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Azar Babayev & Lala Jumayeva

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The partisan politics of foreign policy: explaining Turkey's 'nationalist turn' and its involvement in the 2020 Karabakh war

Azar Babayev and Lala Jumayeva
ADA University

Abstract *This article addresses the party politics of foreign policy through a theoretically informed analysis of the political survival imperative in a domestic context. Building on recent research on party ideologies and political survival/power-seeking, it offers a fresh perspective on the influence of partisan politics on foreign policy. Drawing on qualitative data, including expert interviews, the article uses the case of Turkey as a hybrid, and thus unstable, regime to examine the partisan aspects of foreign policy with a focus on two basic links between party politics and foreign policy behaviour: party ideologies and party leadership. Specifically, the article argues that the ruling AKP's need for domestic survival led to increasingly nationalist, populist behaviour and the formation of an alliance with the main nationalist party MHP, which in turn led to the dominance of a nationalist discourse in Turkish foreign policy, contributing to coercive or risky international moves. This is best exemplified by the AKP government's strong support for Azerbaijan in the 2020 Karabakh war.*

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey generally pursued a restrained foreign policy toward the Caucasus. For example, Ankara chose not to support Azerbaijan militarily during the first Karabakh war (1991–1994). Yet, while siding with the 'brother country', Turkey did not remain fully neutral in this conflict, but restrained. In line with this policy, Ankara also made serious efforts to normalise its own relations with Armenia in 2009–2010. Turkey's strong military support to Azerbaijan in the second Karabakh war in 2020 indicates, however, a significant change in its previously cautious policy in the region.

This article sets out to examine what has influenced the above change in Turkey's policy toward the Caucasus. Specifically, it asks *why Turkey strongly supported Azerbaijan in the second Karabakh war despite its commonly restrained foreign policy in the region*. Since Turkey's open support constitutes quite a departure from a decades-long policy of being reserved, its behaviour renders this question an analytical research puzzle because there appears to be a mismatch

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between Turkey's relative power and its geopolitical ambitions in the Caucasus—traditionally considered a Russian sphere of influence. The article argues that Ankara's support for Baku was, *inter alia*, due to a 'nationalist turn' in the Turkish government's (including foreign) policy made by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)¹ under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a political alliance with the country's main nationalist party—Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The major shift in Turkey's Karabakh policy is discussed here as a key example of AKP's turn to nationalism to illustrate a 'consequential' interaction of the two basic logics of partisan politics in foreign policy: political survival (*office/power-seeking*) and party ideology (*policy-seeking*).

Theoretically, this study aims to explore the relevance of the survival imperative of partisan politics in foreign policy. Specifically, it examines the case of Turkey as a non-Western example, characterised as a hybrid regime with political instability, making the survival imperative a crucial factor in partisan politics; consequently, the ruling elite is primarily pursuing a mobilisation strategy, which includes engaging in assertive, confrontational foreign policy. Previous research has not systematically investigated cases like Turkey, which exhibit these characteristics. While existing research has primarily focused on cases where the influence of partisan politics is expected to be most pronounced, particularly in liberal-democratic regimes, there has been limited research (aside from a few notable exceptions) on illiberal and non-Western cases. These 'difficult' cases present a more mixed or inconsistent impact of party politics, highlighting the need for further research (Hofmann and Martill 2021, 311).

This article explores the impact of partisan politics on foreign policy through a novel perspective, combining research on party ideologies and political survival/power-seeking. It employs a three-level explanatory model to examine the relationship between party ideology (*policy-seeking* assumption) and power drive (*office-seeking* assumption). The case of Turkey and its recent Karabakh policy is analysed as an example. The article argues that (*first level*) Ankara's strong support for the 'brother nation' Azerbaijan was driven by (*second level*) Turkish nationalism, which had been domestically amplified by (*third level*) the ruling party's pursuit of political survival and its coalition with the nationalist MHP. Here, the first and second levels refer to policy-seeking, while the third level to office-seeking. It is also important to note that AKP and MHP are centralised parties with influential leaders as the linchpin of their political survival: Erdoğan, AKP's founder, remains the undisputed leader, while Bahçeli has reigned supreme over MHP since 1997.²

¹ A party with pro-Islamic roots which has been in power since 2002.

² The influence of party leaders is significant in this increasing nationalist dynamic; specifically, Bahçeli's influence appears to have steered Erdoğan towards adopting firmer nationalist positions (Kara 2022, 545).

While acknowledging the substantial influence of structural and international factors on Turkish foreign policy,³ the article primarily seeks to offer a new, counterintuitive perspective on Turkey's 'unexpected' behaviour during the 2020 war by highlighting the role of partisan politics, particularly the dynamics of domestic coalition building. In doing so, it also emphasises that partisan politics is not the sole or main determinant but has played a significant role in shaping Turkey's recent foreign policy. Additionally, it is recognised that Turkish foreign policy became less assertive post-2020, a shift that could potentially find explanation in factors such as changes in the economy and the evolving international landscape. However, it is important to emphasise that the empirical focus of this study is limited to the events surrounding the 2020 war. While these broader contextual changes are acknowledged, this study specifically zooms in on the complexities of partisan politics during that period to better understand its influence on Turkish foreign policy decisions.

In general, the article expands the understanding of how partisan politics influences foreign policy by examining the interplay between *ideological* beliefs and *political* motives of party leaders; its implication highlights the central role of the political survival imperative in foreign policy, potentially modifying one's ideological orientation. In other words, this illustrates how a political strategy, based on the need for domestic survival and manifested in coalition formation, can significantly reinforce ideological and policy changes. The article thus contributes to the literature that challenges the traditional view 'politics stops at the water's edge' in international relations. Empirically, it provides a detailed account of how partisan politics influences Turkey's foreign policy.

Methodologically, we engage in qualitative research using primary and secondary sources, including *expert interviews* in Ankara and Baku. Fifteen interviews were conducted with government officials, experts, and academics, using a standardised, semi-structured, open-ended interview technique. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

To analyse the qualitative data, we reconstructed a causal process, which sequentially links four interrelated events: (1) the ruling AKP's need for domestic survival, prompting (2) increasingly nationalist, populist behaviour and the formation of an alliance with the main nationalist party MHP, which in turn led to (3) the dominance of a nationalist discourse in foreign policy, internationally resulting in (4) coercive moves (military activism), as illustrated by the AKP government's involvement in the recent Karabakh war.

The interview data were analysed as supplementary evidence to support the main arguments. It is important to note that this research is a limited, small-scale study, and we acknowledge these limitations by being circumspect while drawing conclusions.

³ For example, it is important to recognise the recent dynamics of Turkey's foreign relations with key external actors. Notably, Ankara's evolving relationship with NATO, aimed at maximising its strategic autonomy, and increased interactions with Russia in the broader region—marked not only by competition but also by cooperation—have significantly influenced its foreign policy behaviour. These interactions, characterised by a complex balance of strategic interests, have likely reduced the risks of Turkey's geopolitical power projection in the Caucasus, thereby providing it with a strategic advantage at minimal cost.

The first interview question aimed at finding out a general assessment of the dynamics in Turkey's foreign policy over the last decade. Here, almost all interviewees agreed on Turkey's conducting a more independent foreign policy. In their view, during this period Turkey's foreign policy also became increasingly focused on the Turkic world.

The second question was designed to assess the extent to which Turkey's partisan politics impacted the country's foreign policy dynamics over the last decade, especially to understand the role of the AKP–MHP alliance in this process. All experts stressed that this alliance was a 'necessity' for AKP's Erdoğan to win the elections. While, with this, Turkey's foreign policy became also more nationalist, there were slight disagreements on the extent of the ideological impact that the alliance had on Turkey's foreign policy.

The third and fourth questions helped to analyse recent changes in Turkey's Azerbaijan policy, including its support to Azerbaijan during the 2020 war. All interviewees stressed that Turkey's Azerbaijan policy had changed compared to the early 1990s and Ankara was able and willing to openly support Azerbaijan in the recent war, a shift attributed not only to its growing military power but also to its increasingly nationalist government policy. All Azerbaijani experts emphasised the positive change in Turkey's Azerbaijan policy coming with the formation of the AKP–MHP alliance, and all interviewees highlighted the importance of Turkey's support to Azerbaijan during the war, changing the balance of power in the region. Many experts noted that this fact is also enabling Turkey to revive the idea of the unity of Turkic nations. Overall, the interview data provided useful insights into the impact of domestic political dynamics on Turkey's foreign policy, specifically its involvement in the 2020 Karabakh war. This empirical support for the theoretical claims was achieved by correlating the interview findings with the proposed causal links. In particular, the interviews confirmed the study's main argument about the influence of party politics, highlighting the shift towards a more nationalist and assertive stance in Turkish foreign policy due to the AKP–MHP alliance. They also underlined that Ankara's strong support for Azerbaijan during the war was fuelled by the rise of Turkish nationalism, which in turn was reinforced by the ruling party's efforts to ensure its political survival through an alliance with the nationalist MHP. In doing so, the interviews demonstrated consistency with the theoretical framework and, in particular, strengthened the explanatory power of the above three-level model, which links foreign policy preferences to prevailing ideological beliefs and political survival dynamics in the Turkish context. This study is organised as follows. The next section takes stock of the existing partisan politics and foreign policy literature, commonly characterised as an ignored relationship. It also introduces the analytical framework of the study, in which political survival is conceptualised as a key imperative in foreign policy. Turning to the empirical part, we then analyse the formation of a nationalist coalition between AKP and MHP, which has significantly influenced Turkish foreign (and security) policy in recent years. The last section considers the Karabakh issue in Turkish foreign policy and explores the transformation of Ankara's Karabakh policy from 'restraint' to 'resolve' over the past decades, reaching a dramatic climax with its involvement in the Karabakh war in 2020, which is seen as closely linked to the country's partisan politics.

Taking stock: Partisan politics and foreign policy

The study of the relationship between party politics and foreign policy can generally be seen as neglected (Alden and Aran 2017, 80–82; Wagner et al. 2018, 538; see also Raunio and Wagner 2020a). While domestic political factors have gained recognition in IR scholarship (Kaarbo 2015), the role of political parties in shaping foreign policy has received limited attention. Scholars have only recently started to systematically investigate the influence of political parties on foreign policy, marking a growing interest in this area (see, for example, Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Wagner et al. 2017).

Existing research emphasises the significance of political parties in shaping foreign policy, particularly in democratic countries. Numerous studies conducted in recent decades have provided increasing evidence supporting a partisan theory of foreign policy ('parties influence foreign policy'). This in turn has led to a shift in research focus from *whether* parties matter to *how, when and where* they matter (most or least) in foreign policy (Hofmann and Martill 2021). Scholarship in this field thus shows that wherever it plays out party politics represents important aspects of foreign policy today (Plagemann and Destradi 2019; Mello and Saideman 2019; Wenzelburger and Böller 2020; Onderco and Joosen 2021). In many respects, political parties can be seen as the 'key site' for a number of influences attributed to domestic sources of foreign policy (Alden and Aran 2017, 80).

In existing research on partisan politics, attention is also paid to parties as *ideational* (as carriers of ideologies) and *political* (as power-seeking actors) agents. Primarily, FPA scholarship offers two basic links between partisanship and foreign policy preferences: party ideologies and party leadership. Recent partisanship research has made significant strides in exploring the connection between party ideologies and foreign policy. Ideologies, understood here as ways that organise fundamental political values, serve specifically to present and guide the political, economic, and social goals of political actors; as such, they are programmatic and action-oriented, informing both domestic and foreign policy prescriptions while motivating political engagement (Hofmann 2013, 15; see also Schurmann 1973, 18, 20–21). In this view, party ideologies are 'empirically ascertainable attitudes and preferences toward political issues' (Hofmann 2013, 15). Drawing on a multifaceted understanding, this broad, non-normative concept of ideology also goes beyond a single, albeit dominant, left–right dimension.

Pioneering work in this area has demonstrated that ideological positions vary significantly across a broad spectrum of policy issues (Therien and Noël 2000; Rathbun 2004; Hofmann 2013). Generally, there is now a growing consensus that, with left- and right-wing parties holding diverging ideologies and articulating specific party positions on foreign (and security) policy, the partisan division mainly runs along leftist-rightist spectrum (Rathbun 2004; Mello 2014; Wagner et al. 2018; Hofmann and Martill 2021).

Taken together, a closer look at the partisanship literature reveals that many of the determining points in the formulation of ideological orientation and particular policy choices of a state's foreign policy are products of the party level, and not the formal government (Alden and Aran 2017, 81). Yet, the positions of political parties in various foreign policy issues and how

exactly their ideological orientations matter in foreign and security policy decision-making remain largely unexplored (Raunio and Wagner 2020a, 515).

Also, in terms of foreign policy decision-making, all influencing factors, including ideologies, are effectively anchored in the party leadership. Though the role of political leaders in influencing decision-making is well established (for example, Carter and Scott 2009), there remains considerable scope to link these insights to political parties, since partisan factors often determine the extent and reach of the leadership and their imprints on party agendas (Hofmann and Martill 2021, 316). In addition to party ideologies, a closer examination of party leadership here should reveal the role of party leaders and how the degree of centralisation and/or personalisation of a party affects decision-making.

Political survival as a key imperative in foreign policy

As noted, political parties and, by extension, their leaders are primarily driven by two types of motivations: political (material) and/or ideological (ideational). These motivations revolve around the pursuit of *office* and/or *policy*.⁴ Regardless of the regime type, the primary objective for leaders is to ensure their own political survival. Those not in power seek to attain it, and once in power, they strive to maintain and maximise it. This baseline activity of staying in power is fundamental for political leaders. Incumbents, based on the policy-seeking assumption, also advance specific policy agendas to satisfy their own preferences as well as those of their supporters and constituents (Neack 2018, 100).

Concerning foreign policy, political leaders are assumed to constitute the 'focal points' of decision-making (Hagan 1993). In this context, partisan politics gains significance primarily due to the political imperative of retaining and strengthening power, ensuring the long-term survival of the ruling elite, regardless of the regime's democratic nature. Since this imperative is *non-compensatory* and cannot be substituted by any other goal, leaders with a 'paramount self-interest' are likely to outright reject any domestically unfavourable policy option (Mintz 2004, 7). Though leaders sit at the nexus of domestic and international politics, they do not stand above domestic politics as they regularly struggle with other actors for political survival (Neack 2018, 100; see also Hermann and Hagan 1988); thus, they assume a dual role, simultaneously serving as national and political leaders.

In the shorter term, a crucial task for political leaders is to *build and maintain coalitions* of support for their foreign policy agendas. This becomes a fundamental priority alongside the retention of power; building policy coalitions is just necessary for leaders to implement their existing policy preferences (Hagan 1995, 122).

The imperative of political survival is particularly prominent in politically unstable countries prevalent in the Global South (David 1991), where there may be a powerful opposition or extreme distrust among competing actors

⁴ Some authors expand on this set of party objectives by including *vote seeking/maximising* as a third goal (see, for example, Müller and Strøm 1999). However, this can primarily be viewed as an instrumental objective in the pursuit of office and/or policy.

(Hagan 1995, 126). Managing political opposition to their rule and policy agenda becomes crucial for leaders in such contexts. Hagan (1995) proposes three strategies: *accommodation*, *insulation*, and *mobilisation*, each associated with certain tendencies toward engaging in risky foreign policy behaviours.

In this context, mobilisation is a strategy primarily linked to the imperative of retaining power. Leaders seek support for a specific policy by influencing domestic actors, including opponents. They aim to legitimise the ruling regime and its policies through appeals to nationalism, imperialist themes, scapegoating foreign elements, highlighting their capacity for national security and international standing, and diverting attention from divisive domestic problems (Hagan 1995, 129).⁵ As such, mobilisation involves the manipulation of foreign policy issues, often leading to amplified risk-taking.⁶ In terms of political legitimisation, leaders *build coalitions* by aggressively selling their policies, often targeting audiences outside their ruling group. This strategy increases support for their policies while discrediting opponents (Hagan 1995, 130; see also George 1980; Trout 1975). Associated with risky foreign policy, elites may also create 'nationalist coalitions' by leveraging external issues such as military engagement abroad, also becomes relevant in this context (Mansfield and Snyder 2002, 532).

Considering the other two strategies, accommodation refers to 'bargaining with the opposition' to secure their backing for a compromise or 'controversy avoidance', with 'restraint in foreign policy' as the expected result (Neack 2008, 99). The insulation strategy seeks 'to deflect attention away from foreign policy issues', through suppressing opposition for example, if successful, no change of 'a chosen foreign policy course' could be expected (Ibid, 99).

Unlike accommodation and insulation, the mobilisation strategy *directly* impacts foreign policy as leaders manipulate it for political purposes. Its effect on foreign policy can be significant, resulting in strong, forceful, and typically conflictual foreign policy actions that demonstrate the position and ability of the political leadership (Hagan 1995, 130).

Also, empirical studies indicate a broader trend where leaders tend to pursue assertive and independent foreign policies aimed at consolidating domestic support, especially during times of leadership challenges or political vulnerability. This may include resorting to military force during international crises (cf. Hagan 1995, 131). One common manifestation of this trend is the use of 'diversionary wars', where leaders instigate military campaigns to distract attention from domestic problems (Neack 2018, 104–105). An obvious case for foreign policy change in the face of domestic challenges is a country in transition where, being politically or institutionally unstable, the imperative of domestic survival for the ruling elite becomes highly salient. Therefore, 'one of the simplest but riskiest strategies for a hard-pressed regime [...] is to shore up its prestige at home by seeking victories abroad' (Mansfield and Snyder

⁵ For example, domestically 'troubled' elites may engage in a 'nationalist outbidding [...] by advancing bold proposals to deal forcefully with threats to the nation, claiming their domestic political opponents will not vigorously defend the national interests' (Mansfield and Snyder 2002, 532).

⁶ Using foreign policy for domestic political purposes carries a considerable risk, as it has the potential to harm the national interests of the country (Neack 2018, 104).

1995, 33). Viewing it through this lens, domestic political instability can in fact be a key source of international instability.

AKP's 'nationalist turn' and its impact on Turkish foreign policy

Today's Turkey is one of those examples that stand for a self-reinforcing relationship between increasingly authoritarian politics and more coercive international behaviour. Over the past decade, Turkey's international image has shifted significantly under AKP rule: Once hailed as a model of Muslim democracy, it has now faced criticism for authoritarian tendencies. Its government, previously seen as pro-Western, has shifted to an anti-Western stance. Additionally, its foreign policy has transitioned from the doctrine of 'zero problems with neighbours' to a more confrontational approach (Balta 2018).

Since assuming power in the early 2000s as the sole ruling party, the AKP has undergone a fundamental change in its foreign policy orientation. Initially rooted in a phase of liberal multilateralism, marked prominently by Ankara's strong aspirations towards the European Union (EU), the AKP, during its first two terms spanning from 2002 to 2011, actively championed reforms to align Turkey more closely with Europe. Occasionally, the AKP's depiction as a party of 'Muslim democrats' or 'conservative democrats' implied a political image compatible with the liberal-democratic tradition in Europe.

As a single ruling party, AKP's foreign policy has become more dynamic, assertive, and confrontational over the past two decades, influenced by a combination of internal and external factors (Dalacoura 2021, 1126). Especially, its priority to retain power and build policy coalitions have resulted in major changes in Turkish foreign policy, internationally leading to more determined and forceful behaviour. This strategy can be seen as a 'domestic-policy-oriented foreign policy' (Interview with an expert on Turkish politics, 2022, Baku), using foreign policy as a tool to manipulate domestic politics and gain popular support.

Specifically, changes in AKP's political alliances have domestically conditioned a shift towards a more populist and nationalist foreign policy. For example, in the last decade, the ruling party has left its former alliances first with the liberals and then with the Kurdish political movement (Altunışık 2020, 15; see also Taş 2022).⁷ While the party has increasingly used foreign policy as a ruling tool, capitalising on populist dividends and diversionary policy (Kutlay and Öniş 2021a, 3053), a nationalist discourse within the ruling elite gained prominence after domestic crises (including the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the corruption scandals in late 2013), overriding previous aspirations for European integration or neo-Ottomanism.⁸ In addition, AKP's anti-Western

⁷ For a discussion on the move from conservative democratic to Islamist to nationalist discourses in Turkey, each having consequences for foreign policy, and the sustained populism throughout, see Taş (2022).

⁸ A policy change was effectively initiated when Erdoğan asked Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, the main proponent of Neo-Ottomanism, to resign in May 2016 (Balta 2018). His removal from office 'opened the way to reset Turkey's foreign policy orientation, now in the context of changing global and regional realities as well as rising populist nationalism at home' (Altunışık 2020, 13).

stance intensified after the failed coup attempt in 2016, with party leader Erdoğan blaming foreign powers for interference.

Overall, Ankara's nationalist foreign policy in recent years can also be characterised as seeking 'strategic autonomy,' aligning with non-Western powers and using foreign policy for the purposes of domestic legitimacy and power mobilisation (Kutlay and Öniş 2021b).⁹ However, this drive for strategic autonomy has led to 'overambitious policies' going beyond Turkey's middle-power credentials (Kutlay and Öniş 2021b, 1103).

The third-level developments: AKP–MHP alignment and formation of a nationalist coalition

In terms of the above three-level explanatory model, we turn first to the third-level developments to examine the AKP's pursuit of political survival and its coalition building with the nationalist MHP. Prior to its nationalist turn, the AKP government had employed a rather moderate political strategy in response to the domestic constraints of its foreign policy. Specifically, it was more of an accommodation strategy within a largely democratic setting, conditioned by greater political and economic stability as well as a less authoritarian leadership. In its foreign policy, the ruling party relied on the long-standing consensus in Turkey's political mainstream, for example by actively pursuing the country's EU membership, and refrained from domestically controversial actions that might undermine its leadership or provoke political opposition.

Around the mid-2010s, however, the AKP government ideologically pivoted towards an anti-Western, nationalist trajectory, a turn primarily spurred by three domestic challenges (Thumann 2020, 5). The first of these was the 2013 Gezi Park protests, during which a segment of young, middle-class urbanites and civil society members rose up against the government.¹⁰ Following these protests, the AKP, now in 'survival' mode for the first time, not only responded with authoritarian, repressive measures, but also set out to look for new political allies. The second challenge was the end of Turkey's economic boom. In previous elections, the AKP had promised to improve the country's economic situation, but in the November 2015 elections, Erdoğan's victory was based on radical slogans calling to fight for the nation's survival.¹¹

The third trigger for the ruling party's nationalist turn was the eventual breakdown of a tortuous peace process with the Kurdish PKK—outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party. In the crisis year of 2015, AKP government started to fight both the militant PKK and the pro-Kurdish opposition party HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party). This in turn upset his hopes that the HDP would help AKP's Erdoğan become an executive president. The June 2015 elections

⁹ Specifically, Turkey's strong quest for 'strategic autonomy' has been used as 'a discursive tool to legitimise authoritarian practices at home, fragment domestic opposition and accrue popular support through the rhetoric of "national security"' (Kutlay and Öniş 2021b, 1103).

¹⁰ Due to the recent 'Arab Spring', the AKP elite also had to worry about a possible 'Turkish Spring' against them (Taş 2022, 2880).

¹¹ Prior to this election, the AKP benefited from a favourable context as terror attacks in Turkey and the efforts to combat terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria generated increased nationalist support for the ruling party (Kara 2022, 538).

also saw the AKP lose its ability to form a government with a single-party majority in parliament, which it had done since 2002.

Around the same time, AKP leadership began to adopt a more nationalist rhetoric. And its patriotic, anti-Western tone resonated with its nationalist supporters and helped it gain popularity. This also allowed the ruling party to reach out to the MHP for support, despite having been rivals in the past. Following the 2015 elections, the AKP and MHP started collaborating more closely. Most important, after the failed coup, which triggered a wave of nationalism in Turkey, the MHP openly supported the AKP in its fight against followers of US-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, the alleged mastermind of the coup, and both parties continuously criminalised the HDP as a pro-PKK and thus a pro-terror organisation (Kara 2022, 540).

At the time of the 2016 coup, the ruling AKP was clearly on a nationalist path—accompanied by increasingly authoritarian developments. And the failed coup accelerated these tendencies in a dramatic way. The AKP thus moved to join forces with the nationalist MHP—supposedly to save the state and its institutions after they had been purged of Gülen supporters. After the coup, AKP's Erdoğan also pursued his goal to create a presidential system, for which he was offered help by MHP's Bahçeli. Erdoğan rapidly allied himself with his former opponent and thus became a 'nationalist by choice' (Thumann 2020, 5).

Consequently, these dynamics within Turkish partisan politics resulted in an increased emphasis on nationalism in government policies, particularly in foreign and security policy. A significant factor contributing to this trend is the prominent role played by MHP as the main proponent of nationalist ideology. Party leader Bahçeli gives voice to the profoundly nationalist, militarised political culture that is deeply entrenched in the Turkish state—notably in the police, security apparatus, judiciary, and the military (Karaveli 2020).¹² Though previously in opposition to AKP, Bahçeli has since 2016 enjoyed a unique opportunity to stamp his mark on the government policy. Specifically, by allying with AKP, his party provided the ruling elite not only with an ideological rallying point—that is, 'national salvation', but also with the cadres it needed to fill the bureaucracy after the widespread post-coup purge.

Following the system change through a constitutional referendum in 2017, AKP and MHP turned their collaboration into a political alliance. In a critical move, Bahçeli announced in January 2018 that his party would support Erdoğan's bid for the upcoming presidential election. In February 2018, a political coalition was officially established between the two parties—*Cumhur İttifakı* (The People's Alliance). Acting as an electoral alliance without formally forming a coalition government, they have contested together with nationalist slogans in all recent campaigns, including the 2017 referendum, the 2018 general elections, and the 2019 local elections.

¹² The MHP has been closely linked to Turkey's so-called deep state since its founding in 1969, when it was launched as a strike-force against the left; the founding leader Alparslan Türkeş was a former counter-insurgency officer. Bahçeli succeeded Türkeş after the latter's death in 1997.

The second-level developments: Increasing dominance of Turkish nationalism

How the above third-level developments amplified Turkish nationalism, whose increasing dominance of Turkish politics characterises the second-level developments in our model? The ruling party, keen to maintain its alliance with the MHP, has over this time increasingly turned to nationalist rhetoric to demonstrate unity within their alliance. This also meant that the MHP gained a significant level of political sway, disproportionate to its size. As a result, the nationalist party began to exert a notable ideological influence on the country's foreign policy, especially in terms of pan-Turkism (Interview with a senior Azerbaijani expert, 2022, Baku). Overall, the name of the game in recent Turkish partisan politics has been quite simple: the MHP backs the AKP to maintain power, gaining concessions in return to push forward its nationalist, hardline ideas.

Indeed, the AKP–MHP alliance is a nationalist coalition that constantly underlines its ability to protect Turkey's national interests. For example, Erdoğan proclaims that cooperation between the two parties will continue 'for the survival of our country and the future of our nation' (President of Turkey 2019). Using similar rhetoric, Bahçeli also stresses that *Cumhur İttifakı* is 'Turkey's only hope and guarantee against the great powers' (MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) 2020b) and their alliance will be for the country 'the architect of the future and the guardian of independence' (MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) 2019). The AKP–MHP alliance thus lives by the perceived external threats and military engagement abroad, resembling a state of 'forever war' where international tensions usually linger in the political backdrop.

In this respect, nationalism appears to be more instrumental, rather than reflecting deeper values for Turkey's ruling party. This is because an increasingly nationalist foreign policy is linked domestically to AKP's main motive for retaining power. Accordingly, while Erdoğan and his party leaned originally towards reformist and Islamist stances, their pivot to nationalism became more pronounced with their coalition with MHP, a move mainly driven by the political survival imperative.¹³

AKP's turn to Turkish nationalism is particularly remarkable since it represents a stark departure from when the party leadership lashed out at nationalists and viewed MHP as a political foe. In the past, for instance, Erdoğan was highly critical of nationalism while advocating for the peace process with the Kurds. When he saw fit, he took great strides in embracing the Kurdish issue and winning the Kurdish vote in the elections. In previous years, to the dismay of MHP, AKP government had also pursued a 'Kurdish opening' and conducted indirect negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of PKK.

It can therefore be argued that AKP embraced MHP's conservative nationalism more for (power-) political reasons because the ruling party needed the support of the nationalist forces to remain in power. Along with Turkey's slide toward authoritarianism, party leader Erdoğan was thus able to solidify a conservative-nationalist camp, fully supportive of his policy agenda (Aras 2017, 6).

¹³ In the early years of his government, Erdoğan even denounced nationalism on numerous occasions and promised to trample on nationalism and accused nationalists of forcing an identity on people while he pushed for the Kurdish opening (Thumann 2020, 4).

In its predominant mobilisation strategy, the AKP's response to domestic challenges also incorporated elements of alternative strategies. For example, as AKP's Erdoğan transitioned towards a more authoritarian presidential regime, his crackdown on opposition served as insulation. Moreover, the ruling party's coalition with the MHP also mirrored a strategy of accommodation (through bargaining), catalysing its ideological turn towards more nationalist stances. Increasingly appealing to growing nationalist sentiments in the society, party leader Erdoğan assumed a flag-bearer role for Turkish nationalist grievances; this has given leeway to the AKP–MHP coalition, by isolating the PKK and like-minded actors in Turkish politics and, more broadly, redefining the political system in super presidential terms (Aras 2017, 6).

Towards a nationalist course in foreign policy

Turkey's assertive foreign policy in the past decade has garnered significant domestic support for the ruling AKP. Their pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' based on nationalism and independence has successfully mobilised and manipulated foreign policy to serve their political goals (Kutlay and Öniş 2021a, 3064). This is evident in the AKP government's use of pre-election cross-border military operations à la 'diversionary war', which can be seen as a deliberate exploitation and manipulation of national interests for political gain within the AKP–MHP alliance (Kara 2022, 543).

Also, the above ideological shift in the AKP government's stance, transitioning from pro-Western to anti-Western, first began manifesting as an assertive pan-Islamist foreign policy, often termed as Neo-Ottomanism, before it distinctly evolved into a nationalist orientation. This shift gradually redirected Turkey's policy focus from the West toward the Islamic world. During this phase, the AKP's Islamic foundations served as the groundwork for normalising Turkey's relations with Muslim nations, leveraging Turkey's historical and geographical depth. Ahmet Davutoglu played a pivotal role in shaping Turkish foreign policy, first as foreign minister (2009–2014) and later as prime minister (2014–2016). His vision emphasised Turkey's emergence as a global force involved across various regions, with particular significance placed on the Middle East due to its historical Islamic ties and Turkey's imperial past. Overall, the AKP government sought to combine a discourse rooted in civilisation with the concept of Turkish leadership within the Muslim world.¹⁴

Following the loss of its majority in the 2015 election and the failed coup in 2016, the AKP employed a strategy of mobilisation and manipulation in Turkish foreign policy to ensure the political survival of the party and its *strongman* leader Erdoğan, for whom foreign policy also served as a means for personal survival and advantage. This included military operations in Syria as a means to contain domestic opposition and justify divisive policies. These actions aimed to demonstrate the AKP's ability to protect the national interests and eliminate external threats (Kara 2022, 540). Turkey's recent coercive

¹⁴ Alongside these grand schemes, Davutoglu also devised a more pragmatic 'zero problems with neighbors' policy which shaped relations with Syria, Iraq, Iran and other neighbours beyond the Middle East (Dalacoura 2021, 1129).

foreign policy, including involvement in conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and the 2020 Karabakh war, can be seen as a continued trend with a reinforcing effect.

Originally, the AKP's foreign policy had elements both favouring and opposing the West (Colakoğlu 2019). However, the AKP–MHP coalition has ideologically adopted a highly nationalist and anti-Western stance. President Erdoğan framed Turkey's struggle as 'us vs them' or 'Turkey vs the West,' portraying the alliance as the ultimate force against the nation's enemies (President of Turkey 2018).¹⁵ The imperative for political survival and the formation of a nationalist alliance have driven the ruling party towards a revisionist, militarised, assertive, and self-reliant foreign policy aligned with the MHP's longstanding position (Dalacoura 2021, 1130).¹⁶ Erdoğan, once critical of nationalism, now advocates for a resurgent nationalist Turkey aspiring to play a significant role in regional and global politics (Aydıntaşbaş 2020, 5). It is important to note that while the MHP's alliance with the AKP did not determine the shift towards nationalism in Turkish foreign policy, it did take it to a new level.¹⁷ In other words, there was arguably an increasing nationalist orientation in government ideology, amplified by the imperative of domestic political survival.

The MHP, as the AKP's junior partner, plays a significant role in promoting Turkish nationalism and an ambitious foreign policy vision aimed at making Turkey internationally a major power and the leading country in its region (MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) 2009). The nationalist party considers the geography of Turkic nations the primary area of interest for Turkey's foreign policy (MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) 2009). Consequently, the MHP has always been actively supportive of Azerbaijan and its cause in Karabakh (Interview with a Turkish think-tank senior member, 2022, Ankara).¹⁸

In recent years, the nationalist idea of the 'Turkic world' has indeed become deeply ingrained in Turkish foreign policy (Köstem 2016, 736). This guides specifically Turkey's foreign policy towards the Caucasus and Central Asia (Köstem 2016, 722), representing a shift from previous years when Turkey emphasised the Black Sea region for example (Interview with an expert on Turkey's foreign policy, 2022, Ankara). In this regard, it is precisely the MHP that promotes a pan-Turkic discourse, which envisions Eurasia being

¹⁵ For example, Erdoğan viewed the Turkish currency and debt crisis (since 2018) as the West's 'economic war' against Turkey and tried to mobilise the public with anti-Western populist rhetoric, claiming that 'there are various campaigns being carried out. Don't heed them. Don't forget, if they have their dollars, we have our people, our God, our Allah' (BBC News 2018).

¹⁶ As a senior MHP official blatantly put it, foreign policy must be nationalist in nature, otherwise the country will become a colony (Interview with a high-ranking representative of MHP, 2022, Ankara).

¹⁷ While its alliance with MHP is and remains a central factor in Turkish partisan politics with corresponding policy implications, the AKP itself as a political party has generally become less important in foreign policy decision-making in recent years, thus reflecting the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey. This is all the more true as Erdoğan's grip on power has been consolidated with a change of government system in 2018, rendering the president and his inner circle more important than the ruling party or any other institution in shaping foreign and security policy.

¹⁸ It is important to highlight that Erdoğan's AKP has also always maintained a pro-Azerbaijani stance in its foreign policy. However, with the Karabakh war in 2020, a significant shift occurred as Turkey escalated its engagement by providing substantial military support, thus elevating its policy towards Azerbaijan to the next level.

dominated by Turkic peoples (Tanrısever 2018, 24–25), with important implications for Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's involvement in the 2020 Karabakh war best exemplifies the impact of this discourse on foreign policy.

Karabakh issue in Turkish foreign policy: moving from 'restraint' to 'resolve'

After the collapse of the USSR, Turkey had to be cautious about the new geopolitics in the Caucasus (Aydin 2002, 35). For example, when war broke out in Karabakh in early 1990s, Turkey chose not to intervene. Though newly elected Azerbaijani President Abulfaz Elchibey, a strong nationalist, oriented the country's foreign policy mainly toward Turkey in 1992–1993, Ankara sought to maintain its restrained policy.¹⁹

Though Turkey's involvement in the Karabakh conflict was limited, Ankara always demonstrated political support for Azerbaijan. Most notably, in response to the first Karabakh war, Turkey severed diplomatic relations with Armenia and closed the border.²⁰ Also, Ankara internationally supported Azerbaijan's position, for example, in the mediation of the Minsk Group by being active within the OSCE. Furthermore, Turkey and Azerbaijan successfully implemented significant regional projects, including the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway route. These projects not only enhanced their economic cooperation but also strengthened their strategic partnership. However, when it came to 'high politics,' Turkey was cautious in fully aligning with Azerbaijan due to considerations for Russia's 'special interests' in the region.

For decades, Turkey maintained its political support for Azerbaijan in the conflict, though this never included military assistance to Baku in the case of a war. Its reserved policy, however, started to gradually change after a four-day war in April 2016 in Karabakh, which in turn coincided domestically with AKP's nationalist turn, starting in the mid-2010s. None of the third parties responded immediately to this escalation, except Turkey (Zolyan 2017, 114–115). Condemning the silence of the international community, President Erdoğan emphasised that 'Turkey will back Azerbaijan to the end' (Daily Sabah 2016). Overall, Ankara's blunt reactions to the April 2016 war foreshadowed a 'resolve' phase in Turkey's Karabakh policy. Though Ankara did not play any noticeable role in the Karabakh peace process, Turkey was able to build a strong strategic partnership with Azerbaijan under 'one nation, two states'—a pan-Turkic slogan, developing a political potency to change the balance of power of the region with the Russia–Armenia alliance as the main stabilising factor.

¹⁹ For instance, despite President Elchibey's request for helicopters from Turkey, Ankara rejected to help his government to save the situation in Kalbajar back in 1993.

²⁰ In the late 2000s, Turkey, adhering to its cautious foreign policy, aimed to improve relations with Armenia by signing an agreement to restore diplomatic ties and open the border. However, the agreement was never ratified by either country's parliament. Turkish opposition arose from the strong objection of the Azerbaijani government and resistance from nationalists at home, prompting the AKP government to delay ratification, linking it to progress in the Karabakh peace process.

The first-level developments: Turkey–Azerbaijan alliance and 2020 Karabakh war

How Turkish nationalism, having gained ideological dominance in Turkey's politics, in turn motivated Ankara's strong support for the 'brother nation' Azerbaijan? About a decade before the second Karabakh war, the possibility of a new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was seen in Ankara as a 'nightmare scenario' in which Turkey would have to be involved (ICG (International Crisis Group) 2011, 15). Most importantly, Ankara acknowledged that Russia would not relinquish its geopolitical hegemony in the event of a third-party intervention in the Caucasus. Yet, Turkey's Karabakh policy has changed dramatically in recent years, putting Ankara in a position to directly influence the outcome of the war in 2020. Particularly, since the April 2016 war, Ankara has demonstrated a firm will—moving 'from a diplomatic focus to full military support' (Yavuz 2022, 281)—to intervene on Azerbaijan's side in the event of another war.

When the conflict escalated again in July 2020 and two days of fierce fighting took place in Tovuz on the Armenian–Azerbaijani border, causing casualties on both sides,²¹ the AKP government condemned Armenia's attack and emphasised that 'we [...] will continue to do whatever we need to do, as we have done before' (National Defense Ministry of Turkey 2020). After the July escalation, the Azerbaijani government was apparently preparing for an all-out war in Karabakh, and in September, Ankara officially announced that it would provide full support to Azerbaijan if Armenia continued to violate Azerbaijan's territorial integrity (Erickson 2022, 233–4).

Overall, the July clashes were a 'major turning point' for Turkey (Interview with an expert on Turkey's foreign policy, 2022, Ankara), and accordingly, Ankara's strong response can be characterised as the end of Turkey's 'restraint' in its Karabakh policy. Turkey's involvement in the war in late 2020 thus marked a radical shift in decades-long policy, moving towards a firm 'resolve' mode. Ankara's direct support for Azerbaijan also played a key role in determining the outcome of the military operations. Regional experts emphasise that the larger and more technologically advanced Azerbaijani military, supported by Turkey, decisively surpassed the smaller and outdated Armenian forces (for example, Reynolds 2021; Erickson 2022). The Turkish government not only supported Azerbaijan by providing high-tech weapons (including drones) in large quantities which increased sixfold in 2020 alone (Toksabay 2020), significantly contributing to the success of the Azerbaijani army, but also provided it with constant training and tactic sharing (Erickson 2022, 236). According to the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support (ASPMS) signed in 2010, Turkey was actively engaged in providing professional military education and training for the Azerbaijani armed forces. By the year 2020, these efforts extended to encompass joint training exercises. The frequency of these exercises witnessed an increase leading up to 2020; for instance, in 2018, there were seven joint exercises, followed by an additional thirteen in 2019. Notably, the joint exercise conducted in the summer of 2020 in Nakhchivan involved approximately eleven thousand Turkish personnel

²¹ An Azerbaijani border region far from the conflict zone, Tovuz is of a strategic importance as it serves as a crucial transit point for numerous energy pipelines and transport routes.

(Huseynov 2020). It has also been asserted that Turkey dispatched professional military advisors to oversee and guide Baku's military operations (Ostrovsky 2021). Thus, significant Turkish support openly extended to Baku, both in the lead-up to and during the war, proved to be a decisive factor in Azerbaijan's victory in 2020.

A key reason for Turkey's intervention in the second Karabakh war was the ruling AKP's pursuit of an assertive foreign policy with increasing reliance on coercion and military activism, which was reinforced by domestic factors, especially the rise of nationalism in Turkish politics. Specifically, the nationalist AKP–MHP coalition played an important role in the government's open support for Azerbaijan. On the very first day of the war, MHP's Bahçeli offered unconditional solidarity and support to the 'brother country' Azerbaijan: 'We stand by Azerbaijan with our blood, our lives and our existence' (MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) 2020a).²² As is noted by one of the experts interviewed, 'within Turkish political parties, the MHP stands out as one of the most active advocates for Azerbaijan and Karabakh, a stance that occasionally triggers opposition from left-wing parties' (Interview with an expert on Turkey's foreign policy, 2022, Ankara). This sentiment is widely embraced in Azerbaijan: 'If Erdoğan truly and courageously backed Azerbaijan on the Karabakh issue in 2020, a significant 50% of the credit should be rightfully attributed to Bahçeli—a fact that should not be dismissed' (Interview with an expert on Azerbaijani-Turkey relations, 2022, Baku).

Along with the impact of rising nationalism on Turkish foreign policy, it is also important to recognise and explore some other influential factors that have contributed to the change in Turkey's Karabakh policy. Importantly, Russia's relative neutrality in the war (influenced by the Kremlin's reluctance to support Pashinyan's government and its pro-Western stance), for which Azerbaijan's recently increasing band wagoning with its northern neighbour was arguably instrumental as well, also served Turkey's purposes, as Moscow did not openly confront Ankara on this; and this situation gave Turkey new chances in the Caucasus (Interview with a foreign policy expert, 2022, Ankara). Overall, relations between Moscow and Ankara began to improve and deepen in prior years, when relations between Turkey and the West were not experiencing the best of times. Consequently, Ankara was no longer representing Western interests in its Caucasus policy (Veliyev 2015, 91).

Another factor that has contributed to the change in Turkey's Karabakh policy has been the strategic alliances formed among Azerbaijani and Turkish leaders characterised by the existing nature of the political regimes in the respective states as well as economic considerations, with a particular focus on energy-related investments from Azerbaijan. As such, Azerbaijan plays a pivotal role in safeguarding Turkey's energy stability and serves as a substantial investor in Turkey's struggling economy. Ankara witnessed a notable 23% increase in gas imports from Azerbaijan during the initial six months of 2020. Additionally, SOCAR, the state oil company of Azerbaijan, has emerged as the

²² While other Turkish parties such as the social-democratic CHP or the nationalist IYI party (both in opposition to the AKP) also voiced solidarity with Azerbaijan in the war, it was the MHP as Turkey's main nationalist party that led the way, especially as AKP ally, having direct influence on the government in this regard.

leading foreign investor in Turkey (Keddie 2020). The Azerbaijani government also considers the collaboration with Turkey, encompassing economic and trade relations, as a 'joint investment' (Hajiyev 2021). Hence, Baku, being a significant investor in Turkey, exerted considerable influence in this respect. Moreover, the political affinities of strongmen Erdoğan in Turkey and Aliyev in Azerbaijan, coupled with their collaborative investment ventures, contributed to Ankara's determination to support Azerbaijan vis-à-vis Armenia.

After 44 days of intense fighting, Azerbaijan prevailed militarily and gained large swathes of territory. The war—which ended with a ceasefire agreement, brokered by Russia—led to a new geopolitical reality in the Caucasus. On the one side, Armenia was defeated and lost not only its control over the occupied Karabakh region. On the other, Azerbaijan not only managed to directly retake most of the occupied territories (ca. 80%) but also became a stronger player in the region. As a net winner of the war, it also welcomed Turkey to the Caucasus as a strategic ally.

Indeed, along with Azerbaijan, the second Karabakh war has one more winner—Turkey. Though it was Russia that managed to end the war and establish a military presence in Azerbaijan, the postwar dynamics in the region show that Russia is no longer the only external power in the Caucasus. Turkey, with assertive, even risky moves, successfully challenged Russia's position, and with its strong support, Azerbaijan could radically change the military status quo on the ground. As is noted by one of the experts, 'Turkey's open involvement in the conflict was a necessity. By doing so, Turkey secured its role of a serious ally in the region' (Interview with an expert on Turkey's foreign policy, 2022, Ankara). Turkey's new presence in the region thus creates a new balance of power to some extent, and this new geopolitical reality is likely to further strengthen Turkey's strategic position in the Caucasus, which in turn could serve Turkey's ideological ambitions to unite the 'Turkic world.'

Turkey's involvement in the war therefore makes better sense in connection with AKP's nationalist foreign policy with a strong focus on the Turkic world. Here, Azerbaijan also forms a bridge between Turkey and other Central Asian Turkic states and is therefore considered by Ankara as 'Turkey's direct gateway to Turkistan' (Eksi 2009, 107). Also, the second Karabakh war and Ankara's gaining a voice in the region triggered a broader integration process, with 'Turkey and Azerbaijan taking a joint role for the strengthening of the Turkic world' (Interview with an expert on Turkey's foreign policy, 2022, Ankara)—for example, a recent change of the name of 'Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States' to 'Organisation of Turkic States' is a first, yet important, step in this process. President Erdoğan also emphasised that 'this historic change should not remain limited to rhetoric, it should be put into action as well' (President of Turkey 2021b), marking Turkey's new ambitions as a rising power in the broader region.

The culmination of the Azerbaijan–Turkey alliance in the post-war period became the signing of the Shusha Declaration in June 2021, which elevated the relations between the two states to the level of a military alliance. In light of the new geopolitical realities, the two states committed to deepening their cooperation on a range of issues. Most important is their commitment to mutual military assistance if one of the parties is threatened by a third country (President of Turkey 2021a). As such, this treaty underlines the military

dimension of a strategic alliance, reaffirming Turkey's new 'high politics' engagement in the region.

Also, domestically, the 2020 war provided AKP's Erdoğan with an opportunity to play up his nationalist credentials and enhance his legitimacy before Turkish nationalists (Yavuz 2022, 289). Turkish support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh war was the AKP government's most popular policy among the broader public as well (MetroPoll 2021). Although it is difficult to say to what extent Turkey's new Karabakh policy has boosted Erdoğan's popularity at home, this 'bold' move of his nationalist policy has arguably brought him credit as a strong leader in Turkey and beyond.

Conclusion

The AKP-MHP alliance has been a crucial development in Turkish politics in the past decade, allowing the AKP to maintain power and form a policy coalition to tackle political challenges. By employing assertive nationalist rhetoric and pursuing a populist, anti-Western stance, Turkish foreign policy is used to serve the domestic political agenda and align with the preferences of the alliance. This so-called mobilisation strategy, fuelled by nationalism, not only helped overcome political challenges but also garnered domestic support for the ruling party and its nationalist coalition.

The AKP's survival has long been closely tied to the fortunes of its charismatic leader, forming a party highly centralised around him. In recent years, the survival imperative of the ruling party and its leader became also highly salient in Turkish partisan politics, as demonstrated by the AKP's reliance on MHP's support to stay in power. Although not formal coalition partners in the government, they have established an effective policy coalition, combining the logics of *policy-seeking* (MHP) and *office-seeking* (AKP) models of political behaviour. This alliance has contributed to the rise of nationalism in Turkish politics, providing ideological justification for an increasingly authoritarian rule and an independent, assertive foreign policy.

In foreign policy, Turkey's aspiration to become a major international power and its pursuit of strategic alliances to safeguard its geopolitical interests in the broader region, particularly in the 'Turkic world,' underscore the AKP-MHP alliance's influence. While it is challenging to determine the precise impact of the AKP's nationalist turn on Turkish foreign policy, it has undoubtedly reinforced a strong focus on national security and a more assertive strategy in the neighbourhood, including the Caucasus. Turkey's involvement in the 2020 Karabakh war, directly supporting Azerbaijan, best exemplifies this increasingly aggressive foreign policy behaviour.

Overall, the Turkish government's approach aligns with the notion that 'foreign policy is domestic policy.' In the Turkish context, leaders may shift foreign policy to consolidate and enhance their power amidst domestic challenges, perceiving the pursuit of a 'risky' foreign policy as a useful tool to achieve political objectives. Thus, while Turkey's recent engagement in the Caucasus may appear puzzling from an international perspective, it can be better understood by considering the imperative of political survival—a dominant principle in Turkish partisan politics today.

This study's focus on party ideology and political survival as a framework for analysing Turkish foreign policy may be narrow. Indeed, a broader approach is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of foreign policy dynamics. It is important to note that the limitations of this study's design do not allow for an in-depth examination of other important influences, such as the rise of authoritarianism in Turkish politics and its impact on foreign policy. However, these issues are beyond the scope of this article.

In line with this focused analytical lens, the article seeks to explain Turkey's 'unexpected' behaviour during the 2020 war by emphasising the role of partisan politics. At the same time, it recognises the importance of alternative explanations; In particular, we acknowledge such accounts for recent shifts in Turkish foreign policy, as changes in the international (both global and regional) environment and other domestic factors like economic considerations or political regime affinities between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Thus, without denying the explanatory value of these factors, this article makes a case for the significant role played by the recently formed AKP–MHP alliance in steering Turkish foreign policy towards a more nationalist course.

In conclusion, this case study of Turkey's foreign policy has significant implications for the field of IR scholarship. It highlights the critical role of party leadership in shaping and influencing party agendas, underscoring its substantial impact on foreign policy decision-making. The case of Turkey emphasises how party leaders exert their political imprints on foreign policy, revealing that they prioritise their roles as political leaders before assuming the role of national leaders.

This finding underscores the prominence of the political survival imperative in Turkey, where an institutionally unstable regime magnifies the influence of party leaders within the government. By recognising the dynamics of political survival and the centrality of party leadership, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between partisan politics and foreign policy decision-making within the broader field of IR scholarship.

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Notes on contributors

Azar Babayev is an Associate Professor of Political Science at ADA University, Azerbaijan. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Mannheim and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt before joining ADA University. His current research focuses on conflict resolution and regime support, particularly in the post-Soviet space. He recently co-edited *The Nagorno-Karabakh Deadlock* (Springer VS, 2020) and

co-authored *The Provocative Effects of Democratization* (Democratization 30 (5), 2023). Email: ababayev@ada.edu.az

Lala Jumayeva is an Assistant Professor of International Affairs at ADA University, Azerbaijan, where she teaches a range of graduate and undergraduate courses on conflict resolution, international relations, organisations, and development. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Science and International Studies from the University of Birmingham, England. Her current research interests focus on ethnic conflict, conflict resolution and mediation. She recently co-authored *Voices of the Caucasus* (Post-Soviet Affairs 40 (2), 2024). Email: ljumayeva@ada.edu.az

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