

Interests and Conflicts of Interest: Turkey's Experiences from the Libyan Civil War¹

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Abstract:

The overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, followed by the outbreak of civil war in 2014, plunged Libya into complete chaos. The Government of National Accord (GNA), recognized by the majority of the international community, lost control over two-thirds of the country, where authority was assumed by the House of Representatives and the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar. As in so many other conflicts in the Islamic world, foreign actors with vested interests in the region quickly emerged in Libya as well—including Turkey, one of NATO's most prominent military powers. During the conflict, Ankara swiftly found itself at odds not only with the supporters of the LNA, but also with states that, by virtue of their NATO membership, are technically its allies. The purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons behind Turkey's military and political intervention in Libya, how these actions shaped Ankara's relations with other actors involved in the conflict, and what strategic lessons Turkey gained from its involvement in the civil war.

Keywords:

Libya; Libyan civil war; Turkey; NATO; Russia; MEAD.

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Introduction

The Libyan civil war was without a doubt one of the most dramatic episodes of the Arab Spring: it shattered the country's political structure and exposed both regional and global conflicts of interest surrounding Libya. Following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya effectively split into two: the Government of National Accord (GNA), based in the capital city of Tripoli and recognized by most of the international community; and the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by General Khalifa Haftar and supported by the House of Representatives. Various international actors joined the conflict in accordance with their own interests, plunging the country into prolonged chaos.

There is, however, one country for which the Libyan civil war marked a particularly significant milestone: Turkey quickly emerged as one of the GNA's most important backers, providing substantial military and diplomatic support to Tripoli. As the realities of geopolitics so often illustrate, Ankara's assistance was not simply the result of a principled commitment to the GNA. Rather, it presented an opportunity to expand Turkey's regional influence, to reinterpret maritime boundary disputes in the resource-rich eastern Mediterranean, and to test domestically produced defence technologies in live conditions with relatively low risk.

That said, the intervention was far from smooth. Turkey's actions clashed with the interests of several regional and global powers, leading to confrontations with countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia. To make matters worse for Ankara, it also found itself at odds with nations that, on paper, are its allies through NATO membership. Tensions with Greece—never entirely free of hostility—flared up once again, and relations with one of Europe's most prominent powers, France, deteriorated dramatically.

This paper aims to explore the background of Turkey's intervention in the Libyan civil war, examining its interests, objectives, and achievements, as well as the root causes of the conflicts of interest that arose with other international actors.

Background and Key Actors of the Libyan Civil War

The Libyan civil war was undoubtedly one of the bloodiest components of the Arab Spring, which shook much of the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. The Libyan population had grown weary of Prime Minister Muammar Gaddafi's more than four-decade-long reign of terror and following the example of neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt—and with substantial NATO support—they overthrew the ruling regime (this conflict is referred to as the First Libyan Civil War). However, the resulting power vacuum could not be filled: although the Transitional National Council, representing the rebels, was formed after Gaddafi's death, its authority was rejected not only by the former dictator's followers (Kardaş, 2020). Tribal culture remained prominent in Libya into the 21st century, and various militias founded along ethnic and ideological lines soon began trying to enforce their will by force.

The formation of an actual government did not resolve internal divisions. The General National Congress (GNC), which came to power through the 2012 elections and included both moderate and conservative Islamists, failed not only to form a majority government but also to reach internal compromises (Fajarini & Anam, 2022). A significant portion of the population began to rebel against the GNC, and public security in the country fell to an all-time low. The real turning point came in 2014 when, instead of calling new elections, the GNC unilaterally extended its own mandate. This decision sparked a wave of protests, and General Khalifa Haftar—who had played a key role in both Gaddafi's rise and fall—called on the government to dissolve itself. The GNC ignored the prominent officer's warning, but in May 2014, Haftar entered Benghazi, one of the country's most dangerous cities, with his troops. In the operation known as "Operation Dignity," Haftar's forces cleared the city of Islamists, significantly boosting his popularity in Libya's eastern regions.

In response, the GNC hastily called elections, which it lost; however, due to extremely low voter turnout—just 18%—it refused to recognize the newly formed House of Representatives, whose members were forced to flee east and form a new government to Tobruk. The House of Representatives allied itself with Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).

Although the international community attempted to ease the conflict by establishing a new unity government, the Government of National Accord (GNA), created in 2015, was unable to consolidate its power despite early successes. The country became definitively divided. Backed by the UN, the GNA established itself in the capital, Tripoli, while the eastern territories remained under the control of the LNA and the House of Representatives. The GNA was primarily composed of moderate, pro-Western Islamists, while the LNA was backed by anti-Islamist forces (Fajarini & Anam, 2022).

As in other regional conflicts, a variety of international actors soon became involved in Libya. Supporting the GNA were countries such as Italy, Qatar, and, notably, Turkey—the focus of this paper—while France, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Russia sided with the LNA (Pack, 2019; Tekir, 2022). Moscow also deployed units of the Wagner mercenary group, which gained fame in the Russo-Ukrainian war (Selján, 2021).

Libya's geopolitical significance lies in two key factors: first, the country is located on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, holds control over important maritime resources, and lies along a major migration route. Second, it possesses substantial oil reserves, bringing an economic dimension into what is increasingly becoming an internationalized great-power competition (Yüksel, 2021; Maalim, 2023).

The civil war reached its peak in international attention by 2020. During the Berlin Conference, the UN managed to broker a ceasefire between the warring factions, but the deep divisions between the GNA and LNA were not resolved—nor were the vested interests of the international actors involved (Hasar, 2022).

Turkey's Interests in the Libyan Conflict

Geopolitical Objectives and the Quest for Regional Influence

From the late 2010s, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government increasingly sought to establish Turkey as a powerful regional actor. A key component of such geopolitical positioning often involves intervening in conflicts erupting in other states. This strategic approach is evident in the Middle East (e.g., Syria and Iraq) and particularly in the eastern Mediterranean—most notably in Cyprus and, as in this case, Libya (Yüksel, 2021).

In this context, the North African country appeared to Ankara as a kind of strategic foothold. Turkey's objectives spanned multiple dimensions: it provided support to a government ideologically aligned with it, countered the influence of two key rivals—Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (Süsler, 2020; Tekir, 2022), demonstrated its military and diplomatic power, and utilized the conflict as an ideal testing ground for the increasingly prominent Turkish defence industry's latest innovations.

Beyond continental ambitions, a central focus for Turkey was the Mediterranean Sea, particularly its eastern basin. Under the “Mavi Vatan” (“Blue Homeland”) doctrine, Ankara considers gaining strategic control over the eastern Mediterranean a vital national goal. This doctrine carries not only commercial and military significance but is also a key component of the Turkish government's identity politics (Fajarini & Anam, 2022; Yüksel, 2021).

Guided by the Mavi Vatan doctrine, Turkey signed a bilateral agreement with the GNA in 2019, essentially redefining maritime borders in the Mediterranean (Maalim, 2023). This agreement, however, put Ankara at odds with Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece (Hasar, 2022; Harchaoui, 2020), as it sought influence over maritime zones that, under decades of international precedent, were generally accepted as part of other states' Exclusive Economic Zones (Molnár et al., 2020).

It is therefore clear that Turkey's political and military intervention in strategically vital and destabilized Libya was aimed at strengthening its regional position. However, its presence in Libya was not an isolated manoeuvre—Turkey has long pursued influence in countries that were once part of the Ottoman Empire through its so-called “neo-Ottoman” ideology (Yavuz, 2020).

Energy Considerations

Turkey's efforts to expand its influence in the eastern Mediterranean are motivated by far more than political and ideological goals. Since the turn of the millennium, significant natural gas reserves have been discovered off the coasts of Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt—developments that have dramatically increased the region's geopolitical significance (Tagliapietra, 2019). These new reserves are of strategic importance to Europe, as the so-called “EastMed Gas Corridor” represents a potential alternative to Russian gas, thereby contributing to the energy security of European countries that maintain strained relations with Moscow. Gaining control over gas fields in the region would grant Ankara

increased influence not only in the eastern Mediterranean but also in regions far beyond the bounds of neo-Ottoman ambitions.

A key indicator of this effort was the Turkish-Libyan maritime border agreement signed on November 27, 2019—officially titled the “Memorandum of Understanding on the Delimitation of Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean”—which marked a turning point in Turkey’s geopolitical and energy policies (Abobakir et al., 2025). The agreement created a maritime boundary that cuts into Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) previously recognized as belonging to Greece and Cyprus (Hasar, 2022; Süssler, 2020).

By signing the agreement, Ankara essentially established a legal basis to conduct exploratory drilling and potentially extract resources in the eastern Mediterranean, despite firm opposition from much of the international community (Abobakir et al., 2025). Turkey’s seriousness about the deal is evidenced by the fact that its research vessels—backed by naval forces—have repeatedly conducted exploratory operations in waters claimed by other states (Yüksel, 2021).

With this maritime agreement, Ankara achieved multiple strategic goals simultaneously: by its own interpretation, it claimed access to vast gas fields, from which—under the terms of the agreement—it could legitimately displace previously dominant actors like Greece and Cyprus. Furthermore, Turkey could offer European countries an alternative to Russian gas, which they often view as a security risk. However, this step also placed Turkey in open conflict not only with the Greek-Cypriot (and Egyptian) axis but also with other major players in regional energy extraction—most notably France. That Greece, France, and Turkey are all NATO members makes the situation even more contentious, as Ankara’s actions hardly foster the kind of cooperation expected among alliance partners (Molnár et al., 2020).

Military and Defence Industry Interests

Beyond political influence and energy strategy, Turkey’s involvement in the Libyan Civil War served a third, often overlooked, purpose: boosting its defence industry. By the late 2010s, Turkey had made significant strides in developing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), armoured vehicles, artillery, and communication systems—technologies with clear export potential. It is well understood in the arms trade that combat-proven systems are significantly more attractive to buyers, and Libya provided an ideal environment to test these products under real conditions (Besenyő & Málnácssy, 2021; Shoaib, 2020).

The centrepiece of Turkish military support for the GNA was the Bayraktar TB2 drone, developed by Baykar. These affordable, reliable UAVs played a key role in halting LNA offensives, conducting reconnaissance missions, and even successfully neutralizing Russian-made Pantsir-S1 air defence systems—systems that were specifically designed to intercept drones like the TB2 (Selján, 2021). Though the TB2 would later rise to fame in Syria and the Russo-Ukrainian War, its success story effectively began in Libya. Beyond Ukraine, countries like Morocco and Azerbaijan also expressed strong

interest in the system. Azerbaijan later deployed TB2 drones with great success during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, where they once again destroyed several, albeit older Russian-made air defence systems (Ács, 2024).

Turkey's military support to the GNA went far beyond weapons shipments. Under a 2019 security agreement, Ankara sent military trainers, advisors, and logistics support units to Libya—essentially establishing its own military base in Tripoli, thereby securing a long-term presence in the region (Hasar, 2022). Notably, Turkey also provided combat units to the GNA, although these consisted of mercenaries from Syria, partly funded by Qatar (Harchaoui, 2020).

Today, Ankara is effectively one of the GNA's primary strategic partners, giving it substantial influence in North Africa. Turkish advisors have helped modernize the Libyan government forces' military structure (Yüksel, 2021), while testing weapon systems in Libya has provided valuable data to Turkish arms manufacturers and excellent advertising for Turkey's defence products.

Turkey's Political and Military Involvement in the Civil War

Military Intervention: Tools, Legal Background, and Theatre Presence

When Ankara decided to support the GNA, it ensured that this move had a legal basis, just like the redrawing of maritime borders. Under the "Security and Military Cooperation Agreement" signed in December 2019, the internationally recognized Libyan government was granted the legal right to request military assistance from Turkey without exposing itself to accusations of violating international law by the GNA's opponents (Hasar, 2022). The agreement also set a precedent for Erdogan, as similar frameworks were later used to justify Turkey's support for Azerbaijan during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. The logic was simple: intervening in an armed conflict is not a problem if it occurs at the invitation of a Turkey-allied party.

The support provided by Turkey quickly had an impact on the battlefield: with the help of NATO-standard trainers and advisors, the GNA forces—often lagging in training—caught up with General Haftar's troops in terms of combat capabilities. By spring 2020, Turkish defence industry products had given the government forces a significant advantage. Turkey's commitment was further demonstrated by the fact that these arms shipments reached GNA ports under the active protection of the Turkish navy (Selján, 2021).

Although Erdogan did not risk deploying Turkish combat units, he did not leave Tripoli without battlefield-capable allies. Regardless of Ankara's official denial, several international organizations and independent research groups are certain that Turkey actively recruited fighters from friendly militias operating in northern Syria, equipped them, and then transferred them to Libya (Harchaoui, 2020; Tekir, 2022). However, the deployment of thousands of mercenaries from Syria also caused problems for Turkey: the international community questioned the legitimacy of the Turkish intervention, although meaningful countermeasures were not taken since there was no official connection between the Syrian fighters and Ankara.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Libyan civil war was a pivotal moment for the Turkish defence industry. Ankara was able to test its own developments under real combat conditions, and they performed convincingly. The Bayraktar TB2 achieved great success, effectively destroying several modern Russian-made Pantsir-S2 air defence systems. Compared to similar Western weapons, the TB2 is inexpensive and relatively easy to manufacture. By 2021, it had already received orders from increasingly prominent NATO member states such as Poland, as well as from Azerbaijan and Ukraine. Even Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—both of which supported the opposing side in the civil war—showed significant interest in the system (Besenyő & Málnácssy, 2021). While the TB2 gained global fame due to media attention and propaganda campaigns in Ukraine, its initial breakthrough undeniably occurred in Libya (Ács, 2024).

Although the TB2 drones received the most international attention, their effectiveness would likely have been much lower without another Turkish-developed weapon: the Koral electronic warfare system. Koral is a ground-based device that supports reconnaissance operations and disrupts enemy communication and radar systems, including those found on the Pantsir (Bakir, 2021). The cooperation between the Koral systems and the strike drones provided Tripoli with a significant advantage in combat, and Western experts observed Turkish developments with great interest.

The Turkish weapons' success in Libya also translated into tangible results: between 2012 and 2021, Turkey's arms exports increased by 72.7%, with 23.6% of that growth occurring in the 2017–2021 period alone. As a result, by the early 2020s, Turkey had become the 16th largest arms exporter in the world, while arms import into Turkey dropped by a significant 55.5%. Focusing on drone technology alone, Turkey had sold at least \$700 million worth of weapons by 2022 (Soyaltin-Colella & Demiryol, 2023).

Naturally, Turkey received serious criticism for its arms shipments from both rival states and international organizations. However, by the early 2020s, the Turkish defence industry had clearly become a global player. Furthermore, Turkish-manufactured products offered an alternative to countries that did not want to politically align themselves with other major powers but still sought access to modern weapons. From this perspective, it can be stated that the appearance of Turkish military technology in Libya was beneficial not only for testing equipment in live conditions but also for securing diplomatic influence on a new front.

Turkey's Diplomatic Presence in Libya

As has become clear, Turkey's success in Libya largely depended on how effectively it could frame its support for the GNA through diplomatic means. Under the terms of the Security and Military Cooperation Agreement, a legitimate government (the GNA) requested assistance from another legitimate government (Turkey). Officially, Turkey did not deploy combat units to Tripoli, which allowed Ankara to claim that its

relationship with the Libyan government forces was entirely in line with bilateral agreements between sovereign states (Hasar, 2022).

Nonetheless, Turkey ensured the agreement was solidified from multiple angles: Ankara consistently emphasized that the 2019 accord went far beyond arms shipments and training. It also covered the reconstruction of Libya's security sector, the development of military infrastructure, and the transfer of long-term operational knowledge. Thus, President Erdoğan sought to present himself as a state-builder, further legitimizing Turkey's long-term presence in Libya (Yüksel, 2021; Shoaib, 2020).

Naturally, it was to be expected that actors opposed to Turkey's interests in the conflict would challenge its intervention diplomatically. At the January 2020 Berlin Conference initiated by the UN, Turkey was criticized for openly violating the arms embargo on Libya. However, Ankara quickly pointed to double standards, as numerous other participants in the conference—among them Russia, France, and the UAE—were also actively supplying military equipment to the country (Tekir, 2022; Harchaoui, 2020).

Outside the UN framework, Turkey also sought to build a network of supporters. It entered into agreements with Tunisia and Algeria, both of which supported the GNA, as well as with Qatar, which frequently rivals other Gulf states. Still, Ankara had to invest significant effort into maintaining de-escalation channels, especially considering that Egypt and the UAE—supporters of the LNA—were naturally displeased with Turkey's growing presence in the region. Although there were strong exchanges of rhetoric and threats of further military involvement, neither side escalated the conflict (Süsler, 2020).

Ankara also took care to demonize General Haftar's LNA. In Turkish media, Haftar—who had previously helped Gaddafi come to power before turning against him—was quickly portrayed as a "puppet of foreign interests" and a putschist. The House of Representatives, which was elected with a conspicuously low voter turnout, was framed as an illegitimate political body. In contrast, the internationally supported GNA was described as the true representative of the Libyan people, and Turkey insisted it was not siding with any particular party or individual but rather aiding a friendly nation (Hasar, 2022; Selján, 2021).

Consolidating Turkish Intervention in the Long Term

By now, it is entirely clear that Ankara is planning a long-term presence in Libya. The 2019 bilateral agreement provided Turkey with the legal basis to establish military bases in GNA-controlled areas, secure those sites, and—most importantly—reshape the GNA's armed forces in its own image (Hasar, 2022). In Tripoli and in Misrata, Libya's third-largest city, GNA forces are not only receiving basic military training from Turkish troops but are also adopting Ankara's doctrines in intelligence and communications (Yüksel, 2021). This transfer of know-how means that in the long term, the GNA's military will closely mirror Turkey's, and its elite will be deeply tied to Ankara—effectively cementing Turkey's influence.

Yet Turkey's ambitions in Libya go far beyond military influence. Turkish companies are expected to play a key role in rebuilding the war-torn country, including the modernization of civilian infrastructure. Ankara refers to this approach as a "win-win" situation, highlighting that it is present in Libya as a partner, not a colonial power, a term despised by all African nations (Shoaib, 2020).

However, support for the GNA would be meaningless without the appropriate media coverage. Turkey places strong emphasis on making sure that people living in GNA-controlled areas are fully aware that the support they receive comes from Ankara. Turkey's Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) are already operating in Libya. These state institutions are supporting schools, cultural centres, and mosques, all with adequate media coverage to win broader public support.

The Berlin Conference also made it clear that Turkey is attempting to present itself as a helpful partner on the international stage—even if, as we'll see later, not always successfully—to prevent broader global interference in its Libyan activities. Throughout international negotiations and conferences, Turkey has remained actively involved, always seeking to legitimize its operations.

It's also worth noting that Ankara is likely aware that any successful peace process between the GNA and the LNA would require a division of power over Libya. However, thanks to Turkish support, Tripoli has now grown strong enough to claim favourable positions in such a settlement—positions that, logically, would also empower Turkey (Harchaoui, 2020).

Regional and Global Rivalries

Regional Adversaries: Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia

By intervening in the Libyan civil war, Turkey immediately drew the ire of several other regional powers that also have significant interests in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. The three most important regional actors in this context were Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Harchaoui, 2020; Tekir, 2022).

Egypt's interest in Libya's stability is self-evident: as North Africa's most prominent power, it shares a long land border with Tripoli, and as the civil war intensified, arms smuggling rapidly increased, while civilians fleeing the violence triggered a major migration crisis. Additionally, for President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—who himself came to power as a result of the Arab Spring—the fact that much of the GNA's leadership consists of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group considered a terrorist organization in Egypt and much of the Islamic world, is particularly alarming (Yüksel, 2021). Accordingly, Cairo chose to support General Haftar. Since the western side of the Egypt–Libya border was already under LNA control, even joint military exercises were conducted along the frontier. Egypt went so far as to threaten open military intervention against the GNA if it attempted to capture Sirte, the birthplace of former president Gaddafi, located on the southern Mediterranean coast (The National, 2020).

The UAE's rivalry with Turkey is far from limited to Libya; similar competition has unfolded in Yemen and Sudan. Abu Dhabi has long sought to uphold a conservative status quo in the Islamic world and viewed Turkey's intervention as a form of "Islamist expansion." Like Egypt, the oil-rich monarchy perceives the Muslim Brotherhood as a security threat, and the group's prominent role within the GNA naturally pushed the UAE into Haftar's camp. The Emirates didn't just provide financial support; the strike drones it delivered proved just as valuable on the battlefield as Turkey's TB2s (Pack, 2019; Tekir, 2022).

Compared to Egypt and the UAE, Saudi Arabia's support for the LNA was relatively restrained. Riyadh did not commit to major arms transfers but consistently voiced diplomatic support for General Haftar and is believed to have provided financial assistance to Tobruk. Like Turkey's other two regional adversaries, Riyadh also cited the Muslim Brotherhood's involvement as its chief concern (Shoaib, 2020).

It is thus clear that Turkey, through its intervention in Libya, openly challenged its regional rivals. While Ankara pursued a highly dynamic foreign policy—willing to confront conflicts head-on if necessary—to establish itself in North Africa, Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi aimed to preserve the existing status quo (Yavuz, 2020). It is important to note that such hostilities are not rare anomalies: regional powers consistently seek to expand their influence while attempting to sideline their rivals.

Conflict Within NATO: France and Greece

While tensions between Turkey and other prominent powers in the Middle East were almost inevitable due to longstanding regional rivalries, and renewed friction with old adversary Greece was hardly surprising, the clash between Ankara and Paris generated tensions that proved particularly uncomfortable for NATO.

France's stake in Libya rested on two key factors: first, President Nicolas Sarkozy sought to preserve Paris's waning—and since then steadily declining—influence in Africa; and second, in 2010, 18% of France's oil imports came from Tripoli. Although France officially supported the UN proposal to establish the GNA, it became clear in 2016 under rather awkward circumstances that this support was far from sincere: a military helicopter crashed in LNA controlled Benghazi, revealing the presence of French special forces (Molnár et al., 2020). At that point, it became evident that for Paris, a stable Libya—rather than a democratic one—was the priority, as the key oil fields essential to France lay in the areas controlled by Haftar.

Franco-Turkish hostilities peaked in June 2020 when the French navy's La Fayette-class frigate Courbet attempted to inspect a vessel suspected of arms smuggling. According to Paris, the Turkish frigates escorting the shipment locked fire-control radar on Courbet three times—an accusation Ankara denied. The diplomatic crisis escalated to the point where France suspended its participation in Sea Guardian, NATO's key naval operation to ensure Mediterranean security (Süsler, 2020; Hasar, 2022).

In contrast to France, Greece and non-NATO member Cyprus had no objections to Turkey based on military involvement in Libya per se. Rather, their concerns stemmed from the bilateral maritime agreement signed between Tripoli and Ankara in 2019, which redrew maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean. This agreement largely ignored the internationally recognized EEZs of Athens and Nicosia (Fajarini & Anam, 2022). As a result, areas south of the island of Crete that had been considered Greek interests were to become part of Libya's EEZ, and Turkey effectively assumed control over Cypriot maritime zones—excluding only the immediate coastal waters.

In response, Greece launched a campaign within the European Union to oppose Turkey, prompting an official EU condemnation of the agreement between Ankara and Tripoli (Tagliapietra, 2019). Turkey countered the EU's stance by accusing Brussels of acting with "biased, colonialist logic" and claimed it had no right to interfere in North African affairs (Yüksel, 2021).

Despite this opposition, Turkey continued exploratory drilling in Greek and Cypriot maritime areas, leading to repeated confrontations. This activity persisted even after Libyan courts annulled the agreement in 2021, 2023, and 2024, citing Libya's 1982 ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which clearly defines Greek maritime boundaries. Ankara maintained that since the GNA continued to support the agreement—and as it cannot be unilaterally revoked—it retained the right to conduct exploration in Greek waters.

The dispute between the France–Greece–Cyprus triangle and Turkey placed significant strain on NATO. Athens and Paris accused Ankara of undermining the alliance's collective interests for personal gain. In response, Ankara reiterated that it had been invited by the GNA, Libya's legitimate government, and pointed out that France was not a neutral actor either (Tekir, 2022). The controversy also damaged NATO's global reputation, as non-member states saw that the alliance's members were unable to cooperate in line with shared interests when national political and economic priorities diverged.

Cooperation and Rivalry: Russia

The relationship between Russia and Turkey in recent years has been complex. Ankara and Moscow have supported opposing factions in numerous global conflicts: in the Caucasus, Turkey openly backed Azerbaijan against Armenia, while the Kremlin officially acted as a peacekeeper until April 2024. Similarly, Russia has been an ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while Turkey supported the paramilitary forces that ultimately toppled the Assad regime. Despite these opposing stances, the two countries have adopted a pragmatic approach toward one another in both Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria—as they have in Libya.

Though the Kremlin denied it for a long time, Russian Wagner Group mercenaries appeared on the LNA's side during key moments of the Libyan war, including the 2019 siege of Tripoli. Until launching the war against Ukraine in 2022, Moscow continued to disavow any ties to the Wagner Group. However, in Africa, it became clear that the

Russian state was using this largely Russian-manned, modernly equipped force to intervene in conflicts while maintaining plausible deniability (Kardaş, 2020).

Wagner's presence in Libya introduced a new dynamic compared to the other foreign backers of General Haftar. While Turkish-supplied weaponry to the GNA primarily faced weapons sent by other countries to the LNA, in Russia's case, trained personnel also took part in combat operations. It is very likely, for example, that the modern Russian-made Pantsir-S1 air defence systems destroyed by Turkish Bayraktar drones were not operated by LNA troops (Selján, 2021; Tekir, 2022). Ironically, Russia's direct military intervention may have even benefited Ankara from one angle: with the U.S. playing a less active role in post-Gaddafi Libya, Turkey—a NATO member—blocking the expansion of a rival great power was viewed favourably in Washington. This likely made the U.S. more lenient toward Ankara at a time when relations between the two countries were strained over Syria and Iraq (Kardaş, 2020).

Despite this, Moscow rarely criticized Turkey through diplomatic channels, and military escalation was never on the table (Harchaoui, 2020). While countries like Egypt saw the Libyan civil war as a direct security threat, France was motivated by energy concerns, and Greece sought to protect its maritime boundaries, Russia had a broader, more strategic approach to Africa. By supporting various state and non-state actors, the Kremlin aimed to increase influence in the region, hinder NATO expansion, sell weapons to allies, and sign energy agreements (Tekir, 2022). Libya itself posed no significant security risk to Russia. Consequently, Moscow could afford to take a more pragmatic stance—even cooperating with Ankara on certain issues. A good example is the ceasefire proposal jointly drafted by Russia and Turkey in January 2020 to prepare for the Berlin Conference. Although it did not lead to lasting peace, it demonstrated that as long as their core interests remained unaffected, the two powers were willing to work together (Yüksel, 2021; Hasar, 2022).

Impact of Regional Conflicts on Turkey's Room for Manoeuvre

There is no doubt that Turkey gained numerous advantages in the MEAD region through its involvement in Libya. However, these foreign policy manoeuvres also triggered serious conflicts with other states, which often limited Turkey's diplomatic flexibility, making clear that such actions usually come with side effects.

Tensions with Greece and France hurt Turkey on three fronts: first, Ankara's "reliability index" among its formal NATO allies visibly deteriorated; second, Athens, Paris, and Nicosia are now likely to be far more reluctant to support Turkey's longstanding goal of joining the European Union. Furthermore, Greek and French lobbying may influence even those EU countries not directly involved in the Libyan conflict to view Turkish foreign policy more critically—though it's worth noting that Ankara's support for the GNA (recognized by most EU countries) could generate sympathy in some quarters (Tagliapietra, 2019). The third consequence extends beyond Turkey: the fact that NATO member states—two of which possess some of the alliance's most powerful armed forces—were willing to risk maritime incidents rather than resolve

disputes diplomatically cast a negative light on NATO's global image (Süsler, 2020; Yüksel, 2021).

President Erdoğan also fell short of fully achieving some of his goals in Libya. Turkey failed to significantly weaken its MEAD-region rivals—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt—nor did the GNA manage to decisively defeat General Haftar. Just as it alienated certain European countries, Turkey's support for Tripoli also provoked anger from several regional powers in the Middle East, further isolating Ankara diplomatically (Hasar, 2022). However, as noted earlier, this had minimal impact on Turkey's defence industry.

Among all its foreign relationships, Turkey's ties with Russia changed the least. Despite finding themselves once again on opposing sides—as in Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria—the two countries' energy and defence relations (though now less prominent), as well as their mutual interest in avoiding serious escalation, prevented lasting deterioration in bilateral ties (Tekir, 2022).

As a result of the Libyan conflict, Turkey was compelled to seek new regional partners, strengthening ties with Algeria, Tunisia, and Qatar. However, these new alliances may not be enough to offset the diplomatic losses. While Algeria is one of North Africa's key military powers, Egypt currently holds a stronger position. And although Qatar has vast oil reserves, its support for the Muslim Brotherhood makes it vulnerable to isolation in the Islamic world (Attia, 2023).

Summary

Turkey's intervention in Libya was not an isolated foreign policy manoeuvre but rather a live test of a new regional strategy aimed at expanding influence, strengthening economic and military presence, and ensuring autonomous foreign policy capabilities. Based on the experience, Ankara's foreign policy thinking has shifted on multiple levels, increasingly distancing itself from the logic of Western alliances.

The Libyan involvement reinforced the Turkish foreign policy axiom that direct military presence is not merely a defensive tool but can serve as an active instrument of foreign policy shaping. Ankara successfully applied this model first in Syria, then in Libya, and later in Nagorno-Karabakh as well. Simultaneously, the mindset has grown stronger that Turkish power projection need not be confined to diplomatic tools—if necessary, it can deploy asymmetric and hybrid instruments: drones, mercenaries, cyber operations, and economic pressure, along with soft power tools such as support for schools, religious institutions, and aid programs.

At the regional level, Turkey has begun to craft a multipolar balance policy that allows manoeuvrability outside traditional alliance systems. It has managed to cooperate with countries like Qatar, Algeria, Tunisia, and even, at times, Russia, while relations with Western allies—particularly France and Greece—have often become confrontational. Parallel to this, Turkey has proclaimed a doctrine of "strategic autonomy," in which it seeks to assert its interests through its own military strength and economic influence.

The Libyan experience shows that Turkey has successfully increased its military and technological clout and gained significant reputational advantages in the defence industry. However, the intervention also highlighted the constraints imposed by Turkey's need for constant balancing and the fact that active regional involvement is only sustainable when backed by effective diplomacy and strategic alliances.

Notes on Contributors

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Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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