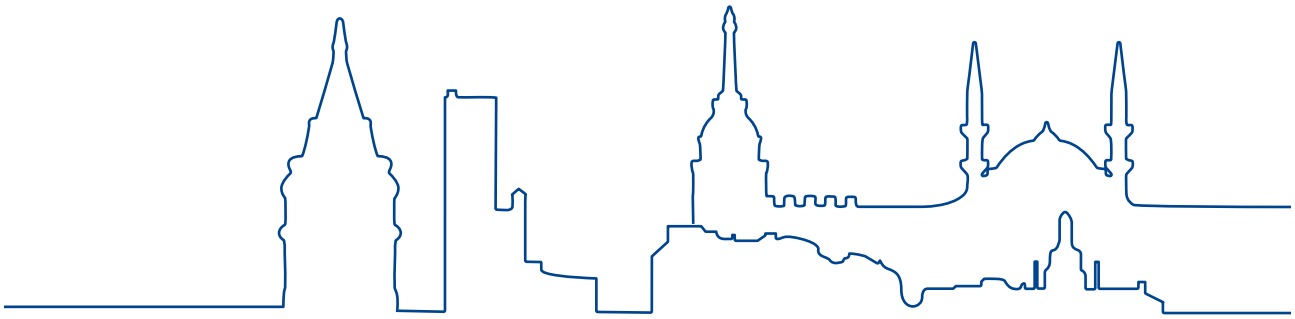


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BEYOND DIPLOMACY: THE POLITICAL UTILITY OF FOREIGN POLICY IN TÜRKİYE

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Executive Summary

Although foreign policy is traditionally driven by strategic imperatives, national interests, and overarching geopolitical considerations—and follows its own distinct trajectory— its effects reach far beyond formal diplomacy, permeating public perceptions of governance and influencing domestic political discourse. Governments often leverage foreign policy narratives to consolidate political support, bolster collective identities, and steer public attention—particularly in moments of intense polarization or electoral competition. These maneuvers underscore the reciprocal relationship between foreign and domestic policy, a relationship that has grown more pronounced with the rise of populism and the securitization of political agendas. Recently, in Türkiye, this dynamic manifests in several crucial developments. The 2023 general elections, the reconfiguration of regional power following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and the evolving Kurdish issue—intimately tied to the Syrian context—are all instances where external concerns converge with internal politics. Recent debates surrounding Türkiye's new Kurdish opening process and the political ramifications of the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Abdullah Öcalan's call for disarmament of the terrorist organization exemplify how foreign policy priorities, especially those tied to security and regional stability, are recast to shape domestic political outcomes. Although foreign policy unfolds according to strategic and geopolitical logics, it also serves as a powerful instrument for domestic political maneuvering. By analyzing these intersection points—where international developments and internal political strategies collide—this analysis aim to shed light on how external narratives are repurposed to frame Türkiye's domestic debates and electoral calculations.

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Leveraging Foreign Policy for Domestic Consolidation

Although domestic and foreign policies are frequently examined as distinct spheres, recent political developments and electoral campaigns in Türkiye underscore their considerable interdependence in certain topics. While foreign policy typically does not constitute the primary driver of voter preferences, it shapes public perceptions of existential threats, leadership competence, and national stature. Over the past decade, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have strategically harnessed foreign policy and security agendas to bolster domestic political support—often by emphasizing Türkiye's regional challenges and framing Erdoğan as the figure uniquely capable of safeguarding national interests.

Despite a protracted economic crisis, the unification of the opposition, and the severe toll of a major earthquake, President Erdoğan secured reelection in the 2023 general elections.[1] Multiple elements contributed to this outcome, but a central component of the AKP-led People's Alliance campaign—formed in alignment with the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)—was its securitization narrative. Erdoğan was consistently depicted as the singular leader capable of defending the nation's security in a volatile region—a portrayal visually reinforced by his appearance in a pilot uniform with a presidential seal, symbolizing decisive leadership.[2]

However, the 2024 local elections revealed the limits of this approach. Despite continued attempts to foreground national security themes, the opposition achieved significant gains.[3] Voters appeared more responsive to economic grievances and the perceived competence of local governance, indicating that while security-focused messaging remains potent in general elections, municipal races are more directly shaped by economic conditions and administrative performance.

To clarify these interconnections between domestic and foreign policy, the following analysis will concentrate on how security imperatives, defense capabilities, and international political developments serve as strategic levers in Turkish domestic politics. This approach illuminates how external policy considerations are not merely responses to geopolitical realities but also tools for shaping electoral outcomes and guiding public discourse.

The Security Narrative: Linking Foreign Policy to Domestic Political Strategies

Following the 2024 local elections, Türkiye's political landscape was reshaped by converging economic pressures, shifting geopolitical realities, and renewed security rhetoric. The opposition's success in municipal contests reflected a widespread dissatisfaction with economic management, as voters prioritized governance and local service delivery over broader ideological or national security narratives. In response to waning public support in national polls, the ruling AKP and its allies embraced a more assertive security-focused message, leveraging foreign policy developments to bolster domestic political narratives.

Central to this strategy was the government's depiction of Türkiye as a nation under siege, marked by global instability and external threats. Official statements frequently cited the Israel-Gaza conflict, escalating tensions in the Middle East, and warnings of a potential Third World War. On October 1, 2024, President Erdoğan escalated

this rhetoric by declaring that "Israel's aggression also targets Türkiye," fueling a narrative of existential threat aimed at rallying national unity and shoring up support.[4]

Amid this period of heightened securitization, an unexpected development took place on October 22: Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the ultranationalist MHP and a key Erdoğan ally, urged Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), to issue a call for disarmament. Initially met with public skepticism,[5] the proposal began to alter perceptions once the government linked the Kurdish issue to broader regional developments, especially related to developments in Syria, suggesting a possible recalibration of a longstanding security dilemma.

By December 2024, the abrupt collapse of the Assad regime in Syria produced a seismic shift in Türkiye's regional posture. Although Ankara's policy had long faced criticism from the opposition for supporting Syrian opposition forces against Assad—seen as contributing to regional instability and fueling migration into Türkiye—government officials capitalized on the regime's downfall to reframe the country's intervention as a strategic victory rather than a liability. Public anticipation of large-scale refugee returns grew, propelled by widespread anti-immigrant sentiment that crossed partisan lines. The portrayal of Türkiye as a rising regional power gained currency in both domestic and international circles, amplifying the government's assertion that it alone was equipped to manage crises and safeguard the nation's interests.

In parallel, Türkiye's deepening role in Syria introduced another dimension to domestic political discourse. Following the capture of Aleppo, pro-government circles characterized President Erdoğan as the "Conqueror of Aleppo," positioning Türkiye's contentious Syrian policy as a strategic victory. This narrative sought to reinforce President Erdoğan's standing as a strong regional actor—a claim resonating both at home and abroad.

By the end of 2024, despite enduring economic challenges, the AKP's public support recovered, underscoring how foreign policy dynamics can significantly influence domestic political fortunes.[6] The resurgence illustrates the potency of securitization and strong-leadership narratives in mobilizing political support, even when economic hardships persist. Such narratives enable ruling parties to project competence in governance, position themselves as the principal defenders of national interests, and depict political opponents as incapable of handling complex crises.

The Kurdish Issue and Security as a Political Tool

The downfall of the Assad regime reverberated across the Kurdish political arena in both Syria and Türkiye. The government and its allies seized on this moment as confirmation of their enduring security policy, which emphasized neutralizing terrorism and preventing the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish entity in Northern Syria. By portraying these efforts as indispensable for national unity, they underscored the necessity of robust domestic cohesion in the face of external pressures.

Until this recent, still-uncertain shift, Ankara mounted successive military operations in Northern Syria—including Operation Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring—against Kurdish forces described as extensions of the PKK by Ankara. Beyond addressing security concerns about territorial integrity, these operations also

played into domestic political narratives, tapping into nationalist sentiments around the Kurdish issue in Syria and contributing to domestic support.

On February 27, 2025, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan issued a public call for the terrorist group to disarm, marking a significant shift in a conflict long entangled with regional power dynamics.[7] The announcement immediately brought to mind the earlier Kurdish opening process, which collapsed in 2015 amid tensions stemming from Rojava in Northern Syria.[8] Although that initiative failed primarily due to shifting power balances on the Syrian front, the current environment appears more conducive to a renewed dialogue. Recent military and diplomatic gains have positioned Ankara advantageously, potentially allowing it to approach the Kurdish question on more favorable terms. Meanwhile, unfolding events in Syria continue to exert influence on how both the Turkish government and Kurdish actors perceive and pursue their respective objectives, underscoring the deep interdependence between domestic reconciliation efforts and regional geopolitical transformations.

This transition also carries significant possible consequences for Türkiye's political alliances and electoral landscape. As the Kurdish question and terrorism recede as one of the central axes of polarization, political actors will likely need to reassess their positions. The Pro-Kurdish People's Democracy and Equality Party (DEM), formerly aligned with the opposition, may contemplate a more independent "third-way" platform. In the event of potential constitutional reforms, the government could seek the party's support, signaling a possible realignment of Türkiye's political order.

Overall, these developments illuminate how foreign policy victories and domestic security narratives intersect to shape internal political dynamics. By framing military interventions, diplomatic maneuvers, or security accords as direct national gains, the ruling coalition has entrenched securitization as a dominant approach. As Türkiye continues to grapple with economic headwinds and ever-shifting regional realities, foreign policy is poised to remain a key instrument for influencing domestic debates and electoral outcomes.

Using International Tensions in Domestic Politics

Türkiye's foreign policy has become increasingly interwoven with domestic political narratives, as external developments are routinely used to bolster national leadership and influence public opinion. By portraying Türkiye as a pivotal actor in a fluid geopolitical landscape, the government positions itself as both a regional stabilizer and an influential participant in global affairs.

A case in point is Türkiye's evolving engagement with initiatives like BRICS, a move that does not necessarily signal an abandonment of existing alliances but is framed domestically as a step toward a more independent and multipolar foreign policy. Such positioning resonates with nationalist sentiments and appeals to constituencies skeptical of overreliance on traditional Western partners. Meanwhile, Türkiye continues to negotiate its role within NATO and maintain critical strategic ties while occasionally leveraging disagreements to underline its autonomy. This balancing act reinforces an image of Türkiye as both assertive and self-reliant on the international stage. Recently, in light of U.S. President Donald Trump's move to scale back Washington's role in European defense,

Ankara has taken steps to position itself within the emerging European security architecture, particularly amid shifting policies on Ukraine.[9]

One illustrative example involves the government's initial objection to Sweden's NATO accession. Officials framed the issue as a matter of national security, highlighting perceived Western double standards by contending that Stockholm harbors individuals it designates as terrorists—an assertion Sweden rejects—and making their extradition a condition for approving Sweden's membership. When Sweden's membership was ultimately approved—after negotiations and concessions—it was presented as a diplomatic victory, demonstrating how assertive foreign policy can yield tangible gains.

Türkiye's foreign policy approach also underscores the interplay between fiery rhetoric and behind-the-scenes diplomacy. In 2019, the undiplomatic letter from U.S. President Donald Trump to President Erdoğan over military operations in Syria appeared to escalate tensions, yet direct communication channels remained open.[10] This duality reflects a broader reliance on populist and nationalist tropes to galvanize domestic support, even as pragmatic deal-making continues out of the public eye.

A similar dynamic characterizes Türkiye's relationship with Greece. Despite public threats—such as declarations that military action might come "suddenly one night"[11]—the two countries have in recent years taken steps toward diplomatic improvement. This fluctuation between confrontational messaging and cooperative engagement underscores the government's broader strategy: to capitalize on national security themes for domestic credibility while leaving room for pragmatic negotiations when needed.

The Defense Industry and National Pride

During the 2023 election campaign, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan prominently showcased Türkiye's defense industry achievements as a testament to both national strength and technological progress. He made several high-profile appearances at ceremonies highlighting key milestones in Türkiye's defense industry, including the prototype unveiling of the KAAN fighter jet, the introduction of the *TCG Anadolu*—the largest vessel in the Turkish Navy—and the debut of the domestically produced Altay main battle tank. The unmanned fighter jet Kızılelma also featured prominently, completing its first autonomous flight in December 2022 and symbolizing Türkiye's growing expertise in unmanned aerial systems. Notably, the *TCG Anadolu*, at 231 meters in length, toured major ports filled with enthusiastic crowds, reinforcing public support for the country's expanding military capabilities. These events were woven into Erdoğan's campaign messaging, painting Türkiye as a rising power capable of innovating, producing, and deploying cutting-edge defense technology.[12]

Türkiye's defense sector has thus become a critical pillar of its national identity and geopolitical strategy. President Erdoğan has deliberately framed the country's military and technological advancements as proof of resilience, self-reliance, and expanding global influence. By emphasizing an ability to develop and produce advanced weaponry without relying heavily on Western suppliers, the government taps into nationalist currents that span the political spectrum.

Central to this narrative is the Bayraktar TB2 drone, lauded for its effectiveness in conflicts from Nagorno-Karabakh to Libya and Ukraine. Its success has elevated Türkiye's international profile

as a defense exporter, with President Erdoğan frequently highlighting the country's growing defense capabilities as a symbol of technological independence and strategic strength. State-organized displays of the drone foster a sense of national pride, reinforcing the perception of Türkiye as a self-sufficient actor on the world stage.

Projects like the KAAN fighter jet, which conducted its maiden flight in early 2024, and the Anka-3 stealth unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV), with its successful inaugural flight occurring in late 2023, serve to broaden Türkiye's indigenous defense portfolio. Domestically, these advancements are heralded as milestones in achieving strategic independence under Erdoğan's leadership. Linking them to a broader "Türkiye Century" vision, the president portrays such progress as part of a long-term plan to cement the country's status as a global power.

From an economic standpoint, defense exports reached an unprecedented USD 7.1 billion in 2024, with customers spanning 185 countries.[13] This expansion bolsters both Türkiye's global defense footprint and the government's economic narrative, demonstrating that domestic innovation can generate revenue while reducing dependence on foreign suppliers.

Public opinion is also favorable. Focus groups by the IstanPol Institute indicate that even opposition supporters regard the defense industry as a unifying success in Türkiye's foreign policy.[14] By regularly showcasing domestically produced military hardware, Erdoğan harnesses these sentiments to project national resolve and underscore the country's capacity to withstand external pressures.

In framing defense achievements as markers of national will and sovereignty, President Erdoğan bolsters his domestic standing while highlighting Türkiye's heightened ambitions on the global stage. He utilizes this image in domestic politics, especially during electoral campaigns.

Conclusion

Türkiye's recent political trajectory highlights the growing fusion of foreign policy and domestic political maneuvering. Traditionally shaped by national interests and broader geopolitical considerations, foreign policy has increasingly been deployed as a mechanism for internal consolidation. Through security-driven electoral strategies, high-profile military advancements, and calculated diplomatic engagements, foreign policy has exerted a transformative influence on Türkiye's internal dynamics.

Central to this approach is securitization—framing a range of domestic and international developments as existential threats to national unity. The Kurdish issue, Türkiye's military activities in Syria, and evolving regional alliances have all been harnessed to underscore the image of decisive leadership at home. Ongoing discussions surrounding the Kurdish peace process, recalibrating ties with Western allies, and new developments in Syria and the Ukraine War suggest that foreign policy will continue to shape domestic outcomes—but perhaps in more complex ways.

Looking ahead, Türkiye's capacity to reconcile security priorities with persistent economic challenges will shape whether foreign policy continues to serve as a primary electoral lever. The interplay of diplomatic efforts, defense initiatives, and domestic politics is likely to remain central to Türkiye's governance, particularly as economic hardships endure. For policymakers and analysts projecting Türkiye's strategic course, recognizing these interdependencies will be crucial in the years to come.

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The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

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