



# **PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE VS. NATION ALLIANCE WHO OFFERS WHAT IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY?**

MURAT YEŞİLTAŞ, BİLGEHAN ÖZTÜRK

SETA | REPORT

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IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY?**

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Murat Yeşiltaş, Bilgehan Öztürk



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مركز الدراسات السياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية



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# ABSTRACT

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This analysis discusses the significance of the 2023 Turkish election in terms of its impact on Turkish foreign policy. The election is viewed as a turning point due to the significant differences between the foreign policy paradigms of the two main electoral alliances, the People's Alliance (PA) and the Nation Alliance (NA). The PA's foreign policy paradigm has been largely recognizable, with an assertive stance developed after encountering a nationwide terrorism wave and regional security competition. This stance has consolidated the power of the PA politically and sociologically. On the other hand, the NA perceives this assertive foreign policy as costly and suggests an alternative foreign policy approach. The election outcome will determine the direction of Turkish foreign policy, with the PA representing continuity and the NA advocating for change. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the specific and singular foreign policy topics and files, as well as the paradigms guiding the foreign policy preferences of both alliances on a macro level.





# INTRODUCTION

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The 2023 election marks a turning point for Turkish foreign policy as there are significant differences between the electoral alliances regarding foreign policy in the presidential race. The initial point of divergence is the difference between foreign policy paradigms. According to the People's Alliance (PA), the Justice and Development Party's (AK Party) foreign policy paradigm is largely recognizable. The support of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), a significant component of the alliance, for this paradigm, is already evident. Particularly after 2015, Türkiye's efforts to counter a nationwide wave of terrorism and intense security competition on a regional scale necessitated a more *assertive foreign policy* stance. This more assertive stance not only united the alliance sociologically in foreign policy discourses and practices but also consolidated the power of the PA politically and sociologically within the country. The consolidation process and competition over foreign policy led to the formation of a significant, albeit not entirely comprehensive, opposition group under the Nation Alliance (NA) at the political and sociological levels. Thus, like the PA, the NA parties also defined their respective political domains through foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

To be more precise, although the PA intends to uphold Türkiye's ambitious foreign policy, the NA perceives this assertive foreign policy as costly and sug-

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<sup>1</sup> Burhanettin Duran, "HDP etkisi ve muhalefetin dış politika muğlaklığı", *Sabah*, 25 Mart 2023, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/duran/2023/03/25/hdp-etkisi-ve-muhalefetin-dis-politika-muglakligi>

gests an alternative foreign policy that they assume will be more economical. At this juncture, we can observe that the outcome of the elections will determine the direction of Turkish foreign policy. The PA represents continuity, while the NA advocates for taking a different route.

In this analysis, the differences between the PA and the NA in both specific and general foreign policy topics, as well as the paradigms that guide their foreign policy preferences on a more macro level, are analyzed comparatively. In doing so, not only official documents that declare the foreign policy approaches of the PA and the NA but also the evaluations and statements of individuals who have the authority to express opinions on the foreign policy approaches of the alliances have been used as sources.

# RESPECTIVE FOREIGN POLICIES OF THE TWO ALLIANCES

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Being and constituting the antithesis of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the PA also requires action in addition to the purported style of policymaking. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and the NA have long argued against Erdoğan and the PA's foreign policy choices and approach on a range of foreign policy issues. Likewise, Kılıçdaroğlu and the NA have promised to backtrack and negate the foreign policy choices of the PA.

## RELATIONS WITH EUROPE

The NA pledges to improve Ankara's relations with Brussels to make progress in Türkiye's European Union (EU) membership process – which it claims the PA is responsible for stalling due to the former's actions that the NA says led to “democratic backsliding” in Türkiye. Aside from the vague trope of “retracting democratic backsliding” that would “magically unfreeze the membership process,” what the NA actually promises in tangible terms is releasing two well-known terrorist-linked and coup-related convicts, Selahattin Demirtas and Osman Kavala, from prison to win the goodwill of the European public and policymaking circles.<sup>2</sup>

From a broader perspective, both alliances see Türkiye's EU membership as a strategic objective. However, while the PA approaches the EU and individual

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<sup>2</sup> Nektaria Stamouli, “2023's most important election: Turkey”, *Politico*, April 17, 2023, 2023's most important election: Turkey – POLITICO.

European countries with a critical approach in many domestic and foreign policy areas, the NA assumes that relations with the EU can improve quickly and unconditionally. The main problem here is the political distance between the ideal or desired situation and the current realities. For the NA, closing this gap depends only on Türkiye's "behavioral change" – both in domestic and foreign policy, as well as in rhetoric and practice – without considering whether this behavioral shift would actually cause a change on the EU side. At this point, it is possible to mention several foreign policy issues that could potentially affect Türkiye-EU relations. The first of these is the Cyprus issue. As part of its plan to win favor with the EU, the NA, particularly the Republican People's Party (CHP), supports the sovereign equality of the two communities on the island, rather than a two-state solution, which contradicts the current foreign policy practice that advocates for a two-state solution in Cyprus.

Another important issue that affects Türkiye-EU relations is the tension with Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean disputes. Since the NA makes general statements about both the Eastern Mediterranean and its relations with Greece, it is difficult to predict the impact of the alliance's stance on EU relations. However, regarding the Eastern Mediterranean, the NA states that it supports the "multilateral negotiations"<sup>3</sup> method to achieve a fair sharing of both maritime jurisdiction areas and hydrocarbon resources. Regarding this issue, President Erdoğan's call to the United Nations (UN) for a regional conference to resolve the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean has been on the table for a long time,<sup>4</sup> and Türkiye is concurrently pursuing a normalization process with Israel and Egypt, which are important coastal actors in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, the NA's proposal to "support negotiations" on the issue as if it were a new effort or had been ignored as an option by the AK Party government is misleading. Ankara has already addressed this issue through Türkiye-Libya maritime agreements and further cemented it with a normalization process with Israel and Egypt as part of the goal of achieving a "protective layer" around the Türkiye-Libya deal. As a result, from what can be discerned in the NA's statements on the Eastern Mediterranean tension, the opposition alliance cannot offer more than what the incumbent government has already achieved. In addition, even if the overall dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean turn toward reconciliation rather than conflict, the possi-

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3 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr), s. 40.

4 "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan BM'ye Doğu Akdeniz için konferans çağırısı", *TRT Haber*, 22 Eylül 2020.

bility of this giving Türkiye's EU membership process a boost, as the NA claims, is uncertain.<sup>5</sup>

Ankara's relationship with Greece has seen the start of rapprochement since the earthquakes, and the difference between the NA's wishes and the PA's policies has started to become negligible. Even if this rapprochement process continues, it is doubtful whether it will create a strong enough dynamic to give momentum to Türkiye's EU membership process, similar to the Eastern Mediterranean.

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>Relations with Europe/EU</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Full membership in the EU</li> <li>· Release of Demirtas and Kavala from prison</li> <li>· Achieving visa liberalization through revising anti-terror laws</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Full membership in the EU</li> <li>· Not allowing the EU's intervention in the cases of Demirtas and Kavala as domestic legal cases</li> <li>· Demanding visa liberalization in the EU's side of the deal while maintaining anti-terror laws as they are</li> </ul>

## Migration and Refugees

When issues that do not originate from Türkiye, and therefore have no progress potential, are excluded from the scope of Türkiye's relations with Europe, migration stands out as a suitable area for the NA to express its views. If the NA comes to power after the May 14 elections, the alliance promises to coordinate and develop a common migration policy with the EU.<sup>6</sup> The NA also criticizes the existence of European countries that prefer to turn Türkiye into a refugee camp and wants to revise both the 2014 Readmission Agreement and the March 18, 2016 Agreement. However, it is unclear how the NA will proceed on issues where the PA has problems with the EU, such as Greece's illegal pushbacks of refugees in the Aegean Sea and Europe's unfulfilled obligations of the refugee agreement. The NA's statements do not address this.<sup>7</sup>

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>Migration and Refugees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Developing and coordinating common policies with the EU</li> <li>· Revising the 2014 and 2016 Agreements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Criticizing the EU's failure to uphold its responsibilities in the 2016 Agreement</li> <li>· Revising the 2014 and 2016 Agreements</li> <li>· Fighting against Greek pushbacks through coast guard assets and documenting Greek violations</li> </ul>

5 Burhanettin Duran, "Türkiye and the Future of Normalization in the Middle East", *Insight Turkey*, Insight Turkey Spring 2022 / Volume 24, Number 2

6 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

7 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

## NATO

The NA also promises to lift Ankara's current resistance to Sweden's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by fast-tracking its membership process. The NA has been critical of the incumbent's insistence on conditioning Stockholm's prospects of joining NATO to the latter's performance in observing its duties as per the Trilateral Memorandum signed between Türkiye, Finland, and Sweden at NATO's Madrid summit. The NA criticizes the incumbent's approach as one of transforming bilateral issues into a multilateral platform and thus creating an unnecessary polarization with other members of the alliance.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the current agenda of NATO enlargement, it is seen that NATO plays a central role in both alliances' external, security, and defense policies. While the PA positions Türkiye's status within NATO in an autonomous manner that does not violate the alliance's general principles, the NA uses language that more closely ties foreign policy to NATO.

Based on the NA's evaluations of Türkiye's position within NATO, it appears that Türkiye is envisioned as following NATO's priorities and adopting a passive role. On the other hand, the PA's perspective on NATO sees Türkiye as determining its own strategic direction while considering NATO one of the factors to be taken into account, rather than as the ultimate and sole determinant. In the PA's position, there is an emphasis and sensitivity to Türkiye's status as a "subject" within NATO.<sup>9</sup>

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>NATO</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Unconditional approval of Sweden's bid</li> <li>· Passive and follower role for Türkiye</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Blocking enlargement if necessary until Türkiye's demands are met</li> <li>· Confident partnership prioritizing Türkiye's national interests</li> </ul>

## RELATIONS WITH THE U.S.

The NA's most concrete statement on relations with the United States (U.S.) is its desire for Türkiye to return to the F-35 program.<sup>10</sup> While the NA does not provide any details on how this could be achieved, the first option that comes to mind is

8 Unal Cevikoz, "Yeni dış politika vizyonu ve Ortadoğu", *Politik Yol*, 13 Nisan 2023, Yeni dış politika vizyonu ve Ortadoğu | PolitikYol Haber Sitesi.

9 "Türkiye Yüzyılı için Doğru Adımlar", *AK Parti Seçim Beyanamesi 2023*, <https://www.akparti.org.tr/media/bwlbqkif/tu-rkiye-yu-zyily-ic-in-dog-ru-adimlar-2023-sec-im-beyanamesi.pdf>.

10 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

the removal of the S-400 missile defense system – in whatever capacity that may require. It is assumed that this would change the U.S. position on the F-35 issue.

Apart from this, the NA's statements on relations with the U.S. are exceptionally vague. The NA promises that relations with the U.S. will be conducted on an institutional basis, based on mutual trust, and in an equal manner.<sup>11</sup> However, current relations are already being conducted on an institutional basis, and the demand for equality has been made by Türkiye, leading to long-standing problems, with the biggest source of the trust crisis being the U.S. Therefore, the NA does not appear to contribute to the current nature of relations in any way.

It is immediately noticeable that, apart from the general framework of Türkiye-U.S. relations, the NA does not address other problems in bilateral relations. This is a matter that stands out as an issue emphasized in the Joint Policy Text and also as an issue that alliance members avoid talking about. There is no statement on the extradition of Gülenist Terror Group (FETÖ) leader Fethullah Gülen, the sanctions imposed on Türkiye, or how the U.S. views its relationship with the PKK terrorist group's Syrian wing, the YPG/PYD and how to resolve this issue. In contrast, the PA is more critical of Turkish-American relations, which is explicitly stated in the AK Party's Election Manifesto.<sup>12</sup>

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>Relations with the U.S.</b>	· Return to the F-35 project	· Preserving sovereign choices
<b>FETÖ</b>	· Unclear	· Extradition
<b>YPG/PYD</b>	· Unclear	· Active fight
<b>Sanctions</b>	· Unclear	· Against/Critical

## RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

The NA promises to continue Türkiye's mediation role in the context of the Ukraine conflict and the extension of the grain agreement; however, it emphasizes Türkiye's NATO membership more in relations with Russia, which differs from the current government, and plans to pursue a relationship with Russia as an "equal."<sup>13</sup> More abstractly, the NA promises to establish a con-

11 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

12 "Türkiye Yüzyılı için Doğru Adımlar", *AK Parti Seçim Beyanamesi 2023*, <https://www.akparti.org.tr/media/bwlbkgkif/tu-rkiye-yu-zyili-ic-in-dog-ru-adimlar-2023-sec-im-beyanamesi.pdf>, s. 424.

13 Nektaria Stamouli, "2023's most important election: Turkey", *Politico*, 17 April 2023, 2023's most important election: Turkey – POLITICO.



structive dialogue with Russia and institutionalize the relationship on a more formal basis.<sup>14</sup>

The NA's promise to establish institutional-level relations with Moscow is a direct criticism and elimination of the leadership diplomacy model established between Erdoğan and President Vladimir Putin. The current model is one of Türkiye's strong points against Russia and brings it closest to equal relations. It is not clear how the NA will establish equal relations if this model is eliminated. Additionally, the NA's desire to continue mediation is not accompanied by a neutral policy regarding the war. It is also unclear how long mediation can be sustained and whether it will be accepted by Russia if an uncertain stance on neutrality and an emphasis on NATO membership is expressed by Ankara.

However, the PA differs from the NA in terms of its relationship with Russia. The PA, which is expected to continue its "balancing act" policy in the Ukraine conflict, is also trying to avoid a new escalation with Russia in the fields of economy, energy, and critical foreign policy issues (such as Syria, Libya, and Karabakh), independently of NATO member countries. Moreover, it can be said that the PA sees its relationship with Russia as an opportunity to reinforce Türkiye's foreign policy objective of "strategic autonomy."<sup>15</sup> The AK Party's election manifesto is based on the expectation that a multipolar international system will emerge as the global system undergoes change. Like Türkiye, Russia is also looking for a multipolar system. Therefore, maintaining relations with Russia is not only important for bilateral issues but also for the great power struggle in the international system from the perspective of the alliance's other members, who see relations with Russia as competitive cooperation."

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
Relations with Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Maintaining mediation (not neutrality) and extending grain deal</li> <li>· Emphasizing Türkiye's NATO membership</li> <li>· Abolishing leader diplomacy and forming institutional relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Maintaining mediation, neutrality, and extending the grain deal</li> <li>· Pursuing its own policy independent of NATO</li> <li>· Leader diplomacy</li> </ul>

14 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

15 Muhittin Ataman, "Turkey's Relations with the West: A quest of Autonomy", *Daily Sabah*, Dec 05 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ataman-muhittin/2019/12/05/turkeys-relations-with-the-west-a-quest-for-autonomy>

## SYRIA

Given the differences between the two alliances, the Syria issue stands out as one of the most crucial topics in the upcoming elections in terms of the return of refugees, the war against terrorism, and Türkiye's relations with the United States. Therefore, the Syria issue stands out as one of the most critical, intricate, and challenging files in Türkiye's foreign policy, and it remains the primary arena where the PA and NA contend. Since the outset of the Syrian crisis, Türkiye has adjusted its foreign and security policies as the security priorities and challenges have transformed significantly. Recently, the AK Party government has adopted a policy of reconciliation with Syria to tackle the terrorism issue (PKK/YPG), facilitate the return of refugees, and achieve a political settlement under the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. However, the NA's stance on topics such as refugees, counterterrorism, the YPG/PYD problem, the situation of the political and military opposition (the Syrian National Army (SNA)), and relations with the U.S. and Russia remain unclear. Moreover, there are varying policies concerning Syria within the NA, making it challenging for the opposition alliance to devise a comprehensive approach to Syria. The challenging aspect of the NA's policy in Syria lies in the pro-PKK Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) external support of Kılıçdaroğlu. This is because the HDP's primary objective is to prevent the Turkish military's mobilization in northern Syria, ultimately providing more freedom of action for the YPG/PYD in Syria. Furthermore, the general stance of the opposition is not significantly different concerning the issue of disarming the Türkiye-backed SNA.<sup>16</sup>

The NA calls for the rehabilitation of the Syrian economy to prepare conditions in the country for the voluntary return of refugees. The NA is aware that this task requires international burden-sharing and dialogue with Damascus.<sup>17</sup>

The NA pledges the safe and voluntary return of refugees in line with domestic and international law through working with international organizations and Damascus. The NA also pledges to establish monitoring and verification mechanisms with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to ensure the safety, property, and recognition of the rights of returning refugees.<sup>18</sup>

16 Alper Coşkun & Sinan Ülgen, "Political Change and Turkey's Foreign Policy", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 2022, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Coskun\\_Ulgen\\_Turkey\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Coskun_Ulgen_Turkey_final.pdf), p. 30.

17 Nektaria Stamouli, "2023's most important election: Turkey", *Politico*, April 17, 2023, 2023's most important election: Turkey – POLITICO.

18 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>Syria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Safe, voluntary, and honorable return of refugees</li> <li>· Dialogue with Damascus</li> <li>· Establishing a monitoring and verification mechanism with the UNHCR</li> <li>· Dismantling the SNA</li> <li>· Unclear on the YPG/PYD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Safe, voluntary, and honorable return of refugees</li> <li>· Dialogue with Damascus</li> <li>· Preserving liberated areas and the presence of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) in northern Syria</li> <li>· Counterterrorism</li> </ul>

## CYPRUS

The Cyprus issue is another strategic foreign policy issue where the differences between the two alliances are clearly visible. During the AK Party era, the Cyprus issue, which had caused fierce competition between the established security bureaucracy and the CHP and AK Party due to the Annan Plan, has moved to a more ambitious point in the context of the “two-state solution.” This is particularly because of the new regional dynamics caused by the Arab Spring. For the PA, the Cyprus issue is seen as geopolitical leverage in terms of the escalation in Turkish-Greek relations, sharing of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, and regional power competition, while for the NA, it is seen as one of the necessary conditions for a rapprochement with the EU.

The NA expresses that Türkiye and Greece should not interfere in the internal affairs of Cyprus and that the parties on the island should solve their problems through dialogue among themselves.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the NA is clearly diverging from the current Cyprus policy and advocates for the sovereign equality of the two communities on the island, rather than a two-state solution.<sup>20</sup>

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>Cyprus</b>	· Sovereign equality of the two communities	· Two-state solution

## AEGEAN AND TURKISH-GREEK RELATIONS

The NA expresses the most general statements possible for the Aegean and Turkish-Greek relations and repeats the most fundamental and unchanging positions of Turkish foreign policy. The NA aims to solve the problems with Greece in the

19 Nektaria Stamouli, “2023’s most important election: Turkey”, *Politico*, 17 April 2023, 2023’s most important election: Turkey – POLITICO.

20 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

Aegean through diplomacy and dialogue without waiving Türkiye's sovereign rights, with the Aegean a sea of cooperation, peace, and good neighborliness.<sup>21</sup>

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>Aegean and Turkish-Greek Relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Solving issues through dialogue and diplomacy without giving up Türkiye's sovereign rights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Solving issues through dialogue and diplomacy without giving up Türkiye's sovereign rights</li> <li>· Preventing the persecution of the Turkish minority in Greece</li> </ul>

## SOUTH CAUCASUS

The NA primarily shares the same stance on Karabakh and the South Caucasus issues as the PA, with little divergence. Accordingly, the NA aims to strengthen the fraternal relationship with Azerbaijan based on common security. It also plans to actively engage in efforts to resolve bilateral issues between Türkiye and Armenia and strives to turn the cease-fire in Karabakh into a lasting peace.<sup>22</sup> However, the NA differs from the PA in that it does not anticipate a military option in case of violations of the cease-fire by Armenia or if the status quo is disrupted. In this sense, while the PA's foreign policy is more assertive, the NA's foreign policy exhibits a more traditional approach to the Azerbaijan issue.

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>South Caucasus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Lasting peace in Karabakh</li> <li>· Normalization with Armenia</li> <li>· Strengthening the brotherhood with Azerbaijan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Lasting peace in Karabakh</li> <li>· Normalization with Armenia</li> <li>· Strengthening the brotherhood with Azerbaijan</li> <li>· Keeping military force as an option</li> </ul>

## CHINA AND UYGHURS

The NA promises to pursue a policy that is more vocal about human rights violations against the Uyghur minority, particularly through components of the CHP and the Future Party (GP), and to work closely with the United States on this issue.<sup>23</sup> The PA's approach to the Uyghur issue is to carefully observe where the balance of power and competition between major powers is evolving, based on

21 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

22 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

23 Alper Coşkun and Sinan Ülgen, "Political Change and Turkey's Foreign Policy", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 14, 2022, Political Change and Turkey's Foreign Policy - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Türkiye's national interests, rather than focusing on cooperation and coordination with the U.S. In the context of China's position vis-à-vis the U.S. in a multipolar world order and Türkiye's need to diversify its foreign relations, the PA evaluates the situation and maintains a careful and conscious silence.

	Nation Alliance	People's Alliance
<b>China and Uyghurs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Being vocal about the human rights violations of Uyghurs</li> <li>· Coordination with the U.S.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Communicating concerns to Chinese interlocutors, avoiding public showdowns</li> <li>· Keeping the U.S. out of it</li> </ul>

## MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East has always been one of the most controversial issues for Turkish foreign policy. From the perspective of the People's Alliance and the AK Party, the Middle East stands out as one of the regions where Türkiye can apply its strategic autonomy most effectively in foreign policy. On the other hand, the Middle East is seen as a pivotal region for the AK Party's foreign policy. This is not only due to the AK Party's foreign policy identity being closer to the region, but rather because the pivot of the Middle East is seen as a geopolitical necessity, rather than a choice. Due to the tectonic changes caused by the Arab Spring, terrorism, the collapse or weakening of traditional state structures, and regional power struggles, the AK Party's foreign policy can't remain neutral. Therefore, security policies that emphasize military power are one of the distinguishing features of the AK Party's Middle East policy. Although it does not cover the entire region, this approach is largely accepted by the MHP since the priority for the MHP is always a foreign policy approach that emphasizes the fight against terrorism and a strong and active Türkiye.

When we look at the AK Party's election manifesto as the carrier actor of the PA, it can be understood that its main approach is the basic strategic framework of regional normalization from the last two years. This largely emerges as the second version of the trade state idea implemented in previous AK Party governments. According to this logic, normalization should continue at a steady pace, and Türkiye's bilateral relations with regional countries should be deepened through commercial relations.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Türkiye Yüzyılı için Doğru Adımlar", *AK Parti Seçim Beyanamesi 2023*, <https://www.akparti.org.tr/media/bwlbqkif/tu-rkiye-yu-zyili-ic-in-dog-ru-adimlar-2023-sec-im-beyanamesi.pdf>.

In contrast to the PA, the NA tends to use more abstract and general expressions when discussing issues and topics related to the Middle East. The clearest expressions used by the NA are regarding Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, which are both also mentioned by the CHP component. CHP officials advocate for improving relations with Israel and Egypt but argue that a prerequisite for doing so is for Türkiye to stop supporting Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, Kılıçdaroğlu and CHP Deputy Chairman Ünal Çeviköz advocate for Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria to come together and form the Middle East Peace and Cooperation Organization (OBİT), based on the assumption that these four countries share similar problems in the region.<sup>25</sup>

Middle East	Normalization	Israel/Palestine	Regional Cooperation	Military Bases
<b>People's Alliance</b>	Endorsement	Two-state solution; Support to Hamas	Deepening of economic cooperation	Preserving military bases
<b>Nation Alliance</b>	Endorsement	Two-state solution; Ceasing support to Hamas	Establishing OBİT	Neutrality

<sup>25</sup> Unal Cevikoz, "Yeni dış politika vizyonu ve Ortadoğu", *Politik Yol*, 13 Nisan 2023, Yeni dış politika vizyonu ve Ortadoğu | PolitikYol Haber Sitesi.



# FOREIGN POLICY PARADIGMS OF ELECTORAL ALLIANCES

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## AXIS OF TÜRKİYE

The “Axis of Türkiye” is arguably the nucleus and summary of the strategic orientation of Turkish foreign policy, especially for the past decade. It is a pertinent definition or concept given the long history and a huge body<sup>26</sup> of recurring arguments and analyses on Türkiye’s alleged “shift of axis” in foreign policy under the AK Party rule due to the latter’s diversification of its foreign policy engagements through the cultivation of relations with non-Western regions and countries.<sup>27</sup> The proponents of the “axis shift” argument argued in a nutshell that Ankara was drifting away from the West and NATO for the pursuit of a strategic alliance with “anti-Western” great powers such as Russia and China and President Erdoğan’s voiced willingness to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) on many occasions was treated as a strong example of such an orientation.

26 See Mensur Akgun, “Turkey: what axis shift?”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 9, 2010, Turkey: what axis shift?, by Mensur Akgün (Le Monde diplomatique - English edition, July 2010); Selin Nasi, “Turkey’s shift of axis”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 31, 2016, Turkey’s shift of axis (hurriyetdailynews.com); Ekrem T. Baser, “Shift-of-axis in Turkish Foreign Policy: Turkish National Role Conceptions Before and During AKP Rule”, *Turkish Studies*, 2015, 16:3, pp. 291-309; Mehmet Babacan, “Whiter an Axis Shift: A Perspective from Turkey’s Foreign Trade”, *Insight Turkey*, 2011, 13:1, pp. 129-157; Ozden Zeynep Oktav, “Regionalism or Shift of Axis? Turkish-Syrian-Iranian Relations” in *Turkey in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy* (ed.) by Ozden Zeynep Oktav, 2011, London: Routledge; Bill Park, “Turkey’s New (De)Security Policy: Axis Shift, Gaullism, or Learning Process?”, in *Providing for National Security* (eds.) by Andrew M. Dorman and Joyce P. Kaufman, 2014, Redwood City: Standord University Press, pp. 254-271.

27 Murat Yeşiltaş, “Türkiye Ekseni ve Güçlendirilmiş Stratejik Özerklik”, *Sabah*, 22 Nisan 2023, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/murat-yesiltas/2023/04/22/turkiye-ekseni-ve-guclendirilmis-stratejik-ozerklik>



In fact, Ankara, under the AK Party, has been interested in increasing its strategic autonomy in its foreign policy by diluting its dependence on its Western allies to ensure its long-term security and interests on the one hand; and diversifying its foreign relations by cultivating more tangible relations with non-Western regions and countries on the other hand. As the leading actor of the PA, the AK Party promises to maintain and consolidate Türkiye's strategic autonomy in foreign policy by referring to the concept of the "Axis of Türkiye" in the words of both Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and President Erdoğan as part of the AK Party's election manifesto.<sup>28</sup>

## EXACT OPPOSITE OF ERDOĞAN AND THE PA

The NA is all about being the antithesis of what President Erdoğan and the PA stand for, not only in essence but also in style. The personal low profile of Kılıçdaroğlu and the crowded nature of his coalition with other components of the "Table for Six" are being hailed as the hallmarks of a "more democratic," "more consensual," and "more participatory" style of policymaking by the members and supporters of the NA, as opposed to Erdoğan's "more authoritarian and single man" rule.<sup>29</sup>

Within the framework of Ankara's relations with the West in general, the representatives of the NA pledge "a professional and dignified dialogue" between Ankara and Western capitals.<sup>30</sup> This vague proposition usually goes hand in hand with the NA's emphasis on and pledge of elevating the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as the chief actor in making and implementing Turkish foreign policy. NA representatives apparently imagine a purely professional and technocrat cadre and institution fully stripped of political considerations and with these qualities it would be a capable force in tackling Türkiye's foreign policy issues better. In that vein, the NA pledges to promote merit among the ranks of diplomats instead of political appointments to ambassadorial posts that have been occasionally preferred to a certain extent by the incumbent over the years.<sup>31</sup>

28 "Axis of Türkiye: FM pledges a powerful country in foreign policy", *Daily Sabah*, April 13, 2023, Axis of Türkiye: FM pledges a powerful country in foreign policy | Daily Sabah.

29 Nektaria Stamouli, "2023's most important election: Turkey", *Politico*, April 17, 2023, 2023's most important election: Turkey - POLITICO.

30 Marc Pierini & Francesco Siccardi, "The Strategic Consequences of a Kılıçdaroğlu Victory over Erdoğan", *Carnegie Europe*, April 13, 2023, The Strategic Consequences of a Kılıçdaroğlu Victory Over Erdoğan - Carnegie Europe - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

31 Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni, 30 Ocak 2023, Ankara, Open (chp.org.tr).

The fact that the NA puts a disproportionate emphasis on the role of the MFA in making Turkish foreign policy under an NA government in the future reflects two things:

1. The NA is aware of its structural defects and limitations as a coterie of disparate components without strong leadership. It will not be capable of making its own fully fledged, well-defined, and clear political choices or taking initiatives in foreign policy as it lacks self-confidence and vision. The lack of self-confidence and vision partly emanates from the NA's nature as a collective of disparate components lacking inner consistency.
2. The NA does not have a clear idea or vision for either the entirety of Turkish foreign policy or for each of the individual issues and files of Turkish foreign policy. The NA is too focused on "getting rid of Erdoğan" first, which is the sole and the most powerful common motivation of its disparate components. As a result, they have not thoroughly thought about any of the challenging issues facing Turkish foreign policy in a post-Erdoğan scenario. Delegating foreign policy-making to the MFA and overemphasizing its neutrality, professionalism, and technocrat nature as a remedy for Turkish foreign policy's critical issues is nothing more than evading responsibility to lead and put forward a vision as well as relevant policies. To draw an analogy with an embassy, the NA promises to have embassies without ambassadors in charge of them. Instead, it envisions embassies run by *chargé d'affaires* who would only deal with day-to-day affairs without having a long-term and fully empowered mandate.

## HIDING THE WEAKNESS: VAGUENESS

In all of the NA's foreign policy topics, there is a vagueness in its approach or positions – not policy – when expressing opinions and making promises about Türkiye's main foreign policy issues. The NA avoids specific and concrete expressions and projects, using general statements that remain at the level of hope for the future. This stance is both a necessity and a choice resulting from the NA's complex and difficult structure. The difficulty of forming comprehensive and satisfying policies in each of the extremely difficult and complex foreign policy issues is not only due to the challenge of creating coherence but also because concrete and visible policies require a leadership that can make a claim; thus, it is an unfavorable field and avoided by the NA. The NA hides its structural weaknesses by avoiding concrete and visible policy discussions and instead opts for general statements.

Another noticeable aspect in the NA's evaluations of foreign policy is its rough description of the stance it will implement if it comes to power as a "traditional" and "Republican" government. The vagueness that dominates the NA's statements on foreign policy also appears here. Without getting into discussions about the nature of "traditional" and "Republican" foreign policy, it can be said that in its simplest form, the NA desires to be the antithesis of the Erdoğan and AK Party eras. However, being an antithesis also requires a comprehensive assessment of the 20-year AK Party rule and the foreign policy it pursued; to present a meaningful foreign policy vision that will replace it naturally requires a "parity." However, the parity is felt to be very far away in the NA's statements on foreign policy. The NA miraculously wants to return to the pre-2002 period as if the 20-year AK Party rule had never happened. It plans to get rid of the "file weight"/portfolio that the AK Party government expanded and enriched in foreign policy. In this sense, the NA is not an antithesis but rather exists in an anachronism, and the concepts of "traditional" and "Republican" foreign policy remain limited to a nostalgic desire since they are not well-thought-out paradigmatic categories.

## WESTERNIST OR EUROPEANIST IDENTITY

In the absence of concrete and well-crafted policies, identity inevitably comes to the fore. In the NA's statements on foreign policy, there is a clear desire to position Türkiye and its foreign policy in terms of identity, belonging, and areas of engagement with the West. Here, the dominant and main political elements of the NA, namely the CHP and the Good Party (IP), with their Western-oriented, secular, and ideologically anti-Middle East/Arab stance, play a decisive role.

In addition to the identity component, another factor that makes it easier for the NA to imagine itself and its foreign policy focused generally on the West, specifically on Europe, is political structural similarities. The NA can only find its reflection in Western Europe, where fragmented, multi-component, unassuming, leaderless, and low-profile figures and structures maintain power. The Middle East, Russia, China, and even the West in the sense of the U.S., do not have the characteristics of ideal partners for the NA since they are dominated by strong leaders and leadership that make mutual understanding and the establishment of common values extremely challenging.

Finally, the desire of the NA to "move Turkish foreign policy away from the Middle East and anchor it in Europe" also includes another aspect of its antithesis to the Erdoğan and AK Party government. Throughout the 20-year AK Party

rule, the wider Middle East region has become the primary geographical region where Turkish foreign policy's main attention and energy are spent. The NA, with its statements and orientations, aims to shift the primary geographical region of Turkish foreign policy from the Middle East to Europe. However, the fundamental difference between the AK Party government and the NA lies in the motives for determining the primary geographical region. While the AK Party government's preference for the Middle East as the primary geographical region resulted from the imposition of concrete geopolitical challenges, such as the Iraq War, the Arab Spring, regional struggles around the Eastern Mediterranean, terrorism, and migration, the NA's determination of a primary geographical region is based on an ideological and identity-reliant preference and a stance that avoids the challenges Türkiye faces.

In contrast to the AK Party and the PA's "Axis of Türkiye," the NA's Western/European or Traditionalist/Republican foreign policy approach also promises to forgo Türkiye's struggle to gain a more active role in foreign policy, an effort that was particularly accelerated by the AK Party over the last decade. The NA's foreign policy envisions a standard that eliminates or weakens Türkiye's role and adopts "not having problems" with the West and Europe as its fundamental goal and measure of success. The principles of foreign policy presented as a general guideline, such as "neutrality, reliability, credibility, and predictability,"<sup>32</sup> can actually be seen as factors that determine and reinforce the passive position. While these can be seen as principles of foreign policy, it is necessary to explain how these principles will be applied to specific foreign policy issues. For example, the question of how feasible it is to build a neutral foreign policy on the YPG/PYD issue is a very difficult question for the NA to answer.

## UNASSERTIVE AND DOWNGRADED FOREIGN POLICY

Just like the "Anti-Erdoğanism" that brought together the 6+2+1 (Table for Six + Ekrem Imamoglu and Mansur Yavas + HDP) disparate figures and parties, their common NA has also supported the "antithesis" of Erdoğan's foreign policy. If what Erdoğan's foreign policy has been pursuing by boosting Türkiye's profile diplomatically and transforming Türkiye into an active contributor to the evolution of the international order, the NA's foreign policy will follow a distinctively "un-

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32 Unal Cevikoz, "Yeni dış politika vizyonu ve Ortadoğu", *Politik Yol*, 13 Nisan 2023, Yeni dış politika vizyonu ve Ortadoğu | PolitikYol Haber Sitesi.

assertive” stance. Instead of demanding equal treatment from great powers such as the US and Russia – a hallmark of Erdoğan’s foreign policy, the NA’s foreign policy will maintain Türkiye’s “place” as a lesser power/actor and will not confront great powers to promote matters of national interest. The NA’s foreign policy will be much more prone to concessions as opposed to Erdoğan’s. The NA’s “unassertive” foreign policy will naturally entail a downgrade of Türkiye’s military activism abroad and less confrontational conduct in core geopolitical issues, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean disputes with Greece, Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus. In line with its “unassertive” foreign policy, the NA will have to contract, shrink, and downgrade the Turkish foreign policy “portfolio,” which has been greatly enlarged, diversified, and expanded under Erdoğan’s leadership over two decades.

## UNSTABLE AND COALITION FOREIGN POLICY

The NA’s foreign policy will be distinctively unstable. Unlike the steady, decisive, and stable foreign policy under Erdoğan’s presidency, which has been largely underpinned by wide executive powers granted by the presidential system, the NA’s foreign policy will reflect the stance of a ruling coalition. The multiplicity and disparateness of actors and political orientations in the NA coalition, quarrels, disagreements, and power struggles will be an integral part of foreign policy-making and implementation processes. Two factors will exacerbate the unstable nature of the NA’s foreign policy: the multiplicity and diversified nature of issues, regions, and files in the Turkish foreign policy portfolio; and the protracted and unresolved nature of almost all core issues and files in the Turkish foreign policy portfolio, such as Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, Aegean, Türkiye-Greece relations, Turkish-American relations, the war in Ukraine, the South Caucasus and so on.

# CONCLUSION

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The May 14, 2023 elections are of historic importance as they crystallize the politics of alliances as an integral part of Türkiye's presidential system. Besides the domestic political differences between the two rival alliances, their foreign policy visions, approaches, and policy preferences for at least the next five years also differ immensely. However, these differences are not only limited to the content of policy areas but can also be seen in methods and approaches, or "styles." Of course, after being in power for 20 years, the AK Party, which constitutes the main backbone of the PA, and Erdoğan have nurtured a dominant dossier and awareness that comes from being much more concrete, clear, and executive in foreign policy, as well as other areas. On the other hand, when small parties are excluded, the main political parties and cadres that form the backbone of the NA and as part of the opposition for 20 years make statements that are much more general, and abstract, and often cannot be defined as policies. Their stance consists of desires, wishes, and vague principles that form the entirety of the NA's foreign policy and individual policy framework. This difference is a natural consequence of the government-opposition dichotomy, but it is also consciously constructed and amplified by the NA.

The NA struggles to formulate bold and clear policies in foreign policy due to its complex and multi-actor structure that possesses significant differences in visions – an issue that is reflected in the "table for six" description. At this point, ambiguity and general statements serve a mitigating function for the NA's structural weakness in its foreign policy declarations.

On the other hand, the NA's expectation of a low-profile, leaderless, and crowded coalition government also leads to a low-profile, leaderless, and hybrid foreign policy.

In contrast to the strong leadership and high-profile, ambitious, and sometimes confrontational foreign policy practices of the PA and Erdoğan, the natural result of the NA's six-party table structure and promise of a return to a parliamentary system is a foreign policy style of a "coalition government." This difference poses a risk to a potential NA government, considering Türkiye's expansion of its portfolio and status as an international actor under the PA's governance. The current structure and approach of the NA appear inadequate to handle Türkiye's vast and diverse geopolitical portfolio. Additionally, the NA's highly fragmented structure is inherently susceptible to a chronic series of disagreements and instability during the governing process. Thus, the dynamic instability potential that arises from the NA could combine with Türkiye's various and challenging problem areas, leading to a highly unstable and risky foreign policy scenario for Türkiye.

Finally, the PA and the NA drastically diverge in their foreign policy paradigms. The PA's "strategic autonomy" paradigm, which has been determined based on the regional and international challenges and experiences it has faced during its long tenure, is met by the NA's Westernism paradigm, which is disconnected from reality and heavily influenced by identity and aspirations, sometimes stuck in anachronism.

# PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE VS. NATION ALLIANCE WHO OFFERS WHAT IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY?

MURAT YEŞİLTAŞ, BİLGEHAN ÖZTÜRK

This analysis discusses the significance of the 2023 Turkish election in terms of its impact on Turkish foreign policy. The election is viewed as a turning point due to the significant differences between the foreign policy paradigms of the two main electoral alliances, the People's Alliance (PA) and the Nation Alliance (NA). The PA's foreign policy paradigm has been largely recognizable, with an assertive stance developed after encountering a nationwide terrorism wave and regional security competition. This stance has consolidated the power of the PA politically and sociologically. On the other hand, the NA perceives this assertive foreign policy as costly and suggests an alternative foreign policy approach. The election outcome will determine the direction of Turkish foreign policy, with the PA representing continuity and the NA advocating for change. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the specific and singular foreign policy topics and files, as well as the paradigms guiding the foreign policy preferences of both alliances on a macro level.