Investigating the aspiration and feasibility of a Turkish shift to nuclear weapons *Is Erdogan's narrative something to fear?*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate why Türkiye might be interested in acquiring nuclear weapons and pursuing armament, and understand whether its nuclear aspirations are truly feasible. In line with existing theoretical nuclear armament models, particularly through realist and idealist views, this paper will determine whether nuclear proliferation in Türkiye can be expected. Considering that in recent years the Middle East region has had points of tension in relation to nuclear developments, it is essential to consider the ways in which international norms, Türkiye's domestic context, and the role of political figures have impacted Ankara's nuclear energy policy and demands for nuclear Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). By providing a detailed critique, and by taking into account the significance of the re-election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the 2023 Presidential elections, this article will provide a nuanced understanding to Türkiye's foreign and domestic policies, whilst providing a new perspective to armament theories.

Introduction: Context of Türkiye

Nuclear proliferation theories can often be divided into two camps: realist perspectives and idealist views. ON the one hand, the former theories tend to emphasise the security challenges that states may face, and how that influences them to adopt policies with the aim of deterrence. On the other hand, idealist theorists argue that states may contemplate developing nuclear weapons depending on the perceived symbolism and subjective consideration of its benefits or necessity in promoting the interests of a state or another body. As presented by Jacques Hyman, nuclear proliferation idealist models can be branched into three categories: emphasis on existing international norms, the domestic circumstances, and the significance of powerful individuals in advocating (or not) for nuclear weaponry. These dimensions can aim to develop whether a state has the means necessary to develop such weaponry, but also provide an insight as to whether a state will truly take the next step to acquire those types of weapons.

The case of Türkiye is a point of interest, especially as in recent decades prominent leader President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has publicly declared a need for change in the international world order regarding nuclear weapons (Hibbs 2019). Through the use of symbolic tropes, the President has drawn attention to the perceived unfairness of the current international order, and referred to the acquiring of nuclear weapons as necessary to build his country's prestige on the international stage and power within the region of the Middle East (Ophir 2021, 2).

Ankara has since 1980 signed and ratified the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT), as well as the Safeguards Agreement at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – an agency which monitors all nuclear facilities, including those in Türkiye (Kibaroglu 2015, 161). Despite these agreements, on September 4th, 2019, in Sivas, President Erdogan made headlines when he told his ruling AK Party members (Adalet ve Kalkınma – Justice and Development) that Ankara had a right to possess nuclear weapons (Toksabay 2019). A few days later, at the UN General Assembly on September 24th, 2019, Erdogan publicly stated that "nuclear power should be either for all or banned" (Hibbs 2019).

Although such declarations suggest a Turkish trajectory to increase their nuclear industry profile, the words pronounced hardly amount to a programmatic announcement that Türkiye will actively pursue research and development initiatives to obtain nuclear weaponry. Thus, whilst Türkiye remains set on developing nuclear energy and there are explicit statements of aspiration made by members of the government, it is unlikely that Türkiye will undertake a military nuclear development route, even if the route is feasible.

This paper will thus analyse the current political and security concerns within Türkiye to understand if there is a realistic material reasoning behind Türkiye's acquiring of nuclear weapons, especially regarding deterrence and security towards powers that have recently developed nuclear weaponry. Furthermore, the feasibility of President Erdogan's ambition will be examined, in terms of the allocation of resources and technological knowledge

needed for nuclear armament. In a second part, three-level idealist perspectives will be adopted to consider whether nuclear power and weaponry will proliferate in Türkiye in relation to international circumstances, domestic perceptions and the influence of political figures, including President Erdogan.

Conceptualizations and Feasibility of Nuclear Proliferation

Realist Perspectives of Security and Deterrence: The Case of Türkiye

Definitions

Realism as a school of thought in politics defines the international order as being an anarchical system, whereby states have to rely on themselves to "protect their sovereignty and national security," regardless of the costs (Sagan 1996, 57). In such a thought, peace is guaranteed as the threat of war is "unacceptable in its social consequences," rather than being dependent on the relative military power between the attacker and the defender in battle (Cimbala 2020, 177). In the context of nuclear weapons, a security dilemma ensues when adopting a realist perspective. A cycle arises as whenever a state acquires nuclear weapons to "balance forces" against its main rival, it can give rise to a nuclear threat for another state in the region, who then feels compelled to initiate their own nuclear weapons program to preserve their national security (Sagan 1996, 57). Therefore, in the realist perspective, states possess nuclear weapons due to continuous competition and the adoption of individualistic behaviour to ensure their own self-protection and survival, oftentimes to the detriment of other states. In the nuclear age, the "gold standard of deterrence" is nuclear weapons, especially in the perspective of international anarchy (Hymans 2006, 456). Although there are numerous critiques on realist perspectives due to their incompatibility with the historical realities of nuclear proliferation, this next section will aim to analyse the security threats that exist for Türkiye and how it may translate into a drive for nuclear armament.

Introducing the Case-Study of Türkiye

Nuclear proliferation has gradually arisen in states within the Middle East region, which have thus attracted the attention of international actors such as the United States of America. Thus, in light of these changes, Türkiye has progressively developed a fear of losing their strategic superiority in the region, despite being a NATO member and benefiting from weaponry and missile commitment within the bounds of its territory.

Back in February 1952, Türkiye entered the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alliance as a member. With the membership, 50 U.S. tactical-nuclear-weapons were deployed at the joint-US Turkish Incirlik Air base (Ophir 2021, 1). For a number of years, Ankara perceived this allocation as a symbol of prestige and the consolidation of security ties with the alliance, especially with perceived insecurities arising from Iran and/or Syria (Kasapoglu 2015, 90). These weapons were viewed as possessing "intra-war deterrence functions," by ensuring the existence of asymmetrical power relations with other states in the Middle East region (Kasapoglu 2015, 91). For instance,

these armaments would be able to regulate and control military escalations beyond a threshold and confine ongoing fighting to the outside of Turkish borders.

However, in the last few years, there has been rising doubts about whether the deployed American B61 tactical nuclear weapons at the Incirlik Air Base have any true deterrence significance (Gürsel 2019). Coupled with this, there is a pervasive anti-American sentiment in the Turkish public domain as the NATO alliance is progressively perceived as serving primarily the interests of the United States, as they branch their influence across the world (Kasapoglu 2015, 166). In response to the "existential threat perceived from the U.S.," Türkiye acquired S-400 air defence systems from Russia, which led to U.S. sanctions. In retaliation, Ankara was deprived of the purchased F-35 warplanes (Gürsel 2019). The loss of these weapons weakened and deteriorated Ankara's main national deterrence source, their air force. Thus, aggravating national security concerns towards Iraq and Syria, deterioration of relations with the European Union due to critiques of undemocratic policies practised by the Turkish governments and fluctuating U.S. commitment to security interests and nuclear deterrence, have made it progressively clear that Türkiye needs to acquire new armaments in any form to protect their sovereignty against external threats (Kibaroglu 2015, 167).

Realist theories would propose that with the current circumstances, developing nuclear weapons would address the state's security concerns. President Erdogan's declarations on the matter allow him to brandish the currently non-existent 'nuclear card', in order to threaten further disability in the region unless steps are taken by third-party states to regulate the proliferation of nuclear weaponry. Since the 1991 Gulf War, Ankara has been largely concerned about "immediate and longer-term asymmetric threats from neighbours possessing weapons of mass destruction" (Varnum 2015, 189). It is thus important to consider whether Türkiye has the resources necessary to acquire such weaponry.

Starting Steps for a Nuclear Weapons Program

Determining whether a state will acquire and develop nuclear weapons is not just a question of will, but rather a consideration of available resources and technological capabilities. Türkiye remains a relevant case to reflect on today as one must determine if it is justified to be trusting of Ankara's comments on hopes for the possession and the access to nuclear weapons. Considering that aspiring nuclear states need both technological as well as economic capabilities to develop such nuclear weaponry (van der Meer 2016, 212), it is expected that for Ankara there will be a "high cost of open development" (Lindenstrauss 2012, 95). While certain analysts would suggest that Türkiye would most likely need to collaborate with both a supplier country and a major nuclear weapon-possessing state to gain the necessary resources and knowledge to "build nuclear weapons clandestinely," it is possible that Turkish scientists and engineers are capable of developing the technology themselves (Kibaroglu 2015, 171). Whilst the exchange of information and technological infrastructure needed to de-

velop nuclear energy can accelerate the process of acquiring nuclear weapons, one cannot presume that Türkiye does not already possess the resources and scientific knowledge needed to cross that line and become a nuclear-weapon possessing country. However, at that precise moment, Türkiye would need to walk away from the obligations they are meant to uphold as a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaties, and face the international consequences of such a decision.

Nuclear Power: Domestic Ambitions of Energy Independence

Theoretical Conceptions: Importance of Nuclear Energy

Acquiring nuclear power provides states with the technology needed to shift from a domestic energy ambition to a military-oriented initiative. Across the world, states have started to turn towards forms of energy that deviate from non-sustainable sources such as oil, which are in limited supply and have environmentally dangerous consequences. Thus, nuclear energy has progressively become the "reality of the modern world," as it is extensively used (Bacık and Salur 2010, 102). In light of this new phenomenon, Türkiye has promoted a new Turkish nuclear energy program (TNEP) in order to achieve its new energy demands. Specifically, Ankara has launched the construction of the first Turkish nuclear plant at Akkuyu, on the southern coast of the province of Mersin. Turkish press have stated that the government has expectations that the plant will meet 10% of the country's future electricity needs once completed (Ophir 2021, 2).

Fear of Dependency: Search for Alternative Sources of Power

The Turkish search for a diverging source of power is due in part to the fear of being too dependent on energy-supplying states like Russia or Iran when it comes to natural gas imports. For instance, on January 3rd, 2007, Iran cut off the natural gas flow that was emitted towards Türkiye, which constituted one-third of all of Turkish gas imports (Al-Marashi and Goren 2009, 13). This has pushed forth growing concerns on potential electricity or gas shortages that are dependent on unreliable partners. The solution or alternative that has been promoted is the path towards nuclear energy. In 2011, Türkiye finally concluded a $20 billion contract with the Russian company ROSATOM for the creation of a large reactor complex – VVER reactor – (Spacapan 2020), composed of four reactors of an individual capacity of 1,200 megawatts (Ophir 2021, 2). Although this new contract is meant to guarantee Turkish independence from non-reliant partners, it must be noted that this large-scale civilian nuclear plant and facility is in majority Russia-owned. Yet, the construction of this complex does allow the possibility for Türkiye to start accessing nuclear energy technology and expertise.

The details of the Turkish Nuclear Energy Program (TNEP)

While the plants have faced their share of difficulties and delays, exhibiting the usual patterns of delays faced by all other plants in the world, the first nuclear plant of Akkuyu was officially granted nuclear facility status on the 27th of April 2023, with the delivery of

the first nuclear fuel to the plant site. Aiming for all its units to be functioning by 2028, this plant will meet approximately 10% of the electricity needs of the country, thus reducing their gas imports by $1.5 billion annually (Guldogan 2023). Although Türkiye did not have a short and limited supply of energy as initially declared as a justification for the construction of the nuclear plant, they are dependent on foreign energy imports (Niphi and Ramana 2023, 256). For instance, as Türkiye is a massive importer in the energy sector, their foreign trade turnover has resulted in a negative trade balance (Ashirov 2023). However, considering that nuclear plants can provide the necessary technological expertise needed to build nuclear weapons, it is essential to analyse whether there is an incentive to transition from a civilian program to a military-oriented nuclear project in the case of Türkiye.

Concluding the Realist Chapter: Acquiring Nuclear Weaponry

In realist theory, there exists a distinction between a 'hard' and a 'soft' point of view when it comes to security measures in the field of nuclear proliferation. On the one hand, the former depicts nuclear weaponry as the "ultimate tool for survival," as they provide the best guarantee of security against external threats (van der Meer 2016, 215). In such perspectives, it is considered that only states that have major pressing security concerns will actively pursue the development of nuclear weaponry as they are the "absolute weapon" (Hymans 2006, 456). On the other hand, the 'soft' point of view is more nuanced as it suggests that states that acquire the bomb will simultaneously have issues and opportunities. However, if the circumstances mean that a state is facing significant existential threats and cannot depend on the support of a nuclear-armed ally, then with the opportune resources, they may be incentivized to ignore the potential difficulties arising from possessing this form of weaponry and go nuclear themselves (Hymans 2006, 456).

Therefore, this nuance between the two perspectives can shed light on the case of Türkiye, particularly when deciphering political messages from Ankara's state officials. At an economic forum in Sivas on September 4th, 2020, when questioned about whether Türkiye had a nuclear capability, President Erdogan stated: "We are currently working on it" (Gürsel 2019). While Ankara may not perceive the nuclear weapon as the main guarantee for their national security, they have strived to at least have the option of developing weaponry if the need arose. For instance, as part of the ROSATOM contract, students enrolled in Turkish universities have been a part of nuclear training programs in Russia, to then be employed at the Akkuyu nuclear plant (Ophir 2021, 2). The number of students in this program has increased significantly, to the extent that they are the "second largest national group" that are studying nuclear sciences in Russia, in front of Iranian and North Korean scientists (Spacapan 2020). These trained science and engineering students will also be capable of contributing to designing nuclear weapons, especially as they bring their newly acquired knowledge back to their home state.

Furthermore, it has been observed that there has been dialogue on the issue of acquiring

nuclear weapons between Türkiye and other nuclear-armed states, including Pakistan. Although a number of analysts highlight with a certain degree of wariness the strategic partnership between these two states, given the history of Islamabad in providing sensitive nuclear technology to other states, these links have yet corroborated or lead to a clear nuclear rapprochement (Kibaroglu 2015, 34-5). Despite a blooming security cooperation tie between Pakistan and Turkey, nuclear development has not yet been on the agenda for their bilateral exchanges (Gheorghe 2023). With these developments that increase the feasibility of acquiring nuclear weapons, it is important to consider an alternative perspective to understand whether Türkiye faces significant existential threats that cannot be resolved through other means, or rather simply the threat of developing and possessing such weaponry suffices in improving Ankara's international prestige.

Critique of the realist conception: Idealism as an alternative?

Along the lines of the realist perspective, the main conclusion reached is that all the states that have the option of becoming nuclear, should go nuclear, "and the sooner, the better" (Cimbala 2020, 175). However, nuclear realist theories are not necessarily applicable in today's context. For instance, Türkiye is one of many empirical contradictions to realist expectations and predictions regarding nuclear proliferation, as it is not solely the feasibility to acquire nuclear weaponry that influences states' motivations (van der Meer 2016, 215). Considering this phenomenon, ad hoc explanations to nuclear proliferation can shed greater light as to why Türkiye does not have nuclear capabilities yet or why the realization of such a program may be achieved in the coming decades, as expressed by President Erdogan. Therefore, this next section will aim to understand the reason for nuclear proliferation by adopting Jacques Hymans' three levels of idealist analysis: international norms, domestic circumstances and individual characteristics.

International Norms: role of nuclear non-proliferation treaties

Participation in nuclear non-proliferation treaties can be understood in two ways: increasing state prestige or a manner for there to be an international acceptance of norms regarding nuclear proliferation. In recent decades, there has been a development of institutions and other agreements which permit non-nuclear states to overcome a nuclear collective action problem (Sagan 1996, 62). Türkiye has been known to pursue a long policy of subscribing and upholding the terms of relevant international arms control and disarmament treaties and conventions (Kibaroglu 2015, 159). This includes the terms agreed upon in 1980 for the NPT, where they formally renounced the recourse to nuclear weapons (Bugos 2019). Similarly, the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty prohibits any nuclear detonations, no matter the purpose or motivations behind such experiments. The clauses attached to these treaties make it more complicated for Türkiye to hide a potential nuclear weapons development program, especially as transparency is an important requirement for the preservation of Anka-

ra's relations with other states (Lindenstrauss 2012, 91).

Although this may be the case, it is necessary to be realistic when it comes to the significance of these treaties over sovereignty and political decisions. Despite the widespread acceptance of these treaties, it is difficult to find concrete evidence that these international nuclear non-proliferation treaties truly ensure that states do not overturn their obligations to acquire nuclear weapons, as can be represented in the well-known examples of North Korea, Iran and Syria whom had ratified the treaties, yet still pursued the development of nuclear weapons (van der Meer 2016, 222).

While the treaties may not be as binding as one could hope, Türkiye has aspired in recent years to increase their influence across the international system, particularly in the region of the Middle East, mainly through soft power means (Lindenstrauss 2012, 95). This has encouraged Ankara, which has now become actively involved in the adherence and effective implementation of these agreements on other states, to adopt a stance of non-nuclear proliferation (Al-Marashi and Goren 2009, 2). Thus, possessing nuclear weaponry would put Türkiye's position on the international stage at risk. Such a policy orientation would be destructive for aspirations of an EU membership, improving US relations, and regional security (Bacık and Salur 2012, 115).

Then, how can the paradox of President Erdogan stating that Ankara cannot reject the idea of having nuclear weapons be explained in relation to Türkiye's place in nuclear non-proliferation advocacy? These declarations are unprecedented in nature, as there has never been such an open and direct proclamation done at the governmental-level that showcases a potential inclination toward the development of nuclear weapons. The explanation for this paradox resides in the symbolic values attached to nuclear weapons and how they are perceived to enhance a state's international bargaining power. Possessing or simply demonstrating an intention of acquiring nuclear weapons offer states more power on the international stage than they would have otherwise, with benefits in diplomatic and economic terms (van der Meer 2016, 223). Thus, President Erdogan's declarations made a ripple on the international stage and uplifted Ankara's bargaining power. The possibility and the potential recourse to this technology allows Türkiye to obtain, to a certain extent, preferable agreements, whilst still maintaining its international prestige by respecting the non-proliferation treaties that it has ratified.

Domestic Level: Influence of Public Opinion

Adopting domestic political factors as a lens of analysis can aid in understanding the role of domestic opinion in shaping decisions to acquire, develop or forgo nuclear weapons. Turkish domestic policies are the core determinant that shape Türkiye's nuclear policy. Prospects of whether Türkiye proliferates or not today and in the near future are interconnected with the political dynamics that exist within its borders (Ophir 2021, 5). Türkiye's political system is that of a parliamentary democracy, which allows for a certain degree of checks and balances. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

is likely to advocate for top decision-makers to uphold the obligations underlined in the NPT, due to the international economic and military response that could follow were the treaty breached. In a way, this NPT regime is not only a reassurance for states that their potential adversaries' nuclear programs are limited, but it can also be employed as an empowerment tool for domestic actors that are opposed to the development of nuclear weapons (Sagan 1996, 72). It thus becomes a necessity for domestic actors to be onboard with any nuclear-development policies before any initiative that directly advocates for the acquiring of nuclear weapons can be pursued.

Although there are serious environmental risks associated with nuclear power, nuclear plants produce much less carbon emissions than other forms of power generation used in Türkiye (Ashirov 2023). But in Türkiye, there has been a certain degree of "public aversion" towards the environmental consequences that may result from using nuclear energy. However, with the adoption of relative preventative measures towards those concerns, the construction of the Akkuyu power plant has been recently finished. The timing of the opening of the plant coincided with the 2023 presidential elections, and may have correspondingly played an important role in turning the elective opinion tide to President Erdogan's side, as it promises energy independence (Gavin 2023). Thus, the Turkish public may actually be more in favor of investments into military technology rather than nuclear power (Gheorghe 2023).

Recently, President Erdogan was re-elected for a new period of five years, quite tightly against his opponent after a second run-off of elections (52.14%). The elections for this presidency were held against the backdrop of a "cost-of-living crisis," with rising inflation where in recent decades the lira has lost 90% of its value, but also recent earthquakes in February 2023 which killed more than 50,000 people (Wilks 2023). Both in Türkiye and abroad, it was predicted that President Erdogan's opponent would win the election due to grievances towards the past leader's management and policies aiming to rectify those issues (Balci 2023). In relation to the hesitancy towards the opposition, the Turkish people preferred to fall back on the security represented through President Erdogan, and nationalistic appeal of Türkiye as playing an influence on the international stage. This re-election suggests the success of President Erdogan and the AKP party, which can likely mean a continuation of the President's policy over the next few years (Robinson 2023). As there is a certain approval towards President Erdogan's foreign policies, there may be a certain aspiration for nuclear weapons, especially if it were to elevate Ankara's international prestige.

Individual Role: Embodied in Erdogan's policies

In idealist perspectives, comprehending and analysing the policies of state leaders is an essential component to understand nuclear policies. Thus, taking into account the psychological profile of state leaders and the influence it has on their decisions can provide insight as to whether a state will revert to nuclear weaponry. The currently re-elected President voiced justi-

fication for the pursuing of nuclear weapons as a necessity for preserving national security. In line with the complexity of security dilemmas, the President advocates for one of two scenarios: the complete eradication of the use of nuclear weapons internationally, or the accession to such weapons by Türkiye or other states (Bugos 2019). These statements have played a significant role in allowing President Erdogan to position himself as the leader of a great – or aspiring – state (Niphi and Ramana 2023, 257). Consistently drawing upon Türkiye's Ottoman legacy and glorification of their past, the President oftentimes expresses the desire to build Türkiye's status as an international world power, although the means to achieve that, such as the acquiring of the nuclear bomb, is unclear.

While idealists concede that proliferation depends in part on sufficient technical expertise, the key variable which determines the incidence of nuclear proliferation depends on a state's perception of the utility of such weaponry (Hymans 2006, 455). The "symbolism" that is attached to nuclear weapons has become emblematic and has been presented as a path for modernization and building international prestige (Sagan 1996, 73). The "norms model" portrays how a state's identity can become a "product of an aspiration to nuclear acquisition," which is then translated in both domestic and foreign policies (Bacık and Salur 2012, 105). This is in large part due to the nature of nuclear weapons, whose power when possessed by weaker powers diminishes the power gap by becoming the "great equaliser" (Bacık and Salur 2012, 106). The individual-level idealist approach to the nuclear proliferation question suggests that the choice to pursue a nuclear initiative with such uncertain consequences does not lie in a rational "cost- benefit calculation," but rather results from a "process of emotional decision-making" (Hymans 2006, 459). Therefore, existing idealist literature on nuclear proliferation suggests that an individual's perspective on acquiring such technology relies in part on the symbolic meanings they attach to nuclear weapons and in part on emotional knowledge.

Considering that President Erdogan has seen his term as President renewed for a further five years, Turkish leadership views on nuclear armaments will perhaps be in large part determined by the position they hold in the state apparatus of Türkiye. For instance, if the current government is unable to implement robust and efficient macro-policies aiming at tackling the recent economic and social problems, domestic discontent may only rise. In such cases, if President Erdogan or his party's rule is threatened or needs to be consolidated by support, then pursuing a nuclear weapons program can be used as a method of diversion for states facing domestic tensions (van der Meer 2016, 225). Adopting such a program could respond to or even further encourage nationalist sentiments, which can be exacerbated after a wave of international negative reactions, with the aim of ending domestic dissensions for a short period of time (van der Meer 2016, 22).

Conclusion

Although it is quite difficult to measure proliferation intentions, regardless of whether one adopts a realist or idealist perspective, it is

important to undertake a holistic view. Understanding how different forces and perspectives can shape a state's nuclear proliferation trajectory remain essential and unique to each case-study. Whilst Türkiye remains set on developing nuclear energy, even with environmental impact reservations from domestic actors, it is unlikely that Türkiye will undertake a military nuclear development route, even if the route is feasible. Instead, Turkish state political leaders have found benefits in threatening the pursuit of nuclear weapons, without fully engaging or following through with their words. This method in diplomacy has been undertaken in an effort to preserve or increase Türkiye's influence on the international stage, but also to resolve domestic tensions and embolden President Erdogan's support. At this point in time, a number of factors as well as multilateral interests and commitments favor restraint in the development of nuclear weapons, especially as Ankara is under pressure to uphold international agreements and transparency. If ever Turkish political actors were to become enraptured with the idea of pursuing nuclear weapons, it would be hoped that another solution can be reached and their aspirations would thus be contained.

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