

The Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan): Turkey's Naval Strategy in the Surrounding Seas (2020-2023).

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ABSTRACT

This article is situated within Geopolitics and Strategic Studies, addressing a gap in Brazilian literature on the geopolitical concept of the Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan). This concept underpins Turkey's naval strategy and is rooted in its strategic rivalry with Greece, especially regarding sovereignty and energy resource exploration. The objective was to define the theoretical variable "Blue Homeland," reflecting Turkey's perspective on its surrounding seas: the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Black Seas. This definition aimed to understand naval strategy behaviour in these maritime spaces. A Case Study methodology, supported by historical and experimental methods, was used. The findings indicate that the Blue Homeland concept, developed in 2006, was adopted by the Turkish Navy's strategic framework by 2020. It is seen as a form of neo-Ottomanism, seeking to restore Turkey's historic role as a major power in the Middle East under President Erdoğan. The study concludes that the strategic logic of the Blue Homeland, amid Turkey-Greece rivalry, has driven the modernization and strengthening of Turkey's Naval Force. Ultimately, the Blue Homeland signifies complete strategic autonomy, which is crucial for the survival of the Turkish state. Keywords: Turkey. Blue Homeland. Naval Strategy. Mediterranean Sea. Aegean Sea

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INTRODUCTION

The geographical position of Turkey³, stretching from the Balkans to the Caucasus, and from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Middle East, along with control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, has bestowed upon this country significant geostrategic importance⁴ throughout History. This is evident not only as the successor to the Ottoman Turkish Empire^{5 6} but also in major geopolitical theories⁷ (Kaplan, 2013, p. 290). In

3 The Republic of Türkiye changed its official name from the Republic of Turkey on 26 May 2022 in a request submitted to the Secretary-General by the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Although there has been a name change from Turkey to Türkiye, in this article the authors will use the official long and short form of the remain name "Republic of Turkey" and "Turkey" respectively to provide a better understanding to the readers.

4 As Quataert asserts (2015, p. 42), "Geography played a significant role in the rise of the Ottomans."

5 According to Marshall (2022, pp. 190-191), "From the 9th century, Turkish nomadic tribes left the Eastern Steppe (Mongolia), crossed the Altai Mountains, the Western Steppe (Kazakhstan), sharply turned left through Central Asia, and reached the Caspian Sea in time to encounter the Byzantine Empire. By this point, they had already come into contact with Islam in the region around Persia and abandoned their pagan beliefs. They appeared on the eastern periphery of the Empire in the 11th century and began raiding into Anatolia [...]. One of the many emirates established in northwest Anatolia at the end of the 13th century was that of a man named Osman Ghazi - Osman, the Warrior - . He expanded his powers by invading Byzantine territories along the Black Sea coast and advancing towards central Anatolia. In honor of the founder, people began to call themselves Osmanli, 'followers of Osman,' which, in Western Europe, resulted in the Ottomans" (Cagaptay, 2020, p. 9).

6 "The Ottomans emerged at a crossroads of empires. They did not constitute an 'Eastern' power in conflict with the 'West,' but a political formation that blended strategies adapted from previous empires and their opponents in connecting the European, Asian, and African continents. In geographical terms, they had a significant advantage, or two. [...] The lands and waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, with their connections to Egypt, Central Asia, and India, offered a wide range of political experiences, social practices, and sources of wealth. With these tools, they created a vast terrestrial and maritime empire that was both territorial — covering a vast expanse of land — and nodal — based on ports, trade centers, and small and long-distance trade routes" (Burbank and Cooper, 2019, p. 173). Kaplan also follows a similar line of argument: "The fluidity of this arrangement between Europe and the Middle East would be facilitated by the location of the Ottoman capital, Constantinople, a safe harbor that ensured access to the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and North Africa, while simultaneously serving as the endpoint of caravan routes from Persia, the Caucasus, and beyond" (Kaplan, 2013, pp. 295).

7 The definition of geopolitics in this article will be: "the study of the constants and variables of space, accessible to humans who, in aiming to construct models of power dynamics, project geographic knowledge into the development and activity of political science" (Correia, 2018, p. 98). Meanwhile, geostrategy is defined as: "the study of the constants and variables of space, accessible to humans who, in aiming to construct models for the assessment and use, or threat of use, of forms of coercion, project geographic knowledge into strategic activity" (Correia, 2018, p. 104). Conceptually similar, they distinguish themselves by the more reflective nature of geopolitics, while geostrategy presents itself as more instrumental.

this regard, Turkey and its strategic surroundings emerge as a prominent subject for a case study in the application of Strategic Studies⁸.

Therefore, through the geopolitical concept of Blue Homeland (in Turkish, Mavi Vatan), developed by the Turkish Naval Force (Türk Deniz Kuvvetleri) a worldview⁹ (Weltanschauung) has been synthesized that guides Turkey towards the dominance of its three surrounding seas, namely the Black Sea¹⁰, the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, and the Aegean Sea (Denizeau, 2021, p.6) (THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2022, p. 321).

The article aims to describe and analyze the praxis of the Blue Homeland concept as a guide for the strategic naval actions of the Turkish Naval Force in the Mediterranean Sea and Aegean Sea. It will address the underlying geostrategic rivalry between Turkey and Greece, particularly concerning issues of sovereignty and the exploration of energy resources in this maritime space, spanning the years 2020 to 2023.

With that in mind, the first section will provide a brief overview of modern Turkish geopolitical history, starting from its foundation through the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Subsequently, the concept of the Blue Homeland will be presented, as articulated by its creator, the Turkish Admiral Cem Gürdeniz¹¹. The third section will delve into the application

8 Among the various definitions available in Strategic Studies (Baylis; Wirtz; Gray, 2019), this article will employ the following definition of Strategy: "the art of distributing and applying military means to achieve the ends of politics" (Hart, 1991, p. 321).

9 According to Stelgias (2021, p. 112), Turkish diplomacy officially adopted the doctrine of Blue Homeland.

10 Given the scope of this academic paper focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea and in light of the geostrategic rivalry between Turkey and Greece, the Black Sea and its strategic surroundings will not be subject to analysis.

11 Cem Gürdeniz (March 24, 1958) graduated from the Turkish Naval Academy in 1979. As a Deck Officer, he served on various destroyers and frigates. He was the Commander of the guided missile frigate TCG Gaziantep and the Third Destroyer Division. He completed his education at the Turkish Naval War College and the Armed Forces College. He earned a master's degree from the United States Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) and the Université Libre Brussels (ULB) in personnel management and international policy, respectively. Promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral in 2004, he served as the Head of the Department of Strategy and Agreements, and later as the Head of the Plans and Policies Division at the Turkish Naval Forces Headquarters. Still as an Admiral, he served as the Commander of the Amphibious Ships Group and the Mine Fleet. He retired in 2012. He is the founder and director of the Istanbul Koc University Maritime Forum. In addition to Turkish, he is fluent in English and French. Admiral Gürdeniz is the author of numerous publications in various languages, including 'Bluehomeland Writings.' He is a columnist for *Aydınlık Daily* and *Yacht Magazine*. Available at <https://uwidata.com/experts/cem-gurdeniz/>. Retrieved in: July

of the concept to the Turkish geostrategic reality. Finally, in the last section, the material enhancements to the Turkish naval power will be described, indicating signs of a new autonomous Turkish Naval Strategy in this maritime area, fundamentally grounded in this novel geopolitical worldview of the Blue Homeland.

GEOPOLITICS OF MODERN TURKEY: A BRIEF HISTORY

After an independence war (1919-1922) concluded with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), the conflict initiated during World War I (1914-1918) between the defunct and defeated Ottoman Empire¹² and the victorious European Allies came to an end. The Republic of Turkey was declared, limited to the Anatolian Peninsula (also known as Asia Minor), as the successor to the dissolved Ottoman Empire. Despite being on the losing side at the end of the global conflict, Turkey remained geopolitically victorious because:

Turkey, as the remnant of the great Ottoman Empire, would only retain a small portion southeast of Thrace in the Balkans, but it holds enormous geostrategic value as it allows for absolute control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits, ensuring the connection between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and securing the Sea of Marmara as a Turkish sea (Correia, 2018, p. 560).

The Republic, founded and led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk¹³, until his death in 1938, represented, for the first time in Turkish history, a process of building a nation-state in Western-style¹⁴. This posed a

10, 2023.

12 On the process of long decline to extinction of the Ottoman Empire, Cf. Palmer (2013).

13 For a biography on the founder of modern Turkey, see the book by Istanbul-born British academic Andrew Mango. Atatürk: The biography of the founder of modern Turkey. Abrams, 2002.

14 According to Kaplan (2013, p. 295): "Atatürk, 'The Father of the Turks,' the only undefeated Ottoman general, who forged a modern state in Anatolia after imperial losses in the Balkans and the Middle East, was a true revolutionary in the sense that he transformed the value system of his people. He sensed that the European powers had defeated the Ottoman

significant challenge to Turkish society due to the rejection of Ottoman cultural heritage, associated with the decline, as part of Atatürk's national project and contestation over memory, or the enforced national amnesia regarding the Turkish past (Yavuz, 2020, p.48-50) (Zürcher, 2017, pp. 133–177, *passim*).

Thus, Kemalism¹⁵, Atatürk's pro-Western secularist doctrine, shaped the geopolitical thinking of the young Republic in its four bordering geographic spaces: the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East. This was achieved through cooperation with the Balkan states of Bulgaria and Romania and the Mediterranean Greece in the west (Balkan Entente, 1934). Additionally, support was garnered from the Soviet Union in the Caucasus to the northeast (Turkish-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality, 1925); and with Iran to the east (Saadabad Pact, 1937).

Turkish geopolitics was embedded in the paradigm of non-intervention in the internal affairs of its neighboring countries under the motto "Peace at Home, Peace in the World" (Cagaptay, 2020, p.19). The idea of non-intervention provided a stable geostrategic belt capable of preserving and guiding Turkey during the subsequent conflict of World War II (1939-1945) and, in general, until the end of the first decade after the Cold War (Gürdeniz, 2020, p. 82); (Kaplan, 2013, p.295).

During the Cold War era, when the world was ideologically divided into areas of influence between the Western bloc led by the United States and the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union, Turkey chose to align with the Western bloc in the face of its main international security threat, the USSR. Playing the role of a buffer state and actively serving as a tool in the U.S. strategy of containment against the Soviets (Gaddis, 2006, p. 28), Turkey directly benefited from its geopolitical significance. It joined the Western collective security military alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty

Empire not due to larger armies but because of their greater civilization, which, in turn, had spawned military superiority. Turkey, from then on, would be Western, he decided, orienting itself culturally and politically towards Europe. [...] He moved the capital from Istanbul [Constantinople] in European Turkey to Ankara in the heart of Anatolia, due to the former's association with the old regime. He made no effort to reclaim the Ottoman provinces lost in the Balkans or the Middle East; instead, he adopted the strategy of building a Turkish ethno-state from the core of Anatolia, providing a solid foundation for a firm orientation towards Europe and the West."

15 There were six ideological principles: republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, statism, and revolutionism (or reformism). These six principles were incorporated into the Turkish constitution in 1937 and are sometimes described as the "Turkish [State] religion" (Zürcher, 2017, p. 183).

Organization (NATO), three years after its founding in 1952, along with its geostrategic rival, Greece¹⁶.

Regarding the role of its Armed Forces during the Cold War and within NATO, “the Turkish Navy was tasked with keeping the Soviets ‘bottled up’ in the Black Sea, while the Army contained their ground forces on the edge of the Soviet bloc” (Marshall, 2022, p.198).

At the end of the Cold War (1989-1991) and the advent of undisputed U.S. hegemony, Turkey sought to reposition itself geostrategically and geopolitically in accordance with the newly established world order (Kissinger, 2015, p.216). A new indigenous Turkish geopolitical approach was necessary, especially after the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan¹⁷ as the Prime Minister in 2003 and subsequently as the President of the Republic from 2014, because:

For years, Turkey harbored the hope of joining the European Union [...] However, in the first decade of the 21st century, it became clear that Turkey might never become an effective member of the European Union for a blunt and recent reason related to geographic and cultural determinism: despite being a democracy and a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the country is also Muslim, which makes it unwanted. The rejection was a shock to the Turkish political body, but, above all, it merged with other trends already underway in society, to make a fundamental correction in Turkish history and geography [...] (Kaplan, 2013, pp. 295-296).

16 The strategic rivalry can be traced historically back to the 19th century, reaching as far as the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire from 1821 to 1830. Greece's independence from the Ottoman Empire was established by the Treaty of London in 1830 (Quataert, 2015, p. 81). For a description of the Greek Rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, Cf. Palmer (2013, pp. 82-100, *passim*).

Parte superior do formulário

17 Recalling the memory of the powerful Ottoman Empire in Turkey, he wants to revive Turkey's greatness, and to this end, he is not afraid to shed the traditional Turkish policy of bringing the country into the Western- led security system for safety. Under Erdoğan, Turkey no longer defines its national interest in tandem with the Western powers. Turkish national interest in Erdoğan's thinking reflects a high degree of strategic autonomy.”(Cagaptay, 2020, p. 18)

Thus, after the 2010s, and particularly from 2016 (Cagaptay, 2020, p.199), to respond to the new challenges of this new world order, Turkey has been seeking a new Grand Strategy^{18 19} focused on its national interests in the geographical area under analysis. For the scope of this article, this is especially related to energy and economic issues related to the exploration of oil and gas in the Eastern Mediterranean (Özertem, 2016) (Cagaptay, 2020, p.210), or even for the establishment of a regional “new order” (Moudouros, 2021, p. 466) and its strategic autonomy.

Therefore, due to an increasingly assertive regional foreign policy and military strategy, aiming for supremacy in the Mediterranean, the influence of a nationalist doctrine called “Turkish Geopolitics” (Türk Jeopolitiği) is perceived (Stelgias, 2020, p.2).

This geopolitical approach²⁰ has been promoted by members of the government, diplomats, and the Turkish Armed Forces, using an appeal to the Ottoman imperial past in its rhetorical construction by these actors. It is an explicit example of the remilitarization of Turkish foreign policy, where the military participates in decision-making mechanisms in the country’s foreign relations (Stelgias, 2021, pp. 112-113, *passim*).

18 The approach to the concept of Grand Strategy for this article will be as follows: “Grand Strategy involves some willingness and ability to think about the future in terms of the goals of a political entity [...]. Above all, Grand Strategy demands an intertwining of political, social, and economic realities with military power, as well as the recognition that politics must, in nearly all cases, drive military necessity” (Murray, 2011, p. 5, *emphasis added*).

19 The most prominent academic formulator of a Grand Strategy for Turkey was Professor Dr. Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as the Director of the Department of International Relations at Beykent University in Istanbul from 1995 to 2004. Davutoğlu later became the Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014) and the Prime Minister of Turkey (2014-2016). His book ‘Strategic Depth’ (Stratejik Derinlik) (2001) “is seen as the architectural framework on which the foreign policy of the ‘New Turkey’ stands” (Marshall, 2022, p. 201). This policy has a neo-Ottoman bias, believing in Turkey’s destiny to emerge as a global power, leveraging Turkey’s privileged geographical position between Europe, Africa, and Asia, and focusing its actions primarily on strategic cooperation. Its guiding principles include having “zero problems” with neighboring countries, balancing security and freedom, and pursuing a regional and multidimensional foreign policy through proactive diplomacy (Davutoğlu, 2013). In general, there are some elements of continuity of Davutoğlu policy’s in Turkey’s current foreign policy, although there is currently [2023] a greater emphasis on *realpolitik*, pragmatism, and strategic rivalry, in contrast to the soft-power discourse, practices, and diplomatic style previously adopted (Davutoğlu, 2010).

Regarding *realpolitik*, Kissinger (2012, p. 107) captures its essence: “[...] the statesman’s obligation to assess ideas as forces in relation to other forces relevant to decision-making; and various elements were valued by the extent to which they could serve national interests, not by preconceived ideologies.”

20 For a synthesis of current Turkish Geopolitics, Cf. Stelgias (2020)

Admiral Cem Gürdeniz stands out as one of the main formulators of Turkish Geopolitics, particularly in its Oceanopolitics aspect^{21 22}. It is in this context that the geopolitical doctrine of the Blue Homeland is created.

CONCEPT OF THE BLUE HOMELAND: A DEFINITION

The use of the expression “Blue Homeland,” in Turkish, Mavi Vatan, has been increasingly used, disseminated, and popularized in Turkish political life and strategic circles to refer to the area of 462 thousand square kilometers where Turkey’s maritime interests are located. This includes those related to jurisdictional waters (territorial sea, exclusive economic zone, and continental shelf) and living and non-living resources in the oceanopolitical space of the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Aegean Sea.

According to Mianji (2020), the geopolitical doctrine of the Blue Homeland serves three purposes: (1) delineating Turkey’s jurisdictional waters, (2) establishing Turkey’s strategy in these maritime spaces, and (3) developing a military-industrial complex to achieve this strategy, countering the hostile encirclement of Turkey by neighboring countries, notably Greece, based on the neo-Ottoman²³ perception that views the Eastern Mediterranean as a locus of imperial presence, a “Turkish lake.”

Turkey’s new strategic posture results from the reorganization of Turkish regional policy, the effects of international politics, and the economic environment, but primarily from the ideological architecture believing in regional hostility and isolation by surrounding countries, threatening the survival of the Turkish state. The manifestation of the

21 Oceanopolitics can be defined as geopolitics focused on the dominion of large bodies of water and oceans (De Castro, 1983, p. 126).

22 There is a need for a cultural or institutional maritime awareness in society for an oceanopolitical doctrine to develop. Regarding the lack of it, referred to as “maritime blindness,” the underestimation of the importance of maritime domain, or even the recognition of its importance only in theory, a challenge faced by naval formulators and strategists of countries, Cf. Till (2022, p. 75).

23 Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman worldview sees the roots of Turkish national identity not in the relatively recent Republic, established a century ago, but in the dynasties of nomadic Turks, the Ottoman Turcomans from the 11th century and onwards. “As a result of the modern expansion of education, urbanization, and competitive mass media, [Erdoğan] this Anatolian majority was successfully able to reconstruct a counter- narrative of Ottoman- Islamic-Turkish identity and values in opposition to those which the Kemalist state had sought to enshrine.” (Yavuz, 2020, p.145). For a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of Erdoğan’s neo-Ottomanism, Cf. Yavuz (2020, pp. 144 – 178, *passim*).

ideological construction of a hostile region is ruthlessly reflected in the geopolitical doctrine of the Blue Homeland (Moudouros, 2021, p.470).

According to the concept's²⁴ author, Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, who first used it at a Symposium on the Black Sea and Naval Security on June 14, 2006, the 21st century will be the "Century of Asia" and the "Century of Oceans," with the Mediterranean Sea being the gateway of the "Century of Asia and the Sea" for Turkey (Gürdeniz, 2020, p.85).

The author continues, in his definition of the Blue Homeland (Figure 1 below):

The surface of this homeland, the mass of water, the bottom and the land mass beneath belong to Republic of Turkey. The size of blue homeland is equal to half of land of Turkey. Every state that has got to coast to the sea has a blue homeland. The most fundamental action of geopolitical reflexes is reflecting tendency to the sea and ownership of the blue homeland" (Gürdeniz, 2020, p.85).



Figure 1 – Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan)
(DENIZEAU, 2021)

24 Geoffrey Till asserts about the development of maritime power, which includes its military component, naval power: "not only does developing maritime power take time; it demands foresight" (Till, 2022, p.78).

This trend of transitioning from the Turkish continental territory to the sea, embedded in the logic of the geopolitical construction of the concept, is well elucidated by Nikos Moudouros, based on the etymological origin of the words “Blue Homeland” as:

“[...] “The Blue Homeland” also focused on the identification of the importance of the connection between land and sea. At this point it would be important to decode the significance of the words chosen to name the doctrine. “Blue” explicitly refers to the sea. The use of the word “homeland” (vatan), however, has distinct ideological orientations. Vatan is a word of Arabic origin meaning the birthplace of a person. However, the politicisation of the concept in contemporary history has transformed the homeland into the description of the specific national region, national geography and national identity. It is, therefore, a concept charged with the mission of transforming “imaginary borders” into contemporary national and political borders (Özkan, 2012, pp. 1-3). Therefore, the “Blue Homeland” [...] also constituted an attempt to promote the procedure of “territorialisation” of the sea and advocate the Eastern Mediterranean as an integral part of the territory and state sovereignty of Turkey. Through this doctrine, Ankara perceives the security, defence and prosperity of the country as elements intertwined with the seas that surround it and not only the land” (Moudouros, 2021, p.468).

In this way, the geopolitical concept of the Blue Homeland, as a vision for the future, by promoting the sea near Turkey as an extension of the country’s sovereignty, and therefore intimately related to the survival of the state, has been able to sensitize, catalyze, mobilize, and involve Turkish society in the geostrategic context of the Eastern Mediterranean

and the Aegean Sea.

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND THE AEGEAN SEA: THE GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT

The underlying issue in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea for the Turkish Naval Strategy is the escalation of the longstanding geostrategic rivalry between Turkey and Greece, particularly since 2020, focusing on (1) the exploration of energy resources in the sea, namely hydrocarbon reserves²⁵ (Özertem, 2016) near the islands of Crete and Rhodes, and (2) sovereignty in this maritime space. These concerns coincide and relate to the emergence of Turkish Geopolitics and its Oceanopolitical aspect, the Blue Homeland doctrine.

Regarding energy exploration, the issue extends to involve Cyprus (Cagaptay, 2020, p.210-213, *passim*) as a point of contention between Turkey and Greece.

Dominated by the Ottoman Empire since 1571 and by Britain since 1878, Cyprus gained its independence in 1960, with Britain, Turkey, and Greece as guarantor states of its sovereignty. The island holds significant geostrategic importance due to its geographic location in the Eastern Mediterranean, near the Middle East and the Suez Canal, with crucial maritime communication lines. After gaining independence, Cyprus was engulfed in a civil war between the Greek Cypriot majority and the Turkish Cypriot minority, whose ethnic divisions were deepened by Britain's imperial policy of *divide et impera*.

The conflict was exacerbated by Cold War dynamics, culminating in the attempted union between Greece and Cyprus²⁶ in 1974, with tacit U.S. support. This move followed the Cypriot government's flirtation

25 Reports on energy, published since 2010, estimate reserves in the Levantine Basin in the Eastern Mediterranean at 122 trillion cubic meters of natural gas and 1.7 trillion barrels of oil. According to Turkish estimates, the potential confirmation of these reserves could meet Turkey's energy demand for the next 500 years or even supply the entire Europe for the next 30 years (Moudouros, 2021, p. 464).

26 This fact, in Turkish geopolitical thinking, "reinforces Turkey's fear of a resurgence of the 'Megali Idea' — the Great Idea — a form of Greek irredentism that emerged in the 19th century, leading Athens to claim Ottoman territories with a Hellenic substrate" (Denizeau, 2021, p. 11). The geopolitical concept of the Megali Idea is associated with Enosis, the union of all Greeks within the borders of a single state (from the Greek word Enosis, meaning union), under the slogan 'Once again, for years and years, it will be ours again.' Its more radical proponents envisioned a resurgence of the Byzantine Empire in the Black Sea and Central Anatolia, with Constantinople (now Istanbul) as its capital, at the expense of the then-declining Ottoman Empire and later, Turkey (Marshall, 2022, p. 168).

with the USSR, guided by the Brezhnev Doctrine, aiming for influence in the Middle East and a warm-water port for the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean.

In this context, a Turkish invasion took place in Cypriot territory in 1974, and in 1983, the northern part with the Turkish Cypriot minority declared itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by itself and Turkey (Cagaptay, 2020, p. 212); (Marshall, 2022, p.179).

Returning to the energy issue, Turkey questions whether Cyprus has the right to explore natural gas reserves around its waters, especially near the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, refusing to recognize exploration licenses granted by Cyprus to international energy companies²⁷ (Cagaptay, 2020, p. 214). As Marshall (2022, p. 180) explains:

Turkey, anxious that its waters have not yet yielded energy, explores in Cypriot and Greek territory and signed an agreement with Libya to conduct drilling [...]. In the summer of 2019, Turkish drillships appeared off the northern coast [of Cyprus], escorted by a [Turkish] warship. Ankara said they were in the sovereign waters of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and 'within Turkey's continental shelf.' [...] In June 2020, Turkey announced its intention to start drilling off islands, including Rhodes and Crete. The Turkish ambassador in Athens was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and informed that Greece was 'ready to respond' to what it considered a provocation if the drilling went ahead. Turkey's position is based on a surprising agreement it signed with Libya at the end of 2019. The agreement 'created' an exclusive economic zone that extends through the Mediterranean from the southwest coast of Turkey to the northern tip of Libya, despite

27 Among the companies mentioned are: the Italian ENI, the South Korean Kogas, the French Total, the American Exxon Mobil and American Noble Energy, the Qatari Qatar Petroleum, the Israeli Delek Group, and the Anglo-Dutch Royal Dutch Shell (Cyprus Profile, 2023).

passing through part of the Greek zone.

Regarding sovereignty, the dispute revolves around control over the islands in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. Apart from the sovereignty dispute over some of the islands, Turkey and Greece also have fundamental disagreements regarding the demarcation of their maritime borders.

This is primarily because Turkey has not acceded to, and therefore not ratified, the “Law of the Sea,” i.e. the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Montego Bay Convention, 1982). This decision stemmed from the Turkish government’s stance that a fair demarcation of maritime borders²⁸ in the Mediterranean requires giving more weight to the contiguous coastline than to scattered Greek islands (Lindenstrauss and Daniel, 2020). Turkey contends that the boundaries set by the Convention for maritime spaces under jurisdiction do not make sense in a confined space full of islands. Under such conditions, Turkish authorities argue that a country like Greece would have an enormous maritime area, partly due to its sovereignty over the islands in the Mediterranean, especially near the Turkish coast (Denizeau, 2021, p. 8).

Additionally, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the geostrategic impact of the Blue Homeland doctrine, both in its current and potential impact, increasing the overall depth of the of analysis, it is important to view Turkey’s actions through the lens of a broader scrutiny. The movements employed by Turkey indicate that the Blue Homeland doctrine can be perceived as a key element of the Turkish Grand Strategy. This doctrine extends beyond mere maritime policies and reflects a

28 According to Denizeau (2021, p.10), the territory claimed by the Turkish naval doctrine of the Blue Homeland has been clearly defined. The claimed Blue Homeland [Mavi Vatan] is “the name of the zone of interests [Turkish] and jurisdiction over the fresh and the sea waters between the 25th and 45th eastern meridians and the 33 th and 43 th northern parallels.” In the Black Sea, this zone corresponds to the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) already owned by Turkey, following the principles of equidistance with other riparian states. By contrast, it encroaches widely on the EEZs claimed by Cyprus and Greece. Mavi Vatan would thus extend to the eastern half of the Aegean Sea, without annexing the Greek islands there, but leaving them only with territorial waters defined by their current width (of 6 nautical miles). In the Mediterranean, Mavi Vatan would border the Libyan and Egyptian EEZs, with the demarcation taking place according to the principle of equidistance between coasts. Finally, part of the waters between Cyprus, Syria, and Lebanon is also claimed by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Turkey and its northern Cypriot ally would thus have naval domain extending over 462,000 km². According to the Blue Homeland doctrine, these claims should serve as the basis for any potential negotiation with other East Mediterranean States, in particular with Cyprus and Greece”.

broader ambition for regional influence.

The Blue Homeland doctrine appears to support Turkey's quest of a new regional order under its leadership, not only in its surrounding seas but also throughout the Levant, which encompasses the region along the eastern Mediterranean shores. Within the framework of Grand Strategy, the Blue Homeland doctrine whilst Grand Strategy provide "a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world and how it should go about doing so" (Brands, 2014, p. 3). This geostrategic approach highlights Turkey's intent to assert itself as a dominant regional power.

The implications of Turkey's Strategy are significant, particularly in the context of competition with other countries for primacy in the region. In the present geopolitical landscape, Turkey's aspirations could potentially conflict with those of regional powers such as Iran, Israel, and Egypt, as well as with extra-regional actors like Italy, France, and possibly Russia. The outcomes of these strategic movements will shape the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

Hence, the Blue Homeland doctrine has provided the theoretical framework to justify Turkey's geopolitical claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, being a significant concept that has merged the worldview of Turkish society²⁹ for a historically neglected space in Turkish geopolitics—the seas³⁰. But what impact does this concept have on the Turkish Naval Strategy? This is the question the next section will address.

TURKEY: NAVAL STRATEGY AND NAVAL POWER

From the perspective of Strategic Studies, the doctrine of the Blue Homeland, in isolation, is an instrument of rhetoric. It only becomes an instrument of strategic thinking for the defense of Turkey's maritime territory and the country's economic interests in the region if it incorporates military power into its political logic. In doing so, it moves beyond the

29 Denizeau (2021, p. 25) asserts that there is a consensus in Turkish society around the Blue Homeland doctrine.

30 " Even the Turkish Naval Institute's (Milli Savunma Üniversitesi Deniz Harp Enstitüsü, succeeding the former naval academy) official periodical journal is named Mavi Vatan – the Blue Homeland. In many issues of the journal, Turkey's young naval officers extensively write about issues like the importance of Libya for the Mediterranean maritime delineation, energy disputes and the role of gunboat diplomacy, and the Cyprus dispute" (Kasapoglu, 2020, p. 3).

discursive and reflective realm of Geopolitics to enter the strategic logic of employing military force — naval units — to achieve its political ends, transforming into a geostrategy (Luttwak, 2001).

It is evident that this process of incorporating strategic logic into the discourse has been occurring in recent years within the Turkish state concerning the geopolitical concept, through the “efforts to develop [material] capabilities [which] remain at the core of the Blue Homeland doctrine” (Kasapoglu, 2020, p. 4).

Clearly, in the context of a maritime space, strategic logic presupposes and requires a modern, active, and combat-trained Turkish Naval Force³¹, with strategic autonomy, provided by indigenous programs for the development of weapon systems³², the construction of naval units by the Turkish naval industry³³, and the “pursuit of autonomy in its defense industrial base” (THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2022, p.155). All these efforts aim at implementing a Naval Strategy for Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, as “the employment of force now [in the form of waging modern war³⁴] required careful preparation and theoretical guidance” (Freedman, 2013, p.xii emphasis added).

In this sense, it has been observed since 2020 that Erdoğan has been skillful in instrumentalizing both the theoretical orientation, the geopolitical concept of the Blue Homeland, and careful preparation of means, the strengthening and renewal of the Naval Power in Turkey³⁵. This

31 “ The Turkish Navy is a highly-disciplined and well-trained branch with high combat-readiness capabilities ” (Kasapoglu, 2020, p.2).

32 “As the anti-ship cruise missile *Atmaca* (Kasapoglu, 2020, p.5), Turkish for Hawk, produced by the Turkish defense company *Roketsan*.”

33 This crucial relationship between the Navies and the naval industry is highlighted by Till (2022, p. 36): “Developing a productive and mutually supporting relationship between the Navies and what is now be called the maritime industrial base and the overall national effort was [is] especially important because only that would provide the means for the sustainment and the maintenance of the Fleet.”

34 The modern form of warfare, in terms of weapons and methods, from the word in English “warfare,” is “developed in terms of a number of broad themes that were increasingly characteristic of society as a whole, such as the growth in power of the State through processes of centralization, bureaucratization, and, to some extent, democratization. It was influenced by the rise of powerful ideologies, such as nationalism. Other important developments were rapid technological progress and industrialization driven by the scientific method, an associated swift rise in national populations, and a growing insistence that the citizen owed a duty to defend the State” (Sheehan, 2019, p.37).

35 During the launching ceremony of the corvette F-513 TCG *Burgazad* in August 2016, President Erdoğan stated: “ Turkey is advancing with determination on the path to becoming a self-sufficient country in the defense industry. Just 1.5 months ago, we took the first step of a

occurs in the context of promoting the Turkish defense industry³⁶ (THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2022, p.155), with the purpose of using, or threatening to use, naval force to defend its national interests when necessary, in support of its foreign policy³⁷, in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea against its geostrategic and geopolitical rivals³⁸.

Thus, the use of the Blue Homeland concept by the Turkish President “seems to obey two sets of immediate considerations: internally, his approach to the military and nationalist movements, and externally, the regional context of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean” (Denizeau, 2021, p. 19).

The outcome of this development has allowed the Turkish Naval Force to gain strength, achieving a significant structural transformation in less than a decade. Thus, the Turkish Fleet has moved from a constrained position, primarily focused on coastal deterrence, to a Navy with the capability of power projection in blue waters (Kasapoglu, 2020, p.2).

project of historic importance for the Turkish Naval Forces on April 30, making the first weld of our multi-purpose Amphibious Assault Ship ‘Anadolu’. Our country will upgrade to a completely different league once the building of this ship is completed, which is to be the first ship that the vertical takeoff and landing aircrafts can also use. [...] We should upgrade to a higher level in the defense industry and become a country that leads, produces and pioneers rather than follows and consumes. As a country that aims to eliminate external dependence in the defense industry by 2023, we should quicken our steps. I see the “Burgazada” corvette, which we are launching today 3 months ahead of the planned date, and the “Kinaliada” corvette, the welding of which we are making now, as a symbol of our determination on the issue” (Defense Turkey, 2016).

36 “A convincing case certainly be made that the ‘maritmeness’ of a country’s culture can certainly be encouraged directly by government support for support for maritime industries and indirectly by such things as private and public investment in the Arts, the control of public education and so forth.” (Till, 2022, p.28).

37 The geography of Turkey, covered by mountains, is indeed a defensive advantage and secure against land attacks. However, it makes it “an island nation” (Kaplan, 2013, p.291), with a perpetual geopolitical sense of encirclement. Its maritime border, extending across the three seas (Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Aegean Sea), is, on the one hand, its weak border. On the other hand, it is an opportunity for its energy resource needs, economic expansion, and a foreign policy that aims to establish Turkey “as a the central state in its region” (Moudouros, 2021, p.464) and asserts that its defense is not confined to the geography of Anatolia.

38 “Compared to its geopolitical competitors [Greece] in the Mediterranean, the Turkish Naval Force benefits from a clear numerical superiority” (Kasapoglu, 2020, p.2) (THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2022, p. 113); (idem, p. 155). Furthermore, “the president has authority over defence procurement and control over Turkey’s top defence companies. Turkey has signed defence-cooperation agreements with a focus on exports and technology transfer, in an effort to boost its national defence industry and achieve defence-industrial autonomy” (THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2022, p.155).

To illustrate, in this section, we will highlight the key projects that represent material enhancements in the context of strengthening the Turkish Naval Power³⁹, undertaken by Erdoğan.

1) MILGEM PROGRAM

The first Turkish national naval project to be introduced is the MILGEM Program, derived from the abbreviation of the Turkish term “Mili Gemi,” translating to “national ship.”

Within the MILGEM program, four modern anti-submarine corvettes of the ADA⁴⁰ class (TCG Burgazada, TCG Büyükada, TCG Heybeliada, and TCG Kınalıada) were constructed and commissioned between 2011 and 2019. These, along with the existing sixteen frigates (of the Yavuz, Gabya, and Barbaros⁴¹ classes), form the core of the Turkish surface combat power

39 For an analysis of the future of the Turkish Naval Force, in addition to the units highlighted in this article, refer to Ozberk (2021). Regarding the increasing use of unmanned aerial vehicles [drones] by the Turkish Naval Force, see Kasapoglu (2020).

40 “Ada,” in Turkish, refers to the Prince Islands, located southeast of Istanbul in the Sea of Marmara.

41 “The strategist, as Freedman (2013, p. 238) points out, ‘is a student of the present who must be aware of the past.’ Therefore, knowledge of history is crucial for the construction of strategy. With the second source of his worldview being history, and the first being Islam, understood not as a religion but as an ‘armed set of ideas’ to be used against opponents especially the pro-Kemalists (Yavuz, 2020, pp.146-147), Erdoğan has been astute in relating present-day Turkey to its Ottoman past, as will be seen below: “The attempt to build a collective memory justifying Turkey’s presence in the Eastern Mediterranean was extended to the advocacy of 27 September, the day of the Ottoman naval victory at Preveza, as a new national day. On 27 September 1538, the Ottoman fleet, under the leadership of Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa, succeeded in defeating the fleet of the Christian alliance (assembled by Pope Paul III) under the orders of Andrea Doria, and in this way managed to extend the dominance of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean. According to Islamist political thought in Turkey, the naval battle of Preveza is considered as the turning point of the Ottoman Empire’s successful transformation from a “land state” to an “empire of the seas”. Indeed, the expansion of Ottoman sovereignty and control in the Mediterranean is advocated by the current government as the proof of the transformation of the Mediterranean into a ‘Turkish lake’. According to the prevailing ideological concept, the hostile encirclement of Turkey on energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean is a prospect that should be addressed, not only for the country’s national security, but also for the protection of its “natural rights” in a ‘Turkish sea.’ It is no coincidence that both the two Turkish drilling vessels (Yavuz and Fatih) and the two seismic research vessels (Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa and Oruç Reis) used in the Eastern Mediterranean bear the names of Ottoman sultans and admirals, an outright reference to this neo-Ottoman context. The patrols of the Turkish Navy in the region were code-named ‘Mediterranean Shield’, explicitly referring to the defence of Turkish sovereignty against external challenges and threats” (Moudouros, 2021, pp.467-468).

2) I-class Frigates

Starting with the fifth ship, the I-class frigates (Istanbul class) began construction as a variation of the ADA class corvettes, boasting about 50% increased fuel capacity and operational autonomy compared to this class. The I-class frigates will feature weapon systems capable of detecting, determining the position, classifying, identifying, and destroying the target, as well as naval fire support. They are designed to carry out surveillance and maritime patrol operations, inspection and surveillance of exclusive economic zones, and prevent potential threats (Ozberk, 2021).

3) TCG-class Frigates

The frigate TCG Istanbul (F-515), the first ship of its class, was constructed at the Istanbul Naval Shipyard of the Turkish Naval Force and began sea trials on June 20, 2023. It was incorporated into the Turkish Fleet on January 19, 2024. Following this unit, three other ships of the class will be constructed: TCG Izmir (F-516), to be built at the Anadolu Shipyard (ADIK), TCG İçel (F-517) at the Sedef Shipyard, and TCG Izmit (F-518) at the Sefine Shipyard. The forecast for the naval units' incorporation is 36 months (2027), replacing the Yavuz class, while the Barbaros class frigates will undergo a mid-life modernization and be equipped with modern Turkish-made sensors (Ozberk, 2021).

4) Multipurpose Amphibious Assault Ship Anadolu

The most significant example of the strengthening of the Turkish Naval Power is the Multipurpose Amphibious Assault Ship Anadolu, built at the Turkish shipyard Sedef, which was incorporated into the Turkish Naval Force in April 2023. The unit is capable of transporting 12 manned or unmanned combat aircraft, 21 different types of helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles, depending on the operation, as well as 13 tanks, 27 amphibious assault vehicles, 6 armored vehicles, 33 various light and heavy vehicles, and 15 trailers on its deck. Additionally, it can embark an amphibious force at the battalion level, symbolizing Turkey's determination to become increasingly present and project its power in the Blue Homeland and the oceans (Defence Turkey, 2023). This represents a

significant operational leap⁴² in the combat capability of the Turkish Naval Force.

Regarding power projection on land, amphibious capability stands out for its importance in the Turkish geostrategic context concerning Greece and Cyprus. As highlighted by Kasapoglu (2020, p.5):

Turkey's potent amphibious units also deserve attention. Turkish military planners have started to establish amphibious capacity in the 1960s at the battalion-level amidst the escalating situation on the island of Cyprus. Before the 1974 military intervention, Ankara had generated an amphibious infantry regiment that took part in the campaign. Currently, the Turkish Navy has a brigade-level amphibious unit along with an elite marine commando (SAT & SAS) force.

Another noteworthy naval unit is the TCG *Ufuk* (A-591), commissioned in 2019 and built at the Istanbul Naval Shipyard. This ship is the "eyes and ears" of Turkey at sea (Kasapoglu, 2020, p.5), with its primary mission being signal and electronic intelligence gathering. Its design is based on the ADA-class Corvettes, and it can operate continuously for 45 days in severe sea and weather conditions (Osberk, 2021).

5) Diesel-electric propulsion submarines (SSK)

The Turkish Naval Force also possesses a fleet of 12 diesel-electric propulsion submarines (SSK), consisting of four units of the *Atilay* class (Type 209/1200), four of the *Preveze* class (Type 209/1400), and four of the *Gür* class (Type 209/1400) (THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2022, p.156).

6) Reis-class submarine (Type 214TN)

Another notable project by the Turkish state is the Reis-class submarine (Type 214TN), to be built at the Gölcük Shipyard, featuring air-independent propulsion (AIP). This project is also related to the Turkish national project for developing a sea-launched cruise missile, *Gezgin*, which can be equipped on these new submarines (Kasapoglu, 2020, p.5),

42 For a detailed description of the capabilities of the Anadolu, Cf. Defense Turkey (2023).

as well as the domestically produced Turkish torpedoes, Akya, and the anti-ship missile, Atmaca (Osberk, 2022).

The first submarine of the class, TCG Pirireis, is undergoing sea trials and will be incorporated into the Turkish Naval Force on August 24, 2024, while the second, TCG Hizirreis, was launched on May 25, 2023. From 2023 onwards, the plan is to commission one submarine each year, totaling 6 Reis-class submarines to be delivered to the Turkish Naval Force by 2028. This project stems from a contract signed in July 2009 between the Turkish Defense Industry (Savunma Sanayii Başkanlığı, SSB) and Thyssen Krupp Marine Systems. The new Reis-class submarines will bring significant benefits not only to the Turkish Navy at the strategic and tactical levels but also to the entire defense industry of Turkey. The experience gained from the Reis-class project will serve as a reference for future Turkish submarines under the Milli Denizaltı (MILDEN) project, the “National Submarine,” which is currently in the design phase and is expected to begin construction in the 2030s (Osberk, 2022).

CONCLUSION

That being said, as we can verify, the geopolitical concept of the Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan), characterized by its nationalist, neo-Ottoman nature, and imperial inspirations, which can be summarized as the vision in which Turkey will dominate its three surrounding seas, the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Aegean Sea. It has been a powerful tool deftly used by the Erdogan government to engage, foster, incite, and attract Turkish society to the geostrategic context of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea.

It was observed, therefore, that the impact of the Blue Homeland concept on the enhancement of Turkey’s Naval Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea has been substantial. In a short historical period since its formulation and presentation in 2006, the originally geopolitical concept of the Blue Homeland has evolved into a geostrategic concept, starting from 2020. This is perceived through the incorporation of the strategic logic of rivalry between Turkey and Greece and its extrapolation to the Cyprus issue, especially in matters of sovereignty and the exploration of energy resources in those maritime spaces, as commented throughout the text.

This transformation was closely linked to indigenous

modernization, development, and strengthening programs of the Turkish Naval Force, aimed at acquiring the necessary means for the defense and pursuit of Turkish national interests, particularly at sea, through full strategic autonomy, which, in ultima ratio, ensures the survival of the Turkish nation-state.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has relentlessly pursued the restoration of Turkey to its historical role as a major power in the Middle East, aiming to emerge as a global power. Leveraging the geographically privileged position of his country between Europe, Africa, and Asia, Erdogan instrumentalizes the past deeply while creating a powerful Turkey in the present. As he envisions the strategic future of his homeland, he sees it increasingly in shades of blue.

A Pátria Azul (Mavi Vatan): Estratégia Naval da Turquia nos Mares Circundantes (2020-2023).

RESUMO

Este artigo está situado dentro de Geopolítica e Estudos Estratégicos, abordando uma lacuna na literatura brasileira sobre o conceito geopolítico da Pátria Azul (Mavi Vatan). Este conceito sustenta a estratégia naval da Turquia e está enraizado em sua rivalidade estratégica com a Grécia, especialmente em relação à soberania e exploração de recursos energéticos. O objetivo era definir a variável teórica “Pátria Azul”, refletindo a perspectiva da Turquia sobre seus mares circundantes, o Mediterrâneo, o Egeu e o Mar Negro. Esta definição visava entender o comportamento da estratégia naval nesses espaços marítimos. Foi utilizada uma metodologia de Estudo de Caso, apoiada por métodos históricos e experimentais. Os resultados indicam que o conceito de Pátria Azul, desenvolvido em 2006, foi adotado pela estrutura estratégica da Marinha Turca até 2020. É visto como uma forma de neo-otomanismo, buscando restaurar o papel histórico da Turquia como uma grande potência no Oriente Médio sob o presidente Erdoğan. O estudo conclui que a lógica estratégica da Pátria Azul, em meio à rivalidade Turquia-Grécia, foi impulsionada pela modernização e fortalecimento da Força Naval da Turquia. Em última análise, a Pátria Azul significa que a autonomia estratégica é crucial para a sobrevivência do estado turco. Palavras-chave: Turquia. Pátria Azul. Estratégia Naval. Mar Mediterrâneo. Mar Egeu.

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