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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EUROPEAN STUDIES DOCTORAL
SCHOOL

**TÜRKİYE’S FOREIGN POLICY:
TRANSFORMATIONS IN
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
FOLLOWING THE 2016 EVENTS**

THESIS SUMMARY

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Introduction

In an era marked by dynamism and resilience, a state's foreign policy can no longer be viewed solely through the lens of short-term decisions or traditional alliances. Since 2016, Türkiye has undergone a tumultuous period, marked by numerous internal and external changes. The political events associated with the 2016 failed coup attempt had a profound impact on Ankara's recent geopolitical evolution, boosting her confidence in the state's unique geostrategic position, the procurement or development of defense capabilities, as well as a transformation in terms of soft power, by adopting the image of a mediator, a bridge between East and West, a third party eager to provide a space for negotiations, etc.

This study traces the fluctuations in Türkiye's foreign policy between 2016 and 2024, a challenging period that has proven essential for understanding the recent evolution of this state. This timeline has been linked to the early years of my academic journey, through courses and end-of-year papers, especially through studying Greek - Turkish relations in my dissertation thesis.

With a unique strategic position and an extremely active international presence in various bilateral, trilateral, and other multilateral formats, Türkiye demonstrated particular skill in sensing and responding to early vibrations of changes in regional and global settings. In the fierce competition for supremacy between great powers, Türkiye faces the dilemma of remaining loyal and firmly anchored in maintaining the status quo or challenging it alongside revisionist actors. In this framework, Ankara invested in developing a dual strategic approach aimed at maintaining political, military, and economic guarantees with Western states, while gradually expanding her influence in Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America.

The importance of this study is closely tied to the highly volatile context of the Black Sea region before the start of the war in Ukraine. With the resumption of diplomatic relations with Russia, as well as a cautious opening towards China, Türkiye signaled her desire to benefit from a multivector, pragmatic policy focused on balancing short and long-term interests. Ankara sought to refresh her international image by perfecting her role as a mediator.

I. Research questions and methodology

The thesis focused on two research questions:

- How have systemic pressures and domestic factors shaped Turkish foreign policy decisions in its relations with major international actors following the 2016 failed coup?
- How can Türkiye's approach to alliance-building be interpreted through the principles of defensive realism?

The first questions aimed to provide a detailed exploration of Türkiye's relations with key actors such as the US, China, Russia, the EU, and NATO, through case studies centered on the interplay between internal state changes and various external contexts. The second research question complements the thesis by addressing the application of defensive realism and the role of domestic dynamics in assessing Türkiye's strategic behavior. By examining how Ankara navigates the maintenance and testing of traditional alliances, in addition to the efforts made to expand her influence, this study adds to the theoretical implications of defensive realism in analyzing foreign policy strategies adopted by middle powers.

Jack Snyder's book from 1991, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, and Fareed Zakaria's review of the book were the main sources of inspiration for the theoretical dimension of the work. Snyder introduced a model based on defensive realism, in which state expansion results from internal pressures exerted by political and economic coalitions. This model centers on an indispensable narrative (the imperial myth) according to which security can be guaranteed solely through expansion, often leading many states to overexpansion and failure. Zakaria contested Snyder's arguments, claiming that the author overestimated the role of internal factors, and neglected the balance of power, alongside the international dynamics that constantly influence foreign policy decisions.

The juxtaposition of these two authors contributed significantly to the study of defensive realism: Snyder signaled the significant importance of internal factors in explaining a state's overexpansion, and his model pointed out the involvement of political and economic elites in the manipulation of nationalist discourse aimed to justify expansionist policies; Zakaria, on the other hand, argued that military power and a state's position in the international arena remain key factors in determining its strategic behavior. Zakaria acknowledged Snyder's contributions, further encouraging the separation of policies determined by systemic factors and those determined by internal factors, but he underlined that states adjust their strategies according to the global balance of power.

This study employed a method of qualitative research: the expert interview. Specifically, the work was designed as a mixed approach, combining expert interviews with a questionnaire aimed at Türkiye's civil society. The latter was eliminated due to inconclusive results. The study retained the interviews conducted with nine experts from diplomacy, academia, think tanks, and parliamentary advising. The participants received a declaration of consent, ensuring that their answers would be anonymized, as well as the interview structure in advance to avoid potential conflicts of interest or concerns regarding the sensibility of the subject.

This phase led to numerous difficulties as these experts belong to highly demanding professional environments, thus they have limited availability for participation. Many Turkish experts invited to the study refused to participate, considering the subject to be sensitive or harmful to their professional circumstances. The goal was to develop a systematized expert interview, as it provides a high level of structured and detailed knowledge collection, that can be comprised in comparable databases. The responses were visually represented using Tableau and introduced in the work.

In this study, the primary sources included the experts' interviews, official documents, statements from officials, public opinions, etc. The secondary sources cover over thirty books on Turkish foreign policy and history, foreign policy, research methods, journal articles, online publications, etc.

II. Structure of the thesis

The work is structured as follows: introduction, five thematic chapters, and conclusions. The first chapter provides a brief overview of the internal changes caused by the failed coup attempt. The second chapter examines the transformations in Ankara's approach to five key actors: the US, Russia, China, the EU, and NATO. The third chapter addresses the shifts in Türkiye's strategies for the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America. The fourth chapter introduces the concept of strategic ambidexterity and its implication in the analysis of Türkiye's role in the war in Ukraine, while the final chapter accounts for the experts' interviews.

III. Main findings of the thesis

The 2016 to 2024 timeframe reflects the adaptability and resilience of Turkish foreign policy, defined by a calculated blend of hard and soft power, it aimed at reducing Western influence, strengthening the state's status as a regional power indispensable to great powers, and projecting a favorable image as an international mediator.

Although Ankara's methods were contested, their efficiency in achieving essential state objectives is indisputable. However, new geographical reconfigurations, such as an eventual armistice in Ukraine, Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office, and the rise of HTS in Syria, among many others, amplify the uncertainties surrounding Türkiye's trajectory, which under Erdoğan's leadership seems increasingly aligned with states that challenge the post-Cold War order.

The distancing of the United States under Trump's leadership from traditional transatlantic cooperation, coupled with a preference for an aggressive transactional approach, exerts pressure on states loyal to multilateral formats with a democratic and liberal core. In this context, the Turkish leader intensifies efforts to gain the support of the American counterpart, once again demonstrating the primacy of close relations with the United States over those with the European Union, a crucial aspect presented in the work.

Nevertheless, the chosen theoretical lens, defensive realism, carries an inherent interpretative vulnerability, as it conceptualizes security predominantly through external threats and states' reactions to them, which aligns with official logic promoted by Ankara: protecting borders, maintaining sovereignty, diversifying partnerships to reduce dependence on a great power or ideological group, and recalibrating the balance of power.

This theoretical approach provided numerous opportunities to observe the dynamism of Turkish foreign policy in regions such as Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America, through the reshaping of Ankara's international image as a worthy mediator, credited with the success of the Ukrainian Grain Deal.

The concept of strategic ambidexterity explored in this work adds originality and expands the divided opinions on Türkiye's multivector approach. Unlike hedging, liminality, or strategic ambiguity, strategic ambidexterity involves a proactive, calculated, and opportunistic avenue for Turkish foreign policy to exploit strong bilateral or multilateral ties, while leaving room for subtle expansion, predominantly through soft power tools, toward regions or states that were previously

unengaged, with the intention to diversify Ankara's political, economic or military cooperation opportunities.

In summary, Türkiye stands at a point where her strategic ambidexterity risks becoming a vulnerability, as the international order enters a phase of accelerated reconfiguration. The current dynamics no longer allow refined subterfuges without losses, and balancing between diverging power blocs becomes increasingly difficult. In this context, Ankara's future will not be defined by her ability to explore ambiguities or adopt multivector strategies, but by how she assumes a coherent direction, admitting both her friends and enemies on the international stage, while maintaining the struggle to fulfill her strategic interests.

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