third chapter, the more constant forms tied to Turkey's geography, demography, and history exemplified by Turkey's troubled NATO-membership; and the more recent forms tied to the fact – as this report has tried to argue briefly – that the world is getting increasingly unipolar, not multi-, bi-, or a-polar as is often argued today.

The tension between Erdogan's tendency towards overreach and the various forms of pushback that this has incurred is key to understanding not merely Erdogan's turn on Hamas and Gaza, but also how Erdogan's Turkey is likely to act looking forward. This final chapter will spell out this tension and outline some of the challenges (and opportunities) this holds for Europe and the West.

A PEAKING POWER DILEMMA

One challenging way this tension can come to bear is in the form of what can be dubbed a 'peaking power dilemma', a critical adaptation of the idea of a 'peaking power trap' as popularised by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley for the case of China (Brands & Beckley 2021; 2022a; 2022b; Brands 2022). According to Brands and Beckley, a peaking power is a regional or global power that has been on the rise and begun to nurture ideas of either gaining significant new (or resuscitating past) strengths at a time when a dawning economic slowdown or strategic encirclement begins to close the window of opportunity on its dreams. The peaking power trap is the idea that the peaking power will be moved by the outlook of its peaking powers to lash out and grab what it can before the window closes. Brands and Beckley thus envision a looming military conflict over Taiwan already in 2025, born more of Chinese frustration that its powers are peaking than from further strength and confidence.

Adapted to apply to Erdogan's Turkey (and a possible add-on to Brand and Beckley's more general idea) it is perhaps helpful to include the strongman and not just the nation state as the subject of this idea. In the 2013–2015 period, for example, it was not just Turkey that faced pushback and loss, it was also – and arguably more importantly – Erdogan. Turns to a more aggressive and even muscular foreign policy stance in both 2015 and 2019 followed his electoral losses. The shift to a

more aggressive stance enabled Erdogan to rally around a nationalist flag to fend off increasing pressure at home. The May 2023 turn towards a more accommodating foreign policy stance, on the other hand, followed his electoral win, albeit against the backdrop of looming economic threats to the Turkish economy. Arguably, the Hamas and Gaza case also put Erdogan under pressure, as a combination of the US diplomatic slight of him coupled with loud and popular domestic criticism of Israel and the US forced him to change approach.

The return to a more belligerent stance towards the West, however, will at least complicate the turn Erdogan made after the May 2023 election towards a more pro-Western approach to save the flailing Turkish economy. And failure to improve the economy could complicate Erdogan's likely push to reclaim e.g. Istanbul in the March 2024 local elections. Tapping into nationalist (or Islamist) tropes and rallying around the flag against strongly perceived threats from outside and within are relevant tools to gain and retain popularity and power. But they tend to cluster security hardliners into a tighter inner circle and foster a more belligerent approach to the world outside. And this, in turn, tends to lead to overreach then pushback, with political isolation and economic downturn as a consequence. Also, the populist economic policy that seems to have joined the turn to a more populist nationalist policy from around 2015, itself makes it even more difficult for Turkey to fend off the economic pushback from without.

It is a difficult balancing act for Erdogan. As China's Xi seemed ready to do in his meeting with Biden on the sidelines of the APEC in mid-November 2023, Erdogan is now putting a lid on the belligerence in the interest of stabilising the economy. He did so for about six months from November 2020 and again from May 2023. In a step back from its hardline independent stance on security, Turkey also in 2024 joined the pan-European Sky Shield Initiative, a German-led joint missile defence project (*Bloomberg* 2024b). But the balancing act still seems to get more frustrated, the U-turns more frequent, and the return to a more belligerent stance more readily available.

Is Turkey then heading for a peaking power trap? Arguably the turns to crack down militarily on the primary foe of nationalist Turkey, the PKK and affiliate groups, after both of his electoral losses in 2015 and 2019 seem to suggest that this could indeed be the case. The polling spikes that have come with each new military operation into Northern Syria and Iraq, along with the highly popular display of new home-made military hardware in the run-up to the May 2023 election also seem to suggest it could be the case.

But there are also a series of mitigating circumstances and developments. For one, Erdogan's political opposition seems to be in even worse disarray after the May 23 election than before (*Turkey Recap* 2023d). Second, however difficult, there seems to be a general recognition that keeping the Turkish economy from the brink requires that Turkey reverses the path of worsening relations with Europe and the US. Thirdly, there seems to be a sobering realisation that the much-needed modernisation of the Turkish air force depends on steering clear of further fallout with the US in particular. Turkey's recent ratification of Sweden's NATO membership in return for the ability to buy F-16s from the US would seem to speak to this point. Fourthly, Erdogan is also likely aware that his renewed support for Hamas and display of the Rabia finger sign in support of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated to Hamas on the day he declared support to Hamas will be met with steep pushback from the leaderships in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Israel, all countries Erdogan has been normalising relations with in recent years. Erdogan's first-ever visit to Sisi in Cairo in March 2024 (*Bloomberg* 2024a) couples with an attempt to keep the support for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood tempered and contained in the domestic news to suggest that Erdogan is aware that he needs to keep the belligerence at bay. Selling Turkish drones to Egypt adds to the nationalist pride (*Reuters* 2024).

Also, Erdogan is of course not completely isolated. In the nationalist vein, Erdogan's engagement with the ramped-up Organization of Turkic States (OTS) seems to be a more successful attempt at the 'pan-Turkism' than those tried and failed by the governments of the 1990s prior to Erdogan's rule. Erdogan has also fostered stronger relations with other populist, nationalist leaders such as Serbia's Vucic and Hungary's Orban. The hold-up of Finland's and Sweden's NATO applications seems subject to coordination between Erdogan and Orban, as both Hungary and Turkey greenlit Finland's bid on 17 March 2023, the day after Erdogan and Orban had met at a sidebar meeting to an OTS summit in Ankara (*MacDougall* 2023a; *Reuters* 2023d; *Scribner* 2023; *OTS* 2023).

That said, further pushback on things such as Turkey's extensive purchase of Russian hydrocarbons – Turkey has overtaken India to become the second-largest importer of Russian energy by December 2023 (*CREA* 2024) – and increased sale of dual-use products to Russia (*Financial Times* 2023c) are likely to keep the peaking power dilemma in place for Erdogan in the immediate future. Moreover, possibly the only real friend of Erdogan's nationalist Turkey, Azerbaijan, is closely allied with Israel. Except for Iran, regional isolation awaits if Erdogan pursues a hard-nosed approach in support of Hamas, and Erdogan is aware that neither he nor Turkey can afford that.

Instead of a peaking power trap, Erdogan thus seems to be trying to straddle an increasingly constraining dilemma between populist appeals to nationalist quests for increased independence often over and against relations with the West, and a more pragmatic outreach to the West to avoid losing popularity to a faltering economy as well as political and security-related isolation.

A DIFFERENT AND MORE INTRACTABLE CHALLENGE FOR NATO AND THE WEST

The increasingly strained balancing act is even likely to get harder. Erdogan's Turkey has to navigate between, on the one hand, a populist tapping into nationalist or Islamist narratives that tend to push Ankara towards overreach and subsequent isolation and pushback, and on the other hand, a much less popular but much needed turn to diplomatic outreach and a less populist economic policy. Thus, the challenge that Erdogan's Turkey poses to NATO and the West more generally is not one of a confident, expansionist actor guided by neo-Ottoman ambitions. Rather, it is born of frustration at this increasingly strained balancing act. In the meantime, the structural and geopolitical challenges outlined in the second and third chapters work in the background to exacerbate this frustration.²¹

For brevity, the challenge can be divided into 'intention' and 'capacity'. Intention first. As before there is more at play here than who Erdogan and what Turkey 'really' are. In a powerful May 2023 speech labelled 'Ukraine and the New World Disorder', Fiona Hill points to what she sees as a historical and contemporary resentment among middle powers of the so-called Global South against a perceived overreach by the hegemonic West as the main reason for their lukewarm support for Ukraine (Hill 2023). These countries share a marked appetite for independence and distance in a world without a hegemon. And they want to avoid getting squeezed or consumed by some new great power competition (Sweijts & Mazarr 2023; *The Economist* 2021). Increased trade with, or ostensible support for, Russia (or China) is not a function of newfound love but invoked as a lever to push back against Western hegemony and prise out a more independent and recognised space for themselves.

With an addition, this fits the Turkish bill as well. As with the addendum to Brands and Beckley from the previous section, it is helpful to consider the strongman leader as separate from the country (see also Levin, 2019 for a different way of making this point). To retain power (and divert attention from own responsibility for a country's challenges), a weak strongman will often find it helpful to play up conspiracies about

the US, the West, or NATO as some all-powerful hegemon acting to contain his country or support its enemies to undermine it from within. Accusations that the West is adopting double standards will often figure at the core of this narrative. If most populations still use iPhones, watch Western movies, and want to send their kids to school in the West, the strongman leader will play to this scepticism towards claimed Western double standards at home in the population to retain power. This also makes it seem less illegitimate to amass power on non- or illiberal democratic grounds, as liberal democracy or some claimed liberal world order can be pitched as a façade for less sanguine intentions.²²

As the bursts of popularity increasingly come at the cost of economic prosperity (and basic rights) – and vice versa – it is becoming ever more complicated to do both simultaneously.

If retention of power is the baseline driver for Erdogan, then the bursts of popularity he gains from pushing back against the West (and other regional foes) is helpful. But so is economic prosperity for the individual Turk. And as the bursts of popularity increasingly come at the cost of economic prosperity (and basic rights) – and vice versa – it is becoming ever more complicated to do both simultaneously. Consequently, U-turns and unpredictability become more prevalent.

Second, capacity. Here, Turkey's muscular approach and increasing hard power capacities also mask key vulnerabilities. Frye would likely still characterise the Turkish methods as the 'methods of the weak' (Frye 2021, 157). In Frye's Putin-universe, these methods include the poisoning of dissidents, political exploitation of cyberwarfare, support for fringe political movements, and – one could add – damaging critical energy infrastructure, and the use of private military contractors and various forms of militia groups as key foreign policy tools. To this list can be added the instrumentalization of migrants to some 'hybrid warfare', as has been the case in November 2023 along the border of Finland (MacDougall 2023b).

Presently Turkey holds both NATO class capacities and capabilities, and indigenous production and successful deployment of middle of the range drones, precise micro-missiles, light fighter jets, armoured vehicles, and naval vessels. This includes a vested pursuit of ascending into the upper echelons of both manned and unmanned versions of 5th generation Stealth fighter jets. Turkey not

only sells drones to over 30 countries; as the third of the often-invoked imageries of Turkey's foreign and security policy has it, Turkey engages in widespread 'drone diplomacy' from Central Asia, through the Middle East and Africa, to Europe (*Bloomberg* 2023). Turkey has massively expanded both its diplomatic presence in Africa and its military deployment in the South Caucasus, Middle East, and Africa, and is racing to expand its naval capacities and capabilities, recently to include a light aircraft carrier.

But, and wholly as intended, this – often propaganda-driven image – also tends to hide a series of vulnerabilities and constitutes something along the lines of Frye's 'methods of the weak'. A brief example will have to serve here. First, the Turkish purchase of the Russian S-400 strategic surface-to-air anti-missile system (SAMs) was the result of a long trajectory that began with Turkish frustration at not getting the requested tech transfer for its own defence industry from the American company, Raytheon, or the European company, Eurosam, as part of the initial negotiations to buy their SAMs. Before turning to Russia, Turkey sought to negotiate the purchase of SAMs from China. It is a good question whether NATO member Turkey actually got much of the called-for transfer of technology from Russia (see e.g. Hintz & Banks 2022). Also, different from US or European SAMs, the S-400 is not interoperable with Turkey's NATO class military infrastructure, let alone NATO's layered missile defence system, the AEGIS. And Turkey has arguably hardly been able to operationalise the S-400 system. Add to this the eviction of the F-35 programme, the sanctions, and the troubles of even getting modernised F-16s from the US as implications of the S-400 purchase.

The S-400 is clearly a challenge for NATO. But so is a seeming Turkish willingness to leverage Sweden's NATO application to push the US to sell the much-needed F-16s to Turkey. And so too is the fact that Turkey seems to lack the commitment of deep friends to come to their rescue to an extent that there is a felt need to develop its own strategic SAMs. The Western sanctions and various export and export license restrictions on Turkey also meant that Turkey had to turn to offer Ukraine co-production of and tech transfers of Turkish drones to gain the engines and engine technology that Turkey was cut off from because of the sanctions etc. This created what we saw Aaron Stein dub an 'Alliance Entrapment', when a Turkish drone was used to target a pro-Russian group in Eastern Ukraine in November 2021, potentially provoking a Russian military response (Stein 2021). Finally, it is naturally a challenge for NATO that Turkey leverages its frustration at being isolated by its own unique threat perceptions by blocking defence plans, blocking the inclusion of countries such as Finland and Sweden, and coming to

near blows in the East Med with countries such as Greece and France. The ensuing crisis mediation within NATO, at least momentarily, reduces NATO's power projection and deterrence.

In sum, all sorts of pushback shape both intention and capacity to make up a different and perhaps more intractable challenge for NATO and the West than the one imagined, for example as when Bloomberg talks of how Turkey's drones help Erdogan expand Turkey's global power (*Bloomberg 2023*). As indicated, this also holds some opportunities for NATO and the West. Despite many perceptions to the contrary, Turkey is highly dependent on good relations with the West for regaining economic strength. Aside from nationalist outbursts, economic prosperity is also a key source of popularity for Erdogan, as the spectacular economic growth between 2002 and 2013 attests to. Returning to economic prosperity through bettering of relations with the West as the primary source of popularity could see Erdogan avoid Brands and Beckley's peaking power trap. How exactly to manage this economic leverage is a political choice, and thus beyond the scope of this report. And it is clearly a difficult one, as Europe and the US will not necessarily be accommodating towards Erdogan and Turkey on most of its wants. But it is not entirely outside the scope of the possible, mindful that the peaking power dilemma also includes a key interest in keeping the economy from collapsing and Turkey from getting isolated politically.

Similarly, a fundamental lack of trust in NATO in Turkey is also offset by the strategic military and geopolitical value of its NATO membership. Again, the detail of how to possibly leverage this fact will have to be left to NATO officials and politicians. And it is not without complexity. Not least because there is no clause in the NATO treaty to evict members. But it is not impossible, as Turkey's highly costly eviction from the F-35 programme over the purchase of the Russia S-400 is a testimony to.



Photo and description: ID: CYAJ70, Charles Dragazis / Alamy Stock Photo. Globe.

CONCLUSION

This report opened with an expanded version of Anne Applebaum's argument in *The Atlantic* from November 2021 to the effect that *The Bad Guys are Winning*. (Applebaum 2021). Erdogan figured in Applebaum's lineup as one of those bad guys. The gist of this report has been not so much to argue, to the contrary, that Erdogan is losing, but to get a sense of how and why Erdogan and Turkey are primarily acting out of frustration at the mounting pushback he and Turkey have come up against in recent years. The report has shown how various forms of overreach have triggered this pushback and how, as a response to it, Turkey and Erdogan have executed several political U-turns in response. And it has shown how one type of structural and two types of geopolitical pushback have worked in the background, as it were, to contain and constrain Erdogan and Turkey.

Opening with the most recent political U-turn on Hamas in October 2023, the first chapter brought out how various forms of overreach have triggered both domestic and international pushback that have frustrated Erdogan and Turkey. Domestic threats to Erdogan's ability to amass and retain power in the form of the Gezi demonstrations and graft probes of 2013, the electoral defeat of 2015, the coup attempt of 2016, and the electoral defeat of 2019 were all met with aggressive responses. This led Erdogan to U-turn and coopt a Turkish nationalist 'Sèvres syndrome' style of worry, shared across the political divides in Turkey, to the effect that outside powers – especially the West – were conspiring to undermine Turkish national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The readiness to shore up and make use of hard power to support and defend Turkey against these perceived threats, however, led to pushback from the outside in the form of political isolation, anti-Turkish military alliances, and economic disengagement. The resulting economic downturn, in particular, has taken a toll on Erdogan's popularity. We see how the populist nationalist statements and actions, although popular, created further pushback from outside, causing, amongst other things, an unpopular deterioration of the Turkish economy. This led to more conciliatory U-turns in November 2020 and May 2023.

The following two chapters introduced one structural and two geopolitical factors that add some depth to this picture of pushback on Erdogan and Turkey. First, *The Economist* and Timothy Frye were invoked to show how strongmen's invocation of nationalism to retain power might immediately boost their popularity and power at home, but also introduce a set of structural weaknesses: increasing corruption in spite of typical claims to be fighting corruption; weakening institutions; decreasing meritocracy and increasing obsequiousness in leadership advice from an ever-smaller inner circle of yes-men; dual threats from both elites and masses, all increasing the likelihood of bad decision making and the erosion of both leader and national strengths.

The first of the underlying geopolitical constraints make it difficult for a middle power like Turkey to be simultaneously strong and independent. Turkey's balancing act between NATO and Russia is invoked as an example, as is a deep divergence between NATO and Turkey – but also between Turkey and almost everyone else – on topline threat perceptions. The second and more contemporary of the geopolitical constraints outlined is the idea – so the report has argued – that the geopolitical environment is still markedly unipolar, even increasingly so, and that this leaves Turkey with a narrowing rather than widening space to manoeuvre.

The upshot of this pushback is what the report labelled a 'peaking power dilemma', a critical adaptation of the idea popularized by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley of China entering a 'peaking power trap'. The dilemma is the idea that pushback against the overreach of rising (or returning) great power ambitions confronts Erdogan and Turkey with a frustrating dilemma of choosing between the adoption of a defiant nationalism prone to lash out militarily and the need for a more conciliatory tone to avoid political isolation and economic ruin. Pursuit of strongman appeals to a defiant nationalism is popular but comes at the expense of economic wealth (for the elite) and security (for the masses). Adopting a more conciliatory line towards the West in particular and a sounder economic policy will gain popularity from the potential return of economic strength but will come at the expense of popularity amongst the more defiant nationalists and their quest for independence.

It is in the increasingly frustrated responses to this dilemma that Erdogan's Turkey is an intractable and unpredictable challenge for NATO and the West. The report ended with a few examples of the challenges (and opportunities) this holds for NATO and the West.

NOTES

- 1 The author of this report would like to extend a special thanks to the anonymous reviewer for highly valuable inputs and suggestions.
- 2 Gideon Rachman's 2022 book *The Age of the Strongman – How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy Around the World* is an expanded version of Applebaum's argument, if Rachman's more detailed characterizations of strongmen such as Putin, Erdogan, and Xi do include analytical notes on some of their weaknesses as well. Comparing the strongmen, Rachman's book unfolds when they rose to have a growing influence in global politics from Putin in 1999 to Bolsonaro in 2018, four main traits of what this influence rests on, and an analysis of why they have come to play such a prominent role.
- 3 This partly reflects a series of interviews and conversations held in Ankara in late May 2023.
- 4 Throughout, this report distinguishes Erdogan from Turkey as the main objects of inquiry but avoids going into further theoretical discussions of how and why this is helpful.
- 5 The PKK refers to the Kurdistan Workers Party, perceived to be the primary terrorist threat to Turkey, and recognised by the US (in 1997) and the EU (in 2002) as a terrorist organisation. The YPG refers to the People's Defence Units, a Syrian Kurdish militant group, claimed by Turkey to be affiliated to the PKK, but also a partner since 2014 to the US-led Operation Inherent Resolve to fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq. FETÖ refers to the Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, Fethullaist Terrorist Organisation, the official Turkish designation of the Gülen movement as a terrorist organisation by Turkey in May 2016. The US and European countries consider neither the YPG nor the Gülen movement to be terrorist organisations.
- 6 Spelling out the entrenched view in its most generic and public form, Pope and Göksel (2020) have referred to key aspects of these three myths as the 'traditional Western perspective' on the AKP government. This report holds that this view is adopted by pundits and researchers of Turkish background as well.
- 7 See Suat Kiniklioglu 2022 for a thorough treatment on Eurasianism in Turkey.
- 8 Thanks to the reviewer for valuable insights and comments that pushed the report to clarify this balance.
- 9 Ryan Gingeras has written several instructive articles on this idea (see e.g. Gingeras 2020; 2023b).
- 10 For some further detail on this highly complex and contested field, see Hirst & Isci 2020; 2023; and Isci 2023.
- 11 Examples include Reza Zarrab and the oil for gold scheme with Iran, the kickback system for granting cronies building contracts, the Sitki Ayan network around Erdogan, and how the 6 February 2023 earthquakes revealed widespread corruption in the housing sector. (See e.g. Financial Times 2023a).
- 12 In an illustrative example, Frye proposes three possible explanations for Khodorkovsky's arrest in 2003: one as Putin and the KGBs' revenge and a means for Putin to give sources of wealth to his cronies; another as part of a long history and culture of state control of the country's natural resources; and the third as a corollary to the effect that high oil prices make nationalisations of these resources much more likely in autocracies (Frye, 2021: 9-10).

- 13 Frye draws on an example from the dying days of East Germany, when Honecker ordered the head of the Stasi to repress the protests. When the Stasi boss argued that they could not beat up several thousands of protesters, and Honecker insisted, the Stasi boss threatened to leak details of Honecker's sex life, lavish lifestyle, and collaboration with the Nazis. And East Germany fell (Frye: 48).
- 14 Some of the more analytical contributions include Stratfor 2023; Dalay 2023; Özel 2023; Basbugoglu & Korkut 2023; Aydintasbas & Shapiro 2023; Barkey 2023; Koru 2023; Pierini 2023; Robinson 2023; Alaranta et al. 2023; Shah 2009 & Schmid 2022.
- 15 Relatedly, Lisel Hintz and David E. Banks (2022) also argue that the nationalist rhetoric invoked to legitimize the S-400 purchase has been 'amplified' by nationalist stakeholders to an extent that it has limited Erdogan's ability to step back from the purchase as it became clear that it would have seriously adverse effects on Turkey's military capabilities.
- 16 Frye draws on a survey published by Joseph Wright in 2008 arguing that personalistic autocracies since WWII have displayed slower growth and more volatile economies than other types of autocracy, and even more so than other forms of government (Frye 2021, 15, 219). It is not for this report to determine whether this holds true today. But recent lessons from Putin's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey, and perhaps even also Xi's China do seem to confirm this overall picture.
- 17 On political strength, the US has many more treaty allies (35 to 51 depending on sources) than China (1, North Korea) and Russia (5 other CSTO members, if the collective defence commitments there still hold). Also, the US has no immediate neighbours that pose challenges or risks to the US in stark contrast to both China and Russia.
- 18 Questions are increasingly being raised on the veracity of the official Chinese and Russian numbers. China watchers such as Rhodium Group's Daniel Rosen and Logan Wright, for example, argued recently that the real size of the Chinese economy is about 62% of that of the US, not the 73% IMF figure that draws on official Chinese data (Rosen & Wright 2023).
- 19 Comparing the countries on purchasing power parity indices, as has often been done in recent years, is a poor standard for comparison as it assumes that e.g., the military hardware produced domestically in China and Russia is of equal quality to that bought internationally, and it neglects the fact that acquisition of the technology and arms needed for the Russian and Chinese armies to stay abreast of the US and the West militarily almost always depends on international purchases.
- 20 The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI's tally is slightly different, but the overall gist is the same (SIPRI 2023a).
- 21 The challenge is to find a way to address this tension and frustration. Mindful of the many differences to other so-called midsized powers or meddlers, as well as the possible similarities to the Russian and Chinese cases loosely alluded to in this report, getting the Turkish challenges right could perhaps help us to rightsize these other challenges as well, and to address Applebaum's 'Autocrats Inc' appropriately.
- 22 This is NOT to say that the US, the West, NATO, the EU, or others hold no responsibility here. A colonial past, Cold War instrumentalization of the competition with the Soviet Union, current protectionist policies, etc, often warrant similar criticism. The point is that these grudges are highlighted here as part of a play to retain power.

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