

Volume 2, Issue 1

Research Article

Date of Submission: 19 Feb, 2026

Date of Acceptance: 18 Mar, 2026

Date of Publication: 26 Mar, 2026

## Goeconomic Rivalry in Syria: Goeconomic Ambitions of Regional and Global Actors

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**Citation:** Alzanganee, S. A. M. (2026). Goeconomic Rivalry in Syria: Goeconomic Ambitions of Regional and Global Actors. *Int Rev Bus Trade Econ*, 2(1), 01-15.

### Abstract

In today's world, ideological competition has evolved into a rivalry focused on geoeconomics, driven by each superpower's desire to assert control over resource deposits and trade routes. Consequently, ideological conflicts have transformed into a contest for resource domination through the control of territories rich in those resources. The international geopolitical landscape is now manifesting as a modern form of geoeconomic rivalry, where economic power serves as a crucial tool. Goeconomic rivalry represents the manner in which states engage in competitive interactions by employing economic means to achieve geopolitical objectives. In light of the changes following the fall of the Assad regime, the regional balance of power has experienced a significant shift. By using the academic frameworks proposed by Clayton et al. (2023), Desai (2013, 2015), and Kurecic (2015), this analysis explores possible scenarios related to the geoeconomics and geopolitics of Syria in the post-Assad era. This study aims to investigate the geoeconomic dynamics of the actors involved in Syria [1-4]. It also seeks to evaluate how economic strategies, trade agreements, and foreign investments may be utilized by these actors to gain influence and control.

**Keywords:** Geoeconomics, Goeconomic Rivalry, Political Economy of Goeconomic Power

### Introduction

Because of its location which is at the heart of the Middle East, Syria is the center of boundless geoeconomic and geopolitical regional vested interests. As historically listed in the Silk Road countries, Syria borders five nations that are all of major importance for international trade over land and sea routes. Alongside its access to the Mediterranean Sea through a canal running from Chalus on the Orontes to the harbour of Seleucia\*, Syria is located in the center of geoeconomic interface of historic civilizations such as Fertile Crescent, Levantine Mediterranean, Egypt, and the Northern Empires. Such historical geopolitical status has implications for the intersection of regional economic concerns and the use of state resources to escalate regional geopolitical concerns. The state's natural resources such as water, oil, and gas are crucial to both regional powers' dynamics and economic stability.

The geoeconomic landscape of Syria is influenced by the natural resource reserves in the region. The power dynamics among non-state actors and regional interests are to be reshaped with geopolitical negotiations among rivalries and alliances. Moreover, control of water resources in the Euphrates River impacts the geopolitical negotiations among neighbouring countries. During the Assad rule, Russia and Iran, two countries with vested interests in Syria, were competing over control of these resources using both diplomatic and military tools. By employing factions seeking to gain political power and to fund their military actions via the control of energy resources, this fierce competition amplified domestic conflicts. Alongside Syria's reserves of natural resources, its geographic location as a crossroad of trade routes between Asia and Europe, all evoke the competing vested interests of global superpowers, regional actors, and local non-state actors.

\*Index Source: The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London, 1840, Vol. 10, General Index to the Contents of the First Ten Volumes of the London Geographical Journal (1840), pp [5]. 1-216 Published by: Wiley on behalf of The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1797624> As the nation is still wrestling with the repercussions of a devastating civil conflict, the geoeconomic landscape casts light upon the tools employed by regional and international actors to promote their strategic ulterior motives. Understanding the strategic dynamics of all involved actors is mandatory to predict and estimate the long-term implications on the nation's stability and regional governance.

To evaluate the future of geoeconomics in Syria, it is essential to consider the influence of both regional and global actors who strive to achieve their geoeconomic objectives within the country. Throughout the Syrian conflict, regional and global players, notably Türkiye, Iran, and Russia, employed a combination of military and economic strategies to further their geopolitical interests. Following the changes in circumstances after the downfall of the Assad regime, the balance of power in the region has shifted. By utilizing the academic frameworks outlined by Clayton et al. (2023), Desai (2013, 2015), and Kurecic (2015), this analysis examines potential scenarios involving the geoeconomics and geopolitics of post-Assad Syria [1-4].

The collapse of the Assad regime, along with the withdrawal of his supporters from Russia and Iran, resulted in a power vacuum in the area. As a rising key regional player with a significant advantage to assert its influence, Türkiye will serve as a counterbalance to the waning power of both Russia and Iran in post-Assad Syria. Throughout the years of the Syrian Civil War, Türkiye was the most prominent backer of the Syrian opposition groups. Over these thirteen years of conflict in Syria, the Syrian issue has been viewed as both a domestic matter affecting the formulation of internal policies and an international issue shaping Türkiye's global strategies and relationships [6,7]. The ongoing changes in Türkiye's foreign policy regarding Syria played a significant role in the eventual downfall of Assad's government [8]. Türkiye's backing of the Syrian opposition forces strengthened its role as the most significant regional player in the aftermath of the Assad regime. As a result, Türkiye gained substantial leverage mechanisms that provided essential channels of communication in post-Assad Syria. This position would be maintained by guiding the newly formed government in Syria to create a legitimate political system, incorporating enhanced levels of transparency and integrity, to help mitigate the negative impacts of Assad's rule. To maintain their influence in Syria, both Russia and Iran should engage with the new government in Syria through their ties with Türkiye, which is currently in a position of relative strength.

The abrupt ousting of Assad's regime has significantly changed the geopolitical environment. In the aftermath of Assad's departure, geoeconomic rivalry is no longer confined to the previous powers or leading nations, especially Türkiye, Russia, and Iran. This transformation in the geopolitical landscape has led to a reshaping of power relations and intensified geoeconomic competition. New dominant powers and key states have surfaced in the geopolitical context of Syria after Assad. The current geoeconomic contest includes Türkiye, the Gulf states, and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with China playing a relatively minor role.

This study attempts to examine the geoeconomic dynamics of the interested actors in Syria. It also intends to assess how economic policies, trade agreements, and foreign investment could be employed by interested actors to seek influence and control. Insights into the implications of these geoeconomic dynamics on local and regional stability are also provided. The following section is a summary of the theoretical framework used in the literature to define concepts of geoeconomics, geopolitics, and geoeconomic rivalry. Section three presents the conceptual framework used in this study to analyze the political economy of geoeconomic power. Section four summarizes the evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy shift towards Syria. Section five presents the analysis and discussion, and section six presents the conclusions.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of Geoeconomics was first introduced by Edward Luttwak (1990) [9]. Luttwak argued that the Cold War era was characterized by a transition from geopolitics to geoeconomics. The waning importance of military power was replaced by the significant role of economic power at the regional and international levels. Luttwak's conception of geoeconomics is fundamental to explaining the transformation of traditional geopolitics to an economic-driven framework of international relations. Luttwak recognized the declining dominance of military power in the aftermath of the Cold War. Nations were increasingly using economic instruments in pursuit of their strategic objectives. What Luttwak termed the "logic of conflict" was being addressed through the "grammar of commerce" rather than the rule of military power. The new arena of competition among states was no longer only territorial but economic warfare. He viewed geoeconomics as a form of conflict rather than a simple economic activity. In their exertion of economic power at the global level, states use economic instruments to advance relative advantages. Geoeconomic policies and practices may include policies of trade manipulation, state-sponsored industrial policies, technological competition, and strategic investments. Such instruments could be used by states to promote their domestic gains that are prioritized over global economic efficiency. In the global sphere of business, states are using a mix of political and economic tools to further their competitive advantages. Thus, the utilization of economic instruments became an integral part of the post-Cold War statecraft [9].

Besides two more emerging factors, the term has been revived recently due to the fierce rise of China as a global pole of economic power employing economic instruments to extend global power [10]. The first factor is the global resurrection of state capitalism in the form of humongous state-owned enterprises. Such forms of enterprises solidify the increasingly evolving economic resources available at the state's disposal. The second, that became the post-globalization era's theme, is the integration of global financial markets and global trade. These two factors made the geoeconomic instruments stronger and more pervasive.

The term geoeconomics is explained as the use of economic instruments to promote geopolitical objectives. On another extreme, in which means and ends are reversed, it is explained as the extortion of economic outcomes by extending the

geopolitical power in terms of competitive advantages. Thus, it could be explained by the interaction among strategies, geopolitics, and international economics [10].

Geopolitics addresses the influence of a state's geographical elements on its politics and international relations. Geographical factors like a country's geographical location, topography, climate, and reserves of natural resources affect its security, economic potential, and political power. Geopolitics explains the interaction between these geographical elements on one hand, and politics and international relations on the other hand. A nation's foreign policy, its relationship with other countries, and the role it plays in the international arena are all shaped by these geographical elements. Geopolitics also explains the mechanisms and dynamics of the fierce competition among states over global resources, as well as, territorial gains of strategic locations.

In his conception of geopolitics, Kovac (2023) acknowledges the complexities that characterize the analysis of geopolitical elements [11]. He urged for careful comprehension of the diverse elements encompassed in the conceptual analysis of the term per se. He emphasizes the interplay between the impact of geographical elements and strategic, political, and economic considerations on a nation's status in the international arena. The critical influence of economic factors, like the monetary systems and their governance, are also to be incorporated for a better understanding of the dynamics of geopolitical advances [11].

Geopolitical competition in the international arena is taking a modern form of geoeconomic rivalry where economic capacity is the pivotal instrument. Geoeconomic rivalry is the form that competitive interactions among states take when economic instruments are utilized to pursue geopolitical goals [12]. It is the use of economic tools to advance strategic gains that are endorsed by the overlap between economic activities and geopolitical strategies. Leveraging economic strength and economic vulnerabilities are used by nations instead of the use of military power. Rather than using military weapons, strategic weapons, including control over technology and critical resources, embargos and sanctions, and control over investment flows, are among the means used in global rivalry [13]. To promote a nation's security, power, and influence in the global sphere, policies for establishing strategic treaties and weakening competing adversaries could be undertaken. Moreover, securing further access to pivotal resources may tilt the balance of power in favor of one nation on account of another.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The following conceptual framework presents the roadmap for conducting the analysis. For analyzing the prospects of geoeconomics in Syria, the role played by the regional and global actors in pursuit of their geoeconomics objectives in Syria will justify the means used through the process. During the Syrian conflict, regional and global actors, particularly Türkiye, Iran, and Russia, each used a mix of military and economic tools to advance geopolitical gains. With the change in the contextual circumstances after the toppling of the Assad regime, the equilibrium of power in the region has changed. Using the following academic approaches presented by Clayton et al. (2023), Desai (2013, 2015), and Kurecic (2015) for analyzing the political economy of geoeconomics power, prospects of possible scenarios of geoeconomics and geopolitics of post-Assad Syria are described [1-4].

The key element for any state to be influential, whether on the global or the regional level, is its political and economic strength. For a country to be recognized as a global or a regional actor, it has to possess political and economic power that dominates the power possessed by other countries. Global actors use their source of strength, particularly economic and financial strength, to achieve further geopolitical aims. Thus, enhancing the state's geoeconomics by the use of economic power to achieve geopolitical gains. Recently, the universal order has been reshaped by the rise of these geoeconomics. Clayton et al. (2023) address the role that domestic political economy plays in shaping a state's aptitude to estimate overseas geoeconomic influence [1]. They also explain the role played by dominant states to project geoeconomic power overseas, either by coercing other less influential governments or by the use of soft power to induce other governments to take a particular desirable course of action.

Recently, the world has become an arena of contests among the global dominant actors where they exercise their power of finance and trade to attain geopolitical ends. Geoeconomic policies include the imposition of economic sanctions, strategic export constraints, restructuring supply chains for security objectives, granting foreign aid to secure political territorial gains, and affecting local and global firms to adjust their business relations. Though an essential element of any nation's geoeconomic power is economic strength, size and connections alone are not yet sufficient. For a nation to project an overseas geoeconomics power, it is supposed to be capable of either embracing or coercing both its domestic firms and citizens and foreign allies or contenders, to act in alignment with this power projection. Restraints to exerting this influence by governments are a spectrum of domestic political economy constraints, like interest groups, legal constraints, and political aims. The question that Clayton et al. (2025) address is about the extent to which governments could drive, both their local firms and global allies, to pursue the state's geopolitical objectives to project geoeconomic power, even if they were on account of their own interests [14].

### **Exerting Geoeconomic Power**

Clayton et al. (2025) examined the core constraints that confine a nation's ability to project its geoeconomic power [14]. They first define geoeconomic power as a nation's capability to induce an entity, whether domestic in general or

foreign in particular, to act in a manner that they would not otherwise do. In a global context, the core constraint that confines a state's ability to exert geoeconomic power is the extent to which the coercing government, defined either as a hegemon or as a dominant global or regional actor, can ask a foreign government or a foreign firm, defined as the targeted entity, to do so to sustain its relationship with the hegemon. The concept of projection geoeconomic power is described as the steps taken by the hegemon, or the more influential regional or global actor, to induce a targeted entity to carry out an action that the dominant actor desires. Thus, the economic model is explained by a constrained utility maximization problem where the utility of the dominant actor is subject to a constraint pertaining to the contextual environment of the targeted entity. The action desired by the dominant actor would also generate utility for the targeted entity. It should maximize the dominant actor's welfare subject to the political and economic environmental constraints fronting the targeted entity. Assuming that the dominant actor can influence the targeted entity's political and economic environment, then the hegemon could offer the targeted entity either a recompense if it complies or a threat if it refuses. The objective of the dominant actor can exceed the economic well-being of its own citizens. It can be extended to further geopolitical goals that could be fulfilled by the geopolitically aimed action to be taken by the targeted entity [14].

### **The Political Economy of Geoeconomic Power**

The foundation of projecting geoeconomic power is the ability of the dominant actor to widen the gap between the two possible ranges of the outcomes resulting from the decision taken by the target entity. The targeted entity has two options, either to opt in, i.e., to take an inside option where it accedes to the desired action, or to take the outside option and opt out of the desired action.

The dominant actor has two possible ways to widen this range. Either by improving the recompense of the inside option or by intensifying the threat pertaining to the outside option if taken by the targeted entity. In Clayton et al. (2023), the provided model worked as a general framework to analyze the projection of geoeconomic power [1]. This is achieved through providing an economic solution to the commitment problems by enforcing a joint threat on the targeted entity. Consequently, the targeted entity will voluntarily comply with the desired action to avoid the threats [1].

The analysis on the domestic level assumes a static equilibrium in which the ability of a nation to induce its own domestic firms to take a desired action varies. It depends on whether the system is a democratic or an autocratic one. When the analysis is done on the international level, the nature of the constraint that confines the exertion of geoeconomic power may change according to the context. An autocracy could weaken its own economy by repeatedly taking arbitrary actions. This would lower its geoeconomic power as other foreign countries may opt to cut out their relationship with an autocracy to avoid future coercive threats. Meanwhile, the dynamic capability that a democratic regime has when it commits to international treaties confines its ability to take coercive actions. The differential abilities and willingness of governments to carry out coercive actions and threats are the key differences in their ability to exert geoeconomic power. A fundamental element of the international political economy of geoeconomic power is the ability of a dominant actor, either to convince or to coerce foreign governments, so they induce their own firms to take the action desired by the dominant actor on its behalf. Other elements determine the aptitude of a dominant actor to enhance its geoeconomic power by influencing the incentives provided to foreign firms. Besides global and international trade relationships, military ties alongside cultural and historical connections are among the essential elements affecting this aptitude.

Geopolitical economy is defined in various ways by many authors. The focal point of the differences among those definitions is the role and the importance of the state in the international political economy. For Desai (2013), the process of uneven combined development (UCD) is the main characteristic of the modern world [2]. Moreover, the state is the main actor on the domestic level of the political economy and the international level of the geopolitical economy [2].

Desai's (2013) conceptualization of geopolitical economy emphasizes the role played by states in the capitalist economy. She discusses the dominant role states play in the process of uneven and combined development (UCD). This requires the full understating of the concept of combined development in which states encompass multiple development stages into briefer, more rapid, and more intensive surges of development stages. In a discussion of the materiality of nations, Desai (2015) addresses the need to comprehend the process of capitalist states' evolution while incorporating the economic role played by states both domestically and internationally [3]. Thus, encompassing the process of capitalist combined development and uneven development as key elements of shaping international relations. The geopolitical economy is the framework used to analyze different types of global conflicts emerging among dominant states and contenders. Securing further access to natural resources is a major reason for global conflict. Global conflicts over resources are described as geoeconomics-geopolitical conflicts. When they evolve, these conflicts cause crucial repercussions on the geopolitical economy [3].

The uneven distribution of natural resources on planet Earth is the main reason behind resource conflicts [4]. An optimal aspiration of every nation is to secure further access to resources that exist in external territories. That is when the probability of conflicts emerges. The interconnection between resource conflicts and the geopolitical economy is still a focus of academic research. The repercussions of resource conflict are of a geopolitical economic nature thus, a major cause of resource conflicts is the geoeconomic rivalries. The role played by states in projecting their geoeconomic

power, and its connection with resource conflicts, are the focal points of the theoretical perspective of the contemporary geopolitical economy.

The post-Cold War era was characterized by multiple waves of globalization and transnational neoliberalism [15]. Using combined development processes, contender states seek to change the global equilibrium of international relationships to displace dominant states. However, whether for a dominant state to sustain its geopolitical position as a global or regional actor, or for a contender state to take over the status of a dominant state, they both need access to natural resources. Though in their origin characterized as ideological conflicts, resource conflicts are classified as third-type geoeconomic and geopolitical conflicts that emerged in the Cold War era. During the Cold War era, ideological conflicts occurred between the two universally dominant capitalist and Marxist ideologies, each adopted by the two superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. This conflict unfolded into a proxy war in which each of the superpowers used their allies of underdeveloped states that were unwillingly pulled into this proxy war. Both the then dominant state, the US, and the contender state, the USSR, turned what was called the "Third World" underdeveloped states into an arena of their cleavage over the dominance of the world. This ideological rivalry turned into a geoeconomic rivalry initiated by the pursuit of each superpower to gain control over resource deposits and trade routes. Thus, ideological conflicts turned into a race over resource control through the domination of territories where resources exist.

Through the process of UCD, global and regional actors, in other words, dominant states, seek to sustain the status quo and preserve the existing world order for their advantage. Meanwhile, less advantaged states, or contender states, seek to alter the status quo and the balance of the geopolitical economy. Geoeconomic power, represented by access to resources, is the main element that determines a state's aptitude to alter the balance of the geopolitical economy. Wars and radical transformations represent the outcomes of resource conflicts. Through the process of combined development, contender states aiming to achieve their geopolitical ambitions seek to transform into dominant states. The world order of geopolitical economy is established by the intersection of these development processes. In their struggle to become dominant, contender states, particularly those that are less advantaged and located in unstable regions, are likely dragged into resource conflicts. Being less secure and resource-deprived, with less geoeconomic power, contender states represent the weakest links in the geoeconomic rivalries that eventually unfold into fulfilling the geopolitical ambitions of the dominant states. The asymmetry of geoeconomic power causes an asymmetric proxy resource warfare that is likely to be determined by the interests of the dominant states [4].

### **Geoeconomics of Türkiye in Syria**

Regaining regional stability is a key objective in Türkiye's foreign policy, necessitating the maintenance of security in Syria and the rebuilding of the Syrian economy. The enormous reconstruction efforts required for the early recovery of Syria's decrepit infrastructure, energy, electricity, and water supply sectors would exceed the capacity of the Syrian economy opening up opportunities for the inflows of foreign direct investments. The extensive reconstruction efforts needed to recover Syria's deteriorating infrastructure and energy sectors, open up lucrative opportunities for foreign direct investment to flow in. Nevertheless, military collaboration appears as a crucial element for any joint developmental initiatives essential to rebuilding Syria

The first step of Türkiye's foreign policy targeting people in need across the world began with the initiation of bilateral relations with Türkiye's vicinity. This perception was transformed into an active policy through cooperation with the global actors via the capacity of the state rather than civil initiatives. The government started to deepen Türkiye's relations with MENA countries, appealing to the common values and shared history belonging to the Ottoman Empire. In this context, applying the policy of zero problems with neighbours, which formed the basis of Türkiye's foreign policy, was also an important step taken to develop bilateral relations and cooperation within the international sphere. However, as developments related to Syria commenced, the traditional foreign policy goals towards the region were affected. Objectives, goals, and tendencies of the foreign aid policy transformed with the changing of the contextual circumstances [16]. After 2011, numerous social and economic problems that developed in Syria turned into regional issues that threatened the security in the region in a very short period. However, a permanent solution to the transition of the Syrian crisis has not yet been found.

The Syrian crisis is perceived as a major turning point in Turkish foreign policy, indicating the end of Ankara's 'no problems with neighbours' policy and the start of a bolder and more proactive approach to shaping the region's affairs. This policy change was especially visible when Türkiye began supporting the opposition in its struggle against President Bashar Al-Assad regime's blood-stained rule. Existing economic ties and a high degree of trade and exchanges increased the political and economic dependence of Syria on its neighbours [17]. The improvement of economic conditions consolidates political relations and leads to stabilization. Trade is not the only factor shaping Turkish foreign policy towards Syria. Over the last ten years, Turkish foreign policy has dramatically changed and continues to undergo significant shifts [16,18]. This change in Turkish policy can be explained in two ways: by the changing domestic political landscape of the country, and by Türkiye's external relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours, including Syria, which have been reshaped through changes in the regional environment.

After toppling Assad's regime, Türkiye's foreign policy toward the dynamics of Syrian political and economic stability is shaped by the contextual necessities of the sought regional stability. Besides security concerns regarding the future of

Syria after the transition, Türkiye has announced that its primary intention is to form stability in the region by delivering foreign aid, particularly in the military sector. Enhancing security, political stability, and economic stability in Syria will be reflected in achieving further stability in the region in general and in Türkiye in particular. The orientation of the government is to provide foreign aid to reconstruct Syria and rebuild Syria's economy. Regaining security and stability in Syria is mandatory to sustain the influential strategic status of Türkiye in the MENA region, as well as Türkiye's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in the region. As the future situation in Syria is still ambiguous, the trajectory of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria is not completely defined. However, intentions of establishing cooperation in the military sector are stated in many official and diplomatic venues [17,19,20].

### **Historical Context of Türkiye-Syria Relations**

Türkiye's foreign policy towards its bordering countries was always shaped by security concerns. Disturbances in its vicinity always created threats to Türkiye's national security. In the aftermath of the Syrian revolution, security disturbances were stimulated by the intensified political insecurity in Syria. Ever since, Türkiye's military intervention in its bordering countries has intensified. The 911-kilometer-long borderline between Türkiye and Syria has been the most significant and critical factor in shaping the bilateral relations between the two countries. After 2011, Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria aimed to remove Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad from power. Although it looked beyond the plausible capabilities due to the backup that Assad's regime gained from both Iran and Russia, Türkiye's support to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and some Islamist opposition groups continued [8].

After 2016, there was a reprioritization of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria, the realpolitik necessities called for such reprioritization [21]. Rather than toppling Assad's regime, the priority became to handle Türkiye's national security threats and to regain Türkiye's influence in the region. It was obvious that any potential effort that could be made by Türkiye against the will of both Russia and Iran would only jeopardize Türkiye's regional position. By risking diplomatic and military escalation, it would have only deepened its level of isolation from the international community, particularly NATO members, European countries, and the U.S. [8,22]. It has been eventually realized that sustaining the same approach of its foreign policy towards Syria would harm Türkiye's relations with the international community. It would have created and escalated further animosity and hostility with its prominent archenemy, namely the U.S.

### **Pre-Conflict Relations**

Before the Arab Uprising, Türkiye sustained a friendly relationship with the Syrian regime. Multiple measures were a reflection of the friendly ties between the two countries. First, it was represented in 2007 by establishing a free trade area (FTA) between the two countries upon the ratification of the Association Agreement [23]. This collaboration between the two governments was followed by two measures that were agreed upon in 2009: the agreement of visa-free travel between Syria and Türkiye, and the signing of a memorandum of understanding for the construction of the Friendship Dam on the joint borders area of the Orontes River [24,25]. Though the laying of the foundation stone of the dam was celebrated in February 2011 in the presence of the prime ministers of both governments, with the Syrian uprising taking place in March of the same year, the project was halted and the future of the project is still uncertain.

The amiable relations among the two countries were reflected in an increase in trade volume from 600 million in 1998 to \$2.3 billion in 2010. The Turkish exports were about three times larger than the Syrian exports to Türkiye, so the trade balance was tilted towards Türkiye. Moreover, economic relations beyond trade were also consolidated among both countries. Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI) in Syria in 2007 doubled from what it was in 2006. Turkish FDI in Syria reached \$146 million making Türkiye the largest foreign investor in the country. In Aleppo's Sheikh Najjar industrial zone, Turkish funds accounted for \$650 million as about 40 percent of businesses had Turkish partners [24].

### **Post-2011 Policy Shifts**

Upon the onset of the Syrian uprisings, the turning point of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria was the hosting of the Syrian opposition movement that was forming slowly [21]. This happened after failing to convince President Al-Assad to halt the brutal attacks on the protests by several delegations of the Turkish government. This reflected the intention of the Turkish government to influence the developments in Syria from the outset of the protests against the Syrian regime.

In reply to the unresponsiveness of the Syrian regime, the Turkish government supported the formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC) in August 2011. Later in September 2011, Türkiye diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime were cut. The Turkish government's diplomatic efforts called for establishing a safe zone and a no-fly zone in Syria alongside an international intervention to end the conflict. In collaboration with some Western allies, Türkiye's strategic goal of toppling Assad's regime was represented in providing military training and logistic support for the armed opposition in Syria. The armed opposition entities were administrated by the allied efforts of the SNC and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, the change in the entire approach of the Turkish foreign policy towards Syria was represented by an explicit military intervention in June 2016 [16,26]. This new approach was engendered by the aggravation of the Syrian refugees' problem.

### **Post-2016 Military Intervention**

The Turkish government aimed to secure the homeland areas of almost three million and a half Syrian refugees to enable their safe return. On the diplomatic front, Türkiye sponsored the Astana Peace Talks in collaboration with Russia.

Accordingly, on December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016, a ceasefire agreement resulted in a meeting between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran. The agreement laid the foundation for further negotiation between the various factions of the Syrian opposition. Upon multiple violations of the agreement, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2017, a second round of Astana peace talks was conducted between Türkiye, Russia, Iran, the Syrian regime, and the Syrian opposition. Followed by two more rounds of peace talks, and an agreement was reached between Türkiye, Russia, and Iran to establish a de-escalation zone in Syria. Alongside aiming to halt the hostilities of the Syrian regime towards the opposition forces, further objectives of creating this de-escalation zone were facilitating the secured return of the internally displaced people (IDPs) to their homelands, the delivery of the humanitarian assistance, and proceeding with the reconstruction of the infrastructure.

Operation Euphrates Shield is the military incursion of Türkiye into Syria that the Turkish army declared complete in March 2017. Areas surrounding the cities of Jarablus, Azez, and Al-Bab were successfully liberated by the collaboration of Turkish and FSA troops. This military intervention reached its natural limit upon the establishment of a safe zone for the Syrian opposition that is backed by the Turkish government.

Almost half a year later it was followed by another military incursion of Türkiye into Syria on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017, when Turkish troops were deployed to the province of Idlib in the northeastern part of Syria. Named as Idlib De-escalation Control Force Activities, this military incursion was explicitly intended to create a de-escalation zone in Idlib. The incursion was agreed upon by Türkiye, Iran, and Russia. It was implicitly intended to confine the Kurdish- controlled area in the northwestern part around Afrin, namely to avert further potential incursions by People's Protection Units (YPG) towards the Mediterranean Sea. Besides the territorial gains that the Assad regime has made in the northern region, the emergence of Al- Nusra Front, later Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as the strongest rebel group in Syria, has invoked a reshape of Türkiye's policy towards Syria [26]. Within the context of a more realpolitik approach, the reshaping of the policy was intended to reduce the risk of fighting against Kurdish militias in Syria [8]. The occurrence of such a military confrontation would have undermined the armed opposition in Idlib led by HTS [21].

### **Operation Spring Shield**

The cross-border military operation, Operation Spring Shield, was carried out by Türkiye's armed forces against Assad's regime's armed forces and allied Russian-backed militias. The military operation was launched on 27 February 2020 in the northern-western Syrian province of Idlib. The operation was triggered by an offensive attack carried out by the Assad regime's forces. It was in response to an airstrike that targeted the Turkish army position in the village of Baylun in Idlib province. This airstrike resulted in casualties of almost 60 wounded soldiers and 26 deaths. Achieving a ceasefire agreement within the context of the Astana peace talk was the primary objective of the operation. Turkish government sought to enhance the stability of its buffer zone in northern Syria. The operation also sought to address a humanitarian concern of further influx of Syrian immigrants from Idlib province towards the southern borders of Türkiye. It was intended to impede the spilling over of the Syrian conflict into Türkiye, particularly the influx of extremists and refugees into the country. Further advances of the Assad regime across northern Syria that would jeopardize the territorial gains of Türkiye were another drive of the operation. Among the main, though unintended, beneficiaries of the operation were the HTS alongside millions of Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs).

A ceasefire agreement was eventually achieved representing a step forward through the de-escalation of the bordering region of Northern Syria. It was signed on 5 March 2020 in Moscow between Türkiye and Russia. Via the cooperation with the Syrian Interim Government and the Turkish-backed Salvation Government established in Idlib province, the operation also sustained a potentially civilian-controlled area that would serve as another buffer zone. Before Operation Spring Shield, the toolkit of the mixed intervention strategy of Türkiye consisted of a diplomatic intermediary of Astana talk and Sochi memorandum, military existence in 12 observation posts, and a down-low dialog with HTS.

Idlib was stated as a de-escalation zone by the Sochi memorandum. Alongside the three other de-escalation zones, Eastern Ghouta, parts of Homs governorate, Daraa, and Quneitra governorates. It was medium-sized in terms of population, and ranked below average in terms of human development. Between the years 2018 and 2019, as an armed opposition group that significantly benefited from Turkish support, HTS succeeded in establishing a firm government and full control over major northern parts of Idlib province. The strategy of soft approach that Türkiye pursued toward HTS turned out to be successful [27]. The HTS group escorted Türkiye's convoys and maintained Türkiye's observation posts. Eventually, HTS clearly stated its will to cooperate with the Turkish government taking further steps in fulfilling the requirements of demilitarization.

Operation Spring Shield was perceived as tactically successful. Alongside the speed by which Türkiye interwind, the operation was perceived as a success because of the surge in the Turkish military resources intended to be used by the Turkish government. It was also perceived as strategically successful as it impacted the Turkish-Russian diplomacy that was resumed after the shift in the battlefield conditions toward Türkiye's favor. Eventually, the successes of the salvation government in administering the development of Idlib province helped secure Türkiye's significant role in determining the future of Syria.

In the short term, by defining Türkiye's red lines to all of Syria, Iran, and Russia, Operation Spring Shield brought geopolitical stabilization to the region. The newly stated equilibrium between the Turkish military forces and the Russian-

supported military forces in Syria prompted humanitarian stabilization in the region. Operation Spring Shield delineated the subsequent rounds of the Astana talk, the Syrian Peace Process which was an initiative to align the opposing aims pursued by each of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran vis-à-vis Assad's regime. Since NATO member countries, EU countries, and the U.S. were excluded from this process, the operation did not harm Türkiye's political or diplomatic relationship with any of these actors [26].

On the humanitarian aspects, Operation Spring Shield helped prevent brutal bloody conflicts across Idlib between HTS fighters and the regime's forces. Mitigating brutal conflicts and bloodshed is considered a critical short-term positive impact of the operation. Otherwise, such confrontation would have aggravated the already existing humanitarian crisis. The short-term positive impact that Operation Spring Shield brought was represented in the violence it prevented, the improved humanitarian stabilization, and the geopolitical measures it sustained.

### **Goeconomic Interests of the Turkish Government in Assad's Syria**

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the 911-kilometer-long borderline between Türkiye and Syria has been the most significant and critical factor in shaping the bilateral relations between the two countries. This borderline has gained more significance in influencing the relationship between the two countries in the aftermath of 2011. Following the onset of the conflict in Syria, a new socioeconomic order was formed in northern Syria. The northern region of Syria, which is adjacent to the southern part of Türkiye, became a focal point of several political deals among the regional powers that have interests in the area. It became the center of several zones of impact for many political and economic projects that serve international and regional interests in the area. The Syrian uprising and the consequent political turmoil caused massive shifts in the demography of this region and the entire Syrian society. Many displaced residents from different regions in Syria moved to live in the northern region alongside the region's original inhabitants, causing densely populated areas. On both internal and regional levels, these waves of internal displacement and the consequent massive demographical shifts engendered a source of contentiousness. A perceptible interlinked political patterns and socioeconomic orders emerged along the 911-kilometer borderline [24]. The northern region of Syria became the place where some radical Islamist groups have emerged. Areas around the borderline became the center of the expansion of militias that are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Thus, this contentious situation obligated the military establishment of both Russian and U.S. military troops and became the subject of repeated incursions of Turkish military forces.

### **The Syrian Civil War and Türkiye's Evolving Policy**

After the onset of the Syrian conflict during President Al-Assad's rule, the northern region of Syria, the area adjacent to the Turkish borderline, was divided into three distinct semiautonomous areas of control, each controlled by a different entity. The north-western part, represented by Idlib province, was ruled by a local Islamist group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The north-eastern part was controlled by the PKK affiliate Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and in the center, three cantons that were subject to the strong influence of Türkiye were established. Even after toppling Assad's regime, to sustain long-term stability in these distinctively semiautonomous regions, a peace policy that treats the Syrian northern border area as a whole, indivisible region, was mandatory. These three areas of control, which were distinctively semiautonomous regions, represented a single goeconomic and geopolitical security ecosystem. This established socioeconomic order was also interlinked with different regional powers including the Assad regime at that time.

The political turmoil in Syria in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising brought about the establishment of areas of economic activation along the Syrian-Turkish borderline. Besides the new border crossings that were opened with Türkiye, areas that are controlled by different entities were connected via new crossings. Despite the contradictory ruling agendas of the local controlling entities of each and their external and regional backers, the three distinct regions were connected to each other, and to the regime-controlled parts of Syria, through a network of internal crossings. Thus, the demographic displacement and the economic dislocation in one region influenced other Syrian regions, also the southern region of Türkiye, as those crossings have facilitated the inflow and outflow of trade, as well as the movement of people though to a lesser extent. As people movement was facilitated, the economic dislocation and demographic displacement in one region, or in regime-controlled Syria, affected the other regions as well as the regions in southern Türkiye.

Türkiye's attempts to stimulate industry in the border area were associated with heavy militarization and securitization. Industry was intended to boost the economic activities in the area, yet despite these attempts, the area remained more dependent on trade. With the objective of mitigating major demographic shifts, Türkiye has made the effort to stabilize the economy in Idlib province alongside the three Turkish-controlled cantons. Yet, the political turmoil in Syria converted the borders into crossing points for refugees' influx to Türkiye, and influx of money, weapons, military forces, and foreign fighters into Syria.

### **Interlinked Socioeconomic Order in Distinct, Semiautonomous Regions**

Despite the contradictory agendas of the ruling entities in the semiautonomous regions around the Turkish-Syrian borderline, they constituted an interlinked socioeconomic order. The three cantons that were subject to Turkish influence, namely: Euphrates Shield, Afrin, and Peace Spring, were interlinked among one another despite the distinct characteristics of each. They constituted a semi-unified socioeconomic order alongside the province of Idlib which was

controlled by the HTS. Moreover, the socially distinct SDF-controlled north-eastern region remained economically linked to the socioeconomic order of the three cantons and Idlib province. Some goods and consumption items, whether from international markets or Turkish markets, were reaching regime-controlled territories via crossings like Bab Al-Hawa in Idlib province, and other crossings in SDF-controlled territories and the Euphrates Shield area. This has proved the interconnectivity among these distinctly separated territories.

This unique socioeconomic order was the result of the demographic shifts in the distribution of the population in the region around the borderline. After the 2011 uprising, the multiple waves of displacement, both internal and external, resulted in a dense concentration of mass population in the north-western region, particularly the Idlib province. The internally displaced population who were fleeing the fire of the Assad regime refuged to this north-western part. Due to its proximity to the international borders, it provided shelter and easy access to international humanitarian aid, thus, constituting a safe haven to the internally displaced population.

With the escalation of the violence throughout the Assad regime-controlled areas, the north-western region provided a safer zone for better economic opportunities. With the decline of Aleppo City as the center of business and industry in Syria, the creation of new centers of economic activities was mandatory. Aleppo hosted the most important industrial and commercial town of Sheikh Najjar, in which 30 percent of the country's industrial establishments were located. The local economy of Sheikh Najjar town constituted 24 percent of the Syrian GDP [24]. A transnational socioeconomic order emerged upon the decline of the centrality of Aleppo city upon its division and detachment from its rural hinterland. The new transnational socioeconomic order was characterized by the establishment of commercial hubs and business communities along both sides of the Turkish- Syrian borderline. The Syrian cities of Al-Rai, Jarablus, and Azez witnessed a rise in economic activities, and the city of Sarmada became a significant business hub. New business communities were formed in the southern Turkish cities of Gaziantep, Urfa, and Kilis. A supply chain system was formed in the southern region of Türkiye due to the influx of Syrian business capital. Besides, the influx of Syrian skilled manpower into the sectors of the plastic industry, shoemaking, tircotage. and small textile workshops, all positively contributed to the level of economic activities. A commercial network was established by the Syrian community as 96 percent of the Syrian population in the southern region of Türkiye received easy access to Syrian products of basic consumption items. Both a transregional economy that connects cities around the Turkish-Syrian borderline, and a transnational economy that connects Syria to the global markets, emerged due to these demographic shifts. The HTS-ruled Idlib province alongside the three Turkish-backed cantons constituted a significant market for Syrian products inflows from Türkiye. The formed bi-directional supply chain allowed for the exportation of the Syrian olive oil produced in both Afrin and Idlib, which was one of the top ten exports and a signature product of Syria, to Türkiye and other countries through Türkiye.

This period of lax border policy that facilitated the movement of capital and people between the two countries ended after 2013. As the conflict escalated in the area around the borderline, Türkiye tightened its border control measures. The construction of the border wall between the two countries, which was considered as the world's third-longest wall, has restricted cross-border movement [24]. The security necessities obligated the restriction of refugee influx into Türkiye from the Syrian borders. Security threats also necessitated the creation of a frontier with the Syrian regime through the presence of Turkish military troops inside Syria, particularly in Idlib province, the Euphrates Shield, and Peace Spring areas.

Nevertheless, during the years 2008 to 2021, Türkiye continued seeking to establish stable and sustainable economic conditions in northern Syria through multiple initiatives, like supporting providers of telecommunication and postal services and electricity supply. Türkiye proceeded with the establishment of industrial zones that require more medium-to long-term economic stability than the creation of trade zones. Official visits conducted by Turkish officials explicitly demonstrated the support for the establishment of the industrial zone in cities like Al-Rai, Al-Bab, and Jarablus. Türkiye was seeking economic stability in northern Syria as it may discourage outmigration. Creating safe industrial and trade zones mitigates refugee influx to Türkiye and encourages Syrians who are residing in Türkiye to return home.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

In this context, all of Türkiye, Iran, and Russia are dominant actors with geoeconomic ambitions in Syria. Each is a dominant state with military and economic strength and strategic and geopolitical interests in the contender state, Syria, with lower economic and political capacities and security vulnerability. Following Clayton et al.'s (2015) approach, the vulnerability of Syria increased the aptitude of these dominant states to use both soft powers, in terms of diplomacy and political means, as well as coercive power, in terms of military means, to induce the Assad regime to advance their geopolitical aims. Alongside the conflicted interests of the involved dominant states, namely Türkiye, Iran, and Russia, the complexity of the geopolitical scene that encompasses the conflicted interests of other, more powerful and more influential global actors, such as other European countries and the US as a hegemon, all with security and strategic interests in the region, all confined these dominant states' aptitude to reshape the geopolitical scene toward the own interest of each actor, also restrained each actor's span of control required to exert its own geoeconomic power.

In its desperate pursuit of survival, the Assad regime was easily induced to advance the interests of the involved actors in return for strategic and military support. The interests of his backers, namely Iran and Russia, were advanced on account of the national interests of Syria, whether strategic, economic, or security priorities. Through the UCD processes

explained by Desai (2013) (2015), with the use of hybrids of soft power, diplomatic and political efforts, and coercive power through military intervention, Iran and Russia sought to preserve the status quo in Syria to sustain their strategic and geoeconomic gains [2,3]. The scenario was different for Türkiye as it was still influential despite the fluctuating animosity with the Assad regime. Apart from the regime-controlled areas, Türkiye's span of impact was significant in the north-eastern region of Syria which was dominated partly by opposition forces, and partly by militias that were proxies to global actors. As a crucial backer of the opposition forces, Türkiye's dynamics of projecting geoeconomic power in Syria were through inducing the opposition forces rather than the regime.

Syria's reserves of natural resources also played a role. The lucrative investments in the field of extraction of natural resources granted to both the regime backers, Iran and Russia, represented the combined development processes adopted by the Assad regime as a least advantaged contender state [4]. Nevertheless, in this context where the contender state is vulnerable and the regime is desperate for security and survival, utilizing the combined development process was not intended to compete with the dominant states nor to surpass any of them, but to receive strategic and geopolitical backup. The instability during the Assad regime and the regime's struggle for survival obliged Syria as a contender state only to submit and to opt in with the actions desired by the dominant states. The balance of power which was tilted toward the interests of the dominant states did not put Syria in a position to opt out.

### **Geoeconomics of Türkiye in Post-Assad's Syria**

The conflict in Syria has shaped the geostrategic relations between Türkiye and Syria and provided more significance to the geoeconomics of the 911-kilometer-long borderline. As regaining regional stability is an ultimate goal in the Turkish foreign policy agenda, rebuilding Syria's economy and sustaining security in Syria are requirements for promoting security in the region. Prospects of future cooperation to boost Syria's economy are represented by the intentions of Türkiye to support the reconstruction of Syria, including rebuilding infrastructure and providing basic services like electricity supply. However, military cooperation appears as a mandatory element of any potential joint measures of developmental projects necessary to rebuild Syria. Türkiye's potential military presence in Syria would have to be re-evaluated within the context of changing circumstances that may occur.

Upon the toppling of Assad's regime, the de facto government, currently designated as the transitional government of Syria, led by the transitional president of Syria, Ahmed Al-Sharaa, has decided to dissolve the army alongside other rebel factions to unify all existing militias and integrate them into a new unified military entity. On several official occasions, the current leaders of Syria explicitly declared their intentions to establish strong ties with the regional actors. Establishing such ties is mandatory to enable the transitional government to rebuild the country's military forces. Establishing cooperation with the Turkish government on many aspects, like partnership on training, arming, and rebuilding air defence, was discussed in many national-level and international-level venues. Filling the vacuum left by dissolving the army requires cooperation with regional backers to sustain security and maintain defence capacity in Syria. Prospects for a potential defence pact between Türkiye and Syria are within the political agenda of both countries. Arrangements of strategic defence cooperation may include establishing additional Turkish military airbases in Syria. Alongside providing training for the troops of Syria's new army, the use of the already existing Syrian airspaces for military purposes would allow Türkiye to fill in the military vacuum and help defend Syrian airspace if any future attacks occur.

Alongside the geopolitical interests that Turkish foreign policy towards Syria is projected to preserve, the economic stability in Syria holds repercussions on the geoeconomic interests as well. Rebuilding the war-torn country opens up lucrative economic and investment opportunities. The enormous reconstruction efforts required for the early recovery of Syria's decrepit infrastructure, energy, electricity, and water supply sectors would exceed the capacity of the Syrian economy, opening up opportunities for the inflows of foreign direct investments (FDI). Besides the massive capacity of the Turkish construction sector and consumer goods industry, the role that Türkiye played as a dominant economic actor in the northern region of Syria presents Türkiye as one of the leading candidate countries for FDI opportunities in Syria.

Maintaining security is mandatory to enhance an adequate level of economic stability that enables Syria to host FDIs. Thus, expanding the capacities of the military sector in Syria is crucial to ensure national security, particularly within the current contextual circumstances of political disturbance. The success of achieving such development goals in Syria promotes Türkiye's zone of impact as a main influential actor in the region.

### **Geoeconomics of the "No Longer Dominant", Russia and Iran**

Perceiving the Arab Spring as an extension of American geopolitical goals, Russia regarded the Assad regime as a friendly ideological ally. During the Syrian conflict, Russia became involved with all other major actors in the region, particularly with Iran and its proxies, with whom Russia sustained a collaboration.

By utilizing hybrid military, political, and diplomatic strategies, including airstrikes and limited naval and ground presence, Russia intended to reaffirm its status as a formidable geopolitical force in the Eastern Mediterranean. The contextual instability allowed for an unprecedented military presence for Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean that was achieved at a low cost [7]. Ultimately, Russia intended to transform its military accomplishments into a political resolution that legitimizes its involvement and permits it to scale back its military operations. Thus, it aimed to maintain its strategic position in the Middle East and to preclude what it perceived as a Western effort to instigate regime change. In October

2015, Russia got involved in the Syrian civil war to mitigate the regime's worsening security situation and to ensure its long-term stability.

While Russia has secured certain economic interests in Syria, the drive for profit was secondary to its strategic aspirations. Nevertheless, the political instability permitted Russia to seek profits. Before the war, strategic factors played a role in Russia's economic strategy in Syria. Alongside military assistance and financial support, Russia has written off Syria's debt on several occasions. Before the civil war, Russia pardoned Syria of 75 percent of its outstanding debt, amounting to \$14 billion [28]. After the civil war, Russia has also played a role in stabilizing government revenues. Amid the efforts made by the Syrian government to generate state employment and sustain subsidies throughout the civil war, the consequent amplifying budget deficit was partially resolved by the currency printed by Russia in 2012 to back the Syrian government.

Before the start of the civil war, Russia was extensively engaged in significant sectors of the Syrian economy. Throughout the 2000s, Russian companies were key investors in the oil and gas extraction industries. Yet, the civil war has severely diminished the productivity and profitability of this sector. In 2010, the Russian energy conglomerate Tatneft entered the Syrian oil industry through excavation work near Deir-ez-Zor City, particularly in South Kishma, which is estimated to hold 4.9 million tons of oil. Another Russian energy conglomerate, Soyuzneftegaz, also invested in energy by signing a phosphate-mining agreement for a site. As the civil war put those investment prospects at risk, in 2015, Tatneft halted its project, and Soyuzneftegaz eventually cancelled its deal.

Throughout the conflict, the Syrian government has entered into multiple substantial military agreements with Russia. 25 percent of the arms produced in Russia from 2005 to 2009 were sold to Syria, thus it was estimated that almost 75 percent of the new weaponry acquired by Syria was supplied by Russia. In December 2011, a \$550 million contract was signed for the supply of 36 Yakovlev Yak-130 Mitten combat trainer aircraft [28].

As soon as stability improved in Syria, Moscow declared that Russian companies would swiftly grant contracts and restart activities in this field, amounting to \$1.6 billion. Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war was accompanied by a parallel commitment to supporting specific infrastructure initiatives. As Russia aimed to reclaim control over crucial roadways, numerous agreements were made, including contracts worth \$675 million and \$280 million. In 2017, Russia finalized a forty-nine-year lease in Tartus to enhance a functional naval base close to the coastal city. In the same year, the Syrian government offered Russian military contractors 25 percent of the earnings generated by oil and gas fields reclaimed from the Islamic State. As Russian oil and gas firms were assisting in the reconstruction of Syria's devastated energy sector, a partnership agreement was established for oil and gas extraction in 2018.

Primarily taking on a role as military advisors and by bolstering and deploying proxies against opposition forces, Iran became involved in the civil war during its initial phases. As Iran's key interests in Syria were more of a geopolitical nature rather than ideological, enduring the authoritarian rule of the Assad regime was critical to sustaining the geoeconomic gains of Iran in Syria [29]. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) was expected to be the primary beneficiary of various Iranian initiatives, likely marginalizing competition from the Iranian private sector or civilian organizations. Despite its significant military engagement and presence, confronting political and economic isolation, Iran faced an economic disadvantage compared to Russia, a rival dominant state with greater resources and tighter integration into the global economy. Nevertheless, Iran's critical role in supporting the Assad regime's warfare requirements has provided it with numerous economic opportunities.

In 2013 and the early months of 2014, Iran intensified its backing for Bashar al-Assad and his administration, admitting that it had deployed its Revolutionary Guards to train a newly formed pro-regime militia. Iranian leaders defended this approach by asserting that they needed to combat al-Qaeda in Syria to prevent having to confront it within their own borders [29]. Throughout 2017, a series of agreements were announced and signed between the two governments. These agreements included opportunities for IRGC in the telecommunication sector. After its purchase of almost 50 percent of the shares in the state telecom company in Iran, by 2009 IRGC became a major owner of Iran's telecommunication sector. Iran was granted the opportunity to build a mobile service network in Syria [30].

In September 2017, Iran declared plans to construct power plants in the coastal region of Latakia, aiming for a capacity of 540 megawatts. In a different memorandum, Iran also pledged to a project for the reconstruction of a 90 megawatt plant in Deir-ez-Zor. Additionally, as part of the same agreement, five gas-fired power plants were to be relocated to Aleppo City [31]. The project, that was estimated at 130 million euros, would have been carried out by the Mapna Group, an Iranian company that may have connections to the IRGC.

The economic opportunities granted to Iran were not excluded to the telecommunications, electricity, and phosphate mining sectors in Syria; other areas such as real estate were also included. 5,000 hectares of land were projected to be allocated to Iran for agricultural use, as well as thousands of hectares for establishing oil and gas terminals [31]. A particularly controversial aspect has been Iran's acquisition of land in Syria for both strategic and religious reasons [28]. Iranian media has confirmed that land purchases have taken place in various regions of Syria. These acquisitions are reportedly located in the Sayyida Zaynab suburb of Damascus, which is home to a notable Shia shrine.

## **New Era of Geoeconomic Rivalry: Türkiye, Gulf Monarchies, and China**

The sudden removal of Assad's regime has dramatically altered the geopolitical landscape. In a post-Assad environment, the geoeconomic competition is no longer limited to the former hegemony or dominant nations, particularly Türkiye, Russia, and Iran. This shift in the geopolitical landscape has resulted in a reconfiguration of power dynamics and heightened geo-economic competition. New hegemony and influential states have emerged in the geopolitical arena of post-Assad Syria. The geoeconomic competition now involves Türkiye, the Gulf monarchies, or the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and to a lesser degree, China. Russia is grappling with the challenges posed by its conflict in Ukraine. Iran's influence in Syria has already diminished following the Gaza conflict, and the weakening of Hezbollah, Iran's proxy forces in Syria and Lebanon, due to attacks. Key military leaders of all Iranian-backed militias in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria have been assassinated. The Houthis remain, but they too have been weakened due to the ongoing conflict between Iran and Israel. Türkiye has managed to maintain its position as the most prominent and dominant player in the geoeconomic competition in post-Assad Syria. Nevertheless, due to financial constraints, Türkiye's involvement in Syria's reconstruction relies on military assistance and its ability to offer technical expertise in the rebuilding efforts. Besides providing humanitarian aid and military support, Türkiye has the potential to contribute technical assistance across various sectors, including utilities, sanitation, healthcare, and aviation management.

In light of the declining Iranian and Russian influence following the removal of Assad's regime, the interim government in Syria is seeking support from GCC countries, as well as Türkiye, which are seen as key players in the country's rehabilitation and development efforts. The first three international trips taken by the de facto government's foreign affairs minister, Asaad Al-Shaibani, were to Gulf monarchies, highlighting the significance of the GCC nations' involvement in shaping the future of Syria after Assad. Assistance from the GCC countries is vital for bolstering the legitimacy of the de facto government within the realm of international relations. In the aftermath of the Assad regime, Syria faces an urgent need for foreign direct investment to support the reconstruction of its war-torn economy, a process that could be expedited by the credibility gained through the GCC's strong relationships with the US and Europe. A notable instance of this was the lifting of economic sanctions following Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, which was facilitated by Qatar. With both Saudi Arabia and the UAE holding connections to the Trump administration during his first term, it is likely that this dynamic will continue into his second term. The lobbying power that both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) possess on the global stage is a resource Syria cannot afford to overlook [32].

Despite the debate regarding the position taken by some GCC governments towards the Islamist background of the current interim administration, the mixed emotions surrounding the removal of Assad's regime led to several supportive measures from a number of GCC states. The interest that Syria holds for GCC nations varies based on several factors. The significance of each GCC country differs from one to another, as does the potential role they could play in influencing the geopolitics of Syria after Assad.

### **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The first Gulf monarchy that was visited by the post-Syria president and his minister of foreign affairs was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Among the Gulf monarchies, KSA stands out as the largest contributor in terms of economic strength and the scale of financial support extended to Syria, positioning it as the Gulf monarchy likely to take the lead in engaging with the post-Assad Syrian government [32].

After the ousting of Assad, KSA did not send any diplomats. Instead, it was the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs who travelled to KSA. KSA paid off Syria's \$15 million debt to the World Bank, signalling to the global community its commitment to a new era of cooperation with Syria following Assad's regime. It has become apparent that the waning presence of Iran and Russia in post-Assad Syria creates an opportunity for extremist Islamist groups to emerge in the chaotic and unregulated environment [33]. Given Syria's urgent need for significant financial assistance to rebuild its crippled economy, KSA's backing is essential. Especially after Trump's visit to KSA during his second term, the kingdom has shown a definitive intention to provide substantial support to post-Assad Syria. This assistance is necessary to curb Iranian influence in Syria and to alleviate the concerns of the GCC nations regarding the potential power vacuum.

### **Qatar**

Among the Gulf monarchies, Qatar has consistently supported the new government in post-Assad Syria from the very beginning. As a result, it is now regarded as the most reliable and trustworthy ally by the current de facto administration. When the Arab League opted out of the Syrian normalization efforts between 2018 and 2023, Qatar chose to back the Syrian forces [33]. In addition to providing direct financial assistance to the energy sector and collaborating with the Iraqi government to pay public employees' salaries, Qatar was a steadfast supporter of the Syrian revolution. Qatar consistently aided the rebel groups in their fight against the Assad regime and also established ties with HTS prior to its rise to power in Syria. In January 2025, Qatar's Emir Tamim became the first Arab leader to visit Syria. Together with Türkiye, Qatar holds a similar view that political Islam is vital to their foreign policy strategies. As such, it is in Qatar's interests to strengthen the connections between the new Syrian de facto government and Türkiye. While KSA may have a larger financial presence in post-Assad Syria and shares an ideological alignment with HTS, Qatar is poised to exert the most influence in terms of leverage power with the current Syrian de facto government.

## United Arab Emirates

In contrast to both Türkiye and Qatar, the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has maintained a secular stance in shaping its foreign policies regarding post-Assad Syria. The UAE opposes emphasizing political Islam in forming global partnerships and establishing international alliances. Its relations with the new Syrian de facto government are based on pragmatism. Initially, the UAE was the most skeptical Gulf monarchy concerning the leadership of HTS, fearing it could align with jihadist groups or promote the resurgence of extreme Islamist factions across other Arab nations [33].

It is advantageous for the Syrian de facto government to improve relations with the UAE to prevent it from becoming antagonistic. Given the UAE's connections with the U.S. and Israel, it is preferable to avoid provoking the UAE into lobbying against the new Syrian government due to its aggressive opposition to political Islam. The success achieved by Islamist-oriented rebels in Syria could motivate other Islamist factions within the Arab world. This scenario represents a significant concern for the UAE leadership, which views political Islam as an imminent threat [32]. Nonetheless, the UAE has underscored the significance of engagement in Syria, a sentiment echoed by the de facto government, which cannot afford to reject foreign direct investment (FDI) and various forms of support from the UAE in the political sphere. The anticipated assistance from the UAE to Syria may encompass humanitarian aid, but is also expected to include diplomatic backing and financial resources for reconstruction and development efforts.

## China: An Evident Need for a "Game Changer"

With an estimated worth of \$200-\$400 billion, reconstruction and rehabilitation investments in post-Assad Syria present a significant opportunity for China to partake in this profitable endeavor. During Assad's rule, the worldwide, economically ubiquitous China was an economic actor. Either illicitly or through a third-party state, China's commercial exchange with Syria continued despite the economic sanctions imposed on Syria during Assad's rule [34]. Unlike Russia and Iran, which provided military backup, China backed Assad's regime via diplomatic and political means. In 2012, the veto-wielding China used its position in the UN Security Council to impede efforts to hold the Assad regime accountable for war crimes in the International Criminal Court.

China is expecting the new interim government in Syria to confine terrorist groups, particularly the Uyghur fighters that are affiliated with Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), who constitute a major concern for China. Fears of Uyghur Islamist groups operating in Syria represent a major concern for China.

As the new interim government is harboring Uyghur militias. Uyghur fighters, who cooperated in solidarity with the Syrian opposition factions during the early years of the Civil war, are being granted official military ranks in Syria in recognition of their contribution to the opposition military activities to remove Assad's regime [34].

China's position on the Uyghur militias in Syria mirrors that of the U.S. regarding Iran's proxy militias in the same region. China is against Uyghur fighters being granted high military ranks and establishing military bases in Syria. Meanwhile, for the interim government, the current agenda neither intends to hand over the Uyghur fighters to foreign entities nor to criminalize them, fearing the risk of political retaliation and backlash, particularly with the tacit approval of the Trump administration for their reintegration into the Syrian military forces. On the contrary, members of TIP were recognized as military heroes and were granted military promotional ranks in the new Syrian government-affiliated armed forces.

China's first commercial agreement in post-Assad Syria is to develop an Industrial Zone in Homs [35]. Nevertheless, China has to figure out new kick-starts to re-establish trade and commercial ties with post-Assad Syria. China's gigantic expertise in trade, infrastructure, and reconstruction constitutes pivotal geoeconomic pillars for China to exert an economic role in Syria's recovery. China's solid economic ties with the Gulf States provide opportunities for Chinese firms to enter Syria's reconstruction race through indirect subcontracting and joint ventures.

## Conclusion

The fall of the Assad regime and the withdrawal of his Russian and Iranian backers created a power vacuum in the region. As a rising prominent regional power with a significant comparative edge to extend its influence, Türkiye is poised to benefit from the diminishing power of both Russia and Iran in post-Assad Syria. Türkiye was the greatest supporter of the Syrian opposition factions during the years of the Syrian Civil War. Over the course of these thirteen years, the Syrian cause was represented as both a domestic concern influencing the design of domestic policies, and an international concern shaping Türkiye's international affairs and international relationships. The ongoing shifts in Türkiye's foreign policy towards Syria, including Turkish military incursions in the Syrian territories, were primarily engendered by refugee issues and security concerns. The dynamics shaped by the continuous shifts in Turkish foreign policy towards Syria were conducive to the eventual collapse of Assad's regime. Toppling the Assad regime posed a chance to solidify Türkiye's status as an influential regional power.

During the Assad rule, Russia represented itself as the gatekeeper of the Syrian northern borders. The collapse of the Assad regime was among the most significant geopolitical setbacks for Russia. The reformation of the government in Syria would be the least beneficial for Russia as a primary stakeholder in Assad's Syria. Currently, Syria represents a crucial component of Russia's geopolitical strategy. The political transformation in Syria would diminish Russia's influence. Regaining the geoeconomic gains Russia accomplished during Assad's rule would be critical to upholding its

influence. The significant position of the Syrian case in Russia's foreign affairs signifies the potential efforts Russia would make to sustain its strategic assets in Syria.

Both Russia and Iran lost momentum in their regional impact with the fall of the Assad regime. However, as two dominant and influential global actors, both would seek out new paths to secure the geoeconomic gains accomplished during Assad's rule. Potential strategies for Russia and Iran to leverage influence in the region require sustaining diplomatic ties with the new government in Syria. The dynamics followed during Assad's rule to project geoeconomic power are no longer efficient with the changing context of the balance of power. The *realpolitik* exigencies obligate both countries to explore alternatives to sustain their geoeconomic gains. The use of coercive power to project geoeconomic ambitions is no longer an option neither for Russia nor for Iran, particularly, when complexities of their internal politics and international geopolitics are incorporated. Both countries are struggling, one with an already existing military warfare skirmish, the other with an already existing economic warfare and another military confrontation. The recalibration of diplomatic initiatives and foreign policies is mandatory within the current situation to secure further advances in the region.

Türkiye has been a steadfast supporter of the Syrian opposition since the onset of the Syrian conflict. Perceived as an unpopular policy at that time, these policies were eventually vindicated by the fall of the Assad regime. Türkiye's support to the Syrian opposition forces solidified its position as the most influential regional actor in the post-Assad transition process. The consequent colossal leverage mechanisms bestowed Türkiye crucial levers of influence with the sturdiest communication channels in post-Assad Syria. A status that would be upheld by influencing the new government in Syria to establish a legitimate political system, with improved measures of transparency and integrity, to enable alleviating the shades cast by the Assad rule. To preserve their interest in Syria, the way for both Russia and Iran to approach the new government in Syria goes through the channel of their connections with Türkiye as it is now in the position of power.

After the fall of Assad, Syria became the battleground for geoeconomic power struggles among the Gulf monarchies. However, the geopolitical dynamics among these intra-Gulf powers have shifted since the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the UAE from 2017 to 2021. Coupled with the economic rivalry between the Gulf monarchies and Türkiye in Syria, the growing influence of Qatar and Türkiye in post-Assad Syria may become increasingly intolerable to the UAE in the future. The competing interests of Türkiye and its Gulf allies, particularly Qatar, versus the rest of the Gulf monarchies are likely to escalate into economic rivalries among these nations. The alliances formed by the Islamist-led post-Assad Syria with both Türkiye and Qatar could heighten the UAE's fears and concerns. Some political analysts have already pointed out the possibility that this conflict may lead to UAE support for certain opposition factions against the current Qatari-supported government in Syria [33]. Nonetheless, analysts also believe that this conflict could be averted if the Gulf monarchies adopt a practical stance in their foreign policy toward post-Assad Syria instead of pursuing an ideology-driven strategy.

The Gulf monarchies play a vital role in providing foreign direct investment (FDI) to Syria. However, any potential financial assistance would come with expectations and not be given freely. The GCC nations aim to protect their interests within Syria. Although their policies may not always align, there is a general agreement on specific geopolitical goals among the GCC countries. First, they seek to prevent a power vacuum that could allow regional powers and Islamist groups to gain influence. Second, they prioritize political stability in Syria, essential for restoring stability in the region, and maintaining the integrity of Syrian territory to reduce justifications for regional and international intervention.

This was evident in their rapid efforts to establish connections with the new *de facto* government right after the overthrow of the Assad regime. Noting that the Assad regime was bolstered and its rule extended primarily due to the intervention of Russia, Iran, and its allies like Hezbollah, such countries with interests in Syria may find ways to operate indirectly in a post-Assad Syria through their proxies. Therefore, despite differing views regarding the new government among supporters and skeptics, the GCC nations have shown signs of involvement in post-Assad Syria. Recognizing the risks associated with non-engagement, Gulf monarchies ultimately understood that it is preferable to engage with whoever is set to govern Syria.

During Assad's rule, China backed Assad on the alleged basis of counterterrorism and as a fortification. With its long legacy of backing Assad, China is in need of a turning point in its foreign policy toward Syria. The ouster of Assad's regime pulled China's foreign policy into a different, vague territory of uncertainties that necessitate a turning of the tide of its potential foreign policy toward Syria. This legacy complicates the future view of establishing relationships with the post-Assad government and population, where rebuilding credibility is essential.

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