

## Balancing the Scales: Türkiye's Geopolitical Role Between China and the West

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### Abstract

*Türkiye is a major actor in world geopolitics because of its advantageous position as a bridge connecting Europe and Asia. Its foreign policy strikes a careful balance between deepening its ties to China, especially in commerce and infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative, and preserving its historical relationships with the West, including through NATO and economic ties with the European Union. Domestic political factors, security concerns, and economic imperatives all influence this delicate balancing act. China offers economic prospects that put conventional alignments to the test, while Western alliances provide institutional and military stability. However, Türkiye's diplomatic moves are complicated by disputes over regional wars, defence plans, and human rights. Türkiye's public opinion is still fragmented, which reflects changes in global power dynamics. Assessing Türkiye's potential influence on regional and global power dynamics requires an understanding of its changing geopolitical strategy. This study investigates the ways in which Türkiye's foreign policy and the international order are impacted by its strategic location.*

**Keywords:** NATO, European Union, Türkiye, Balancing Act, BRI, Western Alliance

### Introduction

Türkiye is an important actor in international geopolitics, trade, and security due to its advantageous geographic location at the meeting point of Europe and Asia. Turkey's location between the Mediterranean Sea to the south, the Aegean Sea to the west, and the Black Sea to the north makes it an essential bridge connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. International marine trade and military operations greatly depend on the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which link the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Due to its geographic location, Türkiye has historically been a hub for trade, cultural exchange, and military conflicts. Anatolia was traversed by the historic Silk Road, which allowed trade between Europe and Asia. Oil from the Caspian Sea is transported to international markets via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, one of the major transit hubs for energy pipelines in Türkiye today. Furthermore, Türkiye's closeness to war zones like Syria and Iraq has made it a significant participant in regional security and migration management, especially concerning the European Union (Tocci & Aydın-Düzgit, 2015). Türkiye's strategic location also influences its geopolitical alliances. In addition to having close relations with Western countries, it is a member of NATO and actively engages with China, Russia, and the Middle East. This delicate balancing act highlights Türkiye's function as a link between many political, economic, and cultural domains.

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Due to its inclusion in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1952, Türkiye has generally sided with the West. Türkiye's geopolitical position as a frontline state against Soviet expansion during the Cold War served as the impetus for this partnership. Türkiye is a major NATO member and is home to military installations, such as Incirlik Air Base, which has proved essential to NATO and American operations in the Middle East. Furthermore, despite continuous difficulties in admission talks, Türkiye has maintained strong political and economic links with the EU and hopes to become a full member. However, Türkiye has increased its interaction with China in recent years, especially in the political and commercial arenas. Türkiye wants to improve its trade connectivity and infrastructure as a member of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Increased investment in energy, digital infrastructure, and transportation has strengthened the economic ties between China and Türkiye. With Türkiye joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a security and economic alliance dominated by China, the two nations have also strengthened their political ties (Açıkalın, 2021). Türkiye's connection with the West is still important, even in light of its expanding ties with China. The nation is still managing a complicated foreign policy, striking a balance between its obligations to NATO and the economic prospects in Asia. Türkiye's larger geopolitical goals to serve as a link between various world powers are reflected in this strategic approach.

Türkiye has played a significant role in transatlantic security as a NATO member with strong historical ties to the West. However, a move towards a more autonomous and comprehensive foreign policy is seen in its growing interaction with China, Russia, and other non-Western entities (Erşen & Köstem, 2019). Global politics will be greatly impacted by this balancing tactic, especially in terms of forming trade routes, alliances, and regional stability.

Türkiye can affect several international frameworks because of its geopolitical location as a bridge connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. While its observer position in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) indicates a desire in alternative security alliances, its involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) indicates a readiness to diversify economic partnerships. Simultaneously, Türkiye maintains its commitment to NATO by hosting vital locations necessary for Western defence operations and taking part in joint military exercises (Güvenç, 2012). By upending established coalitions and establishing new economic and security ties, this delicate balancing act has an impact on the balance of power in the world. It also calls into question Türkiye's larger geopolitical goals, the future of NATO unity, and the relationship between the EU and Türkiye. The strategic decisions Türkiye makes will have a significant impact on regional and global events as global power moves towards multipolarity.

### **Türkiye's Enduring Alliance with the West**

Since joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1952, Türkiye has been an integral part of the alliance's security structure. Türkiye, which is strategically located at the intersection of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, has been NATO's south-eastern flank, protecting Western members from possible Soviet threats during the Cold War and, more recently, from Middle Eastern turmoil.

Hosting important military installations, such as Incirlik Air Base, which has been utilised by NATO and US forces for operations in the Middle East, including counterterrorism operations against the Taliban and ISIS, is one of Türkiye's most important contributions to



NATO. Furthermore, Türkiye oversees the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits, which are vital for NATO naval troops to traverse between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (Chaziza, 2021). NATO can project strength in Eastern Europe and the Middle East thanks to this geostrategic advantage, especially in reaction to Russian military actions in Ukraine and the Caucasus.

Additionally, Türkiye actively takes part in NATO missions, such as peacekeeping operations in the Baltics, Afghanistan, and Kosovo. It has supported collective defence efforts with troops, supplies, and intelligence-sharing capabilities (Wang & Sun, 2024). However, Türkiye's changing foreign policy has occasionally caused tension in its relations with NATO, as evidenced by its acquisition of Russian S-400 missile defence systems. Türkiye continues to be a vital component of the alliance, maintaining regional stability and bolstering Western security objectives despite sporadic conflicts.

### **EU Aspirations: Türkiye's Complex Path to Membership**

For many years, Türkiye's foreign policy has been characterised by its application to join the European Union (EU). Türkiye has long pursued further European integration, first applying to join the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1987 and formally becoming a candidate nation in 1999. Given Türkiye's geopolitical, economic, and cultural connections to Europe, accession talks officially started in 2005. However, because of several structural and political obstacles, Türkiye's route to full membership is still unclear and progress has been listless (Preto Martini, 2024).

Concerns about democratic governance and human rights have been a major barrier to Türkiye's EU admission path. Türkiye's limitations on journalistic freedom, judicial independence, and crackdowns on political opposition have drawn recurrent criticism from the EU. Türkiye imposed a number of emergency measures, such as mass arrests and dismissals, in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt, further straining ties with European institutions. EU leaders are reluctant to move membership discussions further because of these acts and constitutional amendments that increased presidential powers, which have been characterised as democratic backsliding.

Furthermore, Türkiye's foreign policy decisions and geopolitical location have made its EU ambitions more difficult. Tensions with European countries have increased as a result of Türkiye's involvement in regional wars and disputes with Greece and Cyprus over territorial seas in the Eastern Mediterranean (Kılınc Pala, 2025). Notwithstanding these obstacles, Türkiye continues to be a vital trading, security, and migration management partner of the EU, especially in light of the 2016 EU-Türkiye refugee agreement. Türkiye's relationship with the EU is still developing, influencing its place in European and international affairs even though full membership is yet unattainable.

### **Trade and Diplomacy: Türkiye's Economic and Military Collaborations with Europe and the U.S.**

#### *Economic Connections with Europe*

Europe is Türkiye's biggest commercial partner and have always had close economic connections. Established in 1995, the EU-Türkiye Customs Union is a crucial player in promoting economic cooperation and trade, giving Türkiye access to the European single

market for goods. Türkiye exports a variety of goods to Europe, such as machinery, textiles, agricultural products, and auto parts. In exchange, Türkiye imports industrial items, machinery, and cutting-edge technology from European nations. Commerce between Türkiye and the EU is still strong despite obstacles like the political and legal problems surrounding Türkiye's desire to join the EU, and both countries rely significantly on one another for economic stability, investment, and commerce.

By interacting with nations in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, Türkiye has also attempted to broaden its economic connections outside of Europe. Nonetheless, Europe continues to play a major role in Türkiye's economic expansion, as many European businesses engage in Turkish markets. Furthermore, Türkiye receives a substantial amount of foreign direct investment from the EU, especially in the industrial and service sectors (Üngör, 2025)

#### *Partnerships with the U.S.*

With substantial trade and investment flows between the two countries, the United States is another important economic partner of Türkiye. Türkiye imports technology, machinery, and energy resources while exporting textiles, electronics, and automobiles to the United States. Political concerns, particularly those pertaining to the Kurdish war and Türkiye's ties with Russia and Iran, have caused fluctuations in the amount of trade between the United States and Türkiye. However, both nations understand how critical it is to keep up solid economic ties in order to sustain their respective economies (Hawes, 2018).

Due to their investments in industries including energy, telecommunications, and banking, American businesses are well-represented in Türkiye. The United States also helps Türkiye with infrastructure projects, development support, and military funding. However, trade disagreements have occasionally strained relations and affected economic partnership, especially when they involve tariffs and sanctions.

Türkiye's economic ties with the United States and Europe are nevertheless robust today. Global economic downturns and political unrest, especially in relation to Türkiye's domestic political developments and foreign policy, have had an impact on trade volumes. Türkiye's defence strategy still relies heavily on military and diplomatic cooperation inside NATO, but new difficulties have been brought about by Türkiye's independent foreign policy and ties with nations like Russia. Although military cooperation with NATO is still essential, Türkiye's future status within the alliance may be impacted by conflicts over topics like defence procurement and regional interventions.

## **Türkiye's Strategic Engagement with China**

#### *Economic Relations*

A major change in Türkiye's foreign policy and economic approach is represented by its involvement with China, especially through its involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Türkiye's strategic location linking East and West has made it a vital partner of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to improve infrastructure connectivity and encourage trade across Asia, Europe, and Africa (Güneylioğlu, 2022). Significant initiatives including building ports, highways, and railroads are part of Türkiye's participation in the BRI. These projects not only improve Türkiye's local infrastructure but also incorporate it into larger Eurasian trade networks.



Another important aspect of China and Türkiye's economic partnership is their expanding trade. China is now one of Türkiye's biggest commercial partners, and bilateral trade between the two nations has grown dramatically over the last ten years. Türkiye buys high-tech goods, electronics, and machinery from China, and exports textiles, machinery, and agricultural products to China. Furthermore, Chinese investments in Turkish infrastructure are becoming more noticeable in industries including building, transportation, and energy. For instance, Chinese businesses have strengthened their economic links by investing in coal power plants and renewable energy projects as well as the growth of Türkiye's energy sector.

### *Geopolitical Collaboration*

In terms of geopolitics, China's larger goal of increasing connectivity throughout Eurasia depends heavily on Türkiye's function as a bridge connecting Europe and Asia. China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to build a massive network of commercial channels linking the Pacific and Europe, fits in nicely with this position (Tekdal, 2017). China benefits greatly from Türkiye's geographic location since it makes it simpler to access European markets and provides possible routes for travel through Central Asia.

Türkiye's strategic collaboration with China is further cemented by its participation in multilateral organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Despite not being a full member, Türkiye's SCO observer status shows how close it is to China and other members like Russia and Central Asian nations. With its emphasis on economic cooperation, cultural interaction, and regional security, the SCO offers Türkiye a singular chance to engage in a forum that unites European and Asian interests. Türkiye's strategic influence in the area is increased by this alignment with China through multilateral collaboration.

### *Challenges in the Relationship*

Despite increased geopolitical and economic collaboration, Türkiye-China ties are complicated by several concerns, especially those pertaining to human rights, most notably the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in China's Xinjiang province. Given their shared ethnic and cultural heritage, the Turkish populace has expressed significant support for the Uyghur cause and has been outspoken in its criticism of the persecution of Uyghur Muslims. Concerns over the Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghur minority, including claims of widespread detentions and cultural suppression, have been voiced by the Turkish government (Aydın-Düzgüt, Kutlay & Keyman, 2025). Since many Turkish citizens believe that the treatment of Uyghurs violates their human rights, this issue has resulted in domestic political pressure.

However, China has vehemently denied worldwide criticism of its Xinjiang policies, claiming that the actions are required to fight terrorism and extremism. Thus, Türkiye's diplomatic relations with China are strained as a result of its political backing for the Uyghurs, which further complicates their otherwise expanding bilateral relationship (Adısönmez & Öztüğ, 2024). As a result, Türkiye now has to strike a careful balance between handling internal and international concerns over the Uyghur issue and preserving its strategic and economic ties with China.

## **Economic and Security Dilemmas: Türkiye's Balancing Act**

Türkiye must manage its economic and security interests while performing a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, it still depends largely on military and economic assistance

from the West. Given its long-standing geopolitical difficulties with Russia and other regional powers, Türkiye gains from military partnerships that provide strategic security as a NATO member. Additionally, NATO and the United States strengthen Türkiye's defence capabilities by offering military hardware, training, and assistance. In terms of economics, the EU is Türkiye's biggest trading partner, and Western organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF have long contributed significantly to Türkiye's economic growth by lending money and offering technical support.

But as part of its larger foreign policy approach, Türkiye has been working harder to diversify its alliances, particularly with China. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has given Türkiye the chance to obtain vital infrastructure investments, bolstering its economy and giving it more clout in international commerce and regional connectivity (Muftuler-Bac & Gursay, 2010). China's increasing involvement in Turkish infrastructure projects, such as ports and railroads, demonstrates Türkiye's geopolitical move to fortify its connections with Asia and lessen its excessive dependence on Western military and economic resources (Kulaksız, 2019).

Türkiye has a conundrum as a result of this diversification approach since it wants to strengthen its geopolitical and economic relationships with China while preserving its tight ties with the West. Türkiye's position on the international scene is complicated by the possible risks of upsetting long-standing Western friends, particularly when it comes to defence and economic policy. Türkiye's long-term geopolitical policy depends on striking a balance between these two areas, but doing so also highlights the difficulties of negotiating a quickly shifting global environment.

### **Türkiye's Multipolar Diplomacy under President Erdoğan**

Türkiye has shifted away from its traditional Western-centric alliances to a multipolar approach of foreign policy under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This approach stems from a desire to demonstrate more autonomy in international affairs, especially as Türkiye deals with issues pertaining to its EU membership, regional security, and domestic political dynamics. Instead of depending only on its ties with the EU and NATO, Erdoğan's foreign policy vision aims to establish Türkiye as a major actor in a multipolar world by interacting with a range of powers, both established and new (Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay & Keyman, 2025).

A significant component of this multipolar policy is Türkiye's outreach to China and Russia. Türkiye's aim to lessen its reliance on Western alliances is reflected in the growing connections with Russia, especially in fields like defence, energy, and regional security. Notably, Türkiye's 2017 acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defence system, in spite of resistance from NATO members, represents a substantial shift from the country's customary defence procurement practices (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Aksu, 2024). This choice highlights the two nations' expanding strategic engagement, as does Türkiye's participation in cooperative military operations in Syria and collaboration on energy projects like the TurkStream pipeline.

At the same time, Türkiye's ties with China have become stronger as a result of its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its acceptance of Chinese infrastructure investments. Türkiye aims to become a more powerful player in Eurasia and less dependent on the West by broadening its diplomatic and economic alliances. Türkiye's efforts to strike a balance between its traditional relationships and claiming more foreign policy autonomy are also reflected in its approach to China and Russia (Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay & Keyman, 2025).





There are hazards associated with this change to a multipolar foreign policy. It enables Türkiye to move between various international powers, but it also makes it more difficult for Türkiye to keep a balanced stance and handle possible conflicts with NATO members, especially the US and the EU. Nonetheless, Erdoğan's foreign policy is still dedicated to strengthening Türkiye's position as a stand-alone world power, even if doing so means going against long-standing ties.

## **Public Perception of Türkiye's Relationship with China and the West**

Historical links, national interests, and media representations all influence how the Turkish public views the country's relations with China and the West. The prospect of investment and infrastructure development has stoked enthusiasm for Türkiye's involvement with China, despite the country's longstanding military and economic links with Western nations. The Turkish public's perception of these links, however, varies greatly.

### *Connection to the West*

In recent years, tensions over issues like Türkiye's military operations in Syria, its acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile system, and the EU's criticisms of human rights and democratic backsliding have made the Turkish public's perception of its relationship with the West more nuanced (Altunışık, 2021). Many Turks view the West, especially the US and the EU, as a source of political and economic conflict as well as a historical ally. The West is frequently portrayed in the media as both a vital ally, particularly in the areas of commerce and security, and a source of meddling in Türkiye's domestic affairs. Public dissatisfaction with the U.S.'s Middle East policy and the EU's lethargic accession process has resulted in a more critical attitude towards Western institutions (Adisönmez & Öztuğ, 2024).

### *Ties with China*

On the other hand, although it is still developing, the Turkish public's opinion of China is generally more positive. Turkish people have a positive attitude towards China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) because it promises large investments in ports, airports, and railroads. These initiatives are viewed as chances to improve Türkiye's infrastructure and connect it to the rest of the world. Many Turkish citizens find the Chinese government's emphasis on business alliances enticing, particularly in light of the country's current economic difficulties (Avçu, 2023). The political ramifications of these expanding ties, especially with regard to human rights concerns like the oppression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, are less widely known, though. The Turkish media frequently emphasises economic cooperation, but they rarely discuss delicate political topics that can sour relations with China (Kulaksız, 2019).

### *Influence of the Media*

The Turkish media has a big influence on how people think. While occasionally downplaying human rights concerns, state-controlled media outlets are more likely to highlight the good aspects of China-Türkiye relations, such as the economic benefits of BRI investments. On the other hand, Western relations—especially those with the United States—are frequently portrayed critically, emphasising conflicts and anger over what is seen as Western meddling in Turkish affairs (Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay & Keyman, 2025). This framing influences the public's perception of Türkiye's long-term foreign policy objectives and strategic alliances.

## Conclusion

Türkiye is able to negotiate the intricacies of international geopolitics because of its special status as a bridge connecting the East and the West. Maintaining a practical foreign policy is crucial to protecting its national interests as the balance of power in the area and the world changes. Türkiye can take advantage of economic opportunities and reduce political risks by striking a balance in its interactions with China and the West. A complex strategy encompassing economic cooperation, geopolitical cooperation, and handling delicate human rights issues is shown in Türkiye's strategic engagement with China. Türkiye, a vital player in China's Belt and Road Initiative, will gain from enhanced commerce and infrastructure while also contributing significantly to China's larger Eurasian connectivity initiatives. Türkiye's role as an East-West bridge will probably continue to be a top priority for its foreign policy agenda as the relationship develops. As a NATO member and long-time EU aspirant, Türkiye has maintained strategic partnerships with Western nations. However, issues such as human rights concerns, migration policies, and regional conflicts have strained relations. While economic and security cooperation continues, disagreements over Syria, defence purchases, and democratic governance create friction. Public opinion in Türkiye remains divided, with some advocating closer ties to the West and others favouring a more independent foreign policy. Future studies should examine how Türkiye's strategic approach might affect foreign alliances, redefine its place in the changing global order, and affect regional stability.

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