Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies
ISSN-e: 2255-3479

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Türkiye in the face of strategic uncertainty: between hedging and decisive projection in Syria, Libya and Somalia

Abstract

This article analyses how Türkiye is reshaping its foreign policy in a highly uncertain environment, combining a hedging strategy with decisive projection in regional scenarios considered a priority for its security and interests. Using a qualitative comparative analysis approach, this study briefly examines two areas where Türkiye resorts to hedging (Ukraine-Russia and Gaza-Israel) in contrast to three where it resorts to decisive projection (Syria, Libya and Somalia) to assess the scope of Turkish strategic autonomy. The article introduces the concept of decisive projection as a form of proactive strategic autonomy, combining limited military instruments with political agreements, institutional control, control of infrastructure and the deployment of soft power tools. This contrasts with hedging, defined as a strategy of diversification and balance in the face of rivalry between great powers.

Through a scenario-based comparison, it is concluded that Türkiye maintains a dual rationale: it avoids rigid alignments through hedging *vis-à-vis* major powers (Russia, Israel-US), whilst deploying decisive projection in its neighbourhood to secure its security, energy and regional influence interests. Thus, the article offers insights into the understanding of strategic autonomy from a European and Mediterranean perspective.

Keywords

Turkey, Strategic autonomy, Hedging, Decisive projection, Middle East.

Cite this article:

Ortega Sánchez, C. (2026). Turkey in the face of strategic uncertainty: between hedging and decisive projection in Syria, Libya and Somalia. *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*. 27, pp. 197–222.

1 Introduction

Türkiye's foreign policy constitutes one of the most dynamic and adaptive vectors of the contemporary international system. In a global context increasingly characterised by the erosion of the liberal order and uncertainty, Ankara has adopted a foreign policy approach aimed at preserving its strategic autonomy whilst maximising its room for manoeuvre *vis-à-vis* major powers. This combination of flexibility and ambition makes the Turkish case a prime analytical laboratory for understanding how middle powers manage the transition towards a multipolar system in which rigid alliances are losing their centrality.

1.1 Objectives, guiding questions and hypotheses of the analysis

The study of Turkey's dual logic, based on a combination of hedging and decisive projection, is of key relevance to Spain, the European Union and NATO. Türkiye is not only an essential partner in managing Mediterranean security, but also an actor that has redefined the concept of strategic autonomy outside the Western framework since 2011. Analysing this transformation is key to gauging the degree of convergence or friction between the European position and Türkiye's interests in a context where Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Israel's devastating bombardment of the civilian population in Gaza, and growing competition in the Red Sea are significantly influencing European political agendas.

This article aims to analyse how Türkiye has proceeded to reconfigure its external projection to maximise its strategic autonomy in times of high uncertainty, distinguishing between patterns of hedging behaviour (understood as a form of risk management *vis-à-vis* major powers) and decisive projection (conceived in this study as a proactive form of strategic autonomy aimed at directly influencing priority regional environments).

The guiding question for this analysis is as follows*: How is Türkiye reconfiguring its foreign policy to maximise its strategic autonomy in times of high uncertainty, and what are the distinguishing patterns between 'systemic hedging' scenarios (Ukraine, Gaza) and 'decisive projection' scenarios (Syria, Libya, Somalia)?*

Two sub-questions arise from this:

- Sub-question 1: *How do the exogenous conditions arising from the situations in Ukraine and Gaza shape Türkiye's hedging behaviour and limit its scope for strategic autonomy?*
- Sub-question 2: *What combination of instruments does Türkiye use in Syria, Libya and Somalia to project its power, and what external and internal constraints does it face?*

Thus, two main hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. In the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, Türkiye prioritises hedging, understood as selective engagement and diversification of alliances to avoid

the costs of rigid alignment. In these scenarios, Ankara seeks to preserve its autonomy by minimising the risks of retaliation and maximising its value as a diplomatic intermediary between conflicting blocs.

– H2. In the three decisive scenarios analysed (Syria, Libya and Somalia), Türkiye adopts a decisive projection strategy based on a combination of *hard power* (limited interventions, military support and control of critical infrastructure) and *soft power* (political agreements, institutional cooperation and sustained presence). This proactive approach reflects Ankara's desire to consolidate its strategic autonomy through direct control of situations where its interests are immediate and the instruments are directly manageable by the Turkish state.

1.2 Method, sources and relevance of the analysis

This article adopts a qualitative approach to comparative strategic analysis, based on the systematic study of specialised academic literature, secondary sources (think tank reports and policy papers) and selected primary documentation, in particular Turkish institutional reports, news articles and institutional websites. Using this approach, the article analyses Türkiye's hedging strategy aimed at preserving its strategic autonomy, in contrast to three forms of decisive projection in scenarios considered priorities: Syria, Libya and Somalia. These three cases are examined comparatively through three common dimensions (strategic interests, instruments employed, and constraints or rivalries), with the aim of offering an integrated understanding of how Türkiye navigates a geopolitical environment characterised by high uncertainty, as well as of possible future trajectories in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

The article is structured in three parts: a theoretical framework setting out the key concepts for the analysis, an analysis of the exogenous conditions and Türkiye's hedging strategy in the contexts of Ukraine and Gaza, and an analysis of three scenarios of decisive projection (Syria, Libya and Somalia).

2 Analytical framework

2.1 The doctrinal trajectory of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP and its fit with the analytical framework

Turkish foreign policy in the era of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) can be understood as a trajectory of doctrinal recalibration in which the pursuit of strategic autonomy shifts from relying on interdependence and low-friction diplomacy to being increasingly combined with an expeditionary projection towards key scenarios for its economic, energy and security interests, within doctrinal frameworks of regional competition. In an initial phase (2002–2011), Ankara pursued an agenda of expanding influence that prioritised mediation, trade, con connectivity and institutional densification. The *zero problems with neighbours* formula and the notion of *strategic depth*, developed by Türkiye's former Prime Minister and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, functioned as

an essential technology of power: maximising regional centrality through economic ties, political openness and cultural outreach, whilst reducing security costs through normalisation with the surrounding region and convergence with Euro-Atlantic frameworks (Balcı, 2015; Papuççular, 2023).

That balance began to erode rapidly from 2011 onwards. The Arab uprisings, the war in Syria, the militarisation of conflicts involving *proxies* and the rise in cross-border threats (terrorism, migratory pressure and state fragmentation) turned Türkiye's neighbourhood into an area of persistent risk, where influence is no longer gained solely through interdependence, but through the ability to manage the environment coercively. In this phase, Turkish foreign policy incorporated a more visible identity-based dimension, with debates on *neo-Ottomanism* and regional leadership: rather than a restorationist ambition, *neo-Ottomanism* operates as a discursive framework that revalues the Ottoman imperial legacy to legitimise an active presence in the former Ottoman space (the Balkans, the Levant, North Africa), combining historical and cultural references with contemporary instruments of influence (religious, educational, media and humanitarian). In practice, this narrative was linked to an ambition for regional centrality and to the idea of Türkiye as a protective and mediating power in the Muslim world, reinforcing the domestic legitimacy of a more assertive foreign policy. At the same time, a logic of securitisation took hold: borders, local governance and de-escalation came to structure strategic calculations (Balcı, 2015; Papuççular, 2023).

It is here that two key features emerge which underpin the argument of this study: compartmentalisation (simultaneously cooperating and competing with the same actor across different dossiers) and the acceptance that certain scenarios require cumulative instruments to produce lasting effects, that is, decisive projection.

Since 2016, this transition has led to a more explicit practice of strategic autonomy: diversification of partners, transactional diplomacy and the growing centrality of the military instrument and the defence industry, with sustained deployments and expeditionary capability. The attempted coup of 15 July 2016 acted as a catalyst for this shift, by reinforcing the centralisation of the decision-making process, intensifying national security priorities and consolidating a foreign policy more geared towards reducing external dependencies and expanding Türkiye's operational autonomy within its regional environment. This diversification also includes strategic ties with Qatar and, to a lesser extent, with Pakistan, which broaden the diplomatic and security scope from which Türkiye sustains its regional influence. In parallel, and in line with this shift, Ankara has moved towards a transactional pragmatism: it normalises or repairs relations with rivals (such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia) in relation to its interests in energy, trade, investment or regional de-escalation, and deliberately separates issues to prevent a crisis from undermining areas of cooperation, even amidst tough public rhetoric. Within this framework, the maritime dimension crystallised in the Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine, a strategic framework which, from the late 2010s, served to underpin territorial claims and signal a naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean, at odds with the prevailing interpretation of the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), although by 2025 this doctrine has fallen significantly into disuse.

In analytical terms, this set of transformations does not represent a rhetorical shift, but rather the consolidation of a foreign policy capable of alternating between risk management and the production of effects: the doctrinal backdrop that explains why, as will be seen in this analysis, Türkiye resorts to hedging in contexts of systemic uncertainty *vis-à-vis* major powers and to decisive projection when it perceives that it can generate cumulative and controllable results in priority theatres.

2.2 Hedging and strategic autonomy

When we speak of hedging or strategic hedging, we refer to a behaviour of seeking points of security that states employ in situations of high uncertainty and risk. Thus, it is a set of strategies aimed at cultivating an intermediate position—that is, a balance—to avoid or postpone the need to choose a side in a rivalry between great powers at the expense of the other. According to Kuik, this search for points of security is defined by (1) not taking sides or avoiding rigid alignments, (2) carrying out contradictory or opposing measures to offset risks, and (3) diversifying one's actions to keep options open for as long as possible (2021, 303). Goh, for her part, in her analyses of hedging in Southeast Asia, identifies three key elements of hedging, which are (1) indirect or soft balancing aimed at persuading other powers to act as counterweights to a rival's regional influence, (2) establishing complex political, economic and strategic ties with powers in the hope of integrating them into international norms, and (3) involving multiple great powers in regional affairs so that all have a stake in a stable order (2005, IX). The author argues that hedging is carried out not against specific actors, but against general risks, particularly the hegemony of a single power, the withdrawal of a traditional protector, or regional destabilisation due to a conflict between great powers.

Much of the literature has therefore focused on the study of hedging in the Indo-Pacific, and how small and medium-sized states use it to avoid having to choose between the United States and China. This is the case with Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia (Goh, 2005; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Kuik, 2021; Aydin-Düzgit, Kutlay and Keyman, 2025). On the other hand, Tessman applies the term to more influential actors, dividing them into two categories: Type A states, which seek to improve the state's competitive capacity to prevent the leader of a system from exploiting those weaknesses (for example, by diversifying energy supplies), and Type B states, dedicated to insuring themselves against the loss of goods or subsidies that the system leader provides but might cease to supply (for example, by establishing regional organisations to substitute security functions and promote stability) (Tessman, 2012).

As will be seen in this analysis, Türkiye is a state that engages in strategic hedging through a multidirectional foreign policy that seeks to maximise strategic autonomy, avoiding rigid alignment with a single bloc.

2.3 Scenario-based comparison: decisive projection

Whilst we use the concept of hedging to define Türkiye's position regarding uncertainty and major conflicts, this analysis employs the term decisive projection to examine how the country positions itself and deploys resources in specific scenarios with the aim of directly influencing them.

Although decisive projection derives from power projection—that is, a state's capacity to deploy and employ military and strategic resources outside its territory (Gunzinger, 1993)—the concept of decisive projection is characterised by the sustained and multifaceted positioning of state capabilities in a scenario deemed a priority, with the aim of directly and persistently influencing the local political balance and security, generating concrete and controllable strategic effects. Therefore, in this article, decisive projection is conceptualised as an expanded power projection strategy, combining limited military instruments with political agreements, control and management of critical infrastructure, political instruments and institutional presence, aimed at producing lasting strategic effects in scenarios prioritised by a state.

This conceptualisation aligns with recent studies on proactive strategic autonomy and the sustained projection of middle powers, which highlight the combination of military, diplomatic and economic resources to generate prolonged regional influence (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021; Dalacoura, 2021; Sarı and Sula, 2024). From this perspective, decisive projection can be understood as the operational translation of strategic autonomy, applied in a sustained manner in theatres where the state seeks not only to react to uncertainty, but to actively shape the environment.

As will be seen in the present case, whilst Türkiye strikes a balance with regard to certain conflicts involving major powers, it assumes a key leading role in its policy towards post-war Syria or the stabilisation of Somalia or Libya, all with the aim of protecting and advancing its strategic, security or energy objectives at the regional level.

3 Türkiye and hedging: evolving exogenous conditions

Turkish foreign policy over the last decade has evolved towards a distinctive form of strategic autonomy characterised by growing independence in decision-making and an active search for its own room for manoeuvre within a multipolar international environment. This strategy is based on the premise that the international order led by Western hegemony has come to an end, giving way to a multipolar and post-Western world. For Türkiye, strategic autonomy is articulated through three dimensions: military power and defence, diplomatic manoeuvring, and economic pragmatism by diversifying trade relations and strengthening ties with Asian countries and Russia, without abandoning its institutional connections with the West (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021; Šišić and Kurtanović, 2025).

Türkiye seeks to preserve its influence and manage the systemic uncertainty arising from the rivalry between major powers. Far from a passive or neutral stance,

Turkish hedging consists of a deliberate practice of selective alignment, functional compartmentalisation and the pursuit of mutual benefits, allowing Ankara to maintain simultaneous ties with both Russia and the West without being entirely dependent on either (Ulas, 2026).

Thus, whilst strategic autonomy constitutes the structural objective (the aspiration to full decision-making sovereignty and sustained global projection), hedging acts as an operational balancing mechanism that enables Türkiye to navigate between conflicting pressures (Šišić and Kurtanović, 2025). This strategy does not imply a disengagement from NATO, but rather a form of functionally ambivalent membership: Türkiye continues to regard the Alliance as a central anchor of security, deterrence and interoperability, whilst seeking to expand its autonomous room for manoeuvre *vis-à-vis* its Western partners. This dual logic is intensified by the exogenous conditions imposed by conflicts such as the war in Ukraine or the genocide in Gaza, which reshape the country's room for manoeuvre and test the flexibility of its diplomacy and its ability to maintain effective autonomy within NATO and *vis-à-vis* Russia.

3.1 Türkiye's room for manoeuvre in relations with Russia and the US in the context of the war in Ukraine

Turkey's room for manoeuvre in the war in Ukraine stands as a paradigmatic case of systemic hedging: a strategy of selective alignment and compartmentalisation that seeks to maintain institutional commitments to the West without severing critical interdependencies with Russia. On the one hand, Ankara remains a loyal member of NATO; on the other, it maintains vital interests with Moscow in the energy, food and tourism sectors. This dual axis reflects what Balta and Bal (2025) present as a balance between allied cohesion and domestic interests, such that Turkish behaviour oscillates between alignment, autonomy, opportunism and dissonance.

This logic is based on a doctrinal premise: the relative decline of the Western order and the consolidation of a post-Western environment where regional powers can expand their scope for action (Aydın-Düzgit, 2025). Within this framework, Türkiye aspires to act as a pivotal actor, capable of cooperating and competing simultaneously with rivals, whilst preserving flexibility and avoiding irreversible commitments (Shlykov, 2023; Kara, 2024). The war forced Ankara to implement this logic in a visible manner: a policy described as pro-Kyiv but not anti-Moscow (Ulaş, 2026).

On the military-strategic front, Türkiye has provided material support to Ukraine (including the supply of Bayraktar TB2 drones and public backing for its territorial integrity) whilst avoiding measures that would place it in direct confrontation with Russia. On the economic front, it refused to join Western sanctions, prioritising macroeconomic stability and access to energy (Lesage, Daşkin and Yar, 2022). Compartmentalisation thus becomes a structural feature: cooperation on one issue does not necessarily block cooperation on another, reducing the risk of a spiral of retaliation.

The material basis for this calculation is a vulnerability stemming from interdependence: over 40% of natural gas, the majority of imported wheat and a significant portion of tourism come from Russia (Dalay, 2022; Ünlühisarcıklı, 2023; Irkhin and Moskalenko, 2024). Consequently, Turkish strategic autonomy does not entail a break with Moscow, but rather the prudent management of dependencies to avoid domestic shocks. This constraint explains Ankara's moderate tone even at critical moments in the conflict.

On the diplomatic-institutional front, Türkiye has exploited instruments that maximise influence without crossing thresholds. Control of the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits offers a unique lever: by invoking the 1936 Montreux Convention to bar the passage of warships, Ankara limited Russian operational freedom without adopting an openly hostile stance, thereby preserving its role as a mediator (Lesage, Daşkin and Yar, 2022, Šišić and Kurtanović, 2025, Tykhonenko and Rachynska, 2025, Ulas, 2026). In the same vein, Turkish diplomacy facilitated the Black Sea Grain Agreement (July 2022), prisoner exchanges and rounds of negotiations in Istanbul and Antalya (Ulaş, 2026, Yesiltas, 2026), bolstering its global profile and bargaining power *vis-à-vis* Washington and Brussels.

The drive towards autonomy also translates into capabilities: reindustrialisation in the defence sector and a reduction in technological dependencies (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021; Shlykov, 2023; Rudn, 2024). However, this very shift is causing friction with the United States: the purchase of the S-400 led to CAATSA sanctions and expulsion from the F-35 programme (Reuters, 2025a). Ankara has responded by combining pressure and negotiation (for example, by adjusting its stance within the NATO-Sweden framework and using its regional role to reopen dialogue on the F-16s), which demonstrates its ability to operate 'on two fronts' (Reuters, 2025b). Finally, the discourse of strategic autonomy serves a domestic function: it reinforces legitimacy among an increasingly nationalist electorate and is linked to the techno-nationalism associated with the defence industry (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021; Yesiltas, 2026; Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay and Keyman, 2026).

In short, the war in Ukraine has not distanced Türkiye from the West, but has instead consolidated a deliberate ambiguity: sufficient support for Kyiv to maintain its credentials as an ally, and sufficient restraint towards Moscow to avoid economic and security costs. This pattern illustrates a 'mature' systemic hedging strategy: a policy of active balancing and diversification that seeks to translate proclaimed autonomy into real room for manoeuvre, under significant structural constraints.

3.2 Gaza-Israel-US

Secondly, the strategic uncertainty regarding Israel's massacres in Palestine stems not only from the military dynamics on the ground, but also from the way in which the situation is reshaping alignments and generating reputational costs at the regional and transatlantic levels. In this case, Türkiye is avoiding 'crossing the threshold' of Turkish alignment, that is, avoiding an irreversible strategic rupture with the US and

NATO, with its capacity to manage risks gaining greater weight than its capacity to shape the scenario. Following 7 October 2023, the Israeli campaign in the Gaza Strip, marked by sustained bombardment and massive destruction of infrastructure, has come under international legal scrutiny and has been described as a possible crime of genocide by the International Court of Justice (ICJ, 2024). In this context, the US has maintained diplomatic support and military assistance to Israel, including extraordinary accelerations of aid, which increases the cost of any rigid alignment against Israel in the context of the genocide in Gaza and in the face of US support, particularly for a NATO member such as Türkiye (U.S. Department of State, 2025). It is precisely in this tension that one can see, in a manner parallel to the situation in Ukraine, the Turkish strategic dilemma and its hedging.

This strategic dilemma stems from the state identity defined under the AKP government, based on a strong Islamic and neo-Ottoman ethos that seeks to present Türkiye as a key state in the Muslim world and to actively engage in defending the Palestinian cause and fiercely criticising Israel (Uzer, 2022; Erdoğan, 2024; Pribadi *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, a neoclassical realist understanding of international relations views Israel as a necessary partner for balancing regional threats, as well as a key economic partner (Efron, 2018). Among the factors exacerbating this dilemma, we can see that, on the one hand, Türkiye has shifted in recent years from seeking to be a central mediator in Palestinian-Israeli relations to becoming a political patron of Hamas, thereby undermining trust with Israel (Çevik, 2025). Historically, Türkiye has managed to compartmentalise its relations with Israel, maintaining growing trade despite political crises, reaching a bilateral volume of USD 7 billion in 2023, as well as being a key supplier of crude oil to Israel via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (Akram, 2024). Thus, for years Türkiye has been Israel's fifth-largest trading partner, with trade weathering incidents such as the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, when Israeli forces boarded a Freedom Flotilla vessel bound for Gaza in international waters, killing ten Turkish activists and triggering a serious diplomatic crisis.

The crisis has indeed affected relations between the two states, as since 2025 Türkiye has severed trade ties, adopting an increasingly aggressive stance towards Israel and labelling it a 'terrorist state' (Soylu 2025). Ankara has stated that it will only resume trade if an uninterrupted flow of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians is permitted. However, on the other hand, Türkiye has kept the aforementioned Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline open (the possible closure of which would profoundly affect Israeli energy security) as a form of material compartmentalisation, whilst at the same time presenting itself as a mediator and aspiring guarantor of peace in Gaza. Whilst Türkiye has maintained positive relations with Hamas, this dialogue allows it to claim influence over the organisation and to present itself as one of the four guarantors of the ceasefire in Gaza alongside Egypt, Qatar and the US, enabling it to remain at the centre of regional diplomacy and to present itself to Washington as an ally capable of shouldering the burden of stabilisation. In this context, whilst balancing its rhetoric against Israel, Türkiye keeps the pipeline open and has agreed to purchase US liquefied natural gas at higher prices to reduce its dependence on Russian gas (Gazprom), thereby demonstrating its strategic loyalty to Washington (Çevik, 2025).

Whilst these three elements (offering to mediate, preserving certain aspects of Israeli energy security and reducing energy dependence on Russia) can be understood as balancing instruments, Turkey's position towards Israel remains constrained by structural limitations that hinder its stability. Among these, the ideological imprint of the AKP government stands out, pushing Ankara to maintain a stance of condemnation against the Israeli massacres in Gaza, denounced by the Turkish authorities as genocidal.

In this regard, this situation severely hampers Türkiye's ability to hedge, something that is not the case with Ukraine. Israel is firmly opposed to any Turkish military or administrative presence in Gaza, a stance driven both by Ankara's rhetorical support for Hamas and by Türkiye's condemnatory rhetoric towards Israel. Netanyahu's government has begun to view Ankara as an unsuitable and unreliable actor, opting to maintain its freedom of unilateral action in Gaza, on the grounds that a Turkish presence would entail operational restrictions, forcing Israel to coordinate or justify its attacks, which would heighten the risk of accidental clashes between the two armies (Çevik, 2025). Thus, Türkiye appears to be playing an increasingly central role in the Israeli narrative of existential insecurity.

Nevertheless, a kind of equilibrium in the positions of both states within the context of two deeply charged narratives is visible: on the one hand, Israel increasingly perceiving Türkiye as an existential threat and, on the other, Türkiye denouncing Israel's war crimes. This follows a key trend in both states, which find political benefit in rhetorically exaggerating their mutual hostility to strengthen their domestic position, creating cycles of inflammatory rhetoric that are difficult to break even in contexts where there are mutual interests (Erdoğan, 2024).

Türkiye's behaviour on the Gaza–IsraelUS axis clearly follows a logic of hedging: Ankara combines rhetoric of moral confrontation with selective material measures aimed at avoiding irreversible strategic costs, thereby preserving its autonomy and its value as a mediating actor. Unlike the Ukrainian case, where hedging relies on relatively stable functional compartmentalisation, in Gaza this strategy is more fragile and volatile, as it is conditioned by a heavy ideological burden and by identity-based narratives that limit the sustainability of the balance and heighten the risk of strategic incoherence.

4 Türkiye and its 'decisive projection'

As a middle power with growing expeditionary capabilities towards the Global South and a strategic autonomy articulated outside rigid alignment frameworks, Türkiye has moved from managing uncertainty through hedging to intervening in a sustained manner to generate controllable strategic effects in priority regional scenarios. This section examines 'decisive projection' as a form of proactive strategic autonomy: a sustained combination of limited military instruments, political agreements, and economic and institutional levers aimed at producing controllable effects in priority theatres. This analysis argues that, unlike hedging, Ankara does

not primarily seek to keep options open and reduce risk *vis-à-vis* major powers, but rather to actively shape regional environments where it perceives immediate interests in security, influence and connectivity. To this end, three scenarios (Syria, Libya and Somalia/Red Sea) are compared using the same framework: interests and context, instruments deployed, and constraints/rivalries that shape the scope of the strategy.

4.1 Scenario 1: Türkiye in Syria

As of January 2026, the Syrian conflict entered an unstable post-war phase following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2024 and the consolidation of a fragile transitional government in Damascus. Although large-scale violence has subsided, Syria remains territorially fragmented, with precarious local balances and a sustained presence of external actors. Türkiye has established itself as one of the decisive actors on the ground, maintaining a direct military presence and structural influence in the north of the country. Far from a temporary involvement, Ankara has developed a strategy of sustained projection in Syria, aimed at shaping the security environment, influencing local governance and safeguarding immediate strategic interests in the post-war landscape.

Since the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, Türkiye's strategic dilemma has centred on the tension between two priority and often conflicting objectives: promoting the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and preventing the YPG/PYD[1] , the political-military core of the SDF (a Kurdish-Arab coalition) and perceived by Ankara as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party[2] (PKK), from establishing an autonomous entity on its border. This dilemma was exacerbated by the presence of the US, which cooperated with the SDF against ISIS/Daesh, creating a degree of protection over north-eastern Syria and heightening potential friction within NATO due to the contradictions between the US and Türkiye. At the same time, Ankara supported and organised networks of armed opposition and local governance through the Syrian National Army (SNA) in the north, whilst managing internal security challenges (terrorism and radicalisation), migratory pressure and the risk of a direct clash with the Moscow/Tehran axis.

1 PYD (Democratic Union Party): the main Kurdish party in Syria, which dominated the political administration of the north-east during the war.

YPG (People's Protection Units): the armed wing and dominant force linked to the PYD. It formed the military core of the SDF in the campaign against ISIS/Daesh with US support.

2 The PKK is designated as a terrorist organisation by Türkiye, the US, the European Union, the UK, Canada and Australia.

Turkey considers the PYD/YPG to be organically linked to the PKK, and therefore a direct threat to border security. For Türkiye, the elimination of the PKK and the dissolution of the YPG are top priorities in its foreign policy. This is because both groups share militants and personnel trained by the PKK, and there is ideological and symbolic continuity between the two groups (International Crisis Group, 2017; Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of the Interior, 2017).

In the post-war period, following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2024, Turkey's strategic dilemma has shifted to how to translate its presence and influence in Syria by acting as a champion for the president of the transitional government, Ahmed al-Sharaa, who hails from the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This relationship is pragmatic: Ankara has sought to consolidate a central Syrian state capable of absorbing the north-eastern territory and, above all, to bring about the effective disarmament and/or controlled integration of the SDF into state structures, reducing the YPG's autonomy and avoiding governance vacuums that could reignite insurgent dynamics. However, the situation in Syria cannot be understood in isolation from the Kurdish issue in a regional context: for Ankara, the matter is not limited to the YPG/SDF, but forms part of a security continuum linking northern Syria with northern Iraq and, to a lesser extent, with the Iranian dimension of the Kurdish conflict. In this sense, Turkish policy towards Syria is also shaped by the need to contain potential strategic spillover effects, including porous borders and the movement of weapons and fighters that could contribute to a resurgence of the PKK, perceived by the Turkish state as one of its main security threats.

Thus, contrary to what has occurred in scenarios such as Ukraine or Gaza, Türkiye has deployed tools in Syria aimed at protecting and defending its immediate interests, with a predominance of hard power (direct military operations, sustained presence and support for armed actors) combined with political and coordination levers to set red lines and manage escalation. Between 2016 and 2020, Türkiye carried out four direct military operations: (1) Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), aimed at expelling the Islamic State from the border strip and halting the YPG's territorial expansion west of the Euphrates, (2) Operation Olive Branch (2018), launched against Kurdish forces in Afrin, (3) Operation Peace Spring (2019), aimed at creating a security zone in the north-east, and (4) Operation Spring Shield (2020), aimed at halting the advance of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in Idlib and reinforcing Turkey's position in the north-west. These interventions were followed by the establishment of military bases, observation posts and the sustained deployment of personnel and capabilities in northern Syria (Wei, 2019; Sever, 2020; Karaca and Köksal, 2022).

Secondly, Türkiye has relied on support and funding for armed groups. Ankara was one of the main backers of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), providing weapons and training, and subsequently helped to restructure and coordinate factions under the umbrella of the SNA. Added to this is the backing of identity-based formations such as the Sultan Murad Division (created in 2014 and composed of Syrian Turkmen), which operated as an instrument of projection and local control in areas under Turkish influence (Antonopoulos, 2018; Phillips and Valbjorn, 2018; Karaca and Köksal, 2022).

All in all, Turkey's decisive projection of power into Syria has generated structural limits and contradictions in foreign policy, with strategic incompatibilities with allies and rivals, as well as domestic costs. Firstly, there has been persistent friction with the US and, by extension, within NATO: US cooperation with the SDF (dominated by the YPG) was interpreted by Ankara as a direct threat, fuelling a narrative of isolation and undermining allied cohesion in a shared theatre of operations. Secondly, the

sustainability of the Turkish presence has depended on careful management of escalation with Russia and Iran. Following the downing of a Russian aircraft in 2015, Türkiye reoriented its policy to re-establish channels of coordination with Moscow, which increased reliance on de-escalation mechanisms and ushered in a phase of asymmetric negotiation conditioned by Russian air superiority. In this context, Sever (2020) emphasises that, faced with the refusal to supply Patriots, Ankara turned to the S-400 system, a decision that exacerbated tensions with Washington and NATO. This realignment also prompted Türkiye to participate in the Astana Process alongside Russia and Iran to manage the conflict and secure its military presence; however, contradictions persisted, particularly in Idlib, where Türkiye faced the dilemma of protecting the armed opposition whilst maintaining its military deployment against SAA offensives backed by Russia and Iran (Wei, 2019). Added to these constraints is a problem of international legitimacy: the Turkish presence is justified on security grounds, but it clashes with the principle of Syrian territorial sovereignty, restricting diplomatic manoeuvre in the post-war period. Finally, the migration cost acts as a major domestic constraint: the social and political pressure linked to refugees encourages the consolidation of safe zones and returns, but heightens strategic risks if stabilisation on the ground is not sustainable.

In Syria, Türkiye does not operate according to a logic of systemic hedging aimed at keeping its options open *vis-à-vis* major powers, but rather through decisive projection in the sense defined in this article: a sustained and multifaceted presence designed to produce controllable political and security effects in a priority theatre. Ankara combines limited military interventions, permanent deployment and proxy structures with coordination and containment mechanisms (such as Astana) to set red lines and manage escalation, whilst using its territorial influence as leverage to shape the post-war settlement regarding the north-east. Thus, Turkish strategic autonomy manifests itself here proactively: it is not limited to managing external risks, but seeks to actively shape the governance and territorial balance of northern Syria, even at the cost of legitimacy and migratory pressure.

4.2 Scenario 2: Türkiye in Libya

Libya remains trapped in a stalled transition: the institutional deadlock persists between rival authorities in the west (Tripoli) and the east, with fragmented institutions and an electoral process still unresolved, despite UN attempts to steer a roadmap towards elections and institutional unification. In practice, executive power remains divided between the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli and the Government of National Stability (GNS) in the east (backed by the House of Representatives and the Haftar axis), perpetuating 'dual-centre' governance and rival claims to legitimacy. Furthermore, the deadlock over electoral laws and the constitutional framework (following the collapse of the 2021 electoral calendar) has made the paralysis chronic, whilst the UN proposal is structured around the pillars of an elect e framework, institutional unification and structured dialogue (Security Council Report, 2025).

In this context, Libya is crucial for Türkiye for three reasons: (1) maritime geopolitics and energy in the Eastern Mediterranean, anchored in the 2019 Türkiye–Libya Memorandum on maritime delimitation, which underpins Turkish claims and shapes disputes with Greece and other actors, whilst also shielding Türkiye in the event of potential claims over areas with hydrocarbon potential, (2) strategic projection in the Central Mediterranean (access, connectivity and capacity to influence regional balances), and (3) economic interests (reconstruction, contracts and business presence). Thus, Türkiye is taking risks because Libya offers a 'lever' where calibrated intervention and legal agreements can generate controllable strategic effects (maritime, political and in terms of access) *vis-à-vis* regional rivals and the volatility of the Libyan scenario.

In its relationship with Libya, Türkiye has moved from its 'zero problems' policy to an active military presence to protect its national interests. Whilst in 2011 it faced the dilemma of supporting the Gaddafi regime or supporting the rebels, with the escalation of the conflict in 2019, Türkiye decided to provide military support to the UN-backed Government of National Accord to prevent General Khalifa Haftar, backed by regional rivals such as the UAE, from taking full control of the country, which would have completely expelled Turkish influence from the region (Selján, 2020; Kardaş, 2020).

Since then, Türkiye has taken risks and sought to build closer ties with Libya to defend its strategic and economic interests. Thus, the most significant gain has been the 2019 memorandum of understanding, linking the maritime borders of Türkiye and Libya, allowing Türkiye to claim hydrocarbon exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean and serving as a counterweight to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, comprising Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt (Maalım, 2023, Süsler, 2024).

To this end, Türkiye has deployed instruments of hard power, but also of 'smart power', combining military intervention with diplomatic (such as the 2019 memorandum of understanding), economic and humanit e instruments to consolidate its influence in the Mediterranean and Africa. Among the military instruments are active hard power projection, such as the use of unmanned aerial vehicles like the Bayraktar TB2, the deployment of air defence and electronic warfare capabilities, and the dispatch of support forces (such as the transfer of Syrian fighters), as well as the direct deployment of military advisers and training units to professionalise Libyan forces or to carry out demining in civilian areas. Added to this is the control of military infrastructure, such as the al-Watiya airbase or a naval station in the port of Misrata (Seljan, 2020; Maalım, 2023; Süsler, 2024).

Economically, Türkiye is working to secure contracts from the Gaddafi era and position its companies to benefit from the future reconstruction. With the fall of the Gaddafi government, Turkish contracts and projects were worth around USD 18 billion, which Türkiye aims to recover. Similarly, in addition to taking an interest in infrastructure projects and the country's reconstruction, agreements have been established between the Central Bank of Türkiye and that of Libya to stabilise the economy and facilitate bilateral trade (Okumuş, 2021; Süsler, 2024).

Finally, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has been implementing development projects since 2012, covering health, education, social and administrative infrastructure, and, in recent years, initiatives linked to internal security, such as support for police training facilities. Similarly, Türkiye's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), together with the Turkish Red Crescent, carried out search and rescue operations and implemented humanitarian projects following the 2023 floods in Derna (Okumuş, 2021, Türk Kızılay, 2023, TIKA, 2024, TIKA, n. d., Bani Salameh, 2026).

However, Turkey's decisive involvement in Libya, whilst having positive effects for Türkiye, has entailed a series of geopolitical risks. Thus, in the Libyan context, the rivalry with the UAE is the most evident. Abu Dhabi's financial and military support for Haftar's forces in the Libyan National Army is legitimised by accusing Türkiye of supporting groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which it perceives as an existential threat, and by accusing Türkiye of using these networks to expand its hegemony, whilst Türkiye accuses the UAE of sponsoring coup-plotting and separatist regimes, as they did with the 2013 military coup in Egypt against Mohamed Morsi, a close ally of the Turkish government (Kardaş, 2020; Bani Salameh, 2026).

In this regard, there have also been tensions with Egypt, which has viewed the eastward advance of Türkiye-backed troops as a threat to its security, going so far as to threaten military intervention. However, these tensions have eased as the two countries have drawn closer diplomatically (Maalım, 2023).

Finally, Turkey's involvement in Libya has caused considerable friction with the European Union. The 2019 maritime delimitation memorandum, ideologically supported by Türkiye under the Blue Homeland doctrine, has been condemned for disregarding the sovereign rights of Greece and Cyprus over their Exclusive Economic Zones, which has led the EU to formally condemn the agreement and to activate a sanctions framework in response to Turkish drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the freezing of assets of certain individuals and entities involved in such activities (Özşahin and Çakmak, 2022; Maalım, 2023).

Libya constitutes a particularly clear example of decisive projection because it is a theatre where Ankara does not merely manage systemic risks through ambiguity, but seeks to produce controllable strategic effects through a package of cumulative instruments. The combination of calibrated military intervention (drones, air defence, advisory support and operational presence), high-impact legal-political agreements (2019 *Memorandum*) and economic and institutional levers (contracting, reconstruction, monetary cooperation and humanitarian presence) enables Türkiye to exert direct influence over the Libyan political-military balance and, simultaneously, to strengthen its maritime position in the Eastern Mediterranean. This architecture increases Turkish operational autonomy, but also raises costs: Libyan fragmentation limits the predictability, and rivalry with the UAE (which supports the Haftar axis as a counterweight) turns the country into a space of indirect competition where Turkish projection faces rival narratives, resources and networks. Precisely because of this tension between capacity for impact and exposure to risk, Libya illustrates the

threshold of decisive projection. In the following scenario, Somalia will demonstrate even more clearly how this competition with the UAE is shifting towards control of logistical hubs and operational soft power in the Horn of Africa.

4.3 Scenario 3: Türkiye in Somalia and the Red Sea

Somalia has become a priority theatre for Turkish foreign policy due to its value as a geostrategic pivot between the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean routes, in a regional context strained by the militarisation of the coastline and competition for port access. In this scenario, Türkiye acts not only as a development partner, but also as a provider of security and a facilitator of connectivity, relying on a sustained institutional and military presence (including its largest overseas training base in Mogadishu with TURKSOM) and on recent agreements aimed at strengthening Somali maritime capabilities. At the same time, Turkish mediation in the de-escalation between Ethiopia and Somalia following the crisis linked to Somaliland demonstrates that Ankara seeks scope for direct influence over the regional balance, maximising its operational autonomy through diplomatic and security levers. As seen in this section, Somalia offers a particularly clear case of 'decisive projection': an environment where Türkiye aims to produce controllable strategic effects (maritime security, access, political influence) rather than maintaining ambiguity *vis-à-vis* major powers.

There is a key reason for Turkey's growing interest: Somalia is central to Türkiye's economic, energy and security interests. In 2011, Prime Minister Erdogan paid a visit to Mogadishu, where an embassy would soon be opened and where Turkish Airlines flights would begin arriving shortly afterwards, formally establishing relations between the two states.

From an economic perspective, Somalia is viewed as an emerging market for mineral resources and untapped gas and oil reserves. Thus, in March 2024, both countries signed an agreement for Türkiye to explore for and produce hydrocarbons in Somali onshore and offshore blocks (Sıradağ, 2024; Telci and Yimer, 2024). From a strategic perspective, Somalia is situated near vital maritime routes such as the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Türkiye operates its largest overseas military base, Camp TURKSOM, in Mogadishu, where it trains the Somali National Army to professionalise it and combat terrorism. Furthermore, alongside Turkey's entry into Somalia came strategic investment in infrastructure based on Turkish private management of regional logistics hubs. Thus, Mogadishu Airport is managed by the Turkish company Favori and, since 2014, the firm Albayrak has been coordinating the Port of Mogadishu, the country's main port asset in the context of reconstruction. In 2020, this concession was renewed for further fourteen years, extending Türkiye's key role in the development of the Somali economy, as well as, as we have seen, its security (Rossiter and Cannon, 2019; Sıradağ, 2024).

In addition to the military and economic pillars, the third facet of Turkey's presence in Somalia is humanitarian. Türkiye bases its presence in Somalia on a strategy of

humanitarian diplomacy developed since the 2000s. Since the AKP came to power, investment in development aid in Africa rose in the early years from USD 3.84 million in 2004 to USD 249.47 million in 2012 and USD 395 million in 2015 (Hasimi, 2014: 137; Baird, 2016; Dahir, 2020).

Through TIKA, which also arrived in Mogadishu in 2011, more than five hundred humanitarian projects have been implemented in the fields of health, education, agriculture and infrastructure. Examples of these include the Digfer 'Recep Tayyip Erdoğan' Hospital, the construction of urban roads in Mogadishu, and even the construction of the parliament building (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, 2014; Yusuf, Wasuge and Sharif, 2022; TIKA, n. d.). The Turkish Red Crescent also has a significant presence, managing a camp for internally displaced persons with a capacity for twenty thousand people. Thirdly, the Turkish foundation Maarif is responsible for cultural diplomacy and university exchange and training programmes, educating a new generation of Somali ruling elites with cultural and linguistic ties to Türkiye, thereby facilitating long-term political and economic relations (Mosley *et al.*, 2021, International Somalia Maarif Schools, n.d.).

Furthermore, Türkiye's success in Somalia allows it to present itself as an emerging global power capable of offering an alternative development model to the Western one, whilst simultaneously projecting a domestic narrative of itself as a great and protective nation in the face of extractivism by Western states (Özkan, 2014; Baird, 2016).

Turkey's presence in Somalia, although presented as a model of humanitarian diplomacy and a 'win-win' approach, faces various structural constraints and contradictions that result in risks Turkey must assume in order to defend its interests. Among these risks, the strategic rivalry with the UAE turns Somalia into a theatre of external geopolitical competition.

On the one hand, we find that Turkish policy in Somalia is largely directed towards Mogadishu, centralising its aid on the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and alienating autonomous regions such as Puntland or Somaliland, reinforcing the perception that Türkiye supports Mogadishu's centralism to the detriment of federalism (Özkan, 2014; Sofos, 2023). On the other hand, the FGS appears to be becoming increasingly dependent on external support for its survival, postponing the creation of a genuine social contract with the population (Lafranchi, 2025). Furthermore, in Ankara there is a sense of what Mehmet Özkan termed 'Somali fatigue'—institutional weariness stemming from the lack of a clear long-term roadmap and in the face of security risks, such as potential attacks by Al-Shabaab (2014).

It is at the geopolitical level, however, that the greatest risks lie: whilst Türkiye and Qatar have cultivated close relations with the FGS, the UAE has decided to support the autonomous region of Somaliland as a counterweight and as a key regional partner. Through massive investment in the port of Berbera and via DP World, and the establishment of military bases in the region, the UAE has sought to counter Turkey's presence at the port and airport in Mogadishu, supporting Somaliland's

aspirations for independence—which, by late 2025, Israel had joined (Mosley *et al.*, 2021; Sıradağ, 2024; Lafranchi, 2025; Magee, 2025).

Somalia constitutes a key example of decisive projection because it allows us to observe, in a concentrated manner, how Türkiye translates an initially humanitarian presence into controllable strategic effects. Unlike hedging, in Mogadishu Ankara combines complementary and cumulative instruments: (1) social legitimacy and political access through cooperation and services, (2) functional control of logistical hubs (port and airport) that anchor connectivity and revenue streams, and (3) a calibrated security component (TURKSOM) that seeks to strengthen state capabilities whilst securing routes and manoeuvring space in the Gulf of Aden–Red Sea. This architecture reduces dependence on intermediaries and increases Turkish operational autonomy, but it also exposes Ankara to risks (Al-Shabaab, rivalry with the UAE/Israel, centre–periphery tensions). Precisely because of this balance between capacity for impact and costs incurred, Somalia clearly illustrates the threshold at which soft power becomes decisive projection.

5 Conclusion

This article has examined how Türkiye is reconfiguring its foreign policy to maximise its strategic autonomy in a highly uncertain environment, and what distinctive patterns can be observed between scenarios of systemic hedging (Ukraine and Gaza) and scenarios of decisive projection (Syria, Libya and Somalia). The scenario-based comparison confirms the central thesis: Ankara maintains a dual rationale. When uncertainty is imposed by rivalry between great powers and the costs of alignment are potentially prohibitive, Türkiye favours hedging as an operational risk management mechanism. Conversely, when it perceives that it has directly manageable instruments at its disposal and that the effects are cumulative and controllable, it deploys decisive projection aimed at actively shaping the environment. A key corollary follows from this dynamic: Türkiye projects itself, and the more it projects itself, the more risk it assumes, because sustained influence in volatile scenarios increases exposure to retaliation, maintenance costs and friction with external and domestic actors.

In the cases of Ukraine and Gaza, Turkey's behaviour follows a hedging logic characterised by selective alignment, functional compartmentalisation and the preservation of options. In Ukraine, Türkiye has managed to translate its geographical and institutional position (NATO, control of straits, economic ties with Russia) into a pro-Kyiv but not anti-Moscow stance, maximising its value as a mediator and reducing the risk of economic retaliation or regional escalation. In Gaza, by contrast, the same logic proves more fragile: the ideological weight of state identity under the AKP, regional reputational pressure and the centrality of the US–Israel link raise the cost of ambiguity and erode the stability of compartmentalisation. In both cases, hedging does not imply neutrality, but rather an active search for room for manoeuvre. However, as regional polarisation intensifies, maintaining this stance requires increasing effort: Türkiye needs simultaneously to uphold its political

credentials before regional audiences and to preserve lines of communication and controlled dependence with Western partners.

In Syria, Libya and Somalia, Türkiye exhibits characteristics consistent with decisive projection as conceptualised in this study: sustained engagement, a combination of hard and soft power instruments, and the pursuit of specific strategic objectives. In Syria, the priority has been control of the security environment and the shaping of the post-war north, where military presence and proxy structures are coordinated to influence governance and limit the scope of the YPG/SDF. In Libya, Ankara has combined calibrated intervention, high-impact legal and political agreements, and economic and institutional levers to sustain influence and strengthen its maritime position. In Somalia, decisive projection relies on an architecture of social legitimacy, control of logistical and e al hubs, and the provision of security aimed at achieving controllable effects on connectivity and maritime security. It is in this latter case that fatigue is seen as a potential constraint on projection. Among the risks taken, it is worth emphasising that the sustainability of external projection depends not only on Ankara's political will, but also on its capacity to absorb costs in a context marked by macroeconomic tensions, energy vulnerability and the need to prioritise resources. Similarly, this same logic also helps to understand the relevance of the South Caucasus for Türkiye. The Azerbaijan-Armenia axis remains a significant arena due to its logistical and energy value, towards which Ankara is articulating its structural alliance with Azerbaijan alongside its cautious rapprochement with Armenia, whilst taking advantage of opportunities for connectivity, transit and energy projection. Thus, in the three scenarios analysed, strategic autonomy manifests itself proactively: it not only manages uncertainty but also seeks to produce results. Precisely for this reason, decisive projection tends to accumulate risks: dependence on fragile local partners, exposure to asymmetric attacks, budgetary costs and, above all, competition with third parties.

Here**,** a second cross-cutting finding takes centre stage: rivalry with the United Arab Emirates and Israel tends to grow and shape part of Turkey's dilemmas, forcing Ankara to make greater efforts to sustain its hedging strategy whilst assuming greater risks in scenarios where it deploys decisive projection. In Libya and Somalia, competition with the UAE translates into a struggle for logistical hubs, influence over rival authorities and the ability to set rules for regional access. This rivalry turns every Turkish 'gain' into an incentive for Emirati counterbalance, raising the cost of holding positions. In Gaza, the confrontation with Israel, fuelled by identity-based narratives and domestic calculations, reduces the scope for stable compartmentalisation, strains ties with Washington and limits Türkiye's effectiveness as a mediator. The result is a foreign policy which, to maintain autonomy, must simultaneously avoid rigid alignments and sustain material commitments in decisive scenarios, thereby increasing exposure and cost.

Thus, Turkish strategic autonomy should not be interpreted as neutrality, but as a strategy of optimisation under constraints: hedging to avoid being caught up in great power rivalries and decisive projection to consolidate positions in scenarios where Ankara identifies immediate interests.

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Article received: 2 February 2026
Article accepted: 20 April 2026