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French and Turkish Representations of the Mediterranean: Artificial Intelligence Based Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the Mediterranean imaginations of France and Turkey have served as a barometer for analyzing the level of their bilateral relations. Turkey and France have been among the region's prominent rivals since the Middle Ages, and their level of relationship has varied over time. This article investigates key patterns that shape the direction of Turkish-French relations and presents a fundamental factor: *The spatial representation of the Mediterranean*. If the Mediterranean images developed by the two countries are adverse/unfavorable/conflictual, the relationship in a given era deteriorates and vice versa. This study aims to situate the contemporary Turkish and French representations of the Mediterranean through a Critical Geopolitics, and Artificial Intelligence based Content Analysis method. This paper first deals with the theoretical and methodological aspects by focusing on Critical Geopolitics and "word embedding" as a promising technique in content analysis. Second, the historical dynamics between France and Turkey will be discussed by examining the shift in the two countries' representations of the Mediterranean. Finally, this study will shed light on how the Mediterranean representations of Turkey and France in the recent period affect contemporary bilateral relations in line with the empirical findings obtained from *Agence France-Presse* and *Anadolu Agency*.

Keywords: Spatial Representation, Critical Geopolitics, International Relations, Computational Social Science, Word2Vec.

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Introduction

Fernando Passao once asked the sailor in his famous poem: "Are the seas of other countries beautiful?". Most Mediterranean residents either give a negative answer to this question or find it unnecessary to ask. Everyone looked at the same sea but saw their own sea.¹ In that sense, as Fernand Braudel said, the Mediterranean spoke with many voices.² Historically conceived as the basin of grand confrontations and strategic nodes/resources³, the Mediterranean contains

1 Predrag Matvejevic, *Akdeniz'in Kitabı*, İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2004, p. 176.

2 Ian Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008, p. 1.

3 Bouchra Rahmouni Benhida and Younes Slaoui, *Géopolitique de la Méditerranée*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2013, p. 25.

different logics of empires and nation-states, together with the current Euro-Mediterranean region-building dynamics such as the “Union for the Mediterranean”.

Geographies are differently imagined and represent various meanings for societies.⁴ Multiple links between rich history and space in the Mediterranean make its character fairly complex.⁵ This complexity has also been echoed in the Turkish and French representations. Turkey and France were among the foremost competitors in the Mediterranean, from the Crusades⁶ to the present day. Their bilateral relationship has been characterized by multifarious dynamics, from cooperation to hostility. For instance, while dialogue and cooperation marked Turkish-French relations in the 17th century, Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt deteriorated bilateral ties in 1798. Although many determinants affect the relationship between Turkey and France, this article focuses on the role of the two states’ spatial imaginations of the Mediterranean as one of the most important factors. When the Mediterranean images developed by the two countries are adverse/unfavorable/conflictual, the relationship in a given era deteriorates and *vice versa*. This pattern was observed throughout the ages, especially when the two countries’ views of the Mediterranean were conflictual.

In the turbulent context of Turkish-French relations after the 2010s, this study investigates how the two states’ representations of the Mediterranean have changed over time (several presidential/ministerial eras) and how these changes have affected contemporary bilateral relations, as in history. Searching for answers to these questions, this study will rely on Critical Geopolitics and Word Embedding, an emerging content analysis method. Critical Geopolitics is based on a comprehensive critique of the conventional geopolitical approaches that reflect the so-called neutral and objective practice of studying global space. Unlike traditional state-centric strategic analysis, this critical approach considers geopolitics as a profoundly ideological and politicized study rather than an unbiased understanding of given geographical facts.⁷ In this regard, Critical Geopolitics offers a plural and critical theoretical framework that helps to better comprehend particular connections between space and history, especially in the *Mediterranean nexus* between France and Turkey.

While historical representations will be reviewed through the Critical Geopolitics approach, the contemporary era (2007-2021) will be studied using the Word Embedding technique via the news from the *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) (between 2007-2021) and the Anatolian Agency (AA) (between 2010-2021)⁸. In computerized content analysis, programs are generally utilized for frequency analysis, such as to count how often the word is used in the text or which words are used together with the most. However, these approaches ignore

4 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage, 1979.

5 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II (La part du milieu)*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1990.

6 The Crusades were a series of religious wars between Christians and Muslims that started in the late 11th century and were principally waged to regain control of holy sites in the eastern Mediterranean. Between 1095 and 1291, a total of eight main Crusade expeditions took place.

7 Klaus Dodds et al., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics*, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 6.

8 Replication data for this article is available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FKST3T>.

the semantics of the words in texts.⁹ On the other hand, with the “word embedding” method, one of the Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques in Artificial Intelligence, words can preserve their meaning in the content analysis. In this way, it is a promising method, especially in critical theories and methods where the representations of words are essential.

The first part of this study underlines the theoretical and methodological discussions by focusing on Critical Geopolitics and the Word Embedding method. Subsequently, the historical dynamics between France and Turkey is elaborated by comparing the changing representations of the two countries toward the Mediterranean from the 16th century to the end of the Cold War. In the final part, empirical findings from AFP and AA will be analyzed by employing Word Embedding to explain/compare how Turkish and French representations of the Mediterranean have affected their contemporary bilateral relations.

Deciphering Spatial Representations through Critical Geopolitics

From the early 19th century to the end of the Cold War, Geopolitics was regarded as the study of statesmanship and great powers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, studies entitled “Critical Geopolitics” were first introduced through the growing popularity of critical approaches in International Relations (IR).¹⁰ Based on a critique of mainstream Geopolitics, Critical Geopolitics deals with the representations and spatial practices. It entails a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis of power struggles over territories rather than a one-dimensional and deductive form of Geopolitics. From this respect, Geopolitics is considered an intellectual terrain concerned with the interaction of geography, knowledge, power, and social structures.¹¹

Rather than core geographical factors, Critical Geopolitics considers global politics as culturally formed and politically sustained through statecraft discourses and representations.¹² Hence, it focuses on the representations that are formed cumulatively over time, and they can aggregate a variety of cultural, historical, ethnic and geographical aspects. In this way, Critical Geopolitics exposes representational contradictions in a particular region from a critical standpoint. For Yves Lacoste, representation is “the set of beliefs and collective perceptions of a political, religious, or other nature that drive social groups and form their perspective of the World”.¹³ Thereby, geopolitical representation encompasses not just geographical issues but also collective cognitive beliefs, identities and imaginaries about specific locations.¹⁴

9 Ludovic Rheaume and Christopher Cochrane, “Word Embeddings for the Analysis of Ideological Placement in Parliamentary Corpora”, *Political Analysis*, Vol. 28, No 1, 2019, p. 114.

10 John Agnew, “The Origins of Critical Geopolitics”, Klaus Dodds et al., (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics*, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 19.

11 Klaus Dodds, *Global Geopolitics: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh, Pearson, 2005, p. 29.

12 Gearóid ÓTuathail and John Agnew, “Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy”, *Political Geography*, Vol. 11, No 2, 1992.

13 Yves Lacoste, *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*, Paris, Flammarion, 1993, p. 3.

14 Frédéric Encel, *Comprendre la Géopolitique*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2011, p. 65-66.

Critical Geopolitics is also concerned with the formation of borders between “within” and “outside”, “domestic” and “international”, rather than the “outside of the state”.¹⁵ Critical geopolitical thinking raises questions such as how current situations arise or how power works to maintain specific contexts. Hence, it argues that the assumption of a detached and objective researcher charting the observable realities of international politics is fallacious.¹⁶ Moreover, discourses play a crucial role in Critical Geopolitics because they help understand specific political decisions by invoking core spatial meanings.¹⁷ Many prominent post-structuralist scholars, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, contributed to the knowledge of discourse and the relevance of geopolitical representations.¹⁸ Accordingly, Geopolitics for critical writers should be re-envisioned as a “discursive technique” in which statecraft intellectuals spatialize’ international politics in order to describe a “world” marked by specific sorts of places, peoples, and dramas. In sum, Geopolitics is a type of discourse, representation and political practice, according to Critical Geopolitics.

Deciphering Spatial Representations through “Word Embedding”

Content analysis is a method used in social sciences that analyzes the content of communication in a systematic manner. Content analysis can be applied to any material delivering a message.¹⁹ Although its history dates back centuries, content analysis gained popularity with the behaviorist turn in the 1940s. Scholars such as Ole Holsti, Robert North, and Harold Lasswell conducted content analysis mostly quantitatively through word frequency analysis and classifications of the texts. Both the difficulties of manual analysis and the increasing criticism such as frequency not being an indicator of importance in texts,²⁰ led to a decline in the usage of content analysis after the 1960s. This trend was even accelerated by strengthening the post-positivist tradition and the complete exclusion of content analysis, which was regarded as a positivist method.

In the new millennium, the capacity of computers and technology progressed unprecedentedly so that faster, more accurate and in-depth analysis could be conducted. Hereby, content analysis has regained its popularity.²¹ Many different programs and techniques have been developed (e.g. Wordfish, MAXQDA and NVivo). However, the basic logic of these programs is similar: Coding the words and finding the relations either between these words or between texts. To assess these relationships, computer programs calculate the frequencies of words and are used to place related concepts according to the researchers’ aims. Nonetheless, as traditional approaches assert, just because a word is used frequently does not mean that it is significant because these methods ignore the semantics of the words.²²

15 R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

16 Dodds, *Global Geopolitics*, p. 30.

17 Ibid., p. 31.

18 Agnew, “The Origins of Critical Geopolitics”, p. 24.

19 Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou, “Fully Integrated Content Analysis in International Relations”, *International Relations*, Vol. 31, No 4, 2017, p. 449.

20 Robert Jervis, “The Costs of the Scientific Study of Politics: An Examination of the Stanford Content Analysis Studies”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No 4, 1967.

21 Pashakhanlou, “Fully Integrated Content Analysis in International Relations”, p. 451.

22 Rheault and Cochrane, *Word Embeddings for the Analysis of Ideological Placement in Parliamentary Corpora*, p. 114.

To overcome this issue in content analysis, “word embedding”, one of the Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, offers great promise. NLP is an area of artificial intelligence that allows computers to understand, process, and analyze natural human languages.²³ Since human languages consist of words and sentences, NLP tries to extract information from sentences.²⁴ Technologies such as chatbots and command assistants on smartphones fall within NLP’s area. In NLP, word embedding (also called word vectors) is a technique to convert words into numerical vectors with actual values. Word embedding assigns similar numerical representations to words with similar meanings through tokenizing and converting each word in a sequence into vector space. Hence, all words protect their semantic representations in the text without the coding process of researchers.

There are slightly different types of word embedding models (e.g. fastText, GloVe and Word2Vec); however, they work with a similar logic: Generating vectors based on the proximity of words and converting all words in the corpus that have semantic and syntactic meanings. However, this study will use Word2Vec because it learns more quickly and makes more highly accurate predictions of a word’s meaning than compared to the others.²⁵ Meanwhile, as with every model, the Word2Vec method also has a major shortcoming: The meanings of the words are determined entirely in line with the dataset. Nevertheless, this deficiency can be useful for content analyses (especially for critical IR theories) since the representation of a word according to the text is essential for these studies.

In short, by preserving the word’s meaning in the text, word embedding provides a significant methodological contribution and takes the content analysis one-step further. By making available the analysis of words’ meaning in text, it offers a solution to the criticism of content analysis that frequency does not indicate significance. In this way, word embedding can be an essential methodological tool for post-structuralist approaches that completely reject all methods²⁶ that have a relationship with positivism. With this method, post-positivist approaches can study whether the meanings of words in texts are changed or how they are represented differently in various texts. In this sense, to analyze the contemporary Turkish and French representations of the Mediterranean, this study will use the Word2Vec technique of word embedding.

23 Tom Young et al., “Recent Trends in Deep Learning Based Natural Language Processing”, *IEEE Computational Intelligence Magazine*, Vol. 13, No 3, 2018, p. 55.

24 Renu Khandelwal, “Word Embeddings for NLP”, *Towards Data Science*, 28 December 2019, <https://towardsdatascience.com/word-embeddings-for-nlp-5b72991e01d4> (Accessed 10 July 2022).

25 Tomas Mikolov et al., “Efficient Estimation of Word Representations in Vector Space”, *arXiv*, 16 January 2013, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1301.3781> (Accessed 15 April 2022).

26 Yoshiko M. Herrera and Bear F. Braumoeller, “Symposium: Discourse and Content Analysis”, *Qualitative Method*, 2004, p. 16-19.

Whose Mediterranean? Turkish and French Representations of the Mediterranean in History

As François Thual underlined, the Mediterranean represents a heterogeneous space where practices and collective memories make it possible to define a differentiated “we”, and where there is a sense of belonging that records the existence of a community in the long term.²⁷ The meanings of the Mediterranean have transformed over time and affected the regional states’ relations throughout the ages. Among these states, Turkey and France are states at the forefront whose representations of the Mediterranean affect bilateral relations the most.

From the 16th century to the end of the 18th century, the Royaume of France and the Ottoman Empire had a similar perspective for the Mediterranean: A vast market stretching across Europe, the Balkans, Anatolia and Africa. However, the conquest of the North African Shoreline and Cyprus (1571) and then Crete (1669), together with Rhodes, indicated the “Mediterraneanization” of the Ottoman Empire.²⁸ In other words, at the height of the Empire in the 16th century, the eastern and southern Mediterranean was regarded as an “Ottoman Lake”. Based on this imagination, until the 19th century, Turkish-French relations were dominated by political dialogue and commercial and cultural cooperation, as in the case of the Capitulations²⁹ which became an essential part of the two states’ relations in the Mediterranean.

Nevertheless, this image was heavily damaged due to imperial rivalries between Europe’s great powers during the 19th century. For France, the Mediterranean was the central region in which to increase her influence.³⁰ The importance of the eastern Mediterranean mainly stemmed from its strategic position to cut off Britain’s most important colony, India, especially after France lost many of its colonies to England with the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763). Therefore, the Mediterranean became an area which represented militarily, politically and culturally a “French sea of colonial ambition”.³¹ This approach was even more apparent during the Napoleonic era by the expedition to Egypt in 1798.

While the influence of the great European powers (especially that of France) increased, Ottoman power and capabilities heavily decreased. With the opening of the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean ceased to be a “lake” and turned directly into a strait to the Indian Ocean. This transformation led to struggles between the great European powers, and the Mediterranean was gradually turned into a “European zone” through conquests and colonization by France (Algeria, Tunisia), the United Kingdom (Cyprus, Egypt) and Italy (Libya). Hence, the Ottoman representation of the Mediterranean became a “fragile fortress” that needed to be protected and

27 François Thual, *Les Conflits identitaires*, Paris, Ellipses, 1995.

28 Benhida and Slaoui, *Géopolitique de la Méditerranée*, p. 28-29.

29 The word “capitulation” which refers to trading, first originated around the end of the 15th century. A state’s commitment to guarantee certain rights and privileges on an area that it has control over is known legally as a capitulation. The Ottoman Empire and France’s alliance included a list of advantages given to the French monarchy, each of which was codified in a capitulation. “Capitulations” played a crucial role in France’s commercial and diplomatic policy in the Mediterranean when the Ottoman Empire and France established formal diplomatic relations.

30 Dorothee Schmid, “French Ambitions through the Union for the Mediterranean: Changing the Name or Changing the Game?”, *Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 17, No 2, 2009, p. 67.

31 Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*, p. 148.

defended. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire significantly lost power due to external (territorial losses against European states) and internal factors (many independence movements, especially in the Balkans). These losses led to the consideration of the Ottoman Empire as the sick man of Europe, making it “de-Mediterraneanized”.³² In this context, while the Ottoman Empire was forced out of the Mediterranean, France’s occupation of Ottoman lands put the two countries’ ties in a tumultuous position devoid of mutual confidence. As a result of these contradictory geopolitical representations of the Mediterranean, two states confronted each other in many areas.

With the onset of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire and France were in opposing alliances. The Mediterranean in the Turkish imaginary was both a target of the enemy and a place that needed to be rescued from the enemy. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s famous phrase “Armies, your first target is the Mediterranean!” summarizes well that the Turks were clearly in a position to defend their homeland. During the War of Independence (1919-1923) against the occupying powers, the Turkish nationalist movement was mainly led from the Black Sea, then from Ankara.³³ Although France was among the leading occupying powers, France and the New Turkish State signed the Ankara Agreement (1921), which led to both France’s withdrawal from southern Anatolia and the establishment of diplomatic relations. In this respect, the integrity of the Allied Front was broken, the conflicts at the south front of the War of Independence officially ended, and Turkey’s southern border was determined.³⁴ Eventually, after the proclamation of the Republic (1923), Turkey became neighbors with the imperial powers due to their mandatory control of Syria and Iraq. Even though Turkey and France entered an uneasy neighborly relationship over Syria, common threat perceptions³⁵ (from Germany and Italy) in the Mediterranean and Europe brought Turkey and France to dialogue and cooperation. The non-aggression pact (1939) between France, Britain and Turkey and the solution to the Alexandretta dispute³⁶ (1939) between France and Turkey were significant indicators of this circumstance.

Following the Second World War, the Mediterranean was one of the battlegrounds between the United States of America (U.S.) and Soviet Union as a reflection of the bloc

32 Jean-François Pérouse, “La Mer Blanche des Turcs, En Quoi la Turquie Est-Elle Aussi Méditerranéenne?”, *Hérodote*, Vol. 90, No 3, 1998.

33 Ibid., p. 164.

34 Mustafa Yahya Metintaş, “Ankara Antlaşması’nın Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisinde Tartışılması”, *Türk Dünyası Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi Yakın Tarih Dergisi*, Vol. 3, No 5, 2019.

35 William Hale, “Turkey and Britain in World War II: Origins and Results of the Tripartite Alliance, 1935-40”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23, No 6, 2021, p. 835.

36 The Sanjak of Alexandretta, which was formerly a part of the Aleppo Vilayet (Division) of the Ottoman Empire, was seized by France at the end of First World War and included in the French Mandate of Syria. As a result of the Franco-Turkish Treaty of Ankara, the Sanjak of Alexandretta, which had a significant Turkish community in addition to its Arab and Armenian inhabitants, was an autonomous sanjak from 1921 to 1923. It was then a part of the State of Aleppo, and in 1925 it became a direct part of the State of Syria while maintaining its unique administrative position. The Sanjak of Alexandretta (coined as *Hatay* by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) was a priority of Turkish policy when the French mandate over Syria ended in 1935. To advance the idea of unification with the Republic of Turkey, the Turks in Alexandretta undertook several reforms that were influenced by Atatürk and founded a variety of organizations and institutions. France needed Turkey’s friendship, which made its negotiation position weaker. The dispute in the League of Nations was ultimately won by Turkey, and after a referendum, *Hatay* became a Turkish province on June 29, 1939.

politics of the Cold War, which was seen in the Suez (1956) and Lebanon (1958) crises. As NATO members, Turkey and France shared a vision of the Soviets as a common enemy, particularly on NATO's southern flank, where the Soviets could expand their sphere of influence. This shared representation consolidated the interwar era's gradual reconciliation between two countries. On the other hand, Turkey was at odds with practically all regional states-especially Arab nations-in this era due to its pro-western foreign policy.³⁷ This stance was clearly seen in two examples: First, Turkey recognized the State of Israel in 1949 and secondly, Turkey opposed decolonization movements in the Mediterranean (e.g. Algerian independence), although it achieved independence from imperial states.³⁸ Meanwhile, French Mediterranean policies centered upon the decolonization movements. In contrast to Tunisian and Moroccan independence, the traumatic process of Algerian independence (1954-1962) deeply affected France's Mediterranean policy. Due to the Algerian trauma, for France, the Mediterranean continued to be in "proximity" but somehow ceased to be a "priority".³⁹ While France underwent to digest the end of her imperial era, Turkey's abstention in the voting of a resolution calling for negotiations between France and the provisional Algerian government in the U.N. General Assembly in 1958 further consolidated bilateral relations.⁴⁰

In the 1960s, the French Mediterranean policy mainly corresponded to relations with the Maghreb (Northwest Africa) and the Middle East. France sought to re-establish a position in the Arab world that it had lost during the Maghreb's arduous decolonization.⁴¹ In fact, it was linked to the Arab Policy initiated in 1967 by General de Gaulle, who supported the Arab side (Egypt, Jordan and Syria) during the Six-Day War with Israel, which engendered a comprehensive re-orientation of French Foreign Policy in the Mediterranean.⁴² With this policy, France did not only aim to regain a voice in the southern and eastern Mediterranean but also pursued an independent policy from two blocs. Consequently, France decided to leave the integrated military command of NATO in 1966.

In parallel to the Algerian issue being a turning point for France, Cyprus occupied the center of Turkey's Mediterranean strategy. After the withdrawal of Britain from the island of Cyprus in 1960, tensions between the Turkish and Greek communities in Cyprus increased severely. With two major incidents -Johnson Letter (1964) and Cyprus Peace Operation (1974)- the Cyprus issue influenced Turkey's foreign policy more than anything, and it remained at the heart of its Mediterranean strategies from then onwards. In other words, Turkey's perception of the region, especially of the Levant, was restricted to Cyprus.⁴³ As a result of its Cyprus policies, Turkey experienced a kind of "loneliness" in the Mediterranean, although it remained

37 Mustafa Aydın, *Turkish Foreign Policy: Framework and Analysis*, Ankara, Center for Strategic Research, 2004.

38 Melek Fırat and Ömer Kürkçüoğlu, "Ortadoğu'yla İlişkiler", Baskın Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşı'ndan Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2001, p. 634.

39 Olivier Kempf, *Géopolitique de la France: Entre déclin et renaissance*, Paris, Editions Technip, 2013, p. 211.

40 Eyüp Ersoy, "Turkish Foreign Policy Toward the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62)", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 13, No 4, 2012, p. 693.

41 Maurice Agulhon et al., *La France de 1940 à Nos Jours*, Paris, Nathan, 2001, p. 487.

42 Edward A. Kolodziej, *French International Policy Under De Gaulle and Pompidou: The Politics of Grandeur*, London, Cornell University Press, 1974, p. 489.

43 Mustafa Aydın and Cihan Dizdaroğlu, "Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 15, No 60, 2018, p. 90.

in the Western bloc. Hence, as France re-oriented its Mediterranean approach after the Algerian trauma, Turkish foreign policy began to take a multifaceted form in the Mediterranean by improving her relations with the Arab countries to find support for the Cyprus crisis.⁴⁴ While Turkey previously supported the French policies in the Mediterranean, France did not support Turkey on Cyprus policies. In contrast, France was even one of the main opponents of Turkey. Moreover, the coup d'Etat in Turkey in 1980 and Greece's accession to the European Economic Community in 1981 exacerbated the strained bilateral relations. In sum, while Cyprus gained an identity-based geographical representation for Turkey, for France Cyprus was regarded within the European framework, which deteriorated bilateral ties.

With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, preexisting balances in the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia were significantly altered.⁴⁵ As a result, during the 1990s, conflicts in these regions increased considerably. On the other hand, Soviet threats to NATO's southern flank were removed. With this new circumstance, the two states could not develop new strategies for the Mediterranean, and the region even became of secondary importance to them by being considered from a Middle Eastern perspective. This subordination stemmed from the Arab-Israeli conflicts, combined with American interventions in the Middle East in the 1990s (Gulf War, 1991) and 2000s (Invasion of Iraq, 2003). Related to these factors, terrorism originating from the Middle East had a major impact on both countries' policies in the Mediterranean. In this era, France faced many terrorist attacks that emanated from the Lebanese Civil War⁴⁶, the Islamic fundamentalism due to the Gulf War, and the escalating violence in Algeria.⁴⁷ In parallel, Turkey was also preoccupied with PKK's terror attacks in the 1990s. This terror problem ushered both states to develop a similar policy in the Mediterranean context: Enhanced security-based cooperation with Israel.

Together with these domestic security-related perspectives, the Mediterranean also represented a zone of economic and commercial opportunities. This can be seen in both states' relations with Arab nations whilst increasing security-based ties with Israel. In contrast to the Cold War era, both states prioritized their economic links in the Mediterranean over global security concerns and tried to exert a political and economic influence on the Mediterranean.⁴⁸ For instance, France attempted to shape the Mediterranean policies of the European Union during this period, as seen in the Barcelona process, which later influenced the "Union for the Mediterranean" initiated by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008.⁴⁹ In sum, two states developed similar Mediterranean perceptions based on domestic security and economy so that similar spatial imaginations of the Mediterranean conduced to ameliorate bilateral relations in the early post-Cold War era.

44 Aydın, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, p. 39-40.

45 Baskın Oran, "Appraisal of the Period", Baskın Oran (ed.), *Turkish Foreign Policy 1919-2006. Facts and Analyses with Documents*, Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 2010, p. 652-653.

46 Alex Macleod and Hélène Viau, "La France: Les Institutions Internationales au Service du Rang?", *Études Internationales*, Vol. 30, No 2, 1999, p. 293.

47 J. F.V. Keiger, *France and the World since 1870*, New York, Arnold Publishers, 2001, p. 227.

48 Süha Bölükbaşı, *Türkiye ve Yakınındaki Ortadoğu*, Ankara, Dış Politika Enstitüsü, 1992; Hubert Védrine, *History Strikes Back: How States, Nations, and Conflicts Are Shaping the Twenty-First Century*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

49 Védrine, *History Strikes Back*, p. 67.

Situating Contemporary French and Turkish Representations of the Mediterranean through Word2Vec

To understand how Turkey and France conceptualize the Mediterranean in the contemporary era, this study developed two Word2Vec models trained by the news from the AFP and AA in the LexisNexis online database. The main reason for choosing these two sources is that both news agencies are state-supported. While AA is a Turkish state-run news agency, three of the 18 seats on the AFP board of directors are held by France; however, AFP gets up to about 40 percent of its funding from the French government.⁵⁰ To put it another way, news from these two agencies under the influence of home states are proper sources to evaluate representations of the Mediterranean. From these two sources, the only news that contains the words “Mediterranean” and “Turkey/France” are chosen to prevent analyzing unrelated news about the Mediterranean. Lastly, as a period, for AFP, the news from May 16, 2007, when Nicolas Sarkozy came to power, to December 31, 2021, were selected. For AA, it started from 2010 to December 31 to 2021 because the earliest news about related criteria was uploaded to a database in 2010. In this regard, 658 news items from AA and 932 news items from AFP were extracted.

After finishing pre-processing of raw data, two Word2vec models were trained separately by AFP and AA datasets.⁵¹ To test the model before starting analyses, three words -from general to specific- were randomly chosen and tested. As Table 1 demonstrates that the AFP Model brings the closest meanings to searched words; therefore, a French perspective of the Mediterranean through AFP Model can be conducted.

Table 1. AFP Model’s Similarity Test⁵²

	Similar Words	Similarity Ratio
<i>Nations</i>	States	0.771279
	Countries	0.645436
<i>EU</i>	European	0.7761624
	Bloc	0.7086371
<i>Erdogan</i>	Tayyip	0.7387109
	Recep	0.7264774

50 Jon Allsop, “At Agence France-Presse, the French State Plays a Heavy Hand”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 19 April 2018, https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/agence-france-presse.php (Accessed 20 July 2022), para 2.

51 Please see the replication data for this article at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FKST3T>.

52 The similarity ratio (cosine similarity) ranges from “-1” to “1”. A value of “1” indicates that there is a perfect relationship between two words, “-1” indicates that there is a perfect opposite relationship between words, and “0” indicates that there is no relationship between words.

Table 2. Most similar 15 words with Mediterranean in AFP and AA Models⁵³

AFP		AA	
<i>SW</i>	<i>SR</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>SR</i>
Med	0.6078711	Med	0.8159857
Advocating	0.599313	Aegean	0.6939957
Partnership	0.5911629	Besieged	0.6512657
Aims	0.5895497	Provocations	0.6418357
Attending	0.5769861	Unacceptable	0.6414257
Exploit	0.5759044	Hydrocarbon	0.6314057
Stretching	0.5681892	Disputes	0.6274757
European	0.5622824	Gulf	0.6165457
Flank	0.5616192	Surrounding	0.6042757
Developing	0.5526261	Black	0.6028657
Dividing	0.5458387	Concerning	0.6021657
Established	0.5424194	Attempts	0.6017157
Consulting	0.5384076	Middle	0.5982257
Maghreb	0.5316424	Transit	0.5952257
Ukraine	0.5315999	Limits	0.5933157

In Table 2, the “Med”, the abbreviation for the Mediterranean, is regarded as a most similar word to the Mediterranean, proving the accuracy of the AFP model once again. Apart from the “Med”, words such as “partnership”, “advocating”, “attending”, “established”, and “consulting” give altogether a vital clue about the French perspective: The Mediterranean was viewed as a region that would assist France in increasing its engagement with other Mediterranean countries. Moreover, “advocating” shows the French initiatives in the region, such as the “Union for the Mediterranean”. Hence, it can be assumed that France advocated a partnership with regional states in line with her wishes. As an example of this wish, Germany’s criticisms of France for the “Union for the Mediterranean” can be given.⁵⁴

To corroborate France’s approach, the word “stretching” can also be mentioned. “Stretching” is generally used for the increasing influence of countries in the region. For instance, the following quotation illustrates the usage of “stretching” in one of the news items in AFP:

⁵³ The number of similar words can be ranged from 1 to n values. The choice of 15 words in this study is to demonstrate the general framework better.

⁵⁴ Schmid, “French Ambitions through the Union for the Mediterranean”, p. 77.

“French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian on Tuesday hit out at Iran, accusing the Islamic Republic of trying to carve out an ‘axis’ of influence stretching through Syria to the Mediterranean Sea”.⁵⁵

In this regard, “stretching” demonstrates that either France was disturbed by other states’ increasing influence or it desired to increase its influence in the region. Both alternatives demonstrate France’s determination to take a more engaged position. For instance, Turkey has been one of the emerging forces confronting France in the region since the early 2000s. Lastly, as mentioned above, the French representation mainly corresponds to France’s Arab policy, with a particular focus on the Maghreb. This approach is confirmed by the model that indicates similarity between “Maghreb” and “Mediterranean”. Hence, according to the AFP Model, the French perception of the Mediterranean is primarily restricted to “Southern Mediterranean” and “Maghreb countries” rather than the whole Mediterranean.

Similar to the AFP Model, in the AA Model, the word most similar to the Mediterranean is “Med”. This similarity proves that AA model also works. “Aegean”, the second most similar word to the Mediterranean, also confirms the model’s reliability because it is used almost synonymously with the Mediterranean in Turkey. Besides, the similarity of hydrocarbons with the Mediterranean is a significant clue that Turkey’s perspective on the Mediterranean is energy-based. In addition to energy, the AA Model also reflects the “perception of being excluded”. This perception can be easily observed from words such as “besieged”, “surrounding”, and “limits”. The fact that many words with similar meanings appear in the model as words close to the Mediterranean indicates that Turkey is approaching the region with the perspective that it is “left alone”, “excluded” and “provoked” in the Mediterranean as in the 1980s.

Have the French and Turkish perspectives of the Mediterranean always been the same during the contemporary era? Following a brief review of the two countries’ Mediterranean representations, it will be assessed how the two sides’ views on the Mediterranean have changed over time and how these changes have affected bilateral ties. In this regard, three presidential eras in France (Sarkozy, Hollande and Macron) and two eras in Turkey (the period until 2016 when Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey’s former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, was influential in foreign policy, and after) will be analyzed in detail.

55 “French FM Says Iran Trying to Carve Out Regional ‘Axis’”, *Agence France Presse*, <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:SR5H-PR01-DY93-M47N-00000-00&context=1516831> (Accessed 29 May 2022).

Table 3. Turkish and French Representations of the Mediterranean under Davutoğlu, Hollande and Sarkozy Eras.

Davutoğlu (2010-2016)		Hollande (2012-2017)		Sarkozy (2007-2012)	
<i>SW</i>	<i>SR</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>SR</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>SR</i>
Sea	0.9190322	Sea	0.8485386	Proposed	0.789525
Event	0.9117231	Across	0.8482913	Launched	0.789525
Southern	0.9109374	Rescue	0.8459421	Championed	0.789525
Olympic	0.9103145	Coast	0.8388193	Attending	0.789525
Game	0.810004	Cross	0.8331934	Bolster	0.789525
Host	0.8127958	Perilous	0.8312522	Partnership	0.789525
Eastern	0.8115842	Voyage	0.8252346	Unveil	0.789525
Black	0.8190775	Journey	0.8222536	Brings	0.789525
Compete	0.8135857	Turning	0.8187571	Rim	0.789525
Committee	0.8123141	Bid	0.813853	Strengthening	0.789525
East	0.81002	Port	0.8129179	Înaugural	0.789525
Sport	0.8149392	Vessel	0.8092744	Project	0.789525
Resort	0.8117116	Sicily	0.8045904	Grouping	0.789525
Aegean	0.8195744	Dangerous	0.8033874	Eastward	0.789525
Coast	0.8116737	Pick	0.8022023	Med	0.789525

When looking at the Nicolas Sarkozy era, the implications of the “Union for the Mediterranean” initiative are observed in our model. Multiple words evoke regional cooperation, such as “partnership”, “strengthening”, “attending”, “grouping”, and “project”. With these words, it is seen that Sarkozy tried to renew the “Barcelona Process (1995)” through the “Union for the Mediterranean” project and increase French influence in the region.⁵⁶ However, parallel to the fate of the “Barcelona Process”, the “Union for the Mediterranean” initiative also suffered a setback due to the region’s major issues (e.g. Israeli-Palestinian Conflicts and the Arab Spring).⁵⁷ In light of these developments, France began to lose influence in the region whilst simultaneously endeavoring to expand it. Also, the words “launch” and “unveil” appear in our model to describe NATO’s Libya involvement, which is seen as an opportunity to reverse this declining influence. Despite these drawbacks, during Sarkozy’s administration, the Mediterranean was identified as a cooperation hub that became a critical common denominator in mending France’s relations with its neighbors. However, the means of dialogue and partnership were degraded, and conflictual aspects under Sarkozy’s presidency also marked French policy in the Mediterranean.

On the other hand, during the presidency of François Hollande, the Mediterranean has the closest meaning to geographical terms such as “sea”, “coast”, or “port”. This fact

⁵⁶ Frédéric Charillon, *La politique étrangère de la France*, Paris, La Documentation Française, 2011, p. 113-116.

⁵⁷ Kempf, *Géopolitique de la France*, p. 212.

demonstrates that the French perspective on the Mediterranean was not politically constructed at the time. Two factors primarily influenced it: First, due to the diplomatic weakness of Arab states and the increasing influence of both extra-regional major powers (e.g. the U.S. and the Russian Federation) and the regional states (e.g. Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf States); the momentum of France's declining influence in the region accelerated. Second, France faced domestic security issues such as terror attacks. Consequently, France under Hollande was preoccupied with internal concerns and set foreign policy aside, as our model put forward. Apart from the geographical terms, our model also illustrates the migration crises in the Mediterranean, which was perceived as a gateway for the surge of immigrants to France. In other words, throughout Hollande's administration, the French perspective on the Mediterranean was primarily restricted to the migrant route, aside from geographical concerns. Words like "Rescue", "Cross", "Perilous" and "Dangerous" are representations of this in our framework.

Regarding non-geopolitically conceived portrayals of the Mediterranean, the Turkish representation of the region during the Davutoğlu era recalls President Hollande's France. At this point, most of the representations took place in terms of geography and within the context of the Mediterranean Games, which were hosted in Mersin (Turkey) in 2013. Despite trying to boost its influence in the region in the same way France did during this period, Turkey could not create a unique regional representation for the Mediterranean framework due to an increase in the number of regional conflicts and rivalry from several states within and outside the region. That is to say, Turkey, like others, was caught off guard by the region's pervasive political instability, which has had a substantial impact on both domestic stability and relations with regional states.⁵⁸

Although Turkey attempted to play a relatively active role in the Mediterranean during this time (Libya intervention, Israel-Palestine conflicts, Arab Spring, and particularly the Syrian civil war), these countries and events were not evaluated in the Mediterranean context according to our model. When the Syrian and Libyan cases are analyzed, one can observe that they belong to the Middle East rather than the Mediterranean. So, Turkey's self-engagement as a "central" country in the Middle East has led to its isolation and alienation from the Mediterranean.⁵⁹ In sum, Turkey and France did not create distinct depictions of the region during this era. When there was no confrontation regarding representatives in the past, as in this era, two governments embraced a similar and more harmonious foreign policy approach.

58 Aydın and Dizdaroğlu, "Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy", p. 91.

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

Table 4. Turkish and French Representations of the Mediterranean in Post-Davutoğlu and Macron Eras

Macron Era (2017-2021)		Post-Davutoğlu Era (2016-2021)	
<i>SW</i>	<i>SR</i>	<i>SW</i>	<i>SR</i>
Discovered	0.7275123	Med	0.7920678
Neighbouring	0.7111943	Provocations	0.6646034
Disputed	0.6916505	Raised	0.6548411
Gas	0.6809075	Aegean	0.639549
Near	0.6703844	Hydrocarbon	0.6371082
Energy	0.6650675	Attempts	0.6222786
Red	0.6593114	Exploring	0.6220427
Scramble	0.6564488	Solving	0.61878
Exploration	0.655306	Maps	0.6149916
Natural	0.6496357	Unilateral	0.6132184
Threatens	0.6488078	Asserting	0.6112838
Reserves	0.6474256	Helped	0.6049896
Southern	0.6462599	Ignoring	0.6025226
Warships	0.6419194	Exploitation	0.6009468
Virus	0.6407639	Resolving	0.5994657

In contrast to previous eras, the two states embraced the agonistic approach toward the Mediterranean, which harms bilateral relations. During Macron’s administration, the AFP Model kept the Mediterranean nearly identical in terms of “energy”. The words “discovered”, “gas”, “energy”, “exploration”, “natural” and “reserves” can be found in our model. As a result, in this period, the French representation of the Mediterranean was reduced to an energy hub rather than the cooperation hub of the Sarkozy era. Furthermore, unlike the Sarkozy and Holland administrations, the Mediterranean has been linked with crises and conflicts. In this regard, words like “warships”, “disputed” and “threatens” emphasize France’s hard power capabilities rather than a soft power ambition in the Mediterranean. In line with our model, it would not be wrong to claim that one of the primary reasons for this approach is the discovery of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Parallel to France’s approach, our model demonstrates that Turkey also adopted an energy-centric approach to the Mediterranean after 2016. The fact that energy does not have a positive connotation for Turkey as it did for France during the Macron era. However, unlike France and maybe all other regional states, the Mediterranean was seen as a region where Turkey was excluded. This stance may be recognized from the words such as “surrounding”, “besieged”, “limits”, “excluded” and “provoked”. Therefore, Turkey strengthened a broad representation of isolation and loneliness in the Mediterranean, yet it is mainly absent from the regional energy game. In other words, Turkey’s portrayal of the Mediterranean can be characterized as a region with abundant energy resources from which Turkey could not gain an advantage. In parallel to our model, following the discovery of natural gas deposits in the region, the EU, Greece, the

Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel established a multilayered alliance that excludes Turkey. This fact is the result of Turkey's significant crises with practically all of these countries⁶⁰, which led to the marginalization of Turkey in the Southern Mediterranean. Consequently, although Turkey's and France's agonistic representations of the Mediterranean are synonymous, pursuing similar geopolitical goals in the same region and at the same period, the two states found themselves in a confrontation with each other.

Conclusion

Turkey and France have been two prominent rival states in the Mediterranean from the Crusades to the present day. Multifarious dynamics have characterized their bilateral relationship from hostility to cooperation. Although many determinants affect their relationship, this article argued that French and Turkish representations of the Mediterranean have functioned as the main barometer for determining the level of their bilateral ties throughout the ages. While these representations are historical products of "*longue durée*"⁶¹, they also reflect the Mediterranean's diverse and complex character originating from many linkages between politics, culture and geography.

Although there have been various Mediterranean representations, and these diverge imaginations have impacted bilateral relations between France and Turkey, this study offered a major pattern: "When the spatial imaginations of the Mediterranean developed by the two countries are adverse/unfavorable/conflictual, then the relationship in a given era deteriorates and *vice versa*". In this context, this study investigated whether this pattern can be applied to the uneasy contemporary relationship between France and Turkey, especially after the 2010s. Regarding this problematic, this study examined how the two states' representations of the Mediterranean have changed over time (several presidential/ministerial eras) and how these changes have affected contemporary bilateral relations. While historical representations were reviewed through Critical Geopolitics, the contemporary era was studied by a content analysis through one of the Word Embedding technic-Word2Vec. In this regard, Word2Vec AI models were trained by the news from AFP (between 2007-2021) and AA (between 2010-2021). Therefore, this study did not only cover Turkish and French relations but also contributed to the IR literature by applying a new promising method.

According to AI models, Turkey and France did not create distinct depictions of the region until 2017. While the Mediterranean was portrayed within the framework of cooperation for France, especially during the Sarkozy period, no representation was developed during the Hollande period, and the Mediterranean was considered on geographical grounds. Turkey also

60 Tolga Demiryol, "Natural Gas and Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean", *Heinrich Böll Stiftung Istanbul*, 7 September 2020, <https://tr.boell.org/en/2020/09/07/natural-gas-and-geopolitics-eastern-mediterranean>, (Accessed 14 April 2022).

61 A term literally meaning long duration or term coined by French historian Fernand Braudel. The "*longue durée*" is the French Annales school's method to the study of history, which prioritizes long-term historical structures over short-term timeframes. It is used to represent a perspective on history that goes beyond both human memory and the archaeological record, to consider climatology, demography, and geology, and to record the impact of events happening so slowly that those experiencing them are unable to notice them, such as the planet's changing nature or the steady increase in population in a specific area.

had a similar approach to the Mediterranean in this era. Hence, when there was no confrontation regarding representations in the past, the two states adopted a parallel and more harmonious foreign policy approach. However, after 2017, the two states embraced an agonistic approach toward the Mediterranean, which severely harmed bilateral relations. According to the AFP Model, the Macron administration kept the Mediterranean nearly identical with energy. In parallel to France's approach, AA models demonstrated that Turkey also adopted an energy-centric approach to the Mediterranean after 2016. Besides, both countries prioritized hard power tools over soft power, as seen in the models. Therefore, it would not be wrong to claim that one of the primary reasons for these approaches was the discovery of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, in addition to the energy-centric perspective, unlike France, Turkey also conceptualized the Mediterranean as a region where she was excluded. Many phrases with similar meanings to the Mediterranean indicated that Turkey was approaching the region with the perspective that she was "left alone", "excluded" and "provoked" in the Mediterranean as in the 1980s. This perception of self-marginalization incited Turkey, and she established troubled relationships with France and other states, especially in the Southern Mediterranean.

In conclusion, geopolitical representations encompass not just geographical issues but also collective cognitive beliefs, identities and imaginaries about specific locations.⁶² These representations are formed cumulatively over time, and they can aggregate a variety of cultural, historical, ethnic and geographical aspects. In this regard, this study argued that Mediterranean representations of France and Turkey have served as a barometer for deciphering the level of their bilateral relations. This fact helps to better comprehend and analyze Turkish-French bilateral ties and Turkish-European relations that have undergone a significant transformation in the contemporary era, particularly since the Arab Spring. Therefore, unless the two states mutually reconsider their ambitions, rebuild their relationship, and reinvent their spatial imaginations in and beyond the Mediterranean, one need not be a prophet to assume that tumultuous relations between Turkey and France (as well as with Europe) will last.

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⁶² Encel, *Comprendre la géopolitique*, p. 65-66.

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