

# The Increasing Militarization of the Aegean Sea: A Two Level Game Analysis of Shifting Turkish Defense Strategies

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## ABSTRACT

Turkey's increasing militarisation of the Aegean Sea marks a major shift in its defence strategies. This study uses the Two-Level Game Theory to investigate the construction process of Turkey's defence approach in the Aegean Sea. This research relies on secondary sources, including news reports and academic journal articles, to examine how Turkey's military strategies in the Aegean Sea reflect both international pressures and internal priorities. The findings show that Turkey sees Greek militarisation as a direct threat that requires an urgent symmetrical response of equal threat, as the region is highly resistant to pursuing peaceful, mutually beneficial solutions. The study identifies the inherent value of sovereignty and its economic potential as the main drivers of shifting perceptions towards the Aegean Sea, which determine state responses in the territorial dispute. Additionally, President Erdogan has played a central role in promoting the Blue Homeland Doctrine as a strategy used to justify Turkey's militarisation and strengthen its legitimacy. This study offers insight into strategic shifts in Turkey's approach to regional security by analysing the interaction among international negotiations, domestic policy, and the negotiator as the bridge between the two.

## KEYWORDS

Aegean Sea,  
Militarization,  
two-level game theory,  
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## Introduction

Turkey has had major plans for its military moving forward. Since Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power in 2003, Turkey's defence spending has steadily increased. According to a SIPRI report (2026), Turkey's military spending rose from \$10.92 billion in 2004 to \$29.98 billion in 2025, measured in current US dollars, indicating an upward trajectory. The rise in military spending is especially pronounced from 2015 onward, as Turkish foreign policy became increasingly assertive (Lopes da Silva et al., 2021). Although it is still unclear whether there was a causal connection, Turkey's military spending dropped from \$20.47 billion in 2019 to \$15.81 billion in 2020 and continued to hover around that level until 2022, when the effects of the pandemic began to slow. In 2023, Turkey's military spending crept back up to \$19.23 billion. Spending grew further in the following years, reaching \$25.01

billion in 2024 and ultimately \$29.98 billion in 2025, surpassing its pre-pandemic level. It should be noted that SIPRI's military expenditure figures differ from the broader defence and security budget figures frequently cited in government statements and media reports. Helou (2024), citing Vice President Cevdet Yilmaz, reported that Turkey allocated more than \$40 billion to its defence and security budget in 2024, which is a staggering 150 per cent increase. This is projected to grow further, with Turkey planning to allocate a record \$47 billion to defence and security in 2025. Similar numbers were also reported by Soylu (2024).

It's worth noting that the militarisation of Turkey doesn't just manifest in increased spending, but also in greater self-sufficiency. Since 2023, the Turkish government has aimed to double the value of Turkey's defence exports from \$6 billion to \$11 billion in 2024, thereby increasing Turkish self-sufficiency in defence equipment from 80% to 85% (Felstead, 2023). This was also separately affirmed by Helou (2024). Helou, citing Turkish aerospace and defence expert Cem Doğut, stated that air defence systems and missiles will be at the top of these projects, including the Hisar and Siper missile systems, as well as accompanying radar projects. Doğut further noted that additional resources will be used to sustain and modernise Turkey's combat aviation capabilities, including the modernisation of the F-16 fleet and the planned acquisition of Eurofighter aircraft, while domestic platforms such as Hürjet and Kaan remain under development. Turkey's journey to self-sufficiency has been going back since before the pandemic. The share of locally sourced arms in Turkey's defence procurement rose from 24% in 2002 to 70% in 2019, accompanied by a 59% decline in arms imports between 2016 and 2020 compared with 2011 and 2015 (Kachmar, 2024). Erdogan similarly claimed during a delivery ceremony for new Altay tanks in Sakarya Province that Turkey had reduced its foreign dependency in the defence sector from 80% to 20% over the previous two decades (Sevencan, 2023).

Moreover, improvements in self-sufficiency were also extended in an increase in Turkey's defence exports. In 2021, defence exports had reached \$3 billion. This trend can be attributed to an increase in defence projects, where total defence industry project volume reached \$60 billion (Aslan, 2021; Sevencan, 2023). In 2023, that number rose to \$75 billion. The number of defence projects, which was only 62 in 2022, had reached 750 in 2023 (Sevencan, 2023).

All of this suggests an overall effort by Turkey to strengthen its military capacity. Turkey has had a security-oriented foreign policy pretty much throughout its existence, so it's not much of a surprise that its military spending would increase every year, assuming there are no major economic crises (Kalkan, 2020). Therefore, a more interesting view can be obtained by examining the shift in Turkey's conceptualisation of its military beyond increased spending. I think the most nuanced way to look at defence strategies is to examine the "space" in which these militaries operate and the branch of the military to which these spending decisions have led. Historically, this is something we can analyse through the construction of their foreign policy, which was highly influenced by the Cold War and domestic political instability. Turkey's emphasis on a land-based defence strategy is part of NATO's broader geostrategy in states bordering the Soviet Union. Turkey itself can be seen as NATO's easternmost bulwark, strategically positioned to counter Soviet expansion in the Middle East. Therefore, as a manifestation of this geostrategy, NATO, and, by extension,

Turkey, heavily emphasised ground forces and air defence systems to deter and defend against any land-based Soviet aggression. This geostrategic position meant that Turkey's entire defence strategy was oriented toward securing its immediate surroundings and establishing a stable, defensible perimeter around the country. Turkish military doctrine primarily emphasised land control, with investments funnelled primarily into its armed forces. This land-dominant paradigm was further justified by Turkey's internal strife, with the Kurdish-Turkish conflict being the most prominent. In this sense, Turkey's military spending pattern continued to prioritise land forces and counter-insurgency capabilities to address domestic security concerns, with little emphasis on naval or air force expansion beyond basic defensive needs. Although this paradigm started to change with the increasing securitisation of the Aegean Sea.

The Aegean Sea has always been geopolitically significant within the region, especially for Turkey. The Aegean Sea dispute has been going on between Turkey and Greece since the 1970s (Munjal, 2022). Greece gained substantial territory, including many Aegean Sea islands, through the Treaty of London in 1913. The current Turkish and Greek borders were established through the Lausanne Peace Treaty, and there was no struggle for decades until the 1970s, when the issue of the continental shelf in the Aegean Sea was raised (Munjal, 2022; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs [RTMFA], n.d.-a). One of the key issues in the Aegean Sea dispute concerns the delimitation of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and the use of the continental shelf (Vassalotti, 2011; Binsar, 2022). The continental shelf comprises the seabed and subsoil extending naturally from a coastal state's land territory. Under UNCLOS, the width of the continental shelf is typically up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline (Munjal, 2022). In cases where the territories of two states lie closer opposite each other than double that distance, the division is made by the median line (Van Dyke, 1996). The concept of the continental shelf is closely connected to that of an exclusive economic zone. Any state has the sovereign right to explore and exploit non-living resources on the continental shelf, such as oil, gas, and minerals. These rights are exclusive, meaning no other state can undertake resource exploration or exploitation without the coastal state's consent.

The dispute between Turkey and Greece concerns the extent to which the Greek islands off the Turkish coast should be considered in determining the Greek and Turkish economic zones. Turkey argues that the notion of "continental shelf," by its very definition, implies that distances should be measured from the continental mainland. This would mean that Turkey would be entitled to economic zones up to the median line of the Aegean. Greece, on the other hand, claims that all islands must be treated on an equal basis, which would give it economic rights to almost the whole of the Aegean (RTMFA, n.d.-a). Greece and Turkey both claimed rights to parts of the continental shelf in the Aegean. According to Greece, UNCLOS justified its claim to the continental shelf based on the proximity of its islands to the disputed area. Greece argued that each island, regardless of its size, has its own continental shelf, thereby extending Greek rights significantly into the Aegean (Binsar, 2022). Turkey, however, argued that such an interpretation left it with disproportionately limited access to the Aegean's resources, given that Greece controlled numerous islands close to Turkey's coast (RTMFA, n.d.-a). Turkey's stance was that islands close to its mainland should not generate full

maritime entitlements, especially in a semi-enclosed sea like the Aegean (Binsar, 2022). The tension over the continental shelf was rising sharply in 1970, when it was found that the Aegean Sea might hold rich oil reserves. Energy exploration in the Aegean Sea has become a focal point within the already complex, untangled issue. The delineation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) determines which state has the right to exploit resources within those areas. Greece claims that, given the position of its islands within the region, it has the right to extend its EEZs. This overlaps with the areas that Turkey also claims based on its mainland coastline.

The growing strategic importance of the Aegean Sea transformed the capabilities required to secure Turkish interests. Unlike the Cold War period, during which Turkey's security concerns were primarily land-based, the defence of maritime claims and the protection of offshore resources required stronger naval and aerial capabilities. Consequently, Turkish defence planning increasingly shifted toward the modernisation of its navy and air force. As a result, Turkey's navy has undergone rapid modernisation in recent years. One of Turkey's flagship programs under its naval expansion is the MILGEM (National Ship) project (Ozberk, 2024). Before MILGEM, Turkey relied heavily on foreign suppliers for most of its naval vessels. The rationale behind MILGEM was twofold: modernising Turkey's ageing naval fleet and reducing foreign dependency. The project was conceived in the mid-1990s and formally launched in 2004 by the Turkish Navy and the Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB). The project has delivered multiple ADA-class Corvettes, and many are currently being actively deployed in multiple regions, including the Aegean Sea, with more under construction. Multiple other projects also exist, such as the TCG Anadolu, Reis-class submarines, and the TF-X fighter jet, in response to being excluded from the U.S. F-35 program (Sofuoglu, 2022).

Despite the rationale behind the increase in spending or modernisation efforts not directly linked to concerns about the Aegean Sea, they nevertheless produce spillover effects that facilitate the securitisation of the region. This is because many of the capabilities being developed are intended to operate in both the air and maritime domains, both of which remain central to the contestation between Turkey and Greece. Moreover, the interconnectedness of domains in contemporary security concerns also allows spillover effects to manifest, meaning that even though spending is justified by broader strategic considerations, it often still serves to strengthen Turkey's ability to project power and assert its claims in the Aegean.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In understanding this shift and how Turkey is currently constructing its defence strategies in the Aegean Sea, this study will use Robert Putnam's Two-Level Game Theory, first proposed in 1988. The theory posits that the dynamic interaction between domestic and international politics during the negotiation process is highly contingent upon the other and that it is up to national leaders to act as a "negotiator" between the two levels. Putnam (1988) asserts that foreign policymaking is simultaneously facing two distinct sets of pressures: one at the domestic level (Level II) and another at the international level (Level I). At Level I, the "negotiator" must secure favourable outcomes aligned with their national interests through bargaining with foreign counterparts. Success depends on their ability to construct

agreements that are appealing internationally while being mindful of domestic acceptability. At Level II, these agreements are scrutinised by domestic institutions that evaluate their implications in light of domestic priorities. At its core, Two-Level Game Theory assumes that international negotiations (Level I) cannot be fully understood without considering the constraints and opportunities posed by domestic political actors and institutions (Level II). Although the order of this interaction is not fully set in stone and can easily be flipped, national interests and the terms and conditions, or "win-sets," have to be created first at the national level and then brought to the international agreement. This means that domestic institutions behave proactively towards the international agreement rather than simply reacting.

Within the two-level game theory, the "win-set" represents the set of agreements at level I that domestic stakeholders at level II would likely accept. The larger the win-set, the greater the likelihood of finding common ground, and vice versa. This is because international negotiations are constructed by the overlapping win-sets of all participating states. In the context of this study, the two-level game theory will be extensively used to explain the shift in Turkey's defence strategy that securitises the Aegean through militarisation policies. This shift is understood as the result of both domestic and international considerations that Erdogan, as the core "negotiator," has to "negotiate."

The core analysis that will be derived from the two-level game for this study is (1) the perceived changes in international considerations over time, which shift the dynamics of the negotiations at level I, and (2) the idiosyncratic role of Erdogan as the "negotiator" in gaining domestic ratification. These analyses will operationalize as follows: (1) The changing considerations at level 1 which are attributed to the Increasing Militarization conducted by Greece which begets similar response and the increasing influence of the Aegean Sea amidst a global energy and economic crisis, (2) The idiosyncratic role of Erdogan in constructing the "Blue Homeland Doctrine" as a way to garner legitimacy towards the militarization of the Aegean Sea. This theoretical framework then serves two primary purposes in the study. First, it guides the chronology of Turkey's two-level game. Second, it informs current defence strategies through the two-level game.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Level 1 (International level): Balancing the threat of Greek Militarization in the Aegean Sea**

The recent increase in militarisation of the Aegean Sea doesn't start with Turkey; instead, it started with Greece. In June 2022, a deployment of Greek soldiers was filmed on Pserimos Island, which is only 8 kilometres (5 miles) southwest of southwestern Turkey's Bodrum peninsula (Daily Sabah & Anadolu Agency, 2022). Pserimos, which was supposed to be inhabited and demilitarised, was one among 16 islands that have now been militarised in the eastern Aegean. According to AA, facilities such as helipads, guard and watch towers, transmitters, water tanks, and solar panels can be found on these islands. Greek soldiers are seen wearing military camouflage near stone structures resembling trenches or shelters. Also in August 2022, the Turkish Defence Ministry claimed that their Turkish F-16s were targeted by Greek S-300 Air defense systems during a military exercise (Yuksekkas, 2022).

Turkish military drones also recorded the deployment of armoured vehicles on the islands of Lesbos and Samos by Greece, which constitutes a violation of the Treaty of Lausanne and the Treaty of Paris (Gautam, 2022; Daily Sabah & Anadolu Agency, 2022; RTMFA, n.d). The treaty required the islands to be demilitarised, meaning any troops or weapons on them were strictly forbidden. Under the aforementioned treaties, Greece was obligated to maintain the demilitarised status of key islands, particularly those near Turkey, such as Lesbos, Chios, Samos, and Rhodes. These agreements were intended to create a buffer zone to reduce the likelihood of conflict between Greece and Turkey.

Greece's militarisation started ever since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, which incentivised efforts to improve Greek military capability as quickly as possible as a form of preemptive self-defence (Falk, 2022). Since the invasion, numerous arms acquisitions, including jet aircraft, medium tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and anti-tank weapons, have been made. Many of these weapons were installed in the Aegean Islands to fortify their defences and increase their military strength in the region. It is unsurprising that the Greek military would take on an extremely nationalistic stance and drum up the possibility of war with Turkey. It can be seen, even through its own two-level game analysis, that the fear of war would drum up support for this policy approach and for the government of Greece, which was still reeling from the previous military junta. For the next couple of decades, disputes over the Aegean Sea did cause sporadic militarisation here and there, culminating in a point where Greece and Turkey almost went to war over a territorial dispute in the eastern Aegean Sea in January 1996 (Munjil, 2022). The dispute began over Imia, where both countries deployed naval and special forces. The standoff lasted several days while the two countries mobilised for war, but in the end, US diplomacy and political pressure prevented a conflict from breaking out. The intensity and scope of militarisation have increased dramatically since the mid-2010s, as both countries are engaged in a "security dilemma." Although it can be ascertained that Turkey's militarisation was merely "balancing the threat." Turkey's militarisation of the Aegean Sea can be understood as a strategic response to Greece's own increasing militarisation. The idea of threat balancing exists beyond just raw military capability. According to Stephen Walt (1985), it's not just power per se that determines states' ability to pursue their national interests, but rather intent and willingness to use that power aggressively. Therefore, responding to rivals is determined by the probability that perceived threats will manifest, indicating that the state's overall behaviour matters. We can see this nuance of "power" in Turkey's shift in how it approaches the Aegean dispute. If you look at the 4 key determinants of threat, Turkey does possess all of them to some extent. Turkey's overall capabilities, both in aggregate power and offensive capabilities, have always been higher than Greece's. The geographical proximity of both Turkey and Greece is obviously close. But the two things that are obviously shifting are Greece's escalating intent and willingness in the region, and the military gap between the two that is getting closer than before. A more interesting view of how Greece managed to increase its level of "threat" is not through its own internal balancing but through external balancing instead.

Greece's deepening defence ties with major powers, especially the United States and France, diplomatically isolate Turkey. In May 2022, Greece's parliament approved the

renewal and amendment of the US-Greece Mutual Defence Cooperation Agreement (MDCA), which was first signed in 1990 (Ozcan, 2022). The agreement gave permission for US forces to assert their presence through four more military areas, including two army camps, such as the Georgula Barracks in Greece's central province of Volos, Litochoro Training Ground, and army barracks in the northeastern port city of Alexandroupoli and a naval base in Souda Bay in Crete. Greece believes the agreement will also help protect it from "threats" at its northern land border with Turkey. This happened while Turkey was kicked out of the US F-35 fighter jet program. Even if not explicitly stated, the US implicitly projects a lot of perceived favouritism towards Greece, which further fuels Turkey's distrust. This means there is a huge incentive for Turkey to either increase its military capacity independently or increase the perceived willingness to use it as an internal balancing measure, since externally it has little to rely on. This is why we see more military exercises in the region than ever before (Daily Sabah, 2024; Kostidis, 2024). Obviously, this means there was an external shift that incentivised Turkey to update its stance and posture in the region to increase its presence and influence at the metaphorical "negotiation table."

These incentives, as per the two-game theory, must go through a sequential process in which the "negotiator" must first enter and then construct a policy that is domestically acceptable for them to act on. Regardless of what the sequence looks like, the premise is still the same. The sequence is either 1) the military response goes through a domestic "vetting process" to decide whether this is replicable, or 2) Domestic institutions have decided that such a response is preferable preemptively. It is more likely the latter than the former because events of actual military activity tend to require a quick, direct response that relies solely on the military chain of command, with the president at its end. But in the context of constructing defence strategies to balance threats and prevent such aggression from Greece from happening again, the sequence is the former. But before analysing the sequence through the lens of the "negotiator" or domestic institutions, it's wise to look at what jumpstarts this sequence and even accelerates the need to construct overall defence strategies.

### ***The Increasing Inflexibility of the Aegean Sea as the Winds Set***

There has been a significant narrowing of what counts as acceptable win sets due to the securitisation of the Aegean Sea and the framing of the issue as a matter of territorial sovereignty, which makes it even more inflexible. The narrowing of the win sets is caused by the intersection and amplification of two key issues: the inherent inflexibility of sovereignty-related disputes and the increasing economic potential of the Aegean Sea amid a global economic downturn.

It is pretty much the norm that territorial disputes are matters of national sovereignty, even when the territory itself has little practical importance to the state. Unlike in other forms of agreements, such as trade, which allow for some concessions here and there, sovereignty-related issues don't necessarily leave much room for states to compromise. In the case of the Aegean Sea, Turkey sees it not just as a geographic or economic asset to the state. Prior to that, like any other state, Turkey sees it as an essential part of its sovereignty and national identity. This is mostly due to the inherent nature of territory as one of the

state's important building blocks. For any state to exist, it must have territory and the power to govern it. That power is essentially a manifestation of sovereignty. For territory to be meaningful in any way, the state must have legitimate authority without external foreign elements (Storey, 2017). Therefore, the idea of territory becomes one of the most fundamental things. States cannot exist without land, and thus the process of acquiring and holding onto it is a matter of great concern to the state (Rothwell, 2018).

Specifically in the context of the Aegean Sea, there exists a natural rigidity which is further amplified by the zero-sum nature of maritime disputes. The demarcation of territorial waters, the allocation of EEZs, the islands, and the airspace are issues in which gains for one side are perceived as direct losses for the other. For Turkey, any concessions would signal an existential threat, narrowing the range of acceptable win sets. But it has never been this uncompromising. Before the escalation into militarisation, the Aegean Sea dispute between Turkey and Greece was more diplomatic. Even though both countries obviously held competing claims, efforts to achieve solvency were more often than not pursued through diplomacy and mutual concessions. Following the seismic exploration incident in the Aegean Sea, Turkey and Greece signed the Bern Agreement in 1976 (RTMFA, n.d.). Under the agreement, they both commit to negotiating to reach a delimitation agreement and to abstain from taking any actions regarding the continental shelf. Overall, there was some willingness to negotiate and make concessions.

Turkey did, in the early 2000s, pursue a "zero problems with neighbours" under Ahmet Davutoğlu (RTMFA, n.d.-d). To some extent, it might sound like an idealistic model, but it essentially changes the mentality in Turkish foreign policy. It's not necessarily "zero problems" in the literal sense, but rather a balanced consideration of security and freedom, done in conjunction with other considerations and principles.

Therefore, the Aegean dispute, while always a point of contention, was less securitised in public discourse. Nationalist rhetoric was much more moderate. Nationalism still exists, but it was never the biggest driving force behind policy decisions regarding the Aegean and the issue was always deemed "solvable." The Aegean dispute was also not a central issue in public opinion alongside other issues at the time. Therefore, within the context of the two game theories, a wider "win set" was established, and any concessions were not immediately framed as betrayals of national sovereignty. Somewhere along the lines, a shift happens, and it starts with a breakdown of trust between the two states. Greece's extension of territorial waters to 12 nautical miles under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is seen by Turkey as a threat to its access to the Aegean (RTMFA, n.d.-a). But it still begs the question of why Greece has done so.

It all boils down to the significant increase in the geostrategic and economic importance of the Aegean Sea, which changes the calculus of mutual concessions and, in turn, the win set. In the 2000s, seismic surveys and geological studies began to reveal the Aegean Sea's potential as a resource-rich region, particularly in hydrocarbons. The possibility of untapped energy in the Aegean has been and remains quite appealing to both states, especially Turkey (Turan, 2022). Turkey is a net importer of energy, which accounts for a substantial portion of their trade deficit (RTMFA, n.d.-c). They spend over \$40 billion every year on energy resources, with domestic production accounting for only 7% of national demand (Norris &

Norris, 2020; International Trade Administration [ITA], n.d.). This dependence exposes the Turkish economy to the volatility of global energy markets, where fluctuations in oil and gas prices have repeatedly strained its fiscal resources. Therefore, the Aegean Sea, recognising its potential, became a tool for Turkey to enhance its energy security and independence. This is even more pronounced when you look at the broader context of the global economy. The global economy has had its share of ups and downs in the past 20 years. The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent European debt crisis ushered in a period of global economic instability in the 2010s. The COVID-19 Pandemic in the 2020s and the subsequent economic crisis caused widespread disruptions in global supply chains, including in energy markets, where oil prices experienced unprecedented volatility, initially plummeting and then rebounding sharply as economies reopened. The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has significantly disrupted global energy markets by driving up oil and natural gas prices. These 3 back-to-back economic crises have placed an enormous strain on energy-importing nations like Turkey. Turkey's economy suffers from chronic inflation and the devaluation of the Turkish lira. Over the last decade, the Lira has lost significant value against major currencies, which increases the cost of energy imports.

This means that as economic pressures mount, states are less willing to compromise on resource disputes they see as critical to their long-term economic interests. For Turkey, this means adopting a more assertive stance in the Aegean to secure its share of the resources, even if it means more tensions with Greece. The intersection of the inherent zero-sum nature of territorial disputes and their pragmatic value creates very rigid win-sets for Turkey. Any compromise is not palatable as it is perceived as a concession on territorial or energy claims, which harms its economy. The shift in acceptable win sets makes diplomatic resolutions increasingly unlikely, as both Turkey and Greece operate within rigid win sets that leave little room for compromise. Militarisation thus became a rational response to secure their interests.

### **The Idiosyncratic Role of Erdogan**

The negotiator plays a major role as an intermediary between the domestic political system and the international negotiating table in two-level game theory. The theory crystallises the role of balancing competing pressures, interests, and constraints at both levels. Therefore, effectiveness is determined by their capacity to navigate the "maze" and achieve outcomes acceptable to their domestic constituencies and international counterparts. This, however, is quite incomplete. The negotiator is not necessarily just a passive intermediary between two competing interests without its own influence on the process. Since the negotiator is a political actor with their own perspective on the issue, they have preferences for how negotiations should play out and which outcomes are preferable. Therefore, the process of negotiation becomes deeply intertwined with their efforts to secure domestic legitimacy for their choices. This doesn't mean that every negotiator is politically motivated, pursuing their own interests as their primary goal in steering the negotiation. The more generous interpretation is that their political ideology subconsciously shapes how they think about what's best for the country, and they try to convince their domestic constituencies that this is the best course of policy; otherwise, they lose domestic legitimacy if public support doesn't go their way. Far from being a one-way process, this creates a complex feedback loop where

domestic-level actions legitimise and amplify international policy but require the negotiator to galvanise domestic buy-in.

In this framework, the negotiator with their preferences actively works to mould domestic opinion to legitimise their favoured agreement. This goes beyond simply relaying outcomes; the negotiator engages in a proactive process of crafting domestic narratives through grand strategies, forming alliances, and managing dissent to align the domestic win-set with their vision.

Grand Strategy in international relations is the overarching framework that guides a state in using its resources to achieve long-term national objectives by maximising its power. To Erdogan, Blue Homeland was his grand strategy. The Blue Homeland Doctrine, or "Mavi Vatan", is a maritime strategy developed by Turkey to assert and protect its interests in the surrounding seas, specifically the Aegean Sea. The doctrine reflects a strategic shift to prioritise maritime territory and influence. The doctrine was first formulated on the belief that Turkey's traditional land-based defence policy was inadequate given the country's geographic situation and changing regional dynamics. The Blue Homeland Doctrine promotes a more maritime stance by asserting Turkey's right to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the surrounding seas. The nuance of the doctrine has been slightly altered to argue that the expansion of Turkey's naval forces is justified as defensive and necessary preemptive measures to counterbalance Greek expansionism and protect maritime boundaries. This is done to influence domestic perceptions and gain as much legitimacy as possible.

The doctrine is used to strategically reduce Turkey's negotiating flexibility, but to do so, it requires much more domestic legitimacy. This is exactly why Erdogan has been using the blue homeland doctrine as a grand strategy to justify his militarisation of the Aegean Sea. This is done through deliberately constructing the Aegean conflict as a zero-sum contest with a highly narrow range of acceptable compromises at both the domestic and international levels. Any concession in the Aegean would constitute a betrayal of Turkey's sovereign rights, thereby politically invalidating outcomes that might otherwise form part of a mutually beneficial settlement.

Erdogan's rhetoric reframes sovereignty disputes in the Aegean as critical issues tied to Turkey's national identity and historical grievances. The Aegean issue is not inherently politically divisive, at least domestically, and this is inherent to the issue of national sovereignty. Therefore, it is quite easy for Erdogan to build societal consensus supporting militarisation and naval expansion to achieve a range of domestically acceptable outcomes. Public opinion is thus aligned with Erdogan's stance, where winning at the international level yields outcomes affirming Turkey's maximalist claims. To do so, you need as much Institutionalisation of the narrative as possible for the support to be sustainable.

Under Turkey's centralised governance structure, especially after the purge in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, many key institutions, including the military and the foreign ministry, have been reorganised and reoriented to achieve uniformity in policy execution, further tightening the scope of acceptable outcomes. Although the purge and reorganisation are specifically done for the sake of the blue homeland doctrine, they certainly help spread the doctrine. The failed coup attempt provided Erdogan with a pretext

to create sweeping purges within Turkey's military and civil service. Tens of thousands of people were arrested, and around 125,000 civil servants, military personnel and academics were suspended from their positions in the aftermath due to allegations of supporting and aiding the coup (Ibrahim, 2022). The restructuring extended beyond suspension. Erdogan brought key military functions under civilian control, particularly through the Ministry of Defence, which operates directly under the presidency (Yıldırım, 2024). A constitutional referendum was held in Turkey on 16 April 2017, which abolished Turkey's parliamentary system in favour of a presidential model (Ibrahim, 2022). This restructuring of Turkey's political system consolidated executive authority under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The shift granted Erdogan sweeping powers, including the ability to issue executive decrees, directly appoint high-ranking officials, and dissolve parliament. For instance, defence budgets were significantly increased under his direct oversight, with funds allocated to naval expansion and the development of indigenous defence technologies. The absence of legislative hurdles facilitated the rapid operationalisation of the Blue Homeland Doctrine.

The consolidation of executive authority in Turkey under Erdogan was not initially, or exclusively, undertaken for the sake of the Blue Homeland Doctrine, but it emerged as a defence strategy that benefited from it. Erdogan's focus on secular nationalism predated the Blue Homeland Doctrine, but it still aided it, as the doctrine's foundational premise remains closely tied to nationalism. Therefore, the doctrine fit seamlessly into Erdogan's nationalist agenda. The blue homeland doctrine was somewhat of an opportunistic beneficiary, as decision-making is centralised and implementation streamlined; the traditional domestic ratification process of the Two-Game theory was easily sidestepped by Erdogan without significant resistance. In this sense, the doctrine and Erdogan's consolidation of power exist in a symbiotic relationship where the doctrine benefits from Erdogan's centralised authority, its use further reinforcing Erdogan's ability to legitimise its militarisation internationally.

Erdogan managed to sidestep most of the institutional hurdles to his plan simply because of the system. He needs an active plan to engage with legitimacy in the public's eyes, which is achieved by controlling and stimulating nationalistic fervour and institutionalising the blue homeland doctrine.

Regarding spreading the nationalistic narrative, Erdogan is still helped by his previous consolidation of Turkey's media following the 2016 coup. Following the failed coup attempt, the Turkish authorities launched a crackdown that led to the closure of more than 131 media organisations. This was accompanied by the imprisonment of numerous journalists under charges of aiding the coup (BBC News, 2016). The media was highly controlled, with state-run outlets such as TRT and the Anadolu Agency serving as primary vehicles for disseminating the government's narratives. This allows Turkey greater freedom and capacity to popularise the narrative. The media was only an apparatus for spreading the narratives. The narrative itself has to be framed out and communicated. Therefore, we see that Erdogan's speeches and public appearances continue to specifically mention the phrase "blue homeland" and stress the importance of the narrative (Daily Sabah, 2020).

Erdogan's government has clearly embraced the Blue Homeland Doctrine, but much of Turkey's militarisation in the Aegean would likely persist regardless of the doctrine's prominence and would nevertheless help reinforce its principles and domestic legitimacy.

Even if Turkey can always sidestep domestic hurdles, it still needs a quasi-democratic narrative of sovereignty to gain more legitimacy and standing internationally.

Therefore, to ensure the longevity of this narrative, it underwent multiple forms of institutionalisation outside the military. For example, the ideals of the narrative have been integrated into Turkey's educational curriculum (Kostidis, 2024). The Turkish Education Ministry's "Century of Turkey" program was approved, with the ideals of the doctrine extensively incorporated into the textbooks. According to the new program, the subject of geography for ninth-graders emphasises "the importance of Turkey's location characteristics."

Erdogan's approach to domestic ratification benefited from existing nationalistic fervour and institutional consolidation. Even though taking advantage of these things to advance the narrative was deliberate, their existence is not specifically to drive the doctrine. While there is clear evidence of deliberate efforts to implement the doctrine as part of Turkey's maritime and defence strategy, many of its apparent successes are byproducts of Erdogan's predating political agenda, particularly his focus on nationalism and militarisation. Thus, while the Blue Homeland Doctrine is not merely an incidental beneficiary, its prominence in justifying the militarisation of the Aegean Sea owes as much to Erdogan's political calculus as to its inherent strategic value.

## **Conclusion**

This study analysed Turkey's evolving defence strategies by focusing on the militarisation of the Aegean Sea and the strategic role of the Blue Homeland Doctrine as it undergoes domestic ratification. Employing Two-Level Game Theory as the analytical framework, this research examined how Turkey's defence posture is shaped by the interaction of domestic political considerations and international negotiation pressures under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the "negotiator"

The findings demonstrate that Turkey's militarisation of the Aegean Sea is a response driven by both Greece's militarisation and domestic political calculations towards the value of the Aegean Sea. Erdoğan's strategic use of nationalistic narratives and the Blue Homeland Doctrine has proven critical in gaining political legitimacy domestically and internationally. The study highlights how this strategy exploits nationalistic sentiments to solidify public support.

The analysis further highlights the narrowing of acceptable win sets as a consequence of the intersection between sovereignty disputes and the economic significance of the Aegean Sea amid global economic instability. This dynamic has limited diplomatic flexibility between Turkey and Greece, which subsequently turns militarisation into a rational strategy to secure national interests. Moreover, the study demonstrates Erdoğan's role as not just a key negotiator but also a 'salesperson' within the two-level game framework. Although the Blue Homeland Doctrine is central to Turkey's defence policy, this research suggests that its prominence is as much a product of Erdoğan's political priorities as it is a strategic maritime concept. Through prior political control and nationalist sentiments, Erdoğan has successfully balanced out institutional constraints and positioned militarisation as both a strategic necessity and a political tool. This study contributes to understanding the interplay among international strategic behaviour, domestic political strategy, and leadership negotiation.

Future research could further explore the long-term implications of Turkey's militarisation in the Aegean Sea or assess similar strategies employed by other actors under comparable geopolitical pressures.

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