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Beyond Neutrality: Turkey's Mediation Activism as a Political Enterprise

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Abstract

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has incorporated mediation into Turkey's foreign policy to position Ankara as an "order-instituter" in West Asia and as a proactive actor in international politics. Combining Ahmet Davutoglu's "Strategic Depth Doctrine" and Erdogan's use of mediation as a "political enterprise", Ankara has actively engaged in mediating both regional and global conflicts. Erdogan's diplomatic efforts in the Russia-Ukraine, Azerbaijan-Armenia, and Ethiopia-Somalia conflicts, as well as in Syria and Libya, have attracted considerable international attention. This article examines Turkey's strategic pursuit of becoming an influential mediator under President Erdogan, analysing its motivations, achievements, and limitations. However, it argues that Ankara's mediation efforts represent a form of strategic statecraft rather than a neutral instrument of conflict resolution. Herein, diplomatic engagement is deployed selectively according to geopolitical opportunities, political leverage, and foreign policy priorities rather than as a consistent commitment to impartial conflict resolution.

Keywords: Turkey, mediation, diplomacy, foreign policy, peacebuilding, AKP.

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1. Introduction

Conflict is a recurring feature of the international arena that often becomes complex and protracted, posing a threat to international peace and stability. Based on its nature, it can be categorised into two types: inter-state conflict, which occurs between two sovereign states, and intra-state conflict, or civil war, which takes place within a state. Since the emergence of the Westphalian-modelled territorially sovereign state system, conflict has become an intrinsic feature of the modern international order, often arising from competing claims over authority, identity, resources, and borders. The proliferation of militant non-state actors has further complicated the nature and dynamics of modern conflicts.

Diplomacy and dialogue have long served as the principal tools of conflict resolution, with mechanisms like mediation, arbitration, conciliation, and negotiation playing central roles. Among these, mediation is an important tool for resolving armed conflicts in which a third party assists belligerents in reaching a mutually agreeable peaceful settlement. In most cases, it provides a neutral platform for

parties willing to resolve disputes and mitigate the consequences of escalating violence. Thus, effective mediation requires an impartial third party capable of adopting a flexible, context-specific approach rather than a “one-size-fits-all” strategy. Instead of seeking immediate settlements, mediation often aims to secure a truce or ceasefire, thereby creating conditions conducive to dialogue and diplomacy that may eventually lead to durable, albeit non-binding, political agreements.¹

However, the assumption that mediators act impartially has increasingly been questioned within contemporary international politics. While the literature on mediation generally conceptualises it as a neutral mechanism for conflict resolution, comparatively little attention has been paid to how sovereign states employ mediation as an instrument of statecraft to enhance their international standing, pursue strategic objectives, and expand their geopolitical influence. This gap is particularly evident in the case of emerging middle powers, whose mediation initiatives are often embedded in broader, more ambitious foreign policy agendas.²

In this context, Turkey represents an important case for analysis. Leveraging its unique geography

and character as a bridge between the East and the West, it has emerged as a prominent middle-power actor from the Global South and positioned itself as a peacebuilder.³ Over the past two and a half decades, mediation activism has become an integral component of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's foreign policy vision, reflecting his leadership style, political ambitions, and strategic objective of enhancing Türkiye's influence in regional and global affairs.

While this may be the case, Turkey's mediation activism presents a theoretical puzzle. Traditionally, mediation has been understood as an impartial process. But under Erdogan, Ankara's mediation has closely followed its efforts to advance strategic, ideological, and geopolitical interests. This raises the central question this article attempts to address: Does Erdogan's Turkey represent a new model of strategic mediation that blurs the conventional distinction between neutral facilitation and geopolitical entrepreneurship?

The ongoing war between the United States and Israel against Iran, starting 28 February 2026, which became a regional crisis with global implications, further elaborates this puzzle. Despite repeated portrayals

of its image as a principal mediator in West Asia and a foremost voice of the Muslim world, Turkey refrained from getting itself involved in a mediator role in the ongoing crisis. While Erdogan condemned the American and Israeli aggression against Iran, which also killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, labelling them a violation of Iranian sovereignty and illegal, Ankara has not shown much interest in initiating its mediation effort. It raises questions about Turkey's mediation pattern: why has Ankara selectively refrained from mediation during the region's most consequential crisis? As such, this phenomenon suggests that Erdogan's mediation enterprise is not a universal commitment to peace and stability as the Turkish government projects; rather, it is a strategic instrument to be used when Ankara has sufficient leverage, credibility, and political incentives.

This article examines Turkey's mediation activism by drawing on existing theoretical frameworks and argues that the Erdogan government has deployed mediation as a political enterprise embedded in broader foreign policy objectives. Rather than functioning as a neutral mediator, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has deployed mediation as a strategic instrument to expand Ankara's regional and global influence while

simultaneously projecting itself as an influential middle power in an international order largely dominated by the Global North.

2. Theoretical Framework

Existing scholarship conceptualises mediation as a voluntary, non-binding process in which a third party assists the parties to a dispute in reaching a mutually acceptable agreement. Foundational works by scholars accentuate three core elements of mediation, such as consent, impartiality, and the absence of coercion, in which the mediator's legitimacy is determined by neutrality and trust from both disputants.⁴ Under this model, inclination towards one party, military involvement, or geopolitical instrumentalisation diminishes mediation credibility.⁵

Nevertheless, subsequent literature further complicates the above arguments. Studies demonstrate that beyond neutrality, a mediator's diplomatic leverage, political influence, and outreach to conflicting parties often shape the effectiveness of mediation initiatives.⁶ This perspective is relevant to middle power theory in international relations, which holds that middle powers exert meaningful influence through norm promotion and multilateral activism beyond

their borders.⁷ It underscores that states often pursue niche diplomacy or mediation to enhance their international status and demonstrate leadership capacity.⁸

Advancing the middle power theory, role theory further provides a lucid explanation for Turkey's mediation activism. Role theory postulates that states behave in international environments based on roles they adopt driven by their self-conception and communicative action.⁹ The 21st-century foreign policy discourse of Ankara, intellectually crafted under Ahmet Davutolu, has led Turkey to embrace a new role as an "order-instituting actor", culminating in a Kemalist foreign policy attitude of unquestioning Western orientation.¹⁰ This conception shapes Turkey's mediation behaviour, treating it as both a diplomatic tool and an expression of its middle-power identity.

Contemporary diplomatic practice is increasingly based on mediators' close political and strategic alignment with disputants in the conflict. Actors like Turkey often balance their interests, ideological affinities, and strategic partnerships while pursuing mediation initiatives. Thus, this poses a vital question about the simultaneous engagement of the mediator as both an interested

political actor and a credible mediator.

By foregrounding these theoretical strands, this article not only challenges classical mediation theory but also expands it. It defines mediation as a state enterprise of conflict resolution in which diplomatic facilitation is strategically and purely embedded in national and geopolitical interests, status-seeking attitudes, regime legitimization, and the identity-construction project of the mediating actor, without strict adherence to neutrality norms as proposed by classical mediation theorists.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach to evaluate Turkey's mediation efforts under Erdogan. It analyses prominent cases across different regions to identify patterns, variations, and the strategic motivations behind Turkey's willingness to mediate. The cases examined in this study are selected for their diplomatic significance as Turkey's high-profile mediation role in prominent cases.

3. Evolution of Mediation in Turkish Foreign Policy

Throughout the 20th century, Turkey's foreign policy was largely characterised by a cautious, status quo-oriented approach and close

alignment with the West.¹¹ The geopolitical shifts of the 1990s, especially the end of the Cold War, coupled with domestic political instability, prompted Turkey to recalibrate the traditional Kemalist foreign policy. Following the collapse of the USSR, Turkey sought to fill the geopolitical vacuum by expanding its regional engagement and cultivating a Turkosphere, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus – regions with deep cultural and linguistic affinities to Turkey.¹²

During the 1990s, Turkey's foreign policy optimism was further reinforced by its candidacy to the European Union.¹³ As part of its accession negotiation, Ankara presented itself as a bridge between the West and the Islamic world, thus showcasing its aspiration to emerge as a mediating power.¹⁴ In this context, the 2002 victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) became a landmark, bringing greater domestic stability and reconfiguring Turkey's foreign policy towards a more proactive pursuit of regional and global influence.

Following Erdogan's rise to power, Turkey's foreign policy gradually underwent a significant strategic reorientation from a predominantly West-centric outlook towards greater engagement with the East, reflecting

both the perceived decline of the rules-based international order and Ankara's evolving geopolitical priorities.¹⁵ The principal architect of this changing Turkish foreign policy was Ahmet Davutoglu, who viewed mediation as a potent instrument for advancing diplomatic engagement, economic benefits, and Turkey's leadership ambitions on the international stage. In his "Strategic Depth Doctrine", Davutoglu envisioned Ankara as an "order-instituting actor" capable of shaping regional affairs through active engagement in conflict resolution across its neighbourhood.¹⁶ The doctrine also aligned with Turkey's aspiration to establish itself as a "middle power" in an emerging but uncertain world order.¹⁷

A key development during the early AKP period was the institutionalisation of mediation as an instrument of Ankara's foreign policy. For Erdogan, mediation served to strengthen both domestic political legitimacy and enhance Turkey's international profile. In this context, his government launched several diplomatic initiatives, including the "Alliance of Civilizations" initiative with Spain in 2005, which aimed to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue¹⁸ and the "Mediation for Peace Initiative" with Finland at the UN in 2010. It also

formed the "Group of Friends for Mediation" in an attempt to further solidify mediation as a foreign policy instrument.¹⁹ In 2012, the Turkish foreign ministry also launched the Istanbul Mediation Conference, which has since evolved into an annual forum bringing together diplomats, international experts, academics, and UN officials "for knowledge and experience sharing through an innovative agenda focused on mediation."²⁰ As part of its broader effort to institutionalise mediation and develop a more systematic framework for conflict resolution, the Erdogan government established the Directorate General for International Mediation within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2024.

Nevertheless, as Ankara's relations with Western partners strained over issues such as democratic backsliding and human rights concerns, it witnessed parallel yet growing strategic cooperation with Russia while adopting an increasingly assertive posture in the Eastern Mediterranean. These developments further accelerated its foreign policy recalibration.²¹ This reorientation has been further solidified by AKP's Islamist roots, allowing it to employ Islamic rhetoric and cultural affinity to deepen relations with Muslim-majority

countries and claim a leadership role in the Islamic world, and by extension strengthen its international profile. As such, several scholars have characterised Turkey as a “liminal state”—one that occupies an intermediary position and seeks to balance competing geopolitical spheres rather than align exclusively with any single bloc.²²

The following section examines some of Turkey's prominent mediation initiatives to illustrate how Ankara has employed mediation to advance its broader strategic objectives by positioning itself as a credible and influential mediator in regional and international affairs.

4. Cases of Turkish Mediation Under the AKP Regime

As highlighted in the preceding section, since the early 2000s, mediation has emerged as an important instrument of the Erdogan government's foreign policy ambition to position Turkey as an influential regional and global actor. One of the earliest and most significant examples was Turkey's facilitation of indirect peace negotiations between Israel and Syria in 2007, aimed at paving the way for a comprehensive peace agreement.²³ Although Ankara had only a limited

direct stake in the Israel-Palestine conflict, both parties regarded Turkey's historical position as a bridge between East and West as a unique advantage that enabled it to serve as a credible mediator. Turkish diplomats used *shuttle diplomacy* to persuade the two sides “to end the vicious cycle of violence and choose dialogue.”²⁴ It took nearly three years of backchannel diplomacy to build sufficient confidence between the parties and relied heavily on the personal engagements of Erdogan and Ahmet Davutoglu with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, while maintaining strict secrecy in light of the failure of previous Israeli-Syrian peace initiatives. Turkish leaders claimed that a successful peace deal could allow people to drive from Tel Aviv to Istanbul via Damascus, and vice versa, with unrestricted access to holy places for Syrians such as the Al Aqsa Mosque.

However, Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in December 2008 derailed the entire negotiations process, highlighting how the disruption on the ground can quickly undermine the diplomatic initiatives. Consequently, while the Syrian government quickly moved to suspend the backchannel engagements, the Erdogan government also criticised the Israeli

military campaign that downspiralised the Israel-Türkiye bilateral relations. These were further strained in 2010 when the Israeli military raided the Mavi Marmara ship, part of the Gaza Flotilla aid campaign organised by Turkish NGO IHH that was carrying over 600 activists with ten thousand tonnes of aid for Palestinian residents of Gaza, in which nine Turkish activists were killed.²⁵ Although the peace process ultimately failed, it exposed the fragility of conflict-resolution efforts in West Asia and the limits of Turkey's diplomatic influence. But for the Erdogan government, these engagements marked an important milestone in Ankara's broader effort to institutionalise mediation as a foreign policy instrument.

Another early instance of Turkey's mediation diplomacy was in the context of Iran's controversial nuclear programme. Capitalising on its non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council, Turkey, together with Brazil, sought to broker an agreement with Tehran over its nuclear enrichment activities in 2010.²⁶ Their efforts culminated in the Tehran Declaration of 17 May 2010, which proposed that Iran transfer 1,200 kg of low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for 120 kg of up to 20 per cent-enriched uranium for medical research purposes.²⁷ Despite

Iranian willingness to implement the agreement, the United States and the EU rejected the declaration, arguing that it neither adequately constrained Iran's nuclear programme nor provided sufficient safeguards against potential weaponisation.²⁸

Through this initiative, Turkish mediation sought to position the country as a constructive intermediary between the Western actors and its immediate neighbourhood.²⁹ But the absence of sustained confidence-building measures among the principal stakeholders ultimately undermined the initiative, highlighting the structural constraints faced by middle-power mediators operating in highly securitised disputes.

The Balkan region has occupied a prominent place in both Turkey's foreign and domestic policy owing to its political geography and the shared historical, cultural, and political legacy forged during the Ottoman period. Given the region's history of ethnic conflict and political instability, developments in the Balkans have significant security implications for Ankara.³⁰ At the same time, Turkey's aspiration to establish itself as an "order-instituting power" has encouraged a more proactive engagement with the post-Yugoslav political landscape.³¹

Reflecting these objectives, Turkey has actively mediated conflicts in the Balkan region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia, in an effort to promote reconciliation and durable regional peace in a region plagued by ethnic conflicts.³² Although Ankara initially portrayed its mediation efforts as driven by the desire to foster stability, encourage economic development, and cultivate trust-based regional partnerships, these sought to solidify Turkey's position as a rising power capable of shaping regional dynamics as a "natural leader", "big brother", and "protector" of the region.³³

Erdoan has also used this mediation diplomacy to facilitate dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan in both pre- and post-Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021. As early as 2007, Erdogan initiated a Trilateral Summit, christened the Ankara Cooperation Process, involving Turkey, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and held as many as 8 high-profile summits by 2014 to ease tensions between the two countries. In 2011, it also launched the Heart of Asia initiative – a regional platform that brought together Pakistan, Afghanistan, other regional powers, and international observers to secure political commitments for Afghanistan's long-term stability

and to nudge the Taliban toward a political settlement. In the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover of power in 2021, as the relations between Kabul and Islamabad soured following the resurgence of violence by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan, leading to military confrontations along the Durand Line, Turkey and Qatar tried to diffuse the tensions by brokering a temporary ceasefire. However, Ankara failed to get Islamabad to agree to a deal despite weeks of hectic parleys between Afghan Taliban and Pakistan government representatives in Istanbul, thereby rendering the Erdogan government's mediation efforts null and void. It showed the limits of Turkey's mediation efforts, which have focused on building the country's profile within the Muslim world and internationally rather than on achieving tangible outcomes.

Another region which has attracted the attention of the Erdogan government is Africa. The resource-rich but conflict-ridden Africa, which is home to nearly a quarter of the global Muslim population, has seen the Erdogan government seeking to revive historical ties with regions that once lay on the periphery of the Ottoman Empire.³⁴ The AKP government has leveraged Turkey's Ottoman legacy and Islamic rhetoric to nurture stronger ties with the

continent that is home to nearly one-quarter of the world's Muslim population.

Under its "Opening up to Africa" policy launched in 2005, Ankara significantly expanded its economic, diplomatic, military, and cultural engagement across the continent.³⁵ Erdogan has used oft-repeated maxims like "Africa belongs to Africans" and "African issues require African solutions" to extend its olive branch to many African countries, such as Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Somaliland, Ethiopia and Somalia, and between Sudanese rebel groups, etc, which have faced internal strife, ethnic conflicts, and prolonged violence over the years.³⁶ It sought to broker a deal between Somalia and its breakaway region, Somaliland, which has functioned independently for decades, albeit without international recognition. In 2013, Turkey facilitated dialogue between the two parties, culminating in the Ankara Declaration, establishing a consulate in Hargeisa to encourage continued engagement and confidence-building between them.³⁷

Yet, its most important African mediation attempt has been the 2024 brokered deal between Somalia and Ethiopia.³⁸ Under the agreement, Ethiopia was promised "reliable,

safe, and sustainable" maritime access while formally recognising Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.³⁹ In return, Ethiopia agreed to withdraw its recognition of Somaliland.

5. Mediation Through Humanitarian Diplomacy

Over the past two decades, the Erdogan government has pursued a "strategic diversification" policy to engage Turkey in multi-track diplomacy.⁴⁰ As part of this broader approach, Ankara has devoted considerable attention to humanitarian diplomacy, using humanitarian assistance not only to enhance its soft power but also to advance broader political and strategic objectives. His government has simultaneously employed a policy of neopatrimonialism, allowing selected civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) considerable operational space both domestically and internationally.⁴¹ Organisations such as the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE), and the Red Crescent have, consequently, become important instruments of Turkey's humanitarian outreach and diplomatic engagement across multiple regions.⁴²

Even the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA) – the government's own development arm – has significantly expanded its global development partnerships, focusing on capacity building, infrastructure development, and humanitarian assistance programmes, including poverty alleviation.⁴³ Put differently, humanitarianism has increasingly become a source of international legitimacy and status within global politics, and accordingly, the Erdogan government has used these engagements to project Ankara as a 'development partner' and 'harbinger of peace and growth' to fulfil its broader strategic objectives.⁴⁴

As part of this humanitarian mediation, on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in 2022, Ankara, along with the United Nations, brokered the landmark Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) peace deal to create a safe shipping corridor for the Ukrainian grain as the war between Russia and Ukraine disrupted the global supply chain.⁴⁵ It facilitated the export of 33 million tonnes of grains to more than 45 countries through the Black Sea, thereby stabilising spiralling global food prices.⁴⁶ This has been described as the flagship deal brokered by the Erdogan government.

Likewise, in the case of Syria, after

the Arab Uprising of 2010 morphed into a civil war and a decade-long civil strife that practically had the country divided into zones of influence between multiple actors, the Erdogan government backed an opposition umbrella across the ideological spectrum from Islamists like Hayat Tahrir al Sham to secularists such as the Free Syrian Army. While it is true that the country became host to a large number of Syrian refugees who either stayed in the country or used it to move westward towards Europe, it also backed the opposition groups in holding territories such as Idlib, which eventually became the staging ground for the opposition militant groups to launch a military campaign to oust the Bashar al-Assad government in 2024. As such, Syria also became a success story of Turkish humanitarian diplomacy, under whose auspices it pursued its regional interests.

6. Explaining Variation in Turkey's Mediation Pattern and Outcomes

Given the existing sharp divide and polarisation between the Western democracies and other world powers, Turkey has maintained diplomatic communication across warring parties.⁴⁷ A comparative examination of the cases discussed above reveals several

recurring characteristics of Ankara's mediation strategy. First, Turkey's mediation efforts are closely linked to its broader ambition to expand its diplomatic reach and enhance its global image as a middle power. Mediation has therefore functioned as a strategic instrument of status-seeking diplomacy, enabling Ankara to cultivate political influence across different regions and geopolitical blocs.

Second, mediation occurred where the country had significant political or strategic interests and diplomatic credibility with all parties, as seen in the Somalia-Ethiopia case, thus challenging the traditional mediation norm that effective mediation requires strict neutrality. Instead, Turkey illustrates how strategic relevance and political access can sometimes compensate for the absence of complete impartiality.

The recent confrontation between Iran and Israel/USA exposes the Turkish mediation pattern more prominently. Despite projecting itself as a trusted diplomatic actor in the crisis-prone West Asian region, Turkey has not actively sought to involve itself in de-escalating the hostilities. Unlike in its consistent engagement in the Russia-Ukraine war or the Ethiopia-Somalia dispute, it has conveniently tried to not

involve itself in this war. This is despite the fact that the country has incentives in the regional peace does possess access in Tehran and Washington being a member of US-led NATO military bloc while maintaining good relations with Tehran. Moreover, it could also be adversely impacted should the war lead to a refugee crisis.⁴⁷ This reveals Ankara's selective use of mediation diplomacy, demonstrating that the Erdogan government shows its willingness to deploy mediation only where its geostrategic interests align, particularly in burnishing its leadership claims in the region and in the broader Islamic world. In fact, any weakening of the government in Tehran only works in favour. As such, the war between US-Israel and Iran demonstrates Turkey's conditional commitment to conflict resolution.

Third, the outcomes of these mediation initiatives have varied considerably, ranging from unsuccessful negotiations to partial diplomatic success. The initiatives, such as the Israel-Syria negotiations and the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Türkiye trilateral dialogue, have failed to produce comprehensive political settlements even as Ankara, nevertheless, claims such engagements contributed to confidence-building and sustained channels of communication among the parties.

Fourth, Turkey's mediation

diplomacy is characterised by its willingness to engage with non-state armed actors, often described as “spoilers.”⁴⁸ These are actors who are actively engaged in violence within the state, aiming to obstruct or undermine peacebuilding processes.⁴⁹ Contrary to approaches that seek to isolate such actors, Ankara has argued that their inclusion is essential for achieving comprehensive and sustainable peace.⁵⁰ Accordingly, Turkey has maintained dialogue with a wide range of non-state actors, including the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Libyan armed factions, Sunni resistance groups in Iraq, and anti-regime organisations in Syria, such as the Syrian National Army and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham,⁵¹ which eventually prevailed in ousting the Assad regime in 2024. Although these efforts have produced only limited tangible outcomes due to Turkey’s constrained leverage over the principal belligerents, Ankara has nevertheless presented this as a distinctive feature of its mediation model, which does not exclude armed non-state actors from political engagement.

Lastly, a comparison across cases unveils a peculiar dimension. In the case of the Balkans and several African initiatives, where Turkey

maintained a relatively balanced approach in its engagements with the disputing parties, its mediation role received a degree of comparative acceptance. By contrast, in conflicts such as Syria and Libya, where Ankara openly aligned itself with particular actors, its credibility as a mediator deteriorated significantly. This suggests that although complete neutrality may not be essential for mediation, perceptions of excessive political or military alignment can substantially undermine a mediator’s legitimacy.

7. Limitations of the Turkish Mediation approach

During the early years of AKP rule, the Erdogan government sought to present Turkey as a model of Muslim-majority democracy in the region of authoritarian autocracies and monarchies, combining representative institutions, political stability, economic liberalisation, and technological modernisation. President Erdogan, who has harboured ambitions to project himself as an Ottoman Sultan, hoped that this model would enhance Ankara’s appeal as a mediator and a source of political inspiration across West Asia. However, the Arab uprisings and the profound geopolitical transformations that followed fundamentally altered the regional

environment, thereby constraining the effectiveness of Turkish mediation.

Domestic political developments, such as the attempted coup in July 2016, marked a decisive turning point in Turkey's contemporary political trajectory, accelerating the consolidation of executive authority under the AKP while reshaping Ankara's foreign policy priorities.⁵² In the aftermath of the coup attempt, Turkish foreign policy became increasingly securitised, prioritising regime survival, national security, and territorial integrity.⁵³ Consequently, Turkey gradually moved away from its earlier image as a relatively neutral facilitator and increasingly became an active participant in several regional conflicts, thereby weakening perceptions of its impartiality.

A major structural limitation of Turkey's mediation strategy has been its ideological inclination towards and engagement with Islamist movements across the Muslim world.⁵⁴ Most notably, it supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and opposition groups in the ensuing civil war in Syria, leading to widespread criticism of Ankara for ideological bias.⁵⁵ As a result, Turkey's mediation efforts increasingly came to be viewed by several regional actors, particularly Egypt and the Gulf monarchies, not

as impartial diplomacy but as politically motivated intervention designed to advance its regional influence.⁵⁶

The consequences of this ideological shift became particularly evident in Libya, where Ankara initially adopted a diplomatic approach and supported the UN-sponsored peace initiatives to resolve the civil war. However, it subsequently abandoned its diplomatic posture in favour of direct military assistance to the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), thereby becoming an active party to the conflict. This act not only undermined Ankara's credibility as an impartial moderator but reinforced perceptions that its involvement was driven by strategic rather than peacebuilding objectives.

A similar pattern can be observed in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Owing to its geographical proximity and historical ties with both Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkey initially sought to position itself as a constructive intermediary.⁵⁷ Ankara's interest in acting as a middleman also aligned with broader Western efforts, particularly those of its NATO ally, the United States, to reduce Russian influence in the South Caucasus.⁵⁸ However, in recent years, as it moved away from its ambition to emerge as a neutral mediator in the conflict,

Turkey's mediation posture shifted to overt political and military support for Azerbaijan, driven by extensive cultural, economic, political, military, and linguistic ties. A longstanding historical dispute with Armenia over the events of 1915 contributed to Ankara's increasingly partisan position.⁵⁹ As a result, Turkey's diplomatic backing and military assistance, including the transfer of advanced armed drones, significantly strengthened Azerbaijan's military capabilities while simultaneously eroding Ankara's credibility as an impartial mediator. It illustrates the broader tension between strategic alignment and mediation legitimacy.

More fundamentally, Turkey's experience demonstrates the inherent tension that arises when mediation becomes closely integrated into a state's broader foreign policy agenda. The instrumentalisation of mediation as a vehicle for advancing geopolitical objectives risks undermining its primary purpose as a mechanism for conflict resolution. As Ankara increasingly assumes the dual role of strategic actor and mediator, questions inevitably arise regarding the credibility of its commitment to impartial peacebuilding. Turkey's experience, therefore, highlights both the opportunities and the limitations

of strategic mediation as an instrument of contemporary middle-power diplomacy.

8. Conclusion

The above analysis reveals how the Erdogan-led Justice and Development Party (AKP) has leveraged mediation as a diplomatic instrument to position Turkey as an influential middle power in international politics and to claim a leadership role in the Muslim world. Middle powers often rely on multilateralism and norm-centric geopolitical environments to enhance their international role. Ankara's approach shows an activist variant, in which mediation has been increasingly used as part of its strategy of status-seeking and diplomatic entrepreneurship to reinforce its regional and international profile. As such, by portraying itself as a middle power capable of engaging diverse actors across multiple conflict theatres, Turkey has pursued mediation that simultaneously advances its political, strategic, and geopolitical interests.

The Turkish case also offers broader insights into the evolving role of middle powers in contemporary international relations. Traditionally, middle powers have relied on multilateralism and norm-

based diplomacy to enhance their international influence. Turkey, however, represents a more activist variant of middle-power diplomacy in which mediation is integrated into a broader strategy of status-seeking, strategic autonomy, and diplomatic entrepreneurship. In doing so, Ankara has demonstrated how mediation can serve simultaneously as an instrument of conflict management and a vehicle for geopolitical influence. Yet, the convenient distance maintained by Turkey in the ongoing war between Iran and US-Israel substantiates the central thesis of this study that its mediation diplomacy is a political enterprise for its strategic interests than for peace.

The comparative analysis approach adopted in this study elucidates that Turkish mediation is neither applied universally nor uniformly successful, but rather

conditioned by strategic calculations. Therefore, this study argues that Turkey under Erdogan represents an emerging model of strategic mediation that deliberately blurs the conventional boundary between neutral facilitation and geopolitical statecraft. While this model has enabled Ankara to expand its diplomatic reach and reinforce its international standing, it has also exposed the inherent tension between pursuing national strategic interests and preserving the credibility necessary for effective mediation. The Turkish experience, therefore, suggests that the effectiveness of contemporary mediation depends less on absolute neutrality than on the mediator's ability to balance strategic interests with sustained diplomatic credibility, offering an important contribution to the study of middle-power diplomacy and international conflict resolution.



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