

THE EVOLUTION OF TÜRKİYE'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY WITHIN THE AXIS OF TÜRKİYE- EU RELATIONS

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The end of the Cold War marked a profound structural transformation in both the discipline of international relations and the practice of global politics; academic and political debates during this period were largely shaped by the system's polarity. Initially, the promotion of principles such as the free market economy and democratic values by the US-led liberal international system through international organizations created a perception of unipolar stability in global politics. Some thinkers of the period even characterized this situation as an ideological definitive victory and the "end of history." However, absolute assumptions regarding the permanence of this order and the purely unipolar nature of the system began to give way over time to a more complex, dynamic, and multicentric global reality. In particular, developments in international politics, the changing self-perceptions of hegemonic powers, and crises within the global system are considered factors that accelerated this transition.

Signs of an evolution toward multipolarity in the international system have become evident. The emergence of rising powers in Asia, particularly China's assertion of its presence as a power capable of competing with the US by increasing its economic and strategic capacity, has constituted one of the most significant dynamics of this transformation. In this process, not only global superpowers but also regional powers have found opportunities to expand their spheres of influence and have a greater say in the system. Ultimately, the increase in the capacity of Türkiye as a state with influence at both regional and systemic levels, and its rise as a regional power, has paralleled these global trends. This rise in Türkiye's influence capacity has naturally profoundly affected its foreign policy vision and the nature of its relations with all international actors, including the European Union.

With the complication of international competition and the weakening of normative consensus, whether states will continue to define their interests solely within the normative framework of the liberal international order has become a subject of academic debate. In this new and competitive environment, some states have moved toward a quest for strategic autonomy to secure their national interests and increase their capacity for independent action. In this context, strategic autonomy has ceased to be an optional foreign policy preference for states and has become a fundamental component of the self-protection and positioning reflexes of rising regional powers.

This analysis aims to examine the evolution of the concept of strategic autonomy in Türkiye's foreign policy within the axis of Türkiye-EU relations. First, the theoretical foundations of strategic autonomy and its development in the international system will be discussed; then, the asymmetries in the historical background of Türkiye-EU relations will be analyzed. Finally, in line with Türkiye's increasing regional power and multifaceted foreign policy pursuits, it will be evaluated how these relations have transformed from a process of normative alignment into a structure focused on mutual interest and a more autonomous framework.

The Concept and Development of Strategic Autonomy in International Relations

The concept of strategic autonomy has gained increasing importance in the field of international relations over recent decades, in parallel with changes in the structure of the global order. Initially, this concept was based more on the specific security and defense concerns of states. One of the first official uses of the term appeared in France's 1994 White Paper on Defense. This document emphasized France's need to maintain a field of action independent of the Atlantic Alliance in its nuclear deterrence and security policies. In this early usage, strategic autonomy was strictly limited to national defense.

With the strengthening of signs of multipolarity and the resurgence of geopolitical competition, the meaning and scope of strategic autonomy have expanded significantly. By the mid-2010s, the European Union officially adopted this concept through the 2016 Global Strategy Document, highlighting the necessity of a more autonomous security and defense policy. This orientation of the EU was closely related to regional dynamics such as uncertainties surrounding the Transatlantic alliance and increasing security risks in Eastern Europe. Consequently, it has been observed that strategic autonomy evolved beyond a mere national security framework to encompass broader geopolitical and economic assessments, as well as collective regional strategies.

To understand why international actors attach such central importance to strategic autonomy, it is necessary to take a closer look at the systemic changes of the post-

Cold War era. The 2008 Global Financial Crisis is accepted by many experts as a critical turning point that revealed the vulnerabilities of neoliberal economic models and exposed structural weaknesses in the system. While Western economies, particularly the US, struggled with the crisis and increasing budget deficits, emerging economies such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) achieved remarkable growth rates. For instance, the high foreign trade surplus reached by China in that same year served as a tangible indicator of the shift in the distribution of global economic power.

The loosening of traditional hierarchical structures and the increasingly fragmented nature of international relations have offered middle-powers and regional powers the opportunity to act more flexibly in their foreign policies. In this context, strategic autonomy can be defined as an actor's ability to maintain its decision-making flexibility and avoid over-dependence on a single block or alliance, while accounting for objective realities and structural constraints. This approach necessitates that states operating in the international system establish diversified partnerships to survive and maximize their interests in a competitive environment. Therefore, for today's states, strategic autonomy has become a practical necessity rather than an unattainable ideal.

Historical Background and Structural Asymmetries in Türkiye-EU Relations

Following World War II, Türkiye sought to deepen its integration with the political and security architecture of the West. Its geopolitical position and security needs led to Türkiye's accession to NATO in 1952, firmly placing the country within the

Western alliance system. Following the acceleration of integration movements in Europe with the Treaty of Rome, Ankara applied for association with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959. The 1963 Ankara Agreement drew a long-term framework envisaging the establishment of a customs union between the parties and, ultimately, full membership.

However, when the historical development of Türkiye-EU relations is examined, it is evident that various structural asymmetries existed in the nature of the relationship from the beginning. These asymmetries became more pronounced, particularly with the Customs Union Agreement that came into force in 1995. Asymmetries such as Türkiye being the only state that is a party to the Customs Union but not a member of the EU have also created constraints in Türkiye's foreign policy regarding EU member states and its sphere of influence. Despite not having full member status, Türkiye, which had to comply with the EU's common trade policies and agreements with third countries, was forced to undertake the economic obligations of a structure in whose decision-making mechanisms it did not participate. This situation structurally limited Türkiye's potential to seek alternative markets and diversify its commercial partnerships.

In the early 2000s, Türkiye's foreign policy placed a strong emphasis on the European alignment process. Between 2002 and 2005, comprehensive reform packages were implemented in fundamental areas such as minority rights, freedom of expression, and civil-military relations to comply with the Copenhagen Criteria. As a result of these efforts, the European Commission confirmed in 2004 that Türkiye had made sufficient progress to

begin negotiations, and accession negotiations officially commenced in 2005.

Although the EU alignment process served as an important anchor for Türkiye's democratization and economic development goals during this period, the EU was never the "only path" in Turkish foreign policy. The fact that Türkiye's face has historically been turned toward the West does not mean that its foreign policy is equivalent only to the EU. Due to its historical and geographical depth, Türkiye has always possessed a multidimensional vision; however, the EU process constituted the center of gravity during certain periods. Nevertheless, the obligations brought by the alignment process occasionally entailed requirements for unilateral compliance in political and economic terms. For example, even during periods when Türkiye was financially self-sufficient, the collective responsibilities required for integration into EU mechanisms created an asymmetric picture for Ankara in a structure where it lacked sufficient weight in decision-making. Similarly, the possibility of deepening relations with dynamic regional organizations in Asia, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, presented a politically complex situation for a state on the path to full membership. Consequently, while the EU alignment process encouraged internal reforms, it also created an effect that limited Türkiye's strategic options and room for maneuver on the global stage to a certain extent.

Transition from Normative Alignment to Interest-Oriented Partnerships

The optimistic atmosphere of the first half of the 2000s gradually gave way to a process of mutual stagnation and questioning. While Türkiye carried out

comprehensive reforms in line with the Copenhagen Criteria, the European Union began to focus on its own internal issues. The large waves of enlargement in 2004 and 2007, followed by institutional crises sparked by the rejection of the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands, created enlargement fatigue in the EU. This situation prepared the ground for Türkiye's accession process to become stalled by issues such as the Cyprus problem, cultural prejudices, and political obstacles, rather than technical negotiations.

During this process, inconsistencies in the European Union's application of the principle of conditionality were also noteworthy. Although enlargement policy is theoretically built on values, it has been frequently discussed in academic circles that the EU could flex its conditionality criteria when strategic and functional interests were at stake. This uncertainty in relations and the gradual distancing of the full membership perspective led Turkish policymakers to conduct a deeper evaluation of the costs and limits of an EU-alignment-centered strategy.

At the international level, the prominence of transactional relations based on reciprocity and interest became a defining feature of this period. Instead of long-term, value-based, and multilateral commitments; short-term, flexible, and bilateral interest-based agreements began to be preferred more in global diplomacy. This global trend overlapped with the vision of Türkiye, which did not receive the tangible results it expected from the EU process and was gradually increasing its own regional capacity.

Multi-Dimensional Foreign Policy and Strategic Autonomy in Practice

The shift of the global order toward a multicentric structure has brought about a corresponding adaptation in Türkiye's foreign policy strategy. Especially starting in the 2010s, Turkish foreign policy entered a new period where reference points diversified, a shift discussed in international relations literature as "de-Europeanisation." However, this situation should be read not as Türkiye completely breaking away from the West, but as a rebalancing process in which local dynamics, national security priorities, and alternative global partnerships gained weight in decision-making processes.

At the intellectual core of this strategic reorientation lies the idea of transforming Türkiye's geopolitical position from a passive defense line or periphery into an active power center. As detailed in then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's conceptualization of "Strategic Depth," Türkiye moved toward playing a more active role in nearby land basins such as the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, as well as maritime basins like the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. Evaluating the opportunities offered by geography not only in the context of border security but also in terms of building a regional sphere of influence became central to Türkiye's search for strategic autonomy.

Particularly following the Arab Spring, the geopolitical vacuums that emerged in the Middle East and North Africa offered Türkiye the opportunity to expand its influence as a regional actor. The pragmatic regional policies developed aimed to position Türkiye as a mediator, balancer,

and proactive power in the crises surrounding it.

Another fundamental pillar supporting strategic autonomy is the diversification of international partnerships. With the declining influence of unipolarity and the increasing economic appeal of the Asia-Pacific region, Ankara sought to maintain its relations with Western allies while simultaneously strengthening ties with Eurasian actors such as Russia, China, and Iran. The scale of commercial relations with China is particularly noteworthy. The bilateral trade volume, which was at the level of 238 million dollars in 1990, reached tens of billions of dollars in subsequent years, and the establishment of a “Strategic Partnership” between the two countries in 2010 is evidence of this economic diversification. Türkiye’s efforts to integrate into the Belt and Road Initiative via the Middle Corridor vision aim to strengthen the country’s position as a strategic transit and logistics hub between Asia and Europe. Policies in this direction serve the purpose of expanding Türkiye’s room for maneuver and increasing its strategic flexibility in the global system by diversifying economic partnerships and trade routes.

In conclusion, these foreign policy steps by Türkiye should be evaluated as a rational adaptation strategy of a rising regional power rather than a reaction against the West. This network of relations established with different actors in political, economic, and security dimensions increases Türkiye’s resilience against external pressures and reinforces its capacity to make independent decisions prioritizing its own interests (strategic autonomy) in the international arena.

Conclusion and Future Vision

The historical trajectory of Türkiye’s relations with the European Union provides a very fertile ground for reading the evolution of the quest for strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy. As discussed throughout the study, the fact that the international system has moved away from the post-Cold War era and taken on a new structure where multicentric and regional powers are on the rise has deeply affected the foreign policy behavior of states.

The historical course of Türkiye-EU relations has, at the point reached, moved beyond a mere integration process and transformed into a dynamic construction of strategic autonomy that adapts to the structural transformations of the international system. Türkiye’s move to shift its relations with the EU from a traditional framework of asymmetric dependence to a negotiation ground based on mutual interest forms the foundation not only of today but also of the future foreign policy architecture. This situation offers critical clues as to how both Turkish foreign policy and Europe’s geopolitical positioning will be shaped in the coming decades.

In future projections, it is anticipated that multicentric competition in the international system will deepen further, and the search for both Türkiye and EU countries to consolidate their own strategic autonomy will gain momentum. The European Union is in search of a new geopolitical identity to avoid being squeezed in the global power struggle between the US and China and to ensure its own security. For the EU to realize this vision and ensure stability in its immediate geography, it is mandatory to establish

strategic partnerships with high-capacity regional powers like Türkiye that can make their own decisions, rather than a superior-subordinate relationship. Türkiye, in the upcoming period, will further institutionalize its strategy of not being dependent on a single axis in its foreign policy. It will continue to be an indispensable bridge between East and West in energy corridors, supply chain security, and the management of regional crises. Ankara's maintaining its place in the Western alliance while keeping the ground for dialogue alive with Asia-centered structures like BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization should be read as preparation for the flexible and multipolar world of the future rather than a shift of axis.

In light of these dynamics, the future of Türkiye-EU relations will be shaped not through traditional expectations of full membership and normative alignment, but on the axis of functional and issue-based cooperation. Concrete headings such as the updating of the Customs Union according to today's economic conditions like green transformation and digitalization, global migration management, and acting together in the new security architecture will be the new load-bearing pillars of the relations.

As a result, Türkiye's adoption of strategic autonomy as a foreign policy doctrine does not ensure a break in its ties with the EU; on the contrary, it enables these ties to be transformed into a more realistic, rational format where mutual dependence is egalitarian and valid for both sides. In the international order of the future, Türkiye will consolidate its presence not as a passive conformist to a framework whose boundaries are drawn by others, but as a

proactive actor that can put its own strategic priorities on the negotiating table, diversify its interests, and shape the regional order.

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