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## **Turkey and the US Exceptionalism: Change and Continuity in Bilateral Ties in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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### **Abstract**

The emergence of the modern republic of Turkey from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in the twentieth century was the ramification of European great powers' geostrategic interests to a great extent and it reflects in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy as well. The fears and optimism vis-à-vis great powers shaped the country's foreign policy choices throughout the twentieth century. Accepting the American' exceptionalism and operating under it remained a norm for Turkey during the Cold War period and afterward and it was not an exhibition of surrendering the country's national interests unconditionally but a strategy to deal with other immediate threats (mainly from the former Soviet Union) to its territorial sovereignty. Turkey in the first decade of the twenty-first century, meanwhile, witnessed a change in its domestic and foreign policy vis-à-vis all major powers including the US. It is imperative to comprehend contemporary Turkey's aspiration in domestic, regional, and international politics in the context of its Ottoman identity and past traumas. Turkey's policy imperatives, from becoming part of the US alliance in the Cold War period and later developing more cordial trade and geostrategic ties with Russia and China, are all based on Ankara's inherent identity and relevant insecurities rooted in its past glory and traumas. The Turkish elite's efforts to revive the lost glory and restore its distinct role in the region (Middle East, Central Asia, Eurasia, and beyond) by constructing “Neo-Ottomanism” ideology for the country that is largely based on country's geographical and historical characteristics is in contradiction with the US exceptionalism and interests in the region. This chapter aims to analyze the changing dynamics of the US-Turkey ties especially in the context of Ankara's claims of regional hegemony and autonomous global stature.

Keywords: Exceptionalism, Turkey-US Ties, Foreign policy, Discourse, Neo-Ottomanism, Regional Supremacy, China, Russ

### Introduction

Turkey's bilateral ties with the US during the Cold War period remained cordial due to their shared interests and fears. Other than mutual insecurities, Turkey's geopolitical significance was also a factor more pragmatic than Turkey's aspirations to join the Western bloc and the country's past geographic and political affiliations with the US-European allies. Throughout the Cold War period and early years of the post-Cold War era, Turkey accepted and embraced the US exceptionalism wholeheartedly for the sake of finding a secure place among the Western bloc. It was successful in winning the trust of the US and allies, particularly in the security domain; however, it was only possible when Turkey did not seek any regional ambitions of its own and maintain a low profile in regional and global affairs. Turkey's NATO membership since 1952 and later its constant efforts to enter the European Union reflect the country's elites' willingness and desire to become a legitimate member of the US lead Western political and economic order. From the very beginning of the modern republic of Turkey, leadership adhered to the idea that Turkey's security and survival could be best ensured only by preserving and promoting its attachment with the modern western ideology of secularism and nationalism, but for that, it was necessary to secure this position recognized by the West (Oguzlu, 2003).

Islamic ideology holder AKP's arrival and success in the 2002 elections and consolidation of power under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan created an altogether different scenario at home and abroad. Political stability and substantial economic growth of the country had made many observers claim that Turkey can claim a distinct role in regional politics and it is ready to join the rising powers group. The new role of Turkey poses a challenge to the US supremacy and interests in the region. Initially, though, AKP also tried to fulfill commitments to win the membership of the European Union as well as the support of the US. AKP's politics were not contradictory to liberalism and respecting political pluralism at home and abroad. And because of their moderate approach, it was expected that the country would be able to join the EU. However, later politics, in one way or another, created many disagreements and plans couldn't turn up as anticipated. It was

evident that Turkey's hopes to enter the EU began to slide away and along with that its cordial ties and submissive behavior towards the US also started to change. In later years, the process to reform the state and society especially about then ongoing democratization gradually and increasingly lost its momentum. AKP for the sake of consolidating its power and popularity among Islamists (at home and abroad) started facilitating Islamization and autocratic policies. The missing democratic norms and social structure in the country have become the main objection by the Western powers specifically from the US on accepting Turkey in their league.

Turkey's quest to regain its past glory in connection with the former Ottoman Empire and its significant geostrategic location at the crossroads of Eurasia has resurfaced after its economic and political development. The country's elites have therefore been very ambitious in portraying and utilizing Turkey's location as the vital need for the Western powers and claiming the 'Turkish exceptionalism' or 'new Ottomanism' to gain legitimacy for the new role in the region. The post-Arab Spring chaos in the Middle East has further enhanced Turkey's position as the conflict in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other regional countries created a more volatile situation for the US and its European allies e.g. the refugee crisis, militantism/terrorism, the Kurdish question, and economic crisis. Turkey, in the backdrop of these new developments, is reluctant to accept the US exceptionalism unconditionally and adamant to get approval for its changed status in the region.

The rise of China has also contributed to providing countries with alternative options in socio-economic and to some extent in socio-political domains. Turkey, for instance, instead of pursuing its EU plans, is more willing to join newly formed alliances with China and Russia, whether it's through the SCO platform or bilateral ties with China and Russia. Democratic reforms are no more a concern for the ruling elites since the expected new partners in the economic and political sphere are least interested in domestic political governance and tend to value stability more.

In this background, the chapter intended to empirically analyze the existing world system, changing geo-economics and geo-politics in favor of the rising powers and the role and position of Turkey in the context of regional and global developments especially about its collaboration and confrontation with the US on bilateral and multilateral fronts. Emphasis is on how changing the world system has an impact on Turkey's association with the US and other major powers.

## **The Neo-Ottomanism(Turkey's Exceptionalist Aspirations)**

“What are the main factors that place Turkey on a different axis and create a unique cultural dynamism? For these factors, one should look into Turkey's two constant variables related to time and space, into history and geography” (Davutoglu, 2004, p. 80-81).

The construction of Turkey's exceptionalist ideals has its roots in its Ottoman past and geographic advantages; a country that connects the East and the West and reflects that connectivity in its culture and policies. The Ottoman Empire had its roots in Central Asia and its victorious expeditions to the European continent enabled it to establish a lasting interaction with the Western civilization. Modern Turkey inherited the Ottoman traditions in a way that it takes pride to be associated with the Eastern and Western civilization historically and geographically and considers it an exceptionalist status and utilizes it in its dealing with the world. Graham Fuller is one of the people coining the idea of neo-Ottomanism and according to him it is “a renewed interest in the former territories and people of the Empire, which includes Muslims who were part of that Empire,” could possibly be in the backdrop of the emergence of New World Order and enabled Turkey “to see themselves once again at the center of a world reemerging around them on all sides rather than at the tail-end of a European world” (Fuller, 1992, p. 13). Neo-Ottomanism also helps understanding Turkey's idea of coexistence and multicultural society inherited from the Ottoman Empire when many different ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities were able to coexist under the central command of the Ottomans. Turkish elites fantasized to replicate the same idea in the post- Cold War period in the Balkan and the Central Asian countries and then in the twenty-first century extended to the Middle East and other regions near and far with some association with the former Ottoman Empire. It was of course not the exact Ottoman Empire role as the concept of the nation-state has changed things permanently but Turkey perceived itself worthy of playing the role

of a regional hegemon that can assist its subordinated or allies in political and economic spheres and maintain peace (Tulander, 1995).

Turkey's secular and democratic tradition provides it an edge over other Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries in its dealing with the West and that's the reason Turkish leadership has always promoted the image of their country as a mediator and a key player in conflict resolution between the East and the West. Turkey's phenomenal economic growth in the last two decades has made it possible for its leadership to aspire for great power status (Yanık, 2011). Turkey's economic development has increased its regional and international influence and the influence (the use of soft and hard power) convinced policy experts in favor of Turkey's elevated regional and global status as a rising power. The Turkish government has introduced many policies to practice its newly achieved power influence in near and far regions, from the Middle East to Central Asia to the African continent whether its economic incentives, welfare projects, or political intervention and mediation.

Turkey's development projects in the African continent replicate the country's Ottoman past when the empire took a keen interest in developing diplomatic and geostrategic relations with many African states. The decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Western occupation of Africa brought an end to the relations but decades later the AK party's initiatives helped resumed the Turkish-African relationship. The active diplomatic and economic participation enabled Turkey to obtain the status of observer state in the African Union in 2005. Turkey contributes a big amount annually to the African Development Bank since its inclusion as a 78<sup>th</sup> member of the bank in 2013 (Idriss, 2020). The Turkish government has been providing developmental support to Africa through different programs carried out by governmental and non-governmental Turkish organizations like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). TIKA's projects in Africa include, "capacity building for health, education, agriculture, environment, and infrastructure" (Idriss, 2020, Para. 3).

Turkey is involved in several projects of similar nature in the Central Asian republics, Pakistan, and other South Asian countries. A common perception among the Islamists circles in Turkey is that helping struggling Muslim countries and people around the world is their responsibility being the

successor of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish leadership and the masses take it as a responsibility to extend whatever diplomatic and fiscal assistance is possible to all the countries with whom Turkey shares any historical and cultural bonds in the Muslim world and near neighborhood. The programs include assisting governments, scholarship grants for students, small-scale business projects for community empowerment, and technical and fiscal assistance and relief activities in war-torn or developing countries (OECD, 2021).

Turkey's other distinction that it proudly flaunts is its democratic setup. It is the only working democratic republic in the Middle East and Central Asia, fulfilling the requirements of representative governance. The democratic and secular identity of the country enhances its dealings and bargaining capacity with the western world and also makes it a reliable partner in conflict resolution mechanisms. However, over the last decade, this image of Turkey is on the decline as the AKP government under Erdoğan has introduced and promoted many non-democratic trends especially in the human rights domain, and curbed many civil society liberties including the ban on media houses; electronic and print media (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The liberal and secular democracy that Turkey owns and flaunts and takes pride in as its exceptional attribute won many bounties for the country but Erdoğan's authoritarian policies have created many skeptics and it has become controversial to believe Turkey is a free society (Kirişci & Sloat, 2019).

In a bid to get its assumed exceptionalist role affirmed by the international community, the Turkish policymakers portrayed the role of Turkey as a conciliator in the post 9/11 period, a state which has roots in east and west and which inherited traits to manage multi-civilizational conflicts successfully could contribute in the formation of "Alliance of Civilization" to curb the clash and conflict of civilization (Balci & Miş, 2008). Turkey being part of the OIC and also a member of NATO plus its historical, cultural, and geographical connectivity makes it eligible to help mediate conflicts and that is one attribute that Turkey considers exceptionalist in its nature.

The increasing influence of Turkey in the developing and under-developed countries across the globe has compelled the critics to conclude that Turkey's active role is tantamount to its claim for international and regional leadership and it should be seen as a challenge to the Western powers working in the same domains in these countries and regions. Though Turkey is cordial to the core

states but similar to other rising powers, Turkey supports the change in the existing power structure for a more inclusive new world order (Oğuzlu, 2013).

President Erdoğan's critique on the not so inclusive power structure in the UN system could be seen in the perspective of Turkey's rise and its growing influence in the Middle East, Africa, South, and Central Asia. "The world is bigger than five" (Anadolu Agency, n.d.) the slogan also depicts Turkey's aspirations to represent the neglected countries in the United Nations Security Council and also it reflects Turkey's dissatisfaction towards the existing power structure dominated by the US and the few European countries. President Erdoğan in his speech at UN General Assembly clearly exhibits his disapproval of the western dominated power system. His argument emphasized the need for change in political and economic rules dictated by the few since the end of World War II, as the world today and its requirements are different (Dedeoğlu, 2016).

Turkey's neo-Ottomanism and exceptionalist aspiration have attracted praise and critique simultaneously. The Muslim world overall (except some Arab countries) is supportive of the idea that Turkey can play a vital role if included in the elite club of nations. There's a huge support for president Erdoğan among the masses in the Muslim countries for his ideals of neo-Ottomanism and revival of moderate Islamic ideology. Critics, on the other hand, are not convinced of Turkish leadership's rhetoric and consider Erdoğan's authoritarianism harmful not only for Turkish society but also for the region.

### **Turkey-US Relations: Making Sense of the Core- Semi-Periphery Relation**

The conventional definition or identity of the core-periphery or core-semi-periphery makes little sense in the changing economic and in turn geopolitical ties of states in the twenty-first century. The post-Cold War constitution of bilateral or trilateral engagements lacked the Cold War loyalties especially in the backdrop of the speedy globalization process and fast pace economic development.

The semi-periphery conventionally played a part of a producer for the core and also a link between the core and periphery, while in new economic and political circumstances this role has been

changed to the extent that semi-periphery could refuse to be a producer for the core, if it finds it economically inconvenient or less profitable, as there are alternative choices available in an increasingly multipolar world where there are several rising economies and potential market partners.

Turkey has evolved from a periphery to a semi-periphery in the post- Cold War period. Throughout the Cold War period, Turkey served the interests of the core in the region whether it was joining formal alliances like the Baghdad Pact or becoming a member of NATO, or receiving aid and assistance against the common threat of the Soviet Union. Though it was not merely obedience or unconditional loyalty on the part of Turkey still providing Incirlik Air Base to the US for operations and surveillance and also letting the US install nuclear-armed Jupiter missile in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis exhibit Turkey's complete assimilation of the US exceptionalism. Bilateral relations and Turkey's obedience to the US diminished only because of the Cyprus dispute and Turkey's frequent confrontations with the NATO member Greece.

The US conceptualized the role of Turkey as a source of keeping its presence in the EU and the Middle East. That is one reason why the US always supported Turkey becoming a part of the European integration. The rationale of such policy was to place its semi-periphery firmly to the Western institutions (Önis & Yılmaz, 2005). Turkey's integration into Europe could serve the US's interests in one of the most significant (potential challenger) regions by playing the role of a stable. Interestingly, the EU members never exhibit enthusiasm parallel to the US to welcome Turkey among their ranks and reason is obvious, a US ally and obedient state with some very distinctive historical and cultural features could be challenging to handle, meanwhile advocating Turkey's membership in the EU hardly involves any direct costs for the US (Ibid.).

Turkey, unlike other smaller member states of the EU, has its cultural base with a prestigious history and in the last two decades it has achieved tremendous economic growth and relative political stability hence, being a perceived non-European contender for the membership of EU, Turkey consists an ideology that resists undue pressures and holds power enough to alter the dominance from the core. Turkey in this context could better serve the US interests in the region despite having divergence on several policy matters.



The twenty-first century's complex regional and global politics stipulate the need for restructuring the idea of the semi-periphery, by reassessing its significance and relocating states' positions by calculating their potential to practice influences in the contemporary political economy. Contemporary semi-peripheries, in an increasingly multipolar world, have the required capabilities or an environment where they can (and do) challenge the established system. The characteristics of a new semi-periphery include developing their own economic and foreign policies and refusing to surrender to the status quo order serving the interests of the core or hegemons. Twenty-first-century semi peripheries have the potential to challenge the system and in certain policy matters, they can alter the policy choices as well. China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and other rising economies (and fitting well in the semi-periphery category) have confronted the preordained system on several occasions whether on climate catastrophes or agricultural-related policies dictates by the core countries (Kaplinsky, 2006).

In the case of Turkey, it is not challenging the political and economic orientation of the world system practically and opposition to pro-core policies is mainly rhetorical only. It is very much an active part of the Western system under the US patronage and protecting and forwarding the core's interests in the region. However, the Turkish government (under AKP) has been promoting and propagating Ottoman Orientalism to challenge the dominance of the Western countries especially after several failed attempts to convince the EU states to accept Turkey as a full member of the organization.

Turkey's last two decades of economic and political development has enabled it to get engaged in the near neighborhood and practice its influence using soft and hard power especially in the Muslim world, where its leaders have aspired to a foreign policy of “zero problems” (Sozen, 2010) in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The foreign policy vision and strategy of AKP (Justice and development party), was based on Ahmet Davutoglu's doctrine of strategic depth, which includes creating an equilibrium in foreign policy core objectives of guaranteed security and freedom for the country (Ibid.).

Simultaneously, AKP leadership has tried to continue the past policy keeping the economic and defense alliances with Western nations, especially with the US. Well aware of Turkey's strategic

importance because of its location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and its increasing role in the region, Turkish leadership offered strategic depth to its western allies as well. The post 9/11 political and geo-strategic changes in the US foreign policy again validated the significance of Turkey for the west in the region (Zanotti, 2012).

One hurdle in Turkey's way to win the full membership of the EU is perhaps its ambitions of exhibiting its semi-peripheral status which enables it not to admit or submit before every dictation and demand from the core (the European core states).

### **Turkey's Quest to Assimilate in the Western Order: Conditional or Unconditional?**

Turkey's aspiration to be part of the Western political and economic system could better be understood by their past affiliation and association dating back to the time (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century) when the Ottoman Empire was able to expand its territory to central Europe. Ruling and dictating the part of Europe for quite a period is one reason why Ottomans in the 19th century (despite their decline) and the Republic of Turkey in the 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries developed an aspiration to build stronger and sustainable connections with the West. Obviously, from the 19th century onward that desire of becoming a part of the thriving new political, economic, and defense system of the western states was based on survival and development tactics. The formation of the modern Turkish republic in the 20th century under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk further boosted the westernization process and it became an essential element of the state policy and Turkey's identity (Ulusoy, 2009). Another significant reason of westernization of society and politics could be traced in Turkey's not very good experience with its immediate Middle Eastern neighbors during the turbulent times of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Arab countries revolt against the Ottoman Empire and more critically against the Turkification of politics and society under the Young Turks reign (Şükrü Hanioglu, 1991), made it easier for the new rulers of Turkey to build the republic on the western civilization pattern. Ideologically, Kemalists considered any connection with the Middle East a connection with the past that was not desirable for the republican elites. This policy of the Turkish

elites was further strengthened by the Arab countries as republican Turkey's secularization and westernization was not acceptable for them especially when the pan-Arabism movement was at its peak across the Middle East and any pro-west symbol or policy was not acceptable for them (Altunışık & Martin, 2011). Meanwhile, relations with the West were prioritized as the source of modernization. This pattern was followed throughout the Cold War period, though Turkey was struggling to materialize its dream of setting up a modern secular progressive democratic state with economic independence and interdependence (with the West).

Turkey's efforts to join the EU should also be seen in the context of its past affiliations with the European continent and familiarity with western civilization. Efforts of inclusion in the EU are indisputably a matter of political and economic gains for Turkey however, seeing it through Western orientalism does not provide sufficient analytical grounds since the Western scholarship has always considered Ottomans and Turkey outsiders. Even in simple states, Turkey's demographic profile favors its bid for EU membership, a significantly young population as compared to an average aging population of the European countries not only can boost European economic prospects but also can facilitate enormous influence among the Muslim countries. Ironically, the key European countries like Germany and France opposed the full membership of Turkey based on the fear of Turkey's large Muslim population capable of altering the cultural orientation of the EU and the power structure of the EU that could, in turn, change their policies set by the key member states (Zanotti, 2012).

The AKP's EU policy, after a series of rejections and more mantras from the EU, reflects changes from the strategic depth doctrine (that provides an inclusive model of integration for the EU where countries and people from different cultural and ideological backgrounds could enjoy diversity under secular principles). Turkey's assumed role as per the doctrine was to be the change bearer to assist the internal transformation of the EU. The AKP leadership in recent years, as a result of internal socio-economic and political changes, developed disputes on Turkey's modernization and its potential membership in the EU. As per the changed policy, full membership of the country in the EU should not be associated with its complete assimilation to western civilization. Religious identity and Ottoman legacy should not be compromised while pursuing westernization and

modernization (Oğuzlu, 2011). No assimilation here does not mean, an upfront rivalry or opposition to the West but keeping its guards on by not investing too much energy and capital in the process of availing benefits through becoming part of western identity. The strategic depth doctrine serves the interests of Turkey better in a manner that its economic and political links to the west would help create a positive image and influence of the country in Asia. Simultaneously, the doctrine helps Turkey use its influence and historical and ideological connections with the east as major leverage in securing political and economic interests in its dealing with the west.

Turkey-US closer relations are beneficial in this context of building more cordial ties with other western nations and keeping alive the quest and hopes for the full membership of the EU, as Turkey being friendly and cooperative with the US and its allies serve the interests of both sides equally. An isolated and disconnected from west Turkey cannot play an effective and constructive (pro-western) role in the Middle East and other regions where it has a strong influence. Turkey's coercive use of power in the region in the last few years (post Arab Spring period) is the reflection of its distance from the western order (due to their divergences on foreign policy as well as socio-economic matters) and Turkey becoming more coercive regional power than a benign regional power especially it feels insecure and isolated from the core and feels to protect its national and regional interests alone (Önis & Yılmaz, 2005).

The new Turkey-centric westernism is a reflection of the Turkish policymakers' planning and approach to expanding their economic reach to diverse markets beyond the west. The economic development and growth of the Turkish economy also require access to various markets in the near and far region for its manufactured goods as well as for its growing services sector. Turkey also aims to promote investors' friendly policies and environment attracting the developing and rising economies. The rising middle-class support and pressurize the government to build a diverse economic base that involves exploring markets of Asia and Africa as well (Azad, 2020).

Though Turkey's policies have been changed over the years in differently evolved political and economic circumstances, it still is heavily dependent on the EU and western markets for its economic prosperity. It also maintains active strategic ties with the United States and NATO. However, the global changing power structure allows Turkey to refuse to be a naive receiver of the

western dictates. Turkey's preferences and choices are diverse now and that is why even the decisions like joining the EU and introducing reforms at home have become a matter of serving the mutual interests rather than satisfying the core countries alone (Davutoğlu, 2008).

The new strategy questions the role of Turkey in the contemporary world order as a mere tool to the core to work for the protection and promotion of their interests in the region. Now Turkey demonstrates its will to play the role of an independent actor in the region and avail the opportunities on its own. Following the realist paradigm, a country's policies are more pragmatic and interest-based; this approach reflects in Turkey's policies in the Middle East, where despite providing a certain amount of support to its Western allies, it resists excessive interference or policy dictates from the core. Turkey has gradually evolved into a state that willingly adopts and absorbs modernity and western values and implies its strategies to preserve its national interests. It was also possible because of the western world's distrust and lack of will to accept Turkey among their ranks. Meanwhile increasing stability and gradual democratization and competitive market economy practices have increased Turkey's bargaining power vis-à-vis the core countries manifolds.

The realization that American policies in the region have negative consequences for Turkey's security and other national interests has convinced the Turkish leadership and policymakers to adopt a change in the foreign policy in the region to protect the national interests (Oğuzlu, 2011). In this regard it is worth a repeat that Turkey's change in policies in the recent past does not pose a threat to the existing western-centric norms however, it is an adamant supporter of the reform in the existing political and economic system and composition of global pattern that suits all. The objective is to promote the country's supremacy in the region but within the established western model of economic and political developments. Challenging or criticizing certain policies should not be considered going against the core. It only reflects Turkey's will to operate within the system with a certain level of independence and liberty as per its own domestic needs and national interests (Ibid.) Hence, Turkey's aspirations to be part of the western civilization or following the Westernization/Europeanization process have largely depended on its utility to facilitate Turkey in

resolving its domestic socio-economic and socio-political problems and support for the country's rise in the region and beyond (Ibid.)

## **The US-Turkey Ties: Twenty-First Century Bilateral and Multilateral Dynamics**

The global power structure of the post- Cold War world, based on the principles of the free-market economy and liberal democracy, was a turning moment for many countries with untapped credibility and potential to mark their presence in the newly developed economic horizon with the help of LPG (Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization) model. A brief unipolar moment (Krauthammer, 1990) dictated the terms of conduct for the coming years and increasing multipolarity of the twenty-first century following the suit despite political and economic shortcomings of the order.

The capitalist system's triumph paved the way for potential economies to claim their share in global politics and economy based on their competitive nature of production and increasingly democratic state and society. Putting the debate on the shortcomings of capitalism and globalization aside, there are some incredible success stories of the rise of China and India in BRICS nations that pose a threat to the existing world order though these nations (with their different polity) do operate within the existing order of world system.

Turkey in the late 1990s was an emerging market, willing to play a pivotal state role based on its desire to be part and ally of the western order and cooperate with the US and its European allies against the challenges in the background of 9/11 (Yılmaz, 2004). The country's significance and usefulness for the US as a key ally in its campaign against the rising terrorism in the region had also increased manifolds. The US withdrew its support for the country to cope up with the growing threat of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), declaring it a terrorist party. However, along with the increasing dependency on the US and its allies, Turkey developed some differences in the regional policies especially in matters of Iraq and Syria.

The increasing multipolar world order has also contributed to changing Turkish behavior. Turkey's tilt towards the rising economies and influential political actors is the result of the constant rejection

from the European Union to accommodate it as a full member and then differences with the US on regional politics and conflict in Syria and Iraq. Turkey, though not an active part of challenging and changing the existing political and economic order, also shows no resentment to the change of system in favor of a new multipolar order (Robins, 2003, as cited in Azad, 2020). Turkey is conscious of the rise of the non-western countries and utilizing all its diplomatic maneuvers to develop good working dependable ties with them (Velloor, 2017).

In its quest to find new markets and trading partners, Turkey did not hesitate to risk its relations and reputation with the core, especially when it decided to develop trade ties with North Korea and China (Harris, 2018). Turkey's trade ties with Russia also reflect the country's changing preferences in the last two decades.

### **Turkey's Increasing Engagements with China and Russia; Growing Divergences in Turkey-US ties**

Turkey's bilateral ties with China are not an easy task for the country since its strategic depth policy in Central Asia does not go well with Chinese interests in the region (Schleifer, 2010) and (Bruno, 2008). Turkey pursuing the neo-Ottomanism (based on historical and cultural connections) in the Balkans and newly independent Central Asia does not conform to the interests of many developed nations and been considered problematic, especially in the case of China, the policies of neo-Ottomanism in Central Asia could be threatening to increase Chinese indulgence in the region. Despite their conflicting interests in the region and in China (Turkey considers Xinjiang Turkic origin Uyghur Muslim population's demand of East Turkistan legitimate) both countries not only have developed strong trade but also collaborating in political and military endeavors. The rise of China is a challenge for the Western core but a hope and a choice for the ambitious struggling economies. China's compatible economic and financial capabilities are a source of hope for Turkey which is gradually losing its chances in the West. Turkey is facing opposition from the US and its western European allies on so many fronts including domestic authoritarian policies to regional involvement in its Middle Eastern neighborhood and also on the economic front by not facilitating Turkey's producers and products in their markets by granting the country full membership of the EU. Turkey also finds it difficult to win any substantial support of the core of the Cyprus dispute with Greece. Hence, Look East policy and increasing economic and political engagement with

1658

rising China is a viable option for Turkish elites. On the other hand, a friendly and willing to cooperate Turkey also suits China's interests in the region and beyond. It supports Turkey becoming a member of the rising power blocks by facilitating its entry into multinational substitutes of the western core like the Shanghai Cooperation Council and BRICS (Reuters, 2016) and (Lissovolik & Vinokurov, 2019).

The economic cooperation between Turkey and China has increased manifold. With \$21 billion export from China, the trade between Turkey and China was \$23 billion in 2019 (Gürcan, 2019). China is also taking advantage of Turkey's geostrategic assets for connectivity purposes by investing in infrastructure building of ports, power plants, and terminals. A Chinese consortium provided finances of almost \$1 billion and owned a 65% stake in a Turkish container terminal, Kumport, in Istanbul, and through this terminal China's eyes on securing the Turkish market for its exports (Ibid.).

Both countries have signed several bilateral agreements in different fields including health and nuclear energy. With all its investment and exports, China has become the leading importer of Turkey. Post- failed attempted coup of July 2016, Chinese investment in Turkey has increased further as President Erdoğan's trust in the West got badly diminished, Chinese investment from 2016 to 2019 was around \$3 billion and growing (Alemdaroğlu & Tepe, 2020). China's investment is a major source of support for the AKP government in a time when its popularity is on the decline among the western core because of authoritarian policies at home and strategic maneuvers in the region. China rescued Turkey in the face of an acute economic crisis in 2018 when the Turkish lira went through devaluation and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China loaned \$3.6 billion to Turkey for ongoing energy and transportation projects (Ibid.). Another critical support to Turkey after the economic crisis was letting Turkish businesses use the Chinese Yuan instead of the US dollar to do the payment (Daily Sabah, "Turkey's central bank uses Chinese yuan funding for 1st time," 2020). China's finances have been used in many strategically important infrastructure building projects under the BRI (Belt and Road Project) that otherwise were not possible for Turkey to build in a short period. These projects include the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku train (linking transportation



networks to China), construction of the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, and building the Hunutlu coal-fired power plant on the Mediterranean Sea.

Other than joint projects and investment in economic and infrastructure building, both countries are collaborating in defense as well. The Turkey- China defense ties also reflect Turkey's desire to find diverse sources of military supplies and gradually decrease its dependence on the US and its European allies. It also reflects Turkey's aspiration to become an independent player in an increasingly multipolar world. Turkey and Chinese air forces joint military exercises back in 2010 created a lot of stir in the western media as it was the first that any NATO member state held military exercises with China on its own territory (Wolf, 2010). Turkey's interests in building up defense ties with China was also exhibited in 2013 when it signed a \$4 billion deal to acquire a Chinese missile defense system though it could not proceed because of the opposition from the US and other NATO member states but it proved to be a stepping stone for China and Turkey both as a NATO member state's approaching China for its defense needs was a breakthrough (Lague, 2013). In April 2019, the US Congress supported the move to halt a joint F-35 manufacturing program with Turkey in case Turkey goes ahead to buy S-400 missile systems. In response to the US pressure, as per reports, Ankara has plan B of purchasing Russian Su-57 or Chinese J-31 (Sezer, 2019). Turkey's tilt towards China and quest to buy Chinese military technology could be the reason for friction with the U.S, tantamount to Turkey moving away from the Western military alliance.

Turkey's collaboration with China on different infrastructure and energy projects helps Erdoğan lessen his country's dependence on the Western core and their institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Another thing that makes it convenient for Turkey to deal with China is the opposition both countries face on their undemocratic practices at home and expansionist ambitions abroad. They keep on criticizing and challenging the existing system and demand reforms in the system to make it more acceptable and inclusive.

Apart from its growing engagement with China, Turkey's improving ties with Russia also has a significant impact on its dealing with the US and other European states. The impression is that Turkey is moving away from the western core and finding new partners in the possible alternative

centers of power. In this context, Turkey's positively evolving economic and geostrategic ties with Russia are worthy of analysis. Nineteenth century's Ottoman Empire and Russia's interactions were all about rivalries and animosities ending at bloody wars; however, the modern Republic of Turkey received critical support from the Soviet Union against their common enemy (England) in the war of independence (Giritli, 1970). Historical rivalries and fears of Soviet expansionism continued to haunt Turkey and during the Cold War period, it decided to be under the custodianship of the US to ensure its territorial integrity and security. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of Russia had changed the scenario and created many opportunities for both countries to start anew by burying their past rivalries and explore new grounds of cooperation in an increasingly interdependent world. Although they were no longer sharing direct borders, however, historical and cultural interactions made it possible to build a strategic partnership.

Turkey's bilateral and trilateral trade and strategic relations with Russia are also improving after the failed coup attempt against the Erdogan government in July 2016. Both countries are exploring new ventures of cooperation in economic and defense spheres and developing more cordial geostrategic ties in the context of complex regional situations and growing adversaries with the US and its European allies. Their growing military collaborations are a cause of concern since Turkey is a NATO member state and its aspirations to find new partners in a rival or potential rival block could cause harm to the western core. The recent controversy of Turkey buying the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system and strong opposition from the US has created another opportunity for Russia to play on the fault lines between Turkey and the US. The Trump administration imposed sanctions on Turkey in December 2020 and the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has again warned Turkey of imposing more sanctions in case Turkey goes ahead with the deal or buys more arms from Russia (Jones, 2021). Turkey's \$2.5 billion deal of S 400 with Russia has also resulted in the US halting the upgrading of Turkey's aging combat aircraft with advanced F-35. The Turkish leadership has also warned to deepen its military ties with Russia further if the US is reluctant to fulfill its defense commitments (Ibid.).

Putin and Erdoğan's personality confluence has been displayed in their cooperation on Syrian theater although both countries have contrasting interests there. The retreat of the US and its

western allies provided an opportunity for Russia and Turkey to coordinate and secure their own interests in the Syrian conflict. The Astana process is another instance of their successful diplomatic maneuver without any kind of meddling from the US and other western states (Thépaut, 2020). Both countries have applied conflict resolution mechanism in the face of tensions in Idlib, a region with conflicting interests and battleground between Islamist rebels and the Assad regime and Islamist rebels were having Turkey's support while Russia was supporting the Assad regime, Putin and Erdoğan with mutual consent declared Idlib a “de-escalation zone” in 2018 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2017). Turkey and Russia reached an agreement deciding both countries’ joint patrols in the buffer zone to protect the mutual interests and shunning the chances of escalation of tensions. The Sochi agreement reflects the intentions of both leaders to compromise for the sake of better working conditions and future collaboration in the region (Salaymeh & Acun, 2018).

Turkey's growing understanding with Russia on several matters of regional and global importance is a matter of concern for the US especially when it involves military and geostrategic consensus between the two significant players in one of the most critical regions in the world. Russia’s strategy to win an ally from the US by providing direct support (military, economic and geostrategic) to Turkey in times of crisis has been successful so far. Turkey counts on Russia for its economic well-being (tourism revenue, energy needs) and is ready to be part of the alternative and competitive political and economic blocs with the help of Russia and China.

### **Conclusion**

Turkey's remarkable growth in the last two decades and changing global power dynamics have created an unprecedented situation for Turkish policymakers. Turkey is among the top 20 largest economies in the world with a considerable population and significant geographical location. It is the second-largest economy in NATO, possessing credible military capabilities. Growing economic and military capabilities have enabled the country to practice political influence in the near and far regions. In a growing multipolar world, Turkey desires to establish its own strong geo-economic and political profile and diversify its sources of strength by working on its ties with rising nations from the non-Western bloc. Throughout the 20th century, the country was highly dependent on the

US and its western European allies for its economic and defense needs however, its look east and new Ottomanism policies reflect the desire to resist complete assimilation in the Western system. Using its historical linkages and connectivities in the region to maximize national interests is one policy that distinguishes 20th century Turkey from 21st century Turkey. Military interventions, political manipulation, trade expansion, and philanthropist projects in Asian and African countries plus an image of a leading Muslim democratic nation have contributed to enhancing Turkey's image and influence (Somun, 2011). Its growing stature has also contributed to its bargaining power vis-a-vis the US. Turkey is not a challenging state neither it has the potential to secure a place among the core countries. It functions within the existing system structure and world order. While stressing on developing economic, political, and strategic ties with non-western rising powers, Turkey is putting sincere efforts to be part of the western political and economic culture.

The AKP party has designed zero problems with neighbors policy to forward its soft image and envisioned the New Ottomanism to win the bargaining power by utilizing its historical, cultural, and geographic connections. Turkish policymakers adopt and practice the prevailing free-market economy and democratic governance system without any hesitation, simultaneously they depend on the European markets and believe in interdependence with the key western economies as a vital strategy for the growth and development of Turkey.

The perception that Turkey focuses on developing cordial political and trade ties with the non-Western rising powers tantamount to Turkey's willingness to go against the core or establish or join any anti-western coalitions is false on so many levels. Working on good ties with China, Russia, Brazil, and other rising economies rather reflects Turkey's desire to expand its market and benefit from the increasing multipolar dynamics of the twenty-first century. It would be rather naive on the part of Turkish leadership if they ignore the rise of east and emerging non-western power centers as even Western countries have realized the significance of the moment and are preparing themselves for a post-western economic and strategic order and adopting new policies to cope with it (Quinn, 2011).

It is a common perception among Turkish writers and policymakers that Turkey has remained a close ally of the US and the Western bloc but the contemporary world system's requirements and

then cold shoulder behavior from the US and allies have marginalized the country (Yakış, 2018). The sense of deprivation despite rendering all kinds of support and willingness to cooperate compelled the Turkish leadership to find new ways and alienate their country from the Western-oriented system that it was practicing throughout the twentieth century, and that is one reason behind the AKP politics revolving around the neo-Ottomanism whether it is domestic governance or diplomatic ties with other states and the objective of the neo-Ottomanist ideology is to present Turkey as a “benign regional power, especially in the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans.” (Önis & Kutlay, 2013, p. 1411). The new strategy enabled the statesmen to think in terms of pure mercantilist perspective to ensure maximum profit in dealing with the western states and less emphasis on identity issues (Oğuzlu, 2008).

In light of Turkey's overall foreign policy with its Western allies, especially the US and non-Western allies like China, Russia, and other rising powers, the conception of Turkey as a soft-revisionist state would be incorrect analytically. The country is willing to be part of the existing system but it also has a strong desire for certain reforms in the existing international order to make it more inclusive. Erdoğan's famous quote, “the world is bigger than five” should be taken in this context of more inclusive policies and strategies from the international institutions and organizations who are responsible for dictating economic and political plans to the world. The desire to join the alternative power centers like SCO or BRICS is also based on establishing the country's autonomous status in the region and globally and come out of its dependence on the West.

Keeping in mind Turkey's economic and military potentials, it would not be appropriate considering the country a major challenger to the US or the existing world system however, it is safe to say that Turkey is quite successful in diversifying its sources of strengths. It does not rely on the US and other key Western powers only for its economic and defense needs. Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian policies are the result of this realization that his country can afford to refuse the dictates of the US and its allies and can practice independent policies at home and abroad.

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