

SPOTLIGHT TURKEY: A PIVOTAL SWING STATE IN NATO

Turkey's geostrategic location at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, and its dual identity as both a European and Asian state is unique in the world. The country safeguards strategic waterways and offers NATO critical staging bases and logistical support to extend its reach in the Middle East. With its dual identity, multi-axial foreign policy and hybrid political regime, Turkey also emerges as a pivotal swing state in shaping the contours of a stronger Transatlantic Alliance in the emerging new global world order marked by growing power competition between Western liberal democracies and Eastern autocratic regimes.

Tuba Eldem*



* Dr. Tuba Eldem is a Research Fellow at the Center for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin and an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Fenerbahçe University in Istanbul.

Three decades after the publication of Samuel Huntington's *The Third Wave*, which detailed the global spread of democracy since the 1970s, the spread of democracy seems to be ending and instead, authoritarian diffusion appears to be rising around the world. This global democratic backsliding raises concerns that we may be experiencing the beginning of a "reverse wave," which Huntington in 1991 warned might be triggered in part by the weakening of democratic powers and the revival of powerful non-democratic states. As Huntington warned, China and Russia emerged today as outspoken actors with global ambitions giving new politico-strategic impetus to NATO's 2030 Agenda in a global context marked by "aggressive multipolarity". Secretary General's vision for NATO 2030 calls for strengthening political cohesion within NATO to protect the international rules-based order, which Jens Stoltenberg warned "is being challenged by authoritarian powers"¹ including Russia and China.

In the middle are the swing states, countries that have the capacity for a great deal of influence over international processes, but have not decided which vision of the new global order they will embrace. It is thought that the course of these countries will determine the trajectory of the new global order.² Located at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Turkey with its dual identity, multi-axial and assertive foreign policy and hybrid political regime emerges as such a pivotal swing state in the emerging multipolar global order driven by power competition between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. Assuming maintaining Turkey's western orientation and electoral democracy would benefit all parties, Turkey's NATO allies would need to recognize Ankara for what it is and not what it would like it to be, recognize their own mistakes on the way, and finally act responsibly.

Unipolar Moment is Over

From Ankara's perspective, the American unipolar moment is over. There is a huge transfer of economic power from West to East, and reduction in the relative dominance of the U.S. and Europe. The U.S. is likely to remain as the top military power for quite some time. But the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and the NATO-led military intervention of Libya in 2011 have made it all clear that superior military power does not automatically turn into geopolitical influence, which is considered as prerequisite for unipolar stability.³ The world is witnessing the concurrent rise of a number of states existing in different regions which, nevertheless,

¹ Secretary General sets out vision on NATO's future with the Council on Foreign Relations, *NATO*, 1 March 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_182157.htm

² Daniel Kliman and Richard Fontaine, "Global Swing States: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey, and The Future of International Order", *The German Marshall Fund Policy Paper (2012)*, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/global-swing-states-brazil-india-indonesia-turkey-and-future-international-order>

³ Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.

interact on a consistent and continuous basis. The result is an emerging hybrid world order that can barely be explained in terms of the traditional Western-centric polarity. Along with many other emerging powers, Ankara considers the rise of the rest as an opportunity to counterbalance its dependency on West and to expand its strategic autonomy. This does not mean, however, that Turkey wants a wholesale departure from the Euro-Atlantic security community. Although the incumbents do not consider Turkey as part of the Western civilization, they are well aware that the protection of economic and security linkages with the West is essential for their survival.

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Autocratic Linkages Are Growing

Turkey has sought to expand its strategic autonomy by forming intergovernmental, military, and economic links with autocratic powers, such as Russia, China, Iran and Qatar, which provided incumbents alternative sources of political and economic support.⁴ The earlier attempts to build alternative intergovernmental linkages out of NATO had occurred in 2010 when the Chinese-Turkish joint military drills, known as Peace Mission 2010 and sponsored by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), took place in Turkey. Two years later, Turkey became a dialogue partner with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and has expressed an interest in obtaining observer status or even joining as a full member. Turkey’s contract with the black-listed Chinese company, China Precision Machinery Export-Import Corporation for a T-LORAMIDS air missile program in 2013, had eventually backfired in November 2015 under the intense pressure of the NATO and its members. In his visit to Beijing in 2019, President Erdoğan stressed that Turkey and China share a “common future vision” and re-mentioned Turkey’s desire to join SCO, which he first discussed with Russian leader Vladimir Putin back in January 2013.

Turkey’s estrangement from the West following the abortive military coup attempt on 15 July 2016 changed the external opportunity structure in favor of China and Russia. Several high-level Chinese delegations to Turkey and the strategic coordination between China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Turkey’s Middle Corridor Initiative

⁴ Serdar San and Davut Akca, “How Turkey’s Democratic Backsliding Compromises the International Dimension of Democratization,” *Digest of Middle East Studies* 30 (2021), pp. 34–52, Doi: 10.1111/Dome.12223.

(MCI) — stretching through the Caucasus and Central Asia, all accelerated and promoted strategic cooperation between two countries that have started back in 2010.⁵ In November 2016, Turkey and China signed an agreement to align China's BRI with Turkey's MCI. Turkey's geostrategic location with trade access to Europe, Iran and Russia gave Turkey primary position within the framework of the BRI, and as a result the volume of China's FDI in Turkey has, since then, increased more than threefold.⁶ The trade volume between China and Turkey has also improved significantly reaching to 24 billion US dollars as of 2020, as Beijing became Ankara's second-largest trading partner. Turkey and China have also engaged in developing alternative connectivity and information linkages. In 2017, Turkey signed The Belt and Road Digital Economy International Cooperation Initiative to build an interconnected Digital Silk Road. In the same year, Turkey's leading GSM operator Turkcell and Chinese technology giant Huawei signed an agreement in 2018 to collaborate on smart cities. In 2019, Turk Telekom partnered with Huawei to build the country's 5G Network and claimed to set world record for single user 5G smartphone speed. In May 2021, two countries agreed during State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visit to Ankara to further promote the synergy between China's BRI and Turkey's MCI, to strengthen strategic cooperation in various fields including connectivity, infrastructure construction and investment and to deepen communication and coordination for achieving the security and stability in the Middle East.

Russia has also skillfully exploited the new external opportunity structure after the failed coup for its own benefit. Russia's full-throated support for President Erdoğan during and after the coup has deepened bilateral security cooperation culminating into the arrival of the Russian S-400 air-defense system in Turkey on the date of the third anniversary of the abortive coup. While economic linkages in the areas of trade, investment, energy, and tourism have asymmetrically strengthened Russian leverage, intergovernmental linkages between two countries are also expanded thanks to several high-level state visits and formal bilateral agreements, such as the High-Level Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council.⁷

Adaptive Authoritarianism in Full Swing

Turkey's strong intergovernmental and economic ties to the West as an EU aspirant as well as a NATO and Council of Europe member, failed to promote Turkey's

⁵ Chan Yang, Developments in China–Turkey Relations: *A View from China Critical Sociology*, (2019), 1– 11. Gökhan Tekir, (2020). Turkey and The Belt and Road Initiative in Economic Corridors in Asia: Paradigm of Integration? A Reflection For Latin America (Bogotá : Universidad Externado De Colombia, 2020), pp. 383-412.

⁶ Gözde Yılmaz and Nilgün Eliküçük Yıldırım, “Authoritarian Diffusion or Cooperation? Turkey's Emerging Engagement with China”, *Democratization*, 27:7, (2020), pp. 1202-1220, Doi:10.1080/13510347.2020.1777984.

⁷ Ziya Oniş and Şule Yılmaz, “Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No.1 (2016), pp. 71–95.

democratization. Under a populist and charismatic leader effectively mobilizing masses by anti-establishment and anti-Western appeals and plebiscitarian and clientelist linkages, Turkey has experienced one of the most dramatic cases of democratic backsliding in the world over the last two decades. A reasonably level playing field between incumbents and the opposition in Turkey is seriously limited through the incumbent manipulation of state institutions and resources, politicization of the judiciary and weakening of judicial autonomy, extensive clientelism, increasing corruption, and restrictions on civil liberties and fundamental freedoms, including the restriction of political functions of the mass media.⁸ Turkey's 2010 constitutional referendum, August 2014 presidential elections, November 2015 parliamentary elections, the 2017 constitutional referendum, and June 2018 snap presidential and parliamentary elections were found unfair by international observers in terms of opposition's access to media.⁹ State control of the Internet that began in 2007 through filtering social content and denying access to specific Internet resources was complemented with the growth and spread of what Deibert and Crete-Nishihata¹⁰ refer to as second and third generation information controls including legal restrictions, content removal requests, the shutdown of websites and social media platforms, prosecution of internet users, as well as enhancing state surveillance and information campaigns led by a troll-army and automated bots.¹¹ In 2020, Twitter suspended 7,340 accounts in Turkey that are affiliated with the youth wing of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which were used for cheerleading the party platform, especially during the 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum, which consolidated President Erdoğan's power.¹² The change of Turkey's governing regime from a parliamentary system to a presidential system *alla Turca* further personalized power, eroded the remaining crumbs of legislative oversight and judicial independence, paralyzed bureaucracy and completely de-institutionalized policy-making.¹³

Western Leverage Fading

Turkey's strong Western linkage failed to prevent its democratic backsliding at least partly because its Western partners were unsuccessful to strengthen those secular

⁸ Tuba Eldem, "Transformation of Media Sector from Above and its Implications for the Freedom of Media in Turkey", in S. F. Krishna-Hensel (Edt), *Authoritarian and Populist Influences in the New Media*, (Routledge, 2017), pp. 83-115, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315162744>

⁹ Eldem, Transformation of Media Sector

¹⁰ Ronald J. Deibert and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, "Global governance and the spread of cyberspace controls", *Global Governance*, Vol. 18, (2012), pp. 339-361.

¹¹ Tuba Eldem, "The Governance of Turkey's Cyberspace: Between Cyber Security and Information Security", *International Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (2020), pp. 452-4465, [Doi:10.1080/01900692.2019.1680689](https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2019.1680689)

¹² Shelby Grossman et al., "Political Retweet Rings and Compromised Accounts: A Twitter Influence Operation Linked to The Youth Wing of Turkey's Ruling Party", *Stanford Internet Observatory*, 11 June 2020, https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/20200611_turkey_report.pdf

¹³ Günter Seufert and Sinem Adar, "Turkey's Presidential System After Two And A Half Years: An Overview Of Institutions and Politics," *SWP Research Paper 2021/Rp 02*, [Doi:10.18449/2021rp02](https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/2021/rp02)

democratic forces at the expense of Muslim populists. “We basically have turned a blind eye to Erdoğan’s drive towards an authoritarian, one-man system of rule in Turkey,”¹⁴ told Eric Edelman, a U.S. ambassador to Ankara from 2003 to 2005 and a deputy secretary of defense under George W. Bush. It was, however, more than turning a blind eye. The Bush administration presented Turkey under Erdoğan as a poster child for “moderate Islam” in its Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative. The U.S.’ forward strategy in the Middle East has converged well with Erdoğan’s willingness to play an exemplar role in the region. Erdoğan told several times that he heads towards the Middle East and Eurasia in accordance with the mission he has undertaken as “one of the co-chairs of the Broader Middle East Project”.¹⁵ Anti-establishment Muslim populists seem to put Western capitals under a spell at least for a while that neither Washington nor Brussels were very vocal when hundreds of journalists, scholars, members of civil society organizations, politicians, and retired and active duty military officers were all put in jail in waves of controversial coup-conspiracy operations known as Ergenekon and Sledgehammer running throughout 2008-2013.¹⁶ Obama Administration even went ahead to formulate a model partnership to carry the U.S.–Turkey alliance beyond a military and strategic one. The partnership actually never materialized as two leaders began diverging not only in their reactions to the military coup in Egypt in 2013, but also in their choice of partners on the ground in Syria since 2014. President Obama’s long-delayed embrace of Turkey’s elected government that survived the military coup attempt in July 2016 and Washington’s refusal to extradite Pennsylvania-based preacher Fetullah Gülen, the mastermind of the coup, heightened the sense in government that the U.S. is increasingly out to undermine Turkey, a view that gained widespread support from an otherwise divided Turkish population.¹⁷ Although preacher Gülen denies playing any role in the abortive coup, Turkish public has long been aware of Gülen’s wage of decades-long war of position against state establishment. Gülen was first prosecuted in 1999, well before the AKP came into power in 2002, for systematically trying to attack the most vital points of the secular state, including the army, which led him to flee to America. Despite the fierce opposition of State Department attorneys Patrick Meehan and Mary Catherine Frye, preacher Gülen,

¹⁴ Michael Crowley, “Did Obama Get Erdogan Wrong?”, *Politico*, 17 July 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/did-barack-obama-get-recep-tayyip-erdogan-wrong-turkey-coup/>

¹⁵ “BOP Eş Başkanlığı Görevini Kim Verdi!”, *Yeniçağ*, 30 August 2012, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/-72228h.htm>

¹⁶ Tuba Eldem, “Democratic Control And Military Effectiveness Of The Turkish Armed Forces”, In A. Croissant & D. Kuehn (Eds), *Reforming Civil-Military Relations In New Democracies: Democratic Control And Military Effectiveness In Comparative Perspectives*, (Springer, 2017), pp.171-192, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53189-2_9; Tuba Eldem, “Guardians Entrapped: Demise Of The Turkish Armed Forces As A Veto-Player”, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, (Toronto: University Of Toronto, 2013).

¹⁷ Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, “Turks Can Agree on One Thing: U.S. Was Behind Failed Coup”, *The New York Times*, 2 August 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/world/europe/turkey-coup-erdogan-fethullah-gulen-unit-ed-states.html>

having only five years of formal education, was recognized by the U.S. as “an alien of extraordinary ability” in the field of education, and granted a Green card after he attached twenty-nine letters of reference to his June 18, 2008 motion, including two from former CIA officials George Fidas and Graham Fuller, and one from former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Morton Abramowitz.

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Responsible Policy Needed

To move forward, Washington and Ankara must isolate the intractable issues, offer mutual security assurances, and refrain from policies that could undermine the Westward orientation of Turkey, which would have not only severe adverse military and strategic consequences, but also domestic political costs for Turkey’s political regime. The challenge is to keep Turkey’s democracy and civil society vibrant while keeping anti-American sentiment under control until the national elections in June 2023. Turkey’s 2023 elections, which will take place on the republic’s centennial, will be the most critical election in the history of Turkish democracy. The Turkish people will elect a leader that will mold the republic’s second century and at the same time, decide whether Turkey should remain committed to a transatlantic alliance of democracies. Political regime theories suggest that the incumbents’ chances of leaving office declines considerably if a leader rules for longer than three terms and a change in power then becomes more likely through external shocks.¹⁸ As Seda Demiralp argues, Turkey’s consistent economic decline since 2016 presented such a shock that costed the AKP its first major defeat in the 2019 elections.¹⁹ In addition, the COVID 19 pandemic may present a second shock, placing a heavy burden on the already suffering Turkish economy and further limiting the redistributive capacity of the populist machinery. Erdoğan’s popular support falls at its historical low and his populist discourse based on anti-establishment appeals does not appeal to youth. Turkey’s shift towards presidential regime has also paradoxically constrained incumbents’ room of maneuver by “providing the otherwise divided opposition a joint

¹⁸ Barbara Geddes, “Authoritarian Breakdown: Empirical Test of a Game Theoretic Argument,” paper presented at APSA (September 1999).

¹⁹ Seda Demiralp, “Covid-19, Populism, And Political Change in Turkey,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.19, No.4 (2021), 121-130.

anchor of resistance” and solidifying opposition making it more difficult for him to drive a wedge between its factions.²⁰

As Turkey is reaching a crossroads, its Western allies need to act responsibly refraining from any discourse or action that may trigger an opportunity for the incumbents to increase their approval ratings through a ‘rally round the flag’ effect.²¹ Previous research has shown that the rally round the flag phenomenon creates incentives for political leaders who face domestic discontent to engage in diversionary and risky foreign policy moves, sometimes even initiating wars to solidify public support prior to elections. More common than diversionary wars are invocations of diversionary threat and scapegoating — rhetorical emphasis on risks to the nation which divert citizen focus from more serious and credible domestic concerns.²² Under these conditions, a sound and responsible policy is needed to keep anti-Americanism and possible foreign policy adventurism in check.

Where to Now?

First, the Biden administration should use caution when applying sanctions, embargoes, or isolation mechanisms to Turkey if it really wants to retain its Western orientation and electoral democracy. History indicates that these methods often prove counterproductive. The CAATSA sanctions announced by the United States on Turkey on 14 December, 2020, for its purchase of Russian S-400 missile system, may strengthen Turkey’s quest for strategic autonomy in national arms production as has been the case back in the 1974 US arms embargo over Cyprus, or what worse may also push Turkey back to Russia as a preferred and reliable source of weapons, enhancing rather than eroding Russia’s defense industry. Moreover, requiring the removal of S-400s from the Turkish territory to lift the sanctions would also be very costly, especially given the deep anti-American sentiment in the country, often fuelled by incumbents and pro-government media.

The ongoing legal proceedings undertaken by the U.S. District Court in New York against Turkish state bank, Halkbank, for an alleged plot to evade Iran sanctions continue to hang over Turkish economy creating another element of uncertainty to already troubled bilateral relationship. A conviction of Halkbank may lead to Turkey’s already struggling financial industry collapsing, raising unpredictable domestic political consequences. The financial hardships may, undermine incumbents’ political prospects or on the contrary might only boost incumbents’ popularity at the ballot box by fueling

²⁰ Seuffer and Adar, Turkey’s Presidential System.

²¹ John E. Mueller, “War, Presidents, and Public Opinion”, (New York: Wiley, 1973).

²² Alrababa’h, Ala and Lisa Blaydes, “Authoritarian Media and Diversionary Threats: Lessons from 30 Years of Syrian State Discourse”, *Political Science Research and Methods*, (2020), pp. 1–16. doi:10.1017/psrm.2020.28.

rampant anti-Americanism and nativism.

The second message for the Biden administration in all of this is that, if it really wants to restore America's lost soft power, it should think twice about its enthusiasm for an "alliance of democracies" as an instrument to advance its own interests. Global public goods problems cannot be resolved without the active participation of the major non-democracies and neither Turkey nor any other swing state wants to be forced to make win-lose choices between the US and its rivals. A reconsideration of an "alliance of democracies" is also imperative not least because there is a justified degree of skepticism about the quality of America's own democracy at home but also democracy promotion abroad. The promotion of a liberal democratic rule-based world order requires consistent and principled action. Instrumentalization of liberal democratic norms for strategic ends, inconsistency or selectiveness in democracy or human rights promotion, perceived hypocrisy or double standards create high reputational cost for any major normative power. For a rule-based system to work "rules must be visibly observed by their principal and most powerful advocates" tells a 2015 Chatham House paper. Rule breaking actions, such as the invasion of Iraq without UN authorization; the failure to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, the presidential 'war on terrorism' directives ordering lethal drone strikes on adversaries in the Middle East and Pakistan; Edward Snowden's revelations of illegal NSA surveillance activities "open the door for others to pursue a 'might is right' approach."²³ Inconsistency or selectiveness in democracy or human rights promotion, such as the U.S. disavowal of Hamas after it won the free and fair Palestinian elections, its refusal to use the word "coup" after the military coup in Egypt due to the financial aid implications; its ongoing close relationship with theocratic dictatorships and reluctance to sanction Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince over the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul cast a long shadow over America's claim to be the principal democracy and human rights promoter.

²³Chatham House London Conference, *Challenges to the Rules-Based International Order*, 2015, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/media_wysiwyg/London%20Conference%202015%20-%20Background%20Paper%20-%20Session%20One.pdf