

Middle Powers Between the West and the “Rest”: Turkey During the Russian War on Ukraine

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Abstract

Turkey is a middle power that has been illustrating proactive foreign policy over the last decades with a strong motivation for “strategic autonomy.” Turkish foreign policy during the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an interesting case in which to examine and understand the role of middle powers in the changing international order. Especially in the context of widening gaps between the geopolitical positioning of the West, led by the United States and the European Union, and the “Rest,” increasingly represented by BRICS economies, many countries are struggling in between. The paper highlights the positioning of Turkey during the Russian War on Ukraine and argues that it is much closer to those of major BRICS and most countries in the “Global South” than its traditional Western Allies. We argue that the reasons that enabled Turkey to maneuver such proactive foreign policy during the War can be explained by the intertwined effect of the manifestation of “strategic autonomy” in the decision-making, highly centralized populist leadership at home, and the growing room at the international and the regional environment for middle power activism.

Keywords: Post-Western Order, BRICS, Global South, Foreign Policy, Strategic Autonomy.

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Introduction

Turkey constitutes an interesting case study in the evolving “post-Western” international order (Stuenkel 2016). Turkey is a middle power firmly embedded in Western institutions, yet the desire to achieve “strategic autonomy” has been a key element underlying an increasingly proactive and assertive foreign policy in recent years. Turkey has tried to maintain its transactional relations with the West while increasingly deepening its economic, diplomatic, and security ties with non-Western global powers such as Russia and China. In the context of developments in the international order in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this article attempts to address the following questions: despite its NATO membership, why

has Turkey not participated in the sanctions against Russia since the Ukraine War? What explains Turkey's foreign policy behavior during the war?

These questions are highly significant in understanding middle power behavior in the changing international order, where the Russian invasion of Ukraine posed a critical juncture. The central argument is that Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy, a behavior that gained significant momentum since the Global Financial Crisis, has taken a novel turn following the Russian War on Ukraine. On balance, Turkey has benefited from its unique ability to maintain "active neutrality" in the conflict, based on the strong economic, diplomatic, and security ties established with both parties over the years. Turkish foreign policy in the Russian invasion of Ukraine involves simultaneously showing support for Ukraine while deepening economic and security ties with Russia – a contradictory position with an aim to maneuver a proactive middle power activism in the international conflict. The aim is to get international recognition as a "peacemaker" by participating in the negotiation process between Russia and Ukraine while pragmatically continuing its economic relations with Russia as part of diversification efforts. Despite the institutionalized alliance with the West, Turkey was able to position itself in a unique situation that was rather like the position taken in much of the Global South, increasingly represented by the BRICS (stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) economies.

Turkish position was critical of the war but not directly critical of Russia and its President Vladimir Putin for precipitating the war in the first place. As a NATO member, Turkey was an unusual security partner for the West by failing to adopt a direct stand against Russia. Indeed, Turkey has not applied Western sanctions against Russia. Turkey's mediating efforts in the conflict involve domestic political calculations where the populist dividends have contributed to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's electoral success during a severe economic crisis. The war expanded the maneuvering space for political leadership in domestic politics and foreign policy in Turkey. In the long term, however, it may have paved the way for Turkey's further distancing from the Western alliance. Turkey is likely to maintain its institutional links to the Western alliance. Yet the normative, transformative effect of the West, particularly the European Union (EU), is expected to be further diluted as the relationship with the West assumes an increasingly hyper-transactional character.

Although Turkey, as an ambitious middle power, tries to balance its relations with the West and the Rest, it is increasingly positioning itself as an emerging Global South power in the quadrilateral order rather than an institutionalized part of the Western bloc. The asymmetrical nature of its interdependence with the China-Russia axis poses a significant constraint for Turkey's integration into the Rest, while the ideational rupture from the West pushed Turkey away from its traditional allies, namely the United States (US) and the EU.

The paper is organized as follows: the first part of the paper discusses the theoretical framework by evaluating the notion of strategic autonomy of middle powers in the changing international order from the Turkish perspective. The following part addresses the Turkish foreign policy in the Russian war against Ukraine and its domestic ramifications. Furthermore, the next sections evaluate the increasing importance of BRICS as the representative of the "Rest" against

the West and situate middle powers like Turkey in the changing geopolitical landscape. The last part concludes the paper by shedding light on the most recent regional and global developments since Donald Trump came to power in the US for the second term.

Turkey’s Quest for “Strategic Autonomy”

Autonomy in foreign policy refers to the ability of states to determine their priorities and decisions in the realm of foreign policy (Hurreli 1986). The global shifts in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the emergence of new and alternative power centers such as China and other BRICS have influenced and shaped the new foreign policy vision for many middle powers like Turkey. The intensification of great power competition, especially with the enhancing partnership between China and Russia against the Western Alliance, resulted in a new foreign policy orientation for countries that are struggling between the major powers. Middle powers, including Turkey, Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea, and Malaysia, to name a few, are seeking more independent action in foreign policy decision-making, described as a quest for autonomy (Legler et al. 2020; Kutlay and Öniş 2021a; Schenoni and Leiva 2021; Anwar 2022)

The Context for Turkey’s Quest for Strategic Autonomy

The global financial crisis was a critical juncture where the relative weakening of the Western powers, including the US, created a power vacuum for the emergence of new power centers on the global stage, hence accelerating the autonomy-seeking behavior of middle powers. BRICS became an active participant in the international arena where leading countries in the Global South advanced their economic capacities (Wulf and Dabiel 2015; Öniş and Kutlay 2020c). The financial crisis, often referred to as the collapse of the US-led unipolarity, also landmarks the strengthening of the strategic alliance of Russia and China to support one another against the West (Kirshner 2014; Kaczmarek 2015). A key turning point in the post-Western international order is the emergence of expansionist instruments such as the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) from China under the leadership of Xi Jinping, which significantly challenged the dominance of the US, intensifying the geopolitical rivalry between the two superpowers (Yan 2018; Machado 2022). In the new international setting, there is no single power/pole dominating the other, which can be described as an asymmetric multipolar order where the establishment of new security architectures in the Indo-Pacific, such as AUKUS (refers to a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine further escalates the tension between Russia-China axis and the Western bloc (Flockhart 2016; Alami et al. 2021; Bollfrass and Herzog 2022).

The Western Alliance was the principal reference point of Turkish foreign policy on economic, security, and identity grounds. However, since the end of the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy has become increasingly more proactive, developing strong economic and diplomatic ties with Russia and the former Soviet Union, especially Azerbaijan and the Turkic Republics of Central Asia, as well as the Balkans. The shift to a multi-dimensional and proactive

foreign policy accelerated during the early phase of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) era, where the Middle East became an increasingly important focal point of Turkish foreign policy. Going beyond the immediate neighborhood, Turkey expanded its influence in Africa and Latin America during the AKP era (Levaggi and Donelli 2021).

Turkey's relations with the West reached a climax with the decision of the European Council at Helsinki in December 1999, which recognized Turkey as a candidate country and resulted in an important process of economic and democratic reforms, culminating in the opening negotiations for full membership in October 2005. However, the orientation of Turkish foreign policy took a radical new turn during the second half of the AKP era. During this period, Erdoğan's personal vision has increasingly shaped Turkish foreign policy as the notion of "strategic autonomy" became the key underlying principle of Turkish foreign policy (Haugham 2019; Oğuzlu 2020; Kutlay and Öniş 2021a and 2021b). Some scholars have also used the term "Turkey's grand strategy," referring to a multi-dimensional foreign policy driven by the country's economic and security interests, without a firm or external anchor or extra commitment to a particular block (Aktürk 2020; Aydın 2020; Müftüler-Baç 2020).

As discussed above, Turkey's quest for "strategic autonomy" is a combination of international, regional, and domestic dynamics. On the one hand, the deep disappointments with the key Western actors drove Turkey's growing shift away from the Western Alliance. Turkey's relations with the Western bloc witnessed a gradual regression with the disappointment regarding the collapse of the EU membership process after a promising start, which further deteriorated following the failed military coup in July 2016 (Öniş 2023a). The Turkish leadership accused Western powers of instigating the coup, in the case of the US, and for being insensitive to the coup in the case of the European countries. The process of democratic backsliding in Turkey during this period also led to a severe clash of norms (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016). The increasing criticism of domestic malpractices in Turkey on the part of key Western leaders created resentment and a nationalist backlash in Turkey, and Erdoğan was able to expand his popularity at home by capitalizing on growing anti-Western sentiments (Öniş 2023a). Furthermore, the phase of de-Europeanization and personalization of Turkish foreign policy was parallel with the more assertive unilateral actions in response to assertive Russia in the North, border disputes in the East, and failed states in the neighboring Arab countries in the aftermath of Arab uprisings (Kardaş 2013; Barrinha 2014; Dal 2016). Turkey's vital role in the most recent collapse of the Assad regime in Syria after a prolonged civil war can be considered a significant success of the Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, which will be a determining juncture for the future of Turkey's neighboring regions.

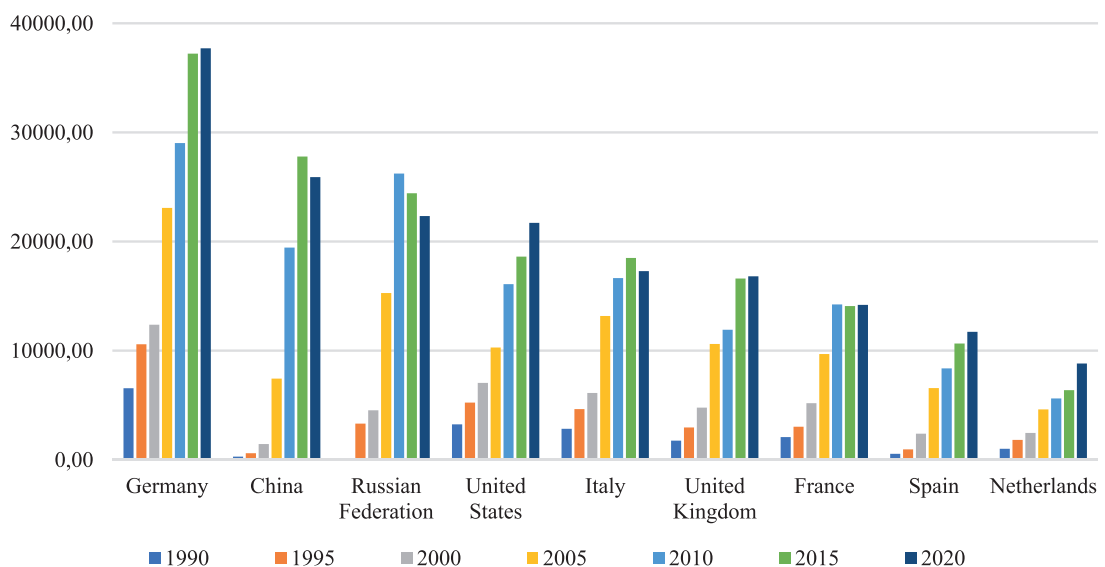
Diversification as an Autonomy-seeking Strategy

At a time when Turkey's relations with the West were in decline, there was a serious attempt to expand ties with non-Western global powers, Russia and China (Köstem 2018; Ersen and Köstem 2019; Balta 2019; Öniş and Yalikhun 2021; Köstem 2021; Güneylioglu 2022; Köstem 2022; Baba and Erşen 2023). This attempt, often characterized as a middle power activism,

is the driving factor behind Turkish foreign policy over the last decade. The relationship with Russia took a new turn during the era, and the personal affinity of the two like-minded leaders, Erdoğan and Putin, played an important role in this process. Economic ties with Russia expanded, symbolized by the fact that Russia’s major foreign investment project, the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, started to be built during this period. Growing security ties between Turkey and Russia emerged as a novel element in the relationship. The most striking development in this context involved the purchase of S-400 missiles from Russia, a clear manifestation of “strategic autonomy” in action, a decision that generated considerable friction and resentment from the US and NATO partners (Kutlay and Öniş 2021b). Despite tension and a major crisis in the relationship, especially concerning the diverging position of the two countries in Syria, it has proved to be robust and has been experiencing progressive deepening over time.

Similarly, the relationship with China has been expanding in recent years (Chan 2020; Öniş and Yalikul 2021; Güneşlioğlu 2022). Ankara signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Beijing in 2010, joined BRI in 2013, and became a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015. There are a significant number of China-backed projects in Turkey, including the recent 1 billion USD investment from Chinese EV giant BYD in Mersin. In addition to that, there are about 4.3 billion USD worth of approved projects from AIIB as of early 2024, showcasing the efforts of the Turkish government in diversifying the source of investment and loans. However, BRI-related investments are less than the expectations of the Turkish political elite due to factors related to domestic economic structure, financial fluctuations, and lack of trust between Ankara and Beijing concerning the Uyghur issue and Turkey’s NATO membership (Üngör 2019; Gürel and Kozluca 2022; Göçer and Ergenç 2023).

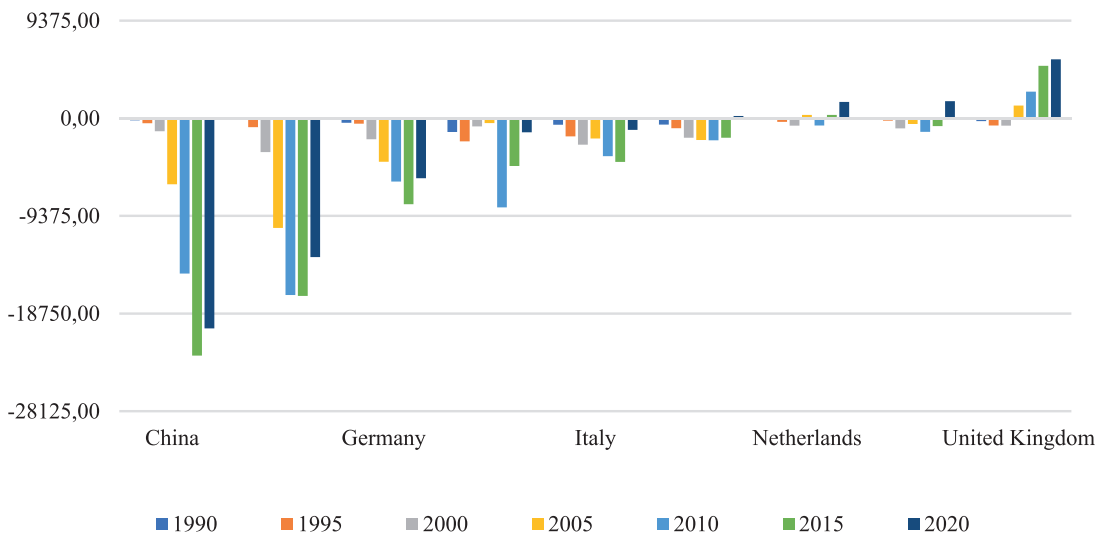
Figure 1. Top Trade Partners of Turkey, 1990-2020 (Million USD)



Source: World Integrated Trade Solution, World Bank

The quest for autonomy embodies a serious attempt by the Turkish government to diversify its relations with non-traditional partners. The best indicators of the success in diversification can be the trade and investment relations of Turkey over the last two decades. Figures 1 and 2 show the total trade and trade deficit of Turkey with major partners, whereas Figure 3 shows the distribution of source-country foreign direct investment in Turkey. Regarding the depth of the trade and investment relations, Western Alliance continues to be Turkey's principal partner. The EU continues to be the critical component of foreign investment in Turkey. Yet, the weight of Russia and China is increasing. A comparison of Turkey's economic relations between the two blocks reveals a striking difference. Trade with the West appears to be much more balanced, whilst trade with Russia and China appears to display a pattern of dramatically unbalanced partners, with imports being much higher than exports. This also illustrates the dangers of an excessive shift in the direction of the Russia-China axis in purely economic terms (Kutlay and Öniş 2021a; Öniş and Yalikul 2021).

Figure 2. Turkey's Trade Deficit with Top Trade Partners, 1990-2020 (Million USD)



Source: World Integrated Trade Solution, World Bank

Turkey's quest for "strategic autonomy" has an important third pillar that extends beyond the West and Russia-China axis to develop organic relationships with key countries of the Global South (Levaggi and Donelli 2021). The Gulf countries, especially Qatar, have become important actors in Ankara's attempt to search for new investment venues that are alternative to the West. Indeed, one of the first visits of President Erdoğan, after his recent electoral success in 2023, was to visit the Gulf to improve financial and investment ties with the Gulf countries, influenced by an attempt to tap into alternative sources of finance to be able to overcome the current economic crisis (Doğan-Akkaş 2023). Africa has been another region where Turkey has been unusually active among major emerging powers, both in terms of

humanitarian aid and building trade and investment linkages (Habiyaemye and Oğuzlu 2014). Another dimension is Turkey’s active promotion of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) by playing a leadership role in building strong economic, diplomatic, security, and cultural ties with member states.

What is also interesting is that recent Turkish foreign policy seems to have two contrasting dimensions, which is quite a rare phenomenon in terms of middle-power activism. The benign side of Turkish foreign policy activism involves the use of “soft power.” Turkey has projected itself as an important humanitarian actor in terms of being one of the leading donor countries in the Global South (Bayer and Keyman 2012), in terms of its receptivity to Syrian refugees, and in terms of willingness to play a mediating role in international conflicts. At the same time, Ankara has also increasingly become more dominant in the recent period based on the use of hard power and military activism. In fact, the success of Turkish drones, reflecting the rapid development of the defense industry, has become the symbol of Turkish foreign policy activism, perhaps overriding the humanitarian element, which was more dominant previously (Rossiter and Cannon 2022; Soyaltin-Colella and Demiryol 2023). Turkey established military bases in Qatar in 2015 and Somalia in 2017. Turkey has conducted several cross-border military operations over the last decade, in Syria since 2016, in Libya since 2019, in Iraq since 2019, and partially involved in Nagorno-Karabakh since 2020 and more recently involved in Ukraine, as we will discuss in a later context (Altunışık 2022; Öztig 2023).

Overall, the “strategic autonomy” in Turkish foreign policy embodies three critical elements. The first is the diversification of its relations with non-traditional partners, including Russia and China, while preserving traditionally established relations with the Western bloc. The second is ambitious engagement with countries in the Global South, actively expanding its sphere of influence in Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, and Central Asia. Finally, it also involves unilateral military activism beyond its borders, along with increasing military capacity, becoming a rising military exporter and one of the most prolific users of armed drones. Altogether, the current trajectory of Turkish foreign policy constitutes a critical case to evaluate in understanding the behavior of middle power in a turbulent world. More interestingly, because of its traditionally institutionalized relations with the West and increasing importance in regional disputes such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Testing Strategic Autonomy: Interplay Between Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

Turkish position from the very beginning of the Russian War on Ukraine could be described as a policy based on “active neutrality” (Kaşlılar 2023; Öniş 2023b; Yanık 2023). Turkey opposed the war, in principle, given its devastating material and human consequences, and tried to push for a peaceful settlement right from the beginning of the war, condemning the Russian invasion at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Turkey supported all the Ukraine-related resolutions at the UN, including resolutions to suspend Russia’s membership

in the UN Human Rights Council and to make Russia liable for war reparations (Chivvis, Coşkun and Geeghan-Breiner 2023). Turkey also firmly implemented the articles of the Montreux Convention and prevented the passage of warships from the Turkish straits to the Black Sea. This was clearly a blow to Russian war efforts and its attempts to gain an advantage over Ukraine. Beyond this, however, the Turkish position differed from the Western Alliance in certain fundamental respects.

“Active Neutrality” of Turkey During the War

Turkey refrained from applying sanctions to Russia whilst trying to play a careful balancing act and face confrontation with the US and other leading Western powers due to the over-violation of Western sanctions. The Akkuyu nuclear power project, Russia’s major foreign investment project built around Mersin in Southern Turkey, continued uninterrupted. The strong personal relationship between Erdoğan and Putin also continued in an uninterrupted fashion, and not surprisingly, Turkey was identified as one of the “friendly” countries with which economic and diplomatic relations would continue under normal times. Putin also used the possibility of using Turkey as an energy hub in the future to export natural gas to Europe. However, the potential of this idea being put into action appears quite remote at this stage, given that European countries are increasingly implementing proactive measures to reduce their dependence on Russian gas and oil. Moreover, Putin awarded Turkey a relatively friendly position by delaying the payments on Turkish gas imports, which was a relief to the Turkish government at a time of continued economic crises and pressures faced in the context of the elections in May 2023.

Similarly, the Turkish leadership sought to maintain strong economic, military, and diplomatic ties with Ukraine. Erdoğan was keen to develop a strong personal relationship with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, in the same way that he had managed to forge with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, over the years. Ironically, the drones (TB2 Bayraktar drones sold through a private Corporation, Baykar Makine), sold to Ukraine as an important element of Turkish exports to Ukraine in recent years, have played a major role in Ukraine’s defense during the war and have helped to build a positive image of Turkey in the mindsets of the Ukrainian public.

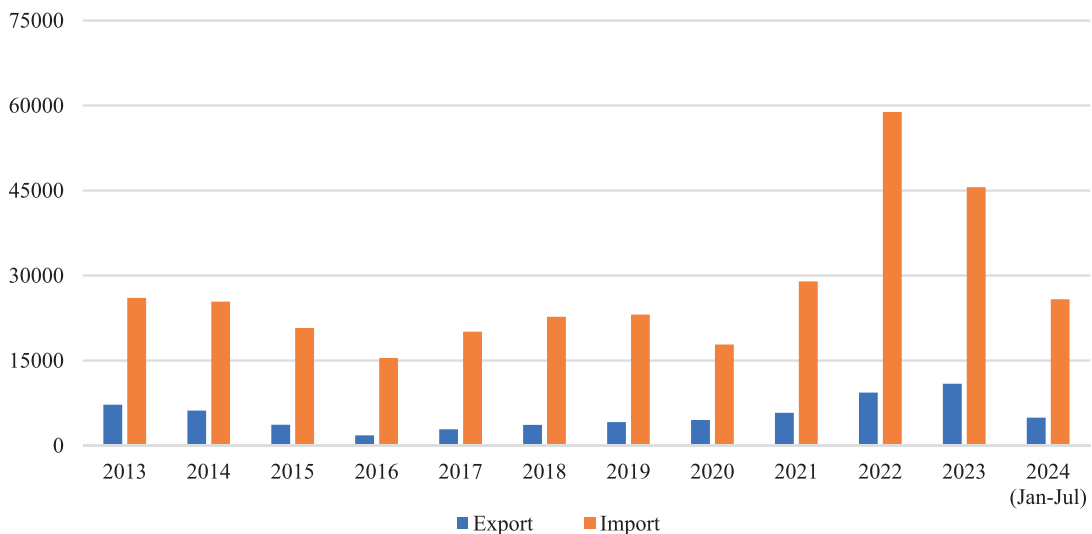
Beyond the realm of bilateral relations involving the two countries, there was a concerted effort to bring the two countries together as part of an active effort to engineer peace. Both President Erdoğan and former Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu played a key role in this process. The Antalya Summit of March 10, 2022, constituted one of the earliest attempts to bring the key representatives of the two countries together as part of a major effort to establish peace. Although the desired outcome could not be achieved, at least it was an attempt to bring an end to the conflict through a negotiation process. The important aspect is that the leading role was played by a NATO member, in other words, a long-term and integral member of the Western Alliance, Turkey.

The Black Sea Grain Corridor Agreement achieved a breakthrough in this context under the auspices of the UN. Turkey and President Erdoğan, in his personal capacity, played an important role in accomplishing this important initiative in July 2022. Because of the deal, Ukrainian ships carrying grain could pass through the Black Sea and the Turkish straits without any infringement from the Russian side. As a result, massive amounts of wheat (over 32 million tons) were being shipped to countries in need, especially to African countries experiencing severe food shortages. The Agreement continued uninterrupted until July 17, 2023. Unfortunately, however, the agreement has been unilaterally terminated by Putin for reasons to be discussed later in this section.

The Ramifications for the Domestic Politics

The active role Turkey played during the Russian invasion of Ukraine has benefited the AKP government in various channels. First and foremost, Turkey was able to take advantage of the Western sanctions imposed on Russia. It was able to increase its trade with Russia during this period (Figure 3) (Özdemir 2023) and was able to extract concessions from Russia, which was of critical importance in a period leading to a major election amid a serious economic crisis (Öniş and Kutlay 2021). Furthermore, Turkey’s proactive moves to bring the two sides to the table to secure peace at the earliest stage proved to be a popular move, both on the domestic and international fronts. The conclusion of the Black Sea Grain Agreement proved to be the most concrete achievement of the series of attempts to play a constructive role as a mediating actor. At the same time, drones manufactured and exported by Turkey played an important role in Ukraine’s defense, creating a positive image of the government in international and domestic spheres.

Figure 3. Bilateral Trade Between Turkey and Russia, 2013-2024 (*Million USD*)



Source: Turkish Statistical Institute

Those attempts of mediation during the conflict created an important populist dividend as part of Erdoğan's broader proactive policy measures to promote Turkey as an important regional and global actor. Erdoğan was able to present himself as an international statesman and employed slogans like "The Century of Turkey" (Türkiye Yüzyılı) to highlight the growing importance of Turkey as a "game changer" in international relations. Indeed, Erdoğan was able to win the presidential election in May 2023 by a narrow margin. His vision of a "strong Turkey," bolstered by his constructive role during the Russian War on Ukraine, proved to be one of the factors that tilted the electoral balance in his favor (Öniş 2023b).

Turkey as a Status-seeking Middle Power

The aspirational feature of Turkey can be explained by the relevant literature on middle-power activism that describes it as "status-seeking" (Karim 2018; Dal 2019). The term refers to emerging powers, such as Turkey, that aim to increase their recognition and influence on the international stage, with attempts to become "agenda setters" in the decision-making process of multilateral mechanisms. It is closely associated with the strategic autonomy behavior by which the states portray themselves as important actors in regional and international affairs through diplomatic initiatives, active participation, and promotion of new ideas. The need for external recognition – status seeking – is closely related to the capacity of leaders to instrumentalize and capitalize on foreign policy decisions to gain domestic popularity and international approval.

A good example of status-seeking behavior is Turkey's bargaining leverage vis-a-vis the US and other NATO partners. Turkey's growing rapprochement with Russia, especially in the realm of national security, involving the purchase of S-400 missiles, had generated significant backlash and criticism from the US and its Western partners. Turkey's decision to block the path of Sweden and Finland to NATO membership on the grounds that these two countries were insensitive to Turkey's security concerns was a popular move in Turkish domestic politics, drawing attention to the ability of Turkey to bargain with the West as a strong actor at the table. Despite the resentment among NATO members, retaining Turkey in its internal security structure was important, given its defense capabilities and possession of the second-largest army in NATO. In addition to hard power elements, Turkey's ability to exercise soft power in its role as a mediating actor, with the conclusion of the UN Grain Deal proving to be the climax in this process, helped to generate goodwill for Erdoğan's regime, which also effectively shielded it from selective criticisms from the West concerning violations of human rights and democratic backsliding.

Post-Election Dynamics: An Orientational Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy?

One of the interesting developments in the post-election context has involved a striking pro-Western turn in Turkish foreign policy in the aftermath of the May 2023 elections. In the economic sphere, the appointment of key individuals (such as Mehmet Şimşek as the Minister

of Treasury and Finance and Hafize Gaye Erkan, the first woman Governor of the Central Bank, who has since resigned), strongly embedded in Western financial institutions and circles was designed to assure Western governments and investors that Turkey would from this point onwards implement “orthodox” economic policies designed to curb chronic inflation and serious macroeconomic instability over the past few years.

Another important move in this direction involved the U-turn regarding Swedish membership in NATO (Michalski, Brommesson, and Ekengren 2024). The Turkish government had employed the blockade on Swedish membership of NATO as a tool for domestic popularity up to the election period. Following the election victory, Turkey decided to endorse Swedish membership in the NATO Summit of Vilnius in July 2023 on the grounds that Sweden (like Finland previously, whose membership process had been approved earlier in the pre-election period) had taken the necessary steps to curb terrorist activities in its domestic sphere and would also support Turkey’s quest for EU membership. This was a major pragmatic U-turn on the part of Erdoğan and the Turkish government, to the dismay of the ultra-nationalist coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (the MHP) led by Devlet Bahçeli.

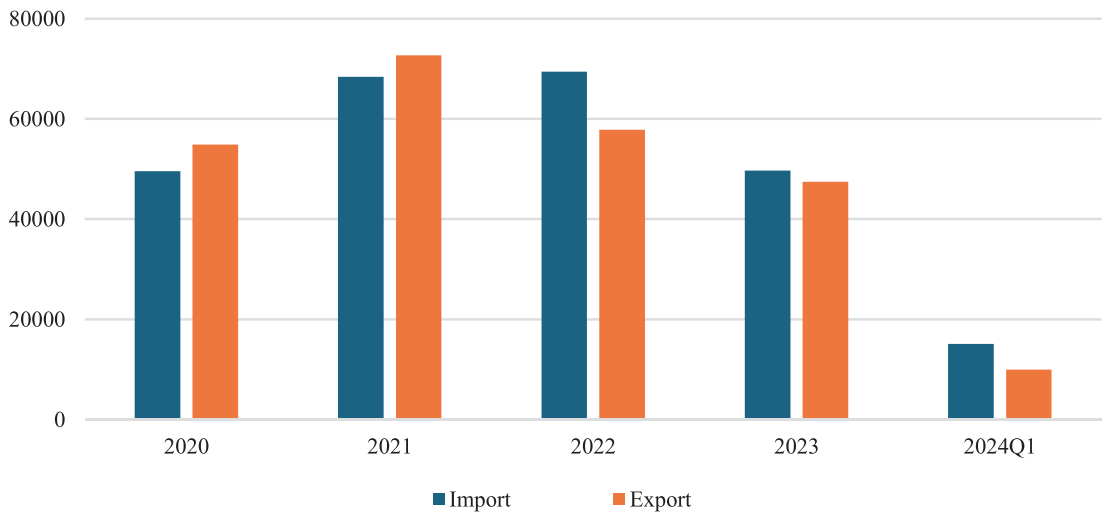
Yet, we need to be cautious about the precise nature of this pro-Western turn. Suppose we approach Turkey-EU relations from the lense of the “economy-security-identity triangle.” In that case, “economic” and “security” conditions continue to be very important and are likely to be the principal drivers of this long-standing relationship. There is no likelihood of Turkey withdrawing from key Western institutions such as NATO and the Customs Union with the EU, considering the economic and security benefits of continued integration with the West. In normative terms, however, Turkey has been increasingly diverging from the key norms of the EU in the realm of democratization and human rights. Therefore, from the Western perspective, Turkey is an important partner in economy and security, but clearly not “Western” or “European” in terms of identity (Dipama and Dal 2024). This perception of Turkey as a deviant case in terms of commitment to “Western norms” or democratic values has no doubt been reinforced during the Russian War on Europe. Whilst Turkey’s attempts to play a constructive mediating role have been recognized, the continuation of close relations with Russia was also scrutinized and subjected to serious criticism.

An important side-effect of the pro-Western turn signals a certain cooling of Turkey’s relations with Putin’s Russia. Russia would have been far more pleased if the stalemate over Swedish membership of NATO had continued, leading to a major crisis in NATO. A clear indication of Putin’s negative reaction was the decision to terminate the Black Sea Grain Agreement in July 2023 (Çolakoğlu 2024). The Turkish side is clearly aiming to restore the deal, given the important humanitarian benefits of the deal on an international scale. Yet, from the perspective of domestic politics, the issue appears to be more marginal since the election process is safely over. We contend that this temporary cooling of Russian-Turkish relations is not likely to lead to a significant crisis over time, taking into consideration the significant commonalities of interests and the strong identity affiliations of the two leaders, Erdoğan and Putin.

BRICS During the Russian War on Ukraine

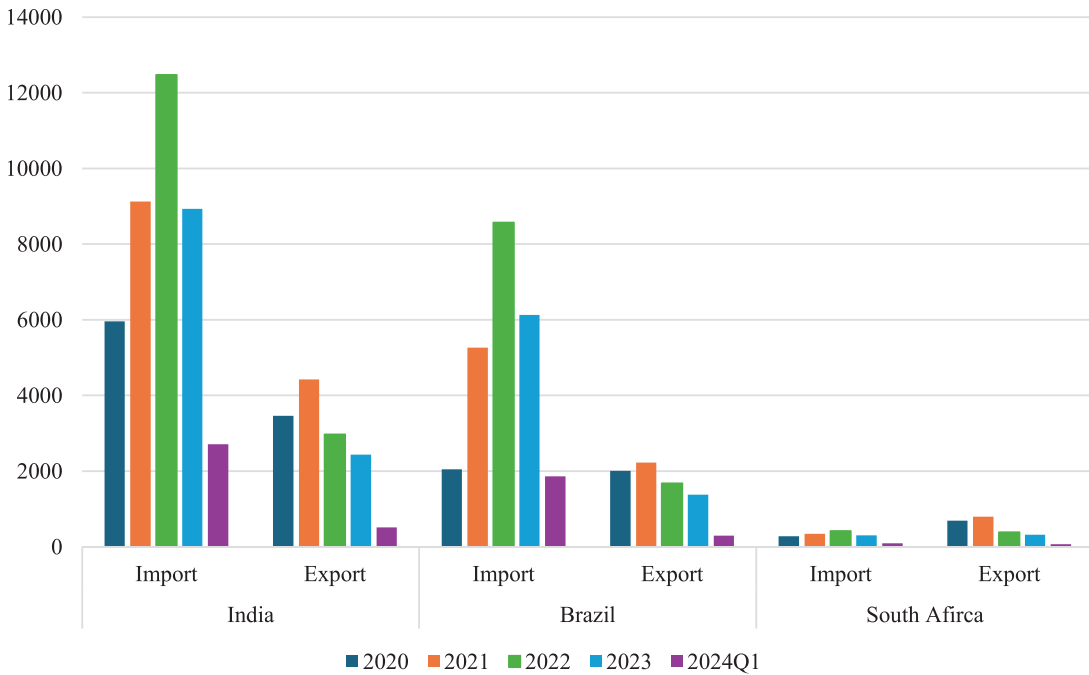
The Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated a major rift between the West and the “Rest.” The West, which for our purposes refers to the G7 plus countries (which also include advanced democracies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia with close ties to Western democracies), has been united in its condemnation of the Russian invasion as violating basic principles of international law and undermining the territorial integrity of a sovereign nation-state. The Western response to the war, led by the US and facilitated by a revitalized NATO Alliance, involved the implementation of major sanctions against Russia and active military support for Ukraine in its struggle against Russia. The “Global South” or the “Rest of the World,” which includes not only the major BRICS but most countries ranging from Latin America to Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, have decided to position themselves as “non-aligned” in the process (Öniş 2023b; Menon 2023). From the Western perspective, the decision of the “Rest” to maintain a neutral stance towards Russia was a moral failure that put the ruled-based international system at risk by providing an escape route and strengthening the resilience of the Russian state and Putin’s regime. A unified global response to the invasion would have clearly led to Russia’s isolation, increasing the likelihood of its punishment for its military aggression and violating a basic principle of the post-war “rule-based” liberal international order.

The major BRICS countries have displayed a considerable degree of unity in their approach to the war, although some differences could also be discerned, especially concerning the position of China compared to other BRICS countries. The following common elements deserve emphasis. First, there was an unambiguous opposition to the war. None of the countries in this category (and this certainly applies to the rest of the Global South) were in favor of the war. Indeed, they actively opposed the war, considering the scale of human and material losses associated with it, and were in favor of ending the war as quickly as possible to end further suffering. At the same time, a condemnation itself did not necessarily mean a direct stance against Russia and Putin, which constituted a sharp contrast with the Western position (Schirm 2023). Whilst they recognized that Putin was, in part, responsible for the onset of the war, the broad consensus was that the war was provoked by the overextension of NATO to Russian borders, which caused security threats from the Russian perspective. Yet another reason for the non-aligned position of BRICS was that they saw it largely as a “European War,” distant from their concerns and from the significant challenges such as development, debt, and climate change that they were confronted with. Brazil, India, and South Africa refused to “globalize” a European security issue (whilst from a Western perspective, all that happens in Europe is global), and they defended security and non-interference as major principles. Their decision to maintain active “neutrality” was also influenced by their economic interests. Clearly, they tried to capitalize on the economic benefits of trade with Russia, especially in the realm of energy, as Russia tried to diversify its economic and trade relations in the face of severe sanctions and restrictions originating from the West. Indeed, the evidence shows that trade relations between Russia and BRICS expanded in the aftermath of the war on Ukraine (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4. Russian Bilateral Trade with China 2020-2024 (*Million USD*)

Source: Direction of Trade Statistics, International Monetary Fund

Furthermore, leading BRICS wanted to present themselves as “peacemakers,” strengthening their status in the emerging post-Western order and contributing to the legitimacy and popularity of the key leaders in their domestic politics (Appel 2024). Within the BRICS, one of the most striking positions involves the position of Brazil following the onset of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s second presidential term following the victory in the October 2022 elections. Being one of the most democratic leaders of the “Global South,” one would have expected Lula to adopt a stance that was closer to the position of the US and leading European powers. Instead, his position differed markedly from the Western Alliance. Whilst he strongly opposed the war, he also adopted a position of neutrality, refraining from directly condemning Russian aggression and taking the side of Ukraine in the conflict. While the US has pledged to support the war in Ukraine “as long as it takes,” Brazilian President Lula da Silva has vocally pressed for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Indeed, he positioned Brazil as a leading country in the peacemaking process by forming a “peace club” that might facilitate peace talks between Russia and Ukraine that might also include countries such as China, India, Indonesia, and Turkey (Heine and Rodrigues 2023).

Figure 5. Russian Bilateral Trade with India, Brazil, and South Africa, 2020-2024 (Million USD)

Source: Direction of Trade Statistics, International Monetary Fund

The position of the leading BRICS country and a major global power – China – deserves emphasis in this context. The Chinese position regarding the Russian War on Ukraine could be described as “pro-Russian neutrality,” which differs from the more balanced, non-aligned positions of other key constituencies of the Global South (Mariani 2023). Certainly, the Russia-China axis, which was already strong, has been solidified further during the war. At the same time, the relationship has become even more asymmetric, as China has become an even stronger partner in the face of Russia’s declining material capabilities. Whilst not questioning Putin’s motives for invading Ukraine and refraining from implementing sanctions against Russia, China has also been actively involved in the quest for peace as part of its broader efforts to project itself as a leading mediator or peacemaker on a global scale. Recent Chinese initiatives in the Middle East, especially to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran together to end one of the major conflicts in the region, are particularly striking in this context. China put forward a twelve-point peace proposal in February 2023 involving a total ceasefire without the withdrawal of any Russian troops from Ukraine, a prospect that the US and its Western allies vigorously oppose (Boon 2023).

Moving beyond the initiatives of China and Brazil, other BRICS and key non-Western actors have also presented themselves as key mediators in the conflict. India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also been quite active in his diplomatic efforts to bring the two parties together and put an end to the costly war as quickly as possible (Jacob 2023). Saudi Arabia, a potential BRICS country, has recently emerged as an influential actor. Prince Salman has

recently gathered forty countries to discuss issues relating to peace. What is interesting in this effort was that Russia was not invited to the conference, which is quite unusual compared with other peacemaking efforts, which refrained from actively taking a position against Russia. Putin is losing some of his earlier popularity within the BRICS and the rest of the Global South. The fact that he has failed to participate in the most recent G-20 and BRICS Summits is quite a striking manifestation of the decline of his personal popularity and his relative isolation.

Turkey Between the “West” and the “Rest”

How does Turkey fit into the broad picture of the global developments since the Russian War on Ukraine? We contend that the Turkish stance is not fundamentally different from the position of the leading countries of the Global South. Indeed, strong parallels may be discerned between the positions of Erdoğan and Lula. Turkey’s position differs from the Western position in the sense that the war is costly and needs to be terminated as rapidly as possible, and Turkey has played an active mediating role right from the outset of the conflict, capitalizing on its unusually strong economic and diplomatic ties to both countries involved in the conflict. Furthermore, there was a concrete achievement in Turkey’s peace efforts, namely the conclusion of the grain agreement involving Ukraine and Russia, which had positive consequences in alleviating food shortages in the developing world, especially in poorer African economies. What is unique about the Turkish context is that it has displayed BRICS-like behavior and failed to display strong solidarity with its Western partners, although, unlike major BRICS, it is a country that is a NATO member firmly embedded in Western institutions, with strong historical ties to the EU. Turkey had to play a more difficult balancing act vis-a-vis the Western powers and Russia, compared to other major powers of the Global South, which were not constrained by such direct institutional and security linkages to the Western Alliance.

As of January 2024, BRICS has formally accepted four new member states, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, with an increasing number of countries from the Global South showing strong enthusiasm towards BRICS. In this context, the efforts of major BRICS (like China, India, and Brazil) countries, potential BRICS members (Saudi Arabia), and BRICS-like countries (Turkey) are commendable and deserve support as an element of multilateral cooperation and an element of rapprochement between the West and the Rest in an era of intense geopolitical rivalry involving the two superpowers, the US and China (Özekin and Sune 2023). An important development in the late summer of 2024 was Turkey’s application for full BRICS membership (Crisp 2024). This raises a number of interesting questions, which are of wider global significance. If Turkey is admitted as a member of BRICS over time, it will be an unusual BRICS country since it is formally embedded in the institutional structures of the Western Alliance, such as its long-standing NATO membership.

The more recent developments, with the Hamas-Israel conflict, further escalated the divide between the West and the Rest, where the firm support of the US and its allies of Israel's asymmetric use of force and continued attacks on the civilians in Gaza brought the question of the failure of international mechanisms where the Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Ceasefire has not been possible (Byman 2024). The veto power of the US in the UN Security Council, which has blocked the ceasefire decision, is an illustration of the erosion of moral superiority proclaimed by the liberal norms the US has been promoting and is contrary to the US position in the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Meanwhile, major powers from the Global South, especially Russia and China, are capitalizing on the issue of Palestine to grow their influence in the Middle East. China is actively supporting the membership of Palestine at the UN, South Africa has filed a genocide case against Israel to the International Court of Justice, and Malaysia has banned Israel-flagged ships from its ports – a few examples of increasing global dissatisfaction observed against the actions of the US and its Western allies. Turkish foreign policy towards Israel has experienced a significant change since the onset of the most recent episodes of conflict (Altunışık 2024). Turkey's position against Israel is much in line with the "Rest" compared to its traditional allies, showing further convergence to the Global South in its position.

Trump's re-election may make space for middle powers like Turkey that are pursuing strategic autonomy in their foreign policy, especially if the Western bloc experiences further fragmentation while the "Rest" increases its influence at the international level. Although it is difficult to predict the future trajectories for Turkish foreign policy in the second Trump era, it might be possible that the new Trump administration pushes countries like Turkey to take certain positions at fronts, such as in Ukraine, Palestine, and most possibly in Syria. We argue that, in any scenario, Turkey will lose its position as the "central actor" if it is isolated from both the West and the Rest.

Concluding Observations

The Russian invasion of Ukraine constituted a major crisis for the emerging post-Western or post-liberal international order. One of the striking consequences of the war was the rift between the West and the Rest in their responses to the Russian invasion. The West has been united in its condemnation of Russia for violating basic principles of international law, imposing sanctions on Russia to penalize the Putin regime, and providing active military support for Ukraine whilst refraining from directly participating in the war effort. The "Rest," which includes the global power, China, and much of the Global South, in contrast, has decided to remain neutral. Whilst they condemned the war itself and pushed for a peace process, they did not necessarily consider Putin's Russia as responsible for the war. They continued to maintain and even expand their economic relations with Russia by avoiding going along with Western sanctions. The contrasting response of the Global South was subject to heavy criticism from the United States and other Western powers. As the war progressed, key countries in the non-Western world increasingly became more vocal on the international stage and presented themselves as potential peacemakers and mediators in the conflict.

The position of Turkey in this broader context between the West and the Rest is quite interesting. Turkey has been historically part of the Western Alliance as a NATO member since 1952, an Associate Member of the EU since 1963, A Member of the Customs Union with the EU since the end of 1995, and a candidate country of the EU since 1999. Yet, Turkey’s position in recent years, notably during the War in Ukraine, has deviated sharply from the dominant positions of the Western Alliance. Turkish foreign policy over the course of the past decade has been shaped by the principle of “strategic autonomy.” Turkey, during Erdoğan’s Presidency, tried to implement a multi-dimensional foreign policy based on three pillars: (a) the continuation of strong economic and security ties with the West; (b) building close economic, security, and diplomatic ties with non-Western global Powers like Russia and China and; (c) developing stronger ties with countries of the “Global South,” ranging from the Middle East and the Gulf, Former Soviet space to Africa and Latin America.

In our judgment, Turkey is a BRICS-like country embedded in “Western institutions” (meaning membership of NATO and partnership with the EU, but not Western democratic norms and values). Indeed, Turkey’s approach to the War in Ukraine was much closer to the positions of the “Rest,” such as key BRICS countries - China, India, Brazil, and South Africa – among others. Turkey’s position was also unique in the sense that it could establish a dialogue with both sides, which enabled it to play an important mediating role, a concrete achievement of which was the UN Grain Agreement of July 2022, which was internationally recognized as a constructive initiative with significant human consequences. It is our contention that Turkey’s role during the war has put a further distance between Turkey and the West and Turkey and the EU. An important transactional relationship will continue based on visions of distant partnerships based on common economic and security interests. Full membership in the EU, a long-term goal of the Turkish state, is unlikely to be realized at any time in the foreseeable future.

A parallel can be drawn for the Turkish foreign policy during the Israel-Hamas conflict. Turkish foreign policy in the initial phase of the conflict attempted to become a mediator between Israel and Hamas. However, with the deepening of the crisis, Turkey has taken a pro-Palestinian stance, for example, by becoming the first country to implement unilateral sanctions against Israel in terms of trade. Turkey’s position, especially in recent periods, has been more in line with the positions of the “Rest,” especially BRICS countries, in voicing out the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Does this mean that Turkey could move further away from the West and become a member of BRICS in the future? At various points in the past, President Erdoğan has expressed his desire to become a part of BRICS and join the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO), often in conjunction with his appointments involving the stalemate in the EU membership process. More recently, Turkish policymakers made clear statements about their intention to become a BRICS member. China, as the leading BRICS country and a global power, certainly favors further enlargement. SCO has recently accepted Iran as a new member, and several countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Nigeria, and Indonesia, have expressed their desire to join the club. In the Turkish case, however, given

its economic and security interests, Turkey is unlikely to leave its long-established position in Western institutions. At the same time, it will try to diversify its external relations as much as possible. Hence, Turkey is likely to act as a BRICS country and search for an influential position within the Global South as one of the critical actors of the emerging post-Western order whilst remaining formally embedded in Western institutions – an aspirational middle power between the West and the Rest.

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