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Turkey in the Context of Transforming International Relations and the New Eurasian Geopolitics

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Introduction

The system of international relations is changing by moving to a post-Western world order. This has created a new environment for many countries in terms of their foreign policy, especially for the ones across the Eurasian continent. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Turkey was an integral part of the Western institutional framework. However, it made a conceptual U-turn in the mid-2010s when Ankara de facto rejected the paradigm which consisted of relying on the West as the reference point in its efforts to promote social and economic transformation and modernise its economy. Nevertheless, this did not affect Turkey's institutional ties with the West, including its membership in NATO and the Turkey-EU Customs Union. This placed the country in a unique position: while operating within the Western framework from an institutional standpoint it is increasingly seeking to have a freer hand in its foreign policy choices.

This transition coincided with a major push to revise Turkey's foreign policy tenets, which led it to assert the concept of achieving strategic autonomy as its primary goal. Presented in the late 2010s, it came as a response to the increasingly complex international environment and its transition from a unipolar to a multipolar set-up. China's economic rise and its Belt and Road Initiative compelled Turkey to devise its own strategy for stepping up its cooperation with other Asian powers. This concept was formalised in 2019 with the development of the Asia Anew Initiative (*Yeniden Asya Açılımı*). Meanwhile, the Eurasian track has become much more pronounced in the Turkish political and expert discourse, giving rise to the emergence of several schools of thought.

As for Russia's rift with the West, it placed Turkey in a unique position by offering it new political and economic opportunities, not without creating new foreign policy challenges, however.

The evolving relations with the West: From Atlantic solidarity towards a strategic partnership

Those who founded the Republic of Turkey back in the 1920s viewed the Europeanisation and a pro-Western foreign policy focus as an imperative and a pathway to national development. During the Cold War, Turkey obtained full membership in several key Western-centric structures such as NATO, the Council of Europe, and the OECD, and the EU accession talks in the 1990s and 2000s came to symbolise Turkey's unwavering commitment to a Euro-Atlantic future.

But the 2010s marked a turning point. Considering the lack of progress in its dialogue with Brussels, Ankara focused on effectively diversifying its foreign policy ties. This process can be described in the following key stages:

- 2012 – acquiring the status of an SCO dialogue partner, a first for a NATO country
- 2014 – launching the TurkStream project
- 2017 – signing a contract to buy Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile systems
- 2018 – *Alibaba*, a Chinese company, buys *Trendyol*, a Turkish online trading platform, in what was the biggest deal in Turkey's online sector at the time.

The deepening crisis in Turkey's relations with the West and the eroding mutual understanding was further elicited by the attempted

government coup on July 15, 2016. Ankara interpreted the refusal by the United States to extradite Fethullah Gülen, a prominent Turkish scholar and preacher, as well as the criticism it faced from European and American political leaders regarding the security measures it had to take as something more than just a failure of its allies to demonstrate their solidarity and loyalty. For Turkey, this was a sign that the United States not only knew that a government coup was in the making but could have possibly backed it. While the West focused on the primacy of human rights, Turkey prioritised public safety in the way it assessed what happened in 2016, which led to a further erosion of mutual trust.

The Syrian crisis further widened the gap. The West opted for backing the YPG/PYD, i.e., the Kurdish groups, while Turkey regarded them as being affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, meaning that the Western policy ran counter to Turkey's national security interests.

Unlike Turkey's Western partners, Russia was more receptive to Ankara's concerns, which enabled Turkey to carry out three military operations in northern Syria, namely Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, Operation Olive Branch in 2018, and Operation Peace Spring in 2019. Three countries – Turkey, Russia and Iran – worked together as part of the Astana format in the second half of the 2010s on a negotiated solution for the Syrian crisis. This effort helped bring about relative stability in the region. Meanwhile, Turkey sought to distance itself from what the Western countries were doing in Syria.

The Eastern Mediterranean offered its own mix of challenges and controversies. Israel, Cyprus and Greece approved the *EastMed* pipeline project with support from the United States and France, while Turkey thought that it ignored its own interests, as well as the interests of Northern Cyprus. Ankara decided to strike back by signing

in November 2019 a Memorandum of Understanding with Libya to delimit the maritime boundary. This was Turkey's way of lending its political support to the government in Tripoli, on the one hand, while also demonstrating that its approach to overcoming the contradictions in the Eastern Mediterranean is firmly rooted in international law, while Greece referred to the Seville Charter. On top of its differences regarding the EU's tendency to side with Greece on the delimitation issue in the Eastern Mediterranean, tension also escalated in Turkey's relations with the United States regarding the US military presence in Greece. In 2021, the United States signed a protocol with Greece on amending a 1990 agreement to increase the number of US military bases to eight. In 2022, the two countries signed a deal to prolong the American military presence in Greece for as much as five years, while this mandate used to be subject to annual renewals.

Turkey and its Western allies held radically opposing views on the situation in and around Ukraine after Russia launched its special military operation in February 2022. The same happened with Palestine after the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated in October 2023. On Ukraine, Turkey opted for not following in the footsteps of the Western sanctions policy by preserving its communication channels with Moscow, assuming a mediating role and refusing to join sanctions, while earning substantial political and economic dividends in return. On the Palestinian issue, Ankara also diverged from its Western allies by advocating Islamic unity.

Having diverged with the United States and the EU on quite a few regional matters by the early 2020s, Turkey further elicited these contradictions by taking a stance on the UN Security Council reform under the "A world bigger than five" slogan, which, as Turkey framed it, reflected the emerging multipolarity of the international relations.

Asia Anew Initiative: A strategic pivot toward the non-Western world

Presented by Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in 2019, the Asia Anew Initiative, also known by its Turkish-language designation *Yeniden Asya Açılımı*, offered a conceptual framing for a long-standing commitment to stepping up cooperation with Asian powers. In fact, Turkey adopted its strategy for improving trade and economic relations with the APR, titled in Turkish *Asya-Pasifik Ülkeleri ile Ticari ve Ekonomik İlişkileri Geliştirme Stratejisi*, back in 2005. This document paved the way for stepping up top-level dialogue between Turkey and East Asian nations. As already mentioned above, Turkey became the first and only NATO country in 2012 to become an SCO dialogue partner. By taking this step, it formalised and institutionalised its relations with Russia and China.

Below are the key drivers of Turkey's eastward pivot:

- economic and political momentum shifting to Asia as a global trend
- failure of the 'zero problems with the neighbours' policy, which led to an escalation of tension with the key regional actors
- commitment by Turkish businesses to diversifying their international footprint
- efforts to avoid excessive dependency on Western partners.

This turn to Asia had an impressive economic effect. Trade with Asian countries surged by a factor of 14 from \$8.2 billion in 2000 to \$110 billion in 2023.

Turkey's relations with China formed the main pillar of its Asian foreign policy. In 2010, the two countries upgraded their relations to a strategic partnership, which prompted Turkey to change the way it treated the Uyghur issue by moving from strong condemnation to backing and speaking out in favour of the One China policy.

China paid back by offering Turkey meaningful support whenever the country faced a crisis. This included

- diplomatic support in the wake of the attempt government coup in 2016
- granting \$3.6 billion worth of loans during the 2018 economic crisis – China's *Industrial and Commercial Bank of China* issued a \$3.6 billion in loans to Turkey for its energy and transport projects
- currency swap agreements in 2019 – Erdogan suffered major setbacks during the 2019 municipal elections, losing control in Ankara and Istanbul, while China granted an additional \$1 billion under a 2012 agreement
- authorising Turkish companies lacking foreign currency to use liras and the yuan in trade settlements during the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are several major projects as part of the Belt and Road Initiative:

- a Chinese consortium bought a controlling stake in the Kumport port (2015)
- building the Hunutlu power station worth \$1.7 billion
- designing the Kars-Edirne high-speed railway
- investing \$5 billion in the Turkey Wealth Fund (2020).

Chinese companies have deeply penetrated the Turkish economy with *Alibaba* buying *Trendyol* in 2018, and *Huawei* and *ZTE* making a major push to expand their presence on the telecommunications market.

There was also a lot of momentum in promoting military technical cooperation, including China's participation in the Anatolian Eagle exercise in 2010 and their joint efforts to work on missile technology. Since 2011, the two countries's navies have been regularly exchanging visits. In 2013, China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation won a \$4 billion tender to create a joint venture for making long-range missiles, while Turkey rejected offers from American, European and Russian companies and chose to partner with an entity designated on a US sanctions list. However, this initiative hit a wall with Turkey having to postpone the project five times under pressure from its Western allies and had to abandon it altogether in 2015, while claiming that it planned to launch a national project to make missiles.

However, structural differences continue haunting Turkey's relations with China despite the positive momentum in their relations:

- Turkey has a big trade deficit with China of over \$20 billion
- the two countries compete in textile, appliances and UAV manufacturing
- there are lingering differences on the Syrian settlement.

Diversifying the Asian vector

That said, Turkey's Asia strategy cannot be reduced to just working with China. It has been equally proactive in forging closer ties with Japan, South Korea and ASEAN countries.

Turkey has a long-standing track record of effectively working with **Japan** in multiple sectors. In 2009, *Dubai Rapid Link*, a consortium formed by Turkey and Japan, built the metro in Dubai. Japanese investment helped build *Marmaray*, a railway tunnel under the Bosphorus (launched in 2013), as well as one of the longest suspended bridges in the world which spans the Gulf of Izmit – it carries the name of Osman Gazi, the first Ottoman ruler (opened in 2016). Launched in 2014, *Türksat 4A* is a Turkish telecommunications satellite which retransmits broadcasting signals and offers broadband access across Turkey, Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa – *Mitsubishi Electric*, a Japanese company, made it for *Türksat A.Ş.*, a Turkish satellite communications company. In the energy sector, Japan's *Kawasaki Heavy Industries* and Turkey's *Rönesans Holding* created a consortium.

Turkey has been proactive in working with **South Korea** in multiple sectors. South Korean companies such as *SK Engineering and Construction*, *Hyundai Motors*, *Samsung*, *LG*, *Hanwha Q-cells*, *Daelim Industrial*, *GS E&C* have been playing an important role in Turkey. In 2012, Turkey signed a free trade agreement with South Korea – it came into force in 2013. In 2015, there was an additional agreement to facilitate trade in services, as well as an investment agreement – both came into force in 2018. In 2021, the central banks of the two countries signed a swap agreement.

Turkey established a strategic partnership with several **ASEAN countries** including Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. In 2017, Turkey became ASEAN's sectoral dialogue partner. By that time, Turkey had embassies in all ASEAN countries having finally opened its mission to Laos in 2017.

Efforts to support the Turkish business community have been a major factor in ensuring that Turkey succeeds in its Asian policy. In particular, the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (*MÜSİAD*) has been an advocate of expanding the country's foothold of the Asian markets, which was not the case for *TÜSİAD*, a similar association with a pro-Western bias.

The Eurasian vector: Between ideology and pragmatism

It was quite natural for Turkey's Asia pivot to be accompanied with a growing interest in Eurasian integration. There are quite a few schools of thought in Turkey's Eurasian movement across a broad ideological spectrum.

Rooted in the intellectual legacy of the socialist Kemalists of the 1930s-1960s, the **Left Eurasianism** stands out with its anti-imperialist and anti-Western rhetoric. Its proponents, including Doğu Perinçek and his followers, advocate forming what they call a Eurasian integration axis with Russia. This school of thought has gained traction with opposition media outlets such as the newspaper *Sözcü*, *Tele1* channel, and *OdaTV* and *VeryansınTV* online outlets. It also enjoys some support within the military establishment, including the authors of the Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) concept, admirals Cihat Yaycı and Cem Gürdeniz, who called for expanding Turkey's jurisdiction over the Mediterranean, Black and Aegean seas to 462,000 square kilometres.

Pan-Turkic Eurasianism is based on the idea of Turkey playing a leading role in bringing Turkic people together. It has its adepts both in the governing elite, including the National Movement Party, and the opposition. They view the Organisation of Turkic States (2021) as a tool for consolidating the Turkic world.

There is also **Islamic Eurasianism**, which builds on the legacy of the pan-Islamism and neo-Ottomanism by emphasising Turkey's centrality in the Islamic world and the need for it to assume the mission of bringing closer together countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia. On a

practical level, Islamic Eurasianism found its expression in the activities of Necmettin Erbakan's National Outlook party. Necmettin Erbakan developed the concept of what he called a Just Order (*Adil Düzen*), which provides for devising an alternative foreign policy blending national interests with upholding Islamic values and rejecting the vicious tendency to take cues from the West. This idea led to the proposal to offer an alternative to the Group of Seven by bringing together eight developing Muslim countries and calling it the M8 or the D8, which stands for the *Developing Eight*. These countries include Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey. The D8 held its founding conference in Istanbul on June 15, 1997, just two weeks before Erbakan stepped down as prime minister.

Pragmatic Eurasianism dominates the official agenda of the Justice and Development Party. It prioritises national interests in trade, economics and energy and provides for stepping up cooperation with Russia, China and Central Asian countries in an ideology-free manner.

Therefore, Turkey's Eurasianism is extremely diverse and includes movements holding opposing points of view, including both anti-Western and pro-Western forces.

Pro-Western Eurasianism was initially inspired by Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel, who talked about the so-called Turkish model for effectively combining the market economy and liberal political institutions while honouring Turkic and Islamic values. They wanted post-Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus to adopt this model. In the 1990s, the United States threw its weight behind the idea of spreading this Turkish model, considering that Turkey, being a NATO member state, could serve as a convenient tool for reshaping the post-Soviet space. For the proponents of pro-Western Eurasianism, this notion includes the Balkans. This led to the establishment in June

1992 of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation (BSEC). But leaders of Central Asian countries started losing interest in the Turkish model in the second half of the 1990s when Turkey suffered from a major financial crisis. The pro-Western wing of the Turkish Eurasianism movement has run its course.

In the second half of the 1990s, pragmatism started to dominate the Eurasian movement. The revised Eurasian foreign policy agenda designated Eurasia as a step toward forging closer ties with the European Union rather than a goal in itself. At the turn of the century, Eurasianism became even more pragmatic as Turkey started to assert its geoeconomic interests in the region. There was a plethora of proposals to build energy corridors for transporting energy resources from Turkic republics to other markets through Turkish territory. This prompted Turkey to rethink the way it approached the Eurasian space by recognising its intrinsic geoeconomic significance. When Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party came to power in the 2000s, it added a political and ideological dimension to the national economic agenda. However, it was not about reviving the obsolete pan-Turkic ideas but consisted of outlining values. This stage in the evolution of the Eurasian concept in Turkey was marked by an effort to forge closer ties with Russia and then China and stepping up mutually beneficial cooperation. However, it is the new foreign policy strategy which dominated this vision. It was rooted in a sense of longing for the glorious imperial past and the Ottoman geopolitical space. Still, this ideology did not supplement geoeconomic pragmatism and the commitment to asserting national economic interests.

All this demonstrates Turkey's commitment to finding an alternative to the idea of following Europe in politics and economics, which used to be the dominating school of thought within the Turkish elite. This also demonstrates the high level of awareness within the Turkish society regarding the new international environment and the need to reshape the country's foreign policy and its external relations by focusing on promoting joint efforts within the Greater Eurasian space.

Conclusion

Turkey has developed a unique model for adapting to the changing international environment and the new geopolitical balance of power in Eurasia in the first quarter of the 21st century. While preserving its institutional links with the West, Ankara has been consistent in pursuing its strategic autonomy by diversifying its foreign policy and external economic ties within Eurasia.

The key factors driving this transformation include

- deepening differences with the United States and the EU on a wide range of issues, including the Syrian crisis, the Kurdish issue and the East Mediterranean
- global economic and political momentum shifting to Asia
- Turkish businesses pursuing their pragmatic interests and focusing on new markets.
- ideological pluralism offering alternative foreign policy models.





For Turkey, the Asia Anew Initiative and the effort to develop the Eurasian foreign policy vector not only helped offset its tension with the West, but also to find a place of its own in the emerging multipolar world. While staying within the formal Western institutions, Turkey de facto has an independent multi-pronged policy and seeks to benefit from the competition between old and new centres of power.

We are unlikely to witness a radical rift between Turkey, on the one hand, and NATO or other Western structures, on the other hand. However, Turkey will keep playing a special role within the so-called collective West by combining integration and strategic autonomy. Turkey's unwavering commitment to this agenda is expected to enable Ankara to fully benefit from its foreign policy opportunities in an increasingly turbulent international environment.



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