

Ontological Insecurity and Emotional Governance in Turkish Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This paper examines how ontological insecurity and emotional governance shape Turkish foreign policy behavior under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Moving beyond rationalist assumptions, it argues that Türkiye's assertive and often reactive diplomacy reflects a struggle for a stable self-identity amid shifting regional hierarchies and perceived external threats. Emotional narratives—particularly pride, humiliation, and resentment—play a central role in legitimizing foreign policy decisions and framing Türkiye's relations with the West, the Middle East, and domestic audiences. Understanding this emotional-ontological nexus offers crucial insights into Türkiye's sometimes unpredictable foreign policy trajectory and the limits of strategic rationality.

No: 1, February 2026

DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.26453.49120](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.26453.49120)

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Introduction

Few countries embody the tension between identity and ambition as vividly as Türkiye. Once self-defined as a bridge between civilizations, it now oscillates between cooperation and confrontation, pride and resentment. Foreign policy speeches of its political elites are filled with moral appeals, historical references, and emotional language rarely seen in traditional diplomacy.

This paper argues that Türkiye's foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is, in part, shaped by the interplay of ontological insecurity and emotional governance. Ontological insecurity refers to the anxiety states experience when their self-identity is threatened or denied. Emotional governance captures how leaders mobilize collective emotions—such as pride, humiliation, and resentment—to stabilize identity and legitimize policy choices. Together, these dynamics explain how Türkiye transforms feelings of exclusion or betrayal into narratives of revival and moral superiority.

To avoid conceptual slippage, we do not use “*emotional governance*” to mean the straightforward emotional *instrumentalization* of collective emotions by elites. Rather, we treat it as the social organization and circulation of collective feelings through narratives, symbols, and institutional practices, within which leaders operate—rather than outside—pre-existing affective landscapes. In the Turkish case, ontological insecurity is the enabling condition: it generates recurring anxieties and recognition claims that make certain emotional repertoires (pride, humiliation, resentment) resonant and politically effective. Accordingly, we do not argue that Turkish foreign policy is “determined” by ontological insecurity; rather, we show how ontological insecurity and emotional governance mutually reinforce one another to produce policy legitimation and identity continuity.

Theoretical Framework

Ontological Insecurity in IR Theory

Ontological security refers to the sense of stability and continuity in an actor's self-defined identity, even in the face of uncertainty or change in its external environment. Originally developed in psychology and sociology to describe individuals' need for a coherent sense of self, the concept has been applied in International Relations to explain state behavior (Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006). Unlike traditional security, which emphasizes physical survival, ontological security focuses on the continuity of identity—how states perceive themselves and how they wish to be recognized by others. States seek routines, narratives, and stable social relationships that reinforce a consistent self-conception, as disruptions can generate existential anxiety and prevent agency.

States may act in ways that prioritize identity preservation over material advantage when deciding to maintain alliances, create national narratives, and establish routines that confirm

their identity (Mitzen 2006; Kinnvall 2004). Ontological insecurity arises when external shocks—such as rejection of their identity by key international players or regional instability—threaten a state’s self-conception, prompting reassurance-seeking or assertive identity reassertion.

Türkiye’s foreign policy provides a significant example of ontological insecurity. Ankara’s pursuit of Western integration—through NATO membership and decades-long EU accession efforts—was motivated not only by strategic interests but also by a desire to validate its self-identity as a modern and Western-oriented state. However, both long-term developments and sudden external shocks challenged this self-conception. Gradual processes, such as the EU’s growing reluctance to advance Türkiye’s accession, undermined expectations of Western recognition,^[1] while abrupt systemic shifts—including the end of the Cold War, the reorientation toward Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Balkans in the 1990s, the 9/11 attacks in the United States, and the Arab Spring—created new uncertainties regarding Türkiye’s regional role and identity. In response, Ankara has sought to maintain consistency in its self-narrative through assertive regional engagement and military interventions, positioning itself as a “regional security actor” in the Middle East and the Black Sea (Neset et al. 2021). These policies reflect a broader effort to reaffirm a coherent national identity rather than pursue purely material calculations.

Emotional Governance in Foreign Policy

In contemporary International Relations, emotions are no longer treated as irrational disturbances to decision-making but as productive forces that shape how political communities define threats, allies, and moral purpose (Crawford 2000). The concept of emotional governance refers to the deliberate use and management of collective feelings—such as pride, fear, and resentment—to sustain social cohesion and justify policy choices (Hunter 2015). Governments, through their leaders’ speeches, symbols, and rituals, regulate these emotions to align public sentiment with state objectives and decisions. By framing certain actors or events as humiliating, heroic, or threatening, decision-makers can mobilize affective energies that make policy directions appear both natural and necessary (Van Hulst and Yanow 2016).

This approach gained prominence after what scholars refer to as the “affective/emotional turn” in 2000 (Crawford 2000) in International Relations (Hall & Ross 2015; Bleiker & Hutchison 2008). The affective turn challenges the assumption that foreign policy is purely rational, emphasizing instead how emotions circulate within societies and institutions. In this case, emotions are seen not as private feelings but as collective practices—they are performed, communicated, and reinforced through narratives and circulated through media, education, and diplomacy (Graham 2014). When anxiety dominates, security agendas expand; when pride is evoked, assertive or revisionist policies gain legitimacy. Thus, emotional governance is not merely about rhetoric but about structuring how a nation feels and, consequently, how it acts (Hall 2015).

^[1] Here, recognition is understood not as a separate normative claim but as the relational dimension of ontological security. It refers to the desire of political actors to have their self-identity acknowledged, respected, and treated as legitimate by significant Others in the international system. The recognition of their self-defined identity transcends mere diplomatic acknowledgement. It reflects the recognition of the foundational ideology, existence and self-perception of the political actor by others. When such recognition is denied or perceived as conditional, it generates ontological anxiety, which in turn renders emotional narratives of pride, humiliation, and resentment politically salient.

In this sense, emotional governance closely overlaps with the notion of ontological insecurity. Importantly, this article does not treat emotional governance as the direct manipulation of public emotions by political leaders alone. Rather, it conceptualizes emotional governance as a relational and structural process in which leaders operate within pre-existing emotional landscapes shaped by ontological insecurity. While political elites may actively mobilize certain emotions, these efforts are effective precisely because they resonate with deeper anxieties, memories, and identity concerns already present within society. Emotional governance, therefore, refers not simply to the management of emotions by decision-makers, but to the mutual constitution of leadership practices and collective emotional dispositions under conditions of ontological insecurity.

States, like individuals, seek a stable sense of self in an uncertain world (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). Emotional management becomes a tool for preserving that self-image. Through narratives of victimhood or revival, governments can reassure their publics and the international actors that the nation remains coherent and purposeful despite external shocks or internal crises. Emotional governance, therefore, serves a dual function for decision-makers: it stabilizes identity and legitimizes action.

Türkiye's recent foreign policy provides a vivid example of this dynamic. AKP has repeatedly drawn upon pride, humiliation, and resentment to construct a coherent story of the national self—one that portrays Türkiye as a rising power whose quest for recognition has long been frustrated, but which under the AKP has been reframed through moral, civilizational, and emotional registers. By appealing to collective emotions rooted in historical imperial memory and moral superiority, Ankara has tried to frame its assertive diplomacy not as aggression but as restoration. Such affective management demonstrates how emotions are not peripheral to politics but integral to how states pursue ontological security in a volatile international environment.

The Turkish Case: Sources of Ontological Insecurity

Türkiye's identity dilemmas reflect deep-seated structural and conjunctural dynamics that trace back to its imperial legacy and its foundational project (Aydın 2005). The Ottoman-Islamic legacy and the trauma of the empire's collapse remain deeply embedded in Türkiye's foreign policy perceptions. Geography further complicates the tension. Bounded by Europe and Asia, and adjacent to volatile regions such as the Middle East, Türkiye finds itself pulled between Western alignment and regional autonomy. The Turkish Revolution, with its commitment to secularization, nationalism, development, and modernity, sought to sever ties with the Ottoman-Islamic past and anchor Türkiye firmly within the Western system (Bora 1997).

Accordingly, Türkiye joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952 and embarked on a path of Western-oriented foreign policy. This alignment, however, was shaped not only by identity aspirations but also by the structural constraints of the Cold War, including the perceived Soviet threat and the imperatives of bipolar security competition. However,

internal structural factors, such as military coups and recurrent interventions in democratic politics, economic transformations, and domestic identity debates, continuously reshaped this orientation (Kirişçi 2017). The disappointment following the Cyprus crisis in 1974 and changing US–Türkiye relations after the end of the Cold War further eroded the notion of unquestioned Western anchoring (Adamson 2001).

Thus, Türkiye’s foreign policy swings between, on the one hand, commitment to Western institutions and norms, and, on the other, a yearning for a distinctive and autonomous regional role and a self-image as a bridge between the West and the East. The incoherence is not merely strategic but ontological: Türkiye continually negotiates between being a modern Western democracy and simultaneously drawing on Ottoman–Islamic historical and cultural references. This tension is not framed here as an inherent incompatibility, but as a persistent representational and identity dilemma through which Turkish foreign policy narratives are articulated. Consequently, its ambivalence toward the EU, NATO, and regional engagements is less a failure of strategy than a manifestation of unresolved identity tensions—caught between Westernization and Ottoman–Islamic heritage, between Western dependence and its quest for independence, and between the projection of influence and the pursuit of independence.

After 2002, AKP sought not only to restructure Türkiye’s political institutions but also to redefine what it meant to be Turkish in the post-Cold War era. During the AKP era, the narrative of Türkiye’s trajectory has undergone changes that represent the shifts in policy and emotional meaning. When AKP first came to power in 2002, there was no articulated framework for ‘New Türkiye’ (*Yeni Türkiye*). The term emerged later as a framework for redefining national identity beyond the secular–Western paradigm of the early republican era. It was a discursive effort to distinguish the AKP era from earlier political periods associated with economic and political instability. The concept emerged as a reaction to mark AKP’s deliberate break with what it portrayed as the authoritarian, elite-dominated political order of the “old Türkiye.” It was framed as a response to the military’s political guardianship and to the political instability of the 1990s coalition governments. It also served to legitimize a new governing identity centered on social inclusion.

This narrative was neither fixed nor static. Over time, it evolved into more explicitly nationalist and civilizational formulations, and became associated with ideas of local and national (*yerli ve milli*) production and autonomy, especially in foreign policy and defense, to regain its agency and confidence by reducing foreign dependence. By 2022, the narrative shifted to a more comprehensive vision of ‘Century of Türkiye’ (*Türkiye Yüzyılı*), representing the greater role Türkiye views itself in the world stage. A narrative shift toward autonomy, with a future-oriented vision and a collective civilizational revival, is apparent in official speeches presenting this vision to the public (Anadolu Ajansı 2022). Contemporary political, military and technological achievements are situated within a long-term civilizational narrative with historical continuity. Thus, the present developments are not only a recovery or a reform but also the beginning of a new civilizational era, shifting Türkiye’s narrative from pragmatic governance to revival, which accounts for achievements through emotional and symbolic claims of Turkish national resurgence.

This paper focuses on the early phase of this discursive transformation, in which identity reconstruction was articulated primarily through ontological restoration rather than through overt civilizational confrontation. The party's 'New Türkiye' (*Yeni Türkiye*) discourse marked a deliberate effort to move beyond the secular-Western identity that had dominated the Republic's early decades. Instead, AKP constructed an alternative national narrative grounded in Ottoman-Islamic heritage, moral leadership, and cultural authenticity (Davutoğlu 2008). This discursive project was less about material change and more about ontological restoration—an attempt to provide continuity with its Ottoman past and self-confidence to a nation that had long oscillated between East and West, pride and resentment, belonging and exclusion.

The 'New Türkiye' vision emerged at a time when traditional sources of national identity were being challenged. The EU accession process initially offered a sense of belonging to the Western community, reinforcing Türkiye's liberal and democratic credentials. However, the EU's growing reluctance to admit Türkiye after 2005 created a symbolic rupture: the promise of inclusion turned into a narrative of humiliation and rejection (Müftüler-Baç 2005). AKP's discourse reframed this setback as evidence of Western hypocrisy and a call for self-reliance. "We are not a country that will be kept waiting at the door" (Şenyuva 2024) and "the EU as a Christian club" (Grigoriadis 2004) have become recurring motifs in political speeches, signaling a shift from the pursuit of external recognition toward the assertion of an autonomous identity.

The Arab uprisings in 2010 and the Syrian Civil War further amplified this process of identity reconstruction. The AKP government portrayed Türkiye as a moral and humanitarian actor standing against oppression—drawing parallels between its Ottoman past and contemporary regional leadership (Polat 2018). These references to history served both emotional and political purposes, offering domestic audiences a sense of pride and legitimizing military activism abroad. At the same time, the recurring theme of victimhood—that Türkiye had long been misunderstood, constrained, or betrayed by Western powers—became central to the national narrative (Morieson et al. 2024), helping to stabilize the government's self-presentation, while channeling societal frustration into a shared sense of destiny, for instance as exemplified by Erdoğan's discourse during Gezi Park protests:

"I wholeheartedly greet my Turkish brothers and sisters in Anatolia and Thrace, and all my friends and brothers and sisters around the world. Dear people of Istanbul, rest assured that no power other than Allah can prevent Türkiye's rise. I remember our martyred chief inspector and the two young people who lost their lives with mercy, and I offer my condolences to their families."^[2]

Through the 'New Türkiye' discourse, AKP thus transformed ontological insecurity into a governing resource. Managing such emotions created a coherent identity framework that justified its policies and reinforced internal unity. What began as a reaction to uncertainty, evolved into a lasting mode of emotional governance—one that continues to shape Türkiye's foreign and domestic politics today. This uncertainty stemmed primarily from Türkiye's

^[2] Translated to English by the authors. Original version: "Anadolu'daki, Trakya'daki Türk kardeşlerimi, yeryüzündeki tüm dost ve kardeşlerimi gönülden selamlıyorum. Sevgili İstanbullular, emin olun Türkiye'nin yükselişini Allah'tan başka hiçbir güç engelleyemez. Şehit başkomiserimizi, hayatını kaybeden 2 gencimizi rahmetle yad ediyor, yakınlarına başsağlığı diliyorum." (Anadolu Ajansı 2013).

perceived loss of recognition and strategic anchoring within the Western alliance, manifested in stalled EU accession, growing tensions with the United States, and a sense of diplomatic isolation following unilateral regional interventions.

Türkiye's ontological insecurity has been repeatedly intensified by external shocks—such as the end of the Cold War, the stagnation of the EU accession process, and the Arab uprisings—which exposed contradictions in its dual identity as a Western ally and a regional power. During the Cold War, dependence on NATO and the United States provided recognition and stability, allowing Ankara to align its self-image with the Western bloc (Aydın 2005). The EU's reluctance to admit Türkiye further undermined the Turkish vision of full Western belonging (Aydın 2005; Müftüler-Baç 2005), while the Arab uprisings and particularly the Syrian civil war deepened uncertainty by turning what was initially imagined as a “model democracy” into a context of instability, refugee flows, and strained ties with both Western and regional partners (Neset et al. 2021). Under the AKP rule, these developments have been reframed as both threats and opportunities—prompting a shift from a Western-dependent ally to a self-reliant, militarily assertive “middle power” (Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol 2023) yet without resolving the historical identity dilemma at the core of Turkish foreign policy.

Emotional Governance in Practice

Domestic Emotional Narratives

Since coming to power, the AKP has relied heavily on emotional narratives to secure its domestic legitimacy and to frame political challenges as existential battles. Three recurring emotional tropes—victimhood, pride, and revival—have served as the building blocks of Türkiye's contemporary political identity.

The victimhood narrative portrays Türkiye as a nation repeatedly targeted by hostile forces, both internal and external. Events such as the Gezi Park protests in 2013 or the July 15 coup attempt in 2016 were framed as conspiracies orchestrated by shadowy Western or domestic actors who sought to weaken the nation's sovereignty (Yılmaz et al. 2021). This framing generated a shared sense of siege and moral unity. By evoking fear and anger, it transformed political dissent into a moral test of loyalty to the homeland.

“Now I ask: Is the West supporting terrorism here or not? Is the West on the side of democracy, or on the side of coups and terrorism? Unfortunately, this West supports terrorism and stands with the coups. Their lives are not burning like ours, but ours are burning.” (*Anadolu Ajansı* 2016).^[3]

The pride narrative, in turn, emphasizes national resurgence. It celebrates infrastructural achievements, regional leadership, and humanitarian diplomacy as signs of a ‘strong and independent Türkiye.’ Massive projects, such as İstanbul's new airport or military operations in Syria, are presented not only as strategic successes but also as emotional victories that restore national confidence.

^[3] Translated by the authors from Turkish to English. The original text reads as: “Şimdi soruyorum; Batı, burada teröre destek veriyor mu vermiyor mu? Batı, demokrasinin yanında mı, darbelerin ve terörün yanında mı? Maalesef bu Batı, teröre destek veriyor ve darbelerin yanında yer alıyor. Bunların canı bizim gibi yanmıyor ama bizim canımız yanıyor.”

During the inauguration of the İstanbul Airport, President Erdoğan defined the airport as “İstanbul Airport is the pride of our country and a project that will be an example in the world” (İletişim Başkanlığı 2018).^[4] In this sentence, President Erdogan evokes collective national pride and a sense of achievement while framing it as a triumph on the international stage. Similarly, the Turkish government framed the Olive Branch Operation not just as a military action but as an emotional victory, reinforcing national pride and self-confidence with a symbolic historic linkage to the Çanakkale War (the War of Independence), moral success with the safe return of Syrians, and the language of victory and triumph over terror:

“In Operation Olive Branch, which we launched on January 20, 2018, we cleared Afrin of terrorists on the 103rd anniversary of a great victory, the Çanakkale Victory. Our Syrian brothers and sisters who were forced to leave their homes and lands have begun to return to their homes and lands in safety and peace.” (TBMM 2018)^[5]

The developments in the defense sector are also sources of national pride, confidence and emotionally charged victories in official discourses. President Erdoğan describes the Turkish defense industry as the “source of pride for our country, literally making history in every field” (İletişim Başkanlığı 2023a), in which its “products are making their mark on world markets”(İletişim Başkanlığı 2023b). He underscores that the development of the Turkish defense industry is “the march of a nation towards independence, the story of a country rising under its own sky, with its own wings.” (İletişim Başkanlığı 2023b).^[6] In another speech, he expressed his views as:

“We have not only written a success story but also achieved a great psychological revolution in the defense industry,” despite “sabotage and treason, Türkiye is celebrating its achievements with pride and the country’s defense sector now includes more than 2,000 companies, far exceeding the 56 firms in 2002.” (*Daily Sabah* 2023)

Expressions such as “making history”, “psychological revolution”, and “independence march” refer to defense developments as a symbolic reversal of past dependence, vulnerability, and external control, with emotions such as national honor, international recognition of its success and grandeur, elevating them to moments of emotional triumph. This affective appeal has been crucial in mobilizing supporters and reaffirming the idea of a Türkiye that has “stood up” after decades of subordination.

Finally, the revival narrative combines the previous two by situating Türkiye’s contemporary story within a broader narrative of civilizational revival. Accordingly, Erdoğan states that “The

^[4] Translated by the authors from Turkish to English. The original text reads as: “İstanbul Havalimanı ülkemizin yüzü akı, dünyada da örnek olacak bir projedir”

^[5] Translated by the authors from Turkish to English. The original text reads as: “20 Ocak 2018 tarihinde başlattığımız Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı’nda, Afrin’i büyük zaferin, Çanakkale Zaferi’nin 103’üncü yıl dönümünde teröristlerden temizledik. Evlerini, yurtlarını terk etmek zorunda kalan Suriyeli kardeşlerimiz, güven ve huzur içinde evlerine, yurtlarına dönmeye başladı.”

^[6] Translated by the authors from Turkish to English. The original text reads as: “bir milletin bağımsızlık yürüyüşüne de şahitlik ediyor, kendi gök kubbesinde, kendi kanatlarıyla yükselen bir ülkenin hikâyesini görüyoruz.”

Century of Türkiye is a vision and revival which embraces the dreams of not only our 85 million citizens but also of such a giant civilization” (İletişim Başkanlığı 2023c). Emphasizing Western values as “imposed and exposed,” Erdoğan stressed the connection between revival and reconnection to historic roots; “No power, no government, no structure that is not born out of the dynamics of our civilization and culture (...) can give us the revival we have been longing for two centuries” (Özoflu and Gerim 2025, 11). Erdoğan employs an interplay between civilizational discourse, legitimacy, and national identity and as Yeşiltaş argues (2014, 43); “the ‘New Türkiye’ discourse reproduced the civilizational identity part of Türkiye’s international order narrative by blending it with an anti-hegemonic ‘dissident’ discourse.”

The invocation of Ottoman-Islamic heritage offers both a moral compass and a sense of historical continuity. It provides emotional reassurance that Türkiye’s global ambitions are neither new nor reckless, but rather a return to its “natural role.” In this way, emotional governance converts insecurity into empowerment, transforming trauma into destiny.

Importantly, the emotional governance of foreign policy cannot be separated from domestic political calculations. Emotional narratives deployed in foreign policy—such as victimhood, pride, and revival—also function as instruments of internal mobilization, helping the governing elite consolidate public support and manage electoral competition. This condition is also true for Türkiye. By framing external challenges as existential threats or moral struggles, the AKP has translated foreign policy decisions into domestic rallying effects, reinforcing loyalty while marginalizing opposition voices. In this sense, emotional foreign policy discourse serves a dual audience: it communicates legitimacy and autonomy to external actors while simultaneously signaling leadership strength and moral authority to domestic constituencies. Especially in periods of electoral uncertainty or declining economic performance, such affective narratives help shift political debate away from material grievances or criticism toward more existential questions of national dignity, survival, and collective destiny.

Foreign Policy Episodes

These domestic emotions are mirrored in Türkiye’s external relations. In its relations with the European Union, the stalled accession process has been narrated through emotions of resentment and humiliation (Müftüler-Baç 2005). The EU’s reluctance to grant full membership has been framed as an affront to Türkiye’s dignity and a betrayal of shared values (Aydın-Düzgüt and Kaliber 2016). Such rhetoric helps the government stabilize ontological insecurity: by casting the EU as the ‘Untrustworthy Other,’ Türkiye’s self-image as a proud, autonomous nation is reaffirmed.

In the Middle East, emotional governance has taken a different tone—one of moral solidarity and nostalgic empathy. During the Arab uprisings and the Syrian civil war, Ankara positioned itself as the protector of the oppressed Muslim populations (Aktürk 2017). References to Ottoman history and Islamic unity functioned as affective bridges linking foreign policy activism with domestic identity narratives. This emotional repertoire legitimized risky interventions and presented Türkiye’s regional involvement as a moral duty rather than a matter of power politics:

“On December 8, Syria Freedom Day, I extend Türkiye’s warmest greetings and affection to our Syrian brothers and sisters. We acknowledge with appreciation and satisfaction the progress our Syrian brothers and sisters have made over the past year despite all kinds of difficulties, sabotage attempts, and provocations. We will continue to provide all necessary support for the preservation of Syria’s territorial integrity, the establishment of social peace among all segments of society, and its emergence as a center of peace and stability in the region.” (Anadolu Ajansı 2025).^[7]

Relations with the United States and NATO oscillate between dependence and defiance. Emotional tropes of betrayal—especially over U.S. support for Kurdish groups in Syria—fuel nationalist resentment and enable the government to portray strategic friction as proof of independence (Michnik and Plakoudas 2020). Periodic reconciliations, in turn, are framed as pragmatic steps of a confident state that negotiates as an equal (Phillips 2018). In both moods, emotional governance supplies coherence, ensuring that even contradictory actions—cooperation and confrontation—can coexist under a single narrative of “protecting national dignity.”

Across these arenas, emotional governance works as a stabilizing mechanism for ontological insecurity. By constructing a consistent “self versus other” storyline, it translates complex structural challenges into emotionally intelligible terms. Through fear, pride, and resentment, Türkiye continuously redefines who it is—and who it is not—turning affect into both the medium and message of its foreign policy.

Policy Implications

Viewing Turkish foreign policy through the combined lenses of ontological insecurity and emotional governance offers valuable insights for both Türkiye and its international partners, particularly the European Union and the United States. It suggests that Ankara’s frequent shifts between cooperation and confrontation with its historical partners, or between assertiveness and restraint in foreign policy behavior, are not random or purely instrumental but embedded in a deeper struggle for identity recognition. Emotional narratives—especially those rooted in pride, humiliation, and resentment—function as the emotional infrastructure of policy-making. They stabilize political legitimacy at home but also narrow the space for pragmatic recalibration abroad.

For international actors such as the European Union and the United States, this analysis calls for a shift in engagement strategy. Rather than perceiving Türkiye’s behavior solely through a cost-benefit or transactional lens, it becomes necessary to recognize the symbolic and emotional dimensions of Ankara’s foreign policy conduct. When Turkish decision-makers perceive gestures of disrespect or exclusion, rational incentives tend to lose their persuasive power.

^[7] Translated to Turkish by the authors. Original version: “8 Aralık Suriye Hürriyet Günü’nde kardeş Suriye halkına Türkiye’nin en kalbi selam ve muhabbetlerini iletiyorum. Suriyeli kardeşlerimizin son bir yılda her türlü zorluğa, sabotaj girişimine ve kışkırtmalara rağmen katettiği yolu takdirle ve memnuniyetle karşılıyoruz. Suriye’nin toprak bütünlüğünün korunması, içeride tüm kesimleriyle toplumsal barışı sağlaması, huzur ve istikrar merkezi olarak bölgesinde temayüz etmesi için gereken her türlü desteği vermeye devam edeceğiz.”

Constructive engagement, therefore, depends on recognizing identity concerns as legitimate political factors rather than mere sensitivities. Policies that communicate respect for Türkiye's agency and contributions to regional stability—without moralizing or conditional hierarchies—can help mitigate feelings of humiliation and restore trust. Dialogue premised on equality and acknowledgment of shared challenges will resonate far more effectively than one couched in technocratic terms of compliance and leverage.

At the same time, Türkiye's partners must appreciate that much of its foreign policy rhetoric is directed as much toward domestic audiences as toward foreign interlocutors. The management of collective emotions serves to reassure the national public that the state remains morally upright and sovereign. Understanding this dual function of foreign policy—both performative and practical—can prevent misreading of Ankara's actions as unpredictable or irrational. Engaging multiple layers of Turkish society, from think tanks and municipalities to cultural diplomacy networks, can further soften the emotional polarization that has come to define mutual perceptions.

For Türkiye itself, the challenge lies in transforming emotional governance from a reactive to a reflective mode. While the instrumental use of emotions has proven effective in consolidating legitimacy and social cohesion, it also entrenches ontological insecurity by perpetuating a sense of siege and exceptionalism. A more stable and predictable foreign policy requires reframing identity narratives around inclusion rather than opposition—defining Türkiye not by what it rejects but by the values and norms it aims to uphold. Strengthening democratic institutions, pluralism, and public trust would provide a firmer ontological foundation than external validation or moralized defiance. Only by internalizing its own sense of continuity can Türkiye reduce its dependence on external recognition and emotional confrontation.

Ultimately, emotional governance can either lock states into cycles of reactive policy or enable them to pursue more empathetic, identity-aware diplomacy. For Türkiye and its foreign interlocutors alike, acknowledging the emotional dimension of politics is not a sign of weakness but an entry point for restoring predictability and mutual understanding in an increasingly affect-laden international environment.

Conclusion

Türkiye's foreign policy under AKP illustrates how emotions and identity anxieties intertwine to produce both coherence and volatility. The framework of ontological insecurity and emotional governance reveals that Türkiye's assertiveness, oscillations, and moralized diplomacy stem less from strategic calculation than from an enduring search for recognition and self-continuity. Emotional narratives of pride, humiliation, and resentment have enabled the government to stabilize domestic legitimacy while projecting an image of moral authority abroad. Yet this same emotional architecture also constrains policy flexibility and deepens dependence on external validation. Recognizing that identity maintenance—not material gain—often drives Ankara's decisions allows for a more nuanced understanding of its behavior. Ultimately, Türkiye's

experience underscores a broader lesson for International Relations: Emotions are not noise in politics but the very grammar through which states negotiate who they are and how they act in an uncertain world.

Beyond a paper on Turkish foreign policy as a case study, this article contributes to broader debates in International Relations by demonstrating how ontological insecurity and emotional governance can be analyzed together as an analytical framework. Rather than treating emotions as episodic reactions or elite manipulations, the study shows how affective narratives become embedded in longer-term identity struggles and foreign policy routines. This perspective opens avenues for comparative research on other middle powers facing similar recognition deficits, shifting hierarchies, or post-imperial legacies. Future research could further explore how emotional governance operates across different regime types, institutional settings, and policy domains, as well as how competing emotional narratives coexist or fracture across societies. By foregrounding the emotional foundations of foreign policy, this article invites scholars to rethink not only why states act as they do, but how enduring identity anxieties shape the possibilities and limits of international order itself.

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