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Turkish Foreign Policy in the Face of Regional and Global Challenges

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ABSTRACT *This article essentially posits that Türkiye took advantage of the deepening competition between global powers under the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) to part ways with its traditional foreign policy tradition and pursue a more independent approach. That the country expanded its economic and military capacity significantly during the relevant period to support a balanced policy between the West, Russia, and China is another major argument. To put those claims to the test, this article primarily analyzes the expansion of Türkiye’s economic and military capacity and proceeds to focus on its policy toward the deepening rivalry between the West and Russia (due to the Ukraine war) and how it responded to the “rise of Asia.” Last but not least, this piece analyzes Türkiye’s pursuit of a more independent foreign policy, how the country clashed with the U.S., the European Union, and Russia as well as their allies on the ground, and how Ankara used its policy of balance to keep a lid on those tensions.*

Keywords: Türkiye, Regional Challenges, Global Changes, Independent Foreign Policy

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Introduction

Türkiye's foreign policy faced major challenges in the second half of the AK Party's two decades in power. Despite being a NATO ally and European Union (EU) candidate country, Ankara experienced serious problems with its Western allies in the 2010s. Having spent the 2000s trying to persuade domestic institutions that it had a legitimate right to govern Türkiye by virtue of having won democratic elections, the AK Party was compelled to try and force Western governments to accept that Türkiye had the right to adopt and implement its foreign policy independently throughout the following decade. After all, the 'internal guardianship' regime was frustrated with the government's democratization attempts to normalize civilian-military relations just as the 'external guardianship' regime opposed Türkiye's attempts to shape its foreign policy independently and in line with its population's expectations.

Upon coming to power, the AK Party government faced the negative consequences of the U.S.' illegal invasion of Iraq. Throughout the 2000s, when Türkiye prioritized the expansion of its economic and military capacity, it sought to offset its disagreements with the U.S. over the Iraq War by working more closely with the European Union. However, the rise of Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy (who publicly opposed Türkiye's EU membership) to power in Germany and France took a toll on Ankara's relations with Brussels, encouraging the Turkish government to seek closer cooperation with Middle Eastern nations in pursuit of a more diverse foreign policy. During this period, the country strengthened its ties with Iran, Iraq, and Syria yet experienced tensions with Israel over that state's attacks on Gaza. Later, Israel's assault on the *Mavi Marmara* caused a major crisis between the two countries, leading to Türkiye being charged with an 'axis shift.' It is important to note that Ankara's accusers refused to acknowledge that Israel's aggression was the main reason behind the deterioration of bilateral relations. Those criticizing Ankara also remained frustrated with Türkiye's attempts to cooperate with Muslim nations in the Middle East, a policy that raised questions about the regional order that the U.S. had established.

Unhappy with Türkiye's pursuit of an independent foreign policy, which inevitably clashed with their vested interests, the U.S. and some European countries attempted to mount pressure on the AK Party by supporting a coup attempt and collaborating with terrorist groups in the 2010s. Such transgressions encouraged Ankara to work more closely with Russia to offset the Western pressure. That cooperation extended to energy and other economic sectors as well as defense. Türkiye's decision to buy the Russian S-400 air defense system, in turn, subjected it to greater pressure and sanctions from its Western allies. It remains unclear whether the Western states took into consideration the pos-

sibility that their continued pressure might push Türkiye further away, encouraging Ankara to work even more closely with Russia and China, Asia's rising power. Nonetheless, it may be easier for them to take such risks because they know that Türkiye would be reluctant to become dependent on either Moscow or Beijing in a way that could result in disagreements akin to those between itself and the West.

With the exception of balancing, expanding its economic and military capacity has been the main method that Türkiye used under the AK Party to alleviate pressure and neutralize threats from the West, Russia, and other countries. In this regard, the Turkish economy grew 340 percent in terms of the nominal gross domestic product (GDP) and 420 percent in terms of GDP based on the purchasing power parity between 2002 and 2021. That the size of developed industrial nations' economies only doubled during that period demonstrates that Türkiye took major steps to catch up with those nations.

This article will primarily explain how the expansion of Türkiye's economic and military capacity contributed to its pursuit of a more independent foreign policy. It will proceed to dissect the impact of emerging fault lines in the global political system and especially the rise of Asia on Türkiye's pursuit of a more independent foreign policy as well as how Ankara has adapted to those circumstances. Furthermore, it will analyze how the escalating competition between the West and Russia (following the latter's attack on Ukraine) has been interpreted from the standpoint of Türkiye's policy of balance. Last but not least, this piece focuses on how Türkiye's steps in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East (within the context of its pursuit of a more independent foreign policy) led to a confrontation between itself and the U.S., the European Union, Russia, and their local partners. It also discusses the policies that AK Party governments implemented to manage those tensions.

The Impact of Economic and Military Capacity on Foreign Policy

During the AK Party years, the expansion of Türkiye's economic and military capacity was the main factor influencing the overall direction and inclinations of Turkish foreign policy.¹ The shrinking power gap between itself and de-

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In addition to the improvement of economic conditions, attempts by traditional arms suppliers to punish Türkiye or force it to change its policies by rejecting the sale of various products were among the main reasons why Ankara decided to actively strengthen its local defense industry

veloped industrial nations, in particular, encouraged Türkiye to act independently of those countries. A comparison between the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2002, the year that the AK Party came to power, and 2021 reveals that the Turkish economy made significant progress toward closing the gap with Western countries. For example, in nominal GDP terms, Italy’s economy was 5.3 times larger than the Turkish economy in 2002. By 2021, the Italian economy was just 2.6 times larger. That number

decreased from 6.3 to 3.6 for France and from 17.4 to 6.1 for Japan, as seen in Figure 1. During the same period, Türkiye’s share of the global GDP increased from 0.68 percent to 0.84 percent.

Table 1: Comparing Türkiye’s GDP under the AK Party with Select Developed Nations (2002-2021)

Country	GDP 2002 (B \$)	GDP 2021 (B \$)	Comparative GDP Ratio to Türkiye in 2002	Comparative GDP Ratio to Türkiye in 2022
U.S.	10,929	22,996	45.5	28.2
Japan	4,182	4,937	17.4	6.1
Germany	2,078	4,223	8.7	5.1
UK	1,784	3,186	7.4	3.9
France	1,501	2,937	6.3	3.6
Italy	1,276	2,099	5.3	2.6
Türkiye	240	815	–	–

Source: World Bank²

A quick look at GDP figures based on the purchasing power parity, which reflects Türkiye’s economic progress over the last two decades more accurately, reveals the country’s strong performance to catch up with developed nations. Accordingly, the gap between Türkiye and Germany narrowed from 3.9 times in 2002 to 1.8 times in 2021 (Table 2). According to the purchasing power parity, the Turkish economy had caught up with the Italian economy in terms of gross domestic product by 2021. Moreover, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that Türkiye would overtake Italy in 2022 to become the world’s 11th-largest economy.³ Again, based on the IMF’s purchasing power parity data, Türkiye’s share in the global economy (in GDP terms) increased from 1.32 percent in 2002 to 2.01 percent in 2021.⁴

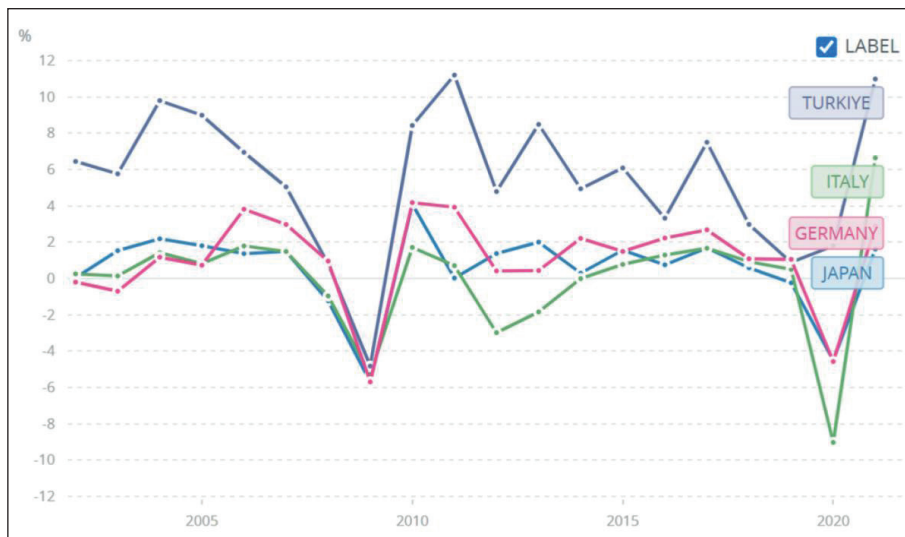
Table 2: Comparing Türkiye with Select Developed Nations in GDP Terms Acc. to PPP (2002-2021)

Country	GDP (B \$)	GDP (B \$)	Comparative GDP Ratio to Türkiye in 2002	Comparative GDP Ratio to Türkiye in 2021
U.S.	10,929	22,996	17.9	9.1
Japan	3,650	5,396	5.9	2.1
Germany	2,410	4,815	3.9	1.8
France	1,760	3,424	2.9	1.3
UK	1,730	3,344	2.8	1.3
Italy	1,640	2,713	2.7	1.04
Türkiye	612	2,591	-	-

Source: "GDP (Current US\$)-Türkiye, Italy, France, Japan, Germany, U.S., United Kingdom, Switzerland."

It is possible to observe that Türkiye recorded more robust economic growth than Italy and Japan during the AK Party years. Except for 2008, when the German economy outperformed the Turkish economy, Germany's growth rate has been consistently and notably less than Türkiye's growth rate (Figure 1). Recalling that Türkiye has experienced many negative developments since 2013, including the Gezi Park revolts, the December 2013 judicial coup attempt, the July 15 coup attempt, and Western (especially U.S.) sanctions, in addition to carrying the weight of more than 4 million (mostly Syrian) asylum-seekers, one must stress that the Turkish economy's ability to outperform developed and industrialized countries in terms of growth represented a significant achievement.⁵

Graph 1: Comparing Türkiye's GDP with Select Developed Nations (2002-2021)



Source: World Bank⁶



The remarkable Akıncı drones, using pioneering techniques developed by Baykar, stand as Türkiye's pinnacle in combat drone technology.
BAYKAR / AA

The expansion of Türkiye's economic capacity had an impact on the military domain, among other fields, as the country began to produce a significant percentage of the weapons that it required.⁷ With the share of local defense products skyrocketing to more than 70 percent, Türkiye's need for Western weapons plummeted, making it easier for the Turkish government to pursue an independent foreign policy. In addition to the improvement of economic conditions, attempts by traditional arms suppliers to punish Türkiye or force it to change its policies by rejecting the sale of various products were among the main reasons why Ankara decided to actively strengthen its local defense industry. For example, the U.S. refused to sell armed unmanned aerial vehicles (or armed drones) to Türkiye, resulting in the emergence of Baykar Technologies and TUSAŞ as local drone developers and, eventually, globally competitive companies.

Indeed, the effective use of Turkish armed drones in Syria, Libya, Karabakh, and Ukraine led to the emergence of a major export market and contributed to Türkiye's economic growth. Whereas Baykar Technologies sold \$664 million worth of armed drones in 2021 to become the country's top exporters in aerospace and defense,⁸ TUSAŞ ranked second with \$567 million. Meanwhile, Türkiye's total defense and aerospace exports soared to \$3.2 billion in

2021.⁹ Turkish defense and aerospace companies continued their export drive in 2022, with the country's relevant exports reaching \$1.98 billion within the first six months.¹⁰

In addition to unmanned aerial vehicles and armed drones, Türkiye's defense industry completed many projects to build combat helicopters, warships, armored vehicles, and missile systems over the last two decades. In this regard, the number of local defense projects increased from 62 to 750 between 2002 and 2022.

During the same period, the total budget of defense projects skyrocketed from \$5.5 billion to \$60 billion. Likewise, the country's defense R&D budget soared from \$49 million to \$1.24 billion and the defense and aerospace industries increased their exports by 13 times.¹¹

It is possible to argue that the expansion of Türkiye's diplomatic capacity and soft power (in addition to its economic and military capacities) has facilitated the active implementation of Turkish foreign policy. With the Ministry of Foreign Affairs increasing the number of Turkish diplomatic missions from 163 to 248 between 2002 and 2020, Türkiye's diplomatic network emerged as the world's fifth largest.¹² Furthermore, the Turkish government launched the Yunus Emre Institute to promote Türkiye and its language. It also increased the number of international offices of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), which plays a key role in coordinating the country's foreign aid, making them more active. At the same time, Turkish Maarif Foundation plays an important role in endorsing Türkiye's higher education opportunities abroad in a large number of countries. Last but not least, Türkiye boosted its soft power (and, by extension, level of activity in the international arena) by inviting tens of thousands of foreign students through the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) –which was established in 2010.¹³

Global Challenges and Türkiye

For countries like Türkiye, which seek to become a global power, correctly interpreting shifts in the international political system is particularly important. With Asia accounting for an increasing share of the global economy and becoming more prominent in international politics, Türkiye encountered new opportunities and risks amid its quest for an independent foreign policy. The emergence of rising powers like China, which offset the West's supremacy, imposed certain limits to the interventionist policies of the U.S. and traditional European powers. Compelled to focus more on the challenge from the Far

Türkiye sought greater independence in foreign policy under the AK Party, building on the robust economic growth and domestic democratization of the 2000s

Just as the Turkish government has been careful to maintain a balanced relationship with Russia to avoid an energy supply crisis, which Europe suffered due to the Russia-Ukraine war, it has worked equally hard to have a healthy relationship with the West not to be targeted by EU and U.S. sanctions

Under those circumstances, Türkiye's Western allies, starting with the U.S., had to choose between the following ways to respond to its pursuit of greater autonomy: (i) to refrain from any extreme reactions that could result in losing Türkiye, a traditional ally, by appreciating the reasons behind Ankara's pursuit of autonomy and allowing it to act independently within the Western alliance, and (ii) to try and replace the AK Party with a more "harmonious" government, assuming that Türkiye's pursuit of independence could result in losing that country in the medium or long term. In this sense, the West responded to the Far Eastern challenge by building a bloc rooted in coercion as opposed to consent. Accordingly, instead of trying to include Türkiye in this alliance, they tried to reshape Türkiye and then incorporate it into the alliance. Tensions over the December 2013 judicial coup, the July 2016 coup attempt, and economic sanctions took a heavier toll on Türkiye-U.S. relations than any other development in history. There is still no rational explanation for Washington's decision to undermine its bilateral relations with Ankara over the Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) and the YPG. Quite the contrary, it is possible to conclude that anti-Turkish lobbyists in the U.S. pushed Washington's Türkiye policy away from rationality to undermine the basis of its alliance with Ankara. In addition to being misled by lobbyists with narrow interests, Washington's prolonged commitment to a misguided Türkiye policy was rooted in the inability of U.S. decision-makers to grasp the changing nature of Turkish-American relations. The two countries had traditionally built an extremely unbalanced relationship of mutual dependence, which enabled the U.S. to successfully intervene in Türkiye. Due to Ankara's recent progress and expansion of its economic and military capacity, however, such interventions have become less likely to succeed. Under the current circumstances, Washington needs to accept this new reality and treat Türkiye as an equal partner whose sovereignty it respects in the face of the serious challenge from the Far East.

East, the Western states found it difficult to preserve their influence over places that they traditionally considered part of their spheres of influence.¹⁴ The Middle East, where Türkiye remains an important player, is among those parts of the world.

Türkiye sought greater independence in foreign policy under the AK Party, building on the robust economic growth and domestic democratization of the 2000s. That development took place against the backdrop of the West's challenges in responding to global power shifts.

However, the U.S. Middle East policy being misled by influential lobbyists and the U.S. security establishment's failure to grasp the new reality prevented its policy toward Türkiye from being rational.¹⁵

A quick look at Türkiye's steps (against the backdrop of the irrationality of its Western 'allies') would reveal that the AK Party governments remained committed to an independent foreign policy while attaching importance to the country's relations with the West as an important component of its policy of balance. Just as the West cares about keeping a country like Türkiye in its corner amid global competition, Ankara has been careful to keep its relationship with the West at a certain level in line with its balanced policy. Still, the above-mentioned reasons pushed the West's policy toward Türkiye away from rationality, occasionally making it difficult for Ankara to keep its relations with the U.S. and Europe at a certain level. During those periods, Türkiye worked more closely with the West's rivals and, among other things, purchased weapon systems from those countries that it had been unable to buy from its Western allies. The country's decision to buy the S-400 missile defense system from Russia was a case in point.¹⁶ It is important to note, however, that Türkiye raised no questions about its NATO membership, pursued EU membership against all odds, and remained committed to preserving its institutionalized relations with the West. Those developments highlighted the limits of Ankara's cooperation with Asia. At the same time, Türkiye's refusal to treat Asia as the West's replacement as a source of support indicated that it did not want to replicate the unbalanced relationship of mutual dependence, which it developed with the West after Second World War, and instead pursued a policy of balance to be able to act independently.

Turkish Foreign Policy and the Rise of Asia

Since the perspective of 'the rise of Asia' rests primarily on the rapid economic progress of East Asian nations, the possibility of Asia serving as a counterbalance against the West in Turkish foreign policy has emerged especially in the economic realm. Shifts in Türkiye's external trade data during the AK Party years attest to that fact. Whereas the European Union accounted for 46.4 percent of Türkiye's external trade in 2002, when the AK Party came to power, its share plummeted to 35.6 percent by 2021. In contrast, the share of Asian countries (excluding the Middle East and Russia) increased from 9.5 percent to 17.4 percent during the same period. At the same time, the U.S. accounted for 5.5 percent of Türkiye's external trade in 2021 (down from 7.4 percent in 2002) and China's share soared from 1.8 percent to 7.2 percent. Those numbers show that the excessive growth of China's external trade had an impact on Türkiye, among other nations, and there was significant demand for Chinese products in the country.

Table 3: Main Regions in Türkiye's External Trade (2002-2021)

	Export (Mil \$)		Imports (Mil \$)		Trade Volume (Mil \$)		Share (Percent)	
	2002	2021	2002	2021	2002	2021	2002	2021
EU (27)	17,433	87,744	23,260	81,087	40,693	168,831	46.4	35.6
North America	3,596	15,317	3,420	13,463	7,016	28,780	8.0	6.1
Asia (Other)	1,790	17,954	6,530	64,679	8,320	82,633	9.5	17.4
Near and Middle East	3,440	34,847	2,321	14,719	5,761	49,566	6.6	10.4
Russia	1,172	5,290	3,892	27,599	5,064	32,889	5.8	6.9
Total	36,059	213,602	51,554	260,682	87,613	474,284	100	100

Source: TÜİK¹⁷

In turn, the share of Asian countries and regions, including the Middle East and Russia, in Türkiye's total external trade soared from 22 percent to 35 percent in 2002-2021 as a natural result of shifts in the global economic system. A closer look at those numbers, however, reveals that Türkiye's trade with Asia suffers from a serious imbalance, creating a major problem of trade deficit for the former. That issue grew more serious vis-à-vis Russia and the Far East between 2002 and 2021. In contrast, the export-to-import ratio of Türkiye's trade with the European Union and the U.S. improved to some degree. Whereas the export-to-import ratio of Türkiye's trade with the European Union was approximately 75 percent in 2002, that number had reached 108 percent by 2021. Meanwhile, the ratio remained largely unchanged and extremely low for Türkiye's trade with Asian nations (excluding the Middle East) at 27 percent.

Looking at Türkiye's trade with China, India, and South Korea (East and South Asian nations with the highest bilateral trade volume), the country's external trade deficit problem becomes much more obvious. From 2002-2021, the share of Türkiye's trade with China increased from 1.8 percent to 7.2 percent of its total trade volume. However, the trade deficit in 2021 corresponded to approximately 58 percent of Türkiye's total trade deficit. Likewise, the \$22 billion trade deficit with Russia amounted to some 47 percent of Türkiye's total external trade deficit in 2021.

The above data demonstrates that Asian countries and Russia came to claim a significantly larger share of Türkiye's total imports over the last two decades –which reached 41 percent in 2021. Nonetheless, the European Union and the U.S. remained the country's main export markets with 48 percent in 2021. Recalling that the Russia-Ukraine war triggered Western sanctions against Russia and energy supply issues, along with China's monopoly over the supply of many key elements, created uncertainty in the global marketplace, it is pos-

sible to conclude that Türkiye –as a country that has strong economic and political relations with the West, its export market, and Russia and Asian countries, which are major suppliers– is rather important. Just as the Turkish government has been careful to maintain a balanced relationship with Russia to avoid an energy supply crisis, which Europe suffered due to the Russia-Ukraine war, it has worked equally hard to have a healthy relationship with the West not to be targeted by EU and U.S. sanctions.

Policymakers in Ankara have been taking China into account in the development of Turkish foreign policy since Beijing has viewed Türkiye as an important partner within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative

Table 4: Türkiye's External Trade with Select Asian Countries (2002-2021)

	Exports (Mil \$)		Imports (Mil \$)		Trade Volume (Mil\$)		Share (Percent)	
	2002	2021	2002	2021	2002	2021	2002	2021
China	268	3,366	1,368	30,953	1,636	34,319	1.8	7.2
India	73	1,225	564	7,521	637	8,746	0.7	1.8
South Korea	55	942	900	7,348	955	8,290	1.1	1.7
Total	36,059	213,602	51,554	260,682	87,613	474,284	100	100

Source: *The Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK)*¹⁸

It is possible to reach similar conclusions vis-à-vis Türkiye's relations with China, which has been playing an increasingly significant role in the country's external trade. Keeping in mind that China has become a major supplier of some critical materials in the world, it would be easier to appreciate why the country must be taken into consideration in shaping Türkiye's economic and foreign policy.

Accordingly, policymakers in Ankara have been taking China into account in the development of Turkish foreign policy since Beijing has viewed Türkiye as an important partner within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative –a major economic and political reflection of China's growing importance in the global economy. Whereas the Turkish government did not disregard Chinese efforts to carve out a sphere of political influence for itself through that project, it has attempted to cooperate with Beijing, especially in the economic domain, based on the win-win principle. In this regard, the two countries signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the Harmonization of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with the Middle Corridor Initiative in 2015. That document represents an attempt to harmonize the Belt and Road Initiative with Ankara's proposed "Middle Corridor" project.¹⁹ The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad as part of that project created

In recent years, Moscow's policy of strengthening its influence abroad resulted in rivalry and occasional indirect confrontations between Türkiye and Russia in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Caucasus

an uninterrupted railway bridge between Türkiye and China. On December 4, 2020, a train left İstanbul to cross a distance of 8,693 kilometers and reach the Chinese city of Xi'an on December 19, 2020. That was the first batch of exports via rail.²⁰

In 2017, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited China at the invitation of that country's leader, Xi Jinping, to attend the first meeting of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Participat-

ing in that event, which many other leaders attended, reflected the Turkish government's desire to further strengthen its relations with Beijing.²¹ Whereas Türkiye did not attend the forum's second meeting in 2019 at the top level, President Erdoğan paid an official visit to China as a guest of the Chinese head of state within the same year. That visit attested to China's growing importance in Turkish foreign policy.²² Altogether, it is noteworthy that Türkiye's Erdoğan visited China quite frequently in the 2010s: once as prime minister (in 2012) and twice as president (in 2015 and 2019) for official visits on a bilateral basis and twice (in 2017 and 2019) to attend international meetings.

It is also possible to observe that investments have very significantly increased in recent years, as the total investment of Chinese companies in Türkiye reached \$4.5 billion. Considering that approximately 70 percent of that investment has been made over the last four years, China's investments in the country can be expected to further increase in the near future.²³ Despite that increase, however, Western countries continue to account for the vast majority of foreign investments. Indeed, China does not rank among the top 10 investors in Türkiye. Between 2003 and 2020, the Netherlands became the top foreign investor in the country with \$26.2 billion –with the U.S. ranking second with \$12.9 billion and the United Kingdom claiming third place with \$11.6 billion. As a matter of fact, the top nine investors were all from Western countries. Azerbaijan, in turn, ranked 10th.²⁴

China's geographical, historical, and cultural distance from Türkiye resulted in that country's failure to be one of the top 10 countries in terms of foreign direct investment. Notwithstanding, Türkiye launched the Asia Anew Initiative in 2019 based on the assumption that the growing importance of China and other Asian countries in the global economy would inevitably spill over to international politics. Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs unveiled that initiative on its official website in August 2019 to "more actively benefit from opportunities stemming from developments in Asia and the resulting potential for cooperation." Through the Asia Anew Initiative, the ministry intended to

“strengthen our relations with Asian countries in a systematic and stable manner, on the basis of a holistic and comprehensive strategy, and with the help of the development of regional, sub-regional and country-specific approaches,” the country attempted to catch up with the international system’s transformation. In this regard, Ankara hoped to build rational relationships with Asia’s rising nations, starting with China, on the basis of the “win-win” principle. Accordingly, one of the Turkish government’s main goals was to promote “more balanced” trade between Türkiye and the relevant countries.²⁵

Where Türkiye Stands on the Escalating Russia-West Rivalry

As a country that Türkiye uses to counterbalance its relations with the West, Russia –unlike China– frequently ends up on the opposite side of Ankara in regional disputes. In recent years, Moscow’s policy of strengthening its influence abroad resulted in rivalry and occasional indirect confrontations between Türkiye and Russia in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Caucasus. As seen in Syria, the possibility of that competition giving way to confrontation remains quite high. Similar risks also exist in Türkiye’s dealings with the U.S., its NATO ally, in the Syrian theater. It is important to stress, however, that both countries are aware of the depth of Türkiye’s security concerns and therefore refrain from any confrontation. A comparison between Moscow’s and Washington’s Syria policies would reveal similarities and differences from Ankara’s perspective. The two countries have the common goal of carving out spheres of influence within Syria and certain collaborations of which Türkiye does not approve.

There are also similarities and differences between the Russian and American approaches to the PKK/YPG terrorist organization, the elimination of which remains at the top of Türkiye’s priorities in Syria. Both countries make the same mistake of viewing that group as an entity with which they can cooperate within the framework of their respective regional policies. It is possible to argue, however, that Russia has taken Türkiye’s concerns more seriously than the U.S. A comparison between Russia’s approach to Operation Olive Branch, which Türkiye conducted against PKK/YPG militants in Afrin, and the U.S. response to Operation Peace Spring against PKK/YPG elements to the East of the Euphrates River would attest to that fact. For example, the Russian government withdrew its forces from Afrin and relaxed its control of the Syrian airspace to facilitate the operations of Turkish fighter jets during Operation Olive Branch. In this sense, it gave the green light to Türkiye’s cross-border operations and refrained from adopting any policy that could frustrate the Turkish government.²⁶ In contrast, U.S. President Donald Trump gave his blessing to Operation Peace Spring in line with his broader goal of retreating from Syria, yet many institutions and groups, including the U.S. Congress and various media outlets, launched a severely anti-Turkish campaign. That period went down as one of the low points

in Türkiye-U.S. relations.²⁷ Moreover, Russia proved to be a stakeholder that Türkiye can meet at the negotiating table (despite being on opposite sides), encouraging the Turkish government to think of Moscow as a partner with which it can cooperate to offset mounting pressure from Washington.

Furthermore, Russia remains among Türkiye's top suppliers of energy and continues to build a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, which facilitated the resolution of political problems between the two nations. Meanwhile, Türkiye's decision to purchase some weapon systems from Russia, which it cannot buy from the U.S. or its other Western allies, represents a significant step for Turkish foreign policy and global politics.²⁸ The S-400 air defense system's procurement from Moscow led Washington to exert additional pressure on Ankara. That the Turkish government remained committed to its agreement with Russia despite mounting pressure, however, signaled that it viewed its relations with its Western allies in new terms and provided insights into Türkiye's take on the West's relations with Russia. In other words, the country is determined to no longer engage with its immediate neighborhood based on impositions from Washington or Brussels but in line with its own interests.

Türkiye's policy of balance, which involves not actively taking sides in disputes between the West and Russia, manifested itself during the Russia-Ukraine war as well. Having rejected Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea because it viewed that move as a violation of international law, Türkiye described that country's February 24, 2022 attack on Ukraine as unlawful and opposed it.²⁹ At the same time, however, the Turkish government refused to join U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia to distinguish itself from those countries. Then Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu summarized Türkiye's policy as follows:

Generally speaking, we have not joined such sanctions as a matter of principle. We have no inclination to join the latest sanctions either. (...) Türkiye doesn't have to pick sides. Türkiye has a principled stance. This is a country that strengthens its relations and cooperation with both nations, Russia and Ukraine, despite our differences of opinion. In case of war, we are not compelled to pick sides.³⁰

He also stressed that it was important for Türkiye to act this way to serve as a mediator to end the war. Over the following months, it became clear that the country was right to adopt that policy. In March 2022, the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine met in Antalya and official delegations from the two countries held talks in Istanbul with Türkiye mediating. Although those meetings did not yield any results, Türkiye emerged as a mediator during that process and continued to play that role. On July 22, 2022, official delegations from Moscow and Kyiv met in the presence of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to reach an agreement for the de-

livery of Ukrainian and Russian grains to international markets through the Turkish Straits. That agreement represented an important step toward ending a serious food crisis in many countries and contributed to the emergence of a more positive atmosphere, which could lead to more comprehensive agreements between the two nations to end the war in the future.³¹

The main characteristic of Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party has been the country's high level of activity in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus, North Africa, and the Balkans

Ankara does not usually side with the West regarding Russia and instead pursues a policy of balance because its NATO “allies,” starting with the U.S., do not act in line with the spirit of alliance regarding threats facing Türkiye, fail to act in solidarity with the country, and even provide (in)direct support to terrorist groups working against it. At the same time, Russia, too, takes steps to undermine Türkiye's national security –which marks the limits of cooperation between Ankara and Moscow. Russia collaborating with Iran against Türkiye in the Middle East, emerging as a rival of Türkiye and its close ally, Azerbaijan, in the Caucasus, joining the anti-Türkiye front in Libya, and efforts to exert greater influence over the Balkans, starting with Bosnia-Herzegovina, lead to confrontations between Ankara and Moscow and serve as a reminder of the obstacles to closer cooperation among them.

Keeping in mind the historical power struggle between the Ottoman and Russian empires, it seems unlikely for Ankara and Moscow to start cooperating in the above-mentioned areas of competition. In turn, that fact encourages the Turkish government to counter-balance Russia by keeping its relations with the U.S. and Europe on a certain level instead of altogether turning its back on the West, with which it has experienced very serious problems in recent years. Moreover, Türkiye being a NATO ally remains an important component of that balancing act –which is why domestic advocates of abandoning the policy of balance and siding with Moscow insist on terminating the country's NATO membership.

Turkish Foreign Policy in the Face of Regional Issues

The main characteristic of Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party has been the country's high level of activity in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus, North Africa, and the Balkans. Türkiye's level of engagement with those regions was determined by the expansion of its economic, military, and diplomatic capacity as well as the reflection of the international system's transformation on those places and how the AK Party's senior leaders, starting with President Erdoğan, thought of Türkiye's place in world politics. Türkiye shaped

Ankara's firm commitment to an independent foreign policy and prioritization of its economic, security, and political interests led to a confrontation in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean between Türkiye and three global players as well as their regional partners: the U.S., Russia, and the European Union

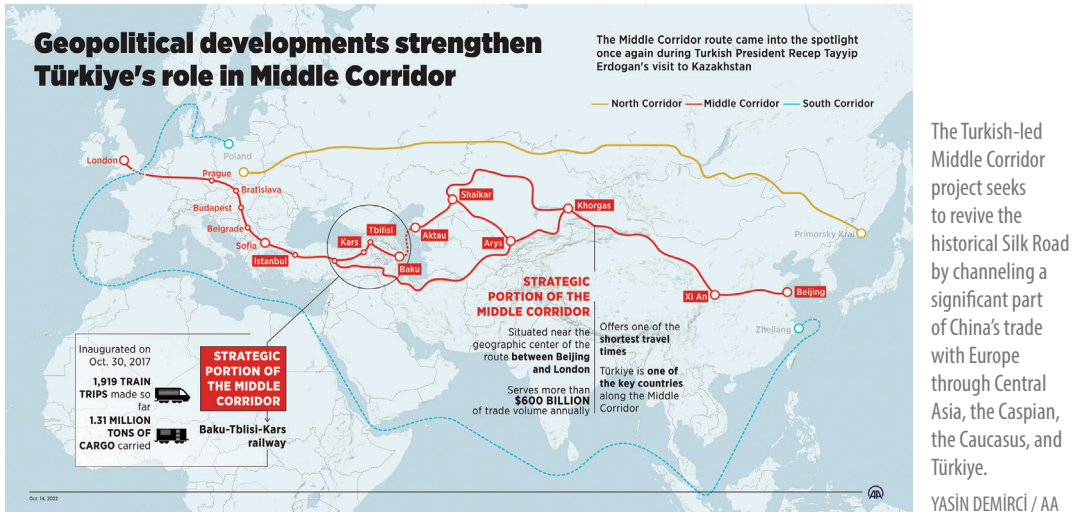
Türkiye to adopt a policy that promoted cooperation with regional players as well as global powers exerting influence over the region. Initially, however, Türkiye strengthened its cooperation with Iran, Syria, and Iraq excessively and opposed Israel's aggression – which caused problems between Türkiye and the U.S. and European countries under the influence of the Israel lobby there. Later, the Arab revolts in the Middle East and North Africa made it more difficult for Türkiye to engage with those regional powers on the basis of cooperation. Having emerged as an important mediator for the resolution of regional problems prior to the Arab revolts, Türkiye was compelled to pick sides in places like Syria, Egypt, and Libya as protests erupted.

The decisions, which Ankara made within that context, took a toll on its relations with Iran over Syria, and Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Egypt and Tunisia. At the same time, some Western countries (which had previously expressed their frustration over the AK Party government's independent steps in foreign policy by complaining about Türkiye's 'axis shift') attempted to take advantage of the erupting chaos in the Middle East to restore Türkiye's previous position. The Turkish government, in turn, responded to impositions from countries, which opposed it in Syria, Libya, and Egypt as well as attempted to fuel domestic pressure by supporting FETÖ and the PKK/YPG, with a delicate policy of balance and by remaining committed to its independent foreign policy approach.

Ankara's firm commitment to an independent foreign policy and prioritization of its economic, security, and political interests led to a confrontation in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean between Türkiye and three global players as well as their regional partners: the U.S., Russia, and the European Union. In some areas of competition, the country encountered one or

its policy toward those regions amid competition with regional powers like Iran, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia as well as the U.S., Russia, and some European countries. At the same time, however, it was compelled to pursue 'normalization' and cooperation with them to address regional issues.

In truth, keeping in mind that the core principles of Turkish foreign policy during the AK Party's first term were 'zero problems with neighbors' and 'multi-dimensional foreign policy,' it was possible for



two of those players. In contrast, it had to push back against all three simultaneously in the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria. In Libya, there was an attempt to overthrow the Turkish-backed and Tripoli-based Government of National Accord. The perpetrators included EU members like France and Greece as well as Russia and close U.S. allies like the UAE and Egypt. Those states worked together to end Türkiye's presence in Libya. Likewise, EU members like France, as well as Israel, the UAE, Egypt, and the U.S., supported Greece and the Greek Cypriots, who pursued a maximalist policy regarding maritime jurisdictions in the Eastern Mediterranean at Türkiye's expense.

During Donald Trump's presidency, the U.S. allied with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. Containing Türkiye's activities in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean were among the main goals of that alliance. Meanwhile, during the Obama Administration, the U.S. collaborated with terrorist entities like the PKK/YPG and FETÖ for the delimitation of Türkiye. It is also noteworthy that Russia and Iran worked closely in the Syrian theater to contain Türkiye, whereas Tehran competed with Ankara without Russian support in Iraq.³² In the early days of the Syrian uprising, Washington appeared to think along the same lines as the Turkish government. In time, however, it adopted an anti-Turkish policy by turning its cooperation with the PKK/YPG into the backbone of its Syria policy.

It is important to stress that global players' efforts to undermine other countries in the region (in addition to directly targeting Ankara) inflicted serious damage on Türkiye. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 fueled instability in that country, entailing extremely negative repercussions for Türkiye. Likewise, Washington imposed heavy sanctions on Iran under the Obama and Trump

Administrations to deal a heavy blow to the Turkish economy.³³ Looking at how Türkiye responds to attacks in the Middle East, it is possible to conclude that the country pursues an active policy on the ground and at the negotiating table, resorting to military force to defend its interest when diplomatic tools prove inadequate. Conducting several military operations in Syria and Iraq, neighboring countries where the PKK/YPG threats remain serious, within its counterterrorism framework, Türkiye did not refrain from confronting global and regional powers like the U.S., Russia, and Iran. Nonetheless, the Turkish government entered into negotiations and took joint action with those same powers to promote peaceful resolutions to ongoing problems. For example, Ankara worked with Tehran and Baghdad against an illegal independence referendum in Northern Iraq by Massoud Barzani, who led the Kurdistan Democratic Party, in 2017. Likewise, it held talks with Moscow and Tehran in Astana and Sochi to find a comprehensive solution to the Syrian question.³⁴

In other cases, Türkiye resorted to military force as needed. Specifically, the country threw its weight behind the legitimate governments of Libya and Qatar. Against the backdrop of an attempt by regional powers like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt to topple the governments in Doha and Tripoli, the Turkish authorities strengthen their military cooperation with the relevant players to send troops to both countries. However, that did not stop Türkiye from pursuing normalization with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt (which it had opposed in Qatar and Libya) through diplomatic negotiations under the right circumstances.

One could argue that the Turkish government launched diplomatic initiatives to normalize its relations with those three nations, which were strained by the Arab revolts, for two main reasons. Primarily, Joe Biden replaced Donald Trump as U.S. President and focused on China and Russia at the expense of its engagements in the Middle East. Moreover, the U.S. eased its pressure on Iran to end the nuclear dispute. Having pursued an interventionist policy across the region because they relied on Trump's support, the governments in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Cairo were concerned about those developments. As such, they pursued normalization with regional powers like Türkiye and Iran. The second point is that Türkiye suffered serious financial attacks amid its pursuit of an independent foreign policy despite Western objections and wanted to diversify its foreign relations to alleviate that pressure. That consideration was influential in starting the normalization process between Ankara and the relevant administrations. After all, political tensions with Middle Eastern nations had placed an additional burden on the Turkish economy. For instance, Saudi Arabia boycotted Turkish products over a crisis between the two countries. Türkiye's exports to that nations plummeted by more than 90 percent in 2021 as a result. That boycott ended in 2022, when President Erdoğan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited each other. At the same time, the return of Saudi tourists to Türkiye had a positive impact on the Turkish economy.³⁵

It is necessary to stress that the normalization process between Türkiye and Israel, which gained momentum in 2022, differs from Ankara's engagement with the Gulf states and Egypt. In truth, both processes started due to the Turkish government's interest in alleviating pressures from the West (starting with the U.S.) and Washington's weakening support to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Israel under Joe Biden. In other words, those nations needed to contain hostilities in the region. The normalization process between Ankara and Tel Aviv, however, was also informed by Türkiye's attempts to end or reduce the assaults of the Israeli lobby in the U.S. as well as Benjamin Netanyahu's replacement as prime minister. Whether normalization with Israel shall continue for a long time will depend on the future of that country's attacks against the Palestinians. After all, the two countries made many attempts to normalize their relations in the 2010s but those efforts failed due to Israel's attacks on the Palestinians (which amounted to massacres) and Türkiye's strong criticism of those actions.

Another process of normalization in Türkiye's regional ties related to Armenia. In line with the AK Party's policy of 'zero problems with neighbors,' the two countries made contact in 2008 and signed several protocols in Zurich on October 10, 2009. However, the government in Yerevan suspended those agreements following a controversial ruling by the Armenian Constitutional Court. That process of normalization, which thus failed, also fueled serious tensions between Ankara and Baku. Following that failed experiment, Türkiye repaired its relations with Azerbaijan and promoted stronger economic and military ties with that country. In 2020, Azerbaijan defeated Armenia in the Second Karabakh War (with Turkish support, starting with armed drones) and put the Armenian government in a difficult position. Accordingly, Yerevan responded positively to Ankara's calls for renewed normalization and the two countries began to make contact for that purpose in late 2021.³⁶

It is an indisputable fact that Türkiye became more active in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus, and the Balkans under AK Party governments between 2002 and 2022. During this period, Türkiye promoted closer economic cooperation with its neighbors (in line with its 'zero problems with neighbors' policy). Later, in the 2010s, the country shifted its attention to national security due to the regionwide instability that erupted during the Arab revolts and its strained relations with the West. At this point, the main debate focuses on whether the AK Party willingly abandoned its policy of economic

Under the AK Party governments, Türkiye pursued a foreign policy that actively contributed to the resolution of regional issues by taking the initiative in Qatar, Libya, and Somalia –with which it does not share land borders

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frustrated some Western nations that used their ‘allies’ and ‘proxies’ within the country and in the Middle East to make it harder for AK Party governments to stick to cooperation in foreign policy. To make matters worse, the Arab Uprisings fueled chaos in Syria, Egypt, and Libya, and certain developments in Syria and Libya placed Türkiye’s safety at risk. As such, concerns over and the emphasis on national security came to play a more prominent role in Ankara’s regional policies. It is possible to argue that the AK Party government made renewed normalization attempts in the 2020s to ensure that economic cooperation plays a bigger role in its regional policies. At the same time, Türkiye’s efforts to end the Russia-Ukraine war and open the grain corridor signaled its intention to serve as a mediator for the solution of regional and global problems.

Conclusion

Under the AK Party governments, Türkiye pursued a foreign policy that actively contributed to the resolution of regional issues by taking the initiative in Qatar, Libya, and Somalia –with which it does not share land borders. The country also advocates United Nations reform, demanding the establishment of a more just international order, to signal its intention to transition from a regional power to a global power. Finally, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly reiterating Türkiye’s commitment to becoming one of the world’s top 10 economies reflects its wish to become a global power.

Taking stock of two decades of AK Party rule with an eye on that objective, it is possible to conclude that Türkiye took major steps toward an independent foreign policy yet experienced serious tensions with the U.S. and some European nations due to its attempts to liberate Turkish foreign policy from the West’s excessively strong influence. In this sense, the country viewed the engagement of Western states, starting with the U.S., with terrorist groups like PKK/YPG

cooperation to focus on national security or was compelled by regional and global developments to make that choice. In truth, hardly anyone expected the AK Party to focus on national security at the expense of economic cooperation, provided that its policy of economic cooperation significantly increased Türkiye’s economic capacity in the 2000s. However, the increase in its economic and military capacity encouraged Türkiye to pursue a relatively independent foreign policy –which

and FETÖ and their sanctions as parts of an attempt to reinstate Türkiye's 'harmonious' policy. Despite those taxing policies, however, Ankara managed to pursue an independent foreign policy that puts its national interests first.

Keeping in mind the power imbalance between Türkiye and the Western nations, which pressured and sanctioned it, AK Party governments needed to engage with other players, which could offset the West, to keep pursuing an independent foreign policy. In this regard, the country sought to cooperate with more nations. Specifically, Türkiye used Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf states as a counterbalance in the 2000s -which was met with the claim of "axis shift" and the charge of "Middle Easternation." In truth, the AK Party government intended to elevate its long-neglected relations with the Middle East to a necessary level and to diversify its foreign policy to ensure that its Western allies would learn to treat Türkiye as an equal partner and to respect its national sovereignty –as opposed to turning its back on the West.

In the 2010s, some Western countries, including the U.S., sought to meddle with Türkiye's affairs by pressuring that country and using other tools. As such, the Turkish government pursued closer cooperation with players like Russia to offset the Western pressure. Judging by its growing influence over the global economic and political system, China, too, will likely emerge as a balancing player in Turkish foreign policy. However, Türkiye would not let its relations with Russia or China resemble the unbalanced interdependent relationship that the West wants to form and preserve with Ankara. In this sense, the Turkish government shall not experience the same problems as the West with those nations. Needless to say, this is necessary for these non-Western countries not to make the same mistakes as the West and for the Western countries to abandon their misguided policies designed to strongarm Ankara if they wish to have a healthy relationship with Türkiye. ■

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