

MHP abstaining, painfully reveals the MHP's failure to influence Turkish foreign policy. The Pan-Turkic Nationalist vision of the MHP has similarly stopped short of influencing Turkish foreign policy toward the Tatars in Crimea following the Russian invasion. Moving forward, scholars of Turkish politics and foreign policy could explore these two cases in comparative perspective.

Conclusion

The AKP-MHP relationship is a strange one. Although Bahçeli often fiercely defends Erdogan's policies in Libya, Syria, and particularly the Turkish military's excursions into northeastern Syria, his party has no leverage over less critical foreign policy issues, such as the treatment of Uighurs, that are in fact of key interest to their core constituency. Even though Turkey cannot afford to alienate China for economic reasons, this should neither stop the MHP from speaking out nor prevent the AKP from appeasing the MHP for domestic consumption.

To be sure, the political system in Turkey has morphed into a regime that is impossible to assess by the standards of advanced industrial democracies. Scholars have argued convincingly that the country now demonstrates all aspects of competitive authoritarianism in a super-presidential regime under the heavy hand of Erdogan.⁶⁴ Expecting coalition politics to play out as they do in European parliamentary systems might be a stretch. One could argue, in fact, that the peculiarity of the Turkish regime could help answer why the MHP continues to stay in this seemingly losing game. Erdogan and the AKP control the state and media apparatus with a tight grip that creates a heavily tilted playing field against opposition groups like the MHP. Further, we know that mainstream parties can quickly shift their policy positions and accommodate the issues of niche parties, thereby weakening the latter's electoral fortunes.⁶⁵ The AKP did just that in the summer of 2015, when its hard nationalistic turn following the collapse of the Kurdish peace process essentially made the MHP's opposition void. These two dynamics have left little room for the MHP to assert itself as a credible veto player.

In sum, the AKP's parliamentary majority depends on maintaining the MHP's support, while MHP needs to stay close to AKP to escape another electoral carnage like the one in November 2015. So, for now, the MHP resembles a life vest. The party keeps the AKP afloat in the parliament while carving a much-needed role for itself, since this is preferable to collecting dirt and grime under the seat. Their alignment remains an electoral alliance for the time being, nothing more. As a scholar of coalition politics and foreign policy, I caution analysts and Turkey watchers against calling the AKP-MHP partnership a coalition. It doesn't look like a coalition, and it certainly does not act like one, especially in the foreign policy domain.

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STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY: EXPLAINING FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE ERDOGAN PRESIDENCY

By Ferhat Zabun

On 27 February 2020, at least 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in Syria's Idlib province.⁶⁶ In response, Turkey started a military operation against the Syrian army of Bashar al-Assad.⁶⁷ This escalation of conflict jeopardized Turkey's fragile, yet until recently improving, relationship with Russia. Concurrently, US-Turkey relations remained extremely tense, due in part to concerns over "hostage diplomacy,"⁶⁸ the S-400 purchase from Russia,⁶⁹ and Turkey's incursion into northern Syria. This raises an interesting and important puzzle about how Turkey managed to allow its relationship with Russia and the US to deteriorate at the same time. I argue this spiraling of diplomatic and military relations on both fronts is the unintended result of strategic ambiguity in Turkish foreign policy.

The main purpose of strategic ambiguity is to create a balance between states so that no

asymmetrical relationship could emerge with either of them. The policy of strategic ambiguity stems from domestic factors, but the success or failure of the policy is constrained by the structure of international politics, which affects countries in different ways in proportion to their relative capabilities. As I explore in my research, Turkey's policies toward Russia and the US fit this model well. On the one hand, Turkey, as a NATO member, purchased a Russian air defense missile system and established a close relationship with Russia. On the other hand, it could not risk alienating the US due to path-dependent interests stemming from their 60-year alliance. This policy of strategic ambiguity is a result of domestic motivations of actors in Turkish politics. Given the lack of escalation on either side, strategic ambiguity served its purpose until very recently. However, the Turkish army's military confrontation with the Russian-backed Syrian army and US-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria shows that the policy of strategic ambiguity has started to become destructive for Turkey.

What is Strategic Ambiguity?

Ambiguity is a constant in international politics, but that is not the same as strategic ambiguity. When a leader sends signals to the international community, different states could interpret the signals in different ways; however, these different perceptions do not necessarily mean that the leader has created this ambiguity on purpose. To illustrate, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan described the downing of a Russian jet by a Turkish warplane in 2015 as a mistake. He said "it is really thought-provoking that our relations with Mr. Putin came to the current level from a very different point and Putin sacrificed Turkey due to a mistake or fault by a pilot."⁷⁰ However, he did not elaborate on whether it was a mistake or fault by the Turkish or Russian pilot. This kind of ambiguity seems to have arisen as a result of misunderstanding because the Turkish presidency made a statement that Erdogan meant the Russian pilot only in one hour without observing the possible effects of the ambiguity.⁷¹

My research focuses on ambiguity that is deliberately created to maintain a balance

between states without taking sides. During World War II, for example, President Ismet Inonu secured a defensive alliance with Britain and France without breaking Turkey's entente with the Soviet Union. By also supporting the policy of negotiating with Hitler and Mussolini, while refraining from taking sides with anyone until an Allied victory proved likely, his use of strategic ambiguity protected Turkey from the destructive effects of combat.⁷²

Conventional wisdom from political science holds that ambiguity ends up fostering conditions for war more easily than cooperation.⁷³ Scholars advance two main perspectives. Firstly, they treat strategic ambiguity as a discursive strategy of policy-makers use in drafting of a diplomatic text.⁷⁴ The main purpose here is to create an ambiguous text that could be interpreted by the conflicting parties differently within the scope of their own national interests and thus helps facilitate agreement. I demonstrate elsewhere, for example, that strategic ambiguity on key issues including continuity of the Cypriot state and federation/confederation of its governance helped Turkish and Greek Cypriots sign the (now defunct) Annan Plan.⁷⁵ Crucially, although strategic ambiguity made an agreement possible at the time, it did not lead to constructive effects in the long term; Greek Cypriots later rejected the plan in a referendum.

Secondly, political scientists treat strategic ambiguity as a practice of foreign policy through which states attempt to create a balance between other states without taking sides.⁷⁶ I engage this point here to argue that the foreign policy of strategic ambiguity in this realm similarly has short-term effects on cooperation but can be destructive in the long-term. I use the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism (NCR) to advance my argument. Examining foreign policy through an NCR lens enables us to take domestic factors into consideration as independent variables along with structural incentives to explain the practice of strategic ambiguity.⁷⁷ Structural effects are important in shaping state behavior; however, they are insufficient in accounting for the observed variance both across and within states that neoclassical realism

captures with its focus on internal factors.

To determine the kinds of state behavior that can produce strategic ambiguity within the scope of this framework, I turn to the structural realism of Walt: “weaker powers have essentially three choices in a unipolar world: they can (1) ally with each other to try to mitigate the unipole’s influence, (2) align with the unipole in order to support its actions or exploit its power for their own purposes, or (3) remain neutral.”⁷⁸ I argue that if a state is sending other states mixed signals and is pursuing at least two of these strategies at the same time, then strategic ambiguity is at work. However, we need to focus on NCR’s domestic factors to explore why a state would do so. Therefore, in the rest of this essay, I enumerate the domestic factors that led Turkey to pursue a policy of strategic ambiguity.

Domestic Sources of Strategic Ambiguity: The Case of Turkey

During the tenure of President Erdogan, who became prime minister in 2003 and president in 2014, Turkey attempted both to ally with the unipole (the US) in order to exploit its power for its own national interests and to ally with Russia to mitigate the unipole’s influence. Even though it seems to have helped create the balance between these two great powers until very recently, Turkey has started to see destructive effects of the policy of strategic ambiguity with the latest attacks on Turkish army in Syria. This foreign policy is a result of domestic motivations of actors in Turkish politics.

The current tensions between the US and Turkey may mark a nadir in their relationship, but the NATO allies have a tumultuous past. Major sources of friction included the US withdrawal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey during the Cuban Missile Crisis, US attempts to prevent (1963) and later sanction (1974) Turkey’s intervention in Cyprus, and the Turkish parliament’s 2003 rejection of a proposal to allow the US to operate from Turkish bases during the Iraq War. The 2016 coup attempt is the critical difference in how Turkey has approached strategic ambiguity.

Turkey was never willing to risk its strategic alliance with the US at any of these critical junctures in the manner it has since the coup attempt. I focus here on the reason why Turkey decided to establish close Russian ties and thus mitigate the influence of the US in a form of strategic ambiguity.

The 2016 coup attempt became a critical moment for US-Turkey relations when Erdogan blamed US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, who is the leader of an Islamic community called the Gulen movement, for the bloody attempted coup and requested his extradition from the US.⁷⁹ Since this request has thus far been refused, Turkey has shifted blame for the coup attempt to the US. The coup attempt was a critical moment leading Turkey to look for alternative alliances. Immediately after the coup attempt, Erdogan proclaimed: “Turkey would be unable to continue its strategic allegiance with the US if it continues to harbor the exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen.”⁸⁰ Since then, he has sent mixed signals about Turkey’s strategic alliance with the US. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jim Risch put it well: “Every move he makes, every sentence he utters, points us in a different direction.”⁸¹

Another factor in domestic politics shaping the government’s new hostility towards the US is the alliance between the US and the Kurdish militia groups in Syria. The Turkish government views the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the militia group that helped the US fight against the ISIS, as a terrorist group. The government points to the close relationship between the PKK, designated as a terrorist group not only by Turkey but also by the US, and the YPG. Therefore, the Turkish side’s main argument is that the US has been indirectly helping the PKK and acting against the national security concerns of Turkey.

These two factors led Turkey to look for alternative alliances to mitigate the influence of the US and did not directly give rise to a close relationship with Russia. One of the factors behind the attempt to balance US influence with Russian ties is the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government’s alliance with so-called Eurasianists.⁸² Some members of this pro-Russia

cohort were imprisoned during the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials by police and judiciary members affiliated with Gulen movement during the period of loose alliance between the movement and the AKP. Erdogan used this tension not only in the war against Gulenists but also as a way of tilting towards Russia. Compounding this dynamic is the AKP's alliance with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). This party not only supported hostility towards the US because of the latter's close relationship with Kurdish groups vehemently despised by the MHP, but also facilitated Erdogan's authoritarian drift by playing the role of key actor in the parliament. Just after the 2016 coup attempt, it was MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli who initiated the discussion of switching to a highly consolidated presidential system and whose voters' support nudged Erdogan over the line to win the referendum approving the switch.

Within the scope of the theoretical framework used here, these domestic factors gave rise to the policy of strategic ambiguity in Turkish foreign policy. While the political tensions with the US about the Gulen movement and support for Kurdish forces in northern Syria led Turkey to distance itself from the US, the Eurasianists and MHP's support for President Erdogan helped Turkey enter into closer military and political relations with Russia. This policy of strategic ambiguity was useful in the sense that Turkey could create a balance between the US and Russia without any military escalation with either of them.

However, these domestic sources cannot explain the success or failure of the policy; here, structural realism's systemic incentives fare better. In a (at least for now), unipolar world in which there is greater freedom of action for the US and greater obstacles to counterhegemonic balancing,⁸³ the US has the power to punish those countries that try to join the opposition. These constraints make it infeasible, in the long-term, for Turkey to pursue a foreign policy of strategic ambiguity. Turkey found itself isolated after the Turkish army's military confrontation with both the Russian-backed Syrian army and the US-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria. In a twist that would be ironic were it not for

implications regarding the sustainability of strategic ambiguity laid out here, Turkey's February request for the US deployment on its southern border of precisely the Patriot missile system that Ankara passed up in favor of the S-400s went unfulfilled.⁸⁴

The argument here can also be applied to other countries within the scope of the theoretical framework of NCR. However, the fact that strategic ambiguity has had destructive effects on Turkish foreign policy does not necessarily mean that it will have similar effects on all the countries. Structural constraints – the determinant factor in the success or failure of the policy of strategic ambiguity – are different for each country in proportion to their relative capabilities in the system. The more capable a country is, the more successful the policy will be. The foreign policy of strategic ambiguity is risky for such a middle power as Turkey located in one of the most unstable regions in the world.

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