

# Opportunistic Constructivism: Examining Türkiye's Strategy Recalibration in Libya Post-2019

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## ABSTRACT

The 2019 Maritime Memorandum between Türkiye and Libya's Government of National Accord marks an inflection point in Ankara's involvement in the Libyan scene. Following this memorandum, Türkiye shifted its engagement in Libya from primarily soft-power policies prior to 2019 toward a multidimensional power-projection strategy that follows the new 'Blue Homeland Doctrine.' This paper investigates the drivers of this recalibration, arguing that clear realist objectives, such as Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), were shaped by constructivist norms guiding Turkish state behavior in Libya.

The study employs a literature review detailing the military and economic dimensions of Ankara's interventions before and after the agreement. It dissects the contrasting arguments for the motives and identifies the gaps between them. This paper contributes to the discipline by developing a new theoretical lens, Opportunistic Constructivism, to explain how constructivism and realism interact in shaping middle-power state behavior. It specifically emphasizes the interplay of realist instruments and ideology-based constructivist frameworks in influencing Turkish foreign doctrine in Libya.

## INTRODUCTION

The dismantling of Gaddafi's centralized authority in 2011 and the emergence of rival governments entrenched an East–West bifurcation, exposing a deep security fragmentation (Lacher 2020). Consequently, these dynamics attracted foreign interventions from Middle-Eastern and Western powers. Among these external actors, Türkiye's trajectory is unique in nature. Prior to 2019, Ankara's engagement in Libya was largely indirect, centered on political alignment with Western factions, limited advisory assistance, and economic interests inherited from the pre-2011 period (Özdamar and Artıkoğlu 2025). Yet, following the circumstances of the 2019 Maritime Memorandum of Understanding signed with the Government of National Accord, Ankara launched a decisive recalibration (Yüksel 2021). It moved towards direct military deployment, drone warfare support, intelligence coordination, institutionalized security cooperation, Exclusive Economic Zones establishment and higher-caliber economic investments (Yüksel 2021).

This study therefore asks: Why did Türkiye change the strategic nature of its military and economic engagement in Libya after signing the 2019 maritime agreement?

The paper gives three interpretive propositions:

P1: The motives behind the Turkish strategy recalibration are mainly centered around realist economic securitization.

P2: The motives behind the Turkish strategy recalibration are mainly centered around ideological doctrines and identity ties.

P3: The motives are a combination of both realism and constructivism in a way that material shocks in the Eastern Mediterranean triggered when and whether Türkiye escalated in Libya, and pre-existing constructivist ties shaped the form that escalation took.

Building on the empirical and theoretical gaps identified below, the paper develops and advances a new synthetic lens: Opportunistic Constructivism. It explains when middle powers escalate from soft-power to hard-power engagement, and why that escalation takes the particular form it does.

## **METHODS**

This paper uses a qualitative, interpretive research design combining a structured review of secondary literature with within-case process tracing. The study treats the three propositions outlined above (P1–P3) as an analytical scaffold. That is, each source is read for the extent to which it supports a realist, a constructivist, or a synthetic explanation of Türkiye's 2019 recalibration.

### ***Literature Identification and Selection***

Sources were identified through iterative keyword and citation-chaining searches of academic databases, university library catalogs, and publicly available policy-institute archives, using search terms built around Turkish foreign policy, the Libyan civil conflict, Eastern Mediterranean energy politics, and relevant international relations theory (realism, constructivism, neoclassical realism, and role theory). Table 1 sets out the criteria used to decide which sources were retained for analysis.

| Inclusion Criteria                                                                                                                                             | Exclusion Criteria                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Peer-reviewed scholarship and academic monographs on Turkish foreign policy, Libya's post-2011 conflict and Eastern Mediterranean maritime and energy politics | General international relations texts with no identifiable connection to Turkish foreign policy or the Libya case |

|                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theoretical works on realism, constructivism, neoclassical realism, and role theory that are applicable to Turkish foreign policy                        | Sources not available in English                                                                                                                                                                |
| Published in or after 2011 (the fall of the Gaddafi regime), or earlier works establishing foundational theory or Libya's pre-2011 historical background | Opinion or advocacy pieces lacking identifiable theoretical or empirical grounding                                                                                                              |
| Directly relevant to Türkiye's pre- or post-2019 military, economic, diplomatic, or ideational engagement in Libya                                       | Sources concerned with Turkish foreign policy outside Libya or the Eastern Mediterranean, except where discussed comparatively (Somalia, addressed only in the Future Research Recommendations) |

**Table 1:** Inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature reviewed.

Titles, abstracts, and (where applicable) executive summaries were screened for relevance against these criteria; sources meeting them were retained for full reading and inclusion in the analysis below. The propositions are evaluated through process tracing by comparing their predicted mechanisms with the sequence of observed events. Evidence of material shocks preceding escalation supports P1; evidence that pre-existing ideational ties explain the choice of partners and framing supports P2; and evidence that material shocks explain the timing of escalation while ideational ties explain its form supports P3.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Fundamental Security Framework*

Security is a framework for analyzing how societies attempt to preserve what they value in the face of uncertainty and risk (Baldwin 1997). Security can, therefore, be defined as a low probability of damage to acquired values (Wolfers 1962; Baldwin 1997). This definition challenges the older perception of security as the ‘absence of threats’ by shifting attention away from whether threats exist and toward the ‘likelihood’ that valued assets will be harmed. This distinction is analytically important. As Baldwin notes, states cannot eliminate an earthquake, but they can reduce the probability that the earthquake will cause serious damage (Baldwin 1997). Different theories of security provide distinct perspectives. Realist approaches prioritize the state as the main referent object, emphasize military threats, and view security as a function of power within an ‘anarchic international system’ (Williams 2011). Liberal approaches expand the concept by highlighting cooperation, economic interdependence, and domestic governance as sources of security, arguing that rules and norms can reduce uncertainty and conflict (Williams 2011). On the third

axis, constructivists challenge both theories by focusing on the social construction of threats and the political nature of security itself, answering the questions of who defines insecurity and whose values are protected through securitization processes (Buzan and Hansen 2009). It is important to establish this fundamental concept of security because security is the central root behind the most consequential political decision examined in this paper, which is signing the 2019 Maritime Agreement. Hence, understanding the concept of security facilitates a critical evaluation of the economic and military motives behind Turkish interventions.

### ***Constructivism in Its Theoretical Lens***

Constructivist perspectives are inward-looking, seeking to deconstruct the dominant rationalist and positivist frameworks, thereafter fracturing the epistemological 'hegemony' that had long dominated the field (Ulusoy 2005). Ontologically, constructivism acknowledges the existence of a material world; epistemologically, however, it insists that this world is interpreted and given meaning through social interaction. It thus positions itself between positivist materialism and post-positivist relativism (Ulusoy 2005). To illustrate this dual positioning, Emanuel Adler provides a well-known analogy distinguishing between throwing a stone and throwing a bird into the air (Adler 1997). The trajectory of a stone can be predicted according to physical laws. Its movement follows deterministic principles. By contrast, the flight path of a bird cannot be pre-determined because it depends on the bird's internal constitution due to its instinct in nature, experience, and adaptive capacity. Similarly, state behavior cannot be understood only through material calculations of capability. This section pairs a constructivist reading with the realist lens introduced in the following section to understand Türkiye's shift in the strategic nature of its military and economic engagement in Libya following the 2019 maritime agreement. Türkiye's historical Ottoman legacy, Muslim identity, and AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) domestic political discourse shape how Ankara presents itself within Libya's unstable political scene (Özüygun 2025). These ideational factors complement the inseparable material calculations, allowing Türkiye to pursue hard and soft-power objectives simultaneously in a flexible policy (Özüygun 2025).

### ***Realism in Its Theoretical Lens***

Realist approaches to international politics perceive the state as the primary, rational actor operating within an anarchic international system in which no central authority can guarantee its survival (Williams 2011). Because security cannot be taken for granted, states are assumed to calculate their behavior chiefly in terms of relative power and material dominance (Williams 2011). Classical variants locate the drive for power in human nature or domestic political competition. However, structural (neo)realism locates it in the distribution of capabilities across the international system itself (Williams 2011). Both variants converge on the expectation that states will act opportunistically to secure or expand their material position when systemic constraints loosen or new threats appear (Williams 2011).

Neoclassical realism refines this picture by treating domestic ideational factors such as leadership beliefs and bureaucratic politics as intervening variables that influence how a state responds to systemic pressure

(Rose 1998; Lobell et al. 2009). This is done without abandoning the underlying assumption that material interest ultimately drives foreign policy (Rose 1998; Lobell et al. 2009). This variant is of utmost relevance to Türkiye. Indeed, Ankara's strategic depth doctrine, associated with Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, frames Türkiye's geographic position at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe as a structural opportunity for multi-directional power projection (Bani Salameh 2022; Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). This is a classically realist reading of geography as a source of relative advantage. Applied to Libya, a realist lens predicts that Türkiye's post-2019 shift toward direct military deployment, drone warfare, and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims should track material triggers (Bani Salameh 2022; Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022).

Realism and constructivism therefore offer competing starting predictions for the same case. In fact, realism expects the recalibration to be explained by the redistribution of material threat, while constructivism expects it to be explained by the activation of pre-existing historical and ideological ties.

### ***Empirical Background***

Following the 1969 coup led by Muammar Gaddafi, Libya functioned as a state 'without statehood'. Gaddafi fragmented coercive power through paramilitary committees, tribal balances, and parallel brigades such as the Khamis Brigade. These actions aimed to strengthen and uphold the Gaddafi regime that lasted for 42 years (Lacher 2020). However, this arrangement prevented the establishment of a coherent state of long-term security (Lacher 2020). This is why, when the regime collapsed in 2011, Libya revealed a state that had not fully been constructed (Perroux 2019). Consequently, cities such as Misrata, Benghazi, Zintan and Sirte developed their own armed coalitions which are mainly based on territorial agreements (UNSMIL 2018). Ideological armed forces emerged from Islamist, Salafist, and nationalist networks (Megerisi 2020). Two competing governments officially came to light: the Tripoli-based General National Congress, and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, backed (and controlled) militarily by General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) (Megerisi 2020). Libya's fragmented security is the tip of an iceberg of historical under-institutionalization, a rentier economy devoid of civic accountability, armed proliferation, socio-economic collapse, and foreign intervention (Megerisi 2020). In February 2021, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), backed by the United Nations, elected a new interim executive authority in Tripoli. The Government of National Accord (GNA) was replaced by the Government of National Unity (GNU). GNU continued mainly the same internal and foreign policy as the GNA (European Parliament 2022).

### ***Türkiye's Foreign Policy***

Türkiye, under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since 2002, has changed the nature of its foreign policy to assert itself as a middle power with ambitions and regional reach (Bani Salameh 2022). This reorientation has projected Turkish influence into Libya especially after the launch of the 'Opening to Africa Action Plan' and its political intensification post-2005 (Bani Salameh 2022). Theoretically, neoclassical realism explains Türkiye's foreign policy as a function of systemic pressures and domestic ideational factors (Rose 1998; Lobell et al. 2009). The Turkish strategic depth doctrine

suggests that due to its location at the crossroads between Asia, Africa and Europe, Türkiye has the advantage of being able to make openings in every direction (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). In this context, Davutoğlu made the case for an extroverted and proactive approach to regional involvement, especially in the Muslim world (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). Since 2011, Türkiye's relations with key regional actors have witnessed huge transformations (Özdamar and Artıkoğlu 2025). Following the unprecedented mass protests in the Middle East and North Africa, the Turkish government saw a rare opportunity to exert Türkiye's influence over the region. Ankara's foreign policy assertiveness reflects a deliberate attempt to expand its room for maneuver in unstable countries with strategic resources (Özdamar and Artıkoğlu 2025).

Libya became one of the most compatible arenas for expanding Turkish strategies because of its institutional collapse and openness to external interventions (Bani Salameh 2022). Libya provides Türkiye with a permissive environment for direct coercive influence and regional power projection (Bani Salameh 2022). Moreover, Libya has become very important for Turkish foreign strategy due to a geo-economic security threat caused by the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. Indeed, Türkiye was excluded from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum launched in January 2019, which was mainly led by Greece, Egypt, and Israel and brought together all of the states in the Eastern Mediterranean except Türkiye and Lebanon. It later spilled over to military and security cooperation between the various states of the Forum at the expense of Türkiye (Bani Salameh 2022). Notably, the Eastern Mediterranean provides the shortest maritime route between Asian and European markets; it is estimated that almost 12% of global trade and over 1 trillion USD worth of goods pass through the Suez Canal annually (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). These characteristics have rendered the Eastern Mediterranean a crucial geostrategic pivot, control over which comes with far-reaching implications. The Gas Forum limited Turkish economic mobility in the Eastern Mediterranean, which significantly weakened its strategic weight in comparison to rivals like Greece and Israel (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). In the same year, Turkish officials publicly introduced a map entitled Mavi Vatan, or Blue Homeland (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022).



**Figure 1:** The Turkish Mavi Vatan/Blue Homeland Doctrine Map

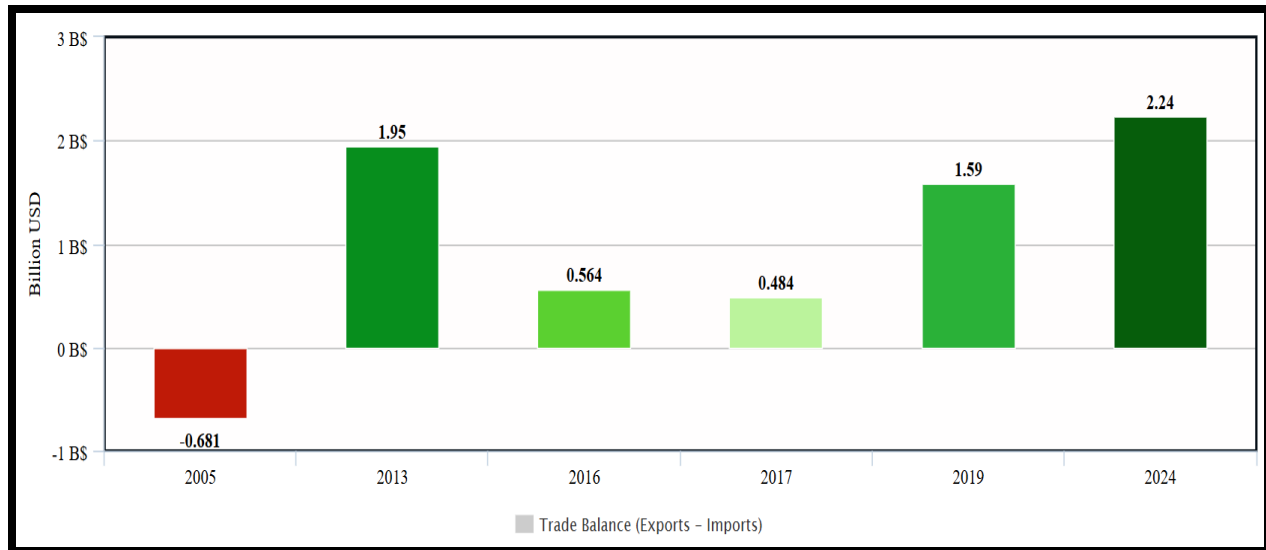
(Yayıcı, Cihat. *Mavi Vatan Map*. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

As depicted in Figure 1, Mavi Vatan frames Türkiye's claims as hydrographic boundaries and as a geopolitical doctrine aimed at maximizing jurisdictional control over offshore zones. The significance of the boundaries shown in Figure 1 lies in the tension it creates vis-à-vis the Greek islands, which further led Greece and its allies to escalate (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). This doctrine finds concrete expression in the 2019 Turkish–Libyan maritime agreement. The agreement involved a maritime route and delimitation scheme between Libya and Türkiye that departs from traditional EEZ demarcations favored by Greece and other littoral states (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022).

### ***The Turkish Interventions in Libya***

Much of the literature on Türkiye's soft-power engagement in Libya pre-2019 frames Ankara's influence as the outcome of a doctrinal strategy that uses neo-Ottoman spheres of cultural diplomacy, humanitarian engagement, and historical identity (Özüygun 2025). These identity-based narratives positioned Türkiye as a 'non-colonial' and culturally proximate actor. This is what made Türkiye unique in comparison with European and Gulf states (Özüygun 2025). Humanitarian work is also an important pre-2019 soft-power vector. In fact, Türkiye's provision of humanitarian assistance helped cultivate legitimacy in a context where external involvement was often viewed with high suspicion (Özüygun 2025). This reinforces the constructivist interpretation of soft power, with legitimacy produced through sustained social practices guiding state behavior (Özüygun 2025). Despite being largely informal, these 'humanitarian' and identity-based engagements established relational infrastructure that sustained Turkish influence across Libya's political scene.

After 2019, Yüksel (2021) recognizes the shift from a proxy and soft-power actor toward assertive near-abroad engagement. Ankara combined military deployment with diplomatic and economic arms. It formed a holistic strategy in which hard power is within a broader political and legal framework (Yüksel 2021). The decisive transformation occurred in 2019, when the LNA offensive against Tripoli prompted Türkiye to escalate military involvement. The 2019 memorandum institutionalized intervention, establishing Joint Command Centres in Tripoli (Yüksel 2021). Süssler (2022) provides detailed analysis of military technology. He focuses on the deployment of Bayraktar TB2 drones, which played an important role in blocking and even, to an extent, reversing Haftar's offensive. The drones provided persistent intelligence coverage and precision strike capabilities (Süssler 2022). They neutralized dozens of LNA armored vehicles and air defense positions, compensating for Turkish numerical inferiority (Süssler 2022). Süssler further argues that Libya (in addition to its geopolitical value detailed above) functioned as a laboratory for Türkiye's defense industry. Türkiye was effectively testing a model of cost-effective expeditionary warfare suitable for middle powers. This advantage reinforced Türkiye's strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean, directly supporting Harchaoui's (2020) geopolitical and Yüksel's (2021) doctrinal analyses.



### *The Turkish Economic Influence in Libya*

**Figure 2:** Türkiye–Libya Bilateral Trade Balance, Selected Years 2005–2024 (Real USD)

Years reflect key inflection points (pre-2011 baseline, post-recovery peak, post-2011 contraction, post-2019 period) Sources: CEIC Data (2005, 2013, 2016, 2017); Trading Economics (2019, 2024)

The graph shows that Türkiye's trade relationship with Libya existed before the fall of Gaddafi. It also shows that the direction of that relationship changed radically over time.

In 2005, Türkiye actually had a trade deficit with Libya of approximately \$681 million. Libya, not Türkiye, held the trade surplus that year. The 2005 data point captures a period when Libya was the stronger trading partner. The relationship then reversed, and by 2013 Türkiye had moved into a substantial trade surplus of \$1.95 billion. Following the 2011 uprising and the political instability, the surplus contracted sharply, falling to \$564 million in 2016 and \$484 million in 2017. However, the absence of a complete collapse and the subsequent recovery (reaching \$1.59 billion in 2019 and \$2.24 billion by 2024) indicate the resilience of bilateral economic ties.

Prior to 2011, Turkish firms were deeply embedded in the Libyan economy (Kekeli 2017). Ankara initially supported the Gaddafi regime in order to protect these substantial economic interests, reinforced by Libyan assurances of future investments (Kekeli 2017). However, as the conflict intensified, Türkiye recalibrated its position by recognizing the National Transitional Council and publicly endorsing political change (Kekeli 2017). This pragmatic realignment enabled Türkiye to safeguard its economic foothold and preserve political influence in Libya's post-revolutionary order.

The Libya–Türkiye economic maritime relationship is based upon contested Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and the regional competitive race for energy sources under the umbrella of the unstable Libyan

sovereignty. Much of the literature frames Türkiye's maritime engagement with Libya through the lenses of a strategic response to exclusionary regional energy architectures after establishing the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (as detailed in previous literature). Valori (2019) presents the foundational legal analysis of the Libya–Türkiye maritime agreement, providing a 'doctrinal defense' of its compliance with international maritime law despite widespread political contestation. Valori argues that the memo aligns with equitable principles under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), particularly the emphasis on proportionality rather than strict equidistance in EEZ delimitation (Valori 2019). He further challenges the assumption that island-based EEZ claims in the region, especially those of Greece, should automatically generate full maritime zones when such claims produce manifestly inequitable outcomes.

In the same vein, Valori (2019) endorses the point that Libya's and Türkiye's shared continental shelf continuity provides a legitimate legal basis for their maritime boundary. This legal framing is essential in understanding how Türkiye leveraged law as a complementary constructivist instrument to enable its economic influence. However, Stergiou (2023) contextualizes the Libya–Türkiye memorandum within a broader geopolitical environment influenced by escalating energy securitization. He argues that the Eastern Mediterranean has been transformed into a zone of strategic rivalry through fossil-fuel-driven alliances, such as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. Hence, this alliance marginalized both Türkiye and Libya (Stergiou 2023). This incentivized alternative alignment through the Türkiye–Libya maritime axis. The 2019 Memorandum of Understanding is thus a strategic move that made other actors reconsider rigid EEZ maximalism (Stergiou 2023). In a more recent perspective, The Arab Weekly (2025) introduces a critical contemporary development that deals with some earlier literature assumptions. In fact, they highlight the endorsement of the Türkiye–Libya maritime agreement by Libya's Eastern government, historically aligned with anti-Turkish regional actors. This represents a valuable win for Türkiye. Indeed, Ankara secured its foothold within the internationally recognized Government of National Unity (GNU), based in Tripoli, and also within the Eastern government appointed by the House of Representatives (The Arab Weekly 2025). The article explains this by stating that Libya's competing governments increasingly view the EEZ agreement as a national asset, thereby consolidating Türkiye's long-term strategic foothold across Libya.

### ***Literature Gaps***

Much of the descriptive work, such as The Arab Weekly (2025), does not have a rigorous theoretical foundation. Indeed, it provides descriptive narrative accounts of maritime cooperation and political developments without explaining the underlying mechanisms. On another note, Stergiou (2023) underestimates the persistence of securitized maritime politics. He assumes that the transition to green energy will reduce EEZ rivalries. In reality, though, EEZs remain central instruments of regional power and pressure, particularly in the tense Eastern Mediterranean theater between Türkiye and Greece (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). That means that energy transition alone cannot explain Türkiye's strategic calculus. In addition, the literature overlooks the domestic political economy of the recalibration. In fact, the scholarship attributes agency at the level of the state or of individual norm entrepreneurs, e.g., Davutoğlu's doctrinal standing (Harchaoui 2020; Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). Yet, it does not

detail the material interests of the domestic actors who benefit from the escalation, e.g., Turkish defense-industrial firms supplying drone and naval technology, or construction conglomerates with AKP-linked ownership that are involved in reconstruction in Libya. This is a distinct gap from the ideological/identity gap already noted regarding the Muslim Brotherhood (Fasanotti 2016). This is because this one concerns organized material lobbies operating under the state level, not upfront of it (like religious/historical narratives). Additionally, the empirical literature underrepresents the theoretical framework of constructivism in explaining shifts in the Turkish nature of interventionism in Libya. This was done despite broader constructivist analyses of Turkish foreign policy that emphasize identity and role-conception (Bilgin 2008; Kardaş 2020).

## **CRITICAL DISCUSSION**

Much of the literature suggests that ideology shaped alignment patterns, particularly through references to the Muslim Brotherhood and identity-based trust networks (Özüygun 2025). However, ideological affinity alone does not sufficiently explain the recalibration of strategy after 2019. Material and strategic opportunity structures, especially maritime delimitation and energy securitization in the Eastern Mediterranean, were repeatedly emphasized (Bani Salameh 2022; Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022; Valori 2019). Energy resources were framed as existential security concerns (Bani Salameh 2022; Stergiou 2023). This dual pattern suggests that Türkiye's recalibration cannot be reduced to either constructivist identity politics or neo-realist power balancing alone. The intervention is a mixture of socially constructed identity alignments and shifting geopolitical opportunity structures.

### ***Distinguishing Interest-Generating from Escalation-Compelling Shocks***

Some of the literature disputes whether the exclusion of Türkiye from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum or the LNA offensive was the most decisive factor for the Turkish escalation (Yüksel 2021; Süssler 2022). This paper, after a closer look into the timeline, argues that they should not be treated as competing explanations for the same event. Indeed, they are two sequential shocks operating on different registers of the recalibration. That is, the exclusion from the Gas Forum was a strategic economic factor that pushed Türkiye to maximize its efforts to sign the 2019 Maritime Agreement in order to secure its EEZ-related vital assets that the opposing coalition/forum threatened. However, the exclusion by itself was not a trigger for a military reaction. The LNA assault three months later is what pushed Türkiye to escalate militarily as the assault was an existential threat to the GNA and thus to the Turkish foothold in Libya. Following this note, the Gas Forum exclusion supplied the material interest that made a maritime deal worth pursuing, and the LNA offensive supplied the proximate emergency that converted a diplomatic-legal instrument into a hard-power commitment. This is why the two events are complementary and not competing. This double-shock reading refines Opportunistic Constructivism (detailed below) by making clear the difference between an interest-generating shock and an escalation-compelling shock, which the existing literature does not draw explicitly.

### ***Toward Opportunistic Constructivism: A Proposed Synthesis for Future Testing***

The literature analysis above resists explanation by either paradigm in its pure form. It also resists explanation by existing synthesis approaches. Neoclassical realism (Rose 1998; Lobell et al. 2009) treats ideational factors as intervening variables that filter how a state perceives and responds to systemic pressure. However, it ultimately subordinates those factors to a continuous logic of power-maximization. That is, ideas shape how a state pursues material interest, not whether or when it escalates. Strategic constructivism (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Sterling-Folker 2002) treats norms and identity as tools an actor deploys to legitimate a pre-existing interest. However, it generally holds that interest is fixed across time. Consequently, this offers no account of why a state's behavior would change in kind (that is, from indirect, soft-power engagement to direct military deployment) at a specific historical juncture. Role theory (Holsti 1970; applied to Türkiye by Bilgin 2008 and Kardaş 2020) explains behavior through a state's self-conception of its regional role. Nevertheless, it similarly treats that self-conception as a fixed disposition rather than specifying the conditions under which identity is activated into material commitment. In brief, none of these approaches specifies a trigger. The recalibration examined did not happen (as classically expected) in a clear gradual trajectory; Türkiye's Libya policy changed in kind, compressed into the months surrounding a specific external shock (its exclusion from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in January 2019), compounded by the LNA's April 2019 offensive against Tripoli.

This paper suggests Opportunistic Constructivism as a future model that accounts specifically for this pattern of sudden qualitative escalation built on pre-existing but previously under-activated ideational infrastructure. The model holds that a state's historical and identity-based ties to a target region/state function as a standing reservoir of legitimacy through a pre-accumulated stock of narrative and relational capital (Ottoman legacy, religious proximity, Muslim Brotherhood-linked networks, in Türkiye's case). Still, it produces only soft-power returns because it is not yet coupled to material capability or opportunity. The idea here is that this reservoir does not itself trigger escalation. Escalation is triggered by a material shock that threatens or opens a strategic asset the state cannot otherwise secure through existing frameworks. When the event/shock happens, the constructivist norms determine the form and partners of the response (why Tripoli and not Tobruk? Why the GNA and not a neutral broker? Why legal argumentation invoking shared continental shelf and historical maritime claims not pure coercion?).

### ***Scope***

The model is not suggested as a general theory of state behavior. It is proposed for a bounded set of cases sharing three features. First, the target state or region exhibits contested sovereignty, such that legitimacy can be conferred by a sub-state authority. Second, the intervening state is a middle power lacking the material capacity to act on realist interest through coercion alone, and thus requires a legitimating narrative to sustain intervention politically and diplomatically. Third, the ideational tie predates the material trigger and had previously operated in a foundational capacity (not manufactured post-hoc to justify an already-decided escalation).

### ***Falsifiability***

The value of Opportunistic Constructivism as a theoretical contribution rests on its capacity to generate predictions that could fail. Three such predictions follow directly from the mechanism above: First, qualitative escalation should co-occur temporally with an identifiable material shock. Second, the form of escalation (choice of partners, legal framing, target selection) should track pre-existing ideational ties. Third, cases sharing the ideational reservoir but lacking the material trigger should not exhibit comparable escalation. Each of these is, in principle, testable against further cases in Türkiye's near-abroad engagement and against other middle powers exhibiting a similar combination of identity-based soft power and constrained material capacity.

### **CONCLUSION**

The evidence detailed and reviewed above supports P3 over either P1 or P2 taken in isolation.

**P1:** The motives behind the Turkish strategy recalibration are mainly centered around realist economic securitization: Partially supported, but insufficient alone to explain the recalibration. Türkiye's exclusion from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in January 2019 and the subsequent EEZ dispute clearly supplied a material interest strong enough to make a maritime deal worth pursuing (Bani Salameh 2022; Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022; Valori 2019). On its own, however, P1 cannot explain why that material interest did not itself trigger military escalation, or why Türkiye's response took the specific form of an alliance with the Tripoli-based GNA rather than, for instance, a purely coercive or unilateral EEZ claim.

**P2:** The motives behind the Turkish strategy recalibration are mainly centered around ideological doctrines and identity ties: Partially supported, but insufficient alone to explain the recalibration. Türkiye's Ottoman legacy, religious proximity, and Muslim Brotherhood-linked networks (Fasanotti 2016; Özuygun 2025) plausibly explain why Ankara aligned with the GNA specifically, and why it favored legal argumentation grounded in shared continental-shelf claims over naked coercion (Valori 2019). On its own, however, P2 cannot explain the timing of the escalation. Why did a decades-old ideational reservoir suddenly translate into direct military deployment in 2019 rather than at any earlier point in the post-2011 period?

**P3:** The motives are a combination of both realism and constructivism in a way that material shocks in the Eastern Mediterranean triggered when and whether Türkiye escalated in Libya, and pre-existing constructivist ties shaped the form that escalation took; the evidence is more consistent with P3. As argued in the Critical Discussion, the Gas Forum exclusion and the LNA's April 2019 offensive against Tripoli operated as two sequential shocks on different registers of the recalibration, and the resulting Opportunistic Constructivism model offers one way of specifying, and future-testing, how those registers interact.

Therefore, Türkiye recalibrated its engagement in Libya because material shocks created the incentive and urgency for escalation, while ideational ties influenced how the escalation was executed. This conclusion, as the Future Research Recommendation section outlines, creates further testable comparisons across additional cases of Turkish and middle-power foreign policy.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This paper's conclusions should be read alongside several limitations tied to its scope and design. Indeed, the analysis rests on secondary and predominantly English-language sources. Turkish-language policy documents, parliamentary debates, and Arabic-language Libyan sources were not consulted directly, which may understate framings, motivations, or domestic political dynamics that may be only fully visible in those languages. Moreover, the paper examines a single case: Türkiye's engagement in Libya. While this depth of focus allows for a detailed account of the 2019 recalibration, it also means that Opportunistic Constructivism, as proposed here, remains a plausible but untested model. Generalizability rests on the comparative work outlined in the Future Research Recommendations, not on evidence presented in this paper alone. A single case cannot, by itself, rule out alternative explanations that would only become visible when Türkiye's Libya policy is set against a case where the material trigger and ideational reservoir do not co-occur. Further, the paper's theoretical contribution is bounded by the scope conditions specified in the Opportunistic Constructivism model itself, namely, contested target-state sovereignty, a materially constrained middle-power intervener, and a pre-existing ideational tie. Cases falling outside these conditions are not expected to be explained by the model, and applying it beyond this bounded set would exceed what the present analysis supports.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

First, conduct a comparative case study of Türkiye's interventionism in Somalia against the Libyan case developed in the paper. Code for the presence and timing of a material trigger analogous to the 2019 Gas Forum exclusion. Discern if the Turkish engagement escalated in kind or remained soft-power-concentrated. This is to evaluate Opportunistic Constructivism: comparable hard-power escalation in Somalia absent a material trigger will count against the model and in favor of a pure identity-driven account, whereas the absence of escalation despite a shared ideational reservoir will strengthen it. Second, investigate possibilities to incorporate this study into a policy brief aimed at developing approaches to ease the tensions in the Libyan conflict. Third, further refine the IR school of thought of constructivism through emphasizing the intersection of neo-realism, constructivism, and IR role theory while being adaptive to geopolitical dynamics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My immense gratitude goes to my mentor Dr. Esther-Egele Godswill, a PhD from the University of Edinburgh, for her invaluable support and formidable guidance through my research journey.

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