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Middle Powers in a Multipolar World: The Case of Turkey's Foreign Policy Repositioning

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ABSTRACT

In today's emerging multipolar world, middle powers are playing increasingly active roles in regional and global affairs. This article examines Turkey's foreign policy transformation over the past two decades, focusing on how it has repositioned itself as an assertive and strategically autonomous middle power. While historically aligned with the West through NATO and its EU aspirations, Turkey has adopted a more diversified and multidirectional approach. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative single-case analysis drawing on official policy documents, leadership discourse, and secondary academic and policy sources. Its outreach now includes deeper engagement in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia, expanding cooperation with Russia and China, and more transactional ties with the United States and the European Union. Key drivers behind this shift include domestic political changes, economic needs, and evolving security concerns. Turkey also employs soft power, including humanitarian diplomacy, media influence, and defense exports, as part of a hybrid toolkit to extend its influence. The article finds that Turkey's repositioning reflects broader patterns of middle-power behavior in a multipolar world. It concludes that its long-term effectiveness will depend on internal stability, economic resilience, and balanced global relations within an increasingly fragmented international order.

KEYWORDS

Middle powers; Multipolar world order; Turkish foreign policy; regional diplomacy.

1. Introduction

The global order is undergoing a fundamental transformation, marked by the steady erosion of unipolarity and the ascent of a multipolar configuration in which multiple centers of power increasingly shape international affairs. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States' dominance as the unchallenged global hegemon gave rise to a liberal international order characterized by American military preponderance, economic integration under neoliberal principles, and the institutionalization of global governance mechanisms (Ikenberry, 2001, p. 3). However, this unipolar moment proved to be historically contingent and structurally unsustainable. The twenty-first century has witnessed the resurgence of strategic competition, the diffusion of economic power, and the reassertion of regional and civilizational identities. As emerging powers such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil challenge the normative and institutional foundations of the Western-led order, the international system is becoming increasingly fragmented and contested (Acharya, 2018, p. 56).



In this shifting global landscape, the agency of middle powers has become more pronounced. Traditionally positioned between major and minor powers, middle powers possess sufficient material capabilities and diplomatic acumen to shape outcomes within specific regional or thematic arenas. They often act as norm entrepreneurs, coalition builders, and mediators in international disputes (Cooper, 1997, p. 9). Unlike great powers, they tend to eschew expansionist ambitions in favor of stability-oriented activism. However, the advent of multipolarity has altered the behavioral logic of middle powers, offering them both opportunities for strategic maneuvering and challenges related to systemic volatility. Recent debates in the *International Journal of Contemporary Security Studies* (IJCSS) have highlighted how middle powers navigate multipolar uncertainty through strategic autonomy, flexible alignment, and regionally grounded security practices, providing an essential analytical backdrop for this study (Petrović, 2025, p. 139-148).

Over the past two decades, Turkey has transitioned from a traditionally Western-aligned actor to a more autonomous and assertive regional power (Kirişci, 2011, p. 33). While maintaining its formal commitment to NATO and its institutional connections with the European Union, Ankara has pursued a multidirectional foreign policy that engages a broader array of partners across the Middle East, Africa, Eurasia, and the Global South (Kardaş, 2013, p. 637). This repositioning has involved a diverse set of instruments, including military interventions, energy diplomacy, cultural outreach, humanitarian assistance, and ideological framing. The resulting foreign policy doctrine diverges significantly from Turkey's earlier tradition of cautious, security-oriented diplomacy. It reveals a deliberate effort to redefine its identity and role on the world stage.

For the purposes of this study, "strategic autonomy" refers to a state's capacity to formulate and implement foreign policy independently of binding alliance constraints; "active neutrality," used interchangeably with "strategic flexibility," denotes selective engagement with competing power blocs without permanent alignment; and "multidirectional foreign policy" describes the simultaneous pursuit of diversified diplomatic, economic, and security relations across multiple regions and actors.

This article seeks to analyze the repositioning of Turkey's foreign policy within the framework of middle power behavior in a multipolar world. It examines the historical evolution, strategic motivations, and operational dimensions of Turkey's foreign policy transformation under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), particularly under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Hintz, 2018, pp. 75–77). The research aims to address three interrelated questions:

- (1) How does Turkey's recent foreign policy behavior correspond to theoretical expectations of middle powers in multipolar systems?
- (2) What strategic, economic, and domestic drivers account for Turkey's growing assertiveness?
- (3) What instruments does Turkey employ to project influence, and what limits does this repositioning impose on regional stability and global governance?

To address these questions, the article adopts a qualitative analytical methodology rooted in the tradition of foreign policy analysis (FPA) and middle power theory. The study combines theoretical insights from neoclassical realism and constructivist perspectives with empirical data drawn from official policy documents, speeches by Turkish leaders, regional diplomatic engagements, and third-party assessments published by international think tanks and academic institutions (Ünver, 2015, p. 272). The research is designed as a single-case qualitative study, using Turkey as an illustrative case of a middle power navigating the uncertainties of a multipolar world. The justification for this case study design lies in the explanatory richness that Turkey provides, given its strategic geography, military capabilities, political transformations, and complex relations with both Western and non-Western actors (Öniş & Kutlay, 2017, p. 8).

The analytical framework employed in this study rests on four core pillars: historical continuity and change in Turkish foreign policy; the quest for strategic autonomy in a fragmented global order; the deployment of hybrid power instruments (hard, soft, and economic); and the impact of domestic political dynamics on foreign policy behavior. Each of these components is examined across temporal and regional contexts to trace the evolution and coherence of Turkey's strategic outlook. The paper does not aim to offer a definitive judgment on the success or failure of Turkey's repositioning; rather, it seeks to critically assess the structural logic, internal contradictions, and external ramifications of this foreign policy shift (Oğuzlu, 2020, p. 31).

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of middle power theory with empirical evidence from Turkey's regional engagements, particularly after the Arab uprisings and the shifting dynamics of the post-2016 international system. By framing Turkey's foreign policy not as an aberration or anomaly, but as a strategic

recalibration typical of contemporary middle powers, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how non-hegemonic states adapt to systemic uncertainty. It also adds to the growing literature on the diversification of global governance actors, emphasizing the role of regional powers in contesting and reconfiguring the norms and institutions of international politics.

Methodologically, the article follows a thematic structure organized into interconnected sections. The first section lays out the conceptual foundations of middle power behavior and its relevance in multipolar settings. The second section traces the historical trajectory of Turkish foreign policy, highlighting continuities and ruptures. The third section examines the specific dimensions of Turkey's repositioning, including military assertiveness, economic diplomacy, and cultural projection. The fourth section investigates the domestic drivers and constraints shaping foreign policy decisions. The final section evaluates the regional and global implications of Turkey's middle power activism and offers reflections on its strategic sustainability.

By weaving together theory, history, policy analysis, and regional dynamics, this article seeks to offer a comprehensive and critical account of Turkey's foreign policy repositioning as a middle power navigating a turbulent and pluralistic international environment. It invites scholars, practitioners, and regional observers to consider the interplay between global structural change and state-level agency, and to assess how countries like Turkey contribute to, and are shaped by, the emerging contours of a multipolar world.

2. Method and Scope of Research

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, using Turkey as a model for analyzing middle power behavior in a multipolar world. The research is based on document and discourse analysis, drawing from academic literature, policy reports, and official statements. Academic peer-reviewed literature is prioritized for theoretical framing, while official policy documents and leadership speeches are used to capture state intent and strategic discourse. Policy reports and think-tank assessments are employed as supplementary sources to contextualize regional developments and external perceptions.

The scope covers the period from the early 2000s to the present, focusing on Turkey's foreign policy shifts, regional diplomacy, strategic partnerships, and balancing between Western and non-Western actors. The study aims to understand how Turkey seeks strategic autonomy and what this reveals about middle power dynamics in global politics.

Core Issue

The core issue of this research is Turkey's evolving role as a middle power within a multipolar international system. The study focuses on how Turkey's foreign policy repositioning reflects broader shifts in global power structures and middle power diplomacy. This topic is highly relevant to contemporary international studies, as it highlights the strategic behavior of states that operate between great powers and emerging poles. By examining Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy and regional influence, the research sheds light on how middle powers adapt to uncertainty, seek agency, and reshape traditional alliance patterns in a changing global order.

3. Middle Powers and the Multipolar System

This section outlines the defining characteristics of middle power behavior in a multipolar international system and explains how structural fragmentation expands both opportunities and constraints for middle power agency.

The emergence of multipolarity has significantly altered the strategic calculus of states that do not belong to the club of great powers but nevertheless possess enough material and diplomatic resources to exert influence. These states, often labeled as "middle powers," occupy a distinctive niche in the international hierarchy, with their behavioral patterns shaped by both systemic pressures and domestic determinants (Cooper, 1997, p. 9). Middle powers are states that are neither great nor small in terms of international capability and influence but have the capacity and willingness to act as stabilizers in the global system. They often leverage multilateralism, mediation, and institution-building to pursue their interests and contribute to global governance (Holbraad, 1984, p. 74).

In a multipolar world where power is more diffusely distributed across regional and functional domains, the scope for middle power activism expands. Rather than aligning unconditionally with dominant powers, these states pursue diversified strategies, including hedging, soft balancing, and issue-based coalitions (Paul, 2018, pp. 122–124). Multipolarity provides middle powers with new avenues for strategic autonomy, particularly when global institutions are in flux and hegemonic leadership is either absent or contested (Gilley & O’Neil, 2014, p. 3). The ability to navigate between rival poles, engage in selective partnerships, and articulate alternative normative visions becomes a hallmark of middle power diplomacy in this context.

Turkey’s emergence as a middle power in the multipolar order is not merely the product of its geography but of its evolving strategic ambitions (Oğuzlu, 2023, pp. 267–284). As a NATO member, a candidate for EU accession, and a rising regional actor, Turkey has long occupied a liminal position between the West and the Global South. The AKP’s foreign policy, particularly in the 2010s, sought to capitalize on this position by advancing a multidimensional diplomacy that was at once Western-facing and regionally assertive (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 73). The country’s increasing involvement in regional crises, its diversification of alliances, and its engagement in international institutions such as the G20 and MİKTA reflect a middle power strategy aimed at maximizing leverage through flexible alignment.

Moreover, Turkey’s behavior fits the profile of an emerging middle power; a state from the Global South that challenges the dominance of established powers not through confrontation, but through norm-setting, soft power, and regional leadership. This is evident in Turkey’s proactive humanitarian diplomacy, its emphasis on Muslim solidarity, and its hosting of platforms such as the Istanbul Mediation Conferences. As a middle power, Turkey aspires not only to influence regional outcomes but also to shape the normative contours of global politics. Its call for reforming the United Nations Security Council under the slogan “The world is bigger than five” illustrates its desire to question the legitimacy of the existing order.

Yet, Turkey’s middle power activism also reveals inherent tensions. While the fluidity of multipolarity offers opportunities for maneuver, it also entails volatility and strategic ambiguity (Schweller, 2011, p. 285). Middle powers like Turkey must constantly adapt to shifting alignments, manage complex regional rivalries, and prevent overextension. The ability of middle powers to influence global or regional agendas depends not only on material resources but also on the coherence of their strategies and the credibility of their commitments (Hellmann & Herborst, 2010, pp. 795–816). In Turkey’s case, balancing between NATO obligations, economic ties with the EU, energy dependency on Russia, and growing interactions with China has proven both a strength and a vulnerability.

Therefore, the Turkish experience serves as an instructive case for understanding how middle powers are repositioning themselves in a world no longer governed by a single hegemon. Turkey’s foreign policy is not simply reactive to structural shifts; it reflects an active pursuit of a new role in the evolving international architecture. By combining strategic ambition with regional embeddedness, and by engaging both institutional and unilateral pathways, Turkey exemplifies the dynamism and dilemmas of middle power diplomacy in a multipolar age (Kardaş, 2013, p. 645).

4. The Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy

This section traces the historical evolution of Turkish foreign policy, highlighting the shift from cautious Western alignment toward a more proactive and regionally assertive posture.

The historical evolution of Turkey’s foreign policy provides crucial insight into its contemporary repositioning as a middle power in a multipolar world. For much of the twentieth century, Turkey maintained a cautious and Western-oriented foreign policy, rooted in the principles of Kemalist ideology. This approach emphasized national sovereignty, secularism, and alignment with the Euro-Atlantic order. Following its accession to NATO in 1952, Turkey firmly positioned itself within the Western security architecture, viewing alignment with the United States and Western Europe as essential to its national security and modernization trajectory (Hale, 2013, p. 204).

Throughout the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy was predominantly reactive and focused on strategic containment. The Soviet threat loomed large, leading Ankara to prioritize military cooperation with NATO allies and limit its engagement with volatile regions such as the Middle East. Turkish diplomacy was characterized

by restraint, caution, and an aversion to regional entanglements that could threaten its Western alliances. This approach continued into the post-Cold War era, although the regional context began to shift rapidly with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War, and the emergence of new threats and opportunities in the Middle East, Balkans, and Central Asia (Robins, 2003, p. 49).

The 1990s marked a transitional phase, with Turkey cautiously exploring new foreign policy directions while grappling with domestic instability and the rise of political Islam. It was not until the early 2000s, with the electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), that a comprehensive shift began to unfold. The AKP's ascent to power signaled the beginning of a more proactive, multidimensional, and ideologically nuanced foreign policy. While the party initially framed its approach in pragmatic and reformist terms; seeking to deepen EU integration, normalize relations with neighbors, and enhance Turkey's soft power; the trajectory of Turkish foreign policy would change dramatically in response to both domestic transformations and regional upheavals (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2009, p. 9).

A key architect of this new vision was Ahmet Davutoğlu, whose concept of "strategic depth" emphasized Turkey's historical and cultural ties across the former Ottoman space. Under his influence, the AKP government launched the "zero problems with neighbors" doctrine, aimed at resolving longstanding tensions and positioning Turkey as a benevolent regional leader. This period saw a remarkable expansion in Turkey's diplomatic outreach, economic partnerships, and cultural initiatives. Relations with Syria, Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf states improved, and Turkey became an active mediator in regional disputes. Simultaneously, its soft power tools; such as development aid, humanitarian diplomacy, and cultural promotion; were deployed to enhance its image and influence across the Muslim world and beyond (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 74).

However, the optimism of this period proved short-lived. The eruption of the Arab uprisings in 2010 presented both opportunities and challenges for Turkish foreign policy. Initially supportive of popular demands for change, Turkey sought to position itself as a model for democratic governance in the Muslim world. Yet, as the uprisings devolved into civil wars and authoritarian reversals, Turkey's approach shifted toward a more interventionist and ideologically driven posture. In Syria, Ankara moved from cautious diplomacy to direct military involvement, driven by security concerns and strategic competition. In Egypt, it backed the Muslim Brotherhood and refused to recognize the post-coup regime, leading to a rupture with Cairo and tensions with other Gulf monarchies (Oğüzlu, 2023, pp. 267–284).

These developments marked a decisive departure from the earlier "zero problems" strategy and ushered in a new era of assertive regional engagement. Turkish foreign policy became increasingly securitized, personalized, and shaped by domestic political dynamics. The failed coup attempts in 2016 further accelerated this transformation, as the Turkish leadership adopted a more nationalist and anti-Western narrative. Relations with the United States and the European Union deteriorated, while partnerships with Russia, China, and Qatar deepened. This pivot reflected a broader desire to pursue strategic autonomy and resist external pressure, even at the cost of traditional alliances.

Today, Turkey's foreign policy reflects a complex amalgam of historical legacies, strategic calculations, and domestic imperatives. While its Western ties remain formally intact, Ankara's actions increasingly signal a desire to operate independently within the international system. This evolution illustrates not only Turkey's adaptation to a changing global environment but also its ambition to shape that environment as a confident, regionally grounded, and ideologically assertive middle power.

5. Strategic Autonomy and Regional Assertiveness

This section examines Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy and demonstrates how this objective has translated into increasingly assertive regional policies and independent security decisions.

One of the most defining and debated dimensions of Turkey's foreign policy repositioning is its growing pursuit of strategic autonomy. In contrast to its historical reliance on Western alliances, particularly NATO and the United States, contemporary Turkish foreign policy has been increasingly marked by independent decision-making, assertive regional engagement, and a willingness to challenge the preferences of its traditional allies. This shift does not imply an outright break from the West but reflects a recalibration of priorities and a broader desire to diversify strategic partnerships in an increasingly multipolar world.

The trajectory of strategic autonomy gained momentum following the breakdown of trust between Ankara and Washington, especially after the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey. The Turkish leadership accused Western powers of being either indifferent or complicit in the events, and the presence of Fethullah Gülen in the United States fueled suspicions of a hidden agenda. These grievances added to existing tensions over Syria, where the United States' cooperation with the Kurdish YPG, considered by Turkey as an extension of the PKK, was viewed as a direct threat to Turkish national security (Hintz, 2018, pp. 141–145).

This environment of deepening mistrust catalyzed Ankara's move toward a more diversified foreign policy strategy. The clearest manifestation of this shift was Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defense system in 2017, despite strong objections from NATO and the subsequent imposition of U.S. sanctions. For Turkish policymakers, this procurement symbolized a commitment to sovereign defense decision-making (Aydın, 2010; Stein, 2020). Critics, however, viewed it as a symptom of Turkey's drift away from the transatlantic alliance. Ankara's subsequent exclusion from the F-35 fighter jet program in 2019, following the imposition of U.S. CAATSA-related measures, underscored the growing rift with Washington and the redefinition of defense relationships (Aydın, 2010; Stein, 2020).

Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy has also been reflected in its increased military presence and operations in its neighborhood. In Syria, Turkey has conducted a series of cross-border operations between 2016 and 2019 aimed at curbing the expansion of Kurdish forces and establishing buffer zones. These military campaigns, including Operation Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring, signaled a new doctrine of proactive defense, wherein threats beyond Turkey's borders were addressed through direct intervention (Hintz, 2018; Oğuzlu, 2020). While these operations were justified in terms of counterterrorism and refugee management, they also served broader geopolitical aims of establishing influence in northern Syria.

Beyond Syria, Turkey has projected its military and diplomatic influence into multiple regional theaters. In Libya, Ankara intervened decisively in support of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, deploying drones, advisors, and naval assets. The intervention not only altered the course of the Libyan conflict but also secured maritime agreements that bolstered Turkey's claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the Caucasus, Turkey's backing of Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war reinforced its image as a capable military ally and a strategic actor in Eurasia. These actions demonstrated Ankara's readiness to take calculated risks and to use hard power as a complement to diplomatic engagement.

The Eastern Mediterranean has become another arena where Turkey's assertiveness is clearly visible. Tensions with Greece and Cyprus over maritime boundaries, natural gas exploration, and the status of disputed islands have escalated into diplomatic standoffs and naval brinkmanship. Turkey has dispatched research vessels and naval escorts to contested waters, asserting its interpretation of maritime rights and challenging the legitimacy of exclusive economic zones declared by other actors. While Ankara defends its position as grounded in international law and national sovereignty, these moves have alarmed the European Union and raised concerns about regional stability.

Yet, Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy is not limited to the military domain. It also entails a deliberate effort to diversify its strategic alignments and reduce dependency on Western actors. Relations with Russia, China, and Iran have gained new prominence, even as they remain complicated by historical rivalries and conflicting interests. Ankara's participation in forums such as the Astana process on Syria and its growing trade with Asian economies reflect an eastward shift in orientation. At the same time, Turkey continues to engage with Western institutions, albeit on its own terms, seeking transactional cooperation rather than full alignment.

The doctrine underpinning this behavior is rooted in the concept of "active neutrality" or "strategic flexibility," whereby Turkey avoids binding commitments to any one bloc and maximizes its leverage by engaging multiple actors simultaneously. This approach allows for agility in a fluid geopolitical environment but also carries risks of isolation and credibility loss. Critics argue that strategic ambiguity may confuse allies and embolden adversaries, while supporters claim it reflects a realistic adaptation to a world no longer governed by fixed alliances or unipolar discipline (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020, p. 200).

In essence, Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy marks a significant transformation in its foreign policy identity. It signals a departure from the predictability of alliance-bound behavior toward a more fluid, interest-driven, and assertive international role. Whether this strategic autonomy can be sustained over the long term, however, will depend on Turkey's ability to manage the complex interplay between its regional ambitions, global partnerships, and domestic imperatives.

To synthesize the foregoing analysis, Table 1 maps the key drivers of Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy to the instruments employed, the primary regional arenas involved, and the main constraints shaping its assertive foreign policy behavior.

Table 1. Turkey's Strategic Autonomy and Regional Assertiveness

Drivers	Instruments	Primary Regions	Key Constraints
Breakdown of trust with Western allies after 2016	Strategic defense procurement (e.g., S-400)	NATO space / Transatlantic relations	Sanctions and alliance tensions
Regional security threats and conflict spillovers	Cross-border military operations	Syria and Iraq	Risk of military overextension
Competition over maritime rights and energy resources	Naval deployments and energy exploration	Eastern Mediterranean	EU opposition and legal disputes
Shifting balance of power in regional conflicts	Military support to allies and partners	Libya and the Caucasus	Escalation risks and regional backlash
Multipolarity and declining alliance predictability	Active neutrality and strategic flexibility	Eurasia and Global South	Credibility costs and strategic ambiguity

As summarized in Table 1, Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy relies on a hybrid toolkit that varies across regions and is conditioned by both structural and domestic constraints.

6. Economic Diplomacy and Energy Strategy

This section analyzes how economic diplomacy and energy strategy function as core instruments of Turkey's foreign policy, reinforcing its regional influence and strategic autonomy.

In tandem with its strategic and military activism, Turkey has increasingly relied on economic diplomacy and energy strategy as key pillars of its foreign policy repositioning. These instruments not only serve as tools for advancing national interests but also reinforce Ankara's aspirations to act as a regional hub and global connector between East and West (Kirişçi, 2009, pp. 29–57). Economic statecraft allows Turkey to pursue influence through trade, investment, development aid, and energy transit, often complementing its geopolitical goals with commercial incentives and infrastructure initiatives (Kirişçi, 2017).

One of Turkey's most pronounced ambitions has been to become an energy corridor linking suppliers in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East to consumers in Europe. Its geostrategic location has made it a natural transit state, and successive governments have sought to leverage this geography by participating in major pipeline projects. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline (2006), the South Caucasus Pipeline, and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) (2018) are emblematic of Turkey's role in promoting energy diversification and reducing European dependence on Russian supplies. More recently, the TurkStream pipeline (2020), built in cooperation with Russia, has enhanced Turkey's position as a critical node in regional energy networks.

In addition to transit ambitions, Turkey has invested in expanding its own energy resources. The discovery of significant natural gas reserves in the Black Sea in 2020 was heralded as a game-changer, potentially reducing Turkey's energy import bill and strengthening its energy independence. Exploration and drilling efforts have also extended to the Eastern Mediterranean, though these moves have been mired in geopolitical controversy, particularly with Greece and Cyprus. Ankara insists that Turkish Cypriots must share in the island's hydrocarbon wealth and that Turkey's maritime claims are legitimate. While these explorations have triggered diplomatic crises, they also illustrate the centrality of energy to Turkey's broader strategy of asserting sovereignty and securing long-term economic resilience.

Economic diplomacy extends well beyond energy. Under the AKP, Turkey has pursued a policy of trade diversification and commercial expansion into emerging markets. Africa, in particular, has become a focal

point of Turkish outreach. Over the past two decades, Ankara has opened dozens of embassies across the continent, increased trade volume exponentially, and supported Turkish businesses in construction, logistics, and consumer goods. Turkish Airlines now flies to more African destinations than any other non-African carrier, symbolizing Turkey's bid for soft economic influence (Özkan, 2011, pp. 93–105).

Similarly, the Balkans and Central Asia have featured prominently in Turkey's commercial diplomacy. Historical and linguistic ties have facilitated economic partnerships, and Turkish companies have become active players in infrastructure development, banking, and education. In Central Asia, Ankara has sought to institutionalize its presence through frameworks such as the Organization of Turkic States, which aims to foster cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries in trade, transport, and culture.

Development assistance and humanitarian aid have also emerged as crucial tools in Turkey's economic foreign policy. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) plays a central role in this regard, implementing projects in over 100 countries. From building schools and hospitals to providing technical training and disaster relief, TİKA's operations reinforce Turkey's image as a benevolent and capable partner. These initiatives often align with Turkish business interests and diplomatic priorities, creating a synergy between altruism and strategic influence (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2013, pp. 327–341).

Despite these ambitions, Turkey's economic diplomacy is not without its challenges. The country has faced significant economic turbulence in recent years, including high inflation, currency devaluation, rising unemployment, and a widening current account deficit. These internal pressures have limited Ankara's ability to sustain expansive foreign economic initiatives and made it more vulnerable to shifts in global capital flows. Moreover, political disputes with key trading partners; such as the United States and some EU members; have occasionally resulted in sanctions or reduced market access, undermining economic diplomacy efforts.

Nonetheless, Turkey's integration of economic tools into its foreign policy reflects a maturing strategic vision. Rather than relying solely on military or diplomatic channels, Ankara is employing a multidimensional approach that links domestic development goals with international outreach. By investing in infrastructure, logistics, energy, and humanitarian programs abroad, Turkey seeks to entrench itself as an indispensable economic actor across multiple regions. The long-term effectiveness of this strategy will depend not only on macro-economic stability but also on Ankara's ability to balance commercial pragmatism with geopolitical ambitions.

7. Cultural Outreach and Soft Power

This section explores Turkey's use of cultural outreach, humanitarian engagement, and public diplomacy as soft power tools to complement its hard and economic power strategies.

In addition to hard and economic power, Turkey has increasingly prioritized the projection of soft power as a complementary dimension of its foreign policy. Soft power, defined as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, has been a hallmark of Turkey's diplomatic posture since the early 2000s. This effort to cultivate cultural affinity, religious solidarity, and humanitarian appeal serves not only to enhance Turkey's image abroad but also to deepen its regional and global reach without direct confrontation (Nye, 2008, pp. 94–109).

The cornerstone of Turkey's soft power architecture lies in its cultural diplomacy. Institutions such as the Yunus Emre Institute, established to promote Turkish language and culture, operate in dozens of countries, organizing language courses, cultural events, and academic exchanges. The aim is to foster a global awareness of Turkey's historical legacy, contemporary society, and shared values with neighboring regions. This form of outreach is particularly effective in countries with Ottoman historical ties, such as those in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa, where cultural familiarity can translate into strategic rapport.

Religious diplomacy also plays a central role in Turkey's soft power strategy. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has expanded its international activities, funding mosque construction, religious education, and interfaith initiatives across multiple continents. This effort seeks to promote a moderate interpretation of Islam consistent with Turkish traditions while countering competing religious narratives. Through this channel, Turkey has projected itself as a custodian of Islamic civilization, especially in contrast to Gulf-funded religious movements or more radical interpretations. While this approach has earned Ankara credibility among certain

Muslim communities, it has also generated criticism from secular quarters and rival states wary of perceived ideological agendas.

Media and public diplomacy constitute another arena of Turkish soft power. State-run outlets like TRT World and Anadolu Agency produce multilingual content targeting international audiences, often with narratives that challenge Western media framings. These platforms are designed not only to inform but also to shape global discourse around issues such as humanitarian crises, regional conflicts, and Turkey's own policies. Social media campaigns and online diplomacy have further amplified Turkish messaging, particularly among younger, digitally connected populations (Kaya, 2019, pp. 6310–6331).

Humanitarian diplomacy represents perhaps the most visible and acclaimed aspect of Turkey's soft power. Turkey has consistently ranked among the world's top donors of humanitarian aid relative to GDP. Its response to crises in Syria, Somalia, Palestine, and Afghanistan has garnered praise, and its hosting of more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees remains one of the largest refugee programs globally. Organizations such as the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay), and numerous Turkish NGOs operate in complex environments, delivering food, shelter, medical services, and educational support (Akpınar, 2013, pp. 735–757). These efforts enhance Turkey's reputation as a compassionate power, particularly in regions where Western engagement is limited or perceived as conditional.

Higher education has also become a strategic tool of influence. Through scholarship programs like Türkiye Bursları, the Turkish government attracts thousands of international students annually, particularly from Africa, Asia, and the Balkans. Many graduates of Turkish universities go on to occupy influential positions in their home countries, contributing to long-term diplomatic and economic ties. This educational diplomacy creates personal and institutional networks that foster goodwill and mutual understanding.

Despite these accomplishments, Turkey's soft power strategy is not without limitations. Critics argue that its cultural and religious outreach can sometimes blur the line between influence and interference, especially when perceived as politically motivated. In some regions, Turkish soft power competes with entrenched narratives propagated by rival actors, leading to contested spaces of influence. Moreover, domestic political developments; such as constraints on media freedom, polarization, and democratic backsliding; can undercut the credibility of Turkey's soft power message.

Nevertheless, the integration of cultural, religious, and humanitarian instruments into Turkish foreign policy reflects a deliberate and evolving vision. By combining moral leadership with national interest, Turkey positions itself not just as a power to be reckoned with, but also as a model to be emulated. Its soft power projection reinforces its identity as a multidimensional middle power, capable of engaging a diverse set of actors and audiences across geographic, cultural, and ideological lines.

8. Domestic Political Dynamics

This section assesses the domestic political factors shaping Turkey's foreign policy behavior, focusing on leadership centralization, ideology, and public opinion.

Turkey's foreign policy repositioning cannot be fully understood without examining the domestic political environment in which it unfolds. Internal dynamics; particularly the concentration of power in the executive branch, the transformation of institutional frameworks, and the role of ideological narratives; have played a critical role in shaping the country's external behavior. Far from being solely a reaction to international developments, Turkey's foreign policy in recent years has increasingly reflected domestic priorities, regime interests, and political calculations.

The shift toward a presidential system, formally adopted through the 2017 constitutional referendum, has significantly altered the structure of decision-making in Turkey. Executive authority has become highly centralized under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reducing the influence of traditional bureaucratic institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and elevating the role of presidential advisors and political loyalists. This centralization has allowed for a more agile and responsive foreign policy apparatus, capable of making swift decisions. However, it has also raised concerns about coherence, institutional memory, and the sustainability of long-term strategy (Sezer, 2020).

Personalization of foreign policy under Erdoğan has also introduced a more ideological and confrontational tone into Turkish diplomacy. The president's speeches and symbolic gestures are often carefully crafted to resonate with domestic audiences, particularly conservative and nationalist constituencies. Foreign policy initiatives are frequently framed as extensions of national sovereignty, Islamic solidarity, or anti-imperial resistance, creating a powerful narrative that links Turkey's international activism to a broader struggle for independence and dignity. This rhetorical posture enhances domestic legitimacy but can complicate diplomatic engagement with foreign partners who may view such narratives as provocative (Taş, 2022, pp. 1–17).

Nationalism, in particular, has become a dominant theme in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy discourse. Political alliances; such as the partnership between the ruling AKP and the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP); have reinforced a hardline approach to issues related to territorial integrity, regional security, and ethnic identity. This dynamic has manifested in Turkey's uncompromising stance on the Kurdish question, maritime disputes in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, and assertive military interventions abroad. The securitization of foreign policy thus serves both international and domestic objectives, reinforcing the image of a strong and sovereign state confronting external threats (Yabancı, 2019, pp. 92–114).

Public opinion also plays a non-negligible role in shaping foreign policy decisions. Surveys indicate that a substantial segment of the Turkish population supports an independent foreign policy and harbors skepticism toward traditional Western allies, particularly in light of perceived double standards and past grievances. This public mood provides political cover for assertive policies and makes it difficult for the government to pursue conciliatory approaches without appearing weak. At the same time, the economic costs of diplomatic isolation, sanctions, and reduced foreign investment can generate public discontent, placing pressure on the leadership to balance nationalist rhetoric with pragmatic outcomes.

Media and education contribute to shaping public perceptions of international affairs. Pro-government outlets often frame Turkey's foreign engagements as battles for justice, leadership, and historical restoration. School curricula and public campaigns emphasize Ottoman heritage, civilizational mission, and resistance to colonial powers. While these narratives foster a strong sense of national pride, they may also narrow the space for critical reflection and alternative perspectives on global realities (Arda, 2015, pp. 203–226).

Finally, economic performance is intimately linked to foreign policy legitimacy. The government's ability to deliver growth, attract investment, and manage crises influences public support for its international agenda. Periods of economic success have emboldened Turkish leaders to pursue more ambitious foreign policy goals, while downturns have sometimes forced recalibrations. For example, the 2021–2023 economic crisis contributed to a wave of normalization efforts with former regional rivals, as Ankara sought to stabilize the currency, attract Gulf investment, and repair ties with the West.

In sum, Turkey's foreign policy cannot be detached from the domestic political context that both enables and constrains it. The interplay between institutional change, leadership style, ideological narratives, and popular sentiment creates a complex environment in which foreign policy is crafted not just as an instrument of state interest but also as a reflection of internal legitimacy and regime consolidation. Understanding this domestic foundation is essential to assessing the consistency, motivations, and future trajectory of Turkey's international behavior.

9. Regional and Global Implications

This section evaluates the regional and global implications of Turkey's foreign policy repositioning, considering its impact on regional stability, alliance dynamics, and global governance.

Turkey's foreign policy repositioning, while rooted in national ambitions and shaped by domestic dynamics, has far-reaching implications for both regional order and the broader architecture of global governance. As Ankara redefines its strategic identity and projects influence across multiple arenas, it both contributes to and disrupts existing balances of power, institutional norms, and patterns of cooperation. Understanding these implications is essential not only for assessing Turkey's own trajectory, but also for evaluating the evolving role of middle powers in a multipolar world (Özkeçeci-Taner, 2022, pp. 445–460).

In the Middle East, Turkey's assertiveness has introduced a new layer of complexity to an already volatile regional environment. Its involvement in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the Gulf has challenged the dominance of tra-

ditional regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Turkey's military presence in northern Syria and Iraq has altered the strategic calculations of Kurdish actors and created tensions with both Baghdad and Damascus. In Libya, Turkish support for the Tripoli-based government reshaped the dynamics of civil conflict and provoked counter-alignments by Egypt and the UAE (Stein, 2020). In the Gulf, Ankara's close alliance with Qatar during the 2017 blockade reinforced ideological and geopolitical divisions within the Gulf Cooperation Council.

These interventions have redefined Turkey's regional identity. Once seen as a model of moderate Islamic democracy and economic modernization, Turkey is now increasingly viewed through the prism of hard power projection, ideological ambition, and neo-Ottoman revivalism. While this posture has enabled Turkey to assert itself as a regional force, it has also raised anxieties among neighbors who fear encroachment on their sovereignty or influence (Altunışık, 2008, pp. 41–54). Diplomatic ruptures with several Arab capitals, particularly in the early 2010s, illustrate the costs of unilateralism and ideological overreach.

In recent years, however, there has been a discernible shift toward normalization and pragmatic engagement. Ankara has sought to repair ties with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel, motivated by economic necessity, regional recalibration, and shifting global alignments. These efforts have included high-level visits, trade initiatives, and security dialogues, aimed at turning the page on a decade of mutual suspicion. While structural differences remain, the thaw in relations indicates Turkey's recognition of the need to balance strategic autonomy with cooperation, and activism with restraint.

In Europe, Turkey's relationship with the European Union continues to be characterized by ambivalence and transactionalism. Despite being a long-standing candidate for EU membership, accession talks have stalled, and mutual frustrations have deepened. Human rights concerns, democratic backsliding, and maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean have strained relations. Yet, economic interdependence, migration management, and shared security interests prevent a full rupture. The EU relies on Turkey to stem irregular migration, combat terrorism, and stabilize neighboring regions, while Turkey depends on European markets, investment, and diplomatic recognition. This mutual dependency sustains a fragile equilibrium, where cooperation persists amid political divergence (Tocci, 2014, pp. 1–20).

Within NATO, Turkey's position has become increasingly complex. Its acquisition of Russian defense systems, divergences over Syria policy, and diplomatic confrontations with fellow members have triggered debates about alliance cohesion. Some analysts argue that Turkey is drifting away from NATO's strategic core, while others emphasize its indispensable role in counterterrorism, Black Sea security, and regional deterrence. The war in Ukraine has further highlighted Turkey's relevance, as it has maintained dialogue with both Kyiv and Moscow, facilitated prisoner exchanges, and played a central role in brokering grain export agreements. These actions illustrate Ankara's capacity to act as a balancing force and pragmatic mediator, even amid contentious alignments.

Globally, Turkey aspires to reshape the norms and institutions of international politics. It has advocated for reforming the United Nations Security Council, expanded its presence in Africa and Latin America, and increased its participation in alternative multilateral forums. Through its engagement in the Organization of Turkic States, the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, and the G20, Turkey positions itself as a bridge between the developed and developing world. These efforts aim not only to enhance Turkish influence but also to challenge Western-centric governance models and promote a more equitable and pluralistic international order.

However, Turkey's global ambitions are constrained by material limitations, reputational challenges, and strategic contradictions. Economic fragility, diplomatic isolation, and inconsistent messaging can undermine Ankara's credibility. Balancing ties with Russia and the West, Iran and the Gulf, China and NATO, requires deft diplomacy and internal cohesion. Moreover, Turkey's assertiveness may alienate potential partners if perceived as self-serving or coercive. Thus, the success of its global engagement strategy depends on its ability to manage contradictions, build coalitions, and project consistency over time.

Overall, Turkey's repositioning generates both opportunities and tensions for regional and global politics. It introduces a more diversified and contested set of actors, norms, and alignments, reflecting the broader reality of a multipolar world. Whether Ankara will emerge as a constructive middle power that contributes to stability and cooperation, or as a revisionist actor driven by unilateralism and ambition, will depend on the evolution of its domestic politics, economic resilience, and diplomatic choices in the years to come.

10. Executive Summary and Recommendations

Turkey's evolving foreign policy reflects a broader transformation in the behavior of middle powers within a shifting global order. Moving beyond its historical alignment with Western-centric frameworks, Turkey has adopted a more assertive, strategically autonomous, and multidirectional approach to international engagement. This repositioning has been shaped by both structural global changes, including the erosion of unipolarity and the rise of multipolarity, as well as domestic political transformations that have empowered leadership to pursue ambitious foreign policy agendas.

The research highlights Turkey's ability to blend hard and soft power tools, including military interventions, economic partnerships, cultural influence, and strategic diplomacy, across several regions including the Black Sea, North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Central Asia. This hybrid strategy has allowed Ankara to increase its regional influence, forge new alliances, and contribute to reshaping global governance debates. However, this same assertiveness has led to tensions with traditional allies, economic vulnerabilities, and questions regarding long-term strategic coherence.

Domestically, centralized political control and ideological narratives have facilitated swift decision-making but also introduced challenges in policy consistency and institutional capacity. Externally, Turkey's pursuit of active neutrality (strategic flexibility) between competing blocs, such as NATO and Russia or the West and emerging Eastern powers, has demanded careful calibration. While this approach has yielded some short-term gains, it also carries risks of overextension and strategic ambiguity.

Recommendations derived from the study include the following:

1. **Strengthen Institutional Capacity:** For Turkey to sustain its middle power role, it must invest in foreign policy institutions that enhance strategic planning, inter-agency coordination, and diplomatic professionalism.
2. **Rebuild Strategic Trust:** Repairing strained relationships with key allies and partners; particularly in the EU and NATO; through confidence-building measures and transparent dialogue is essential to ensure external support and reduce diplomatic friction.
3. **Balance Ambition with Resources:** Aligning foreign policy objectives with economic capabilities and societal consensus will enhance policy sustainability and reduce the risks of overreach.
4. **Promote Norm-Based Engagement:** Emphasizing international law, multilateral cooperation, and regional stability will improve Turkey's global image and reinforce its legitimacy as a constructive actor.
5. **Leverage Soft Power Strategically:** Expanding cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, and development cooperation can complement hard power strategies and deepen Turkey's influence in emerging regions.

In summary, Turkey's foreign policy trajectory offers important insights into the opportunities and constraints faced by middle powers in the 21st century. Its experience underscores the significance of strategic autonomy, the value of adaptability, and the importance of balancing ambition with long-term vision. As a case study, Turkey provides a compelling example of how states situated between great powers can actively shape the evolving global order; if they navigate it with prudence, resilience, and foresight.

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