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## Turkey is stepping up its foreign policy



Over the past two decades, Turkey has pursued and is pursuing an increasingly active and interventionist foreign policy in line with geopolitical transformations and structural challenges of regional conflicts. With fewer internal restrictions, the Turkish political apparatus and, above all, the President of the Republic, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had enough room for manoeuvre and flexibility to formulate an ambitious foreign policy, which has at times led to an aggravation of relations with both global and regional players.

### Revision of regional policy

Ibrahim Kalin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's chief foreign policy adviser during his time as prime minister and currently head of intelligence, coined the term 'precious solitude' to justify Turkey's Middle East policy, which was heavily criticised at the time. When he first used the term, a serious diplomatic row broke out between Ankara and Cairo. Ankara, which already had strained relations with Syria and Israel, also began to experience difficulties with some of the rich countries of the Persian Gulf. All the efforts made to restore Turkey's ties with Egypt, Israel and the Persian Gulf countries have been largely unsuccessful for at least a

decade. However, due to new structural challenges in Turkey's relations with states with which it previously had disagreements, a new era began and Erdoğan is gradually using this favourable opportunity with all tools available to him, including political, economic and social ones.

The obvious restructuring of Turkey's foreign policy is being closely monitored, first and foremost, in the region. Both internal and external factors contributed to this shift. Internal factors include domestic political events (two recent election phases), economic problems and general public opinion. External factors include changes in the dynamics of world forces (the outgoing US era in the Middle East), regional conflicts (Israel's massacre in Gaza) and diplomatic pressure, as they are part of a broader regional reconciliation, which began with the 'Al-Ula Declaration' of 2021 in Saudi Arabia.

**These factors** have prompted Ankara to adopt a foreign policy characterised by great pragmatism and restraint. Turkey's newfound momentum in relations with the US, Egypt and Iraq has played an important role in this transformation. Ankara's relations with Washington entered a new chapter when the Turkish parliament approved Sweden's accession to NATO and the US Congress approved the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. Erdoğan's visit to Egypt marked a new era in this strategic partnership. The Turkish-Iraqi security summit in Baghdad in mid-March was a breakthrough in bilateral relations; the two governments have taken joint steps to combat the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and discussed the creation of a security corridor along their land border and accelerating the construction of a 'Development Road'.

On April 22, during his first visit to Iraq in 13 years, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed a memorandum of understanding with Iraq, Qatar and the UAE on the construction of the Development Road project, a multimodal transport corridor that will connect the Persian Gulf with Turkey by road and rail via Iraq. The length of the project will be 1,275 km and its expected cost is about \$20 billion. Starting from the Iraqi port of al-Faw, at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab river, it will consist of roads for the transportation of goods and passengers, as well as freight railway lines that will connect to the Turkish road and railway networks in the border town of Faysh Khabur. Factories and workshops will also be built along new road and rail routes.

### **Impact of domestic policy on foreign policy**

Three important events influenced the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy: the elections in May 2023, and March 2024, and the reshuffle within the foreign policy apparatus. The appointment of Hakan Fidan, former director of the National Intelligence

Organisation, as head of the Foreign Ministry has given a new impetus to Turkish foreign policy. Although this shift implied a policy where intelligence and diplomacy would work side by side, it is ultimately Erdogan who determines the parameters of Turkish foreign policy. It is noteworthy, however, that as head of the national intelligence service Fidan had a significant influence on the formation and implementation of foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis Syria, and was the main architect of Turkish efforts to normalise relations with Middle Eastern countries, from which Ankara had been moving away over the past decade. This is a new, calmer and more pragmatic foreign policy approach. Hakan Fidan is known for his calm and silent diplomacy, closely monitors the changing dynamics in the region and navigates the foreign policy landscape accordingly. The last elections raised the question “what went wrong?”, which led to a revision of foreign policy. Despite the absence of change in the government or leadership, it seems that the election results have significantly influenced the priorities of Turkish foreign institutions and, as a result, the direction of the country’s foreign policy.

Turkey’s current foreign policy is similar to the pre-2010 era, when cooperation with regional actors was a key aspect of the strategy. Economic considerations currently prevail over ideological factors in shaping foreign policy decisions. In a world order characterised by uncertain multipolarity, Turkey, like other regional powers, believes that it has wide room for manoeuvre in foreign policy in pursuit of ‘strategic autonomy’. This approach implies cooperation between regional actors. As observed in regional crises, Erdoğan now refrains from unilateral steps (as it was before) and seeks to act in coordination with regional and global actors. Although some may interpret this as passivity, Turkey’s new foreign policy approach reflects rationality and caution, especially when the regional environment is constantly turbulent. As Ankara continues to carefully study new regional realities, as well as begins to actively interact with certain regional actors, Turkey’s role in the region will likely gradually grow.

### **Turkey’s obvious lean towards Russia and China**

As a member of NATO, Turkey has been criticised by Western allies in recent years because of its ties with Russia and China. Ankara has rejected the claim that its ‘axis’ is moving away from the Western military alliance, saying it remains a committed member of NATO and adheres to its goal of full EU membership. However, the scale with which Turkey is developing its relations with non-Western powers – politically, economically and in terms of security– is concerning to Western states, especially after they unleashed a war against Russia

via Ukrainian neo-Nazis. Turkey has recently warned that it will not support any NATO involvement in the war against Russia.

Russia was already an important player for Turkey in the initial period after the end of the Cold War. However, at that time, Turkey was firmly linked to the Western alliance. Ankara's foreign policy position has undergone noticeable changes after both the EU and the US disregarded Turkish political and security concerns. The disappointment in relations with Western powers turned into a confusing dilemma, which Erdoğan used in the interests of Turkey.

Ankara has two aspects to its foreign policy: membership in the NATO alliance/the EU and participation in organisations opposed to the West. These two aspects do not contradict, but complement each other. They are integral components of the country's foreign policy, which strives for strategic autonomy and flexibility, while also aiming to revive Turkey's historical importance as a global power connecting East and West. For example, Erdoğan's statement from September 2022, on the possibility of Turkey joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a defence bloc led by China, can be viewed in the broader context. A few days after this statement, Erdoğan made a speech at the UN General Assembly, in which he argued that Turkey is a key part of NATO and Euro-Atlantic security. Thus, under Erdoğan's leadership, Turkey is trying to balance between the two blocs by using its status.

Fidan made a **similar statement**: "Although we have a customs union with the EU, we are also exploring new opportunities for cooperation with several partners on various platforms, such as BRICS". This statement about BRICS membership is of great importance and goes beyond mere desire. Turkey's accession to BRICS will provide new opportunities for trade and investment. It would also be part of a multipolar interdependence, i.e. states today wanting to diversify their diplomatic and economic partnerships. In addition to economic reasons, which are key motivators to accede, BRICS membership would also strengthen Turkey's status in the international arena and increase its negotiating power with Western states.

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