Wedge Strategy in the Great Power Competition: How Russia Attempts to Drive a Wedge in the Turkish-American Alliance

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Abstract: This study primarily aims to make sense of Turkish-Russian strategic rapprochement in the era of the great power competition. By using the theory of wedge strategy, the paper tries to provide a meaningful perspective on the Russia's attempts to divide the Ankara-Washington alliance. The research revolves around the following questions: What kind of wedge strategy has Russia adopted? How effective has the Russian wedge strategy been towards the Turkey-US alliance? Which strategic objective of the wedge strategy has Russia achieved? The study concludes that Russia has pursued a reward-based wedge strategy towards the Atlantic Alliance to drive a wedge between Turkey and the US. It is argued that the Russian wedge strategy has significant implications for Turkish foreign policy such as pivotal dilemma, alliance anomaly, and strategic autonomy.

Keywords: Russia, Turkey, the U.S, Great Power Competition, Alliance Politics, Wedge Strategy

Öz: Bu çalışma özellikle büyük güç rekabeti döneminde Türk-Rus stratejik yakınlaşmasını anlamlandırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, ayırma stratejisi teorisini kullanarak, Rusya'nın Türk-Amerikan ittifakını bölme girişimlerine anlamlı bir bakış açısı getirmeye çalışmaktadır. Araştırma aşağıdaki sorular etrafında şekillenmektedir: Rusya ne tür bir ayırma stratejisi benimsemiştir? Rusya'nın ayırma stratejisi Türkiye-ABD ittifakı üzerinde ne kadar etkili olmuştur? Rusya, ayırma stratejisinin hangi stratejik hedefine ulaşmıştır? Çalışma, Rusya'nın Türkiye ile ABD'nin arasını açmak için Atlantik İttifakı'na yönelik ödül temelli bir ayırma stratejisi izlediği sonucuna varmaktadır. Rusya'nın ayırma stratejisinin Türk dış politikası üzerinde eksen ikilemi, ittifak anomalisi ve stratejik özerklik gibi önemli etkileri olduğu savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Türkiye, ABD, Büyük Güç Rekabeti, İttifak Siyaseti, Ayırma Stratejisi

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Turkish-Russian bilateral relations have shown a noticeable improvement. This rapprochement has been marked by a growing partnership and increased cooperation in areas such as economy, trade, energy, and even security and defense. Although the relationship has faced intense competition and confrontation on certain issues, both sides have managed to overcome these disputes swiftly and have consistently worked to deepen cooperation across various domains. Notably, their relations have reached a stage where Russia has supplied Turkey with advanced defense systems (the S-400 air defense system), and Turkey has neither sided itself with Russia's invasion of Ukraine nor complied with NATO-imposed sanctions against Moscow. In contrast, Turkish-American relations have experienced a significant divergence. Since the end of World War II, Turkey and the United States have been members of NATO, established to counter the expansion of the Soviet Union. However, in recent years, notable disagreements have emerged between Turkey and its long-standing ally, the United States, across multiple policy areas. Despite their alliance, U.S. sanctions against Turkey have included its removal from the F-35 fighter jet program. As a result of these shifting dynamics, Turkey's ties with the U.S. have become increasingly strained, while its relations with Russia have continued to improve.

How can we make sense of this existing situation in the strategic triangle between Turkey, the U.S. and Russia in the era of the emerging great power competition (2007–2023)? In recent years, the strategic rapprochement that emerged between Turkey and Russia has become a highly debated puzzle for scholars and politicians. In this study, I argue that Russia, as a rising great power, has pursued a wedge strategy towards the Turkey–U.S. alliance. Accordingly, the article aims to address the main question of how Russia has attempted to drive a wedge in the Turkish-American alliance. The study also has three subsidiary research questions: What kind of wedge strategy has Russia adopted? How effective has the Russian wedge strategy been towards the Turkey–U.S. alliance? Which strategic objective of the wedge strategy has Russia achieved? The primary goal of the paper is to examine the strategy of Russia toward Turkey and to analyze its strategic implications on Turkish foreign policy and its relations with the U.S.

The main argument of the study is that Russia has pursued a reward-based wedge strategy towards the U.S.–Turkey alliance to undermine coherence between them and to detach Ankara from Washington. Driving a wedge in the Atlantic Alliance through Turkey, Russia aims to enhance its relative power against the U.S. Since 2007, Washington has been viewed as an imminent security threat by Moscow due to NATO's expansion strategy in the Russian sphere of influence, such as Georgia and

Ukraine. Turkey, as a state in a pivotal situation, holds a highly important position in Russia's strategic calculus regarding its near-abroad doctrine. At the same time, Turkey, as NATO's eastern flank, has been playing a vital role against possible Russian expansion in Europe, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. Due to the rising great power competition between Washington and Moscow in the last decade, Turkey has been heavily pressured between these two great powers.

As a research methodology, a qualitative method was applied to understand ongoing developments and to extract meaningful insights from a collection of detailed information regarding the above-mentioned strategic triangle. In order to approach the issue comprehensively, a qualitative analysis technique was employed. During the evidence collection process, to provide a basis for and strengthen the argument of the paper, I examined not only the related states' attitudes and behavior in foreign policy but also the statements of political leaders. To conduct the research, I applied the wedge strategy developed by Timothy Crawford (2008) and Yasuhiro Izumikawa (2013). Additionally, I attempted to adapt Izumikawa's Triangular Alliance Politics Model (2013, 507) to the U.S.–Turkey–Russia strategic triangle.

The literature regarding Turkey-Russia relations in the 21st century acknowledges that there is a strategic rapprochement between the two countries, although they have been competing in various fields. Scholars investigate this rapprochement at different levels of analysis, namely national, regional, and global (Aktürk, 2014; Aktürk, 2019; Erşen & Köstem, 2019; Öniş & Yılmaz, 2016; Balta, 2019; Harunoğlu, Sever & Erşen, 2021; Küçük, 2022). Apart from the existing literature, this study addresses Russia-Turkey relations as an extension of the great power competition between Russia and the U.S. The research focuses particularly on the Russia-Turkey dimension of the U.S.–Turkey–Russia strategic triangle from Moscow's perspective. The paper has originality in terms of applying the theory of wedge strategy to understand the relations between Turkey and Russia.

Theoretical Framework: How Does Wedge Strategy Work?

The wedge strategy is one of the main tools used by states in their foreign policies and alliance relations. Put differently, this strategy constitutes one of the elements of the national security strategies of states. Anomalies in alliance relations between states and changes in the international distribution of power can be better understood through the theory of wedge strategy. Firstly, I try to clarify the relationship between the wedge strategy and alliance politics. To understand what the wedge strategy is, it is necessary to understand the concept of alliance politics in international relations because the wedge strategy constitutes a sub-component of states' alliance politics.

The existing literature on alliance politics suggests that when states perceive a threat to their security, they pursue balancing or bandwagoning behavior (Walt, 1987; Waltz, 1979). States engage in balancing behavior in two ways: internal balancing and external balancing. If states try to increase their military capacities against the power posing a security threat, this is considered internal balancing behavior. Under similar conditions, if states try to ally with other states, this is called external balancing behavior (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1985; Snyder, 1997). External balancing behavior is further divided into two categories. Whether they mobilize their own resources internally or seek allies externally, states aim to increase their relative power against a rival state or an alliance bloc (Claude, 1962, p. 89). When states use external balancing behavior to increase their power capacity by forming an alliance against rival or enemy states, this is defined as positive external balancing behavior in the literature. On the other hand, states' attempts to prevent rival states from forming alliances or to cause their dissolution are defined as negative external balancing (Hei, 2012).

In terms of national security policies, the main task of states is to enhance their relative power within the existing international distribution of power. States' alliance relationships are closely related to the balance of power system. The alliances formed by states not only increase their own power capacity but also lead to a relative decrease in the power of the rival side (Liska, 1962, p. 26). At this point, the wedge strategy signifies a strategy that states resort to when they adopt negative balancing behavior. With the wedge strategy, states strive to increase their relative power against their rivals by preventing the formation of threatening alliances or causing them to be disrupted if they have already been established (Crawford, 2008, p. 3). The wedge strategy refers to a conceptual framework that helps to make sense of alliance anomalies in power relations. Crawford (2008, p. 4) defines an alliance anomaly as a general deviation from expected patterns of alliances among states.

When it comes to the definition, arguments and types of wedge strategy, Crawford (2011, p.156) defines the wedge strategy basically as follows: a wedge strategy is an attempt by a state to prevent, disrupt, or weaken an enemy or rival alliance at acceptable costs. If this attempt is successful, the relative power of the state increases vis-à-vis the rival state. This means that states also engage in negative external balancing behavior. Indeed, Morgenthau (1949, p.42) defines balancing behavior as either decreasing the power of the outweighing side or increasing the power of the underweighting side. From this statement, it is understood that states consider the negative external balancing strategy as an option, albeit implicitly. As Waltz (1979, p.42) points out, in an anarchic international system, states try to build and maintain alliances on the one hand, and on the other hand, they try to dissolve the

alliances formed by other states and prevent them from forming. Therefore, the main aim of the wedge strategy is to detach any power center from the opposing coalition bloc (Liska, 1962, p.43).

Therefore, to talk about a wedge strategy in a certain power relationship, there must be a strategic triangle (Table I) in which at least three states interact. Izumikawa (2013, p. 507; 2018, p. 110) emphasizes that in order for a wedge strategy to be implemented, there must be three sides, namely the divider (D), the target (T), and the divider's enemy. In this study, we call the divider's enemy the binder (B). He defines this mutual interaction environment as a strategic triangle. While there is a global or regional strategic competition between State D and State B, State T is the actor affected by the competitive circumstances. Thus, State T becomes an arena for competition and conflict between the two states (D and B). It is assumed that State D and State B pursue external balancing behavior as they try to increase their relative power. Under these strategic conditions, State B tries to ally by attracting third parties to its side, while State D tries to prevent State B from succeeding in this goal. State D is defined as the divider, as it represents the actor endeavoring to prevent the formation of a coalition of states hostile to it or to ensure its disintegration. State B is designated as the binder, in that it is a state that tries to prevent the breakup of countries allied to it and to make neutral countries its allies. Finally, State T is designated as the target country, which State D tries to prevent it from entering an alliance with State B (Akdoğan, 2025, p.7).
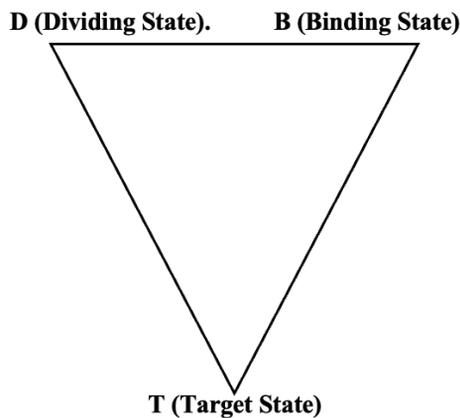

Figure 1: The Strategic Triangle

Given the existing literature, there are mainly two types of wedge strategy. Crawford (2011, p.160) categorizes them as accommodation and confrontation. On the other hand, Izumikawa (2013, p.503) conceptualizes reward-based wedge strategy and coercion-based wedge strategy. In this study, I mainly prefer Izumikawa's conceptualization. The reward-based wedge strategy indicates the divider country's attempt to direct the target country's alliance policy in its favor and against the rival/enemy by providing inducements such as concessions, compensations, promises, and endorsements. A concession is a tool used by divider states to meet some demands of the target state to appease and not alienate it. Compensation is a way employed by the divider state when the target state behaves in line with that divider country'sforeign policy priorities. The promise is a pledge used by the divider state to maintain and deepen the target's strategic rapprochement with it. The endorsement technique signifies the divider states' diplomatic support to the target state in its disputes with potentially hostile countries (Crawford, 2021, p.10). The divider states exploit these incentives to keep the target state away from the enemy state (Liska, 1962, pp.188-189).

On the contrary, the coercion-based wedge strategy refers to the divider's effort to direct the alliance policy of the target by exerting pressure through foreign policy instruments such as political pressure, economic sanctions and hard power (Chai, 2020, pp.512-513; Yoo, 2015, pp.5-8). By pursuing a coercion-based wedge strategy, the divider states try to shape the target country's behavior by sending the message that it would have to pay heavy costs if it enters an alliance with the enemy (Martin, 1992).

There are two main views in the literature on which type of wedge strategy produces more successful results. Crawford (2008, pp.1-5; 2021, pp.175) argues that the reward-based wedge strategy ensures positive results, and thus it is more commonly used by states. Crawford (2011, p.161) argues that a reward-based wedge strategy weakens/distorts cohesion in the hostile bloc and lists three main reasons for this effect. First, incentives encourage the target country to distance itself from the member states of the opposing bloc or to maintain its distancing stance. Second, rewards may lead to negative consequences between the target country and its allies or potential allies or exacerbate existing disputes. Third, as long as the binding state perceives the divider state as a potential enemy, the perception of a common threat between the target state and the binding state remains weak due to the adoption of the reward-based wedge strategy.

On the other hand, a coercion-based wedge strategy can also produce positive results in favor of the divider state. States can test the strength of the alliance

relationship between the binding state and the target state by applying pressure through threats against the target country (Byman & Waxman, 2002, pp.171-172). If the desired support cannot be obtained in this testing process, the alliance cohesion of the enemy bloc may be damaged. However, such a wedge strategy poses a great risk. The wedge strategy may backfire and lead the target country to further strengthen its existing strategic ties with the binding country or to establish strategic ties with it. Trying to create a wedge between enemies that culminates in uniting them is not without risks. As a result, it is argued that the reward-based wedge strategy is a more effective method and is preferred by states due to its less risky nature (Crawford, 2011, p.262). Crawford's finding confirms the argument of Walt's balance of threat theory. If the divider country is seen as a common threat by both the binding and target countries, the latter two countries become allies against the former (Walt, 1987). For this reason, alignment consistency conditions emerge, and the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" starts to operate (Jervis, 1997, p.211). This is not a desirable outcome for the divider side.

Finally, it is important to focus on the strategic outcomes of the wedge strategy and the conditions for its implementation. Crawford (2001, pp.165-166) argues that an effective wedge strategy has possible strategic outcomes. The degree of effectiveness and success of the wedge strategy is measured through the following strategic outcomes. There are four possible strategic objectives for states pursuing a wedge strategy. The first one is the re-alignment of strategic objectives. The strategic shift that occurs when the target country ends the existing alliance relationship with the binding state and establishes an alliance with the divider state is defined as re-alignment. Re-alignment represents the most effective and successful strategic outcome of the wedge strategy. However, it should be noted that if the alliance relationship between the target and the binding state is coherent, it is almost impossible with a coercive wedge and very difficult with a rewarding wedge to achieve such a strategic goal.

The second possible outcome of the wedge strategy is the de-alignment behavior of the target state. This means that the target state, driven by pressure or incentives from the divider state, ends its existing alliance relationship with its ally and adopts a neutral position. De-alignment behavior may burden the target country with an acceptable cost of deception. It can keep itself out of war and conflict by interpreting the obligations imposed by any treaty text. The target state can argue that the conditions are not met and claim that it is not ready to take a side in any conflict. The third is the pre-alignment strategic outcome. This strategic goal tries to maintain the neutral position of the target through pressure or incentives from

the dividers. In this case, the target state has not yet established alliance relations with the hostile bloc but is inclined to do so. The pre-alignment strategy is cost-effective to implement for both the divider and the target country compared to the other two strategies. With this strategy, the divider side prevents the target from weakening its relative power by joining a rival bloc.

The fourth is the dis-alignment strategy. The key feature of this outcome is that the target state, while not formally switching alliances, fails to uphold its existing alliance commitments. In other words, using the dis-alignment strategy, the divider country drives a target country in the enemy bloc into a strategic rift with its allies and creates a rift within the alliance by fueling disagreements between them. Therefore, with this strategy, the divider country enhances its relative power by eroding the alliance cohesion of the rival bloc. To achieve dis-alignment, the divider state may employ a reward-based wedge strategy towards the target countries in an attempt to sow discord between the target and its current ally or exploit existing tensions within the rival alliance bloc.

For a state to pursue a wedge strategy, two initiation conditions must be present: means and motivation (Crawford, 2021, pp.11-13). The means signify the rewarding or punishing power that the divider states need to implement the strategy. In international relations, power is defined as the capacity and ability of State A to make State B do something that it would not otherwise do (Baldwin, 1979). Thus, first and foremost, the divider must have the means/capacity to shape the behavior of the target state. While existing literature focuses on ‹reward power›, this paper expands the concept to include ‹coercive power›, drawing from Linda Molm's work on social interactions (1997, pp.2-8). If the reward-based wedge strategy, as stated earlier, is based on positive sanctions and requires the existence of reward power to sanction, the coercion-based wedge strategy is based on negative sanctions and requires the existence of coercive power to sanction. States need political, economic and military tools to manipulate other states in line with their desires. The power to reward and punish, which is a relative concept, makes sense according to the needs of the target country (Izumikawa, 2013, p.507). The divider must possess the capacity to influence the target by using both rewards and punishments, ultimately shaping its alignment policy (Crawford, 2011, p.13).

As for the second initiation condition, motivation, this refers to the willingness of any state to bear the potential costs of a wedge strategy (Singer, 1963, p. 423). In other words, the target country is expected to have the strategic weight required to pursue a wedge strategy (Crawford, 2021, p.11). In the power struggle between any two states, the alliance policy pursued by the target country must have strategic

importance that can affect the outcome. The main motivation of the divider country is the desire to achieve a strategic goal that is worth bearing the cost. A possible alliance position to be taken by the target country must enjoy strategic importance so that the divider can increase or maintain its relative power vis-à-vis the binding state. In this case, the divider, by making a cost-benefit calculation, can afford to bear the cost by pursuing effective instruments aimed at directing the alliance relations of the target country.

Finally, favorable conditions are needed for the wedge strategy to produce an effective result (Izumikawa, 2013, pp.500-507). Favorable conditions determine which type of wedge strategy will be implemented and the effectiveness of the implemented strategy (Yoo, 2015, p.7). One of these conditions is that the target country is experiencing disagreement and tension in its relations with the enemy country. The weakening of solidarity and cohesion between the target country and the binding country within the alliance provides a favorable political environment for the divider country to detach the target country from the enemy bloc. In addition, potential areas of disagreement between the binding country and the target country that have not yet evolved into tensions can also be provoked, thus making the conditions more favorable (Dian & Kireeva, 2021, pp.5-6). The second favorable condition is the occurrence of a power shift in existing international power relations that would allow the target and divider countries to expand their leverage. This power shift allows the divider country to expand its room for maneuver and become a center of attraction while reducing the costs that the target country would incur in changing its alliance policy. In this way, the wedge strategy can produce relatively more effective strategic results.

Case Study: How Russian Wedge Strategy toward Turkey-US Alliance Worked?

Initial Internal Conditions for Russia

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, for a state to pursue a wedge strategy, means and motivation as two initial conditions must be present. It is not enough for the divider to have motivation; it must also have the means to realize its wedge strategy. For this reason, I will first examine whether Russia has the motivation to pursue a wedge strategy towards the Turkey-US alliance, and then examine whether it has the means to implement this strategy. Firstly, when looking at the motivation behind Russia's wedge strategy, it should be noted that it has two dimensions. The first dimension is related to the existence of a rival/enemy alliance bloc that Russia perceives as a security threat. Despite the end of the Cold War, the fact that NATO

not only continues to exist but also continues to expand has been viewed as a serious security threat by Russia. This reality has motivated Russian political elites to increase their relative power vis-à-vis the United States by pursuing a wedge strategy. The second dimension of Russia's motivation to pursue a wedge strategy is the strategic status of Turkey as a NATO ally in its efforts to increase its relative power against the United States. Turkey's geopolitical location as a regional power bordering both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, as well as its possession of the Turkish Straits, has had strategic importance for Russia—whether Tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet. It is a historical fact that since Peter I (18th century), Russian political elites have been trying to gain influence over Turkey on the one hand, and to prevent rival great powers from establishing influence on Turkish territory on the other.

Turkey is a country that has critical strategic importance for Russia regarding weakening NATO, which is increasingly seen as a security threat in the Russian strategic mind. Moscow has placed great emphasis on disrupting strategic cohesion among NATO's members and, if possible, preventing its expansion into Russia's immediate neighborhood. Turkey's strategic position motivates Moscow to pursue its wedge strategy towards the Atlantic alliance through Ankara and drives it to bear the potential costs. By pursuing a wedge strategy towards Turkey, Russia seeks to cause discord in NATO and disrupt cohesion within the alliance. The most effective way to cause discord and division between Turkey and NATO is to erode the Ankara–Washington alliance. By offering attractive incentives, Russia's primary objective is to drive Turkey into a political position where it distances itself from its strategic relations with its ally, the United States, and does not act in accordance with its alliance commitments. By doing so, Russia can create the conditions for an alliance security dilemma within the Atlantic Alliance, increasing its fragility and reducing its durability (Snyder, 1984, pp.471–475).

Looking at the second precondition of the wedge strategy, means, it is worth noting that Russia has both incentive and coercive power over Turkey. First, the energy, trade, and security/defense sectors constitute Russia's main rewarding factors for Turkey. Turkey is an energy-dependent country. With its growing population, rapid urbanization, and expanding industry, this dependence is increasing. In 2022, Turkey, which was 70% dependent on foreign energy, paid $96 billion abroad for energy (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2022). Russia, with its rich oil and natural gas resources and geographical proximity, is one of the main energy suppliers for Turkey. Russia supplies a large part of Turkey's natural gas needs through two separate pipelines across the Black Sea. Blue Stream and Turkish Stream carry Russian gas to Turkey via pipelines under the Black Sea. As of 2023, Russia met one-third (35%) of

Turkey's natural gas imports (EMRA, December 2023). Turkey is also dependent on Russia for oil supplies. As of December 2023, Turkey imported an average of 950,000 barrels of oil per day. Russia supplied 450,000 of this amount (Daily Sabah, 2023b). Therefore, Turkey is a country that receives almost half of its oil imports from Russia.

When it comes to the trade volume between the two countries, it is seen that it reached $68 billion in 2022 (Daily News, 2023). This figure made Russia Turkey's largest trading partner. With nearly 6 million tourists visiting Turkey in 2023, the tourism sector is another component of Russia's reward power. Given that Turkey gained around $55 billion in tourism revenues in 2023, and that the largest number of tourists came from Russia during that period (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023), dependence on the Russian market in the tourism sector is also in question. Furthermore, Turkey has been making efforts to expand its defense capabilities in recent years because of the regional security threats it faces. Turkey has been taking steps to prepare for future threats. Russia has the potential to meet Turkey's needs in terms of air defense systems and fighter jets. This renders Russia a center of gravity for Turkey and provides Russia with the capacity to reward Turkey. As a result, Moscow has reward-power instruments such as concession, compensation, promise, and endorsement to induce and encourage Turkey to move closer to Russia.

Favorable External Conditions for Russia

The theoretical framework outlined earlier highlights two crucial external conditions influencing the success of a wedge strategy. These are different from the internal initial conditions mentioned above. Primarily, a wedge strategy's effectiveness depends on intra-alliance divisions in the enemy/rival bloc. Political, economic, or military disagreements between the target state and the binding state create a favorable environment for successfully applying a wedge strategy and achieving its outcomes. The existence of intra-alliance fragmentation on the rival side provides the divider state with significant opportunities to isolate the target country from the alliance and, if possible, induce it to break away from the alliance.

When we look at Turkish-American alliance relations, although the 2003 invasion of Iraq sparked debate in the Ankara-Washington alliance, the divergence of threat perceptions between Ankara and Washington began to increase in 2009(Gülmez, 2020, p.481). As Turkey's relations with Israel deteriorated, the improvement of its relations with Iran indicated a conflict of interests between Turkey and the US in the Middle East. The Davos Crisis (2009) and the Mavi Marmara attack (2010) revealed differences between Turkey and the US on the issue of Israel. Additionally, in 2010, the signing of the Tehran Declaration between Turkey, Iran, and Brazil, and Ankara's

opposition to sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council, made it clear that Turkey and the US were also diverging on the issue of Iran. In a sense, Turkey was focusing on its own national interests and seeking a new position for itself in the international arena (Yeşiltaş & Pirinçci, 2021). One of the most important issues of intra-alliance disagreement in Turkey-US relations is the Syrian Civil War. Syria has become a battleground for various regional and non-state actors (Küpeli, 2025, p.285). Since 2013, Ankara and Washington have pursued different—and even opposite—policies in Syria. The rift became evident when the US put aside the goal of toppling the Assad regime and focused on the fight against the terrorist organization ISIL. Subsequently, the disagreement deepened even more when the United States waged the war against ISIL not with Turkey on the ground but with the PYD-YPG armed groups, which Turkey designates as a terrorist organization. Furthermore, when Turkey carried out military operations against terrorist organizations (PKK, YPG, and ISIL) in northern Syria—despite being an ally—the United States opposed these operations and did not support them.

In addition, Turkey's procurement of advanced weapons from the United States, aimed at increasing its defense capacity and preparing for regional threats, has constantly faced obstacles. To this end, Turkey sought to acquire Patriot air defense systems from the US in the early 2010s. However, the Washington administration was far from providing the defense system Turkey needed at a low cost and with fast delivery. This attitude of the US gave rise to great resentment in Ankara, as it was seen as a delaying tactic. Moreover, in 2015, the US decided to withdraw the Patriot batteries it had deployed to Turkey in 2012 to eliminate security threats from Syria. Subsequently, the US imposed an arms embargo that prevented the procurement of certain defense industry products during Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018), and Operation Peace Spring (2019). The development that escalated mutual tensions and deepened mistrust regarding the strengthening of Turkey's defense capacity was its removal from the F-35 fighter jet project. As a result, Turkish political elites and public opinion began to question the alliance with the United States more seriously, and the need for rapprochement with alternative power centers began to gain ground. Since 2010, the Ankara–Washington strategic divergence has led to a debate on an «axis shift» within the Atlantic alliance. Turkey's shift away from being a loyal and respected member of the Western bloc, and its growing strategic autonomy in foreign policy, began to be referred to as a shift in Turkey's axis (Akgün, 2010).

The second favorable condition for the wedge strategy is that the shift in the international distribution of power expands the room for maneuver of alternative

power centers. This power shift reduces the costs for states pursuing a wedge strategy and increases the likelihood of achieving their goals. The new structural conditions of the international system in the aftermath of the Great Recession (2007–2009) brought about a political climate that expanded Russia's sphere of influence. The Great Recession revealed that the economic and political pillars of the US-led unipolar international system that emerged at the end of the Cold War were beginning to shift. The power shift signaled the end of the «unipolar moment» (Layne, 2012, p.203). The 2007–2017 period is seen as a transition phase from the unipolar world system to a multipolar one. As of 2017, it is argued that the structure of the international system has transformed into a multipolar order (Mearsheimer, 2018, p.218).

Russia is also considered to have achieved the status of a rising power in the same period, increasing its national power capacity and its political and military engagement. It is argued that while the power distribution in which the United States was the sole superpower came to an end, a new power distribution emerged in which China and Russia became peer competitors (Mearsheimer, 2018, p.218). The multipolarization of the international system simultaneously increases flexibility and uncertainty in terms of policymaking for all states in the system. It has expanded the room for maneuver, especially for states like Russia that pursue a wedge strategy. At the same time, the strategic dependence of the target states on their ally has decreased. When these two situations are considered together, the transition to a multipolar world not only intensifies great power competition but also offers favorable conditions for the implementation of the wedge strategy (Kassab, 2022, pp.56–71). Great power competition has simultaneously brought alliance competition, due to its own dynamics (Crawford, 2021, p.4). For instance, in the US National Security Strategy of 2017, it is stated that Russia is trying to undermine the Atlantic alliance by driving a wedge between the US and its allies (The White House, 2017).

Russian Reward-Based Wedge Strategy towards Turkey

Since 2007, Russia has been actively using the wedge strategy as a foreign policy tool to weaken the Atlantic alliance that surrounds its borders. Turkey, seen by Moscow as a country with pivotal importance within the Atlantic alliance, became one of the target countries for Russia's wedge strategy. A closer glance at Russia's relations with Turkey during this period reveals that Moscow has woven the wedge strategy with great delicacy. Therefore, it is understood that Russia, having learned from the strategic mistake made by the Soviet Union in the aftermath of World War II, has shown great sensitivity to stay away from discourses and actions that could lead Turkey into security concerns. During the early Cold War period, the USSR practiced a coercion-based wedge strategy, which led Turkey to distance itself from

the USSR and to ally with the United States. In recent years, by contrast, it has been seen that Russia is acting through a reward-based wedge strategy to drive Turkey away from the US axis of alliance.

Russia's strategic objective with the wedge strategy is aimed at achieving one of the three possible objectives, including re-alignment, de-alignment, and dis-alignment. Another strategic outcome of a wedge strategy, pre-alignment, is excluded from possible results for Russia because Turkey is already in an alliance bloc (NATO). In other words, Russia can achieve one of these three strategic objectives: Turkey›s re-alignment, de-alignment, or dis-alignment. However, considering the historical and current dynamics in the US-Turkey-Russia triangle, achieving full re-alignment or de-alignment appears unlikely for Moscow. Therefore, dis-alignment from the Atlantic alliance emerges as the most attainable goal for Russia's wedge strategy targeting Turkey.

We will analyze Russia's reward-based wedge strategy towards Turkey by dividing it into three periods: 2007-2011, 2011-2016, and 2016-2023. The year 2007 marks an important turning point in Russia-NATO and Moscow-Ankara relations. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, President Putin warned that NATO's continued expansion into Eastern Europe, led by the US, was jeopardizing Russia's security and that they would be forced to take countermeasures (BBC, 2007). After that, in 2008, NATO's acceptance of Georgia and Ukraine's bids for membership at the Bucharest Summit, which was followed by the outbreak of the Georgia War, strained Russia's relations with the alliance (Balta, 2019, p.77). Meanwhile, the beginning of the global economic crisis (2007-2009) experienced by the Western bloc offered opportunities for Turkey and Russia to strengthen their economic and trade relations (Erşen, 2011). In 2008, Russia overtook Germany to become Turkey's largest trading partner with a trade volume of $38 billion (International Trade Center, 2023). In addition, Turkey's decision to open the Turkish Straits and the Black Sea to warships during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, based on the provisions of the 1936 Montreux Convention, and not in line with US demands, was welcomed in Moscow (Erdoğan, 2008). Turkey also pursued an active mediation policy to end the tension and conflict between Georgia and Russia (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018, p.76). Russian President Medvedev's visit to Turkey in May 2010 accelerated the strategic rapprochement between the two countries. Medvedev stated that this visit elevated Ankara-Moscow relations to the level of «strategic partnership» (Sputnik, 2010). As part of this visit, the High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) mechanism was established between the two countries. Moreover, Russia committed to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant (Akkuyu) with an agreement signed in the field of energy. Another important development was Russia's decision to grant visa exemption to Turkish citizens (Dünya, 2010).

The second summit of the HLCC was held in Moscow in March 2011. This summit witnessed an unusual gift exchange between Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Medvedev, conveying strategic messages to each other. Medvedev presented Erdoğan with a painting depicting representatives of the two countries signing the 1921 Treaty of Moscow, while Erdoğan gifted Medvedev a painting of the original copy of the same treaty (President of Russia, 2011). The choice of the 1921 Treaty of Moscow as the subject of the paintings is significant. It laid the groundwork for Ankara-Moscow cooperation in the interwar period, and by referencing it, both countries signaled a desire to return to a similar era of strong bilateral relations.

The second period (2011-2016) posed significant challenges to Russia's wedge strategy in Turkey. During this time, the Moscow administration did not abandon its wedge strategy and continued to act with inducive behavior toward Turkey. For instance, Russia did not sever ties with Turkey despite its opposing stance in the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011. Moreover, during Putin's visit to Turkey in December 2014, it was announced that the South Stream project was canceled, and the Turkish Stream project would be implemented (Kızılkaya & Karagöl 2015, pp.57-60). The plan was to carry natural gas to Turkey and even Europe via a pipeline laid under the Black Sea. Russia's move not only met Turkey's gas needs but also strengthened Ankara's strategic autonomy against Europe by supplying gas through Turkey. Putin also made a gesture by naming the pipeline project Turkish Stream. It should be noted that Russia is attempting to preempt the energy corridor consisting of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Iranian gas by constructing a natural gas supply route to Europe via Turkey. In this way, Russia both uses Turkey as an energy market and disrupts harmony within NATO by making Turkey dependent on Russian energy and tries to keep the European energy supply corridor under its control.

A severe crisis erupted in November 2015 when the Turkish Armed Forces shot down a Russian warplane for violating Turkish airspace on the Syrian border. This incident led Russia to suspend the strategic partnership with Turkey. Despite the crisis pushing relations to a low point, both Ankara and Moscow sought to de-escalate and rebuild ties. In fact, between November 2015, when the plane was shot down, and June 2016, Russia suspended its reward-based wedge strategy and began to put pressure on Turkey. Closing Syria's airspace to Turkey, lifting visa liberalization, suspending the Turkish Stream and Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant projects, imposing barriers on Turkish trade products, claiming that Turkey was supporting ISIL, and allowing the PYD/PKK to open an office in Moscow were the results of this coercive policy (Köstem, 2020, p.5). All of these pointed to Russia's coercive power over Turkey. In other words, Russia's reward-based promises, rewards, and concessions to Turkey were witnessed to be used as a stick rather than a carrot for a while.

The third period in Turkey-Russia relations, marked by the July 2016 coup attempt by the FETÖ organization in Turkey, opened a new chapter in the relations between both countries. The coup attempt by the FETÖ in July 2016, combined with the support and shelter provided by the US to the Gülenists, motivated Turkey to seek closer relations with Russia (Aktürk, 2019, pp.97-98). Moreover, after the coup attempt, President Erdoğan's first foreign visit to Russia created a new political climate that further deepened the strategic rapprochement. In fact, the assassination of Russia's ambassador to Ankara in December 2016 by a member of the police was handled with great maturity by Moscow and was not turned into a new crisis. The rapid overcoming of the downing of the plane crisis and the fact that the assassination of the ambassador did not escalate into new tension can be considered as concessions of Russia's reward-based wedge strategy. In a sense, Russia has not only made promises and rewards to Turkey for the sake of creating a rift in the Atlantic alliance but has also made concessions at its own cost. Russia's first step in getting bilateral relations back on track was to take steps toward realizing the Turkish Stream and Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant construction projects. Russia has resolutely set out to fulfill its promises. The Turkish Stream project, which was completed, was inaugurated in January 2020 with the joint participation of Putin and Erdoğan. The partially completed Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant was inaugurated in April 2023 with the participation of Putin and Erdoğan.

Conversely, Russia's approach towards Turkey's anti-terror operations in Syria (against ISIL, PYD, and PKK) after 2016 exemplifies the multifaceted nature of Moscow's wedge strategy as it incorporates elements of concessions, rewards, and endorsement. While Russia not closing the Syrian airspace to Turkish warplanes is evaluated within the scope of concessions and rewards to Turkey, Russia's attitude of understanding Turkey's security concerns is considered an endorsement. Russia even went further and fueled the rift between the two allies (Ankara and Washington) by claiming that Turkey's military actions in Syria were a consequence of the US' flawed Middle East policy. Thanks to Russia's reward-based wedge strategy, Turkey successfully carried out military operations in Syria. Moreover, with the Moscow Declaration signed in December 2016, Turkey changed its axis in the Syrian crisis, shifting from the US-Saudi Arabia axis to the Russia-Iran axis. Thus, the Astana process, seeking a political solution to the Syrian issue, was launched between Russia, Ankara, and Tehran (Köstem, 2021, p.9).

Russia's most critical move to separate Turkey from the Atlantic alliance was to supply Turkey with the S-400 defense system. Russia turned this situation into a strategic opportunity. Although Turkey had been in search of an air defense system for a long time, it could not obtain Patriots from the Atlantic Alliance. In 2017, Russia

promised to provide Turkey with the advanced technology of the S-400 defense system in accordance with Turkey's "low-cost-fast-delivery-technology transfer" policies. Russia delivered the defense systems to Turkey in 2019 according to the agreed schedule. The trade deal between Russia and Turkey significantly damaged Turkey's relationship with its long-standing ally, the United States. In an attempt to deter Turkey, the US warned of severe consequences. Despite these warnings, Turkey remained resolute and took delivery of the S-400s in 2019. The US responded with a series of sanctions, most notably excluding Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program and imposing sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

In order to prevent Turkey from engaging in military and defense cooperation with Russia, the US has pursued a coercion-based binding strategy. However, this strategy backfired, pushing Turkey further away from NATO and closer to Russia. In April 2019, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, recognizing that Turkey was moving closer to Russia and further away from the United States, stated that "Turkey must make a choice; Turkey can either continue to be a reliable NATO ally or it can become a country that undermines NATO's security" (Pence, 2019). Speaking at the 2021 Munich Security Conference, Biden warned that Putin was trying to weaken the NATO alliance, pointing to Russia's wedge strategy (Biden, 2021a). Then, at the 2021 NATO summit, Biden explicitly stated that "Russia and China are both seeking to drive a wedge in our transatlantic solidarity" (Biden, 2021b).

The positive outcomes of Russia's reward-based wedge strategy towards Turkey were seen in the Ukraine War which started in February 2022 with Russia's invasion attempt. Turkey has chosen to remain neutral in the Ukrainian War, while the countries of the Atlantic alliance have sided against Russia and provided political, financial and military support to Ukraine. Turkey, unlike its alliance bloc, has exerted great effort to bring Moscow and Kyiv together at the negotiating table to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. In 2022, the warring parties came to the negotiating table twice, in Antalya and Istanbul thanks to Turkey's attempt as a mediator. In addition, Turkey not only disagreed with the Western bloc's political, commercial and financial sanctions against Russia but also facilitated Russia's circumvention of the sanctions. Finally, in a break with the United States, Turkey openly objected to Sweden and Finland joining the NATO alliance and refused to ratify their membership for two years. The Ukraine War became the litmus test of whether Russia's reward-based wedge strategy towards the Turkey-US alliance was successful. Russia welcomed Turkey's attitudes and behaviors during the war and took steps to reward further Ankara. For example, Russia signed the Grain Corridor Agreement in 2022 in line with Turkey's efforts, Although, Russia had economic and strategic expectations, Moscow's quick

positive response to Turkey's efforts and the signing of the agreement in Istanbul contributed to Turkey's international prestige. Then, in 2023, it rewarded Ankara by postponing some of Turkey's natural gas payments (600m dollars), when it had been struggling with economic difficulties (Daily Sabah, 2023a).

Conclusion

The present study focuses on understanding the development of a closer strategic relationship between Turkey and Russia during the period 2007–2023. The study adopts the "wedge strategy" as a theoretical framework to analyze the dynamics within a strategic triangle comprised of Russia (divider), Turkey (target state), and the United States (binder). This triangle has three interconnected dimensions: Turkey-Russia, Turkey-U.S., and Russia-U.S. However, this study attempts to explain only the Turkey-Russia dimension of the strategic triangle. In this context, the main argument of the study is that the new form of relationship observed in the Turkey-Russia-U.S. strategic triangle is an outcome of Russia's wedge strategy towards the Atlantic alliance through Turkey. Therefore, the research focuses on how Russia pursues its wedge strategy and the results it produces.

In connection with this, the paper attempts to answer three sub-research questions. I present the main findings of the study related to these questions. First, what type of wedge strategy has Russia employed against Turkey? Identifying the type of wedge strategy used by Russia aims to make an empirical contribution to the debate in the existing literature about which type of wedge strategy produces more successful results. As mentioned in the theoretical framework section, there are two distinct types of wedge strategies: reward-based and coercive-based. In the existing literature, there are opposing views on two main issues. One concerns the debate about which type of wedge strategy is more commonly used. In this regard, Crawford argues that the reward-based wedge strategy is more widely employed, while Izumikawa contends that the coercive-based strategy is also widely used. The other issue is which type of strategy produces more effective results. The conventional wisdom in the literature is that the reward-based wedge strategy, compared to the coercive-based one, yields more successful results on the target state. The study's findings support the hypothesis that the reward-based wedge strategy is more effective. In short, the study argues that Russia has been partly successful in driving a wedge between Turkey and its ally, the United States, by employing a reward-based wedge strategy towards Ankara. Second, how effective has Russia's wedge strategy towards Turkey been? Measuring the effectiveness of Russia's wedge strategy helps to identify and understand its strategic repercussions on Turkish foreign policy.

Within the scope of this question, the findings obtained during the research process are categorized under three main headings.

First, Russia's wedge strategy has led to the emergence of a pivotal dilemma in Turkish foreign policy. Regional powers like Turkey hold pivotal strategic geopolitical importance in great power competition. Turkey is seen as the pivotal country of the Atlantic Alliance. Pivotal states are regional actors that pursue foreign policy behavior according to the strategic interests of the alliance bloc to which they belong. Therefore, in the course of great power competition, rival great powers struggle to gain influence over a pivotal state and, if possible, to ensure that it acts in their interest. The attractive incentives offered by Moscow's wedge strategy have enabled Turkey to move strategically closer to Russia while disrupting its strategic alignment with the Atlantic Alliance. The U.S. response has been to preserve its ally Turkey's allegiance to the alliance, opting for a coercive-based binding strategy. In the face of this U.S. stance, Turkey has inevitably sought greater rapprochement with Russia. In short, Turkey was caught between Russia's reward-based wedge strategy and the U.S.'s coercive-based binding strategy. The study defines this kind of conundrum, in which Turkey is caught between two great powers, as the pivotal dilemma. In particular, developments over the procurement of the S-400 defense system and the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant revealed that Turkey was being dragged into the conditions of a pivotal dilemma.

Second, Russia's wedge strategy led to an alliance anomaly within the Turkish-American alliance. In line with its strategy, Russia offered Turkey attractive inducements that facilitated strategic rapprochement. Ankara's strategic cooperation with Moscow in trade, energy, and defense resulted in a strategic divergence from its ally, the United States, on several issues and a shift away from its security commitments to the alliance regarding Russia. While the Atlantic Alliance views Russia as a challenging power center and seeks to contain and encircle it, Turkey believes that Russia's security concerns regarding NATO should be acknowledged. Turkey's decision to pursue a policy of divergence from NATO regarding the Ukraine War and to disregard the sanctions imposed by the Atlantic bloc can be considered concrete indications of this. In this context, Turkey's attitudes and behaviors that deviate from the strategic expectations of the Atlantic Alliance constitute an alliance anomaly.

Third, Russia's wedge strategy encouraged and consolidated the strategic autonomy of Turkish foreign policy. Turkish strategic autonomy has significantly expanded in the aftermath of the Great Recession. One of the factors contributing to this development is Russia's wedge strategy towards Turkey. Moscow has sought

to reduce Ankara's strategic dependence on Washington by adopting policies and behaviors that enhance Turkey's strategic autonomy abroad. Russia's provision of air defense systems that increase Turkey's military capacity, its willingness to supply fighter jets, the transformation of Turkey into a natural gas transfer hub for the European allies of the Atlantic Alliance through the Turkish Stream project, and Russia's construction of a nuclear facility are considered the main components that strengthen Turkey's strategic autonomy.

The last question that I try to answer is which strategic objective of the wedge strategy Russia has achieved. As stated in the theoretical section, by the wedge strategy, states aim to achieve one or more of the four possible strategic objectives: re-alignment, de-alignment, dis-alignment, and pre-alignment. The study argues that Russia, through its reward-based wedge strategy, has achieved the strategic objective of dis-alignment in Turkish foreign policy. Strategic implications for Turkish foreign policy, such as the pivotal dilemma, alliance anomaly, and strategic autonomy, indicate that the strategic goal of dis-alignment has been achieved. Under the current circumstances, Russia, being the dividing country, cannot achieve the other strategic goals (re-alignment and de-alignment) with Turkey as a target country. Since Turkey is part of an alliance bloc, the pre-alignment option is not one of the possible objectives Russia can achieve.

If we are to make a prediction about the political situation of the US-Turkey-Russia strategic triangle, as long as the divergence of interests and threats between the US and Turkey, and Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy continue, Russia's wedge strategy towards Turkey will continue to disrupt and deepen strategic cohesion within NATO. However, attributing the deterioration of the Ankara-Washington alliance solely to the relative success of Russia's wedge strategy risks a deterministic approach. Therefore, the main weakness of the study is its failure to consider internal factors in its analysis of the problems in the Turkish-American alliance. Future studies could develop a more comprehensive and explanatory approach by adopting a perspective that also takes into account the impact of the decisions made by political elites in Ankara and Washington on the alliance between the two countries.

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