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Abstract

Türkiye's strategic positioning as a middle power has become increasingly significant in the evolving landscape of global geopolitics. Leveraging its unique geographic location at the crossroads of Europe, Middle East, and Central Asia, Türkiye has adeptly navigated a complex array of international relationships, asserting influence in regional and global affairs. As the only country in NATO with a majority Muslim population, it also sought to build bridges and maintain constructive relations with emerging powers in the region. This article explores Türkiye's multifaceted role as a middle power, examining its diplomatic initiatives, regional architectures, economic strategies, and military engagements. Through a balanced approach of cooperation and assertiveness, Türkiye has positioned itself as a pivotal player in addressing regional conflicts, fostering economic partnerships, and contributing to global security frameworks. Additionally, the article delves into the challenges and opportunities that Türkiye faces in maintaining its middle power status, including navigating great power rivalries and managing domestic political dynamics. By analyzing Türkiye's foreign policy and strategic objectives, it provides key observations into how middle powers can effectively contribute to an increasingly multipolar world order, while emphasizing Türkiye's potential to shape international norms and foster stability in an interconnected global landscape.

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Geopolitical Realignments in the 21st Century

After a brief U.S.-led unipolar moment between 1990 and 2008, shifting power balances have led to the transition of global might from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region and the evolution of the Western-centric rule-based neoliberal world order toward a more equitable multicentered order. Great power rivalry ushered by China's meteoric rise and assertive policies in the Indo-Pacific sphere created anxieties in the U.S. and intensified strategic competition for technological supremacy and global domination.

As the U.S. forms regional alliances to navigate its complex relationship with China and contain its expansion, from example through Quad involving Australia, India and Japan, resentment against the inability of international bodies to act as impartial mediators in arenas of conflict such as the Western Pacific, Middle East, and Ukraine grow. Confidence in the permanent members of the UN Security Council to maintain global security erodes not only due to costly grinding wars, trade protectionism, and declining productivity, but also to a lack of a coordinated response to most pressing challenges such as climate change, poverty, and mass migration.

The paradigm of defensive neorealism in international relations sees "conflict as the representative picture of world politics," focuses "more on issues of distribution rather than efficiency," and lends more credence to "power as an instrument and a stake".¹ Changes in relative power trajectory such as China's rise against the U.S. or Russia's resurgence against Europe are a structural cause of major shifts in the international system, which often increase the probability of war.² Risk is a product of Threat and Vulnerability ($\text{Risk} = \text{Threat} \times \text{Vulnerability}$). The heightened insecurity in such an unstable world and exposures it increases are the main reasons why countries seek to hedge their risks.

The risk for tensions around flash points such as Philippines, Taiwan, or Israel-Gaza to spill into a wider conflict like in Ukraine is real. Catastrophic outcomes of a such a showdown would imperil the global economy beyond recognition and reshape the security landscape. The spiral of arms race in the security dilemma between great powers and their quest for power-maximization in pursuit of hegemony makes a dangerous world. But it also creates room for "middle powers" to shape 21st century multipolarity.

¹ Robert Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999): 42–63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539347>.

² Charles F. Doran, "Theories of International Relations: Theories of Systemic Change" (Lecture 4, Johns Hopkins SAIS, October 5, 2020).

As the global economic gravity shifts to Eurasia and the multicentered world evolves into multipolarity, developing countries of the Global South seek a louder voice, a more level playing field, and equitable treatment in world affairs – and if not, then they intend take the helm and build ad-hoc partnerships to reach desired outcomes. The term “hedging middle power” in this discussion designates multi-aligned, regional powers such as the UAE, Indonesia, Brazil, and Türkiye that seek strategic autonomy and prioritize economic pragmatism over a steadfast approach to alliance-building.

Regional organizations such as the BRICS+, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) are manifestations of rising regionalism among hedging middle powers. Within these groups, geoeconomics dictates a more nuanced approach for members with similar challenges to catch up with technological advancements and to re-focus on converging interests rather than those that set them apart.

A major driving factor behind re-alignment and cooperation among middle powers such as Türkiye, Indonesia, Pakistan, or the Gulf countries is to distribute risks by hedging against potential changes in great power dynamics – as in U.S. foreign policy toward Russia and China, or India’s naval activism as a rising power in the subcontinent. Survival in this multi-layered, unstable world order necessitates flexibility to compartmentalize and re-prioritize policy agendas.

Türkiye as a Hedging Middle Power in a Multicentered World

Located at the crossroads of lucrative trade corridors and energy transit routes between Europe Asia, and Africa, Türkiye is engulfed within a geopolitical storm that upends traditional alliances and redefines partnerships on a global level. As the easternmost member of NATO, bordering tumultuous regions, Türkiye served as a bulwark against Soviet-communist expansion during the Cold War and against the spread of radical Islamism in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks. But its quest for agency and strategic autonomy since mid-2010s has dictated a more independent foreign policy.

Türkiye’s more recent activism in regions near and afar, from Syria to Libya, from the Balkans to East Africa, is a product of both its imperial legacy to expand economic partnerships in the post-Ottoman space and its quest for security in an unstable world. Driven by a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors, Türkiye assumed a balancer role between competing poles in its periphery, supported by a tendency toward multi-alignment and hedging.

Over the past twenty years, Türkiye’s deteriorating relations with the EU over the frozen conflict in Cyprus and rising tensions with the U.S due to the presence of YPG-PKK terrorists in Syria-Iraq gradually pushed Türkiye to the outskirts of Western political orbit. Türkiye’s ties with Brussels and Washington sank to their lowest levels after the failed coup attempt by FETÖ (Gülenist)-affiliated forces in 2016 and subsequent crises over the

purchase of Russian-made S-400s, expulsion from the F-35 program, and imposition of CAATSA sanctions on Ankara.

Until 2020, Türkiye perceived aggression in its traditional allies against its core national interests, and in fear of looking weak, it started building up an offensive arsenal with sophisticated weapons such as drones, frigates, smart munitions, and precision-guided missiles. Guided by resurgent nationalism and supported by a powerful military-industrial complex, Türkiye exhibited delicate power-balancing maneuvers to reach its geopolitical goals against a growing coalition of belligerents, including the EU, Israel, Iran, and the Gulf countries at the time.

In the new era of reconciliation that started with Abraham Accords (2020), Al-Ula Summit (2021), Türkiye-Gulf partnerships (2021), and Athens Declaration (2023), Ankara adopted a more pragmatic approach to alliance politics and re-prioritized its interests to emphasize economic bridge-building toward shared prosperity. As the Turkish economy showed signs of fragility, the government intended to make the business climate more investor friendly and attract foreign capital.

A return to economic orthodoxy and sound fiscal policy gave confidence to markets just as alternative providers of finance such as China, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia decided to expand their footprint in Turkish assets. Türkiye's aim to diversify its business portfolio and cultivate deeper economic ties with a wider array of nations is an outcome of both frustration with imbalances in the current form of global governance and enchantment with rising multipolarity. Its proactive involvement in regional peace initiatives from Gaza to Ukraine and from Libya to Azerbaijan is also a sign of Türkiye's desire to gain heightened status as a mediator and trusted advisor.

While all this is predictable, what surprised many observers was Turkish MFA Hakan Fidan's statement of interest at a recent meeting with Russian President Putin to join BRICS. In a world in which "the future of the global order is highly uncertain",³ Fidan's visits to Russia and China before the NATO summit in Washington by itself underscore Türkiye's (or at least one branch of the government's) desire to become a hedging middle power by acting as a multipolar pivot and a regional balancer between the NATO/U.S. and Eurasia.

While Putin embraces Ankara's interest in joining the BRICS and China looks to diversity its investments through stronger ties with Ankara, Türkiye sees BRICS as a balancing mechanism to de-risk its exposure against the current Western-led global order as opposed to a replacement mechanism. Partly since Türkiye's largest trade partner is the EU (50% share), it aims to be the key link in a trade union along the Trans-Caspian "Middle Corridor" from China to Europe. This is why, in his visit to Beijing in 2019, Turkish

³ Sarang Shidore, "Southeast Asia in BRICS Is Good for the Global Order," *Foreign Policy* (blog), July 24, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/04/brics-southeast-asia-thailand-malaysia-russia-china/>.

President Erdoğan stressed that Türkiye and China share a “common future vision” and expressed its desire to join the SCO.⁴

Erdoğan re-iterated his interest in the SCO to Chinese President Xi when the two met in Astana, and committed to deepen their relationship in trade, tourism, and investment. China’s growing geoeconomic role embodied in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an important factor for this change in Türkiye’s worldview. Chinese EV manufacturer BYD’s decision to invest US\$1 billion to build a factory plant and launch an export hub in Türkiye, for instance, is a tell-tale sign of how shifting economic interests dovetail with political realignments. Aside from its symbolism, an investment of this magnitude is poised to induce competition and boost Turkey’s growing EV sector, acting as a catalyst to attract more foreign investors.

Such friend-shoring/ally-shoring to manufacture in or source from countries that face similar bottlenecks or have complementary advantages is an important factor that brings countries of the Global South together. In Türkiye specifically, it opens new avenues for young talent and moves them up in the value chain, acting as an incentive to manufacture higher-end products, and that way to increase the share of value-added, high-tech sector in exports. Hedging against Western monopoly on certain supply chain items and defense technologies, along with localization, knowledge transfer, and longer-term strategic partnership rather than transnationalism of buy-and-forget type deals, also helps to de-risk Turkish industrial base.

Impact of Türkiye’s Realignment on Regional Dynamics

Unlike China and Russia, Türkiye is not Washington’s adversary. It is, however, constrained by and dissatisfied with the U.S.-led world order due to the interest deficit between its material capabilities and acknowledged role in the system. As U.S.’ relative power is slowly eroding, where Türkiye’s interests meet with BRICS+ and the SCO are in the quest to reform global governance structures and give a louder voice for hedging middle powers to raise their aspirations in decision-making mechanisms.

Also, despite their centrality on land, China and Russia have constrained access routes to southern seas, which gives them an incentive to cultivate “amphibious states”⁵ with maritime access, such as Türkiye, Pakistan, and Iran for power projection and security connections. Pursuing its self-interest, Türkiye diverges from other NATO members by working with Russia and China in defense technology partnership and not joining Western sanctions on either one or Iran.

⁴ Tuba Eldem, “Spotlight Turkey: A Pivotal Swing State In Nato,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, September 7, 2021, <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1070/spotlight-turkey-a-pivotal-swing-state-in-nato>.

⁵ K.E. Calder, *Super Continent: The Logic of Eurasian Integration* (California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 73–74.

For some in Western capitals, this precarious situation undermines NATO's alliance purpose, mission, and coherence. It also puts a big question mark on whether membership to NATO can feasibly co-exist with the SCO and/or BRICS, since NATO is not only a military alliance but a political one as well. There is no formal mechanism to expel an ally from the North Atlantic club, but it would become extremely difficult for Ankara to run competing political agendas at such high-level fields without facing some form of repercussion from either side or both.

If the war in Ukraine continues for a long time, the Gaza war sustains the risk to spread out to the rest of the Middle East, and a potential Taiwan crisis looms close, Türkiye may have to drop fence-sitting and make some hard choices as to whose side to be on. It may even be inadvertently drawn into a conflict over Russia or Iran and be left out in the dark having to navigate its own exit strategy from multiple crises.

There are also limits to Türkiye's economic maneuverability despite all the drum beat on hedging. The country is a major recipient of Western investment, above all. U.S., UK, Netherlands, and Germany are the top four FDI investors with the EU overall "commanding a substantial 59% share of FDI inflows" as opposed to Middle East and Central Asia that contribute roughly 8% each.⁶

75% dependent on imports for its primary energy demand and running a chronic current account deficit with rampant inflation, Türkiye cannot de-dollarize its economy in the foreseeable future, unlike what China and even some Gulf countries are contemplating to do. Even its energy trade with Russia and Iran in local currencies are indexed to the U.S. dollar.⁷ Beyond this, neither China nor Russia would want to transact in their local currencies for other tradable goods simply because they run huge trade surpluses against Türkiye. In short, it is still a tall order for Turkish decision makers to de-risk out of dollar-denominated capital markets and supply chains.

The way forward

To effectively navigate its evolving role as a middle power, Türkiye should pursue several strategic avenues:

1. **Enhance Diplomatic Engagements:** Türkiye should continue to strengthen diplomatic ties across various global platforms, especially with emerging economies in the Global South. Engaging in dialogue within organizations like BRICS+ and the

⁶ Hassan Jivraj, "Can Turkey Tempt Foreign Investors Back in 2024?," *fDi Intelligence* (blog), April 17, 2024, <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/feature/can-turkey-tempt-foreign-investors-back-in-2024-83668>.

⁷ "Turkey, Russia, Iran to Use Local Currencies for Trade | AA," September 9, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/international-relations/turkey-russia-iran-to-use-local-currencies-for-trade/21528>.

SCO can provide Türkiye with additional leverage in international negotiations and foster greater collaboration on shared challenges.

2. **Diversify Economic Partnerships:** To mitigate dependency on Western investment, Türkiye must seek to diversify its economic partnerships, particularly with countries in Asia and Africa. Initiatives that promote FDI from non-Western powers, as seen with recent investments from China, can create a more balanced economic portfolio.
3. **Focus on Regional Stability:** Türkiye should leverage its unique geographic position to act as a mediator in regional conflicts, such as those in Israel-Gaza, Libya, and the Caucasus. By positioning itself as a neutral facilitator, Türkiye can enhance its reputation as a stabilizing force, potentially attracting investment and strengthening its diplomatic relationships.
4. **Invest in Technological Innovation:** To enhance its economic resilience, Türkiye must prioritize investments in technological innovation and high-value industries as opposed to labor-intensive sectors and extractive/polluting industries. Collaborations with countries involved in the BRI or the “Middle Corridor” can catalyze advancements in key sectors, such as renewable energy, manufacturing, and information technology (IT).
5. **Strengthen Internal Political Cohesion:** Addressing domestic political dynamics is crucial for maintaining Türkiye’s agency on the global stage. Promoting a stable political environment will enhance Türkiye’s credibility as a partner and mediator, crucial for attracting investment and fostering regional cooperation.
6. **Maintain Flexible Foreign Policy:** Türkiye’s ability to adapt to shifting global dynamics while maintaining strategic autonomy will be essential. A flexible foreign policy that balances relations with both Western allies and non-Western powers will allow Türkiye to navigate great power rivalries without compromising its national interests.

By adopting these recommendations, Türkiye can solidify its position as a proactive middle power capable of influencing the multipolar world order while promoting regional stability and economic prosperity.