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Strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy in an age of multipolarity: Lineages and contradictions of an idea

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Abstract

Strategic autonomy has become a guiding principle for several states as the international order moves toward multipolarity. Turkey has also attempted to carve out a more autonomous space from its traditional Western allies by building new ties in the non-Western world, ranging from the Russia–China axis to the Middle East and beyond. This paper explores the idea and practice of strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy. We argue that strategic autonomy is not pre-determined or mechanically driven by 'hedging' behavior. We conceptualize strategic autonomy with reference to its three fundamental dimensions: structural orientation, political motive, and economic infrastructure. In this context, we highlight two soft spots in Turkish foreign policy since 2011. First, geopolitical imperatives and domestic political priorities often contradict each other, which prevents the country from effectively implementing autonomy-seeking policies. Second, strategic autonomy is mainly associated with 'high politics' without paying proper attention to its geo-economic dimension in the form of solid political economy fundamentals and economic infrastructure.

Keywords: strategic autonomy, multipolarity, Turkish foreign policy, geopolitics, economic security

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci famously argued, ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, a great variety of crisis-ridden morbid symptoms appear’ (1971, p. 276). While ‘morbid symptoms’ include severe inequality, marginalization, and poverty on the one hand and polarization, conflict, displacement, climate crisis, and ecological collapse on the other, we have been observing that the liberal international order is deteriorating, giving rise to a ‘system change’ at the global level. The interregnum is increasingly shaping the present nature of global affairs at a time when great power competition between the US and China leads to paradigmatic shifts in global affairs. The emergence of new centers of power challenges the material and normative underpinnings of the current international order. After a brief period of unipolarity, the world is moving toward multipolarity, with significant implications on alliance patterns, development paradigms, and foreign policy orientations (Posen 2009; Cooper and Flemes 2013; Silvius 2019; Schweller and Pu 2011).

In such a context, policymakers also make more frequent references to the emerging multipolarity and the associated risks of external dependency. French President Emmanuel Macron, for instance, has been pushing hard for ‘European sovereignty’—or strategic autonomy (Macron, 2023; Anderlini and Caulcutt, 2023). The German Chancellor highlighted that ‘in this new multipolar world, different countries and models of government are competing for power and influence’ (Scholz, 2023). UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (2023) also claimed that the ‘world is becoming unhinged’ at a time when ‘we are moving rapidly to a multipolar world.’

A multipolar international order is more enthusiastically received in many corners of the non-Western world. Russia has long been an advocate of multipolarity. Aligning with China, they have become more ardent supporters of a post-Western international order. On a broader scale, the Russian and Chinese leadership appear to believe that history is on their side. During his visit to Moscow in March 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping told Russian President Putin, 'Change is coming that hasn't happened in 100 years. And we're driving this change together' (Kynge, 2023). At the Belt and Road Forum in October 2023, Xi and Putin pledged to build a 'fairer, multipolar world' (Pierson *et al*, 2023). Several other states in the Global South also embrace multipolarity. Brazilian President Lula da Silva, for instance, endorsed a post-Western world by committing 'to help construct a global order that is peaceful and based in dialogue, multilateralism, and multipolarity' (Osborn, 2022).

One of the hallmarks of the emerging multipolarity is the growing popularity of the idea of 'strategic autonomy' for many states trying to 'avoid being trampled in a brawl among China, Russia, and the United States' (Spektor, 2013, p. 8). Turkey is no exception. We argue in this paper that the idea and practice of an autonomous foreign policy has become more central in the Turkish case, especially since the Arab uprisings. Turkish policymakers have been attempting to carve out a more autonomous space from Turkey's traditional Western allies and building new ties in the non-Western world, ranging from the Russia–China axis to the Middle East and beyond.

There is a growing body of literature on the idea and practice of 'strategic autonomy' in Turkish foreign policy. For example, Haugom (2019) formulates Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy as an attempt to reduce its dependence on foreign military technology and to seek 'flexible alliances'

to maximize national interests. Kara (2024, pp. 8, 19) examines Turkey's 'strategic autonomy driven hedging strategy' as an attempt to maintain 'a non-aligned posture'. Yetim and Hazar (2023) analyze Turkey's autonomy-seeking policies within the context of the changing balance of power dynamics between rival hierarchical orders. Kutlay and Öniş (2021a) frame Turkey's 'quest for strategic autonomy' not only as a 'hedging strategy' that emanates from geopolitical imperatives at a time when power shifts shape global politics but also as an instrument used by the government to organize domestic politics.

The existing research is valuable for conceptualizing strategic autonomy and documenting its manifestations in Turkish foreign policy. Strategic autonomy is not predetermined, prescriptive, or mechanical. In theory, due to its geopolitical position at the crossroads of Europe and Eurasia, its NATO membership, the Customs Union it shares with the EU, and its multiregional outlook between the Western and non-Western world as a non-colonized and non-colonial country, Turkey has a diversified set of assets to leverage emerging multipolarity. Yet, the same features—its multilayered institutional relations with the West— also make Turkey's autonomy-seeking policies controversial. This position suggests that Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy has delicate trade-offs and soft spots. Hence, rather than using strategic autonomy in a prescriptive manner as a byword for balance-of-power-driven 'hedging' strategies, we unpack the concept along the external–domestic nexus to assess its drivers, achievements, and limits in the Turkish context. To capture this complex dynamic, in this paper, we conceptualize strategic autonomy with reference to its three fundamental dimensions: structural orientation, political motive, and economic infrastructure. In the Turkish context, we argue that strategic autonomy is not only about responding to geopolitical imperatives and carving out a more autonomous policy space to

preserve ties with all rival major powers. It also has a domestic dimension. Strategic autonomy has not just been used in a prescriptive manner to define the direction of Turkish foreign policy after 2010, but it has also been used to strengthen regime security at home. A potential clash between structural drivers (urging restraint and caution in times of great power competition) and political motives (prioritization of regime security) often undermines the country's stated goal of becoming an influential actor in its broader neighborhood, whether via multiple alignments or by building long-term oriented capacity-building policies in the form of a solid economic infrastructure to render autonomy-seeking policies more sustainable. The three-dimensional approach (structural orientation, political motive, and economic infrastructure) enables a holistic perspective to account for the multiple trade-offs in contemporary Turkish foreign policy and the antinomies of strategic autonomy, which we will examine in the rest of the paper.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we will provide a brief overview of strategic autonomy. Second, we will examine how strategic autonomy has been interpreted and implemented in the Turkish context and the structural orientation on which it rests. Third, we will discuss the political motives and the economic context that undermine the effective operationalization of an autonomous foreign policy. The final part concludes the paper.

Strategic autonomy: Anatomy of a concept

Strategic autonomy is a floating signifier whose content depends on the country/regional context and the time in question. As such, it is not novel. In the Cold War context, autonomous foreign policy was considered the most feasible strategy for countries that did not want to side with either the Western alliance or the Soviet bloc. Historically, countries like India advocated the non-aligned

movement (NAM) to balance one great power against the other. Although NAM could not induce significant changes in global political and economic governance, its legacy survived in the Global South. In the post-Cold War context, the origins of the concept date back to the mid-1990s when the French were contemplating their own autonomy in defense matters (Koch, 2023). The concept made a comeback in the second decade of the 2000s, with the rise of multipolarity and the 'return of geopolitics' at the global scale.

The most well-known articulation of the concept of 'strategic autonomy' in recent years has been offered by the European Union (EU). The concept was first formally introduced through the EU Global Strategy in 2016, mainly with reference to the EU's increased need for a more autonomous security and defense policy and its readiness to assume the role of a hard power on the world stage, with the looming prospect of Donald Trump's election as the US president and the rising assertiveness of Russia in the Eastern neighborhood (EEAS, 2016). The COVID-19 crisis, China's increasing global reach, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have expanded the concept beyond security and defense-related matters. It also covers economic, energy, food, health, and digital policies in the EU. The focus has been on reducing excessive dependency and increasing self-reliance, albeit still through multilateral cooperation with like-minded allies and adherence to norms where possible and necessary. As such, strategic autonomy in the context of the EU has not been discursively formulated as a conduit for independence from the US and/or China but rather conceived as an approach to enhance the EU's capacities to protect itself from foreign aggression, increase its global economic competitiveness, and project its norms at the global scale (Helwig, 2023).

Other actors who have employed the concept in various forms since the 2010s have been the 'emerging powers' in the non-Western world. In positioning themselves in what they perceive to be a post-Western international order, these powers have mainly articulated the concept as the expression of distancing themselves from major powers, most notably the US and, in some cases, China, in the formulation of their foreign policies to avoid getting squeezed in the US-China competition (Spektor, 2023). Nonetheless, aside from this broadly conceived meaning, these countries differ from one another in terms of how they believe this autonomy should be realized and exercised. For instance, while strategic autonomy requires regional and norm-based multilateral cooperation for Indonesia to hedge against both the US and China (Gindarsah and Priamarizki, 2015), the emphasis for India has been on selective partnerships with the US/West, with little reference to norms-based cooperation in their discourse on the matter (Monsonis, 2010). This variety between countries necessitates a closer inquiry into the specific cases where the concept is employed, focusing on the drivers and constraints of the discourse and the practice of strategic autonomy. Below, we unpack how strategic autonomy relates to the structural orientation of Turkish policy.

Structural orientation: emerging multipolarity

The idea and practice of autonomy-seeking have a long history in Turkish foreign policy. Like most other middle powers, Turkey has also pursued active policies to expand the external policy space when conditions were ripe (Papuççular, 2023, p. 3). For example, in the Cold War context, 'external relative autonomy' was on the agenda of the foreign policy establishment despite its implementation being curtailed because of significant military and economic constraints (Oran, 2001, pp. 39–43). In the restrictive bipolar Cold War context, autonomy-seeking in Turkish foreign

policy was moderate and ad hoc. Apart from major crisis periods, such as the Cyprus issue in 1974 and the subsequent diplomatic rift with the US, Turkey remained a consistent member of NATO and the Western alliance till the collapse of the USSR.

In the post-Cold War context, the concept of a 'multidimensional' foreign policy rose to prominence among foreign policymaking circles to elevate Turkey's status and influence in global politics. In the early 2000s, Turkey's ties with the Western alliance remained robust under a unipolar international system. Turkey implemented substantial reforms to comply with EU regulations as an EU candidate country. Furthermore, following the 2001 financial crisis, Turkey adopted Western-oriented post-Washington consensus policies endorsed by the IMF and the World Bank.[1] Despite the Turkish government having significant policy disputes with the American administration in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Western orientation was still a fundamental reference point in Turkish foreign policy.

Turkey's quest for autonomy in the 2010s was qualitatively different from these previous periods. First, the transition to a post-Western world became a dominant theme in global politics, rendering unipolarity obsolete. Second, Western-led international institutions, such as the IMF, World Bank, and the EU, ceased to be credible anchors shaping policy paradigms in Turkish political economy and foreign policy (Öniş and Kutlay, 2021). Third, the unexpected mass demonstrations and strong desire of people to dismantle authoritarian political regimes in the Middle East and North Africa initially created a strong sense of opportunity for the Turkish government to shape the region in its image. Hence, Turkish foreign policy has acquired a more autonomous character.

The discursive use of the concept of autonomy by the Turkish elite suggests that they equate it with an assertive foreign and security policy in a multipolar order, also referred to as a 'national foreign policy' (*milli dış politika*).[2] In the words of Turkish foreign minister Fidan (2023b, p. 12), 'After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the discussions of the world order from unipolarity to bipolarity, and finally to multipolarity, are the symptoms of a problem in the current global governance mechanisms.' Strategic autonomy is used to describe Turkish foreign policy behavior in a post-Western world, where it pursues its national interests and acts as an independent nation-state with regional/global engagements and aspirations. Turkey remains in Western-led institutions such as NATO 'despite certain differing points of view' (Fidan, 2023b, p. 20). Yet, at this time, weak anchorage allows flexible partnerships and closer ties with the non-Western world.

It has been suggested that it is through strategic autonomy that Turkey can act as a 'balancer, broker, mediator' in geopolitical conflicts, as in the case of the Russian aggression of Ukraine, and an 'offensive realist actor' prioritizing hard power and military excursions to secure its national security, as in the cases of Syria, Iraq, and Libya. In doing so, Turkey claims it can initiate flexible partnerships with countries like Russia, China, and Iran while presuming this does not contradict its place in Western institutions and the transatlantic alliance. Hence, the expression of autonomy is premised on the assumption that Western hegemony is over, which requires Turkey to establish selective partnerships to strengthen its self-reliance and national security. As such, an autonomous foreign policy is primarily interpreted as *autonomy from* the Western bloc. Indeed, in most pressing domestic, regional, and global issues, Ankara has not seen eye to eye with the US—nor with the EU, for that matter. The EU's reluctance to fully commit to Turkey's EU accession after the onset of the launch of accession negotiations in 2005 had already substantially hampered the EU's

credibility in the eyes of both the Turkish population and the political spectrum at large by the end of the 2000s (Ugur, 2010). Turkish policymakers believed the ‘lack of strategic thinking in most Western circles’ drove a wedge between Turkey and its transatlantic allies. One of the key policymakers highlighted this view as follows: ‘I believe the West alienates itself from the rest of the world, losing control of most problems. The war in Ukraine, relations with China, the fight against terrorism, and the shifting economic center of the world from the West to the East. I believe there is a lack of strategic thinking in most Western circles’ (quoted in Türkten, 2023).

In the wake of the Arab uprisings, Turkey considered this tectonic shift a rare opportunity to position itself as a ‘rule-maker’ in the Middle East. The Turkish government supported protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. However, when peaceful protests turned to a bloody civil war in Syria, and the revolution in Egypt was interrupted by a military coup in 2013 after a short experience with democracy, the Turkish government’s ambitions in the region also waned. The government, however, failed to recalibrate its foreign policy stance and did not hesitate to engage in simultaneous discord with multiple actors. It was striking that ‘as of 2020, Turkey did not have ambassadors in Egypt, Israel or Syria—the three key regional states with which it cultivated strong ties in the early 2000s’ (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021a, p. 1085). In this period, Turkey’s relations with its Western allies also reached historic lows. As EU membership prospects waned, Turkey’s contestation of EU foreign policy has grown (Aydın-Düzgit, 2023). The divergence of interests with the US after the Arab uprisings, particularly in Syria, and Turkey’s growing mistrust of the American administration after the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey have brought both parties on a collision course.

This was not a foreign policy behavior in sync with the principal logic of building flexible partnerships in multipolar systems. As Posen (2009, pp. 347–52) rightly points out, 'Isolation is perhaps the most dangerous situation in multipolarity.' However, this is what happened in Turkish foreign policy in the 2010s. The AKP government advocated multipolarity on the one hand but undermined long-lasting bilateral ties with Western allies and several states in the MENA region on the other. As a result, maximalist autonomy-seeking policies did not help Turkey improve its national security, democratic development, and economic welfare during this period. Turkey faced a massive refugee issue, significant democratic backlash, and a series of foreign policy stalemates that jointly triggered a 'governance crisis' (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021a; Aydın-Düzgit *et al.*, 2023).

The accumulating 'governance crisis' has compelled Turkish policymakers to shift gradually to a more cautious autonomy-seeking behavior since the early 2020s. As discussed extensively in other contributions to this Special Issue, the government tried to improve relations with Israel and Egypt, searched for opportunities to establish diplomatic contact with the al-Assad regime in Syria, and adopted a constructive role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Furthermore, President Erdogan and the Turkish parliament approved Sweden's membership in NATO.[3] However, the core tendency to pursue 'independent foreign policy' did not change significantly. The Turkish government frames policy autonomy as both a constructive and destructive tool of diplomatic statecraft. The Minister of Foreign Affairs highlighted this point as follows: 'We will strive relentlessly to strengthen Turkey's position as an active and effective, fully independent actor that *sets* or *disrupts* the game when required' (Fidan, 2023a).

In summary, a considerable distancing from its traditional Western allies, the search for flexible partnerships with the non-Western world, and the willingness to pursue a military offensive when deemed necessary appear to be the primary reflections of Turkey's strategic autonomy. However, this approach might not work when there is a mismatch between Turkey's stated ambitions and actual capacities. For instance, Turkey managed to strike a delicate balance in the Russia–Ukraine conflict (Cheterian, 2023) but has not been effective in the most recent war between Israel and Hamas since October 2023. This brings us to the two fundamental constraints concerning strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy: political motives and economic infrastructure.

Political motives: Regime security

There is a strong domestic policy dimension to the rhetoric of strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy. The discourse on autonomy from the West has served as a key instrument through which the government discredits domestic opposition and consolidates its support base, particularly during domestic crises. Since the 2013 Gezi protests, Turkey's internal challenges and dissent, such as the failed coup attempt of July 2016, have been portrayed as always and necessarily a product of Western interference and manipulation in collaboration with the domestic opposition, instilling a sense of victimhood and mobilizing public support behind Erdoğan's controversial, divisive, and anti-Western policy choices (Kaliber and Kaliber, 2019; Aydın-Düzgit *et al.*, 2022).

More recently, in the run-up to the May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections in which Erdoğan declared victory, the government campaign heavily focused on Turkey's advances in the security and defense sector and presented them as a symbol of how the government, and in particular President Erdoğan, elevated Turkey's international status against its Western enemies

and their domestic collaborators by enhancing its sovereignty from the West. This discourse was accompanied by a high dose of techno-nationalism (Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol, 2023) via proud physical displays of Turkey's defense industry. Erdoğan repeatedly highlighted in his campaign speeches how Turkey was victimized by the US, which refused to provide it with drones, and that it was thanks to his efforts that Turkey became fully self-sufficient in producing its own drones and other military equipment. Early research has found some evidence that the government's narrative on autonomy, tied mainly to the advances in the security and defense sector, has, in fact, ensured the support for Erdoğan and the AKP of those who voted for the ruling coalition in the last election, but who were not considered partisans, hence most likely to defect in the face of Turkey's ongoing economic crisis (Öztürk, 2023; Akbıyık and O'Donohue, 2023).

The emphasis on strategic autonomy not only functions as a domestic discursive instrument for political power but also conditions the country's foreign policy choices from the perspective of regime security, which relies heavily on nationalism, state capitalism, and domestic legitimacy (Aydın-Düzgit, 2023). This emphasis results in a situation whereby Turkey pursues short-term political calculations to serve domestic political interests at the expense of a longer-term strategic vision defined through the lens of collective national interest. The outcome is a foreign policy that zigzags and hampers Turkey's long-term credibility at the global level. While serving, at times, the interests of the governing elite, it comes at a high cost to the country in terms of deepening its ongoing economic, political, and foreign policy problems.

Nowhere has this result been more visible than in Turkey's relations with the EU, where the country has positioned itself as the gatekeeper of migration at the EU's borders thanks to the EU-

Turkey migration deal. This arrangement has primarily benefited Turkey's ruling elite by solidifying the turn to a relationship devoid of democratic conditionality in its relations with the EU (Saatçioğlu, 2020). Meanwhile, it has also benefitted the EU by reducing the number of refugees transiting through Turkey. Yet, the mass migration of almost 4 million Syrian refugees, making Turkey the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, ushered in a host of novel problems regarding the economic and societal integration of the refugees (Şahin-Mencütek et al., 2023). In addition, attempts at a rapprochement with Syria to enable the prospect of limited returns of refugees have so far failed (Reuters, 2022). This transactional arrangement also failed to foster cooperation in other areas between the two sides —the opposite has, in fact, happened.

When the Turkish government dispatched drilling ships to Cypriot waters in 2020, this was framed as a demonstration of an independent foreign policy against the West (Taş, 2022, p. 576). In response, the EU imposed sanctions consisting of asset freezes and travel and funding bans for listed persons and entities (European Council 2019). Despite being a de facto candidate state for accession to the EU, Turkey remains outside any of the current formal and informal discussions on the future of EU enlargement policy and EU foreign and security policy, both sparked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The European Commission's special report on Turkey (2023), published upon the invitation by the European Council, received minimal attention from the European Council (2024), which only referred to the Cyprus issue in its conclusions, drawing reactions from Turkish officials (Pierini, 2024). Turkey's poor record in democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, along with the Cyprus impasse, have also led to the EU's veto of initiating bilateral talks for the upgrading of the EU-Turkey Customs Union deal, which is sorely needed to

ramp up Turkey's trade performance, bring closer integration with the European supply-chains, and improve its economic productivity and global competitiveness (see next section).

The outcome of the two contradictory trends—namely, the necessity of seeking strategic autonomy due to geopolitical imperatives versus the maximalist autonomy discourse in the service of regime security—does not only implicate Turkey's relations with the EU but also extends into other foreign policy issues to constrain Turkey's influence. For instance, previous research has shown how Turkey's relations with Israel have deteriorated after 2007, mainly due to Israel's depiction by the Turkish government as a 'menace' to win popular support (Aydınlı and Erpul, 2021, p.1). In a similar vein, in the case of Israel's war on Gaza, Turkey's initially balanced tone soon gave way to a more assertive discourse where President Erdoğan referred to Hamas as 'freedom fighters' (Gavin, 2023). Soon after, on the week of the centenary of the Republic, Erdoğan held mass rallies attended by millions of people in support of Palestine, rallying his base, presenting himself as the global leader of Muslims, boosting his legitimacy, and overshadowing the celebrations demanded by the opposition for the Republic's centenary. Turkey's consistent pleas to act as a mediator fell on deaf ears, with Egypt and Qatar, alongside the United States, ultimately taking up the role to negotiate hostages and a potential ceasefire (Al Jazeera, 2024). In a similar vein, Turkey was excluded from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum launched in 2019, bringing together all of the states in the region except Turkey and Lebanon and later spilling over to military and security cooperation between the various states of the Forum at the expense of Turkey (Çelikpala, 2022; Aran and Kutlay, 2024).

Seeking autonomy for the sake of regime security also impacted how Turkey managed its relations with Russia, reflecting in turn on Turkey's relations with the US and its NATO allies. While Turkey's rapprochement with Russia in the last decade can partially be read as an effort to hedge between Russia and the West in a multipolar world, the failed coup attempt in July 2016 has constituted a turning point in bringing the two sides closer (Erşen and Köstem 2023). Russia's strong and immediate reaction to the failed coup attempt, coupled with the government's conviction that the US was complicit in it (Kingsley, 2016), pushed the latter to develop closer relations with Russia for the sake of regime security, to the extent that Moscow actively lent its support to Erdoğan's presidential and parliamentary election bid in June 2023. Despite remaining a member of NATO to benefit from its security guarantees, this proximity alienated Turkey from its traditional NATO allies and constrained its influence in the international fora. For instance, following its move in 2017 as the only NATO country to purchase the S-400 Russian defense system, Turkey was removed from the US's F-35 fighter jet program and sanctioned under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2020. As a result, Turkey, as a NATO member, ended up on the CAATSA-related sanctions list along with Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Although Turkey's ultimate approval of Sweden's accession to NATO in January 2024 resulted in the US approval of the sale of F-16 warplanes to Turkey, this concession was overshadowed by the US decision to extend the sale of F-35 warplanes to Greece on the same day. Turkey initially preferred to buy up to 100 F-35s to modernize its air force (The Guardian, 2024).

Aside from Turkey's burgeoning relations with Russia, Turkey's relations with the US were primarily hampered by the US financial and logistical support to the People's Protection Units

(YPG) in Northern Syria, which Turkey considers a terrorist organization and, hence, a significant threat to its national security. On the domestic side, the point at which this has occurred also closely relates to the government's motive to remain in power. The peace process with the Kurds collapsed precisely when the AKP failed to co-opt the Kurdish movement and so faced a considerable loss in the June 2015 elections. Thus, it turned to the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) for a governing coalition that would keep its hold on power. This pivot necessitated a decisive nationalist turn in both the AKP's domestic and foreign policies, particularly on the Kurdish issue, revitalizing the securitization and the clampdown of the Kurdish movement both inside and outside of the state and bringing Turkey once more to loggerheads with the US. The impact of the deterioration of the US-Turkish relationship did not remain limited to weapons sales but also expanded to Turkey's exclusion from major US-led global multilateral initiatives such as the I2U2 Initiative, which brings India, Israel, and the UAE together with the US to 'deepen economic integration in the Middle East, Asia, and beyond.'[4] Turkey's worsening ties with the US also paved the way to a much closer US alignment with Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, as demonstrated by the defense agreement signed between Cyprus and the US on 9 September 2024 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

Economic infrastructure: beyond interdependence

The economic infrastructure constitutes the third fundamental pillar of strategic autonomy at a time when economic security has become more central under multipolarity. During the Cold War period, there were two rival blocs with mostly stable alliance patterns and limited economic interaction. In the unipolar phase of the post-Cold War era, economic liberalism with free trade and global financial integration became a standard template. With the rise of great power

competition between the US and China, however, a more complex pattern of conflict and cooperation is becoming more pronounced. While economic interdependence is still the norm, its ‘weaponization’ has become more common as a foreign policy and national security tool.[5]

In such an uncertain environment, several countries aim to develop closer relations with rival great powers to maximize economic opportunities and avoid overdependence on a single actor. The AKP government has also adopted active internationalization strategies since the early 2000s to diversify Turkey’s external economic relations. The economy expanded in absolute terms, Turkey’s trade openness increased, and new markets came within reach of Turkish entrepreneurs. At nominal prices, Turkey’s foreign trade volume increased from $113.3 billion in 2002 to $577.4 billion in 2022. The government also pursued a more active economic diplomacy. The number of diplomatic missions increased to 251 in 2024, making Turkey the third highest in the world for the number of diplomatic posts (Lowy Institute Global Diplomacy Index, 2024). The number of countries where Turkish ordinary passport holders can travel without a visa increased from 51 to 93 between 2002 and 2022 (Kutlay and Karaoğuz, 2023, p. 123). The government has also invested in ‘connectivity projects in energy, transportation, and logistics… [to] consolidate [Turkey’s] position as a hub in the energy and transportation corridors’ (Fidan 2023b, p. 22). For example, the number of countries to which Turkey’s national air flag carrier, Turkish Airlines, flies reached 130 in 2022, up from 54 in 2002—with the number of international destinations reaching 230 (Kutlay and Karaoğuz, 2023, pp. 124–5).

The recent strides made in the indigenous defense industry have become a noticeable area that underpins Turkey’s quest for strategic autonomy. As geopolitical rifts with the US intensified, the

regional security environment deteriorated, and defense-related sanctions became a more frequently used tool by the Western powers, Turkish governments prioritized building indigenous technologies in the defense industry. In addition to the well-established public contractors (such as ASELSAN and TAI), Baykar Holding, owned by the President's son-in-law, has succeeded in producing effective Bayraktar TB-2 drones (Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol, 2023). As of 2023, Bayraktar TB-2 drones are exported to 32 countries (Yıldırım, 2023), including Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Libya. Turkey also built the first national warship (MILGEM) and developed various air defense systems, military vehicles, and equipment. As Ciftci (2023, p. 772) points out, 'Turkish arms sales also sharply increased in the new millennium, moving the nation's rank in defence exports from 42nd in 1996 to 14th in 2020 and 11th in 2021.' In 2022, four Turkish companies were listed among the 'top 100' defense contractors worldwide (Gönültaş 2023).

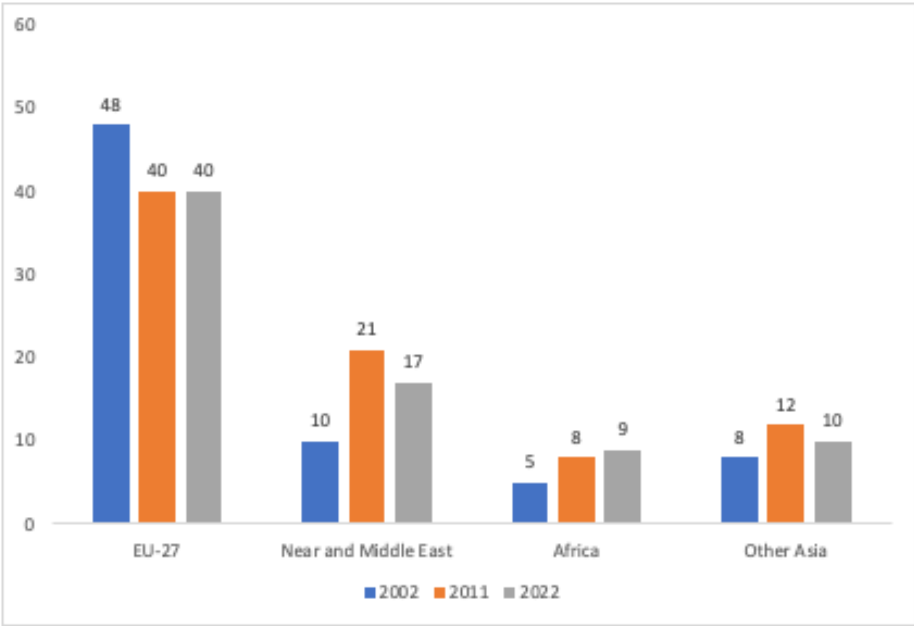
The noticeable advancements in the defense industry gave Turkish policymakers an important edge in Turkey's external relations. However, the sector is still fledgling, with significant question marks remaining about the economies of scale, spillover effects into other sectors, and commercial viability of government support schemes. Equally important, Turkey's approach to security predominantly focuses on 'high politics,' sidelining the economic security dimension. Given that Turkey must simultaneously manage multiple dependencies to rival hierarchical orders, the current economic infrastructure constrains Turkey's attempts to carve out more autonomous space in a multipolar world.

Developing closer trade and investment ties with the non-Western world without abandoning Turkey's longstanding political-economic relations with the Western world has been stated as a

key principle of the government's foreign policy strategy. The government representatives suggest that they do not consider Turkey's foreign (economic) policy orientation as a 'zero-sum game.' In an interview given by one of the top government officials, this point is stated as follows: 'We do not see foreign policy as a zero-sum game. The fact that we are a NATO member and want to be part of the EU does not mean we cannot develop better economic and political relations with Russia, China, and Gulf countries. The fact that we are trading with China and Russia does not mean we will give up trading with Europe... We do not want to be dependent on any country' (quoted in Türkten, 2023).

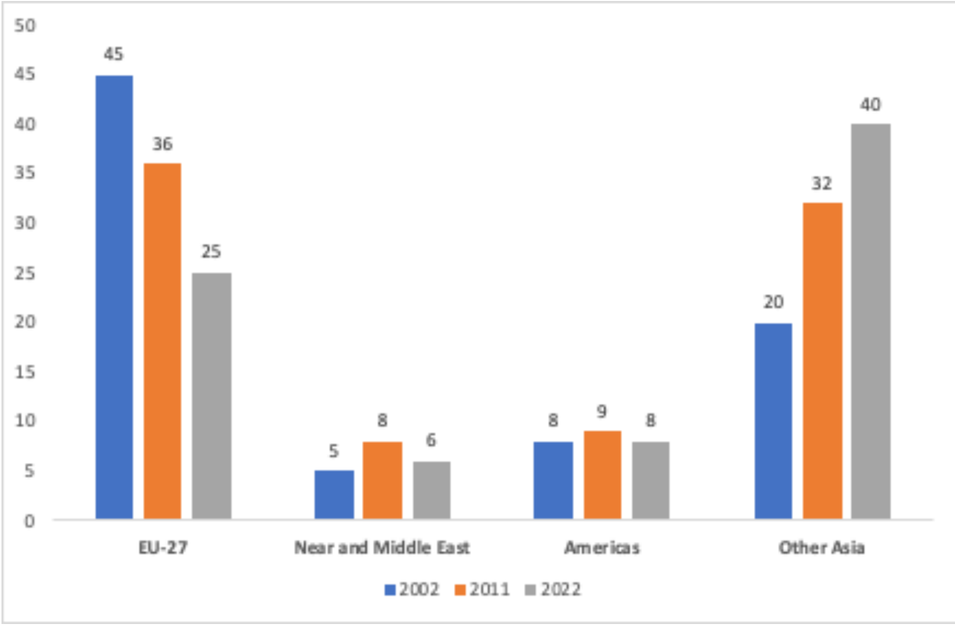
At face value, this statement aligns with the standard autonomy-seeking policies of middle powers trying to take advantage of a multipolar order. In fact, Turkish foreign trade has been diversified over the last two decades. Turkey's total trade volume with EU-27 was $40.6 billion in 2002, which increased to $182 billion in 2022. During the same period, Turkey's trade with 'Asia' (Near and Middle East and 'other Asia' including Russia and China) increased from a mere $19 billion to more than $220 billion. Turkey's traditional Western partners'—especially the EU's—share in Turkey's overall foreign exports decreased from 48 to 40 percent between 2002 and 2022 (see Figure 1). Also, the EU's share in imports declined from 45 percent in 2002 to 25 percent in 2022 (see Figure 2). Turkey's trade relations with Middle Eastern countries expanded considerably during this period. The share of the Middle East in Turkey's exports increased from 10 percent in 2002 to 17 percent in 2022 after reaching a record 23 percent in 2013. The more striking improvement materialized with Russia and China. Turkey's trade with these two countries 'increased from a mere US$6.7 billion in 2002 to US$106.8 billion in 2022' (Kutlay and Karaoğuz, 2023, p. 153). In this sense, considerable trade diversification has occurred in Turkey's foreign economic relations over the last two decades.

Figure1. Turkey's exports based on regions (percent of total)



Source: Calculated based on TÜİK data. 'Other Asia' includes Russia and China

Figure 2. Turkey's imports based on regions (percent of total)



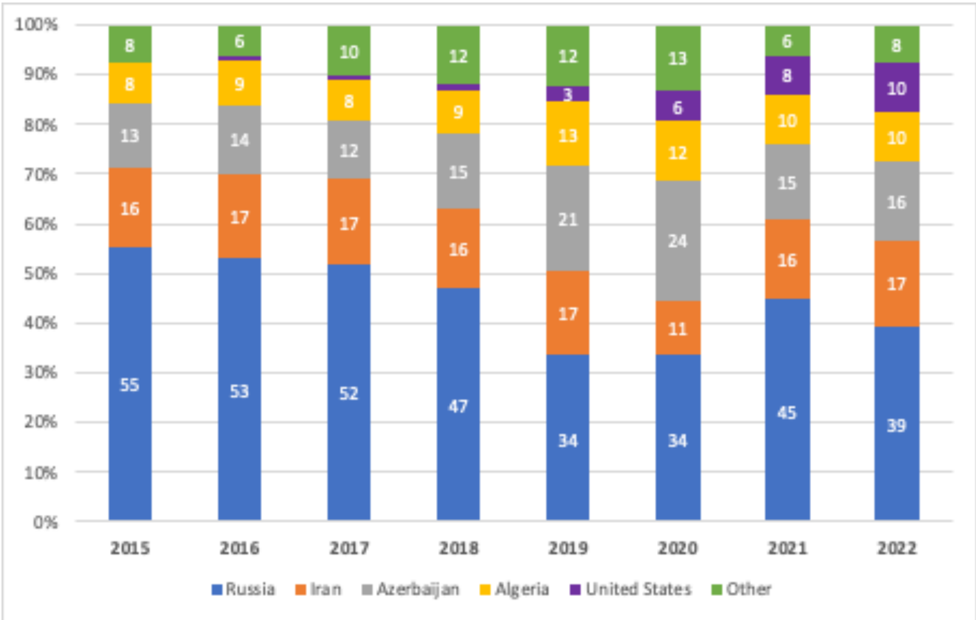
Source: Calculated based on TÜİK data. 'Other Asia' includes Russia and China

As a natural resource-poor developing country with a solid manufacturing base and growing raw materials demand, it is normal for Turkey to have trade deficits with Russia and China. At the same time, Turkey's diversification away from the West toward the non-Western markets leads to certain challenges in carving out a more autonomous space in its foreign relations because increasing trade relations with the large non-Western countries, especially Russia and China, are likely to create new dependencies. Turkey's foreign trade with the EU is much more balanced than that of Russia and China. The export/import ratio for Turkey with China is less than 10 percent and just 13 percent with Russia.

The structure of Turkey's external trade relations requires a carefully formulated multidimensional outlook to manage multiple dependencies. The most important non-Western trade partners (Russia and China) are not large export markets for Turkish entrepreneurs. It is true that Turkey's economic relations with those countries go deeper than trade.[6] In 2023, a record 6.3 million Russian tourists visited Turkey. Turkish construction firms have built several projects in Russia, amounting to $102 billion between 1987 and 2023—20.3 percent of the total volume of Turkey's construction projects abroad (Ticaret Bakanlığı, 2024, p. 5). Russians also have constructed Turkey's first ($20 billion worth) nuclear power plant in Mersin, Akkuyu, through the 'build–own–operate' model. Due to the extensive bilateral economic interdependence, Turkey did not join the massive Western sanctions against Russia following Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As documented above, however, the interdependence in Russia–Turkey and China-Turkey relations are *asymmetrical*. As long as the composition of Turkish foreign trade remains the same, the trade deficit with those countries will likely grow, putting additional pressure on Turkey's current account deficits. Also, Turkey does not have strategic sectors such as energy or high-tech that

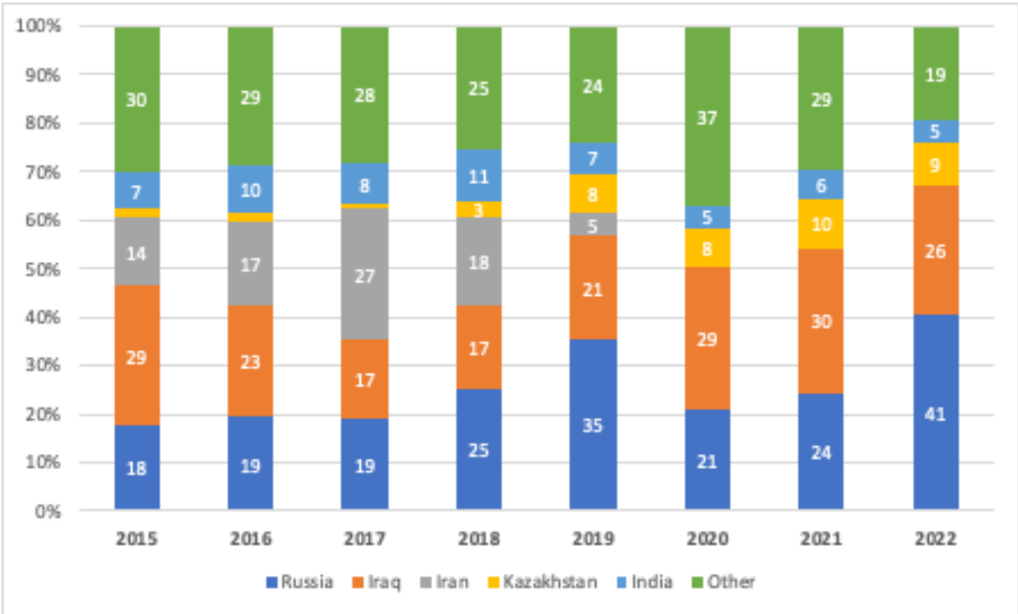
would provide competitive leverage. Despite efforts to diversify its energy resources and some degree of achievement, Turkey still depends on Russia for natural gas, importing almost 40 percent of its total imports (see Figure 3). Turkey's oil imports from Russia also surged from 24 percent in Turkey's total oil imports to 41 percent in 2022 with the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Turkey's natural gas imports per country (share of total)



Source: Calculated based on the EPDK reports

Figure 4. Turkey's oil imports per country (share of total)



Source: Calculated based on the EPDK reports

Turkey, on the other hand, heavily relies on Western capital in the financial and investment domains. Western investors (the EU and the US) still make up almost 70 percent of Turkey's incoming foreign direct investment. Worsening political and security ties with Western countries, institutional deterioration, and inconsistent economic policies impede Turkey's potential to attract high-quality foreign investment from Western countries, which is necessary for a sustainable balance of payments accounts and economic development. During the 2010s, 'the amount and quality of foreign direct investment in the Turkish economy have declined significantly… not a good sign in terms of the long-term contribution of foreign investments in Turkey's overall economic productivity and technology transfer' (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021b, p. 3061). This suggests that Turkey's performance so far does not match its potential despite Western economic actors trying to reorient their supply chains to reduce their exposure to China and Russia.

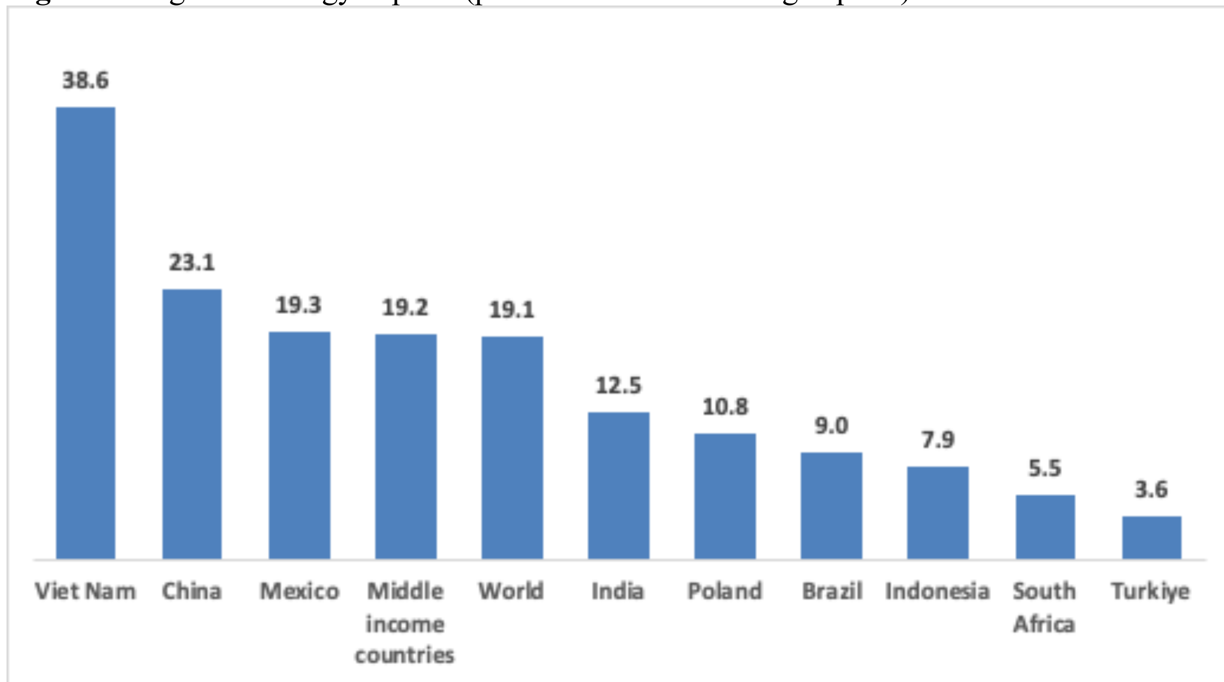
On the institutional front, the poor state of political relations with the EU poses delays in upgrading the Customs Union deal and in Turkey's adoption of the green transformation, which is crucial for Turkish entrepreneurs to gain deeper access to the European markets. The Customs Union, covering only manufactured and processed agricultural products, is now an outdated deal and needs to be modernized to cover other sectors. The Customs Union is also a suboptimal deal because when the EU signs a free trade agreement with a third country, the latter gains automatic access to the Turkish market, whereas Turkey needs to sign a separate agreement with the same country to have market access on equal terms (Taştan, 2022, p. 2). This lopsidedness was, arguably, not a significant challenge when free trade and multilateralism were predominant norms, but in times of geoeconomic fragmentation and 'weaponization' of interdependence, the asymmetric nature of the Customs Union is more likely to constrain Turkey's foreign economic policy options.

This imbalance leaves Turkey in a delicate situation. Developing closer trade ties with the Russia-China axis comes with growing trade deficits.[7] Also, Turkey so far has not attracted a high volume of investments from China. In 2024, the Chinese BYD signed a $1 billion deal to build an EV manufacturing plant, welcomed by the government at a time when Turkey became a 'partner state' of BRICS. According to news reports, however, the Chinese firm was offered unusually generous government incentives, even putting Turkey's own indigenous EV project, TOGG, at potential risk in the long run (Sağlam 2024). On the other hand, given that the Turkish economy is still tightly coupled with the Western—especially American—financial networks, the West remains main capital provider. However, as the Turkish government does not see eye to eye with its transatlantic allies on key geopolitical issues, Turkey has become more exposed to 'weaponized

interdependence.'[8] For example, in the middle of geopolitical turmoil between Turkey and the US in 2019, the American president threatened to 'destroy and obliterate' the Turkish economy (Reuters 2019). That conflict came just one year after a 40 percent drop in the value of the Turkish lira, in the middle of another political stalemate between the parties in 2018 (BBC, 2018). Furthermore, US President Trump raised tariffs on steel imports from Turkey up to 50 percent in the wake of Turkey's Syria operation in 2019 (Breuninger, 2019). The Volkswagen Group also suspended its $1.4 billion investment in Turkey's Manisa region. Later, the Group cancelled the project entirely in 2021, which the Turkish officials lamented as a 'political' decision (Daily Sabah, 2021).

At the root of the problem lies the structure of the Turkish economy. Turkey's 'deficit-led' economic growth model generates external dependencies due to high reliance on low- and medium-end exports (Güven, 2016; Öniş, 2019). Turkey's dependence on the import of intermediary goods and advanced technologies from other countries causes balance of payments problems and exacerbates the financial fragility of the country. For example, the share of high-tech goods over Turkey's manufactured exports hovers around 3–4 percent, suggesting the need for significant industrial upgrading toward a high-tech frontier (see Figure 5). Hence, Turkey needs a more coherent economic security framework to support its autonomy-seeking policies.

Figure 5. High-technology exports (percent of manufacturing exports)



Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2022 data

Conclusion

There is a growing consensus among academics and policymakers that we are moving towards a multipolar world, bringing forth the concept of strategic autonomy as a path through which states' interests can best be served. In this paper, we have underlined that regardless of whether countries that claim to pursue strategic autonomy are, in fact, 'strategically autonomous', the concept deserves analytical attention since political actors in states or in international organizations such as the EU can justify their foreign policy decisions in the name of strategic autonomy.

This paper has focused on the discourse and practice of 'strategic autonomy' in Turkish foreign policy by unpacking the concept with respect to structural orientation, political motives, and economic infrastructure. We have argued that the structural orientation of strategic autonomy in

Turkish foreign policy is primarily geared toward attaining autonomy from the West in building an assertive foreign policy in Turkey's broader neighborhood. Yet we have also shown how political motives driven by the need to attain regime security and the economic infrastructure act as constraints in reaching those goals. As such, we find a discrepancy between Turkey's discourse on strategic autonomy and the actual implementation of policies, which fail to deliver in terms of increased self-reliance, economic competitiveness, and influence in the regional/global order.

Further comparative research could help identify the similarities and differences between emerging powers in how they articulate and implement strategic autonomy in their foreign policy. Given the primacy of domestic politics that we highlight in this paper, future research could focus on how regime types influence the pursuit of strategic autonomy in these countries. There is a burgeoning literature on the politicization of foreign policy by populist leaders. Yet, there is considerable doubt as to whether this amounts to a standard populist foreign policy playbook that transcends national borders (Destradi *et al.*, 2021, 2022). For instance, one can expect a case like India, a country governed by a populist authoritarian leader in search of strategic autonomy, to be constrained in its autonomy-seeking policies from a regime security perspective. Yet, while facing considerable economic challenges, India, since 2020 so far, has undertaken multiple policy adjustments to seek autonomy from its main rival, China (Tarapore, 2023). This case suggests that regime type alone may not be sufficient to account for states' constraints on strategic autonomy-seeking behavior. More comparative research is needed to see why and how states seek strategic autonomy and to identify the external-domestic context that hinders or facilitates its successful implementation.

Notes

[1] We should note that the dynamics of 2001 economic reforms require a nuanced analysis along the external–domestic nexus. For a comprehensive assessment of the post-Washington consensus policies in Turkey, see Öniş (2009); for the role of the EU, see Tocci (2005); for the mechanisms of policy transfer from the international financial institutions to the domestic front and the role of domestic reform-oriented actors, see Tsarouhas (2020).
[2] Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan referred to this concept in his first speech when he assumed his post in June 2023. See, NTV (2023).
[3] For more on the background, see Gisclon and Keyman (2023).
[4] See, the Wilson Center event for details, available at https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/road-ahead-i2u2-american-emirati-israeli-and-indian-partnership
[5] On the complex political economy dynamics of the emerging international system that led to the interviewed nature of conflict and interdependence, see Farrell and Newman (2023); Miller (2022); Niblett (2024); Wright (2017).
[6] For a comprehensive assessment of Turkey–Russia relations, see Köstem (2018).
[7] When it comes to the Middle East, Turkey is a net exporter in its trade relations with the countries in the region. However, the Middle East is one of the most unstable regions for Turkish exporters, marred by conflict, civil wars, and state failures.
[8] For more on 'weaponized interdependence' and how the US has been overusing its financial power to coerce other states, see Farrell and Newman (2023, 2019). For more on China's 'economic statecraft,' see Cha (2023).

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