



CHAPTER 16

**THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE
INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM AND
TÜRKİYE'S INCREASING ROLE**

Burhanettin DURAN

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM AND TÜRKİYE'S INCREASING ROLE

Burhanettin DURAN

Social Sciences University of Ankara

Abstract

The international system is undergoing a new transformation process caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine War, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this transformation process, such phenomena as climate change, global environmental problems, xenophobia, and technological competition are accompanied by the acceleration of great power rivalries, the rise of the South and regional powers, trade wars, the widespread pursuit of nuclear armament, the dysfunction of the UN institutions, the increase in proxy conflicts, and the emergence of new forms of terrorism. The power competition between the US, China, the EU, and Russia is bringing the post-Cold War order to an end and emphasizing the phenomenon of “chaotic multipolarity”. The state of chaos in the international system marks a period in which the US has abdicated its responsibility for maintaining global order, while China, as its main rival, lacks the will and capacity to shoulder the burden. Consequently, emerging global-regional risks and threats compel rising powers to become more self-reliant, prompting many regional players to prioritize “strategic autonomy” policies. This underscores the importance of adaptability, fostering new capacities, strong leadership, internal stability, and conducting effective diplomacy. Türkiye under the AK Party, which has been the country's sole ruling power for the last twenty-two years, has demonstrated remarkable adaptability to the new chaotic world. Advocating for the reform of the UN system, Türkiye shows the will to contribute to the establishment of a new global order. Having to navigate through the regional chaos sparked by the Arab uprisings and to grapple with migration and terrorism problems caused by civil wars, Türkiye presents a distinct model of strategic autonomy by effectively leveraging its hard and soft powers. Ankara's policies in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Karabakh serve as notable examples in this regard. Furthermore, its strategy of maintaining a balance between Washington and Moscow, its efforts toward normalization with certain countries, and its reshaping the existing alliance relations should be viewed as elements of the process of consolidating this strategic autonomy.

Keywords

International System, Great Power Rivalries, Strategic Autonomy, AK Party, Regional Chaos, UN Reform

Introduction: International System and Türkiye

The international system is undergoing a profound transformation mainly caused by some global and regional developments such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine War, and Israel's war on Gaza. In this process, several other issues like climate change-related global environmental crises, growing xenophobic political narrative in the West, and emerging and destructive technological competition are also accompanied by an acceleration in great power competitions, the increasing role of regional powers, the widespread risk of the pursuit of nuclear armament, dysfunction of international organizations including the United Nations (U.N.), increase of proxy conflicts, trade wars and the emergence of new forms of terrorism.

The international community is unable to fulfill its basic responsibilities. The failure of international organizations to address many destructive conflicts brings about a severe crisis of legitimacy. As a result, the international order has undergone its deepest legitimacy crisis since the Second World War. The international system has become more chaotic and competitive by the day as many foreign policy issues –from war and terrorism to trade routes– take a central stage as a natural extension of this trend.

In this environment, the potential impact of the ongoing Russia-West conflict to Eastern Europe and the Balkans is already treated by European decision-makers as a nightmare scenario. For instance, many Western politicians, including Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, has recently alleged that the world entered into a new period of war: “I don't want to scare anyone, but war is no longer a concept from the past. It's real and it started over two years ago” (Duran, 2024a).

The power rivalry between the U.S., the European Union (EU), China, and Russia is bringing the relatively stable post-Cold War order to an end, emphasizing the concept of “chaotic multipolarity” (Ataman, 2018). The state of disarray in the world system marks a period in which the U.S. has largely abandoned its responsibility for maintaining the international order and providing global public goods, while China, as the main rival of the U.S., cannot shoulder the burden and does not have the will to do so. Consequently, the most recent global and regional risks and security threats force the rising powers to become more self-reliant, and prioritize “strategic autonomy” in their foreign policies. This underlines the significance of adaptability, stimulating new capacity, strong leadership, internal stability, and conducting effective diplomacy.

Unbalanced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of new security threats such as climate change and irregular migration, the international system witnessed the intensification of global power rivalry due to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Indeed, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which started after al-Aqsa Flood initiated by Hamas on October 7, served as a reminder that frozen or low-intensity conflicts in many parts of the world could easily turn into large-scale massacres. The world is heading toward a period of multipolar system with major risks. Unilateral policies of global powers have created mistrust toward the current international instruments of the world system. The Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Israeli-Palestinian question, and the Israel-Iran military confrontation accelerated the emergence of a chaotic situation, which requires rising powers like India, Brazil, and Türkiye to take more responsibility to mitigate the tension resulting from the intensified global rivalry.

Türkiye under the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), which has ruled the country for more than two decades, has demonstrated remarkable adaptability to this new chaotic world. Supporting a comprehensive reform of the U.N. system, Türkiye shows the will to contribute to the reformation of the current system or the establishment of a new global order. Türkiye presents a distinct model of strategic autonomy by effectively leveraging its hard and soft power after having to navigate through regional chaos sparked by the Arab uprisings, while also grappling with migration and terrorism (Duran, 2024). Ankara's assertive policies in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh are notable examples. Furthermore, its strategy of maintaining a balance between the U.S. and Russia, normalization efforts with regional countries, and restructuring the existing alliance should be seen as main factors consolidating Türkiye's strategic autonomy.

Türkiye not only emphasizes stability, peace, and cooperation in its surrounding regions but also endeavors to contribute to the resolution of global crises, notably the Russia-Ukraine War (Ataman, 2023). To achieve this goal, it has been employing various instruments such as leader diplomacy, high-level cooperation council meetings, humanitarian aid diplomacy, bolstering existing integration organizations, and developing trilateral cooperation models.

By taking into consideration the current transformation in international and regional politics, this chapter will discuss Türkiye's perspective on the current global crisis. It aims to analyze the recent policies that Ankara has developed in response to the chaotic transformation of the international system in terms of its underlying motivations and resultant outcomes. To that end, it will briefly analyze the most important developments and challenges of the current international system, namely the Russian-Ukrainian War and the regional conflicts in the Middle East. Then, the evolving discourse of foreign policy will be assessed within the conceptual frameworks of the "Türkiye Axis" and the vision of the "Century of Türkiye".

Debates on the Structure of the International System

Multipolarity and its possible effects have been one of the hottest topics in international politics in the last decades. Scholars with different theoretical traditions put various ideas, ranging from the multipolarity's influence on the likelihood of war, and great power conflict, to factors of alliance formation and the future of American primacy. Leading neorealists like Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer contend that bipolarity is the most stable and peaceful structure for several reasons. For instance, Waltz argued that the existence of only two superpowers that can easily deal with each other without distraction by others which makes the system stable and peaceful. Furthermore, he argued that alliances are more stable in a bipolar international system because the defection or absence of a state within an alliance does not matter much due to the huge capability gap between the superpower and its smaller partners. In contrast, for Waltz (1979), multipolar systems are more prone to conflict and weaker alliances because smaller states get more leverage due to the availability of several great powers and the lack of dominant powers. This situation also causes alliances to suffer significantly when defection occurs since the similar distribution of capabilities in the system renders the loss of an alliance member much more harmful.

One of the key consequences of multipolarity is the change in the behavior of alliance formation. In multipolar systems, it is generally acknowledged that states tend not to enter into alliances according to balancing imperatives because there is neither a hegemon to fear (as in the case of unipolar systems) nor a rising perceived threat (as in the case of bipolarity). In bipolar systems, states tend to protect themselves by entering into a bloc against the other while they also seek ways to leverage their options by playing the superpowers against each other. On the other hand, in unipolar systems, the most important factor in the formation of alliances is the nature of the reaction to the unipolar state. This reaction does not necessarily contain the unipolar state but also could occur as influencing its actions or exploiting its international status (Ikenberry et al., 2009, p. 20).

Another key issue in the polarity debate is the probability of war. For decades, scholars contended different types of polarity as more peaceful than others, yet no substantial causal link has been found. In the meantime, many argued that the distribution of capabilities alone cannot account for explaining the likelihood of war but one should delve into the level of dissatisfaction of the actors toward the relevant distribution of capabilities within the system.

On the other hand, some scholars argued that rather than dissatisfaction toward the global hierarchy, anarchy, and its key effects such as the security dilemma are the most important variables in explaining the probability of a war. Thus, most studies found the system polarity as an indeterminate variable in the explanation of war onset. However, Wohlfort (2009) claimed that unipolarity is an important contributing factor in the decrease of military competition and conflict in the international system after the Cold War, while the probability of war would likely increase with the return of bipolarity or multipolarity. The reason for this is that narrow capability gaps between actors incentivize them to engage in status competition i even under conditions where their national security and territorial integrity are ensured (2009).

The erosion of U.S. hegemony and the transformation of the structure of the international system gave rise to concerns in the U.S. administration circles that U.S. primacy or preponderance in global affairs is good for both its national security and for the world. However, Stephen Walt underlined the fact that catastrophic events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, unsuccessful U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the consistent rise of China, and the domestic economic crisis occurred when the U.S. was the superpower in a unipolar international system. Walt also emphasized that multipolarity will bring out several states with similar material capabilities, which in turn would likely induce security competition among them. This situation would provide flexibility for the U.S. in choosing its allies by exploiting the insecurities among those actors. In this vein, there are meaningful historical examples such as the U.S. alliance with the Soviets against Nazi Germany, and the U.S. rapprochement with China against the Soviets during the Cold War. Still, Walt(2023) indicates that the emerging multipolarity has significant downsides such as the declining U.S. influence on smaller states due to their increased autonomy, increased likelihood of war due to the heightened security competitions, and the possibility of more states seeking nuclear weapons under the lack of a global hegemon.

While multipolarity's influence in international politics may vary, it is becoming increasingly evident that power has become more and more limited and conditional which makes it impossible for a specific actor to seize and maintain it. It indicates a forced decline of American power not only to other rising states but also toward newly rising regional actors, global organizations, and even local militias and terrorist networks. The changing character of the actors, who possess kinds of power, resulted in an important shift in what power is good for. Meanwhile, the relevance of military and economic power is overshadowed by the effects of new instruments under the hands of emerging influential non-state actors. Power now becomes as much as an ability to disrupt, disable, block, and destroy, besides its conventional characteristics of constructing, enabling, repairing, and building. Power is now more of a negative instrument rather than a positive one (Schweller, 2022, pp. 401-402).

Rising Global Challenges

By taking into account debates on the current structure of the international system, the current state of affairs in the international realm marks a significant juncture, characterized by unforeseen geopolitical developments and strategic realignments. Mired by escalating regional conflicts, the international stage witnessed a series of events that have reshaped global dynamics and heightened uncertainty. The war in Ukraine stands as a pivotal moment in Europe's contemporary history, ushering in a paradigmatic shift in security perceptions and geopolitical strategies. The intensification of geopolitical tensions has underscored the fragility of the international order. Challenges faced by the U.S. in maintaining its global standing and China's assertive rise have signaled potential shifts in the global balance of power, with implications for regional dynamics and strategic alliances.

As noted in the 2024 report of the Munich Security Conference, the international system has begun to operate on a "lose-lose" basis (Bunde et al., 2024). With the return of power politics into international politics, instead of preferring solidarity and cooperation, states choose to think in relative terms and to compare their losses with the gains of their adversaries. Accordingly, great power rivalry, the Global South's quest for more autonomy, and tensions between the West and Russia –and also between the U.S. and China– have gained momentum instead. Since October 7, 2023 Israel's atrocities in Gaza and the endorsement of those actions by the West, the U.S. in particular, have taken a heavy toll on international community's trust in the U.N. system and faith in universal human rights.

As the international system gets dragged into chaos, the few powers with the ability to create order are competing with one another. To make matters worse, this rivalry could intensify soon. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres highlighted that the "well-established mechanisms" during the Cold War to manage superpower relations are absent in the current multipolar world, which results in nuclear proliferation and "a dangerous and unpredictable free-for-all with total impunity" (UN News, 2024).

The transformation of global power competitions into proxy conflicts, the deepening sense of insecurity, disruptive technological competition among the global powers, and the flagrant disregard of international norms and institutions hint at the approaching age of political instability. The U.S. stopped maintaining the liberal international order, which served its national interests for decades. China lacks the required set of norms, ambition, and capacity to promote order. EU depends on the U.S. even just to stay safe from threats. India and other rising powers, in the meanwhile, have been trying to protect themselves from the emerging chaos.

This disarray in the international system and the affiliated challenges are reflected in the assessments of CIA Director William Burns. According to Burns, the Russian invasion of Ukraine marked the end of the post-Cold War era. For him, Russia may pose the most immediate challenge to the West and the U.S., but it is China, who seeks to reshape the international order under Xi Jinping's leadership, that represents a more serious threat to Washington in the long run. He concludes that the middle powers are diversifying their external relations, collaborating with the U.S. and China simultaneously (Duran, 2024c).

The Impact of the Ukrainian War on the West

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine precipitated a fundamental reassessment of Europe's security posture, undermining the long-standing peace-oriented approach. The collapse of Europe's reliance on Russian energy sources further exacerbated concerns, prompting a re-evaluation of defense spending and strategic autonomy. The discourse surrounding NATO's role, transatlantic alliances, and the necessity for self-reliance has gained prominence amid growing apprehensions regarding Russian aggression beyond Ukraine's borders. The economic ramifications of the conflict have reverberated across Europe, prompting discussions on the efficacy of sanctions and the resilience of the Russian economy. While efforts to isolate Russia through economic measures have been pursued, the conflict has underscored the complexities of great power rivalry and the challenges of maintaining international order. Geopolitical tensions have intensified, leading to a reconfiguration of alliances and the emergence of new power dynamics, with implications for global stability. The escalation of the conflict has raised concerns about the erosion of international norms and mechanisms, as evidenced by the proliferation of proxy conflicts and disregard for humanitarian principles. The United Nations' efficacy in resolving disputes and upholding universal values has been called into question, exacerbating the sense of insecurity and instability (Butchard, 2017).

Many European states increasingly believe that Russia poses a threat to the European security. This is why, Germany and other European countries feel compelled to increase their defense spending against the Russian threat. The possibility of a violent conflict with Russia intimidates European countries, yet peace does not seem to be on the table. The U.S. and Europe want Russia to suffer a "strategic defeat" (Anadolu Agency, 2023). However, by playing the nuclear card, Russian President Vladimir Putin reminds the Western countries that he won't accept defeat, while seeking to engage in a "strategic negotiation" with the Western countries.

The Russian-Ukrainian war undermined the security architecture of the European continent. The European elites remain confused, yet fully aware that they will have to deal with the Russian threat for the coming years. The gap between the Atlanticists, who believe in relying on the U.S. and NATO, and their critics, who claim that Europe has to help itself, keeps widening. Similarly, the longtime French idea of "strategic autonomy" and the perspective of Germany, which appeals to the Eastern Europeans through the European Sky Shield Initiative, are not perfectly aligned. The European elites believe that they have no choice but to arm themselves in near future. European leaders, who witnessed the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan and the disruption in aid to Ukraine, have been claiming that the continent has to be able to defend itself. Therefore, having been forced to leave Africa due to Russia's growing influence, France tries to unite Europe around a common stance toward Moscow.

The Western countries have launched a "war of attrition" against Russia. Receiving military support from some non-Western countries such as China, North Korea, and Iran, Russia has fortified its military industry. Economic sanctions imposed by the West failed to undermine Moscow's financial might, which mainly stems from energy resources. On the one hand, it is clear to everybody that the Russian threat compels European countries to arm themselves. On the other hand, the war has

not been going as well as Russia expected. Ukraine's strong resistance has demonstrated strong anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism. The occupation has also consolidated the Western alliance with the enlargement of NATO by Finland and Sweden's admission into the alliance and forced European countries to adopt a new defense and security policy.

Renewed Conflicts in the Middle East

Regional conflicts in the Middle East, including the Israel-Palestine conflict and the crisis in Yemen, have contributed to heightened uncertainty and volatility in the region. The re-eruption of the Israel-Palestine conflict in 2023, resulting in significant civilian casualties, has disrupted normalization efforts and raised the risk of further instability. The potential for escalation, particularly in conflicts involving Iran, Israel and Lebanon poses a challenge to regional stability and global security.

The dominant trend of the past several years in the Middle East has been normalization or rapprochement between different regional actors. In the highly bleak big picture of the international system, the normalization drive of recent years in the region could stand as one of the rare silver linings. However, this trend has been upset by the ongoing invasion and bloodshed in Gaza, which triggered several dormant flashpoints across the region.

Before October 7, 2023 China was already making inroads into the region while the U.S. had long been in the process of gradual, but strategic drawdown. Meanwhile, China's mediation efforts played an effective role in the rapprochement between two regional rivals, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia and thus the normalization process in the Middle East.

It is difficult to claim that relations among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members have returned to the pre-blockade level. Differences in the perspective of the GCC states continue. While Kuwait and Oman maintain their neutral position, Qatar continues to pursue a more independent foreign policy. The UAE and Saudi Arabia accept these differences. On the one hand, the problems in the Red Sea region continue to influence the wider region. Following the Gaza crisis, "Iranian proxies" remain as significant and effective players for the Gulf states. In the meantime, Israel's atrocities and genocidal acts in Gaza damaged the normalization process between Israel and the Arab states. Most recently, Saudi Arabia described the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders as a precondition for normalization with Israel (Farhat, 2024).

As an extension of the widespread instability and confrontation across the region, the Iraqi government has been calling on the U.S. to withdraw from Iraq. Such a move can make it impossible for American troops to remain in Syria, too. Whether for better or worse, it is obvious that a physical withdrawal of the American presence from both Iraq and Syria will create a power vacuum. Against the backdrop of the mentioned instability and tension both at international and regional levels, a large power vacuum left by a big power like the U.S., will inevitably exacerbate the existing dynamics of instability.

Türkiye's Role in the International System

Over the last decade, Türkiye has increasingly been playing a central role amid geopolitical, security, and destabilizing challenges, while various regional and global issues highlight its strategic position in international politics. Türkiye has implemented different coping mechanisms and policies to mitigate risks and capitalize on opportunities arising from crises, demonstrating a proactive and strategic approach to its geopolitical landscape.

Against the backdrop of escalating regional conflicts and geopolitical tensions. Building on efforts to normalize relations with its neighbors, Türkiye has prioritized regional stability and economic cooperation. However, challenges persist in Türkiye's relations with the U.S. and Europe, influenced by shifting geopolitical dynamics and global crises. Amid the turmoil in the international system, Türkiye has sought to navigate the evolving dynamics by pursuing a holistic foreign policy approach. By using its geographic significance and regional influence, Türkiye attempts to contribute to international stability and order, while safeguarding its national interests. Through strategic partnerships and proactive diplomacy, Türkiye endeavors to mitigate the destabilizing effects of global chaos and to emerge as a constructive actor in shaping the future international order.

Türkiye's activities, behaviors, and policies at both regional and international levels can be summarized as an attempt to insulate the country from the destabilizing effects of the disarray and instability in the international system. Within such an unpredictable and unstable international system, Türkiye aims to achieve strategic stability and by doing so, contributes to the construction or formation of a more stable international system. Türkiye welcomes the critical importance of managing risks and seizing opportunities in this chaotic context, and builds the Türkiye axis along three strategic lines through an integrated foreign policy – namely to create a peace, prosperity, and stability belt around the country, institutionalize regional and continental initiatives through new openings and further steps, and take initiatives in building a more just global order (Fidan, 2023).

As a country that has struggled against the challenges arising from the intensive global and regional instabilities for the last decade, Türkiye seeks to promote stability and order in its immediate and remote neighborhoods. Ankara's geographic location as well as its national capacity and interests beyond its immediate region inevitably makes it a relevant and interested party in its larger region. Due to this dynamic, even the bilateral relations and arrangements of Türkiye carry extra-regional and global weight and significance. For instance, Türkiye and Somalia concluded a framework agreement for defense and economic cooperation on February 8, 2024. The deal covers various issues such as terrorism, external threats, piracy, and unlawful fishing. Türkiye has undertaken the responsibility of guarding the Somalian coast, the development of maritime resources and building a Somali navy (Özkan, 2024; Devocioğlu, 2024). Accordingly, Türkiye developed a model for taking its relationship with other African nations to the next level. Due to the strategic location of Somalia's territorial waters for the global trade routes and the importance of the region for great powers, this deal goes beyond the bilateral framework of Turkish-Somalian relations.

Likewise, Türkiye has taken an important step in its relations with Iraq. The Türkiye-Iraq security summit, which took place in Baghdad on March 14, 2024, represented a forward leap in bilateral relations. The two states agreed to fight with the PKK and discussed the creation of a security corridor along their land border and expediting the Development Road Project. The importance and prospects of the project for global connectivity, geopolitics and trade make the recent bilateral understanding and arrangement between Türkiye and Iraq a greater arrangement that would have extra-regional and global weight. The Development Road Project, which consists of 1,200 kilometers of railroads and highways between Basra and Ovaköy, a gate on the Turkish-Iraqi border, represents a significant "leap forward" in economic relations (Yeni Şafak, 2023). Keeping in mind the unstable situation and unsafe conditions in the Red Sea, that project gains additional importance for the shipment of goods between Asia and Europe.

The only silver lining in the international system, namely the normalization process in the Middle East between multiple actors, is still relevant for Ankara except for Israel due to the spiraling violence in Palestine. Despite Ankara's strained relations with the incumbent government in Tel Aviv, due to the latter's genocidal war in Gaza, it maintains a normalization process with other significant capitals in the region. Normalization does not suffice anymore to describe the nature of Ankara's relations with other regional actors. Actors such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt have been subject to Ankara's normalization efforts and are slowly but steadily turning into strategic partners for Türkiye. Thus, Ankara transformed the normalization processes into strategic partnerships to brace for the "age of chaos" (Duran, 2024d).

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 has encountered new opportunities and risks amid its quest for an autonomous foreign policy. The emergence of rising powers like China, which offset the West's supremacy, has 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 East, the Western states have found it difficult to preserve their influence over places that they traditionally considered part of their spheres of influence (İnat & Yıldız, 2021). The Middle East, where Türkiye remains an important player, is among those parts of the world.

Türkiye's Adaptation and Way of Dealing with Challenges

Türkiye's foreign policy faced major challenges roughly since 2013. Although it is a longtime NATO ally and European Union candidate country, Ankara experienced serious problems with its Western allies for the past decade. Ankara has also endeavored to persuade the Western states to accept that Türkiye had the right to pursue an independent foreign policy orientation throughout the same period. Besides balancing, expanding its economic and military capacity has been the main method that Türkiye has used under the AK Party to alleviate pressure and neutralize risks from the West, Russia, and other countries.

Recent developments and transformations in Turkish domestic politics increased its capacity and capability to overcome global and regional challenges. The most important development is the rise of the Turkish defense industry and its self-reliance in providing national security (Ataman, 2023). With the share of local defense products skyrocketing to more than 70%, Türkiye's need for Western weapons plummeted, making it easier for the Turkish government to pursue a more autonomous and assertive 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 national defense industry. For instance, the U.S. refusal to sell armed unmanned aerial vehicles (or armed drones) to Türkiye, resulted in the emergence of Baykar Technologies and TUSAŞ as local drone developers, and eventually, globally competitive companies.

Indeed, the effective use of the 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 the aerospace and defense industry (Yıldırım, 2022), TUSAŞ ranked second with \$567 million. Meanwhile, Türkiye's total defense and aerospace exports soared to \$3.2 billion in 2021 (Savunma SanayiST, 2022). 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 (Işık, 2022).

Western Response and Türkiye's Cooperation with Russia

Ankara has been careful to keep its relationship with the West at a certain level, in line with its balanced policy. In the last decade, Türkiye cooperated 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. It is important to note, however, that Türkiye raised no questions about its NATO membership, pursued the 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 non-Western countries. At the same time, Türkiye's refusal to treat non-Western countries 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 World War II, and instead pursued a policy of balance to be able to act independently.

Unhappy with Türkiye's pursuit of an autonomous foreign policy, which inevitably clashed with their vested interests, the U.S. and some European countries attempted to mount pressure on Ankara by supporting YPG and by giving a safe refuge to the FETÖ (the Gülenist Terror) members in the second half of the 2010s. Such transgressions encouraged Ankara to work more closely with Russia to offset Western pressure. That cooperation extended to energy and other economic sectors as well as defense. Türkiye's decision to buy the Russian S-400 missile air defense system was a case in point (Yücel, 2020; Yeşiltaş, 2017; Üstün, 2019). This decision, in turn, subjected it to greater pressure and sanctions from its Western allies.

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 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. The US and Russia have the common goal of carving out spheres of influence within Syria and certain collaborations that Türkiye does not approve.

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 Russian weapon systems, which it could not buy from the U.S. or other Western allies, represents a significant step for Turkish foreign policy and global politics (Duran, 2019). 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 national 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 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula because it viewed that move as a violation of international law, Türkiye also described that country's February 24, 2022, attack on Ukraine as unlawful and opposed it (NTV, 2022). At the same time, however, the Turkish government refused to join the U.S. and the EU sanctions against Russia to distinguish itself from those countries. Then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu pointed out that Türkiye refused to join the sanctions imposed by the Western countries since Ankara does not take sides in the conflict as a principled stance. Çavuşoğlu argued that Türkiye is determined to maintain good relations with both countries and serve as a mediator to end the war (Deveci & Kabakçı, 2022).

In March 2022, the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine met in Antalya, and official delegations from the two countries held talks in Istanbul under the mediation of Türkiye. Although those meetings did not yield immediate results, Türkiye emerged as a mediator during that process and continued to play an effective role. On July 22, 2022, official delegations from Moscow and Kyiv met in the presence of President Erdoğan and U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to reach an agreement for the delivery of Ukrainian and Russian grains to international markets through the Turkish straits. The agreement represented an important step toward ending a serious food crisis in the world and contributed to the emergence of a more positive atmosphere, which could lead to more comprehensive agreements between the two nations in the future to end the war (Hürriyet, 2022; TRT Haber, 2022).

Rise of Asia in Turkish Foreign Policy and Relations with China

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. 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 (Yılmaz, 2024). Türkiye's Foreign Ministry unveiled this initiative on its official website in August 2019 by declaring that Türkiye aims to "more actively benefit from opportunities stemming from developments in Asia and the resulting potential for cooperation" (MFA, 2022).

Through the Asia Anew Initiative, the ministry intended to strengthen Türkiye's "relations with Asian countries systematically and stably, based on a holistic and comprehensive strategy, and with the help of the development of regional, sub-regional and country-specific approaches." Thus, 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, based on 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 (MFA, 2022).

Accordingly, Turkish policymakers have been taking China into account in the development of Turkish foreign policy, since Beijing has viewed Ankara 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 (Akkemik, 2024). 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 (MoU) 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" project¹. The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad as part of that project created an uninterrupted railway bridge between Türkiye and China. On December 4, 2020, a train left Istanbul to cross a distance of 8,693 kilometers (5401.58 miles) and reach the Chinese city of Xi'an on December 19, 2020. That was the first batch of exports via rail (Kabakcı, 2021).

In 2017, President Erdoğan visited China at the invitation of President Xi Jinping, to attend the first meeting of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Participating in this event, which many other leaders attended, reflected the Turkish government's desire to further strengthen its relations with Beijing (Anadolu Agency, 2017). 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 (Sabah, 2019). 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 Chinese investments have very significantly increased in recent years, as the total investment of Chinese companies reached \$4.5 billion. Considering that approximately 70% this amount was invested between 2019 and 2023, China's investments in Türkiye can be expected to further increase soon (Yılmaz, 2021).

Turkish Foreign Policy Toward 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 these 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 senior leaders, starting with President Erdoğan, thought of Türkiye's place in world politics. Türkiye shaped its policy toward these regions amid competition with regional powers like Iran, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, as well as global powers such 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.

Ankara's firm commitment to an autonomous 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, the U.S., Russia, and the European Union, as well as their regional partners. Conducting several military operations in Syria and Iraq, the neighboring countries where the PKK/YPG threats remained serious, Türkiye, within its counterterrorism framework, did not refrain from confronting global and regional powers like the U.S., Russia, and Iran. Nonetheless, during this era of tensions, 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 the 2017 independence referendum in Northern Iraq by Masoud Barzani, who led the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Likewise, it held talks with Moscow and Tehran in Astana and Sochi to find a comprehensive solution to the Syrian question.

In other cases, Türkiye resorted to military force when 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

1 The Turkish-led Middle Corridor project seeks to revive the historical Silk Road by channeling a significant part of China's trade with Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian, the Caucasus and Türkiye. Accordingly, it requires the construction of transportation infrastructure for that purpose. In this regard, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad became operational in 2017. See, Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022, July 20). Türkiye'nin çok taraflı ulaştırma politikası, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye_nin-cok-taraflı-ulaştırma-politikasi.tr.mfa

Tripoli, the Turkish authorities strengthened their military cooperation with the relevant players to send troops to both countries. However, this did not stop Türkiye from pursuing normalization with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, which it had confronted in Qatar and Libya, through diplomatic negotiations under the right circumstances. In 2020, Azerbaijan defeated Armenia in the Second Karabakh War with the Turkish support, the use of armed drones in particular, 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 (Duran, 2021).

In the 2010s, Türkiye shifted its attention to national security due to the regionwide instability that erupted during the Arab uprising and its strained relations with the West. The increase in its economic and military capacity encouraged Türkiye to pursue a relatively independent foreign policy, which frustrated some Western states that used their "allies" and "proxies" within the country and in the Middle East to make it harder for Ankara to stick to cooperation in foreign policy. 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 Ankara 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

We can conclude that Türkiye took major steps toward an autonomous foreign policy, and experienced serious tensions with the U.S. and some European states due to its attempts to free Turkish foreign policy from the West's excessively strong influence. In this sense Turkish policy makers viewed the engagement of Western states with terrorist groups like PKK/YPG and FETÖ and their sanctions as parts of an attempt to reinstate Türkiye's "harmonious" policy. Despite those challenges, however, Ankara managed to pursue an autonomous foreign policy prioritizing its national interests.

The turbulent landscape of the international system, marked by a series of crises and conflicts, underscores the urgent need for strategic leadership and collaborative action. As the world grapples with the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine War, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it becomes evident that the traditional mechanisms of global governance are faltering, giving way to a period of chaotic multipolarity. In this evolving environment, Türkiye emerges as a pivotal player, navigating the complexities of regional and global dynamics with resilience and adaptability. Under the leadership of the AK Party, Türkiye has demonstrated a proactive approach to addressing the challenges posed by the transformation of the international system. From advocating for the reform of the U.N. institutions to spearheading initiatives for regional stability and cooperation, Türkiye has shown a commitment to shaping a more just and stable global order.

Central to Türkiye's strategy is the pursuit of strategic autonomy, leveraging its geographic significance and soft power assets to advance its national interests while promoting peace and stability in its neighborhood and beyond. Through strategic partnerships and diplomatic initiatives, Ankara seeks to insulate itself from the destabilizing effects of global chaos while actively contributing to efforts to build a more secure and prosperous world. As Türkiye continues to play a constructive role in regional and global affairs, it underscores the importance of dialogue, cooperation, and collective action in addressing the multifaceted challenges confronting the international community. By fostering a vision of peace, prosperity, and stability, Türkiye reaffirms its commitment to shaping a more inclusive and equitable international system for the benefit of all nations.

Under the AK Party governments, Türkiye pursued a foreign policy that actively contributed to the resolution of regional issues by taking initiatives in Qatar, Libya and Somalia, with which Türkiye does not share land borders. The country also advocates the U.N. 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 Erdoğan has been repeatedly reiterating Türkiye's commitment to becoming one of the world's top 10 economies, reflects its wish to become a global power. Türkiye is determined to achieve these objectives through the establishment of a "Türkiye axis" in "the Century of Türkiye" which is the vision of Turkish foreign policy orientation (Kanat & Duran, 2024).

References

- Akkemik, K. A. (2024). Structural shift in Türkiye-East Asia economic relations: The demise of Japan and the rise of China and South Korea. *Insight Turkey*, 26(1), 169-185.
- Ataman, M. (2018, September 30). Balancing against American hegemony. *Daily Sabah*. <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ataman-muhittin/2018/09/05/balancing-against-american-hegemony>
- Ataman, M. (2023). The ‘century of Türkiye’: a new foreign policy vision for building the Türkiye axis. *Insight Turkey*, 25(3), 73-96.
- Bunde, T., Eisentraut, S., & Schütte, L. (2024). *Lose-lose*. Munich security report 2024.
- Butchard, P. M. (2022). *The responsibility to protect and the failures of the United Nations Security Council*. Hart Publishing.
- Deveci, M., & Kabakçı, F. (March 1, 2022). Dışişleri bakanı Çavuşoğlu: Yaptırımlara katılma eğilimimiz yok. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/disisleri-bakani-cavusoglu-yaptirimlara-katilma-egilimimiz-yok/2520335>
- Devecioğlu, K. (2024). Türkiye and Somalia: A new cooperation approach from regional security to economic development. ORSAM Analysis, No. 317.
- Duran, B. (2019, July 13). S-400’lerin teslimatı ve 15 temmuz. *Sabah*. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/duran/2019/07/13/s-400lerin-teslimati-ve-15-temmuz>
- Duran, B. (2021, December 17). Normalleşmenin yeni durağı, Ermenistan. *Sabah*. Armağan Gözkaman, “Türkiye-Ermenistan ‘Normalleşmesi’: Farklı Koşullar, Yeni Bir Yaklaşım”, *Anadolu Agency*, (May 6, 2022), retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/turkiye-ermenistan-normallesmesi-farkli-kosullar-yeni-bir-yaklasim/2580860>.
- Duran, B. (2024a, March 30). Busy post-election agenda awaits Türkiye after local vote. *Daily Sabah*. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/busy-post-election-agenda-awaits-turkiye-after-local-vote>
- Duran, B. (2024b). Türkiye’s vision for its new century. Kanat, K. B., & Duran, B. (Ed.), *What does the century of Türkiye vision say to Türkiye and the world?* (pp. 11-31). SETA Publications.
- Duran, B. (2024c, February 19). Türkiye’ diplomatic normalization efforts to Yield Key Alliances. *Daily Sabah*. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/turkiyes-diplomatic-normalization-efforts-to-yield-key-alliances>
- Duran, B. (2024d, February 3). Ready to explode’ Middle East and the U.S. *Daily Sabah*. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/ready-to-explode-middle-east-and-the-us>
- Farhat, B. (2024, February 7). Saudi Arabia says no relations with Israel before recognition of Palestinian state on 1967 borders. *Al Monitor*. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/02/saudi-arabia-says-no-relations-israel-recognition-palestinian-state-1967-borders>
- Fidan, H. (2023). Turkish foreign policy at the turn of the ‘century of Türkiye’: Challenges, vision, objectives, and transformation. *Insight Turkey*, 25(3), 11-25.
- Ikenberry, G. J., Mastanduno, M. & Wohlforth, W. C. (2009). Introduction: Unipolarity, state behavior and systemic consequences. *World Politics*, 61(1), 1-27.
- İnat, K., & Yıldız, M. (Fall 2021). Will the rise of China transform the international system?. *Insight Turkey*, 23(4), 231-258.
- Işık, Y. E. (2022, July 4). Savunma ve havacılık ihracatı 2 milyar dolar sınırında!. *Defence Turk*. <https://www.defenceturk.net/savunma-ve-havacilik-ihracati-2-milyar-dolar-sinirinda>
- Kabakçı, F. (2021, March 24). Türkiye-Çin ilişkileri birçok alanda geliyor. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/turkiye-cin-iliskileri-bircok-alanda-gelisiyor/2186643>.
- Kanat, K. B. & Duran, B. (Eds.). (2024). *Türkiye’s vision for its new century*. SETA Publications.

- Özkan, M. (2024). Why did Turkey sign a defense agreement with Somalia? *Politics Today*.
- Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2022). Türkiye'nin çok taraflı ulaştırma politikası. https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye_nin-cok-tarafli-ustastirma-politikasi.tr.mfa
- Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2022). Yeniden Asya girişimi. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/yeniden-asya-girisimi.tr.mfa>
- Schweller, R. (2022). Polarity in International Relations: Past, Present, Future. Græger, N., Heurlin, B., Wæver, O. & Wivel, A. (Eds.) *An emerging world that defies historical analog*, (pp. 389-410). Plagrave Macmillan.
- Suleymanov, A. V. (2017). United Nations role in resolution international conflicts. *International Relations*, 17(1), 86-94.
- URL 1. UN News: Global Perspective Human Stories (7 February 2024). Peace is UN's Raison D'être: Guterres (Date Accessed: 13.08.2024) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/02/1146322>
- URL 2. Anadolu Agency (22 December 2023). NATO chief says Russia suffered 'strategic defeat' in Ukraine. (Date Accessed:13.08.2024) <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/nato-chief-says-russia-suffered-strategic-defeat-in-ukraine/3089990>
- URL 3. Yeni Şafak (16 September 2023). Türkiye-Iraq development road project: Enhancing regional connectivity, trade. (Date Accessed:13.08.2024) <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/turkiye-iraq-development-road-project-enhancing-regional-connectivity-trade-3670576>.
- URL 4. Yıldırım, G. (2022, June 14). Milli İHA ve SİHA'lar ihracat şampiyonunu değiştirdi. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/milli-ihha-ve-sihalar-ihracat-sampiyonunu-degistirdi/2613116>
- URL 5. Savunma SanayiST (June 14, 2022). Savunma ve havacılık'ta 2021 yılının ihracat rekortmenleri. (Date Accessed:13.08.2024) <https://www.savunmasanayist.com/turksat-5b-uydusu-hizmete-alma-toreni-gerceklestirildi>
- URL 6. NTV (March 11, 2022). Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Ukrayna haklı davasında yalnız bırakıldı. (Date Accessed:13.08.2024) <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ukrayna-hakli-davasinda-yalniz-birakildi,-YO-zJwSb0SdgW0Mhzeqhw>
- URL 7. Hürriyet (July 23, 2022). Tahıl krizini bitiren tarihi imza! Karadeniz'in kilidini İstanbul açtı. (Date Accessed:13.08.2024) <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/tahil-krizini-bitiren-tarihi-imza-karadenizin-kilidini-istanbul-acti-42105535>
- URL 8. TRT Haber (July 22, 2022). Guterres: Anlaşma Erdoğan'ın ısrarlı çabalarıyla oldu. (Date Accessed:13.08.2024) <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/guterres-anlasma-erdoganin-issarli-cabalarıyla-oldu-696515.html>
- URL 9. Anadolu Agency (May 16, 2017). Kuşak ve Yol Forumu'nun ardından. (Date Accessed: 13.08.2024) <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/kusak-ve-yol-forumunun-ardindan/819306>
- URL 10. *Sabah*, (July 4, 2019). Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Çin'de gazetecilerin sorularını yanıtladı. (Date Accessed:13.08.2024) <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2019/07/04/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-cinde-gazetecilerin-sorularini-yanitladi>
- Üstün, K. (2019, April 20). S-400 krizi eşğinde Türk-Amerikan ilişkileri. *Sabah*. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/kadir-ustun/2019/04/20/s-400-krizi-esiginde-turk-amerikan-iliskileri>
- Walt, S. M. (2023). America is too scared of the multipolar World. *Foreign Policy*.
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison Wesley.
- Wohlforth, W. C. (2009). Unipolarity, status competition, and great power war. *World Politics*, 61(1), 28-57.
- Yeşiltaş, M. (2017, December 16). Türkiye, batı ve S-400. *Sabah*. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/murat-yesiltas/2017/12/16/turkiye-bati-ve-s-400>

- Yılmaz, M. Ş. (2021, December 30). Pekin büyükelçisi Önen: Çin'in ülkemize yatırımları son dönemde önemli ivme kazandı. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/pekin-buyukelcisi-onen-cin-in-ulkemize-yatirimlari-son-donemde-onemli-ivme-kazandi/2461397>
- Yılmaz, N. (2024). Asia anew initiative: main aspects of Türkiye's Asia opening. *Insight Turkey*, 26(1), 11-21.
- Yücel, H. (2020). No. 302.

About Author

Prof. Dr. Burhanettin DURAN | Social Sciences University of Ankara
burhanettin.duran[at]asbu.edu.tr | ORCID: 0000-0001-5682-0583

Prof. Duran graduated from Boğaziçi University, Department of Political Science and International Relations in 1993. He completed their Master's and Doctoral studies in Political Science and Public Administration at Bilkent University between 1993 and 2001. Throughout his career, he held academic positions at various universities, becoming an Associate Professor in 2006 and a Professor in 2013. Currently, he serves as a faculty member in the Department of International Relations at Social Sciences University of Ankara. Since October 2018, he serves as a member of the Presidential Council on Security and Foreign Policies. Duran has authored articles on topics including Turkish intellectual history, Turkish foreign policy, Islamism, Europe, democracy, and civil society in various journals. He also authored a book titled "19th Term Parliament History" (3 volumes). Additionally, he edited the books "The Triumph of Turkish Democracy: The July 15 Coup Attempt And Its Aftermath", "Transformation of the Political System in Türkiye and the Presidential System", "Iran Sanctions", "Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East", "Libya Crisis: Policies of Regional and Global Actors", and "Eastern Mediterranean: Türkiye's Rights". He is among the editors of the works "Türkiye in Transformation", "World Conflict Zones I-II", "Middle East Yearbook 2008", and "Turkish Foreign Policy Yearbook" published between 2009-2019.