

The Turkish blue homeland doctrine: Conceptual principles and key directions

Abstract

This article examines the Turkish “Blue Homeland” (Mavi Vatan) doctrine as a maritime-security concept that informs Turkey’s behavior in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean. The argument conceptualizes Blue Homeland as a sector-specific framework rooted in strategic naval thinking, contested maritime jurisdiction, and energy geopolitics. The study traces the emergence of doctrine in Turkish naval circles in the mid-2000s, its subsequent political expansion in the late 2010s, and its practical translation into policy instruments: naval presence, exploration protection, delimitation diplomacy, and defense-industrial support for sustained maritime capability. Using qualitative analysis of the literature and policy discourse, the article argues that Blue Homeland functions as a securitized maritime framework that enhances domestic audience costs, narrows compromise space, and increases the likelihood of technical jurisdictional disputes evolving into political crises. At the same time, the doctrine does not inherently exclude negotiation or cooperation; its regional impact depends on escalation management, legal and diplomatic credibility, and interplays of domestic politics and alliance constraints.

Keywords

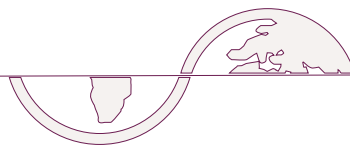
Turkey, Blue Homeland, Mavi Vatan, maritime security, Eastern Mediterranean, Black Sea, Aegean Sea, energy geopolitics, strategic autonomy

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia analizę tureckiej doktryny „Błękitnej Ojczyzny” (Mavi Vatan) jako koncepcję bezpieczeństwa morskiego, kształtującą działania Turcji na Morzu Czarnym, Egejskim i wschodniej części Morza Śródziemnego. Artykuł ujmuje Błękitną Ojczyznę jako strukturę sektorową, wywodzącą się ze strategicznej myśli morskiej, sporów o jurysdykcję morską i geopolityki energetycznej. Kreśli też genezę doktryny, która wyłoniła się w kręgach tureckiej marynarki w połowie pierwszej dekady XXI wieku, jej późniejszą popularyzację polityczną pod koniec drugiej dekady XXI wieku oraz jej praktyczne przełożenie na instrumenty polityczne: obecność morską, ochronę eksploracyjną, dyplomację delimitacyjną oraz wspieranie przemysłu obronnego na rzecz trwałości potencjału morskiego. W oparciu o jakościową analizę literatury naukowej i dyskursu politycznego artykuł dowodzi, że Błękitna Ojczyzna funkcjonuje jako skrajnie upolityczniony model operacji morskich, którego reperkusje obejmują utratę społecznego kredytu zaufania, zawężenie przestrzeni kompromisów i podwyższone prawdopodobieństwo przemiany technicznych sporów jurysdykcyjnych w kryzysy polityczne. Jednocześnie doktryna ta nie wyklucza negocjacji ani współpracy. Jej regionalny wpływ zależy od zarządzania eskalacją, wiarygodności prawno-dyplomatycznej oraz interakcji między polityką wewnętrzną a ograniczeniami sojusznicy.

Słowa kluczowe

Turcja, Błękitna Ojczyzna, Mavi Vatan, bezpieczeństwo morskie, wschodnia część Morza Śródziemnego, Morze Czarne, Morze Egejskie, geopolityka energetyczna, autonomia strategiczna



Introduction

Maritime spaces have become a central arena of international politics. Competition over offshore resources, strategic sea lanes, and maritime jurisdiction has intensified worldwide, but it is particularly acute where legal disputes overlap with alliance politics and great-power rivalry. The Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea exemplify this pattern as unresolved delimitation questions intersect with energy initiatives, fragmented regional institutions, and persistent security dilemmas. The geography of Turkey, which borders multiple seas and controls the Turkish Straits, makes maritime security integral to its national security strategy and a salient component of its foreign policy.

In this context, a doctrine referred to as “Blue Homeland” (Mavi Vatan) emerged as one of the most contested concepts in contemporary Turkish strategic discourse. Popular media and some policy commentary often use Blue Homeland as shorthand for Turkey’s assertive international behavior in general. However, this broad framing runs the risk of analytical overstretch because it blurs the distinction between a maritime-security doctrine and Turkey’s broader foreign policy goals (regional balancing, active diplomacy, alliance management, and economic statecraft). In line with reviewers’ core criticism, this article deliberately narrows the analytical scope and treats Blue Homeland as a maritime-security doctrine with its own mechanisms and policy effects.

The main research question is: How has the Blue Homeland doctrine impacted Turkey’s maritime-security instruments and crisis behavior in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean? A related question concerns implications: How does the doctrine affect regional stability and Turkey’s relations with neighbor states and institutions?

The methodology and analytical approach. The article uses qualitative analysis of the literature and policy discourse. Because Blue Homeland operates partly as a strategic narrative, discourse itself is not mere rhetoric; rather, it can convey threat perception and legitimize instruments that would otherwise be politically costly. Accordingly, the analysis follows the doctrine–instrument–outcome logic:

1. Doctrine definition: identifying core claims (sovereignty, deterrence, energy security, and legal framing) from relevant writings and the use of the concept in strategic com-

munication (Gürdeniz, 2018; Yaycı, 2022).

2. Instrument identification: mapping policy tools consistent with those claims—naval presence and operations, exploration protection, delimitation diplomacy, and defense-industrial capability (Denizeau, 2021; Ülgen, 2021).

3. Outcome assessment: evaluating how these tools affect crisis behavior and regional security dynamics, in particular escalation risks and bargaining positions (Colibasanu, 2021; ECFR, 2020; Friends of Europe, 2022).

This article does not seek to evaluate Turkey’s maritime claims in legal terms; instead, it aims to analyze how the doctrine functions as a security framework and how it structures policy choices under uncertainty.

The literature review and definition of concepts. Scholarly debate on Blue Homeland comprises three main discussion foci: origins, legal-geopolitical implications, and regional security outcomes.

Origins: The naval doctrine vs. political “invention”.

One recurring misconception is that the doctrine was “introduced” by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2018. In contrast, specialist accounts trace Blue Homeland back to the Turkish naval strategic circles in the mid-2000s and link its early conceptual development to Admiral Cem Gürdeniz and later elaboration to individuals such as Admiral Cihat Yaycı (Gürdeniz, 2018; Yaycı, 2022). Political leadership is better understood as having disseminated and institutionalized the concept, rather than having devised it. This distinction matters because it explains why the doctrine retains its strong operational-military logic even when used in broad political messaging.

Legal debate: Delimitation principles and contested interpretations. Another line of debate concerns legal interpretation. Turkey’s arguments emphasize equity and proportionality in delimitation, particularly where small islands may generate maritime zones perceived as disproportionate to mainland coastlines (Aksu, 2020; Gizikis, 2021). Opposing positions, especially from Greece and Cyprus, tend to highlight island entitlements under the prevailing interpretations of maritime law. Thus the legal framing of Blue Homeland is a strategic tool: legal interpretation is used to justify both bargaining positions and operational attitude (Colibasanu, 2021; ECFR, 2020). Critics argue that the doctrine can normalize “lawfare” (i.e., the strategic use



of legal claims to shape geopolitical space) even when disputes remain unresolved (Syrigos, 2021; Wilks, 2020).

Regional security debate: Escalation vs. deterrence and deconfliction. The third debate trajectory concerns the stabilizing or destabilizing effects of Blue Homeland. Its supporters emphasize deterrence and protection of national interests, claiming that credible maritime capability prevents coercion and preserves bargaining leverage (Denizeau, 2021; Ülgen, 2021). For their part, critics argue that securitized framing increases crisis frequency, escalatory signaling, and friction with partners (especially in the EU context) (Friends of Europe, 2022; Wilks, 2020). Many policy analyses propose de-escalation pathways, such as technical talks, incident prevention mechanisms, and structured dialogue, while acknowledging that final-status issues are hard to resolve in the short term (ECFR, 2020; Friends of Europe, 2022).

Terminology. This article uses only the “Blue Homeland” coinage (Mavi Vatan) for the sake of clarity. The term “Blue Motherland,” which occasionally appears in translations, does not represent a distinct or formally recognized doctrine. Consistently adhering to one term prevents “terminology drift” and enhances analytical precision. In addition, the article considers Blue Homeland in terms of a securitized maritime framework so as to avoid treating the doctrine as a vague ideology. Securitization means that maritime issues are framed as existentially linked to national survival (sovereignty, resources, and strategic depth), which legitimizes extraordinary measures (persistent naval presence, protection of exploration assets, coercive signaling). Once securitized, compromise becomes politically costly with the doctrine generating audience costs at home and reputational stakes abroad. This dynamic helps explain why technical disputes can quickly morph into political crises (Colibasanu, 2021; Friends of Europe, 2022; Wilks, 2020).

Origins and Evolution: From Naval Thought to Political Dissemination

The literature reports that Mavi Vatan emerged in the mid-2000s as professional strategic naval thinking as a response to the perceived constraints on Turkey’s maritime jurisdiction and to the changing energy environment in the Eastern Mediterranean (Gürdeniz, 2018; Denizeau, 2021). The early advocates of the doctrine argued that maritime space should be treated as a

political, economic, and military extension of the homeland. The concept accorded priority to defending continental shelf rights, resisting the perceived “encirclement” by island-based delimitation claims, and securing freedom of action for Turkey’s Navy.

It took some time before the doctrine penetrated into politics. In the late 2010s, the concept was ever more frequently invoked in official narratives and gained visibility through large naval drills branded “Mavi Vatan,” which strengthened its public recognition and communicated resolve to external observers (Hürriyet Daily News, 2019). This stage was relevant in that the doctrine entered domestic political discourse and, which is often the case, expanded symbolically, becoming a sign of national strength. Nevertheless, its operational content has remained maritime, covering jurisdictional claims, naval presence, and resource protection.

Institutionally, Blue Homeland interacts with Turkey’s broader strategic autonomy discourse, which promotes building defense-industrial capacity, sustaining deployments, and cultivating options in diplomacy. However, analytically it remains a maritime-security doctrine, with its central instruments and effects concentrated in maritime theaters (Ülgen, 2021; Yapar, 2021).

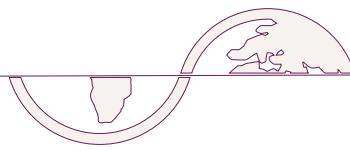
The Core Principles and Policy Instruments

Blue Homeland is founded on four core principles, each associated with distinct policy instruments.

Maritime sovereignty and jurisdictional claims. The assertion of Turkey’s maritime rights in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean is the bottom line of the doctrine. Blue Homeland emphasizes the continental shelf and potential exclusive economic zone (EEZ) claims and promotes delimitation based on equity and proportionality (Aksu 2020; Gizikis, 2021). The doctrine frames disputes as sovereignty issues rather than technical disagreements, thereby raising political stakes and affecting negotiation approach.

In this sense, one key implication is that delimitation is treated as a strategic contest where bargaining power matters. Even if legal outcomes are uncertain, the doctrine encourages Turkey to maintain a strong position through presence and legal-diplomatic assertion (Colibasanu, 2021; ECFR, 2020).

Naval power as deterrence, presence, and signaling. The use of naval power for deterrence and presence is another



cornerstone of the doctrine. Naval deployments, patrols, and drills serve multiple functions: protecting maritime interests, signaling resolve, and shaping crisis dynamics. Analysts highlight the increasing role of coercive diplomacy, in which controlled military pressure is used to support the negotiation of positions, while trying to avoid open conflict (Denizeau, 2021; IISS, 2020).

This pillar is reinforced by defense-industrial measures. Turkey's emphasis on domestic capacities (shipbuilding, sensors, unmanned systems, and missiles) underpins sustained maritime presence and is often framed as a basis for strategic autonomy (Ülgen, 2021). In the logic of Blue Homeland, naval capability is not only military power but also a tool for political messaging and bargaining.

Energy security and protection of offshore activity.

Energy security is a central driver. Offshore hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean and gas discoveries in the Black Sea increase the strategic importance of maritime jurisdiction. Blue Homeland links the protection of exploration and drilling activity to national security, making the safeguarding of vessels and infrastructure a state priority (Goldthau & Sitter, 2020; Colibasanu, 2021). Even when their commercial viability is contested, energy projects are a formative factor in alliances and regional coalitions, turning maritime disputes into broader geopolitical alignments (Friends of Europe, 2022; Wilks, 2020).

Legal-diplomatic initiatives and delimitation diplomacy.

The Blue Homeland doctrine also includes a legal-diplomatic component, which comprises technical mapping, formal claims, negotiation offers, and strategic agreements. The Turkey-Libya maritime delimitation memorandum is frequently cited as a landmark example of "delimitation diplomacy," which aims to alter the bargaining geometry of the Eastern Mediterranean and counter rival initiatives (Özkan, 2020; Colibasanu, 2021). The agreement demonstrates that Blue Homeland can be advanced through legal instruments and partnerships, not only through naval operations.

The Straits and the "gateway" function.

Turkey's role as a maritime gateway through the Turkish Straits is yet another, oft-underlined facet of Blue Homeland. While predated by the Montreux Convention, the doctrine reasserts the idea that maritime governance of chokepoints is inseparable from national security. If anything, the control and regulation of passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean become even more strategically critical under intensified great-power rivalry. This

bind Blue Homeland to broader security discussions on regional stability, freedom of navigation, and escalation management in the Black Sea (NATO, 2022).

Regional Implications and Case Illustrations

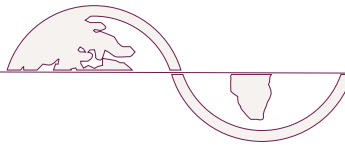
To show how doctrine translates into outcomes, this section outlines doctrine-driven dynamics in three maritime theaters.

Eastern Mediterranean: Crisis dynamics, alliances, and energy politics. In the Eastern Mediterranean, Blue Homeland has sharpened crisis dynamics. Often accompanied by naval escorts, survey and drilling activities have tested the crisis-management mechanisms between Turkey, Greece, and EU institutions. The doctrine influences the ways that Turkey frames disputes; specifically, they are approached as sovereignty questions tied to national dignity and economic security, rather than just as technical delimitation issues (Colibasanu, 2021; Wilks, 2020). This increases domestic audience costs and reduces political space for compromise.

At the same time, official narratives often emphasize dialogue and "equitable sharing." Yet the combination of securitized rhetoric, competing energy initiatives, and rival regional alignments makes cooperation difficult without confidence-building measures and structured deconfliction (ECFR, 2020; Friends of Europe, 2022). Policy proposals commonly include technical talks, arrangements for incident prevention, and clearer channels for maritime crisis communication even if final-status issues remain unresolved (ECFR, 2020).

The Aegean Sea: Persistent disputes and escalation control. The Aegean has long experienced disputes over maritime zones, airspace, and island-related questions. Blue Homeland re-energizes these disputes by emphasizing maritime jurisdiction and highlighting the perceived asymmetries caused by island-based claims (Gizikis, 2021). The deterrence logic intrinsic to the doctrine can be a stabilizing factor by preventing unilateral disadvantage, but it may also increase militarized signaling frequency and the risk of accidental escalation. As a result, escalation control becomes central, with a focus on sustaining presence while minimizing incident probability and preserving diplomatic off-ramps (Gizikis, 2021; ECFR, 2020).

The Black Sea: Balancing in wartime. The Black Sea is an essential dimension even if it receives less media attention than the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's role in the Straits regime and its balancing behavior after Russia's full-scale invasion



of Ukraine illustrate how maritime security intersects with alliance politics. Turkey cooperates with NATO on deterrence while also preserving channels with Russia and prioritizing its own maritime stability interests (NATO, 2022). This is consistent with the autonomy pursuit often associated with Blue Homeland, but again the concrete relevance of the doctrine is maritime, involving sea-lane security, infrastructure protection, and crisis management.

Black Sea energy projects make maritime security even more pivotal. Offshore infrastructure and production plans produce new security requirements, such as protection against sabotage, coercion, and hybrid threats. Even when framed domestically as economic achievements, these developments reinforce the logic of the doctrine, according to which maritime security and economic resilience are interwoven (Ünay, 2017; NATO, 2022).

Domestic Drivers: Nationalism, Legitimacy, and Policy Continuity

The persistence of Blue Homeland is partly explained by domestic politics. Maritime sovereignty narratives resonate with nationalist constituencies and may function as symbols of state strength and strategic independence. Once embedded in strategic communication, the doctrine generates audience costs since de-escalation can be construed as concession, while assertiveness is framed as defense of national rights (Friends of Europe, 2022; Wilks, 2020). Additionally, bureaucratic routines of training, procurement, and operational planning can institutionalize doctrine and sustain it beyond short-term political cycles (Ülgen, 2021; Yapar, 2021).

Institutions and partners: NATO, the EU, and deconfliction. Blue Homeland affects relations with institutions and partners by reframing maritime disputes as security issues rather than technical questions. In the EU context, securitized disputes contribute to diplomatic friction and can trigger sanction debates, even if implementation is uneven (Friends of Europe, 2022; Wilks, 2020). In NATO, the management of intra-alliance tension (especially with Greece) and maintaining deconfliction channels are main challenges. In this environment, the utility of technical mechanisms, such as hotlines, rules of behavior at sea, and incident prevention, increases because they reduce the probability of contested actions escalating into uncontrolled crises (ECFR, 2020; NATO, 2022).

Criticism, Constraints, and Analytical Boundaries

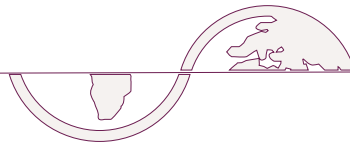
Blue Homeland invites three major criticisms.

Legal criticism. Critics argue that Turkish interpretations diverge from the prevailing readings of maritime law, particularly by restricting island entitlements or invoking historical narratives too broadly (Aksu 2020; Syrigos, 2021). Consequently, Turkey's doctrine-informed legal framing may harden positions and reduce the legitimacy of its claims in international settings.

Strategic criticism. Another criticism is that the doctrine exacerbates disputes, aggravates Turkey's friction with partners, particularly in the EU, and may reduce long-term diplomatic flexibility (Friends of Europe, 2022; ECFR, 2020). Where securitization is intense, technical disputes become politically charged, increasing crisis frequency and reducing compromise space.

Analytical criticism. A third criticism targets analysis as such and denounces treating Blue Homeland as a master key for Turkish foreign policy as a whole. This article responds by disciplining the scope. Blue Homeland is viewed as a doctrine of maritime security that influences instruments (naval presence, delimitation diplomacy, and exploration protection) and crisis framing. On its own, it does not explain Turkey's policy across all regions and issues. Besides, multiple capabilities and constraints matter as economic pressures, alliance dependencies, defense-industrial limits, and escalation risks determine how far doctrine can be operationalized (Denizeau, 2021; Ülgen, 2021).

Practical implications: Security externalities and the value of deconfliction. When maritime questions are securitized, routine technical disagreements can mutate into political crises. This produces "security externalities" for neighbors and partners, increasing the value of incident-prevention mechanisms and technical working groups that operate even when final-status disputes remain unresolved (ECFR, 2020; NATO, 2022). From a policy perspective, long-term stability is more likely when deterrence is paired with credible deconfliction and diplomatic off-ramps; otherwise, coercive signaling can become self-reinforcing.



Conclusion

Turkey's Blue Homeland doctrine is best understood as a securitized maritime framework that originated from naval strategic thinking and later gained political visibility and institutional support. Rather than being a comprehensive foreign policy doctrine, Blue Homeland functions as a sector-specific maritime-security concept that structures Turkey's perception of threats, interests, and available policy instruments in the surrounding seas. By combining maritime sovereignty, naval power, and energy security into a coherent strategic narrative, the doctrine transforms maritime issues from technical disputes into matters of national security and political legitimacy.

The analysis above shows that Blue Homeland channels Turkey's behavior primarily through concrete instruments: sustained naval presence, protection of exploration activities, delimitation diplomacy, and the development of defense-industrial capabilities that make long-term maritime projection possible. These instruments, in turn, impact crisis dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean by increasing audience costs and narrowing compromise space, while reinforcing the strategic importance of maritime security in the Black Sea amid intensified great-power rivalry. Importantly, the doctrine does not mechanically produce escalation; rather, it influences the ways in which escalation and de-escalation are framed, justified, and managed in Turkey's strategic discourse. The Blue Homeland doctrine should be neither reduced to aggressive posturing nor dismissed as mere rhetoric. Its effectiveness and consequences depend on how securitization interacts with legal-diplomatic credibility, alliance constraints, and domestic political incentives. While the doctrine provides deterrence and bargaining leverage, it also generates security externalities for regional actors, increasing the importance of deconfliction mechanisms, technical dialogue, and institutionalized channels of communication.

Looking ahead, the future impact of the Blue Homeland doctrine will largely depend on Turkey's ability to balance assertiveness with cooperative mechanisms, maintain escalation control, and integrate maritime ambitions into a broader framework of regional stability. For both scholarship and policy, the key analytical conclusion is that Blue Homeland should be treated neither as a totalizing explanation of Turkish foreign policy nor as a purely symbolic narrative, but as a doctrine of maritime security with identifiable instruments, clear strategic logic, and measurable implications for the regional order in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

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