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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Allies in a standoff: Examining the confrontation between Turkey and the United States in Syria

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Abstract

Turkish confrontation with the United States (US) in Syria serves as a test case for how junior allies, which often rely on their senior allies for defence and security, can come close to armed conflict with them. Neither the theoretical literature on alliances nor the empirical literature on Turkey–US relations provide sufficient insight into such a case. Addressing existing gaps requires identifying the likely factors that lead junior allies into disputes with their senior allies and examining junior allies' ability to challenge the policies of their more powerful counterparts. In the case of Turkey, the way it withstood the US by revealing its readiness to use military force over the latter's cooperation with armed groups Turkey considered a threat proves that, despite their disadvantage in the balance of power, junior allies can militarily stand up to their senior allies. Nonetheless, the fact that Turkey has failed to alter its ally's behaviour shows the limits of success in this endeavour, the reason for which, in our case, lies in Turkey's lack of normative attachment to and weak interest-based ties with the US.

Introduction

The opposing positions Turkey and the United States (US) adopted during the Syrian crisis brought relations between the two states to one of the lowest points in years. Although the two allies initially collaborated to overthrow the Assad regime, they later diverged on a number of issues, including the Syrian opposition, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Kurdish groups, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). During this process, Turkey focused its attention mostly on the Syrian-based Kurdish groups, while the US partnered with the same groups in the fight against ISIS. Competing positions and divergent interests over Syria brought about a gradual escalation of tensions between the two sides, which eventually dragged them into a militarised dispute.

Certain aspects of the Syrian dispute neatly fit within the overall framework of Turkey–US relations, given Turkey's long-standing discontent with US policies in its surrounding geography.[1] However, Turkey's main concern in earlier instances was the possibility of becoming involved in

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[1]Mustafa Aydın, 'Geographical blessing versus geopolitical curse: Great power security agendas for the Black Sea region and a Turkish alternative', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 9:3 (2009), pp. 271–85; Serhat Güvenç and Soli Özel, 'US–Turkey Relations since World War II: From alliance to transactionalism', in Güneş Murat Tezcür (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 523–43; Stephen Larrabee, *Turkey as a US Security Partner* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008); Ian O. Lesser, 'Turkey, the United States and the delusion of geopolitics', *Survival*, 48:3 (2006), pp. 83–96; Oya Dursun Özkanca, *Turkey–West Relations: The Politics of Intra-alliance Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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regional conflicts in which it had no desire to take part as a result of actions taken by the US.[2] In the case of the Syrian dispute, Turkey's concern was not about being entrapped in a regional conflict due to the US, but rather about entering into an armed conflict with the US itself. Therefore, the Syrian case surpasses other comparable events in its potential to trigger a serious crisis between the two allies. This unique aspect of the Syrian dispute makes an examination of this case a valuable source of insight into the direction of the Turkey–US alliance.

Some authors contend that, despite the tense moments between Turkey and the US in Syria (and also their differences in other policy contexts), their alliance remains intact, which is a testament to its resilience.[3] However, the explanatory power of this perspective is compromised by the fact that it omits to examine the resilience level of the Turkey–US alliance – an omission that can lead to inaccurate conclusions being drawn. That is, Turkey's alliance with the US, as the authors assert, does possess resilience, but, as the Syrian dispute will reveal, its resilience level is at the lowest possible level for maintaining an alliance relationship. Therefore, the fact that Turkey has so far avoided the worst-case scenario in Syria – a military conflict with the US – does not negate the fact that its alliance with the US is under significant strain.

Other authors argue that mutual trust and cooperation between Turkey and the US have deteriorated to such an extent that the alliance relationship has lost its functionality.[4] From this US-centric perspective, the Syrian dispute illustrates Turkey's unreliability as an ally, given the wide range of issues over which it has challenged the US and the subsequent tensions between the two sides. The problems associated with the above accounts are also present in this perspective, since it fails to explain how a dispute like Syria fits within the general trend of a bilateral alliance relationship such as the one between Turkey and the US, which despite its problems still continues.

A third group of authors strike a middle ground, arguing that Turkey's tendency to stand up to the US is a result of its pursuit of strategic autonomy, but not to the extent of terminating its alliance with the US.[5] Although these accounts seek to challenge pessimistic perspectives, they overlook the risks inherent in such an alliance relationship: in particular, it requires constant risk management, since existing ties are not sufficiently resilient for allies to overcome challenges easily, as the Syrian dispute will demonstrate.

In the remainder of this article, I first review the literature on intra-alliance disputes and then present a conceptual framework that aims to achieve two goals: explaining how a weaker ally is likely to behave in the event of a dispute with a more powerful ally and presenting a framework that allows us to gauge the resilience of the former's alliance with the latter. In the next part, I outline and analyse the pivotal moments in Turkey's confrontation with the US in Syria through a two-stage process-tracing approach. In the following section, I examine the identity- and interest-related factors in Turkey's alliance with the US in an attempt to assess the strength of ties between the two sides and Turkey's ability to settle disputes with its senior partner. I conclude that the lack of normative attachment to its senior ally as well as the weak interest-based ties between the two sides have hindered Turkey's ability to resolve its dispute with the US in a less confrontational manner.

[2] Didem Buhari Gulmez, 'The resilience of the US–Turkey alliance: Divergent threat perceptions and worldviews', *Contemporary Politics*, 26:4 (2020), pp. 475–92; Nur Çetinoğlu Harunoğlu, Ayşegül Sever, and Emre Erşen, *Turkey between the United States and Russia: Surfing on the Edge* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021).

[3] Gulmez, 'The resilience of the US–Turkey alliance'; Kadir Üstün, 'U.S.–Turkey relations endure despite crises', *Insight Turkey*, 22:2 (2020), pp. 23–32.

[4] Morton Abramowitz and Eric Edelman, 'Turkey: An increasingly undependable ally', Bipartisan Policy Center (23 April 2015), available at: {https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/turkey-an-increasingly-undependable-ally/}.

[5] Ali Balcı, 'A three-level analysis of Turkey's crisis with the U.S.-led order', *Insight Turkey*, 21:4 (2019), pp. 13–24; Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Turkish foreign policy in a post-Western order: Strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?', *International Affairs*, 97:4 (2021), pp. 1085–104.

Military alliances and intra-alliance disputes

Military alliances have been one of the central topics in the study of international relations.[6] Despite the broad scholarly attention paid to this topic, the lack of clarity vis-à-vis the definition of alliances has, to a degree, undercut the explanatory power of existing works. This is most evident in the tendency to subsume various interstate arrangements such as non-aggression agreements, neutrality accords, ententes, and offensive or defensive pacts under the umbrella term 'military alliance'.[7]

Lumping together qualitatively distinct relationships that entail different commitments under a single rubric can lead to conceptual and analytical confusion in assessments of interstate relations. For example, in bilateral or multilateral agreements among states, promising to observe neutrality is a wholly different pledge from promising to provide defence assistance in the event of security contingencies. A narrower and more parsimonious definition of military alliances is, therefore, necessary to avoid conceptual confusion. In this article, military alliances are defined as arrangements 'among states in the realm of national security in which the partners promise mutual assistance in the form of a substantial contribution of resources'.[8]

According to the conventional view, states enter into military alliances (hereafter alliances) to jointly counter challenges, which may come from actors that possess hostile intentions[9] and/or threatening capabilities.[10] Although alliances help states meet their balancing needs, they may also serve as mechanisms to control or restrain actors from which states perceive a threat.[11] Even if states do not perceive each other as a threat, alliances may still enable them to influence the policies of their allies.[12] This ability is especially manifest in asymmetric alliances in which a preponderant actor possesses greater military capabilities than other participants.

One potential downside of alliances characterised by imbalances of power is that a powerful state, thanks to its dominant position within an alliance, may chart a particular course of action despite the opposition of its junior allies. As will be detailed below, if the relevant issue concerns the interests of a junior ally, that ally is likely to introduce its own measures to protect its interests against its interlocutor, a development that may drag the two allies into an escalatory spiral that could even lead to armed conflict.

Disputes or conflicts among allies represent an important research area within the field of alliance studies, with the existing literature focusing mainly on the questions of how joining an alliance affects the likelihood of conflict between states[13] and how alliance structures – according to whether, for example, they are symmetric or asymmetric – contribute to the occurrence of disputes among allies and, therefore, affect alliances' durability.[14] This literature, which is largely

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[6]See, for example, Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022); James D. Morrow, 'Alliances and asymmetry: An alternative to the capability aggregation', *American Journal of Political Science*, 35:4 (1991), pp. 904–33; Paul Poast, *Arguing about Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Patricia A. Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

[7]See, for example, Brett Leeds and Burcu Savun, 'Terminating alliances: Why do states abrogate agreements', *The Journal of Politics*, 69:4 (2007), pp. 1118–32; Glenn H. Snyder, 'Alliance theory: A neorealist first cut', *Journal of International Affairs*, 44:1 (1990), pp. 103–23.

[8]Stefan Bergsmann, 'The concept of military alliance', in Erich Reiter and Heinz Gartner (eds), *Small States and Alliances* (New York: Springer, 2001), pp. 25–37 (p. 26).

[9]Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

[10]Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979).

[11]Paul W. Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 195–222.

[12]Snyder, 'Alliance theory'; Prashant Hosur Suhas, 'How alliances shape rivalries', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:4 (2023), p. sqad070.

[13]Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *War Trap* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Hyung Min Kim, Jungmoo Woo, and Jae Chul Lee, 'What is the relationship between alliance and militarized conflict? Analysis of reciprocal causation', *Armed Forces & Society*, 46:4 (2020), pp. 539–63; James Lee Ray, 'Friends as foes: International conflict and wars between formal allies', in Charles Gochman and Alan Sabrosky (eds), *Prisoners of War* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1990), pp. 73–91.

[14]Leeds and Burcu Savun, 'Terminating alliances'; Morrow, 'Alliances and asymmetry'.

composed of quantitative studies, falls short of providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter due to two issues.

First, it suffers from the above-mentioned problem of conceptual confusion, namely, that disputes between or among allies are treated too broadly, encompassing disputes that result from violations of neutrality, non-aggression, or various other pledges. Second, the quantitative literature, by and large, lacks an insight into the factors that drive states to act in ways contrary to the tenets of an alliance relationship and cause disputes to arise. Although analyses of the subject matter in light of variables such as information transparency in alliances,[15] degree of institutionalisation in alliances,[16] and 'alliance embeddedness'[17] contribute to the filling of this gap to some extent, this line of inquiry is useful for identifying the factors that influence allies' ability to resolve disputes among themselves, but not for addressing the fundamental question of why disputes among allies occur in the first place.

Furthermore, and relatedly, the preceding works take as their central focus endogenous factors, assuming that it is internal issues – such as institutional deficiencies – that plague the operation of alliances and, consequently, facilitate the conditions that lead to conflict among allies. It follows that had the internal defects that bedevil the functioning of alliances not existed, dispute proneness among allies would have been prevented. This, however, need not be the case, as, even if alliances do not have any internal flaws, exogenous developments may drive a wedge between allies and create unexpected intra-alliance challenges.

Externally caused disputes between allies

The existing literature on alliances pays scant attention to externally caused disputes between or among allies and lacks attempts – with a few minor exceptions, on which more below – to shed conceptual light on such events. This omission is particularly remarkable given the landmark events associated with the subject matter, such as the Suez Crisis pitting the US against Britain and France, China's opposition to the Soviet Union's embrace of peaceful coexistence with the West and the break-up of the two communist powers that followed, the split between the Soviet Union and Albania as a result of the former's rapprochement with Yugoslavia,[18] the division within NATO in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and – this article's case study – Turkey's dispute with the US over the latter's Syria policy. The negative impact of these events on the relevant alliance relationship was caused by an external development lying outside of the alliance's sphere of responsibility. However, the impact created by the relevant event was sufficiently powerful to set allies at odds and, in some cases, even to threaten the alliance's unity.

By providing a hypothetical setting featuring an externally caused dispute and applying a phased approach to actors' interactions, I aim to provide a conceptual framework for the subject matter, highlighting in particular the stages that allies are likely to go through during such a dispute and evaluating their capacity to control the stress level. It should be noted that my framework may be subject to refinement given the likely requirement to incorporate context-specific factors in assessments of other externally caused disputes. It nonetheless provides a sufficiently comprehensive conceptual template that can be used to shed light on other similar events, on which I will say more in the conclusion.

Despite the above-mentioned gap in the literature, there are several scholarly attempts to conceptually address externally caused disputes between allies, but they fail to explain why a policy pursued in a given setting does not recur in other similar settings, leaving the question unanswered

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[15]David H. Bearce, Kristen M. Flanagan, and Katharine M. Floros, 'Alliances, internal information, and military conflict among member-states', *International Organization*, 60:3 (2006), pp. 595–625.

[16]Andrew G. Long, Timothy Nordstrom, and Kyeonghi Baek, 'Allying for peace: Treaty obligations and conflict between allies', *The Journal of Politics*, 69:4 (2007), pp. 1103–17.

[17]Gregory Winger, 'Alliance embeddedness: Rodrigo Duterte and the resilience of the US–Philippine alliance', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 17:7 (2021), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab013}.

[18]I am grateful to one of the reviewers for bringing this example to my attention.

as to why actors behave differently. For example, Ambrosio and Vieira explain the reaction of Russia's allies to the 2014 Ukraine crisis through the concept of security dilemma, highlighting the threat they perceived from Russia following its intervention against Ukraine.[19] However, an analysis based on the security dilemma does not explain why Belarus, which figures in both works as a case study, saw Russia as a threat in 2014, but allied with Russia in 2022 in its war against Ukraine. Making sense of such cases, I argue, requires the development of a typological model that can be used to evaluate an alliance in its current form, as well as to compare and contrast it with its previous form. This typology will enable one to portray a more comprehensive temporal picture of the relevant alliance and determine whether it has improved, deteriorated, or remained unchanged, and what factors inform allies' behaviour towards each other in a given policy setting.

Disputes, alliance types, and conceptual clarity

Before I develop my theoretical framework, two concepts central to my argument require clarification. Specifically, they pertain to the definitions of 'an externally caused dispute between allies' and 'an asymmetric alliance'. The need to clarify the latter owes to the fact that one of the primary objectives of this article is to contribute to the literature on 'asymmetric' interstate relations, with a particular focus on weaker (secondary) states.

Externally caused disputes between allies

In this article, the term 'externally caused dispute' (hereafter dispute) refers to a tense situation caused by developments that occur outside the jurisdiction of an alliance. Such a dispute has two distinct features. First, a state engages in an activity that its allies disapprove of or object to due to its counterproductive nature and/or negative impact on their interests. Second, the contentious issue in question between allies carries within it the potential to take on a militarised character and, therefore, engender a militarised dispute. 'The term "militarized … dispute" refers to … cases in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one … state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state.'[20] It follows from this definition that states can engage in a militarised dispute without engaging in a military conflict, but the reverse is not true: a military conflict is inevitably a militarised dispute.

The adoption of the second criterion enables me to make a distinction between disputes and disagreements between allies and exclude from analysis cases that echo the latter and that can simply be viewed as differences of opinion between allies on relatively minor issues. Thus, disagreements pertain to situations that put much less strain on relations between allies – a disagreement over whether to contribute to an international peacekeeping mission is an illustrative example – and carry almost no prospect of generating a militarised dispute. The lower potential of situations characterised as disagreements to bring allies to loggerheads disqualifies them as ideal cases to test the resilience and strength of alliance relations.

Asymmetric alliances

The research inquiry pursued here requires significant differences in military capabilities between disputant states that are military allies. Therefore, my argument calls for the existence of an asymmetric alliance relationship.

[19] Thomas Ambrosio, 'Belarus, Kazakhstan and alliance security dilemmas in the former Soviet Union: Intra-alliance threat and entrapment after the Ukraine crisis', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74:9 (2022), pp. 1700–28; Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, 'Ukraine's crisis and Russia's closest allies: A reinforced intra-alliance security dilemma at work', *The International Spectator*, 49:4 (2014), pp. 97–111.

[20] Daniel M. Jones, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. David Singer, 'Militarized interstate disputes, 1816–1992: Rationale, coding rules, and empirical patterns', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 15:2 (1996), pp. 163–213 (p. 168).
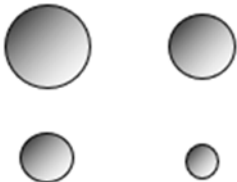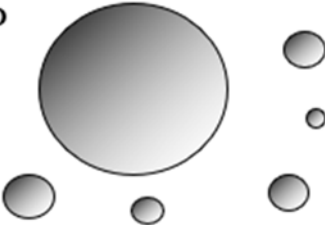
	Symmetric	Asymmetric
Bilateral	**A** E.g.: The Anglo-Soviet Pact (1942)	**C** E.g.: The US-South Korea Alliance (1953)
Multilateral	**B** E.g.: The Balkan Pact between Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia and Romania (1934)	**D** E.g.: The Collective Security Treaty Organization (2002)

Figure 1. Alliance types based on military capabilities.

Asymmetric alliances can exist in bilateral or multilateral formats. A bilateral asymmetric alliance occurs when a weaker ally relies on a powerful state for the protection of its vital interests,[21] which are defined here as concerning key national security priorities related to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political unity of states. The stronger state in a bilateral asymmetric alliance may require the weaker ally to achieve some of its goals, such as using the latter's territory to execute targeted military operations or contain a rival force. However, it does not depend on the weaker ally's support to safeguard its vital interests, as it can do so on its own through internal balancing.[22] A stronger state chooses to join forces with a weaker state not because it needs the latter to protect its vital interests, but to attain its security (or other) objectives with greater ease, indicating that capability aggregation is not an absolute necessity, but rather a facilitator.[23]

These features are also true for multilateral asymmetric alliances. But this alliance type possesses the distinct feature that, although it contains multiple actors, one ally singles itself out in a such way that its military capabilities come close to, match, or exceed the aggregate military capabilities of the participants of the rest of the alliance. Box-D in Figure 1 illustrates this visually.

Incorporating this assumption is necessary because not doing so risks blurring the line between symmetric and asymmetric alliances. It may be mistakenly assumed, for example, that since a lead

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[21] Jasen J. Castillo and Alexander B. Downes, 'Loyalty, hedging, or exit: How weaker alliance partners respond to the rise of new threats', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 46:2 (2023), pp. 227–68.

[22] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), p. 157; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 168.

[23] See, for example, Carla Norrlöf, 'NATO is not a hegemonic burden', Project Syndicate (2 April 2024), available at: {https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nato-at-75-unique-source-of-american-power-in-the-world-by-carla-norrlof-2024-04}.

power may occupy a relatively less dominant position in multilateral asymmetric alliances that contain a larger number of states, it requires other allies' support to protect its vital interests. If this were to be the case, the alliance would take on a symmetric character. For symmetric alliances, both bilateral (Box-A) and multilateral (Box-B), capability aggregation is essential to protect the vital interests of all participants, notwithstanding the possibility of significant power differences in this alliance type also.[24] While there is no lead power in symmetric alliances, asymmetric alliances are conditional on the existence of a lead power. The lead power in this study is called the senior ally, while weaker participants of asymmetric alliances are referred to as junior allies.

Clarifying the research problem

The following theoretical argument will be developed in an attempt to demonstrate causality between external developments that lie outside of an alliance's area of responsibility (independent variable) and disputes between allies (dependent variable). In this section, I sketch out a hypothetical policy setting featuring a dispute between two allied states, with the aim of offering a framework into which the involved parties' likely verbal and physical acts vis-à-vis each other can be inserted.

The unit of analysis for the dispute in question is dyadic, involving a junior ally and a senior ally.[25] A consideration of an alternative case where, rather than one junior ally, two (or more) junior allies jointly engage in a dispute with a senior ally is unlikely to produce a meaningfully different outcome given clear power differentials. Accordingly, if the senior ally has a sufficiently strong motive to pursue a course of action in a geopolitical setting, it will largely be unmoved by the level of opposition it faces from its allies. This will especially be true if the issue in question takes place in the senior ally's region. It is of limited scholarly interest to consider such a scenario, regardless of whether real-life examples pertaining to this case exist, since the outcome would be fairly predetermined: the senior ally would aggressively pursue its objectives in its region – especially if the issue concerns its security – even if it requires knocking out some junior allies that stand in its way.[26]

The opposite scenario, on the other hand, would provide a more fruitful course of analysis given its more interactive and less predictable character, which allows for theoretical endeavours – such as operationalising variables to assess risk-reducing or risk-enhancing factors between allies – to surmise what outcome may arise from the relevant dispute.[27] This scenario calls for a geopolitical contingency – or an unexpected regional development – in a junior ally's neighbourhood, to which it feels compelled to respond given its proximity to the relevant locality. As for the senior ally, it is assumed to be relatively less affected by the same development, but it nonetheless has a sufficiently motivating reason to get involved in it. And this involvement has the potential to set allies at odds and result in a dispute.

Such a case requires the existence of competing goals in the relevant geopolitical setting, and this can only be possible if there is a considerable geographical distance between the two allies. This is because, if the opposite were true – that is, if two allies were regional neighbours, a geopolitical development required a response, but rather than offering each other assistance they entered into a dispute that could even spark a military conflict – it would be infeasible to consider them allies. Such a situation would suggest that the alliance and the principle of collective security on which it is based are devoid of meaning and substance.

In addition to this clarification, it is also important to note that the question of whether the disputants are tied to each other in a bilateral or multilateral asymmetric alliance is of negligible importance. If a junior ally is upset by its senior ally's response to a geopolitical development in its region, it will demonstrate its frustration with the policies of its counterpart irrespective of the

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[24]Box-B has been depicted in a way that illustrates this point.

[25]For an analysis of dyadic interactions, see Paul D. Senese and John A. Vasquez, *The Steps to War: An Empirical Study* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[26]Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 142–3.

[27]See, for example, Bueno de Mesquita, *War Trap*.

alliance format. So, the hypothetical framework presented in the following section is applicable to both scenarios.

In the second theoretical discussion, I aim to clarify the issue of what kind of behavioural constraints are likely to impinge upon disputant allies while they are interacting with each other in a tense environment. Notwithstanding the shortcomings of the scholarship reviewed above, a thorough analysis of this issue will be aided by a consideration of internal factors, as such factors provide a lens into the existing state of affairs between allies – more precisely, how capable they would be, in view of their current ties, to mitigate the effects of a contentious issue. Contrary to the tendency to view them as creating causal effects, factors related to intra-alliance dynamics are introduced in this section as intervening variables, as their main function in assessments of externally caused tense episodes between allies lies in illustrating the restraining and driving forces that would influence allies' behaviour towards one another in times of dispute.

Conceptual framework

A dispute in an asymmetric alliance

In asymmetric alliances, maintaining defence ties with a preponderant actor serves as security reassurance for junior allies.[28] Indeed, in the context of our discussion, an unexpected geopolitical development would normally prompt a junior ally to appeal to its senior partner for support, which would result in a common position being adopted on the issue at hand. The caveat here is that not all collective behaviour among allies is guided by security considerations, with NATO's involvement in the Libyan conflict to protect civilians and then facilitate Qaddafi's overthrow being a notable example. In addition to humanitarian motives, allies may be motivated by profit-maximising behaviour, leading them to exploit contextual opportunities to advance their interests.[29] Regardless of which motives are at work, as long as allies achieve the desired result quickly while maintaining unity, they will not face the risk of an intra-alliance dispute.

However, as the issue in question is a regional contingency, there is a possibility that it may acquire a dynamic character and develop into a volatile geopolitical situation. If such a development occurs, it may undermine efforts between allies to achieve the relevant goal quickly and complicate calculations regarding how to address issues that require a response in an environment characterised by increasing complexity. In such a policy environment, allies are likely to reevaluate their previous positions and devise alternative strategies so as to provide a more effective response to newly emerging challenges. This process will risk sidelining the previously agreed-upon collective goal between allies, which will prioritise their own interests given changing circumstances, even if they adopt conflicting objectives with their fellow allies.

In such a situation, the two allies will experience rising tensions in their bilateral relations. But this process is likely to unfold in a gradual manner, as the ties of an alliance serve to mitigate impulsive tendencies at the outset of a dispute. Therefore, the context within which two allies begin to interact while dealing with their dispute is expected to take the form of a low-stress environment.

At the beginning of this process, the two allies are likely to express their uneasiness at each other's policies through verbal means. The junior ally is expected to be more vocal than the senior ally in this respect. This is because as the junior ally is an integral part of the region in which it encounters the senior ally, it will be more sensitive to developments in its immediate surroundings. As a result, one would expect the junior ally to make direct appeals to the senior ally to heed its concerns, and should such calls go unheeded and the senior ally insist on pursuing its own agenda, there is a strong likelihood that the junior ally will accuse the senior ally of undermining its interests. That said, since the dispute is taking place in a low-stress environment in this phase, the context is

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[28]Brian Blankenship and Erik Lin-Greenberg, 'Trivial tripwires? Military capabilities and alliance reassurance', *Security Studies*, 31:1 (2022), pp. 92–117.

[29]Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for profit: Bringing the revisionist state back in', *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 72–107.

permissive of dialogue-oriented interactions, during which disputant allies can table new proposals and introduce alternative solutions to resolve their predicament.

If such interactions fail to bear fruit, the tendency to resort to military measures increases. Viewed from the perspective of the junior ally, introducing military measures will convey the message that it is capable of fending for itself and dealing with regional developments on its own. Importantly, the junior ally's resort to military measures in a low-stress environment will be limited in scope, since its primary objective is to demonstrate resolve without risking a military confrontation with the senior ally. If the junior ally's acts of resolve fail to produce the desired outcome and the two sides continue to be resolute in their divergence, they risk entering a high-stress environment.

The distinguishing feature of this environment is the escalation of tensions to the point where the two allies face the risk of direct armed conflict. Even if allies avoid such an eventuality, the steady increase in the stress level is likely to produce a militarised dispute. This manifests itself when allies demonstrate an increased readiness to engage the other side kinetically. In a high-stress environment, allies set out to pursue their goals through increased military involvement, as the local environment will demand higher readiness and a stronger resolve to use force.

From the vantage point of the junior ally, given that the two sides are pursuing clashing interests, the increase in the senior ally's military activities acts as a stumbling block that restricts its free-dom of action. This forces the junior ally to enhance its own military preparations and activities. Unlike in the previous phase, the junior ally's intensification of its military activities in a high-stress environment has the potential to lead to a direct military engagement with the senior ally. By designing its policies without fear of the realisation of the conflict scenario, the junior ally indi-cates to its senior partner that it is prepared to take more aggressive steps and its risk tolerance level has risen significantly.

Yet given that the state with which it has entered into a dispute is its ally and a more powerful actor, the junior ally may elect to refrain from actions that could heighten tensions further. Indeed, since the risk of a military clash between the two allies is greater in the high-stress environment than it is in the previous phase, there is a more pressing need to take steps to prevent tensions from turning into an armed conflict. By taking steps in this direction, the two sides can avoid a more serious crisis. In the event that the opposite scenario occurs, and tensions escalate further, it becomes almost certain that a military conflict will ensue between the two allies.

Factors influencing allies' behaviour

The above hypothetical framework provides an outline of the likely path by which a dispute between a junior ally and a senior ally might emerge, develop, and end. Examining the level to which tensions may escalate between disputant allies based on the foregoing hypothetical scenario will provide an insight into the strength (or weakness) of alliance ties.

The existing scholarship in the field of International Relations tends to examine alliance relation-ships primarily from the perspective of interest and identity. According to the former, states act as rational utility maximisers, meaning that their participation in and commitment to international collectivities – such as alliances – are determined by cost–benefit calculations. This perspective speaks to accounts that echo neorealism and the utilitarian or institutional wing of neoliberalism; and these accounts consider practical benefits as key determinants in explaining how states relate to their allies.[30]

As for identity-centred perspectives, which are commonly associated with the constructivist tradition, they emphasise the importance of shared norms and values for explaining how alliances operate. On this account, once states have become allies, they begin to feel part of a community[31]

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[30]Bueno de Mesquita, *War Trap*; Celeste A. Wallander and Robert O. Keohane, 'Risk, threat, and security institutions', in Helga Haftendorn, Robert O. Keohane, and Celeste A. Wallander (eds), *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 21–47.

[31]Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds), *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
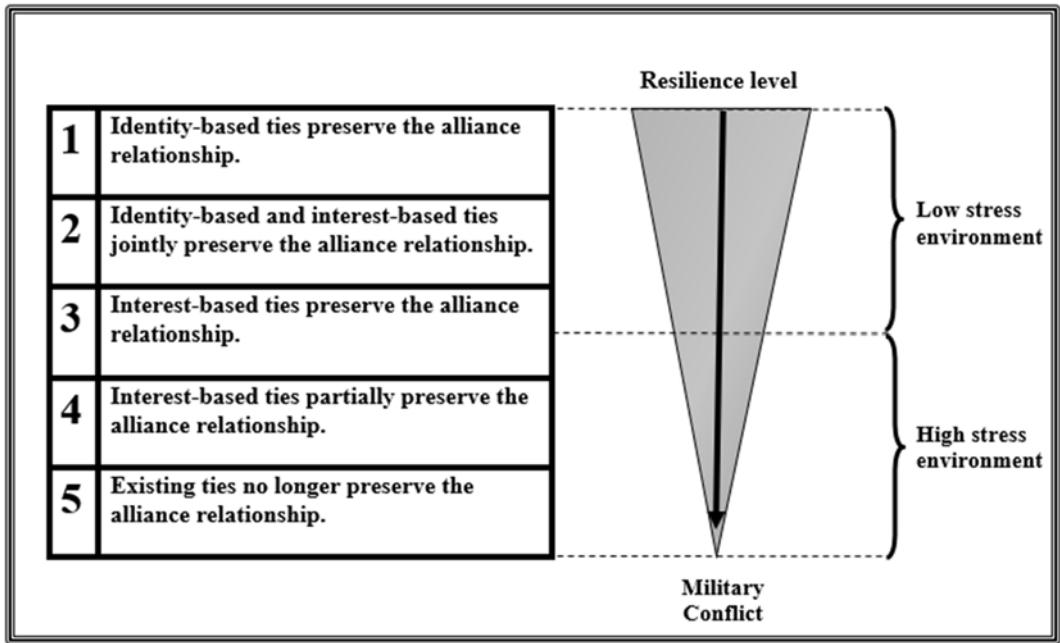
Figure 2. A typology of alliance resilience.

thanks to their assimilation of common norms and values.[32] This ultimately creates a sense of shared identity based on common principles – such as respect for democracy and international law – or common attachments – such as pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism. The existence of non-material ideational factors takes interstate relations to a whole different level that defies the instrumental articulation of alliances.

It should be noted that analysing alliance relations dichotomously (based on interest or identity) may lead to an incomplete picture, as both factors may simultaneously be present in alliance relations and, as a result, affect allies' ability to resolve disputes among themselves. This possibility speaks to the necessity of introducing in-between categories that contain elements related to both interest and identity. It may be difficult to determine which of these two factors will have more impact on disputants' decision-making when an alliance relationship runs into trouble. Overcoming this difficulty requires examining the meaning and significance the incumbent government of a state attaches to the relevant alliance.

Obviously, the more committed a government to an alliance, the more resilient that alliance will be and, therefore, the easier it will be to overcome disputes. As outlined in Figure 2, I illustrate a way to identify the resilience of an alliance relationship by considering five different scenarios, each of which contains elements related to identity, interest or lack thereof.

TYPE-1: An alliance relationship built around a shared identity is the most resilient alliance type, as states 'define national identity and interests within the framework of' particular values and norms.[33] The existence of a common normative framework promotes ideational unity among allies, which in turn prevents them from viewing one another as potential threats and facilitates the resolution of dispute-causing issues. This process is helped by ties and contacts established between allies at various levels, including those at the sub-leadership level among diplomats, bureaucrats,

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[32] Alexandra Gheciu, 'Security institutions as agents of socialization? NATO and the "New Europe"', *International Organization*, 59:4 (2005), pp. 973–1012.
[33] Ibid., p. 990.

and military officials.[34] An institutionalised network of relations allows junior allies to communicate with and influence senior allies when the former engages in a dispute with the latter. Given that the two sides adhere to common norms and values, senior allies will be sympathetic towards junior allies and their concerns, which means that they will be willing to take steps to address their counterparts' grievances caused by their policies. Type-1 alliances will obviously serve participants' interests as well. What is stressed here is that identity-based ties are the main determinant guiding states' behaviour in times of intra-alliance disputes. In this alliance type, states would even forgo certain interests in the name of maintaining their ties with their allies with whom they share a common identity.

TYPE-2: If identity-based factors and interest-based factors combine to influence allies' behaviour during times of dispute, resolving the relevant issues becomes harder. This is because attempts to resolve issues in this case will be complicated by the uneasy interplay between interest-driven motives on the one hand and identity-based ties on the other. It is possible that junior allies will prioritise interests over identity during disputes, in which case they will be more emboldened to stand up to their allies in order to protect their interests. The tendency to disregard normative constraints facilitates, if not fosters, unrestrained behaviour, increasing the likelihood of tensions escalating among allies. If, on the other hand, normative ties serve as a constraint on states, finding an off-ramp out of the relevant dispute is possible.[35] In this case, disputants conclude that their interests are best served by maintaining ties with normatively like-minded states, even though they are upset by some of their policies. This means that a senior ally is expected to be responsive to the concerns of a junior ally and take appropriate steps to mitigate them, while the junior ally contributes to this process by avoiding acts that would heighten tensions further. Consequently, although less resilient than the Type-1 variant, Type-2 represents a relatively robust alliance relationship.

TYPE-3: Another alliance type is one in which normative factors do not exist or lose their effectiveness over time, indicating that allies' ability to resolve disputes will be determined solely by utility-driven considerations.[36] In the absence of normative constraints, states will adopt a more rigid and unyielding stance towards their allies in their attempts to defend their interests. Therefore, as opposed to the two previous cases where states deal with their issues within a low-stress environment, in cases of Type-3, allies risk finding themselves in a high-stress environment. But the pendulum can swing the other way also, such that since states participating in Type-3 alliances base their policies on utilitarian considerations, they would avoid acts that would threaten the alliance relationship, if they conclude that maintaining the status quo is beneficial for their long-term interests. Should this be the case, allies will prefer to deal with their issues without resorting to hard-line measures – such as issuing threats or engaging in military preparations – and this enables them to stay within the bounds of a low-stress environment and settle their dispute without it becoming militarised.

TYPE-4: However, if states are less concerned about the preservation of the status quo, they will not hesitate to employ stricter measures against their allies. This typically occurs when a junior ally feels no longer as dependent on its senior partner for the protection of its vital interests and has achieved near self-sufficiency in defence. This points to a situation in which autonomy is valued more highly than security.[37] When normative ties are lacking and interest-based ties are weak, junior allies will feel more emboldened to stand up to their senior ally, but equally important, the latter will be unwilling to address the former's concerns and more likely to pursue its own agenda. As a result, it is almost certain that allies will deal with their issue in a high-stress environment, where tensions will escalate into a militarised dispute, possibly involving a degree of direct military action. Nonetheless, viewed from the perspective of junior allies, they would refrain from steps

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[34]Winger, 'Alliance embeddedness'.

[35]Senese and Vasquez, *The Steps to War*, pp. 20–1.

[36]Bueno de Mesquita, *War Trap*.

[37]Morrow, 'Alliances and asymmetry'.

that would drag them into a full-fledged military conflict with their senior partner, if they conclude that maintaining the status quo will still provide functional benefits. In Type-4 alliances, such benefits are usually indirect, indicating that although a junior ally does not receive any notable direct defence benefits from its alliance with a senior ally, it can leverage its position within the alliance to obtain benefits in other issue areas.[38]

TYPE-5: The point at which interest-based factors fail to rein in aggressive tendencies is when the cost–benefit balance indicates that exercising restraint to maintain the relevant alliance relationship is suboptimal. This scenario highlights the fact that the alliance relationship has totally lost its ability to withstand disputes. As far as states' commitment to their allies is concerned, Type-5 represents the weakest possible alliance form, meaning that states are expected to defend their interests more forcefully against their allies in times of dispute. Measures adopted in this case will involve employing force against one's allies in a way that will result in a full-scale armed confrontation.

Turkey–US interactions in Syria

In this section, I outline the key moments of Turkey–US tensions in northern Syria. The discussion describes the process by which Turkey (the junior ally) enters into a dispute with the US (the senior ally) that gradually takes on a militarised character. Given that the Syrian crisis has been going on since 2011, there is a great deal of material to cover, so relevance criteria had to be applied to the collection and presentation of empirical information.

The First Phase (2011–2016)

The externally caused dispute between Turkey and the US owed to the cascading effects of the Arab Spring, which, like several other Arab countries, reached Turkey's immediate neighbour Syria in 2011. Given the ruling Assad regime's inability to contain the situation at its incipient stage, the unrest in Syria descended into a large-scale insurgency and subsequently into a civil war.

During the early stages of this event, Turkey and the US forged a common position, calling for the establishment of a democratic Syria without President Bashar al-Assad.[39] As would be expected of allied states, the two countries combined their efforts in a volatile geopolitical environment to achieve the same goal – to remove Assad – and the hallmark of their collaboration was the creation of the rebel group known as the FSA.[40] However, this collaboration was not security-driven, as the Syrian regime could not possibly threaten Turkish or US interests, as it was fighting for its very existence and constantly losing territory to rebels. This is why Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah joined the Syrian conflict on the side of Assad, seeking to prevent his overthrow.

Although the Turkish and US sides justified their support for the Syrian opposition on humanitarian grounds, other plausible reasons can also be cited: namely, the US administration – led by liberal interventionist officials[41] – hoped that a US-friendly government would be installed in Syria, a country historically at odds with the US.[42] As for the Turkish government, despite previously being on good terms with Assad, it sought to replace his minority regime with a Sunni-dominated one.[43]

[38]Paul Poast, 'Does issue linkage work? Evidence from European alliance negotiations, 1860 to 1945', *International Organization*, 66:2 (2012), pp. 277–310.

[39]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 'Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Ahmet Davutoğlu'nun ABD Dışişleri Bakanı Hillary Clinton ile ortak basın toplantısı 11 Ağustos 2012, İstanbul' (11 August 2012), available at: {https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-ahmet-davutoglu_nun-abd-disisleri-bakani-hillary-clinton-ile-ortak-basin-toplantisi.tr.mfa}.

[40]Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 'Al-Quds is Muslims' red line' (5 December 2017), available at: {https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/87594/al-quds-is-muslims-red-line}.

[41]David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), Kindle edition, pp. 5615–20.

[42]Jacob Abadi, 'US–Syria relations in the shadow of Cold War and détente', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 57:4 (2021), pp. 534–52.

[43]Behlül Ozkan, 'Turkey, Davutoglu and the idea of pan-Islamism', *Survival*, 56:4 (2014), pp. 119–40.

Because Turkey did not possess the military power to implement regime change on its own, the incumbent government considered it necessary to have the US on its side; as a result, it seized on instances of large-scale civilian deaths to persuade the US leadership to launch a Kosovo-style operation against the Syrian regime.[44] The US side, however, proved reluctant to engage in such an endeavour due to the difficulty of the task, about which CIA director Leon Panetta told journalist David Sanger that "'There is no way to do this other than a full-scale war.'"[45]

Turkey and the US, after their agreement to remove Assad fell apart, found themselves at odds over the issue of how to deal with the deteriorating security situation in Syria. According to the US, the most pressing issue was ISIS's territorial expansion and its emergence as an international terrorist organisation.[46] For Turkey, although ISIS was a threat, there were other issues that required attention, such as creating a safe zone for refugees, establishing a no-fly zone, empowering the moderate Syrian opposition and the FSA, and addressing the security threat posed by the Assad regime.[47]

Changing priorities ushered in a period of discord between Turkey and the US – an expected result of volatile geopolitical settings – and the failure to resolve a regional unrest in a manner that favoured the two allies – the removal of Assad – paved the way for subsequent divergences. Thus, as the Syrian crisis dragged on, the two allies revised their earlier positions, eventually pursuing competing goals in an environment marked by the existence of a plethora of actors, including the regime and its state and non-state allies, various branches of the Syrian armed opposition, ISIS, and the Syrian Kurdish group the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed branch the People's Defense Units (YPG).

This atmosphere gradually drew Turkey and the US into a low-stress environment, with the two allies reacting to each other for not acting in a reconciliatory manner and heeding their respective concerns. During this period, Turkey, for example, temporarily refused to allow the US to use its Incirlik base in the campaign against ISIS, due to Washington's failure to align its Syria policy with that of Ankara.[48] With the two sides becoming increasingly divided over the above-mentioned issues, the Kurdish issue would add another layer of stress to their relations, given that the US-led coalition had begun collaborating with the PYD/YPG in the fight against ISIS.

Turkey called on the US to end its cooperation with the PYD/YPG, which was considered to be a more serious threat than ISIS given that it was an alleged part of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), against whom Turkey has waged an anti-insurgency campaign since the early 1980s.[49] Because the two allies were now operating in a low-stress environment, Turkey displayed the behaviour that would be expected of a junior ally in such a setting, namely expressing its frustration with the US via messages directed at its leadership. The appeals made to the White House to choose between an ally (Turkey) and a terrorist group (the PYD/YPG) epitomised Turkey's resentment towards its senior ally.[50]

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[44]TRT Haber, 'Başbakan Erdoğan net konuştu' (30 August 2013), available at: {https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/basbakan-erdogan-net-konustu-99175.html}.

[45]Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, p. 5611.

[46]The White House, 'Letter from the President: Authorization for the use of United States Armed Forces in connection with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (11 February 2015), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/letter-president-authorization-use-United-states-armed-forces-connection}.

[47]AK Parti, 'Suriye rejimi, ISID ve PKK düsmandir' (28 October 2014), available at: {https://www.akparti.org.tr/haberler/suriye-rejimi-%C4%B1sid-ve-pkk-dusmandir/}.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 'CNN International'ın Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan ile mülakatı' (3 September 2015), available at: {https://www.tccb.gov.tr/mulakatlar/1709/34284/cnn-internationalin-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ile-mulakati}.

[50]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, '2023 Hedeflerine Doğru Kutlu Yürüyüş Devam Edecek' (10 February 2016), available at: {https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/38783/2023-hedeflerine-dogru-kutlu-yuruyus-devam-edecek}.

Despite the emerging tensions between the two allies, the conducive nature of low-stress environments for dialogue-oriented interactions provided an opportunity to negotiate and resolve dispute-causing issues. Turkish and US officials, for example, came together on several occasions to discuss the possibility of using the FSA in a campaign against ISIS. According to the US side, this plan, designed by Turkey, would 'require as many as 20,000 U.S. troops on the ground', something both Obama and Trump opposed.[51] A close examination of the US position on this issue reveals that Washington formed a different opinion about the FSA than Ankara, coming to the conclusion that the group was unreliable, if not dangerous, given the presence of extremist elements within its ranks, with parallels drawn between the FSA and Afghan mujahedeen. According to Sanger, 'many in the White House recalled how the United States came to rue the day it armed local groups in Afghanistan during the war with the Soviets. Those weapons, of course, had been pointed back at American troops for a decade.'[52]

As a joint plan with the US proved infeasible, Turkey displayed another typical junior ally behaviour in a low-stress environment: that is, introducing its own military measures to deal with the relevant local developments. Thus, in addition to providing continued military support to the FSA despite the US turning its back on the group, Turkey launched its first cross-border operation, called Operation Euphrates Shield, in August 2016 to combat non-state actors. This operation enabled Turkey to drive a wedge between the PYD/YPG-controlled areas in northern Syria and also remove ISIS militants away from the Turkish border.[53]

Referring back to our theoretical argument, the Turkish military actions during the low-stress phase were solely intended to demonstrate that Turkey was capable of acting independently, and there was no indication of an upcoming military confrontation with the US. This was manifest in the fact that the US adopted a supportive stance towards Operation Euphrates Shield. However, US support was expressed in a manner that highlighted the Turkish operation's anti-ISIS dimension, and the fact that the operation had also been intended for the PYD/YPG was played down by the US side.[54] Therefore, the root cause of the Turkey–US dispute in Syria remained unaddressed, which consequently dragged the two allies into a high-stress environment.

The Second Phase (2017–2023)

Satisfying the core element of a high-stress setting, the subsequent period witnessed increasing resort to military force by the disputant allies. A watershed event in this process was the simultaneous air campaign conducted by the Turkish armed forces against the PKK militants in Iraq and YPG militants in Syria in April 2017.[55] With regards to Syria, the close proximity of US troops to the area struck by Turkish jets and the US State Department's expression of disapproval of the Turkish action were indicative of rising tensions between the two allies.[56]

This process involved further military actions by Turkey. Thus, when the Turkish side concluded that the US would not clear the northern Syrian province of Manbij of YPG militants despite its earlier pledge to do so, the Turkish air force began to strike certain areas in that province.[57] The

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[51]Brett McGurk, 'Hard truths in Syria', *Foreign Affairs*, 98:3 (2019), pp. 76–7. Quoted in Cengiz Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), Kindle edition, pp. 4624–5.

[52]Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, pp. 5604–5.

[53]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, 'Zeytin Dalı harekâtı' (2016), available at: {https://www.msb.gov.tr/ZeytinDaliHarekati}.

[54]US Embassy & Consulates in Turkey, 'Deputy Secretary Antony Blinken's interview with NTV's Ahmet Yeşiltepe' (27 September 2016), available at: {https://tr.usembassy.gov/deputy-secretary-antony-blinkens-interview-ntvs-ahmet-yesiltepe/}.

[55]Anadolu Ajansı, 'TSK'dan Sincar ve Karaçok dağlarına hava harekatı', AA (25 April 2017), available at: {https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/tskdan-sincar-ve-karacok-daglarina-hava-harekati/804409}.

[56]US Department of State, 'Department Press Briefing: April 27, 2017' (2017), available at: {https://2017-2021.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-april-27-2017/#TURKEY}.

[57]Sedat Ergin, 'ABD ile Menbiç'te büyük bilek güreşi', Hürriyet (26 January 2018), available at: {https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/abd-ile-menbicte-buyuk-bilek-guresi-40721983}.

Turkish strikes demonstrated that the presence of US troops on the ground would not stop Turkey from targeting Manbij. Following this event, Turkish President Erdoğan, accusing Western nations of turning a blind eye to Turkey's concerns, declared that Turkey's next incursion would be into Manbij as part of its fight against terror.[58]

Adding momentum to this process was the fact that, in the face of Turkey's determination, US forces enhanced their visibility in northern Syria and conveyed messages of resolve. Thus, US General Paul Funk, accompanied by *New York Times* correspondent Rob Nordland, issued a sharp warning to Turkey from Manbij, saying that "'You hit us, we will respond aggressively. We will defend ourselves.'"[59] The culmination of this tense episode was Erdoğan's message that the Turkish armed forces would destroy every terrorist, and US forces better not be close to them.[60]

It is evident from this episode that the confrontation between Turkey and the US in northern Syria had gradually evolved into a militarised dispute. Following the definition of Jones, Bremer, and Singer,[61] despite the absence of a kinetic engagement between the two allies' military forces, the Turkish and US sides engaged in verbal and physical acts – in the form of threats and military moves – aimed at the other. Although the two allies were now engaged in a militarised dispute, neither side changed its behaviour, allowing verbal and physical exchanges to continue. The US government, for instance, accused the Turkish side of 'endangering innocent civilians, and destabilizing the region, including undermining the campaign to defeat ISIS' following Turkey's initiation of Operation Peace Spring against YPG forces in October 2019.[62]

Operation Peace Spring was the largest military operation carried out by the Turkish military in Syria to date, enabling Turkey to seize control of more than 4,000 square kilometres of northern Syrian territory.[63] Given the operation's scope, there was an increased risk that the Turkish army could encounter US forces and engage in a military conflict with them. Crucially, however, it transpired after the operation that Turkey had taken steps to avert a likely conflict between Turkish and US troops. US Defense Secretary Mark Esper stated after the Turkish operation that Turkey had informed the US in advance of its upcoming operation so that US troops could safely be evacuated from the area into which the Turkish army was set to move.[64]

However, these precautionary measures did not alleviate the high-stress atmosphere between the two allies, as the dispute-causing issues remained unresolved. As a result, the Turkish government began exploring other options for addressing its concerns. This eventually led to the formation of a partnership with Russia and Iran under the Astana framework, where the three countries pledged their common commitment to preserve Syria's unity.[65] Turkey's attempts to overthrow Assad had been met with Russian and Iranian opposition previously, but now it was considered necessary to collaborate with them to resolve the Syrian conflict.

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[58]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 'Afrin Operasyonu Sahada Fiilen Başlamıştır' (20 January 2018), available at: {https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/89139/afrin-operasyonu-sahada-fiilen-baslamistir}.

[59]Rob Nordland, 'On northern Syria front line, U.S. and Turkey head into tense face-off', *New York Times* (7 February 2018), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/world/middleeast/us-turkey-manbij-kurds.html}.

[60]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 'AK Parti grup toplantısında yaptıkları konuşma' (13 Februrary 2018), available at: {https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/90412/ak-parti-grup-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma}.

[61]Jones, Bremer, and Singer, 'Militarized interstate disputes, 1816–1992'.

[62]US Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury designates Turkish ministries and senior officials in response to military action in Syria' (2019), available at: {https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm792}.

[63]Kara Kuvvetleri Komutanlığı, 'Barış Pınarı Harekatı' (2019), available at: {https://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/1332020-57351}.

[64]Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'Esper condemns Turkey's Syria incursion, says U.S. stands with Syrian Democratic Forces' (11 October 2019), available at: {https://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/1988255/esper-condemns-turkeys-syria-incursion-says-us-stands-with-syrian-democratic-fo/}.

[65]Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Joint statement by representatives of Iran, Russia and Türkiye on outcomes of the 21st international meeting on Syria in the Astana Format, Astana, 24–25 January 2024' (2024), available at: {https://www.mfa.gov.tr/iran–rusya-ve-turkiye-temsilcileri-tarafindan-yapilan-astana-formatindaki-suriye-konulu-21-yuksek-duzeyli-toplanti-ya-iliskin-ortak-bildiri.en.mfa}.

This collaboration represents yet another example of the incongruence between Turkish and US positions on the Syrian conflict, since the US, unlike Turkey, considers Russia and Iran as hostile forces that must be kept in check within Syria. To this end, the US bolstered its protective shield over the Kurds, much to the dismay of Turkey, in order to keep pro-regime forces away from US/Kurdish-controlled territory in Syria – a process that has even involved lethal military action.[66]

Although, with its participation in the Astana process, the Turkish government appears to have prioritised diplomacy over military force during the subsequent stages of the Syrian crisis, in reality, military force accompanied diplomatic efforts. Thus, the Turkish military continued to strike targets in northern Syria near US military personnel, causing tensions between the two allies to rise again.[67] For its part, the US also exercised the use of force option against Turkey during this period, even targeting its ally's military assets directly. This occurred in October 2023, when a US F-16 aircraft shot down a Turkish attack drone in northern Syria, on the grounds that 'some of the strikes [launched by the Turkish drone] were inside a declared U.S.-restricted operating zone'.[68] The fact that Turkish–US tensions have escalated to the point of direct kinetic engagement underscores the persistence of a high-stress atmosphere between the two sides, as well as the militarised character of their dispute.

Turkey–US dispute in broader perspective

Implications of Turkey's normative decoupling from the US

Given that the state with which Turkey entered into a dispute was not a menacing foreign power, but its long-standing ally, the question that arises in light of this is why the Turkish government was unable to resolve its Syrian predicament less confrontationally with the US by utilising common ties based on identity and/or interest that are typically present between allied states. In response to this question, one might highlight Turkey's right not to compromise on its legitimate security concerns related to the PYD/YPG. Yet the discussion above indicates that Turkey's discord with the US over Syria extends beyond the Kurdish issue, also involving matters related to the FSA, ISIS, and even the Syrian regime and its allies, Russia and Iran.

Taking a retrospective approach, the Syrian dispute, while unique in the history of Turkey–US relations, is not the first of its kind, as the two allies have been involved in tense moments during earlier historical periods as well, as exemplified by the Cyprus-related disputes during the Cold War.[69] But in such instances, divergences were dealt with in a much less confrontational manner, with both allies seeking to resolve their issues within a low-stress environment. On the part of Turkey, the process of overcoming disputes with the US in earlier times was facilitated by Turkish foreign policy's identity-based Western character, which was evident in the Turkish ruling elite's backing of the free world vision championed and promoted by the US against rival communist ideology[70] as well as the dominance of pro-Western diplomats – despite minor exceptions – in the Turkish foreign affairs bureaucracy[71] and the close institutional ties between the Turkish and

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[66]Thomas Gibbons-Neff, 'How a 4-hour battle between Russian mercenaries and U.S. commandos unfolded in Syria', *New York Times* (24 May 2018), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html}.

[67]David Ignatius, 'Turkey is playing with fire in northern Syria', *Washington Post* (23 November 2022), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/11/23/turkey-attack-kurds-northern-syria/}.

[68]US Department of Defense, 'After U.S. downs Turkish drone in Syria, focus remains on defeat ISIS mission' (5 October 2023), available at: {https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3550462/after-us-downs-turkish-drone-in-syria-focus-remains-on-defeat-isis-mission/}.

[69]Congressional Record, 'Proceedings and debates of the 89th Congress, second session, volume 112, part 1, 10 January–27 January 1966' (1966), pp. 335–7.

[70]Eray Alim, 'Turkey's post-colonial predicament and the perils of its Western-centric foreign policy (1955–1959)', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 58:6 (2022), pp. 972–88.

[71]Hüseyin Sert, 'Bir raporun hikayesi: Türkiye'nin Batı ile ittifakında Dışişleri bürokrasisinin rolü ve bakanlık içi bir itiraz olarak "Üçüncü Dünyacılık"', *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, 75:1 (2020), pp. 97–125.

US military establishments.[72] Viewed from Turkey's perspective, such reciprocal ties and channels between the two sides provided a means of dialogue and facilitated the process of hammering out contentious issues with the senior ally.

One could plausibly argue that maintaining close relations with the US in earlier times was also driven by a need to safeguard Turkey's national security, given the threat posed by the Soviet Union. The Soviet threat was indisputably a critical factor in Turkey's foreign policy calculations in the early stages of the Cold War, as Turkish diplomats revealed at the time.[73] However, from the early 1960s onwards, the threat Turkey felt from the Soviet Union had significantly declined thanks to the advent of peaceful coexistence and détente. This climate enabled Turkey to pursue its foreign policy objectives – such as in Cyprus – more easily and assertively, without fear of repercussions from the Soviet Union.[74]

Providing further evidence of why Turkey's alliance with the US in earlier times conforms to the Type-1 alliance model shown in Figure 2 is that even though the US-centric foreign policy approach did not always serve Turkey's interests, the country maintained its international orientation, regardless of the government in power. For example, the Western character of Turkish foreign policy during the Cold War deprived the country of the necessary political support when it came to dealing with the Cyprus issue at the UN General Assembly, where post-colonial states enjoyed numerical superiority.[75] Despite such drawbacks, Turkey continued to pursue a westward course in its foreign affairs and remained a committed member of the US-led international order.

Such features hardly characterise the present period, given Turkey's normative decoupling from the West,[76] which is evident in its democratic backslide as well as the accompanying negative developments, including those relating to violations of human rights, freedom of expression, and the rule of law.[77] The autocratic tendency informing Turkey's domestic politics also manifests itself in its foreign policy choices, as evidenced by the growing ideational convergence between Turkey and non-Western authoritarian countries such as China and Russia around notions such as multipolarity over unipolarity.[78]

The new features characterising Turkey's internal and external politics call into question the country's position within the Western alliance system and often prompt its NATO allies to express discontentment with its policies. As the senior ally of the alliance system Turkey belongs to, the US takes the lead in this respect, demonstrating its frustration with its ally through concrete measures such as applying the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in response to Turkey's growing defence ties with Russia.[79] The fact that Turkey is the first and only US ally to be subjected to CAATSA starkly reveals the depths to which the alliance between the two countries has descended.

This atmosphere explains why Turkey struggles to find common ground with its senior ally on international matters and why channels of dialogue prove ineffective when it comes to dealing with problems of common concern, such as the Syrian crisis. In line with the propositions stipulated in our theoretical framework, a state of affairs such as the one characterising the Turkey–US alliance demotivates the senior ally to seek ways to address its junior allies' grievances.

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[72]Güvenç and Özel, 'US–Turkey relations since World War II', pp. 525–9.

[73]Necmeddin Sadak, 'Turkey faces the Soviets', *Foreign Affairs*, 27:3 (1949), pp. 449–61.

[74]William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 106–18.

[75]Eray Alim, 'Turkey between the Third World and the West: Consequences of failing to strike the right balance (1961–1965)', *Middle East Critique*, 31:3 (2022), pp. 285–302.

[76]Kutlay and Öniş, 'Turkish foreign policy in a post-Western order'.

[77]Zeynep Gülşah Çapan and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Postcolonial colonialism? The case of Turkey', in Charlotte Epstein (ed.), *Against International Relations Norms* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 193–210.

[78]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 'Çin'de Global Times ve Huánqiú Shíbào gazetelerinde yayımlanan makale' (2 July 2019), available at: {https://www.tccb.gov.tr/makaleler/1898/106908/-turkiye-ve-cin-ortak-gelecek-vizyonu-paylasiyor-}.

[79]US Department of State, 'The United States sanctions Turkey under CAATSA 231' (14 December 2020), available at: {https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231/}.

Enter interest-based factors

In light of the downward trend in relations between Turkey and the US, it is not surprising that their dispute has become militarised, although it is noteworthy that tensions have not escalated into a hot conflict given the risks involved. Viewed from Turkey's standpoint, the second scenario would incur significant costs on the country, as it would not only drag Turkey into a military conflict with a much more powerful country but also put at risk Turkey's position within NATO, given the status of the US within this alliance as the lead power and, relatedly, junior allies' reliance on it for security. Referring back to our argument on asymmetric alliances, the US-led Atlantic alliance plays a crucial role in protecting the vital interests of junior allies – a fact that even nuclear-armed members of NATO acknowledge.[80]

If this proposition were to be true for the case of Turkey, the country's alliance with the US would correspond to Type-3 in our model: that is, in the absence of normative ties, interest-based ties preserve the alliance relationship between the two sides during crisis moments such as in Syria. However, available evidence regarding Turkey's security ties with the US in the conventional and nuclear realms does not support this proposition.

Regarding the conventional realm, given the progress Turkey has made in meeting its own defence requirements, the country has become much less dependent on its senior ally. For example, key weapons systems, such as artillery and armed drones, used by Turkey to strike targets in northern Syria, are indigenously produced.[81] Developing such capabilities is part of Turkey's efforts to strengthen its own defence-industrial complex and reduce its dependence on its Western allies. According to official figures, the Turkish defence industry's dependence on external suppliers has declined from 80 per cent to 20 per cent over the last two decades.[82]

As for the nuclear dimension, because Turkey lacks its own nuclear deterrent, it could be argued that the extension of the US nuclear umbrella facilitates the protection of its vital interests. The existing state of affairs, however, casts significant doubt on the idea that US nuclear capabilities can be considered an important element of Turkey's security strategy. As discussed above, during the tense engagements between the two sides, the US even took direct military action against Turkey by shooting down its drone in northern Syria. An alliance relationship characterised by such unconventional events makes it implausible to argue that the junior ally would factor into its security strategy the nuclear capabilities of its senior ally.

Despite the negative outlook of Turkey–US relations, the Turkish leadership's decision to inform the US in advance of its largest cross-border incursion – Operation Peace Spring – suggests a tendency to avoid a larger crisis between the two countries. This must be due to the fact that the benefits derived from existing alliance relations – although not at their maximum attainable level – must still be incentivising enough for Turkey. This would align with Type-4 in our model, namely that interest-based ties partially preserve the alliance relationship, but nonetheless enable the maintenance of the status quo.

Indeed, from Turkey's perspective, the preservation of the status quo means remaining allies with the world's most powerful country – the US[83] – as well as remaining a member of the world's most durable alliance system – NATO – which is led by the US.[84] Having such a status provides

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[80]War on the Rocks, 'A chat with Britain's top officer, Adm. Radakin' (18 September 2023), available at: {https://warontherocks.com/2023/09/a-chat-with-britains-top-officer-adm-radakin/}.

[81]Baykar, 'Unmanned aerial vehicle systems' (2022), available at: {https://www.baykartech.com/en/unmanned-aerial-vehicle-systems/}; Makine ve Kimya Endüstrisi, 'E Fırtına HTS Fırtına Howitzer Integration' (2023), available at: {https://urunler.mke.gov.tr/Urunler/E-F%C4%B1rt%C4%B1na-HTS-F%C4%B1rt%C4%B1na-Howitzer-Integration/28/1976}.

[82]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 'Savunma sanayiinde tam bağımsız Türkiye hedefimize ulaşıncaya kadar çalışmayı sürdüreceğiz' (28 July 2023), available at: {https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/148963/-savunma-sanayiinde-tam-bagimsiz-turkiye-hedefimize-ulasincaya-kadar-calismayi-surdurecegiz-}.

[83]Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[84]Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

Turkey with significant indirect benefits, as it can influence the decision-making processes of the Atlantic alliance in matters related to its interests.

This ability manifests itself most clearly in Turkey's southern and northern geopolitical environment. In the south, Turkey, as part of its attempt to safeguard its interests in the eastern Mediterranean, holds a veto power as a NATO member to block the Republic of Cyprus's membership of the alliance and prevents the participation of non-NATO countries, such as Israel, in NATO exercises and activities.[85] As for the northern vector, NATO membership allows Turkey to thwart its allies' policies that run contrary to its interests in the Black Sea. Thus, Turkey, by exercising its veto power within NATO, seeks to prevent the militarisation of the Black Sea and to keep NATO at bay so as not to provoke Russia, defending the position that disputes in the region should be resolved by littoral states based on 'the principle of regional ownership'.[86]

These cases underscore a typical feature of Type-4 alliance relations, namely, that participating in an alliance network led by the US brings partial and indirect benefits. They are partial and indirect because they are mostly positive externalities that accrue to the junior ally from participating in an alliance. More to the point, the frequent use of veto power by one member of a military alliance to protect its interests in other issue areas contradicts the basic rationale of participating in such organisations, as, from the perspective of junior allies, being part of an alliance is primarily intended to ensure their country's safety and security.[87]

In fact, the opposite dynamic is at work in the case of Turkey, as there have been cases where the Turkish government has viewed efforts to bolster the deterrence of the Atlantic alliance as a threat to Turkey's own security. One notable case is the issue of US bases in Greece. There is a widespread belief among Turkey's ruling elite that the US is trying to encircle Turkey from the west by establishing new military bases in Greece. In the words of Erdoğan: 'The US now has five plus four, totalling nine, bases in Greece. Against whom then are these bases formed, and why are they there? They are saying, "Against Russia…" This is a lie; they are not being honest.'[88]

These dynamics provide further support to the argument that Turkey's alliance ties with the US remain intact not because they provide direct (security) benefits to Turkey, but rather because they provide indirect benefits. Even though the benefits are indirect, they are functional and attractive enough to warrant preservation. Thus, despite the incumbent Turkish government's growing estrangement from the US (and more generally from the West), measures to avoid a military conflict with the US in Syria have – so far – enabled Turkey to prevent the collapse of the partially satisfactory status quo.

Conclusion

The Turkish–US dispute in Syria demonstrates how an exogenous development can drive a wedge between allies and lead to the escalation of tensions to the level where even a military conflict may result. In our case, Turkey's failure to deal with its dispute with the US in a less confrontational manner lies in its normative detachment from its ally and the weakening of interest-based ties between the two sides. The transition from the Type-1 alliance relationship that used to characterise Turkey's alliance with the US to Type-4 underscores these negative dynamics and explains why Turkey has struggled to resolve its Syrian conundrum with its senior ally.

[85]Hurriyet Daily News, 'Turkey blocks Israel from NATO summit' (24 April 2012), available at: {https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-blocks-israel-from-nato-summit-19033}.

[86]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Millî Savunma Bakanlığı, 'Millî Savunma Bakanı Hulusi Akar gazetecilerle birlikte "Milli Teknoloji ile Güçlenen Mehmetçiğin Yaşam Sergisi"ni gezdi' (7 April 2021), available at: {https://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/742021-32320}.

[87]Bergsmann, 'The concept of military alliance'.

[88]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı, 'President Erdoğan: We could never vote in "favour" of NATO membership for countries that support terrorism' (29 May 2022), available at: {https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-we-could-never-vote-in-favour-of-nato-membership-for-countries-that-support-terrorism}.

Although asymmetric alliances may provide junior allies with a means to ensure their security, as my argument demonstrates, they also limit weaker states' ability to determine their own policy course. Often, they must tailor their policies by taking into account the likely reaction of their senior partners. A related point, which warrants further research, is that it is an inherent feature of asymmetric alliances that senior allies set down tacit rules at certain junctures to ensure that their junior partners do not engage in acts they would disapprove of. Besides the case study presented in this article, the 1956 Suez Crisis illustrates this point. During this event, the Eisenhower administration forced Britain and France to abandon their Sinai campaign, as the US would not tolerate such adventurism that risked provoking Soviet retaliation – something the two states evidently failed to foresee.[89] France and Britain ultimately complied with their senior ally's request, allowing the Suez Crisis to dissipate and their alliance with the US to remain intact. This process, one can argue, was aided by the two states' well-established positions within the US-led liberal international order and the common identity they shared with the US. As discussed, the same was true in Turkey–US relations during the Cold War, with anti-communism (or Westernism) serving as the normative glue that bound the two sides together and made it relatively easy for them to resolve their disputes.

Unlike in the Cold War era, it is highly questionable whether the liberal order can serve as a binding force among its adherents today. Scholars describe the present situation as the crisis of the liberal order by drawing attention to the 'populist, nationalist and xenophobic strands of backlash' observed in Western or Western-leaning countries.[90] As liberalism faces challenges, authoritarian ideological currents are gaining ground, leading to the strengthening of alliance ties within that camp. To return to the Belarus example mentioned earlier, and referring back to my typology, the gradual restoration of ideational ties based on authoritarian solidarity between Belarus and Russia helps explain why Minsk opposed Moscow's Ukraine campaign in 2014 but supported it in 2022. As per my typology, Russia and Belarus have moved towards a more resilient alliance relationship due to the strengthening of anti-Western ideological tendencies within each regime.

In the event of Trump's return to power in the US, authoritarian solidarity may grow even stronger, thus allowing illiberal powers to feel more emboldened to challenge US allies in Europe and Asia-Pacific. Clearly, the Biden administration is aware of these risks, as evidenced by its efforts to incorporate Japan into AUKUS and to tighten the US-led alliance network.[91] In addition to addressing the China threat collectively, bringing allies together under its leadership helps the US to prevent them from acting in a way that may run counter to its strategic calculations. Based on my theoretical argument, if the second scenario were to occur, the US would seek to constrain the actions of its allies, similar to what has happened in northern Syria in relation to Turkey.[92]

In addition to these hindrances, junior allies may face other consequences, such as being deprived of security support when it is most needed, if they engage in acts of which their senior allies would disapprove. For instance, Armenia's insistence on seeking close ties with the West by refusing to heed Russia's concerns has cost it the support of its senior ally during its recent military conflict with Azerbaijan. Therefore, participating in an asymmetric alliance as a junior partner comes with the burden that junior allies are expected to align their policies with and seek approval from a more powerful partner. The Turkish case is a telling example in this regard, since Turkey could not operate near its borders freely without taking into account its senior ally, even though the latter sits oceans away from the relevant geopolitical environment.

[89]Oles M. Smolansky, 'Moscow and the Suez Crisis, 1956: A reappraisal', *Political Science Quarterly*, 80:4 (1965), pp. 581–605.

[90]G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), pp. 7–23 (p. 7).

[91]Demetri Sevastopulo, 'Aukus weighs expanding security pact to deter China in Indo-Pacific', *Financial Times* (7 April 2024), available at: {https://www.ft.com/content/bd94b87a-0395-420b-a35c-909b1762650a}.

[92]It must be noted that my theoretical framework would not consider a China-related dispute between the US and its Pacific allies as an externally caused one, but it would nevertheless shed some light on the relevant issue.

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