



# TURKISH MILITARY TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENTS AND MILITARY INDUSTRY CAPABILITIES OF FORCE PROJECTION IN THE LIGHT OF GEOPOLITICAL GOALS

*András MÁLNÁSSY\**

*The study examines a specific segment of the Turkish military industry capabilities in the light of the country's geopolitical aims. In the transformation of the international system, we can simultaneously see the change in the distribution of military capabilities. While U.S. hegemony and the Western liberal order are increasingly challenged, superpowers' realism based on politicization of interests is gaining ground on the international political arena. As for Ankara's place in the international system, Turkey is not a global power in terms of its relative power, but more like one of the regional powers while it wants to become a global player in the future. However, Turkey can be described as a major military producer and exporter in the international arena. Turkish-made military equipment, such as drones, is already being used in many parts of the world, which supports Ankara's geopolitical interests and force projection capabilities.*

**Keywords:** *military technology; defence industry; geopolitics; foreign policy; force projection; Turkey.*

## Introduction

In accordance with its geopolitical conception, Turkey looks at the world in a realistic paradigm characterized by a constant struggle for power and survival. Therefore, it is present in the strategic culture of Ankara, which does not shy away from the use of military force. In the background, lies the Ottoman imperial heritage

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*\* András MÁLNÁSSY is a PhD Student at the Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences, Óbuda University, Hungary. E-mail: malnassy.andras@gmail.com*



as difficult to process experiences even nowadays. The revival of the former imperial greatness as a goal goes hand in hand with the revival of political rivalry and interest-based foreign policy.

## 1. Theoretical Background

Ankara has always viewed the world in a realistic paradigm. In realism it may also be possible to reduce the hegemonic influence of a given region (in the sphere of interest), one of the possibilities of which is to emphasize the principle of *regional ownership* (National Security Council Convenes at the Presidential Complex 2017). The main point of this approach is to find regional solutions to regional problems; the regional actors directly involved need to work together and address the challenges internally, and not externally. In recent years, the term “regional ownership” has become recurrent in Turkish foreign policy thinking. Ahmet Davutoğlu has used it several times in his activity as Foreign Minister, and the regional ownership approach has been the basis for a number of Turkish initiatives in the Black Sea, the Caucasus and Central Asia’s common neighborhood, North Africa (Besenyő 2021, 70-89), and especially in the Middle East. In particular, these initiatives are: The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), established in 1992, the Black Sea Forum for Partnership and Dialogue, created in 2006, the Black Sea Harmony, established in 2004, and the Turkish proposal to create a Stability and Cooperation Instrument for the Caucasus, in 2008 (Frappi 2018, 45-71). The implementation of regional ownership and geopolitical thinking is well demonstrated by the Astana process in the case of the Syrian civil war and Turkey’s mediation efforts in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

A realistic approach to theories of international relations is perhaps closest to the theory and practice of Turkish foreign policy-making, as for Turkey, the national interest (*raison d’état*) plays a central role, where war can be a political tool. According to neoclassical realism, the areas and ambitions of a country’s foreign policy are first and foremost driven by its place in the international system and, in particular, its capabilities in power (Şener 2013, 3-21). Neoclassical realism seems to be the proper theoretical framework of the study because, in my opinion, this theory is best suited to present recent Turkish foreign policy and geopolitical goals.

The neoclassical realist approach highlights that a country’s foreign policy behavior is not always in straight relationship with one another. Foreign policy decisions are made by the political leaders in power, thus their perception of power and the context of decisions within the state are more important than the capabilities of the state. Intra-state factors appear as important variables in the foreign policy-making process (Gideon 1998, 144-172).

According to one group of neo-classical realists, in most cases, a balancing policy that meets the expectations of neorealism is automatic; only exceptional



circumstances, erroneous perceptions, or domestic political factors may distract rational national security responses. The other type of neoclassical realism allows for a more general approach to foreign policy that can predict the strategic decisions of states. This means that when there is no immediate threat in the international system, states can often choose from among a wider range of options or there is not a single optimal policy that international conditions allow. Actual decisions in such circumstances are more influenced by the worldview of leaders, power structure, strategic culture, domestic political processes, and factors influencing actors in the defence industry (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, 20-155).

## 2. Defence Industry – the Basis of Turkish Power Potential

Defence industry has basically three roles in every state, namely, military, political, and economic ones. A military role refers to arming the state with weapons systems and military equipment that enable it to achieve military policy goals. The development of military techniques is a complex process, including research and development, in terms of development of new technologies, end products, production of platforms and systems, and construction of disarmament capabilities. Companies operating within the defence industry play a strategic role while maintaining and developing national military capabilities (Wiśniewski 2015, 215-228).

For Turkey, *the military role* of the defence industry is determined by three specific conditions. The first condition points to the support of the Turkish armed forces, and the second condition refers to Turkey's competition with some neighboring countries. The current Turkish military doctrine of advanced defence and growing aspirations for regional power status place force projection capabilities at the forefront. According to the Turkish defence doctrine, threats to national security must be stopped before they reach national borders. This third condition can be achieved with an advanced defence industry and military equipment (Karaosmanoglu 2003, 1-30).

As far as the Turkish security environment is concerned, the MENA region is referred to as *unstable* in terms of regional neighborhood, with conflicts in, for example, Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Also, Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional policy objectives create an insecure security environment that requires Turkey to maintain effective and capable military force, as well as military potential for deterrence.

*The political role* of the defence industry is primarily engaged with the role of the state in international politics. Arm exports are not only economically profitable for a state, but can also be used to exert political influence. Therefore, in its foreign and defence policy, a sovereign country seeks a level of independence and capabilities that will enable it to equip and operate armed forces on its own. Exports of military equipment can strengthen political alliances and gain political influence in importing states. In the case of Turkey, the development of the defence

industry can also be seen as a kind of prestige. The ability of the defence industry to develop and manufacture advanced, high-tech weapons systems is a symbol of technological and industrial capabilities and superpower status. According to the Turkish government’s geostrategic approach, the development of a national defence industry could help lay the foundations for a more independent foreign policy (Besenyő and Málnássy, 2022, 10-21).



**Figure no. 1:** Fields of Turkey’s military enforcement in recent years<sup>1</sup>

*From an economic point of view, the defence industry is an important sector of the national economy. The revenue provided by the defence industry makes a significant contribution to the national economy. Companies operating in this sector produce significant profits, invest significant sums in, *inter alia*, the development of advanced technologies and various researches, and employ a large number of skilled workers. In doing so, the defence industry also boosts practically the economic growth, industrial and technological development and social well-being (Ilchenko, Brusakova, Burchenko, Yaroshenko and Bagan, 2021, 438-454).*

<sup>1</sup> \*\*\*, “Turkey’s Active Military Involvement and Military Presence in the Region”, *Foreign Policy*, URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/08/turkey-military-overstretched-nagorno-karabakh-turkish-military-presence/>, accessed on 15.06.2022.

### 3. Overlapping Spheres of Interest, Conflicting Regional Interests between Russia and Turkey

Russia is pursuing an increasingly active foreign policy globally, both through military and non-military means. The withdrawal of the United States in certain geopolitical areas has provided an opportunity to activate Russian foreign policy and also to fill power gaps. For Turkey, this could be a challenge especially where the interests of the two countries overlap and conflict with one another. The geographical proximity of Russia and Turkey has a significant impact on their foreign policy relations. Geographical proximity also means that two states can increase their influence only at the expense of each other. Their conflicts of interest are typically strategic, and their goals are mostly incompatible, which entails conflicts of power. Russia and Turkey have traditionally had overlapping interests in the Caucasus and the wider Black Sea region (including part of Ukraine’s maritime territories), the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Balkans.

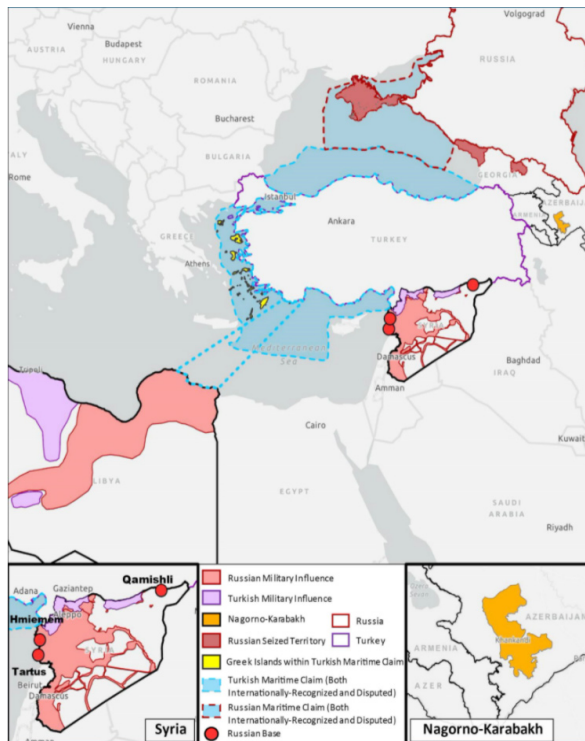


Figure no. 2: Turkey's maritime and continental spheres of influence in the region<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> \*\*\*, "Russia-Turkey Competition Escalates across Theaters", *Institute for the Study of War*, URL: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russia-turkey-competition-escalates-across-theaters>, accessed on 15.06.2022.



The “frozen conflicts” in the Caucasus and the wider Black Sea region are already a more serious and acute source of instability. These areas also serve as a kind of buffer zone between Turkey and Russia. The events in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as the conflict in Karabakh, certainly deserve special attention. The situation of the various Turkish-speaking peoples living in the region can also be a source of tension. However, these areas have traditionally been part of Russia’s near abroad, where Ankara has not openly questioned Russian influence so far.

The Russians sought to have a warm-sea exit, and the Turks have sought to roll back Russian influence in the South and Eastern Mediterranean ever since the Ottoman Empire. However, Russian policy in the Middle East, beyond the Eastern Mediterranean, is in many respects contrary to Ankara’s interests. Moscow and Ankara support definitely different forces, preferring different outcomes in the surrounding regional conflicts (Nagorno-Karabakh, Libya and Syria) (Torbakov 2010, 31-39). Moscow’s re-emergence in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara’s sphere of interest, led to a conflict in the recent relationship between the two states.

#### **4. The Conflict between Russia and Ukraine and Turkish-Ukrainian Ties**

In 2011, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu laid the foundations of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council between Turkey and Ukraine, including joint government meetings. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, a serious rapprochement can be observed between the two countries. Turkey saw the annexation as a strategic threat, as Russia had strengthened its position in the Black Sea, which seemed to be a more significant problem, especially at the time of the deterioration of relations between the two countries at the end of 2015 (Celikpala and Ersen, 2018, 72-92). In this context, Erdoğan condemned the Russian move, while reassuring the Crimean Tatars – who were in an increasingly difficult position – of Turkey’s support.

The shooting down of the Russian Su-24, which violated Turkish airspace, could be seen as a breakthrough in Ukrainian-Turkish relations, as a result of which Ankara had to reconsider its economic dependence on Russia and the military-political dangers of a deteriorating relationship. As a result, high-level meetings between Ukrainian and Turkish leaders began in early 2016. Turkey’s approach was well received by the Ukrainians, and Petro Poroshenko, then the Ukrainian head of state, briefly had visited Turkey several times. Due to the political rapprochement, joint government meetings also became more frequent, with the tenth one held in February 2022, as a result of which the free trade agreement was also signed. This can also be seen as beneficial for Kyiv, as Turkey is Ukraine’s fourth most important trading partner (Karasova and Mishchenko, 2021, 210-218).



In parallel with the revival of political cooperation, major Turkish corporations have been commissioned in Ukraine, such as metro and mobile network construction. In addition, a mass visit of Ukrainian tourists to Turkey has begun, and by 2021 they had already made up the largest group after the Russians and Germans. In addition to political and economic cooperation, military cooperation including that of the military industry also started to develop rapidly, and this continued into the mid-2016 settlement of Russian-Turkish relations. The most important part of the military and military industrial cooperation was the sale of Turkish drones, with Turkey agreeing to sell dozens of Bayraktar TB-2 drones from 2019 and deciding to manufacture them in Ukraine since Erdoğan's visit in February 2022. The Bayraktar TB-2s were also deployed in the conflict-stricken eastern part of Ukraine in October 2021, to demonstrate its technical superiority over separatist forces using Soviet military technology (Stein 2022, 2-16).

### **5. Ankara's Security Perception and Attitude to the 2022 Conflict between Russia and Ukraine**

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly indicated in the fall of 2021 that he would mediate between the opposing Russian and Ukrainian sides. The Turkish head of state also offered to mediate between the Ukrainian and Russian presidents, during his visit to Ukraine, in February 2022. However, after the end of the Chinese Winter Olympics, events began to escalate rapidly and thus Turkish diplomacy remained reactive. The recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics was condemned by the Turkish Foreign Ministry, which also stood for Ukraine's political unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty, but, like other countries, had no real impact on what has happened (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, 2022).

With the attack of February 24, 2022, Ankara had little room for maneuver. On the first day of the war outbreak, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the Russian military operation and acknowledged Ukraine's territorial integrity. At the same time, he stressed that Turkey's relations with both countries are friendly and have close political, economic and social ties. The Ukrainian ambassador asked the Turkish government to close the Turkish Straits and the country's airspace for Russian aircraft. Turkey has activated Article 19 of the Montreux Conventions on War and shut down the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus from warships in war-torn states, acknowledging that war is taking place in the Black Sea region. This move was welcomed by the United States (Kraska 2022).

However, Ankara has not complied with Ukraine's request to close its airspace in front of Russian aircraft, just as it did not adopt sanctions against Russia, as it did in 2014. Moreover, in the first month of war, Turkey received more than ten thousand Russian citizens, and the number of Russians and Ukrainians buying homes in Turkey



increased. According to the decision of the Turkish National Security Council at the end of March 2022, the straits continue to be closed and mediation activities will continue. In the meantime, Turkish diplomacy will do its utmost to facilitate the end of the war, or at least the signing of a ceasefire, in which the country has made some progress due to its geopolitical weight (Tapia 2022, 15-17).

The first major development took place in front of the Diplomatic Forum in Antalya on March 10, 2022, when Sergei Lavrov, Russia, and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba sat down to negotiate. The Turkish Foreign Ministry has made serious efforts to get the two foreign ministers to sit down in order to negotiate. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu consulted with them separately, but no significant results were achieved. A more successful day was March 29, 2022, when the Ukrainian and Russian negotiating delegations met again in Istanbul for a few hours, and the Russian side indicated that it was reducing its military activities in the vicinity of Kyiv and Chernihiv. Erdoğan, on the way home from Uzbekistan in late March, also signaled the country's willingness to be one of Ukraine's security countries and reaffirmed its mediation between Zelensky and Putin (Tapia 2022, 10-18).

For the Ukrainian side, Turkey's most significant contribution to the conflict was the Turkish drones. At the outbreak of the war, the number of Turkish drones on the territory of Ukraine was raised to many dozens. Some of these were destroyed by the attackers but most of the Bayraktar TB-2s were left to be used by the Ukrainian army. Thus, in the first days of the war, several successful attacks were carried out against Russian military targets. The limited numbers and capabilities of the Bayraktars prevented it from reversing the war, but their well-digitized deployments, such as videos of the shooting of Russian targets, provided excellent propaganda material to boost Ukrainian fighting morale (Egeresi 2022, 2-10). It is not known exactly how many working Turkish drones are currently in the hands of the Ukrainians, but it can be said that the Turkish military technology is well tested and therefore, the Turkish drone manufacturers can expect additional orders. After war outbreak, Turkey has continued to transport drones, but as it did in the fall of 2021, it relied on business relations and did not present it to the world as military aid (Can 2022).

## **6. Breakthrough Development of Turkish Drone Capabilities (UAVs) in the Light of Geopolitics**

Bayraktar TB-2 is the best known drone in the Turkish military industry. Medium-altitude, long-flight (MALE) drones can stay in the air for up to 24 hours. Bayraktar has a wingspan of 12 meters, a length of 6.5 meters and a maximum take-off weight of 650 kilograms and 5-8 thousand meters, respectively. Bayraktar completed its first mission in southeastern Turkey in 2016, against targets of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Unmanned aerial vehicles were initially used primarily as part of





Turkey's operations in northern Iraq and Syria. However, Turkish drones appeared on the international arms market as well: in 2018, Qatar and, then, Ukraine signed agreements to procure Turkish drones. In doing so, Turkey has caught up with the United States, Israel, China and Iran, as an exporter of combat drones (Besenyő and Málnássy 2022, 15-16).

In the early 2020s, Turkish drones appeared in more and more battlefields. In Syria, the drones played a key role and caused significant casualties in the ranks of the Assad regime. Regarding Libya, Turkish Bayraktars sent in support of the Government of National Accord (GNA) made headlines by destroying a Russian-made Pancir-Sz1 air defence system. In the Eastern Mediterranean, some of the patrols and reconnaissance tasks were taken over by Turkish drones, further bolstering the maritime border dispute off the coasts of Greece, Cyprus and Turkey. Finally, a significant number of Turkish combat drones also arrived in Azerbaijan, which contributed greatly to Baku's military success in Karabakh (Can 2022, 2-4).

There are several benefits to using drones in the battlefield. Perhaps the most important of these is cost-effectiveness. Although Bayraktar drones are far from cheap construction (the price of a Bayraktar TB-2 is estimated at about \$ 5 million), they are still much cheaper than fighter jets; especially if one adds the cost of training of the fighter pilot. Due to the use of UAVs, there is no need to risk human lives on the battlefield, so decision-makers do not have to account for the casualties in front of their constituents. The Turkish drones were indeed remarkably effective, destroying many targets in the battlefields mentioned above. However, several other aspects are worth considering. First, the aircrafts are not valuable in themselves; in many cases, they have more of an executive role in an integrated system. Effective reconnaissance, a communication system, and electronic jamming are all essential elements of a successful drone operation, as are well-trained personnel (Düz 2022, 4-31).

However, drones are far from invulnerable. Turkey, for example, had lost at least 20 drones in Syria and Libya in the first six months of 2020. Bayraktar TB-2 has no active or passive defence system against attack from either the ground or the air. In addition, the enemy's effective electronic warfare can force them to the ground. Turkish combat drones were highly effective against opponents who were surprised by the large-scale use of drones and did not have proper air defence and strong electronic interference. Therefore, it is advisable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century forces to prepare for war against UAVs.

### **Conclusions**

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict that started on 24 February, 2022, brought about many important geopolitical changes for the surrounding regions. Turkey is in a special situation, as recently, Ankara has tried to build good relationship both with



Ukraine and Russia. Turkey became a mediator during the conflict and will probably try to maintain this position in the future. The most important result of Turkish diplomacy so far is that it facilitated the “peace talks”, in Turkey, with the parties involved in the conflict. Despite not joining the sanctions against Russia, Ankara has sent aid supplies and drones to Ukraine to present the country’s geopolitical relevance. Turkish drones have been involved in several armed conflicts and have been successfully tested in several cases and battlefields. Drone technology will most likely improve rapidly, and there are also new technologies on the horizon that could make UAVs more effective.

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