A5 Journal of Defense Industry
www.a5dergi.com
Volume: 1 Issue: 1 Year: 2026
ISSN: 3108-8201

# From a Middle Power to a Technological Actor: Turkey's UAV/UCAV-Based Security Policy in the Balkans

Muratcan IŞILDAK[1]

*1. International Balkan University*

***Research Article***

*10.71350/a5journal.5*

**Received:** 27.12.2025
**Accepted:** 07.02.2026
**Published:** 05.03.2026

***Abstract***

*This study examines the strategic transformation of Turkey's security policy in the Balkans through the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) and armed uncrewed aerial vehicles (UCAVs). Arguing that Turkey's influence in the region cannot be explained solely by an increase in military capabilities, the article conceptualizes UAV/UCAV capacity as a multilayered security strategy integrated with NATO interoperability, deterrence production, defense diplomacy, and narratives of regional stability. Through case-based analysis of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, the study demonstrates that technology-based security instruments enable middle powers to generate disproportionate influence within alliance structures. Employing a neoclassical realist framework, the article explains Turkey's evolving security role in the Balkans by examining the interaction between systemic constraints and domestic defense-industrial capacity.*

***Keywords:*** *Turkey; Balkans; UAV/UCAV; Middle Power; NATO; Regional Security*

## Introduction

Uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) and armed uncrewed aerial vehicles (UCAVs) have driven a structural transformation over the past decade not only in military technologies but also in how states construct security policies, produce deterrence, and establish regional spheres of influence. For states with limited access to conventional power projection or those excluded from the ranks of global great powers, UAV/UCAV systems have emerged as a new force multiplier, offering cost efficiency, reduced political risk, and high strategic visibility. This underscores the broader strategic impact of UAV/UCAV systems beyond mere military power, a factor vital to understanding Turkey's regional role.

The Balkans provide a distinctive analytical framework for examining this transformation. Partially integrated into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture following the Cold War, the region has remained a fragile sub-system due to persistent ethnic tensions, uneven state capacities, and competition among external actors. The regional security complex approach highlights how threat perceptions and security dynamics in the Balkans are produced through geographic proximity and patterns of mutual interdependence (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 43–60). The gap between Europe's normative security discourse and the United States' strategy of selective engagement has further transformed the region into a strategic arena in which middle powers can exercise influence (Judt, 2005, pp. 615–640).

Within this context, Turkey has pursued a security strategy in the Balkans that prioritizes high-impact, low-visibility engagement through defense technologies rather than permanent military bases or direct force projection. As a NATO member, Turkey has reshaped regional security perceptions through technology-based capacity transfers while remaining within the alliance's normative and legal boundaries. This approach is consistent with classical alliance theory, which emphasizes that alliance behavior is shaped not only by the distribution of power but also by the direction and intensity of threat perceptions (Walt, 1987, pp. 17–26). Moreover, the United States' strategic reorientation toward systemic competition with China has expanded the maneuvering space for middle powers in peripheral security regions, such as the Balkans (Allison, 2017, pp. 21–44).

Theoretically, this study adopts a neoclassical realist framework. While structural realism remains insufficient for explaining why states turn to asymmetric technologies, neoclassical realism offers a more convincing account by analyzing the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic variables—particularly defense-industrial capacity, threat perceptions, and political leadership preferences. From this perspective, Turkey's UAV/UCAV capability is treated not merely as a military asset but as a strategic mechanism through which accumulated domestic capacity is translated into foreign policy behavior and regional security outcomes.

## 1. UAV/UCAV-Based Security Interaction in the Balkans

### 1.1 Albania: NATO Membership, Technology Transfer, and Asymmetric Security Capacity

Albania exemplifies Turkey's UAV/UCAV security policy in the Balkans by addressing structural gaps in air surveillance, border security, and maritime monitoring through technology transfer, illustrating regional influence.

The procurement of Bayraktar TB2 systems by Albania should therefore be understood not merely as a weapons acquisition, but as a multilayered security relationship encompassing training, maintenance and sustainment, intelligence generation, and operational integration in line with NATO standards. This process has transformed not only Albania's technical capabilities but also its decision-making structures and situational awareness capacities. UAV/UCAV systems thus function as a low-cost yet high-impact security multiplier for Albania.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, Turkey projects power in the Balkans not through permanent military deployments but through defense technologies endowed with high NATO legitimacy, enabling indirect yet effective influence. This strategy strengthens Turkey's position within intra-alliance power dynamics while allowing it to avoid confrontation with the United States and European allies. The model of technology-based binding emphasized in the defense diplomacy literature is clearly observable in the Albanian case (Bitzinger, 2015, pp. 123–125; Wivel & Crandall, 2019, pp. 142–145).

From the standpoint of strategic theory, such capacity transfers foreground the relationship between the use of force and political objectives, as well as the alignment between means and ends. Technology in this context is not merely a tactical instrument but an extension of the state's strategic choice (Clausewitz, 1976, pp. 75–89; Gray, 1999, pp. 17–29).

### 1.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina: Ethnic Fragility, Perceptual Deterrence, and the Balancing of the Security Architecture

Bosnia and Herzegovina represents one of the cases in which the symbolic and strategic dimensions of Turkey's security policy in the Balkans intersect most intensely. The post-Dayton political structure has produced an order characterized by weak central authority, institutionalized ethnic veto mechanisms, and a security environment largely sustained by external actors. Within this context, Turkey's UAV/UCAV capacity functions less as a tool of direct military use than as an instrument for generating perceptual deterrence.

Turkey's technological competence in the defense industrial domain renders its potential intervention capacity visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina without the need for actual deployment. This visibility creates indirect yet effective pressure on actors seeking to challenge the status quo, particularly during periods of heightened ethnic tension. Deterrence here is produced not through conventional force buildup but through a combination of capacity imagery, discourse, and technological visibility (Posen, 2014, pp. 45–47).

This effect intersects with mechanisms of soft power and perception management. In a context where security is produced not only through physical capabilities but also through the management of expectations and perceptions, Turkey also activates symbolic and social power channels (Nye, 2004, pp. 5–15; Van Ham, 2010, pp. 33–52). The Bosnian case thus illustrates that Turkey has assumed a balancing and stability-producing role in the Balkans rather than that of an interventionist military actor (Paris 2004, 163–168).

### 1.3 Kosovo: Sovereignty, State-Building, and the Politics of Recognition through Military Technology

Kosovo represents the case in which Turkey's UAV/UCAV-based security policy in the Balkans most directly intersects with questions of sovereignty, state-building, and international legitimacy. For a polity that has yet to complete its international recognition process, lacks United Nations membership, and faces uncertainty regarding NATO and European Union accession, security capacity constitutes not merely a military concern but a foundational pillar of statehood and political existence. Accordingly, security in Kosovo operates less as a conventional defense policy and more as a performative, visible expression of sovereignty.

Turkey's defense-industrial support and military cooperation with Kosovo thus play a strategic role not only in enhancing capacity but also in consolidating state institutions and reinforcing Kosovo's image as a "functional state" in the international arena. UAV/UCAV technologies have become symbolic indicators of modern statehood and sovereign capacity. The use of advanced technologies in border surveillance, airspace awareness, and security governance generates not only internal security benefits but also a political message directed outward—namely, that Kosovo is capable of managing its own security and operating in harmony with international security architectures.

The concept of "visible capacity" emphasized in the state-building literature is concretely manifested in Kosovo through defense technologies (Lake, 2009, pp. 225–227). Structuring security capacity in a manner that is both displayable and communicative functions as a critical lever in Kosovo's pursuit of international legitimacy. In this sense, UAV/UCAVs operate not merely as weapons systems but as material and symbolic representations of sovereignty.

From Turkey's perspective, Kosovo exemplifies how diplomatic and technological efforts reinforce stability, fostering trust in Turkey's regional influence and commitment to the international order.

Turkey's military presence in Kosovo and the role of the Turkish Armed Forces are important complementary elements of this strategy. Turkey has maintained an active presence within KFOR for many years, and this presence is widely perceived as a stabilizing factor within Kosovo's security architecture. To deepen understanding, specify how UAV/UCAV-based defense cooperation enhances NATO's collective security and Turkey's strategic role within the alliance, thereby addressing concerns about alliance cohesion and technological influence.

Viewed through a neoclassical realist lens, the Kosovo case vividly illustrates the delicate balance Turkey has established between systemic constraints and domestic motivations. Rather than pursuing direct military dominance in the Balkans, Turkey projects power indirectly through defense technologies and military training cooperation. This strategy neither violates the normative boundaries of the international system nor limits Turkey's regional maneuverability. In Kosovo, the use of UAV/UCAVs—or the construction of capacity in this direction—is oriented not toward conflict generation but toward filling security gaps and consolidating state capacity.

The Kosovo case also underscores the importance of security communication and institutional representation. In a context where security is produced not only through military instruments but also through communicative and symbolic channels, the reinforcement of defense technologies with cultural proximity and political narratives strengthens the state-building process (Straubhaar, 1991, pp. 39–44; Mosco, 2009, pp. 137–155). In this respect, Turkey's policy toward Kosovo—shaped by the convergence of military capacity, diplomatic support, and historical ties—positions Ankara as a multilayered provider of security and diplomacy in the Balkans.

### 1.4 Comparative Assessment: The Construction of a Technology-Based Regional Security Architecture

When the cases of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo are examined together, it becomes evident that Turkey's UAV/UCAV-based security policy in the Balkans does not rest on a uniform, mechanical, or doctrinal strategy. On the contrary, Turkey has adopted a differentiated, context-sensitive security approach that takes into account each country's political regime, security vulnerabilities, international status, and alliance relationships. This approach distinguishes Turkey's role in the Balkans from classical models of power projection based on establishing military dominance, demonstrating instead the development of a flexible, cost-effective, and politically legitimate model of security production through defense technologies.

The Albanian case represents the most institutionalized and least contested implementation of Turkey's NATO-compatible capacity-building strategy. Defense-industrial cooperation with Albania, a NATO member state, does not challenge intra-alliance balances but instead aligns with NATO standards and contributes to collective security. In this context, UAV/UCAV systems function not as instruments of hard power projection but as tools of alliance-based security production for Turkey (Bitzinger, 2015, pp. 142–144; Wivel & Crandall, 2019, pp. 120–122).

The Bosnia and Herzegovina case, by contrast, illustrates how Turkey deploys its UAV/UCAV capacity beyond direct military use to generate perceptual deterrence and security narratives. Institutional weakness, ethnic fragmentation, and limited central authority have left Bosnia and Herzegovina in a condition of chronic security uncertainty. Within this context, the capacity image generated by Turkey's defense technologies produces a balancing effect independent of actual military deployment. This case demonstrates a conception of security that extends beyond material capability to include the management of perceptions and expectations, pointing toward a security understanding that transcends classical realism (Paris 2004, 205–208; Posen, 2014, pp. 45–47).

The Kosovo case represents the arena in which Turkey's UAV/UCAV-based security policy most directly intersects with processes of sovereignty, state-building, and international legitimacy. To enhance policy relevance, explicitly discuss how UAV/UCAV technologies influence Turkey's diplomatic standing and normative influence in Kosovo and the broader Balkans, addressing potential concerns about sovereignty and legitimacy in regional security cooperation.

Taken together, these three cases demonstrate that Turkey's security role in the Balkans is neither temporary nor merely symbolic. Instead, Turkey is undergoing a long-term, multilayered, and strategic transformation through defense technologies. UAVs and UCAVs are not only military instruments within this transformation but also diplomatic, discursive, and normative tools. Instead of establishing permanent military bases or engaging in overt power displays, Turkey generates influence in the Balkans through technology-based security cooperation. This trajectory indicates that Turkey is moving beyond a conventional middle power identity toward the role of a "niche security provider" in specific regional contexts.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, this strategy reflects a rational balance established between systemic constraints, alliance commitments, and domestic political dynamics. Turkey neither behaves as a revisionist power nor as a passive regional actor in the Balkans. To better connect with readers, elaborate on how UAV/UCAV deployments affect Turkey's strategic autonomy and its influence within NATO's intra-alliance power dynamics, highlighting the implications for alliance cohesion and Turkey's evolving role.

### 2.2 NATO's Hierarchical Structure and Asymmetric Power Domains

NATO is formally presented in its founding documents as an alliance of sovereign and equal members united around the principle of collective defense. However, this normative framework often obscures the sharp power hierarchy that characterizes the alliance's actual functioning. In practice, NATO exhibits a highly asymmetric structure in terms of capacity, decision-making authority, and strategic direction, with the United States at its core.

The United States maintains an uncontested leadership role within NATO based on its overall military expenditures, nuclear deterrence capabilities, global force projection, satellite and intelligence infrastructure, and command-and-control systems. NATO's deterrence architecture remains heavily dependent on U.S. military and technological capacity, rendering the alliance formally multilateral but functionally centralized.

European allies occupy a paradoxical position within this hierarchical structure. Despite their economic strength and diplomatic influence, countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom face significant limitations in terms of military will, strategic autonomy, and operational continuity. The war in Ukraine has further exposed these structural deficiencies, reaffirming Europe's continued reliance on U.S. security guarantees.

Within this power architecture, the maneuvering space available to middle powers is not in direct competition with larger actors but in producing capacity in overlooked domains. Turkey's UAV/UCAV-based security strategy exemplifies this, emphasizing its strategic importance within NATO.

UAV/UCAV systems provide Turkey with three primary advantages. First, they generate a high deterrence–low political cost balance. Second, they complement NATO's need for continuous surveillance, early warning, and flexible response capabilities in peripheral security regions. Third, they enable Turkey to produce alliance-based binding through defense-industrial interdependence. Accordingly, Turkey's power within NATO should be understood not in terms of absolute military strength, but through the concept of functional centrality (Wivel & Crandall, 2019, pp. 1–18).

### 2.3 Power Asymmetry in the U.S.–Turkey–EU Triangle

While the United States continues to maintain NATO's military and strategic leadership, it has increasingly moved away from the Cold War-era model of a directly managing hegemon. As systemic competition with China has become central, Washington has redirected its military and political resources toward the Indo-Pacific. This shift has, in turn, encouraged a strategic orientation that promotes allies' capacity production in low- and medium-intensity security crises surrounding Europe (Lake, 2009, pp. 54–57).

From the U.S. perspective, Turkey's UAV/UCAV capacity represents a form of low-cost stability production on NATO's southern and eastern flanks. For this reason, despite political frictions with Ankara, Washington has avoided entirely excluding Turkey from a regional security role. The emerging pattern is better characterized not as a rupture but as functional cooperation under conditions of managed tension.

The European Union, by contrast, has long constructed its security identity around the discourse of normative power (Manners, 2002, pp. 235–258). However, in the absence of supporting military capability and operational autonomy, this discourse has produced a structural vulnerability. Technologies such as UAVs and UCAVs provide the speed, flexibility, and operational continuity that the EU largely lacks. Consequently, despite political tensions in EU–Turkey relations, an implicit dependency has emerged in the security domain.

The value generated by UAVs/UCAVs extends beyond firepower, creating data dependence within the ISR cycle. This highlights how technology is central to NATO's future, fostering innovation and resilience.

### 2.4 Redefining Middle Power Theory in the NATO Context

The Turkish case necessitates reconsidering middle power theory in the NATO context. Whereas the classical literature depicts middle powers primarily as normative mediators, Turkey has emerged within NATO as an actor that produces technology, provides security, and generates perceptual deterrence. This demonstrates that a middle power can function not as a passive balancing element but as an active capacity node.

Within NATO, Turkey is positioned through four core functions: a technology producer, a security provider, a generator of perceptual deterrence, and a builder of state capacity. Clarifying how these roles redefine middle power functions is essential because it highlights a shift from normative to operational–technological influence, which is central to understanding Turkey's unique position within NATO.

## 3. Theoretical and Normative Implications: Reconceptualizing Middle Power Status in the NATO Context

This study argues that the existing conceptual and normative boundaries of middle power theory have become increasingly inadequate in the NATO context. In classical international relations scholarship, middle powers have been defined as actors positioned between great powers and small states—militarily limited, yet effective through diplomatic activism, normative agenda-setting, and commitment to multilateral institutions (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993, 19–23). While this framework has helped explain the behavior of actors such as Canada, Australia, and the Nordic countries in the post–Cold War era, it has progressively lost explanatory power within alliance structures like NATO, where military and technological capabilities are decisive.

In the NATO context, power is distributed not primarily through normative contributions or diplomatic activism but through operational contributions, technological production, and deterrence capacity. Accordingly, treating the middle power solely as a normative category is insufficient to explain intra-alliance power relations. Turkey's role within NATO clearly reveals the limits of this normative paradigm. Across a broad geography extending from the Balkans to the Black Sea, Turkey produces security through technology in areas where the alliance seeks to avoid direct military engagement. This makes it necessary to reconceptualize the middle power not only as a normative actor but as a functional one.

One of the principal theoretical contributions of this study is to redefine middle power status in terms of technology-based and asymmetric capacity. Clarifying how niche technological advantages, such as UAVs and UCAVs, influence the distribution of power within NATO is important because it demonstrates the broader applicability of the reconceptualization beyond Turkey, potentially affecting alliance stability and cohesion.

The Turkish case also yields broader normative implications regarding NATO's future. This trajectory signals neither NATO's dissolution nor Turkey's departure from the alliance. Instead, it indicates that NATO is evolving toward a more flexible, polycentric, and technology-oriented security architecture. While U.S. global leadership persists, Washington increasingly pursues a burden-shifting strategy, encouraging allies to produce capacity, especially in low- and medium-intensity crises (Lake, 2009, pp. 54–57).

In this context, technology-producing middle powers such as Turkey assume a central role within NATO's emerging security architecture. Turkey's role is increasingly defined not by the alliance's normative discourse but by the concrete security outcomes it produces. This demonstrates that power relations within NATO are not only hierarchical but also functional. However, this transformation raises important normative questions. Technology-based middle powers carry not only the capacity to produce security but also normative responsibility concerning how, where, and for what political purposes such capacity is employed. The diffusion of UAV/UCAV technologies entails risks of securitization and militarization as much as it enhances deterrence (Posen, 2014, pp. 47–49). For this reason, the model of a technology-based middle power should encompass accountability, intra-alliance coordination, and the preservation of normative constraints alongside the production of capability.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates clearly that Turkey is no longer a "middle power" in the classical sense within the NATO context. It is neither an actor confined to normative mediation nor one that operates passively within boundaries drawn by great powers. Instead, through the capabilities it has developed—particularly in UAV/UCAV technologies—Turkey has assumed a functional, operational, and transformative role within NATO's security architecture. The Balkan cases illustrate this transformation concretely, emphasizing Turkey's strategic importance to NATO's evolving security landscape.

In Albania, NATO-compatible capacity building; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, perceptual deterrence and balancing; and in Kosovo, direct contributions to state capacity and sovereignty consolidation collectively reveal that Turkey does not employ defense technologies as a uniform tool of power projection. Instead, it uses them as a context-sensitive security instrument. This confirms that Turkey's role in the Balkans is neither temporary nor merely symbolic, but rather indicative of a long-term, strategic transformation that reassures NATO partners of its enduring influence.

At the theoretical level, these findings point to a new category in the middle power literature: the technology-based, asymmetric, and context-sensitive middle power. Within this framework, Turkey neither challenges U.S. global leadership nor undermines NATO's cohesion. On the contrary, it emerges as an innovative actor that fills capability gaps, materializes burden sharing, and contributes tangibly to NATO's increasingly flexible security understanding, inspiring confidence in its ongoing role.

Accordingly, the study's central message is clear: Turkey's power within NATO derives not from absolute military strength but from technology, operational flexibility, and the capacity to generate contextual influence. This not only necessitates revisiting middle power theory but also indicates that NATO's future is evolving toward a polycentric and technology-oriented structure rather than a single-center architecture. In this emerging order, Turkey is not a peripheral ally; it is an actor that effectively shapes the rules of the game in specific domains.

**REFERENCES**

1. Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
2. Bitzinger, R. A. (2015). *Arms Production in the Global South: Problems and Prospects.* London: Routledge.
3. Buzan, Barry, and Ole Wæver. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Clausewitz, Carl von. 1976. *On War.* Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
5. Cooper, A. F. (1997). *Middle Powers in the International System.* London: Routledge.
6. Cooper, A. F., Richard A. Higgott, & Kim Richard Nossal. (1993). *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order.* Vancouver: UBC Press.
7. Gray, C. S. (1999). *Modern Strategy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

8. Judt, T. (2005). *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945.* New York: Penguin Press.
9. Lake, D. A. (2009). *Hierarchy in International Relations.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
10. Manners, I. (2002). "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40 (2): 235–258.
11. Mosco, V. (2009). *The Political Economy of Communication.* 2nd ed. London: Sage.
12. Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.* New York: PublicAffairs.
13. Nye, J. S. (2011). *The Future of Power.* New York: PublicAffairs.
14. Paris, Roland. (2004). *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
15. Posen, B. R. (2014). *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
16. Straubhaar, J. D. (1991). "Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8 (1): 39–59.
17. Van Ham, Peter. 2010. *Social Power in International Politics.* London: Routledge.
18. Walt, S. M. (1987). *The Origins of Alliances.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
19. Wivel, A., & Marie Crandall. (2019). "Punching Above Its Weight? Denmark and Middle Power Diplomacy." *International Journal* 74 (3): 1–18.
20. Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.* New York: PublicAffairs.