

# The Complexity Effect in U.S.-Turkey Relations: The Restructuring of the Middle East Regional Security

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# The Complexity Effect in U.S.-Turkey Relations: The Restructuring of the Middle East Regional Security

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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a discussion of its core theoretical argument that the international order is more complex than the theories generated by traditionalist state-centric approaches and critical approaches, including the regional security complex approach. The complexity approach highlights the sensitive dependency of complex systems on the nonlinear feedback loops and dynamic interactions by which the longer term reactions to the behavior of actors could set off actions-reaction spirals. This path dependency is evident in the erosion of U.S.-Turkey relations which is a cause and a consequence of the realignment in the international system and the Middle East regional system.

**Keywords:** Copenhagen School, path dependence, feedback loops, balance of power system, YPG

## ABD-Türkiye İlişkilerinde Karmaşıklık Etkisi: Orta Doğu Bölgesel Güvenliğinin Yeniden Yapılandırılması

### ÖZET

Bu makale uluslararası düzenin, bölgesel güvenlik kompleksi yaklaşımı da dahil olmak üzere, gelenekselci devlet merkezli yaklaşımlar ve eleştirel yaklaşımlar tarafından üretilen teorilerden daha karmaşık olduğuna dair temel teorik argümanının bir tartışmasını sunmaktadır. Karmaşıklık yaklaşımı karmaşık sistemlerin, aktörlerin davranışı sonucu uzun vadede ortaya çıkan reaksiyonların etki-tepki sarmalları başlatabileceği, doğrusal olmayan geribildirim döngülerine ve dinamik etkileşimlere olan hassas bağımlılığını vurgulamaktadır. Bu patika bağımlılığı, uluslararası sistemdeki ve Orta Doğu bölgesel sistemindeki taban kaymasının bir nedeni ve sonucu olan ABD-Türkiye ilişkilerinin erozyonunda açıkça görülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kopenhag Okulu, patika bağımlılığı, geribildirim döngüleri, güç dengesi sistemi, YPG

## Introduction

This paper analyses how specific aspects of United States (U.S.)-Turkey relations reveal the need to use complexity in International Relations (IR). In applying the complexity theory to this question, the main theoretical argument proposes that the complexity of the international system links the survival of the long-standing partnership between the U.S. and Turkey to the future of the Middle East. The paper first sets out a comprehensive explanation of complex systems that resonates with the characteristics of the international system. It argues that complex systems are non-linear, emergent, co-adaptive, heterogeneous and path-dependent on feedback loops by which the effect of the dynamic interaction of their multiple components serves to provide feedback into this interaction.<sup>1</sup> Combining complexity thinking and assumptions from the Copenhagen School, the paper adds merit to the current literature, which offers no such application to utilize insights from complexity to the Copenhagen School.

A widely used approach to explain complexity in the security field is the Regional Security Complex Theory, the brainchild of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver – the prominent scholars of the Copenhagen School with regard to security studies in the context of IR studies.<sup>2</sup> This theory examines regional sub-systems, that (compared to global system) are relatively small in specific regions such as balance of power system structures based on shared perceptions like the primary cause of conflicts or alliances shaped by international affairs. The paper elaborates on the distinguishing characteristics of regional security complexes and argues that they fit together with complexity thinking as a useful method for analyzing the U.S.-Turkey relationship.<sup>3</sup>

The paper also adds to the existing literature on the U.S.-Turkey relationship by offering a framework based on the process tracing of feedback loops in U.S.-Turkey relations as a methodology. Notably, the idea of interactions and feedbacks has been developed as a supplement to the rather static structural view of Regional Security Complexity Theory. The two could be linked as examples of structure-agency interaction. In doing so, the paper proposes an empirical test of its hypothesis by highlighting internal attributions of states as a cause of systemic transformations.<sup>4</sup>

Considering Turkey's priority of containing Kurdish nationalism, the paper emphasizes how some events like feedback loops (iterations), given their impact on the rise of Kurdish nationalism which Turkey's decision-makers label as an actual threat to the nation's territorial integrity. And, the focus of the analysis demarcates the different iterations laid out in the paper as they are not consequential on this priority. These iterations focus on macro shifts in the international system including the end of the Cold War period, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (9/11) and the 2008 global financial crisis - all of which have made the regional nature and definition of security more noticeable in line with the predictions generated by the Regional Security Complex Theory and complexity thinking.

The findings of the paper propose that the current complexities in the U.S.-Turkey relationship could develop into a complex security situation. Each actor is looking out for themselves and both see

1 A feedback is the outcome of loops that initially influence the initial dynamics of a given system, which, in turn, transform the whole relationship by altering the behavior of complex systems from top to bottom. Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Social and Political Life*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997.

2 Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

3 James D. Thompson, *Organizations in Action*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1967, p. 6.

4 Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems*, New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 2.

things mainly from their own local perspective, despite the implications for the wider system. While this finding fits within state-centric analytical frameworks, the above mentioned three 'iterations' and the repercussions cannot be deducted from mainstream theories without some complex assumptions. One very dramatic consequence of this complexity would be realignment of the Middle Eastern balance of power through regional security complexes in favor of U.S. adversaries which would not always be directly proportional (linear) reactions to foreign policy decisions (such as U.S. support for the armed Kurdish groups).

The following section discusses the literature from which IR theories on complexity are drawn. The paper then reviews theoretical works on IR with specific attention to the studies on Regional Security Complex Theory. The subsequent sections illustrate U.S.-Turkey relations to test principles drawn from a systematic synthesis showing how Regional Security Complex Theory and complexity theory fit together. Finally, the fourth section presents the findings that demonstrate how complexity thinking can help advance Regional Security Complex Theory, while the last section forms the conclusion.

## **The Core Assumptions of Complexity**

Complexity approach in IR, which has a history going back to James Rosenau (a pioneer in the globalization studies field) and others, is derived primarily from the works on complexity theory in other disciplines.<sup>5</sup> Despite a plethora of literature on complexity, the concept still suffers from a lack of both ontological and epistemological underpinnings.<sup>6</sup> There is no consensus on the hierarchy of the core assumptions of complexity thinking which points to a lack of ontology that continues to be a weak spot of complexity thinking in general.<sup>7</sup> This weakness necessitates both thorough discussion of the evolution of complexity thinking and a working definition of complexity.

In his 1997 book 'System Effects,' Robert Jervis conceptualizes core assumptions of complexity such as nonlinearities, feedbacks, indirect effects, contingencies, interaction effects and unintended consequences to help in the resilience of systems-based studies.<sup>8</sup> He argues that a minor variation in any one of numerous components of systems might trigger other reactions in that vein, causing radical changes in the system and its components. A more familiar example of complexity behavior is the interaction of complex organizations; what the American sociologist James D. Thompson defines as a set of interdependent parts which together make up a whole.<sup>9</sup>

Raymond A. Thiétart and Bernard Forgues, in their attempt to apply complex properties to organizations, claim that organizational behavior is subject to not just internal forces but also to the external forces of the system.<sup>10</sup> Through a diverse agenda, these forces seek to coordinate actions in

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5 James N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1990; Jervis, *System Effects*.

6 Erica Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, "The Foundations of Complexity, the Complexity of Foundations", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol 42, No 2, 2012, p. 172; David Earnest and James Rosenau, "Signifying Nothing? What Complex Systems Theory Can and Cannot Tell Us About Global Politics", Harrison Neil (ed.), *Complexity in World Politics: Concepts and Methods of a New Paradigm*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2006, p. 143-164.

7 Cudworth and Hobden, "The Foundations of Complexity".

8 Jervis, *System Effects*.

9 Thompson, *Organizations in Action*, p. 6.

10 Raymond A. Thiétart and Bernard Forgues, "Chaos theory and organization", *Organization Science*, Vol. 6, No 1, 1995, p. 21.

the present which are activated by past actions undertaken by other actors and will influence actions to be initiated by other actors. What these characteristics of complex organizations lead us to expect is that the international system would be provided with a complete description in terms of the interaction of its dynamics that are sensitively dependent on non-linear feedback loops. The literature holds feedback loops to be either positive or negative with significantly different results by which “feedback can result in stability, or if there is positive feedback and a change is reinforced rather than dampened down, dramatic shifts can take place and a system can be said to have become ‘path dependent’”<sup>11</sup>

Non-linear mathematics was first applied in the prediction of complex systems such as Edward Lorenz’s weather related work.<sup>12</sup> Through an effort to replicate atmospheric conditions by computer models of atmospheric convection, Lorenz found that non-linear type of behavior shows evidence of a high dependence on the initial conditions.<sup>13</sup> Lorenz used systems of deterministic equations which are an idealization of hydrodynamic systems that show evidence of symmetric and steady output under certain conditions while showing an irregular flow pattern under different conditions.<sup>14</sup> He found that ‘non-periodic solutions’ are typically reactive regarding slight alterations, such that slightly differing initial states can evolve into considerably different states.<sup>15</sup> In his experiments, small changes in weather conditions have shown various weather patterns which can trigger alteration of the atmosphere.

Since the weather related work of Lorenz, interest in complexity has grown among researchers in different scientific fields, including the IR discipline. Lars-Erik Cederman, in his 1997 book ‘Emergent Actors in World Politics,’ contributes to the theoretical development of complexity thinking by applying the emergence notion as a basis for the assessment of the progress of countries and their people.<sup>16</sup> In terms of international affairs, emergent properties imply that characteristics of the international system cannot be drawn merely from the characteristics of its elementary components.<sup>17</sup> As for complexity, the IR system does not appear as an exterior and solid structure but interacts as an emergent system. Its emergent characteristics, stemming from the repeated interaction of its elementary parts, are neither constant nor purified from its elements.

In his ‘Turbulence in World Politics’ in 1990, which is seen as pioneering the application of complexity thinking to IR, Rosenau conceptualizes ‘global turbulence’ as global chaos (a term widely used as synonymous to complexity).<sup>18</sup> According to him, global complexity is formed by any kind of disorder brought by advances in people’s capabilities through better education and technology. The rise of new actors and the decline of state authority promote both greater fragmentation as well as greater integration throughout global system.<sup>19</sup> Rosenau’s subsequent work in 2003 observed that although works on complexity are restricted in prediction, they “challenge prevailing assumptions that political, economic and social relationships adhere to patterns traced by linear processes”.<sup>20</sup> The focus

11 Cudworth and Hobden, “The Foundations of Complexity”, p. 169.

12 Edward N. Lorenz, “Deterministic Nonperiodic Flow”, *Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences*, Vol. 20, No 2, 1963, p. 130.

13 Ibid., p. 135.

14 Ibid., p. 136.

15 Ibid.

16 Lars-Erik Cederman, *Emergent Actors in World Politics*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1997.

17 Seva Gunitsky, “Complexity and Theories of Change in International Politics”, *International Theory*, Vol. 5, No 1, 2013, p. 36.

18 Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics*, p. 244–245.

19 Ibid.

20 Earnest and Rosenau, “Signifying Nothing?”, p. 148.

of complexity thinking on “strategic interaction and unintended consequences” makes it particularly appropriate for the study of social systems.<sup>21</sup>

Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, in their 2012 article, “The Foundations of Complexity, the Complexity of Foundations”, attribute a particular character to social systems as being embedded in scientific systems (non-social and non-human systems).<sup>22</sup> According to them, the complexity phenomenon (an observable fact or event especially one whose reason is in question) suggests a foundation for analyses of international affairs insofar as its characteristics are observable and empirically applicable. Nevertheless, the lack of a recognized methodology limits the application of complexity to international affairs and has led to a split into three main groupings on how to apply the core assumptions of complexity into social systems - including the metaphoric approach, the general approach, and the restricted approach.<sup>23</sup>

The metaphoric approach seeks to utilize the complexity approach as a collection of assumptions or as a generative methodology that helps to achieve the constraints of reductionist approaches while envisaging the consequences of specific global political affairs.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the general approach attempts to apply the core assumptions of the complexity approach wholesale in offering a unified approach by which social discipline insights can be derived from two options; one based more on non-social disciplines, the other derived from social disciplines.<sup>25</sup> Lastly, in its focus on an analytical split between social and non-social systems, the restricted approach can interpret the particular characteristics of the social, whilst considering “inscribed complexity” in both social and non-social systems and the probability of their “overlapping, interrelating, and co-constituting” characteristics.<sup>26</sup>

The authors of this paper view the complexity approach as less a new IR theory but more a metaphor while considering that social systems should be examined specifically for their particular human characteristics, including their ability for consciousness and accommodation of themselves to changing conditions. Through a proper foundation in the restricted strand, the following section scrutinizes the question of what analytical value the complexity concept and its epistemological principles actually hold for advancing the Regional Security Complex Theory.

## **U.S. and Turkey Relations from the Copenhagen School Viewpoint**

While traditionalist security studies remain rooted in reductionist, state-centric political thought, they have been criticized increasingly for not responding to the security needs of the post-Cold War era and for neglecting individual as well as societal security.<sup>27</sup> The Copenhagen School of Security Studies broadens the concept by placing particular importance upon the social aspects of security. The Copenhagen School is credited with bringing the concept of the regional security complex and the issues of sectors (security factors) and securitization into the literature of international security

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21 Ibid.

22 Cudworth and Hobden, “The Foundations of Complexity”, p. 175.

23 Ibid., p. 165.

24 Ibid., p. 174.

25 Francis Capra, *The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living*, London, Flamingo, 2003, p. 70.

26 Cudworth and Hobden, “The Foundations of Complexity”, p. 174.

27 Paul Williams, “Critical Security Studies”, Alex J. Bellamy (ed.), *International Society and its Critics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 135.

studies, all of which are dependent on the actions and interpretations of the actors concerned.<sup>28</sup> These issues help broaden security studies by dividing the security concept into security factors and setting out a comprehensive statement of the concept.

The Copenhagen approach addresses the security concept not only as it relates to military security but also to economic, societal, political and environmental factors. Buzan, Wæver and Jaap De Wilde use these five factors to assess the sectors in which a securitization could take place.<sup>29</sup> Securitization is a political and subjective process by which political or military elites attract public attention and establish consensus on an issue,<sup>30</sup> such as securitization of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. The Turkish leadership labels Kurdish nationalism a security threat by making speech-acts – group of pronunciation with a single interactive purpose, purposeful unit at statement level (thanking or requesting for example).

Considering geography as complexes that are shaped through securitization processes, Buzan and Wæver argue that security interdependence is rising regionally because the actual threats become more intensified in geographically closed regional complexes than in regions outside these complexes.<sup>31</sup> The mutual interdependency of states derives from the existence of a regional security complex in which states need to cooperate and act together against a common threat. Cooperation between and among states depends not only on the balance of power but also on the perceptions of historical friendship or hostility that are generated as a result of international roles that states pursue for themselves within the international system.

An appropriate example of how the international roles pursued by states affect their relationships could be the unilateral and isolationist tendency of the George W. Bush administration (from 2001 to 2009) and the Donald Trump administration (from 2017 to 2021) that sought to reverse the internationalist system that the U.S. itself championed.<sup>32</sup> The U.S. had pursued a leadership role for an internationalist system based on international regimes and organizations such as the UN, as well as alliances such as the NATO from the end of the Second World War in 1945.<sup>33</sup> Contrarily, the shifting international role of the U.S. after the Cold War ended posed great challenges for Turkey, which realized its own political and socio-economic transformation in the aftermath of the Second World War by penetrating the liberal international order. Applying insights from the Copenhagen School could help instill a better understanding of the dynamics that injected hostility into U.S. and Turkey relations.

Amid changing international and regional circumstances, the U.S. has sought to maintain its role of global supremacy in the post-Cold War era while the regional level of security has become more apparent.<sup>34</sup> From this point forward, it would be appropriate to assume that the end of the Cold War period is the first iteration that generated feedback loops in the U.S.-Turkey relationship. While U.S. foreign policy

28 Basar Baysal, "20 Years of Securitization: Strengths, Limitations and A New Dual Framework", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 17, No 67, 2020, pp. 3-20.

29 Buzan, Wæver and Wilde, *Security: A New Framework*, p. 25.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid, p. 41.

32 Doug Stokes, "Trump, American hegemony and the future of the liberal international order", *International Affairs* Vol 94, No 1, 2018, p. 149.

33 Ibid., p. 149.

34 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 3.

elites brought rogue states within the scope of security formulation as a threat against the existence of the U.S.-dominated global order, Turkey has never perceived the threat of rogue states as being equal to the former Soviet threat. The then President of Turkey Turgut Özal (1989-1993) gave official support to the U.S. policy in Iraq following the 1991 war.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, military and Foreign Service chiefs were deeply concerned about events in northern Iraq after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent U.S.-led Gulf War against Iraq in 1991.<sup>36</sup> Certain key figures such as General Necip Torumtay, the then Chief of the General Staff, securitized the founding of a Kurdish regional administration in northern Iraq that would encourage Kurdish separatists (in southeastern Turkey in particular, where the Kurdish population forms the majority) to trigger a civil war of secession.<sup>37</sup>

The reaction of the Bush administration to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., during which the U.S. sought its own solutions through, for example, unilateral actions, has generated a second iteration in the U.S.-Turkey relationship.<sup>38</sup> This unilateral approach by the U.S. was a primary driver for its waging the 2003 Iraq war, which was to ruin the international reputation of the U.S.<sup>39</sup> While Washington enjoyed wide support for the Gulf War (1990-1991) when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the provocative role of Iraq was not too clear in the later situation – in the early 2000s.<sup>40</sup> The 2003 Iraq war was also ill-received by Turkey, which started to question its strategic alliance with the U.S., especially when the regional Kurdish administration gained increased autonomy.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Turkey couldn't gain the solidarity and support it expected from its NATO allies for its assaults on the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK - "a designated terrorist organization which has fought a bloody insurgency inside Turkey" since the 1980s) with members such as Denmark turning a blind eye to the PKK's agencies in their territories.<sup>42</sup> While Turkey's growing mistrust weakened its respect for U.S. priorities, Ankara began to believe that it might be better off establishing alliances with countries that shared similar problems like Iran.<sup>43</sup>

The third iteration in the U.S.-Turkey relationship has been generated by Washington's strategies of gradual abandonment of the Middle East and the strengthening of the armed Kurdish groups in the aftermath of the 2007 mortgage crisis in the U.S., which grew into the global financial crisis that began in 2008, exacerbating the repercussions of the 2003 Iraq war.<sup>44</sup> The negative effects of the two U.S. based financial events were evident worldwide, as were the Barack Obama administration's (from 2009 to 2017) policy preferences that sought to respond to the financial challenges by helping the U.S. rid itself of the burdens of the 2003 Iraq war period.<sup>45</sup> The Obama administration designed and

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35 Murat Yetkin, *Tezkere: Irak Krizinin Gerçek Öyküsü, (Resolution: The True Story of the Iraq Crisis)*, İstanbul, Remzi Kitabevi. 2004, p. 16-17.

36 Ibid., p 17.

37 Ibid., p 18.

38 Ahmet Sözen, "A Theoretical Evaluation of Different Faces of Power: US-Turkey Relations Towards Iraq", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 6, No 24, 2010, p. 55-78.

39 Ibid.

40 Şaban Kardaş, "Turkish-American Relations in the 2000s: Revisiting the Basic Parameters of Partnership?", *Perceptions*, Vol. 16, No 3, 2011, p. 25.

41 Ibid.

42 Colin Kahl, "Shadow Government: The United States and Turkey Are on a Collision Course in Syria", *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2017.

43 Kardaş, "Turkish-American Relations in the 2000s", p. 25.

44 Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World: Release 2:0*, London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2011, p. 1-6.

45 Ibid., p 1.

implemented a gradual abandonment strategy by which the U.S. would draw its armed forces away from the Middle East.

Meanwhile, in December 2010, Arab uprisings triggered a destructive security competition which gave rise to Middle Eastern powers solidifying their regional roles.<sup>46</sup> Taking advantage of this power vacuum, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) organized terrorist attacks in the Middle East and various EU states that caused an instantaneous securitization.<sup>47</sup> Political or military elites throughout the world have attracted global public attention and established a consensus about the ISIS threat.<sup>48</sup> This securitization process led the U.S. to open areas for regional actors to maneuver in as it began to limit its engagement in different regions. This behavior was explicit in Obama's policies toward the armed Kurdish groups in the Syrian crisis of 2014 when the U.S. pursued short-term objectives such as strengthening regional actors like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Arabs, Christians, and Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).<sup>49</sup>

The rapprochement between Ankara and Erbil, especially between 2005 and 2014, and between Ankara and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq didn't prevent Turkey's governing elites from securitizing the US strategy of strengthening Syrian Kurds as an action that would have the effect of strengthening Kurdish nationalism in southeastern Turkey. While Ankara maintains a very clear priority to eliminate the PKK from northern Iraq, the Turkish government supports the territorial integrity of Iraq and political stability in the KRG. Nevertheless, Ankara's enduring official position to prevent Iraqi Kurdish independence and KRG leaders' sensitiveness to transnational Kurdish aspiration for ethnic solidarity limits their perception of friendship towards each other.

Coming to power in 2017, Trump also decided to support the YPG. This decision signified his determination to maintain Obama's policy towards the YPG although, contrary to Obama's short-term policies, the Trump administration initially sought to remain permanently in Syria under pressure from former military commanders, Democrats and even some of Trump's staunchest Republican allies.<sup>50</sup> In addition to this, it appeared that the Trump administration preferred isolationist behavior that questioned the liberal international order led by the U.S.<sup>51</sup> What was worse for Turkey was that Trump accused traditional U.S. allies of free-riding on U.S. protection. Despite Trump's 2019 decision to pull U.S. troops from northeastern Syria as a green light for subsequent cross-border military operations by Turkish armed forces and allied Islamist elements of the Free Syrian Army (December 2019 to March 2020), the U.S.-Turkey relationship was to suffer from a continuing deep mistrust.<sup>52</sup> This is mainly due to Turkey's intensified security concerns, especially regarding Washington's incoherent foreign policy since Trump's promise to withdraw from Syria has actually never been fully

46 Bülent Aras and Richard Falk, "Five Years after the Arab Spring: a Critical Evaluation", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No 12, 2016, p. 2252.

47 Bill Park, "Regional Turmoil, the Rise of Islamic State, and Turkey's Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas", *International Journal*, Vol. 71, No 3, 2016.

48 Mustafa Aydın et al., *Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy*, Istanbul, 2018, p. 19.

49 Evrim Görmüş and Soli Özel, "US Policies Adrift in a Levant in Turmoil", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 15, No 60, 2018, pp. 135-150.

50 Görmüş and Özel, "US Policies Adrift", p. 135.

51 Stephen M. Walt, "US Grand Strategy after the Cold War: Can Realism Explain It? Should Realism Guide It?", *International Relations*, Vol. 32, No 1, 2018, p. 3.

52 Eric Schmitt and Maggie Haberman, "Trump Said to Favor Leaving a Few Hundred Troops in Eastern Syria", *The New York Times*, 20 October 2019.

implemented. During 2019, Trump twice announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria yet twice partially reversed course.<sup>53</sup>

All in all, the Copenhagen School of security studies suggests that the U.S.-Turkey relationship has experienced a securitization process as a result of intensified threats in geographically closed regional complexes and the shifting international roles that the U.S. and Turkey pursue for themselves. Security independence between the U.S. and the Syrian Kurdish groups increased regionally when the destructive security competition between regional actors such as ISIS and the Kurdish groups became more intensified in the context of the Middle East regional complex. In an analogy to the Regional Security Complex Theory's suggestions, the mutual independence of the U.S. and Kurdish groups stems from their need to work together against the Islamic State they both oppose.

As a result of this securitization process, the U.S. and Turkey have perceived one another to be a threat, and have taken precautions to contain each other. They have taken positions in different regional security complexes. While the U.S. established political and military links with the YPG, Turkey securitized this U.S. behavior and adopted a more assertive foreign policy.<sup>54</sup> To counter these developments occurring on its borders, Turkey, from 2011 onwards, began to pursue a bigger regional role in the Middle East and to establish singular, one-sided political and military support to particular Islamist Sunni groups, especially the rebelling Kurdish factors.<sup>55</sup> These shifting international and regional roles that both the U.S. and Turkey admit to pursuing individually, have had a significant bearing on cooperation between the two countries.

The Copenhagen School's state-centric logic is criticized in liberal discourses as an elitist approach that overlooks their individual citizenry's perceptions of insecurity and threats against security.<sup>56</sup> In doing so, the attempt remains incomplete, because it fails to take into account the complexity of the international system. The analytical concepts of complexity as a supplement to the rather static structural view of regional security complexity can be developed as a way of showing just how the two could be related as evidenced by the following analysis.<sup>57</sup>

## **Complexity in Regional Security**

Complexity appears at the system level in which "is ignorant of the behavior of the system as a whole, it responds only to information that is available to it locally".<sup>58</sup> Turkey responded to information that the KRG in northern Iraq had become a noticeable source of Kurdish autonomy following the U.S. Wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003. The rise of a regional Kurdish administration in northern Iraq could, to a significant extent, count on U.S. military operations that prevented the Iraqi regime from regaining control in some predominantly Kurdish regions. It became a widely-held view in Turkey that the U.S. does not support Turkey's struggle with the PKK and supports an independent Kurdistan.<sup>59</sup>

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53 Ibid.

54 Aydın et al., "Research on Public Perceptions", p. 19.

55 Aras and Falk, "Five years after the Arab Spring", p. 2253.

56 Claire Wilkinson, "The Copenhagen School on Tour in Kyrgyzstan: Is Securitization Theory Useable (sic) Outside Europe?", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 38, No 1, 2007, p. 5-25.

57 Jervis, *System Effects*, p. 20; Cudworth and Hobden, "The Foundations of Complexity", p. 177.

58 Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, p. 66.

59 Yetkin, *Tezkere*.

While the PKK found a military safe haven in the Qandil Mountains within the KRG's territorial boundaries, the KRG's increased functional autonomy has offered a model for other Kurdish groups that pursued wider self-rule. A case in point is the rise of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) as the dominant Kurdish group in Syria since its establishment in 2003. This information, available to Turkey 'locally', was one of the major factors leading to the deterioration of U.S.-Turkey relations. Ankara started to perceive a threat particularly when the YPG, the PYD's military wing, pursued greater local control of northern Syria. Since the Turkish political and military elites considered YPG to be the PKK's Syrian affiliate, they securitized U.S. support for the YPG as an action that could lead to the strengthening of a self-ruling Kurdish entity along Turkey's southern border similar to the emergence of the KRG in northern Iraq.<sup>60</sup> Thus, U.S. support to Syrian armed Kurdish groups was regarded in Turkey not as an action to deter the ISIS, but as a security threat against the survival of the Turkish state since the increased autonomy of Kurds in Syria could be replicated in Turkey.<sup>61</sup>

One of the findings derived from the analysis of U.S.-Turkey relations is that the two countries are looking out for their respective security concerns and that they consider issues primarily from their individual perceptions of whether they are inspired by friendship or hostility a behavior which inevitably has consequences for the broader system. This finding seems to fit within statist paradigms such as simple realism or the statist framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory.<sup>62</sup> One could argue that the same has been true of U.S. policy.<sup>63</sup> Traditional statist approaches would expect all states to pursue their myopic self-interest in security, without considering the consequences for the system as a whole.<sup>64</sup> This is the tragedy of great powers, as realists see it.<sup>65</sup> Yet, in their failure to fully framework the effects of system dynamics, statist frameworks overlook how the securitization of the Kurdish issue within Turkish public opinion pressures change in Turkey's foreign policy that has consequences and repercussions not only for the regional system but the wider system.

Specific aspects of U.S.-Turkey relations reveal the need to understand just how the complexity effects through feedback loops and path dependence have influenced developments in terms of the evolution of the relationship. The 1991 Iraq War generated an iteration with significant feedback effects on Kurdish nationalism as the Iraqi Kurds were determined to take advantage of the greater role admitted by the US in Iraq. Increased skepticisms evolved in Turkey, not only in some circles but also in terms of public opinion, that the PKK was being supported within the framework of Operation Provide Comfort (later replaced by the 1997 Operation Northern Watch) that called for a no-fly zone and a safe haven for the Kurds.<sup>66</sup>

Public opinion in Turkey was to play a significant role in shaping Turkey's response to the shifting policies of the U.S. in the post-9/11 era, particularly to the 2003 Iraq War that as a result of

60 Kahl, "Shadow Government".

61 Aras and Falk, "Five years after the Arab Spring", p. 2252.

62 Buzan, Wæver and Wilde, *Security: A New Framework*.

63 Walt, "US Grand Strategy after the Cold War".

64 Brian C. Schmidt, "Anarchy, World Politics and the Birth of a Discipline: American International Relations, Pluralist Theory and the Myth of Interwar Idealism", *International Relations*, Vol. 16, No 1, 2002, p. 25.

65 Walt, "US Grand Strategy after the Cold War".

66 Erik L. Knudsen, "The Quagmire of Northern Iraq: The Clash of US, Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish Interests", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 26, No 4, 2003, p. 11.

the 9/11 attacks generated a feedback on the Middle East regional security complexity. The public and the government in Turkey were disappointed about the unilateral international role that the U.S. carved out for itself at that time and the pressure the U.S. exerted on Turkey's involvement in the 2003 Iraq War. As a result, it proved inevitable that Turkey would suffer from the proximity of the battlefields to its territory. In reaction to the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. unilaterally declared war on Iraq in 2003. This further increased Turkey's skepticism about the main aim and intention of U.S. foreign policy towards Iraq as the degree of Kurdish self-rule within northern Iraq spread.

This skepticism increased when the U.S. designed strategies for its gradual abandonment of the Middle East and its strengthening of YPG in the early 2010s in response to the deterioration of the U.S. economy caused by the huge budget deficits, which, in large part, were directly attributable to the costs of the 2003 Iraq War. U.S. support to armed Syrian Kurds was viewed in Turkey as a part of a U.S. grand strategy in the Middle East to establish a Kurdish State in northern Iraq, northern Syria and southeastern Turkey.<sup>67</sup> This securitization of the Kurdish issue and the accompanying U.S. actions registered within Turkish public opinion and among influential circles and generated a third iteration in U.S.-Turkey relations. Turkey adopted an opposite approach to that of the U.S., in the Middle East regional security complex, which became manifest in Turkey's assertive regional policies that after 2011 sided in particular with the rebelling Kurdish groups.

Statist frameworks maintain that structures are prevailing and matter more than the international features of the international components.<sup>68</sup> The emergent and co-adaptive characteristics of complex systems differentiate from such a structural nature. This complexity accompanies the need for bringing characteristics of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) into analytical focus when examining Turkey's internal components as a cause of the decline in the U.S. domination of U.S.-Turkey relations as well as in the Middle East region.<sup>69</sup> The coming to power of the AKP in Turkey in 2002 represented a bid to gain authority over the army, which occupied a dominant position in Turkey's bureaucracy.<sup>70</sup> The AKP began to implement diplomatic choices at variance with the previous traditional pattern that had been influenced and favored by Turkey's military.<sup>71</sup>

While the U.S. was preparing for war against Iraq, Turkey's military chiefs clearly held to a realistic position that, since the war was inevitable, and since Ankara was an ally, Turkey must cooperate with the Pentagon and negotiate U.S. military demands and maintain a firm military presence in northern Iraq. Nevertheless, starting from the early periods of AKP rule, public opinion began to play a crucial role in the nation's decisions and choices.<sup>72</sup> The prevailing strategy of standing by the U.S. was abandoned as a result of this changed characteristic among Turkey's internal components, which enabled Turkish public opinion to become more decisive in helping determine the foreign policy preferences of Turkey's governing AKP, therefore weakening the power of the army.<sup>73</sup>

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67 Park, "Regional Turmoil", p. 450.

68 Jervis, *System Effects*, p. 48-49.

69 Marcie J. Patton, "The Economic Policies of Turkey's AKP Government: Rabbits from a Hat?", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No 3, 2006, p. 513-36.

70 Ibid. p.513.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid. p.514.

73 Patton, "The Economic Policies", p. 514.

While statist approaches overlook the potential impact of internal characteristics of states on system, complexity thinking views system as a double-entry notion through which both the system and the attributions of its units exhibit an indispensable relationship.<sup>74</sup> Such an organization includes an interaction with the environment, through which it forms a closed system of organization in its integrity and autonomy (Turkey for example) as well as a system open to its environment (e.g. the Middle East region).<sup>75</sup> Kurdish nationalism is an actual threat that is becoming more intensified; which could accelerate secessionist movements in geographically closed neighboring countries, including Turkey and Iran, given their substantial Kurdish minorities.<sup>76</sup>

When a regional Kurdish administration in northern Iraq had become apparent in the course of the 2003 War, Kurdish groups there achieved an increased degree of self-rule. It became a widely-held perception among influential circles in Turkey that the U.S. no longer saw reason to consider Turkey's security concerns, given that it supported increased autonomy for Kurds instead. Ankara saw the extending of the influence of YPG, which is widely viewed as affiliated with the PKK, as a development that could lead to the strengthening of the Syrian Kurds' position in a way similar to the events that developed in Iraq following the U.S. wars there.<sup>77</sup>

Because Turkey is influenced by the U.S. support for the YPG, it was able, as a result, to establish closer cooperation (i.e., a regional security complex) with Iran, given that they share the same concerns about the Kurds.<sup>78</sup> Turkey and Iran differentiate in their positions regarding the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. While Tehran prefers destabilizing the region, Ankara's official position is to maintain political stability. Nevertheless, the two countries share interest in containing the rise of Kurdish nationalism and preventing the emergence of a quasi-Kurdish state in Iraq or Syria could accelerate secessionist movements in Kurdish areas of Turkey and Syria. These shared concerns have amounted to an important incentive for both countries to cooperate more closely with each other. By doing so, Turkey and Iran accommodated themselves to their environment.

The focus of complexity thinking on coincidental characteristics of the IR system helps in tracing the process through which the effects of the past can have consequences in the future.<sup>79</sup> Past actions of the U.S. following the end of the Cold War generated a transformation of the international system whose effects are felt today. Path dependency explains the way change is both transmitted and sequenced into the present. And, this transformation can be explained through the emergent and co-adaptive features of complex organizations: thus, throughout the non-linear feedback loops, the outcome of any interaction can feedback onto itself.<sup>80</sup> This loop factor is illustrated in the way the U.S. reacted against the 9/11 attacks – its heavy-handed approach towards Iraq that alienated many of its traditional allies, Turkey among them, which was an important reason for the eventual emergence of the Trump phenomenon.

74 Gunitsky, "Complexity and Theories of Change", p. 50.

75 Edgar Morin, "From the Concept of System to the Paradigm of Complexity", *Journal of Social and Evolutionary Systems*, Vol. 15, No 4, 1992, p. 377.

76 Yetkin, *Tezkere*.

77 Kahl, "Shadow Government".

78 Yetkin, *Tezkere*.

79 David Peak and Michael Frame, *Chaos under Control: The Art and Science of Complexity*, New York, W. H. Freeman and Company, 1984, p. 122.

80 Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, p. 4.

A lot of complexity results from the simple re-iteration of simple equations.<sup>81</sup> This generates highly complex configurations while the variations in original conditions always seem to occur within a specific range of possibilities. Given that changes happen within prescribed borders, it raises the question of whether complex systems can demonstrate deterministic behavior. It is possible that the deterministic equations used to model weather systems can leverage advances in the field of the complexity metaphor that might bring insight to the process of explaining the shifts in the international system. While it is not easy to predict the future course of U.S.-Turkey relations in exact terms, it is safe to say that the impact of changes to initial dynamics of complex systems in small variables will multiply as time passes.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

In the recent decade, the U.S. has pursued a strategy to support armed Kurdish groups to repel radical Islamic terror groups, particularly ISIS. Nevertheless, Turkey has become increasingly concerned about the strengthening of the Kurdish administration and its nationalist ambitions. These concerns are pushing Turkey into the arms of U.S. rivals in the region. Both Iran and Russia are expanding their authority in the region by establishing political and military support for radical regimes such as Assad's in Syria and political and militant movements like Hezbollah. These strategic policies are increasingly connecting Iran's and Russia's allies in an ever-strengthening regional security complex. Given these regional circumstances, Turkey finds itself flip-flopping between these rival regional security complexes.

The primary cause for current problems in U.S.-Turkey relations is not simply the recent actions of the two countries. The complex view of the IR system facilitates the understanding that the U.S.-Turkey relationship is shaped by the feedback loops generated under both regional and global circumstances. The complexity of the international system can trigger a dramatically different evolution of relations between U.S. and Turkey as a feedback (reaction) caused by the U.S. For example, the U.S. does not hesitate to use methods like arming the YPG, even if these methods hurt former allies such as Turkey. As a result, U.S.-Turkish relations continue to be vulnerable to the U.S. approach toward minority, rebel groups which have problematic bonds with Turkey.

The international roles that the U.S. and Turkey pursued for themselves in the post-9/11 era have had consequences for perceptions of historical friendship or hostilities – what the Regional Security Complex Theory ties to cooperative or non-cooperative behavior of states. There were hostility perceptions among Turkish military and Foreign Service chiefs in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union when the U.S. sought to maintain its global supremacy role. Given its resources, the U.S. cannot help but be superior to smaller, poorer states that do not have Washington's military capacity. The issue is the way in which the U.S. dominates – that is, its treatment of its allies, not considering their strategic security concerns, etc. Turkey was deeply concerned with events in northern Iraq following the 1991 Iraq war. These events amounted to challenge Turkey's priority of preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish administration in northern Iraq. The hostility perceptions in Turkey turned to be reciprocal between the U.S. and Turkey thanks to the feedback loops generated

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81 Ibid.

82 Gunitsky, "Complexity and Theories of Change", p. 44.

by the 9/11 attacks. The unilateral U.S. reaction to the 9/11 attacks during the Bush administration undermined the U.S.-led liberal international order and played no small role in the inauguration of Trump as a president who questions this order and views local U.S. allies as burdens on the U.S.

If we acknowledge that the complexity of the international relations system is at play here, the causal logic of the complexity approach leads us to expect that Turkey's internal characteristics can pressure systemic transformation – something other than the predictions generated by the regional security complex approach.<sup>83</sup> A U.S. that operates with a systemic moral conscience could assist Turkey in managing its affairs. Facing complexity invokes improving diplomacy and collaboration, adopting multilateral solutions and soft power and constructing some advanced strategic partnerships. If the U.S. chooses to nurture its relationships with allies such as Turkey, the erosion of the U.S. position of influence could be mitigated and the U.S. still could be the primary actor in maintaining stability in the Middle East.

The underlying message of this paper is that the U.S. and Turkey are rebuilding their alliance due to various factors. Both countries could form a revised alliance as an important constituent of the regional peace system. Neither of them desires the continuation of the Syrian chaotic status-quo and its accompanying insecurity nor do they desire Iran to dominate with a greater role in Syria or in the Middle East. Clearly, the security of the region is in a state of greater flux today than it has been in the past, yet tackling the present challenges in the Middle East depends on the effective involvement of regional U.S. partners.

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83 Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, p. 2.

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