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INTERROGATING ERDOGAN'S NEO-OTTOMAN GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION

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Abstract: *This paper examines the possible emergence of the neo-Ottoman geopolitical order with the Republic of Turkey at its helm under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The blueprint for this ambitious order is taken from its Ottoman antiquity. Neo-Ottomanism attempts to secure continuity with its Ottoman past by foregrounding Islam as the core theo-cultural framework to achieve the political end of constituting Islamic nations to come under one particular order. To achieve this desired end, Erdogan intensifies his endeavor and employs his tact to forge alliances with Islamic nations and promises them solidarity and mutual prosperity keeping his leadership role intact. To pursue this ambition, he expressed his belligerence against the neighboring nations such as Armenia, Greece, Cyprus, Georgia, Bulgaria, etc., which were once the constituents of the Ottoman empire and preferred interventionist policy to diplomatic cooperation. The symptoms of neo-Ottoman pre-eminence are evident in the nautical territories in the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara and the Mediterranean Sea. The study employs methods of analysis and scrutiny of the existing literature in the field and the related areas to achieve the objective of what constitutes Erdogan's neo-Ottoman geopolitical imagination and to conclude as to what are the geopolitical symptoms that validate the possible emergence of the neo-Ottoman political process, and limitations that underpin the process.*

Keywords: *Neo-Ottomanism; Complex Geopolitics; Recep Tayyip Erdogan; Islam; Hegemony*

INTRODUCTION

Neo-Ottomanism refers to the revival of Ottoman geopolitical supremacy (Yavuz 1998 2020; Ivaylo 2019). With its Ottoman past and sharply defined Islamic presence under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey aspires to re-establish its Ottoman hegemony. This takes Erdogan toward a complete revamp of its existing foreign policy. His foreign policy primarily aims to strengthen the Islamic brotherhood, specifying their cultural commonality. This is designed to develop a perception that the way to the Islamic world passes through Turkey. Therefore, Erdogan's renewed geopolitics embodies the aspiration of refashioning Turkey as a neo-Ottoman power ambitiously modeled on its hegemonic Ottoman antiquity[1].

[1]Ottoman, etymologically 'Uthman' in Arabic referring to the name of emperor Osman I, began assuming the shape of an empire towards the end of the XIII century in the north-western Anatolia under the leadership of a Turk named Osman I (1299-1323/24). It became a transcontinental empire as it expanded faster covering West Asia, South-East

NEO-OTTOMANISM: GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

What is so distinctly neo-Ottoman as the study intends to establish? This section deals with this question distinctly. The academic enterprise involved in formulating the concept of 'neo-Ottoman' primarily concerns the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He provides the machinery and ideology to construct a political narrative or national sentiment around neo-Ottomanism. The conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP)[2] that came to power under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2002 reinvented Ottomanism by harping on Sublime Porte's[3] Islamic imperial glory extending Turkey's 'Strategic Depth'[4] in the contemporary geopolitical narrative. His electoral success, seemingly average economic well-being, and open advocacy of non-secular ethos were his introductory masterstroke to emerge as an impactful leader domestically (Cinar 2011). This might have reinforced his vision of reconceptualizing Ottomanism in the form of neo-Ottomanism[5] (Alekseevich 2018).

Turkey, under Erdogan, sought to revive its Ottoman supremacy by exercising its control over the erstwhile imperial region (Wastnidge 2019). The quest for expansionism is to exercise the geopolitical hegemony over the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Red Sea and the Caspian Sea for maritime pre-eminence. Moreover, it intends to stretch its strategic leverage among the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) by harking on its Pan -Turkic identity for continental ascendancy (Alkin 2021). As Erdogan stated: "the sun will rise from the East again" (The Siasat Daily 2021). His 'Vision 2040', a strategic document, is equally illustrative of the political and economic integration Turkey intends to achieve and the geopolitical leadership it aspires to occupy. This embodies the revivalist aspiration of reincarnating Ottoman civilizational glory. Erdogan's ego is disproportionately emboldened by his relative success in the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 in extending his support to Azerbaijan. The geopolitical dividend of the war further magnified his neo-Ottoman imagination. Hence, his mandate to "continue to develop our relations in every field in accordance with the natural road map of our civilization

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Europe and North Africa. Its inaugural success came in the form of its eventful replacement of the existing and most powerful Greco-Roman-Christian Empire named Byzantium Empire in 1453 with the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II. This replacement introduced a Sunni variant of Islam, which transitioned the cultural texture and flavour of the land - from the classical Byzantine-Hellenic-Christian-cultural mosaic to the monotheism of Islam. The empire experienced its climactic success economically, politically and culturally in the XVI century under Suleiman I, popularly known as Suleiman the Magnificent (Imber 2009; Keyder 2018; Gibbons 2013).

[2] *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) meaning Justice and Development Party.

[3] Sublime Porte was the 'High Gate' or 'Gate of the Eminent' of the Ottoman Empire which provided entry to the official buildings of Istanbul.

[4] The concept of 'Strategic Depth' was spelt out by Prof. Ahmet Davutoglu, academic and former Prime Minister as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, in his book 'Stratejik Derinlik' published in 2001. Davutoglu predicted the rise of Tukey in the larger 'geopolitical areas of influence', the latter being the gateway to Asia, Europe Africa and the Atlantic. He identified the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East as the adjoining land mass that constituted 'Turkey's potential spheres of influence'. He explained how Turkey can expand its geospatial orbit by linking the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean Sea, Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf and Gulf of Bahrain the wider maritime connectivity corridor to emerge as a major regional and global power.

[5] The term 'neo-Ottomanism' was coined in the Chatham House paper by David Barchard in 1985. Subsequently, the 'Strategic Depth' thesis of Davutoglu became the founding document of the neo-Ottoman narrative. It is treated as the 'Red Book' or secret constitution of the Turkish Republic which is renewed every five years.

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and culture" (Alkin 2021) would bring Turkey to the center stage of global trade and commerce through transnational corridors.

For this, he refers to 'Ittihad-I-Islam' (Unity of Islam) as the most potent political methodology to exercise unity among Islamic nations. Therefore, he encourages religious orthodoxy and supports certain radical Islamist groups. His statecraft focuses on the Islamist approach of creating a confederacy among the Islamic nations following Sunni theology. This supposed arbitrating role over the Islamic world has invited severe opposition from the competing forces. His vision of pan-Islamic foreign policy has not gone well with many stakeholders. In addition, Turkey's attempt at creating an Islamic confederacy combining Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran and Qatar formulated in an Islamic Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2019 emerges as an alternative to the Saudi-led Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). To achieve this end, AKP advertises Erdogan as a catalyst to fulfill the vision of Ummah (the whole community of Muslims bound together by the ties of religion). However, the Arabian Peninsula does not seem to agree with Erdogan's foreign policy. Erdogan's enthusiasm over the Arab Spring and the concomitant overthrow of the Arab monarchies was short-lived, as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) remained steadfast amid the convulsions of the Arab Spring.

Ankara was noticed to have intervened in Libya, Egypt, etc. (Akca 2019) during the high tide of Arab Spring and deployed military and mercenaries to escalate regional tensions. Its Libyan engagement embodies its economic aspiration. Turkey's move towards engaging with Fayez al-Serraj, the Prime Minister under the GNA (Government of National Accord), enabled it to drill oil and natural gas from Libyan shores (Aljazeera 2020); and this infuriated the EU very enormously as the above act involved infringement of the sovereign rights of the country concerned and noncompliance of the maritime law. Regional actors such as Cyprus, Greece and others have outrightly denounced this move. Cyprus declared Turkey a pirate state in 2018 for its unilateral intervention into the former's maritime space (Colonna 2018).

Moreover, on the Eastern Mediterranean shores, Ankara does not recognize the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in Cyprus and Greece. Turkey's interventionist policy in the region keeps the tension mounting. Erdogan expresses no willingness to settle the dispute in the region. He adopts the policy of profiteering and hegemony. This belligerence of Turkey has led to the formation of the EastMed (Eastern Mediterranean) Gas Forum (EMGF) as an anti-Turkey bloc comprising Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Italy and Palestine to protect their natural deposits in their nautical territory. Noticing such developments, Erdogan shows strength by stitching an alliance with Pakistan, Qatar and Iran.

Turkey revitalizes its relationship with Islamabad with the rise of the Taliban and the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan. The defense, economic and cultural cooperation between Ankara and Islamabad seem to have been strengthened over the years. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Turkish arm trade with Pakistan between 2016 and 2019 reached 112 million USD (Rafiq 2021).

The Turkish FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) in Pakistan has risen to 300 million USD since 2009 (Rafiq 2021). With the Taliban infighting and the Haqqani-ISI supposed complicity (Bhalla 2021), Islamabad, with Beijing's tutelage, will play a major role in Afghan domestic and foreign matters. Therefore, Erdogan may re-energize its trilateral agreement with Iran and Pakistan

under the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) platform in 1985. The proposed formation of the trade bloc in the Muslim-majority countries in West and Central Asia is essential to facilitate a single market of goods and services under ECO. The Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad and Istanbul-Tehran-Mary-Tashkent-Almaty rail linkage, as earmarked under ECO (Kahagh 2010), may give Turkey the much-needed advantage to participate in the geopolitics and trade opportunities in Central, West and South Asia.

Besides Afghanistan and Pakistan, Turkey's export volume to the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) Member Countries[6] was 20.3 billion USD in 2007, spiraling to 42.2 billion USD in 2016 (Bilginand Demir 2018). Such expenditure, essentially among the Islamic nations, and Erdogan's loud call for cooperation towards the developing nations manifest Turkey's will to emerge as a leveraging force in the Islamic world. This evident generosity and the call for collective Islamic identity underline Erdogan's deep-seated desire to position Turkey as a neo-Ottoman power. Apart from the soft power that Ankara exercises by increasing its expenditure level in its partnering Islamic nations, it also equips itself with the hard power of acquiring the Russian S-400 missile system 'Triumf' surface-to-air missile system despite the US's sanctions. This act of defiance exhibited by Erdogan is symptomatic of the growing autonomy of Turkey to emerge as an independent power post the US pull-out. This indicates Istanbul's attempt to reverse the US's hegemonic presence.

Erdogan's religious conservatism also shows his apparent rejection of Western orientation. This drift towards cultivated fundamentalism to deploy the religion card to emerge as a force to be reckoned with explains his growing detachment from the US's sphere of influence. Though Turkey is a member of NATO and a critical regional partner, its ideological affiliations and fundamentalist tendencies stand contrary to the democratic ethos the NATO-led nations share. The US's anti-Russian and anti-Communist ideological position and its democracy and human rights flagship require Turkey's partnership. However, Erdogan has not heeded the US's stated ideological position. Turkey's geostrategic positioning makes it a critical partner that can never be set aside. Any escalation in the Black Sea region, including the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and the probable ones, gives Istanbul the geopolitical and geostrategic center stage. This fact is equally well-known both to the US and Turkey. Erdogan will likely weaponize its geostrategic positionality to apply the chock point tactics to harvest geopolitical dividends.

Moreover, Turkey shares a border with Syria, Iraq, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Bulgaria and Greece. The US is left without a choice but to ignore Turkey for Erdogan's fundamentalist proclivities. Its foreign policy in the region and Russia's proximity require working relations with Turkey, though ideologically, the two countries have serious contradictions.

Moving to the severe geopolitical developments in the Black Sea region on account of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Erdogan harbors the strongest desire to secure the possible rise of Turkish regional power. His subtle neo-Ottoman geopolitics is apparently at

[6]The IDB member countries include Albania, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote D'Ivoire, Egypt, Gabon, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Suriname, Syria, Togo, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Uganda, and Yemen.

play as he may wield influence in the Black Sea territory, with Russia getting mired in its egotism and sanction stress. This subtility in geopolitics is well-manifested in 2021 when Erdogan invested $4.5 billion in Ukraine, promised to increase the annual trade worth by $10 billion, and thereby emerged as a prominent foreign investor (Gostev and Liklikadze 2022). This indicates Erdogan's growing trade interest in Ukraine and increases the speculation of the unleashing of his neo-Ottoman aspiration as the erstwhile Ottoman sway over the south of Ukraine is not an obscure fact.

Erdogan's denial to supply weapons to Ukraine against Russian aggression may generate questions of ambivalence. Still, it is well-established that Kyiv has been well-supplied with Turkish arms, notably the 'Bayraktar' drones (Gostev and Liklikadze 2022). Furthermore, the existing agreements between Erdogan and Zelenskiy (President of Ukraine) on the areas of arms supplies and other critical appliances, engines and ships illustrate the growing proximity between Turkey and Ukraine. In addition, Turkey and Ukraine have reached a deal to co-produce the most efficient Turkish Bayraktar drones; and the production hub has been decided to be in Ukraine (Bekdil 2022). In 2019, Baykar Makina, a Turkish drone maker, received a contract from Ukraine to dispatch six Bayraktar TB2 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) (Gostev and Liklikadze 2022). The contract involved $69 million and also included other related critical appliances.

Erdogan's formal indifference and official unwillingness to comment on Russia and to express approval on the matter of the application of NATO membership by Sweden and Finland are diplomatic responses not to secure open enmity against Russia. The geopolitical obscurity that he generates is primarily to conceal his neo-Ottoman intentionality. Erdogan plays a very subtle diplomatic game to integrate his interest in the ongoing geopolitical upheaval in the region. He may advertise a diplomatic posture being a negotiator of peace and de-escalation of conflict, but the symptoms speak something contrary. There is perhaps a serious lack of genuine interest on the part of Turkey to go overboard and exercise its strategic and diplomatic weight to find a workable solution to the crisis. Turkey's geopolitical hide-and-seek explains the formulation of its regional profile from the complex development in the region. Erdogan measures his diplomatic step so diligently that he does not appear to be either a troublemaker or a profit-seeker in the ongoing crisis. His role as a peacemaker is primarily designed to repair his growing rift with the west. The geopolitical churn in the region in the event of the ongoing war does not create a climate for him to secure success by capitalizing on religion. It demands the revision of geopolitical strategies. Erdogan has seemingly restructured his policy perception taking due cognizance of the geopolitical symptoms and developments in the region.

The newfound courage that Ankara expresses is the gift of China. It is Beijing that has provided the much-needed economic immunity to Ankara. With the Chinese BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) in full swing in Turkey, Erdogan's dependence on the west has been drastically minimized. China invested around $3 billion in Turkey between 2016 and 2019 (Alemdaroglu and Tepe 2020) and has expressed its intent to expand the volume to $6 billion by 2021 (Daily Sabah 2019). Through BRI, it has taken Turkey's geostrategic advantage to expand its presence in the Mediterranean Sea. With the trade and defense partnership with Turkey, China has built a robust networking system for facilitating trade and acquiring depth in the region's geopolitics – Eastern Europe, West Asia and North Africa. The Turkey-Iran-Pakistan-China rail connectivity clears the way for intense trade and defense cooperation.

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However, this developing saga of cooperation between Turkey and China and their partnership with Pakistan over the emerging complex political trajectory in Afghanistan sound more like a bloc formation. However, this partnership stands on the shaky foundation of opportunism, not cooperation. It may not take much time for this relation to regress into rivalry as all three prioritize power over genuine commitment concerning mutual prosperity and prosperity of the regions they operate on. Turkey's opportunism became well manifest when Erdogan decided to take a U-turn in getting Abdulkadir Yapcan, a prominent Uighur political activist living in Turkey since 2001, arrested in 2016 and initiated his extradition to China (Alemdaroglu and Tepe 2020). This change of mind explains Erdogan's intentions of coming closer to China and seeking its investment in Turkey. This tendency invites criticism of Erdogan's foreign policy, which is characterized by convenience, not commitment. The overt custodianship of the collective Muslim cause that Turkey champions receive considerable backlash from the Muslim community.

Erdogan no doubt battles against the challenges and contradictions, but his commitment to Turkey's neo-Ottoman incarnation emanates from the impending expiry of the Treaty of Lausanne.[7]It is nearing its expiry in 2023 and may liberate Turkey from the legal constraints imposed on it. The territorial shrinkages that Turkey suffered in the event of this treaty enforced in 1923 may serve as a reason for Erdogan's incremental antagonism against smaller neighboring countries. Furthermore, instances and symptoms of such antagonism are evident even before the expiry. His geopolitical muscle-flexing with his unequal neighbors is not a new phenomenon. The Issue is whether Turkey would justify its invasive and intrusive behavior toward the smaller nations by claiming that they were formerly part of the former Ottoman Empire. Further, President Erdogan ignites the Turkish nationalistic fervor by reminding his folks of this unjust treaty that pushed Turkey to make substantial territorial concessions to the other powers violating its legitimate historical claims. Hence, Ankara has the "right to demand a return to the national border envisioned by the Misak-iMillî plan" (National Pact 1920; Maziad and Sotiriadis 2020) by the Ottoman Parliament, which "claimed territories from Eastern Thrace (now part of Greece) to Cyprus, the eastern Aegean islands, parts of northern Syria, northern Iraq, the entirety of modern Armenia, parts of Georgia, and even to Iran" (Batuman 2010; Ozkan 2014).

However, the expiry of the treaty of Lausanne may empower Erdogan to exercise his control over the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea and most importantly Bosporus Strait[8], which Turkey lost to the Allied Forces on the negotiating table in 1923. Such a tendency of redefining Ottomanism, if made a policy in the years to come, may escalate tension in the region and invite antagonism from the major regional powers, namely the EU, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia. These are some critical areas in which Turkey intends to capitalize while emerging as a neo-Ottoman power.

Erdogan's foreign policy primarily with the nations which were the constituents of the erstwhile Ottoman empire inheres superiority complex. The post-Lausanne geopolitics is likely to

[7]Treaty of Lausanne was signed post the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by the Allied Forces at Lausanne, Switzerland on 24 July 1923. The significance of the treaty lies in the re-definition of the modern state of Turkey and the loss of provinces that were once part of the Ottoman Empire. But, the autonomy promised to the Kurds for the creation of independent Kurdistan in the Treaty of Sèvreswas not delivered (Entessar 1989; Edmonds 1971; Bajalan 2019; Phillips 2017).

[8] The waterway which connects the Aegean Sea with the Black Sea.

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become more intricate as Turkey may intensify its ongoing policy of border skirmishes primarily with Greece, Bulgaria, Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Iraq and Syria. Its involvement in exacerbating conflicts in Armenia, Iraq, Syria and Greece is indicative of a new policy of territorial expansionism. Erdogan's territorial imagination of the supposed greater Turkey or the neo-Ottoman inspires his action. He self-indulgently crowns himself as the modern Caliph (Beyond the Cusp 2017) and nurtures the reverie of Ottoman revivalism. The lost glory finds the new leader in revisiting the relic and establishing continuity with the forgotten legacy. To that end, he intends to emerge as a singular leader of the Arab world and expects others to bend to his whims. He, moreover, supposedly equates his will with the Ottoman will. This imaginary grandeur drives him to engage in constant bickering with his neighbors.

NEO-OTTOMANISM: GEO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS

Culture plays a very critical role in the effort to unify people both within and beyond the border. It also contributes to the development of complex geopolitics as politics is an act of people's cultural behavior. In this connection, pan-Islamism as a politically-determined cultural movement is not new. Its monotheistic theological framework facilitates pan-Islamic political unity. Erdogan banks on this religiously-determined political ideology to succeed in his attempt to establish neo-Ottoman geopolitical order. His geopolitical ambition in West Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and Africa is not limited to garnering support through financial incentives and infrastructural development. He uses the soft power mechanism to attract Islamic nations under his geopolitical umbrella. Therefore, Ankara has opted for 'Ertugrul' (Resurrection) (Subramanian 2020), a Turkish drama series based on the XIII century Ottoman imperial and cultural milieu. The politics of telecasting the same in the Islamic countries as a cultural canon depicting the glory of the Ottoman past indicates the cultural logic of securing the legitimacy of Turkey's superiority. Erdogan uses this strategy effectively as an instrument of geo-cultural gravitas to communicate the message of Islamic cultural greatness and historical superiority.

The cultural and historical content created to celebrate the tales from the Turkish past and communicated through popular TV shows, Turkish soap operas, etc. (Carney 2018; Cevik 2019) has attracted Muslims across the globe. They are becoming increasingly popular, primarily in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Economically weaker Muslim countries consume this content more than their wealthy counterpart. The poor economy is the ideal ground for ideology to flourish. Erdogan is well aware of this reality and leaves no opportunity to aestheticize the Ottoman cultural and political legacy. This cinematic romanticization of a historical reality involving imperialism, political and territorial expansionism and religious superiority is the most exciting recipe for securing leadership roles among Muslim countries.

The TV series 'Dirilis Ertugrul' (Ertugrul's Resurrection) is gaining immense popularity in Pakistan owing to the most dramatic glorification of Muslim heroes taken from Turkey's Ottoman ancestry. 'Ertugrul's immense popularity has gained the stature of the Muslim 'Game of Throne'. These TV series, which depict the acts of bravery of Muslim Oghuz Turks battling against the Mongol invaders, Christians, Byzantines, etc. (Farooqi 2020), were made with the definite objective of presenting a counter-narrative to Islamophobia; and by doing this, Erdogan becomes the protector of Islam's prestige. It builds a sense of pride among the Muslims by

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glorifying the exceptional courage shown by the Ottoman masters and creates a sense of Islamic unity. The most crucial part of the entire exercise is the political messaging. The overt political drama is designed to send messages to the Muslims to gravitate towards Turkey to rebuild the Muslim political and cultural authority over the competing forces. Erdogan's aspiration of securing for Turkey the leadership role among the Muslim countries, however unpragmatic it may appear in the face of the regional rivals cultivating the same urge, is very well inferred from these geo-cultural enterprises. Motion pictures made on the Ottoman imperial saga spiced with cinematographic alchemy and circulated widely through OTT (over-the-top) platforms in the age of the 4G internet have added exceptionality to Erdogan's geo-cultural project.

Moreover, the latest Turkish soap opera, 'Magnificent Century', aired in 45 countries, is gaining immense popularity in the Arab world. The Turkish soap operas project Turkey as modern, Muslim and prosperous (Rohde 2012). This combination goes well with the aspirations of Muslim youths who expect to see the marriage of Islam with modernity. Erdogan makes no mistake in addressing this aspiration through motion art as soft power diplomacy. As Semuhi Sinanoglu (2017), a Turkish scholar, called this cultural contour 'political technology' and marked:

> Undoubtedly, each power creates its own political history narrative, and presents its national heroes by choosing them on the axis of their own ideology. In this context, the neo-Ottoman TV series on TRT are not only inspired by historical events; constructing them in a specific way, especially in parallel with today's politics, produces consent to the able nationalist-conservative-authoritarian politics.

Neo-Ottomanism, therefore, is an expansionist political ideology. The Ottoman saga fits well with this ambitious political ideology. Therefore, history became an ideological tool to serve a political end. Narrative-building is not a politically innocent act. Erdogan's preference for narrative-building involves the political project of establishing neo-Ottomanism. He knew the effects of this promotionism and the geopolitical and geo-cultural dividends they embody. Erdogan, therefore, injected more revenue into this industry as it attracted the attention of the Islamic nations toward Turkey.

These soap operas are also becoming very popular in Afghanistan, primarily among children and youth. The contents of violence and the gory depiction of aggressivity have surprisingly gained more enthusiasm and interest among Afghan youths (Sarwary 2014). These are, however, the soft power modalities that Erdogan quite tactically deploys to establish Turkey's leadership role in the Islamic world. That is why Turkish academic Omar Al-Ghazzi said that this new image of Turkey "demonstrated that shift of perception from Turkey as an enemy to Turkey as a model (…) Turkish soft power was perhaps at its height with the rise of Erdogan – this went hand-in-hand with the popularity of Turkish popular culture, particularly Turkish TV series" (Ravi 2020). Under Erdogan, Turkey has emerged as a model that combines Islam, modernity and prosperity. The advertisement of this combination has attracted many Islamic nations, primarily those economically not well-off, to drift towards it and accept its pioneering role. To convey this message, Erdogan chooses popular culture as the most effective mode to achieve geopolitical and geo-cultural ends.

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However, Erdogan's policy of cultural penetration into the wider Islamic world has also received flak from the Arab world. He imagines Istanbul in tandem with the imperial Ottoman past and considers it to assume the leadership role in the Islamic world with an anti-west posture and pro-Islamic character (Karaveli 2016). For this, he intends to export 'Derilis Ertugrul' as a cultural tool to gain broader legitimacy in the Islamic Ummah (community). On the other, Saudi Arabia, the current custodian of the holy places of Mecca and Medina, deems the royal kingdom as the legitimate authority to lead the Islamic Ummah. The competition for Islamic leadership, based on one's historical past and another's present position, has created a cultural binary between the Turks and the Arabs in the Islamic world. This indicates the complex competitiveness among the Islamic countries to occupy a leadership role. Erdogan's geo-cultural design uses culture to gain political dividends (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013), but his competitors are equally equipped with similar strategies to unseat his cultural narrative.

Saudi Arabia has created a counter-narrative by showcasing the 'Kingdom of Fire' set in the backdrop of the Arab victory over the Turks and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The infallibility aspect that has been cinematographically demonstrated in the Turkish TV series about the Ottoman imperial heroes finds antithesis in the form of a response from Saudi Arabia. This has unleashed the geo-cultural narrative war suggesting how culture determines politics in Islam. Egypt is also critical of the Turkish policy of cultural aggrandizement in the Arab region. As a retort, the supreme religious authority – Egypt's Dar al-Iftaa, has also banned 'Dirilis: Ertugrul' and issued a fatwa that said:

> They (Erdogan and his followers) export to the people and nations the idea that they are the leaders of the caliphate, responsible for supporting Muslims worldwide and being their salvation from oppression and injustice, while also seeking to implement Islamic law. They hide the fact that their main drive in these colonial campaigns is what [Turkish President] Erdogan reaps from material and political gains (Middle East Monitor 2020).

It further mentioned, "[t]he Turkish President and his followers are not immune from using religious discourse in general, and fatwa in particular, as a cover for their military operations, just like terrorist groups and organizations" (The Siasat Daily 2020).

Therefore, the contesting geopolitical symptoms in the region are not favorable enough for Erdogan to expect dramatic results for his neo-Ottoman intentionality. His reliance on popular culture as an instrument of power to accelerate his neo-Ottoman ambition meets several challenges. His aspiration of securing geopolitical advantages through geo-cultural modalities is seemingly a strategic cliché that has been well-exposed. His neo-Ottoman project on the strength of religion does appear to be very viable as his regional rivals with aspirations for occupying Islamic leadership are equally astute to present challenges.

LIMITATIONS

Erdogan's neo-Ottomanism is fraught with a few serious limitations. They include economic underperformance related to the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic, anti-incumbency, religious fundamentalism, Kurdish separatism, US sanctions and the EU's

disappointment over Turkey's interventionist geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey-Russia conflict, troubled relation with Iran and Saudi Arabia and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

With the Covid-19 pandemic wreaking havoc across the globe, Turkey's economy is in shambles. The devaluation of the Lira down to 8.0 per dollar in October 2020 (Ozsoy 2020) was undoubtedly a factor that troubled Turkey. In August 2021, the inflation in Turkey reached 19.25%, and the Lira came down to 8.808 (Kucukgocmen and Spicer 2021). The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has further exacerbated the Turkish economy. Food prices and inflation see no semblance of respite. Turkey's inflation rate will reach 70% by April 2022 (Robinson 2022). In such a dismal economic scenario, the Turkish Lira has weakened, reaching "16.5 per USD in early June and edging closer to the all-time low of 18.4 hits in December" (Trading Economics 2022). This tendency does not seem to ease shortly. Therefore, economic underperformance will likely lead to domestic political instability and social unrest.

The Republican People's Party (CHP - *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) constantly criticizes Erdogan's failure to address the collapsing economy. The credibility of CHP's criticism emanates from its victory in the Istanbul mayoral election in 2019. Anti-incumbency is a significant drawback that Erdogan may have to deal with in the 2023 presidential election. The short-term skirmishes that he orchestrates with his neighboring nations are undertaken to divert the attention of his people from his inability to address the increasing economic crisis at home. These diversionary tactics will not work beyond a certain point when inflation chokes the nation. Erdogan resorts to encouraging nationalism, Islamic unity and restoration of Ottoman glory, Turkey-centred geopolitics in the Arab world and beyond, and some incursions here and there. He relies on nationalism by presenting the fiction of Ottoman resurrection. Through these bouts of nationalist delusion, he somehow escapes criticism around economic underperformance. His political longevity is ensured through the tactical demonstration of a possible revival of Ottoman dominance. This narrative receives popular support. The public gives credence to this inflated narrative of geopolitical hegemony. The national sentiment that he panders to grants him political immunity. People seem to have believed in the logic of nationalism that he has so demonstratively inoculated. However, the theo-cultural rigidity that he relies on to distract public attention from the core and economic security issues is a very limited dose of euphoria, which will not stand long in the face of hunger. The crippling economy is likely to restrict Erdogan's expansionist aspiration.

When the world gradually recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic, the weight of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is becoming unbearable as inflation is staring at countries everywhere. Sanctions on Russia and import restrictions from it and Ukraine writhing under war stress have contributed to rising inflation worldwide. The crushing weight of inflation further exacerbates the condition of Turkey's fragile economy hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. It no doubt raises concern in Erdogan as inflation has always been a strong determinant in abetting social unrest. These dire economic conditions restrict him not to flag off his neo-Ottoman geopolitical narrative. In the event of Turkey's increasing proximity with the US-NATO security structuralism, Erdogan risks its relationship with Russia as it depends mainly on Russian gas, oil, gasoline, etc. Turkey cannot diversify its import dependencies overnight. It needs Russia for its economy, whether import-export or tourism, to secure stability in the inflation-driven global economic framework. The Turkish economy is reeling seriously under currency

devaluation, unemployment and inflation. This has increased the chances of social disquiet and given freehand to the opposition to corner Erdogan for mismanagement. The Parliamentary election in 2023 will not be an easy go for Erdogan. For him, the road ahead does not seem to be leaden with prospects as he enjoyed before. Turkey is now caught in a situation where securing a balance between the US-NATO and Russia is its utmost priority. It needs them both to give its sunken economy some semblance of vitality. With these complex developments, it may be argued that Erdogan's dream of neo-Ottoman geopolitical leverage will fail.

Moving further, Kurdish separatism (Bahcheli and Noel 2011; Gunter 1988; Fuller 1993) always remains a strong undercurrent that may take the shape of a high-intensity disruption at any time. This would test Erdogan's patience, tact and damage control mannerisms. Erdogan's growing unpopularity in the neighborhood and beyond may attract antagonism, which may also help intensify the Kurdish issue. Moreover, the Kurdish insurgency around the creation of independent Kurdistan, the land of ethnic Kurds and geographically comprised south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, north-eastern Iran and northern Syria, perforates Erdogan's narrative of unity and greater Islamic brotherhood. His espousal of an alternative international order centering on Islam with Turkey as its arbiter meets challenges from the militant movements orchestrated by the Kurdish separatist organizations such as Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK - *Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) and its Syrian affiliate People's Protection Forces (YPG - *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*), and People's Democratic Party (HDP - *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*).

The genesis of conflict between the Turks and the Kurds dates back to the Treaty of Serves, which was signed on 10 August 1920 between Britain, France, and Italy on the one hand and the Ottoman Empire on the other following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. It promised protection of the religious and ethnic minorities in the new Turkey, mostly truncated territorially in the aftermath of its defeat. Article 62 (Romano 2020) of the treaty set conditions before the Kurds to express the collective Kurdish desire for independent Kurdistan in the form of a demand for secession from the Ottoman empire before the Council of the League of Nations. However, the Kurdish choice to join Mustafa Kemal in Turkey's War of Independence completely diluted the Kurdish demand for a separate homeland. The Treaty of Lausanne that followed in 1923 did not entertain the demands of the cultural, linguistic and ethnic minorities except that of the Jewish, Greek and Armenian communities. Ataturk's new Turkey was designed along the secular and the western outlook; it neglected the Kurdish distinctive linguistic and ethnic identity. The suppression of the Kurdish revolt almost became a pattern in the history of the new Turkey post-Lausanne. The demand for independent Kurdistan has not decreased despite the consistent oppression unleashed by the Turkish state machinery. This indicates the tough challenges that Turkey faces from within. The militant and separatist activities that the Kurdish political leadership assiduously pursues to gain independence pose a threat to the neo-Ottoman vision of Erdogan. The US sanctions against Turkey under Donald Trump, then President of the USA, over the purchase of Russia's S-400 led CHP to get into a dispute with AKP. The Trump-Erdogan relationship has witnessed mounting differences over the latter's involvement in Syria and attack on the Kurdish forces. This irked Washington as its crackdown on the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, ISIS), with the help of the Kurdish forces, got impeded by Turkey's involvement. Though Trump attempted to strengthen the

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bilateral relationship with Erdogan, they hardly reached any lasting consensus. The Washington-Ankara relation got further mired in policy and diplomatic log jam.

The complications that surrounded Trump-Erdogan diplomatic relations and its spill-over to the present may turn out to be a major constraint to Turkey's neo-Ottoman aspiration. With Joe Biden at the helm of US diplomatic affairs being the President of the USA now, his decision over Turkey's increasing fundamentalism, primarily Erdogan's misadventure in converting Hagia Sophia to a mosque and opening the Chora Church in Istanbul for Muslim worship, is yet to be seen. If further sanctions are imposed, it may develop fissures in AKP. The onset of war between Russia and Ukraine in February this year and its dramatic escalation at present changes the calculus of the US-Turkey relationship. Turkey, an important factor in the Black Sea region and a member of NATO suddenly becomes more significant. The US attitude adopted during the Trump dispensation has been changed purely for strategic reasons.

Nevertheless, Turkey no doubt walks on a diplomatic tightrope and has to secure balance. On the one hand, its likely drift towards the US invites Putin's ire; moving towards Russia extending solidarity, as it suffers global ostracization, on the other, attracts Biden's disappointment. The rising inflation and economic emergency at home do not favor Erdogan to take sides. Turkey, therefore, finds itself in a very peculiar situation where any move to express allegiance to either side is risky. Erdogan's indecision over the approval of applications for membership submitted by Sweden and Finland illustrates the weight of his geopolitical compulsion.

Beyond the border, the European Union expresses its deep disappointment over Turkey's bullying behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean against Greece and Cyprus. The EU-Turkey relationship was exacerbated as Erdogan threatened to open the floodgates of Syrian refugees into Europe in 2015, losing the case of its possible inclusion into the EU and ruining its pro-western image. The EU has expressed concern over Turkey's intrusive foreign policy towards Greece, Cyprus, Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh regions and its denial of the Armenian genocide in 1916. Erdogan's border standoff with Greece and Cyprus and his illegal drilling in the eastern Mediterranean have disturbed Turkey's relationship with the EU. The EU may demand action against Turkey if Erdogan engages in territorial redefinition modeled after the Ottoman Empire and continues intruding on the territories of nations that were once Ottoman colonies. If it escalates into some form of confrontation, the growing geopolitical complexity in the EU-Turkey relationship may risk Turkey's ambitious future around the formation of neo-Ottomanism. The EU-Turkey conflict has seemingly been silent over a couple of months due to the war in Ukraine. However, the EU would never allow Erdogan's neo-Ottoman reverie to translate into a concrete geopolitical reality.

Turkey and Russia are not on the same page concerning their position in Syria and Libya. The uproar around the death of Andrey Karlov, Russia's ambassador to Turkey, in Ankara (2016) and the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkish authority in 2015 express inherence of bitterness in Ankara-Kremlin relations. These incidents led Russia to impose serious economic sanctions and travel and tourism restrictions. The bilateral ties came suddenly to a screeching halt. As a follow-up to that flurry of retaliatory events, Sergei Mironov, a Russian lawmaker, introduced a bill in the parliament to criminalize the refutation of the Armenian genocide. However, by the end of 2017, the Erdogan-Putin relationship seemed to have got stitched as

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Turkey signed the deal to purchase the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system. However, the historicity of Ottoman-Russian relations is nevertheless not that clean. It was fraught with conflicts. Russian would never appreciate Turkey establishing neo-Ottomanism by forming an Islamic confederacy. Such a possibility would seriously hamper Russian aspirations. Russia would always stand as a major hurdle to Erdogan's configuration of neo-Ottomanism. Erdogan's insecurity also primarily emanates from Russia's strong regional presence. He may see opportunities in the event of Russia's defeat in the ongoing war with Ukraine. If something very adverse happens and Putin undergoes dethronement, Erdogan may capitalize on the leadership vacuum in Russia to emerge as an effective leader. To that end, he may have to make some compromises with the US administration to take the seat of regional leadership. Nevertheless, to imagine the shape of geopolitical trajectories in the Black Sea region this way is more of daydreaming than probable.

CONCLUSION

These challenges explain Erdogan's insecurities. His dream of neo-Ottomanism seems delusional and symptomatic of his self-aggrandizement and embodies the poverty of pragmatism. He chooses Islamism over pragmatism to achieve his signature project, neo-Ottomanism. His method is his drawback. Failure, therefore, is very imminent and unavoidable.

Further, the Islamic world is not a monolithic category, and many inconsistencies and contradictions exist in it. They resist the possible formation of coherent unity. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, etc., are the major regional players rivaling for leadership using Islam. The Iran-Turkey relationship is fragile and complex, fraught with conflict, cooperation, and Shia-Sunni sectarian incompatibility. However, they need each other for trade and mutual economic growth, being neighbors. Their relationship experiences several ups and downs with their role in Syria, Libya and Caucasus. Turkey's preference for Ottoman revivalism by securing a leadership position among the Islamic nations meets several stakeholders who, too, share the same dream. The Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the war in Ukraine leading to high inflation, has injured Turkey economically beyond repair. The economic statistics break the morale of the people. This is an indication of the possible social unrest that will take the shape of a serious problem. For Erdogan, to emerge from those challenges in a year or two is to meet the election in 2023. It is not easy for him to imagine something like neo-Ottoman territorial redefinition. The complex geopolitical developments in the Black Sea region in the event of the war in Ukraine do not look attractive enough to conduct that misadventure. In such a scenario, Erdogan's dream project is more of a fantasy than reality.

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