

# How Should Türkiye Position itself in the Competition for Alternative International Systems? - Tarık Oğuzlu



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Within the changing dynamics of international politics, the question of 'what should be the grand strategy for Turkey' has never been more critical. Although Turkey, as a medium-sized country, can influence developments in its immediate region, it is directly affected by developments on a global scale. In recent years, the new Cold War climate brewing among the United States of America, the People's Republic of China, and the Russian Federation have begun to put extra challenges on many countries, including Turkey.

The United States of America, the principal founding and protective country of the liberal world order that developed after 1945, are not as strong as it used to be. Non-Western actors now have a much greater say in world governance in parallel with the increase in their power capacities. The People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation come first among these actors. China began opening to the world in the late 1970s and has achieved its current position within the system. Thus, contributing to restructuring the existing order in line with its priorities is in China's national interest. On the other hand, moving to a multipolar order in which Russia is recognized as a great power on par with other global heavyweights is Russia's main priority. While China has already proved its rule-making capacity within the existing order, it is remarkable that Russia has fast turned into a global rogue state trying to disrupt others' geopolitical games in a zero-sum fashion.

The United States of America, feeling that the ground beneath it is starting to shake in the face of these two countries, acts as if it is not disturbed by the emergence of a new ideological, normative, and geopolitical cold war among great powers. A new cold war appears to have been seen by the American security establishment as vital to America's ability to maintain its dominant position in international politics. The sharp polarization of world politics along ideological and geopolitical fault lines and the recognition of the United States and China as the emerging leaders of

two poles in conflict with each other seem compatible with the global strategy of the United States.

In the Cold War between 1945 and 1990, the countries outside the two competing blocs could not effectively shape world politics despite all their desires and efforts. However, in today's world, many medium-sized countries, including Turkey, as well as underdeveloped and developing countries, are disturbed by this new cold war climate, which is becoming increasingly destructive. In this new polarized environment, which emerged within the framework of the separation between democracies and autocracies, many countries are trying to stay out of the tension. Developing pragmatic relations with as many countries as possible is the primary desire of many countries today. It is precious for many countries to pursue a multidimensional and multidirectional foreign policy without taking sides. Turkey is one of them. No matter how deep-rooted historical, political, economic, social, strategic, and institutional relations it has established with the Western world, Turkey has been simultaneously trying to develop closer ties with non-Western countries based on mutual benefits and pragmatic concerns.

Trying to create an Ankara-centric strategy within the framework of the concept of strategic autonomy, Turkey is faced with severe challenges from both Western and non-Western actors. What Turkey expects from its Western allies and partners is the acceptance of its strategic autonomy-oriented foreign policy. On the other hand, it is uncomfortable with its strategic intentions being continuously questioned by its Western partners as it tries to distribute its eggs in different baskets and does not want to play the traditional role that its Western partners expect it to do in the emerging new world order. The perception that strategic decisions are taken in Western capitals such as Washington and Brussels without Ankara's input, but it is nevertheless expected to fulfill them in its neighborhood as the local representative of the Western world disturbs Turkish elites.

In addition to this established perception about the Western world, the idea that Western countries do not take Turkey's geopolitical and security interests into account sufficiently and that they put Turkey's territorial integrity and economic prosperity at risk with the policies they follow resonates with Ankara. The perception that its struggle against all forms of terrorism is not sufficiently accepted in the Western world and that the policies of Western countries in the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, Caucasus, and Middle East regions harm its national interests seriously affect Turkey's view of the West.

On the other hand, the growing salience of illiberal dynamics in its domestic politics strengthens the perception that Turkey is rapidly moving away from the norms and values of the West. Turkey, which does not feel pressured about democratization, human rights, and similar issues in its relations with Eastern actors, does not have this comfort in its relations with Western countries.

From this background, three fundamental facts are essential in determining the grand strategy that Turkey should follow in the coming years. First, its neighborhood's geopolitical developments continue to affect Turkey's territorial integrity and economic prosperity negatively. Secondly, Turkey is a trading state and derives half of its national wealth from international trade. Finally, Turkey is a medium-sized power with a national income of fewer than one trillion dollars. On the one hand, this situation determines the limits of what Turkey can do in the international arena. On the other hand, it requires it to keep itself away from the polarizations that have begun to emerge on a global scale.

Thus, Turkey's grand strategy must contain realistic and liberal tendencies and assumptions. Turkey needs to have a strong army that extensively relies on its national defense industry and has the capacity and ability to conduct military operations outside its borders. It is vital to defend itself against *fait accompli* by its regional rivals and, if

possible, establish its homeland defense in the future. In addition, prioritizing diplomatic and economic instruments in relations with its neighbors will facilitate Turkey's achievement of its interests. The multilateral cooperation that Turkey develops with the surrounding countries based on the logic of regionalism will also effectively eliminate the negative consequences of the policies pursued by non-regional global actors. Turkey's luck is that most of the countries in its region are uncomfortable with the emerging conflict among great powers and do not want to have to take sides.

Being a trading state and importing the economic resources and technological capacity it needs to complete its development requires Turkey to support liberal and Kantian dynamics in international politics. A world where unpredictable, hard power struggles are experienced, protectionist economic policies are implemented, serious problems are encountered in global supply chains, energy inputs increase, and divergences between global actors in the technology and economy are strengthened and incompatible with Turkey's national interests. Unless global powers, which differ from all other actors in terms of their material power capacities, are limited by international law and international organizations, world politics will evolve around the idea that the strong can do what they want, and the weak are doomed to their fate. Therefore, Turkey should contribute to making international politics rules-based and predictable.

Although it is understandable to some extent that it pursues a policy of balance among great powers, Turkey should be more distant from global actors who try to endanger the liberal world order and the rules-based international relations structure. It should also be noted that nearly half of Turkey's foreign trade and seventy percent of foreign direct investment entering the country originate from the West. Despite all the difficulties experienced in the European Union membership process, the contribution of the standards developed within the European Union to the welfare of Europe is still apparent. It would be suitable for Turkey to materialize its national development within the framework of similar standards.

Similarly, NATO membership offers Turkey immense opportunities in international politics. Instead of developing bilateral relations with each NATO member country, especially the United States, being in continuous relations with these countries within NATO's multilateral institutional mechanisms provides opportunities for Turkey to articulate its security priorities successfully. Being under NATO's nuclear security umbrella is also essential for Turkey's national security. NATO membership is a vital power multiplier in Turkey's relations with both NATO members, such as Greece, and non-Western global actors, such as China and Russia.

In the international political and economic arena, the Western bloc is still dominant against other alternative power blocs. Developed institutional relations with Western actors are decisive for Turkey regarding economic welfare and national security interests. In the context of the changing global balance of power, it is normal and understandable that Turkey desires to take part in non-Western institutional platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and the Eurasian Economic Community and to develop close relations with the critical power centers of the non-Western world, especially China. Yet, it's equally essential that Turkey pays ultimate care to preserve the gains it has achieved within NATO as well as alongside the EU membership process.



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