

## Türkiye between the East and the West: Political Preference or Pragmatism?

Doğu ile Batı Arasında Türkiye: Siyasi Tercih mi, Pragmatizm mi?

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### Abstract

In recent years, Türkiye has become the focus of an axis shift debate in the international arena. In particular, the straining of relations with the Western alliance and the increase of strategic cooperation with Russia give rise to a debate about whether Türkiye's attitude is a change of axis or a balance policy. Türkiye's relations with the countries of the Asia-Pacific are on the rise with a strong focus on the economic dimension, as Ankara increases its efforts to upgrade its trade and investment links with the economic powerhouses of Asia. This rapprochement with Asian countries takes place at a time when Türkiye's relations with the West are going through difficult times, which leads to popular propositions based on the false dichotomy of Türkiye ideologically choosing the East over the West. This article proposes that rather than a binary choice of improving relations with a group of countries at the expense of others, Türkiye's efforts can be more accurately interpreted as pragmatic foreign policy activism aimed at diversifying the country's relations with a focus on gaining a certain degree of strategic autonomy and avoiding excessive dependence on any party at a time when the world is going through an era of significant uncertainty. It is also noted that Türkiye's foreign policy pragmatism and its quest for strategic autonomy require not only strengthening relations with the Asia-Pacific, but also re-calibrating ties with traditional partners and allies in the West such as the United States and the European Union. The tension with the USA during the Donald Trump era, the economic crisis in Turkey, the Covid Pandemic, the S400 crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine are important breaking points that affect Türkiye's policy reforms.

**Keywords:** Türkiye, foreign policy, trade, pragmatism, strategic autonomy, Asia Pacific.

### Öz

Türkiye son yıllarda uluslararası arenada eksen kayması tartışmalarının odağı haline gelmiştir. Özellikle Batı ittifakı ile ilişkilerin gerilmesi ve Rusya ile stratejik iş birliğinin artması, Türkiye'nin tutumunun bir eksen değişikliği mi yoksa denge politikası mı olduğu tartışmasına yol açmaktadır. Türkiye'nin Asya-Pasifik ülkeleriyle ilişkileri, Ankara'nın Asya'nın ekonomik güç merkezleriyle ticaret ve yatırım bağlantılarını geliştirme çabalarını artırmasıyla birlikte, ekonomik boyuta güçlü bir şekilde odaklanarak

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artmaktadır. Asya ülkeleriyle bu yakınlaşma, Türkiye'nin Batı ile ilişkilerinin zor zamanlardan geçtiği bir dönemde gerçekleşiyor ve bu da Türkiye'nin ideolojik olarak Batı yerine Doğu'yu seçtiği gibi yanlış bir ikileme dayanan popüler önermelere yol açıyor. Türkiye'nin iç politik dengelerinin iyi okunmadığı analizler özellikle Türkiye'nin Batı dünyasından kopup, Doğu'daki bölgesel güçlerle stratejik ortaklık kurma amacı olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Buna karşın birtakım analizler ise Türkiye'nin Asya ile artan ilişkilerinin esasında Batı dünyası ile gerilen ilişkileri tamir etmek için bir denge unsuru olarak kullanıldığını iddia etmektedir. Bu makale, Türkiye'nin çabalarının, bir grup ülkeyle ilişkilerini diğerleri pahasına geliştirmek gibi ikili bir tercihten ziyade, dünyanın önemli bir belirsizlik döneminden geçtiği bir zamanda, belirli bir stratejik özerklik kazanmaya ve herhangi bir tarafa aşırı bağımlılıktan kaçınmaya odaklanarak ülkenin ilişkilerini çeşitlendirmeyi amaçlayan pragmatik bir dış politika aktivizmi olarak yorumlanmasının daha doğru olacağını ileri sürmektedir. Türkiye'nin dış politika pragmatizminin ve stratejik özerklik arayışının sadece Asya-Pasifik ile ilişkileri güçlendirmeyi değil, aynı zamanda ABD ve Avrupa Birliği gibi Batı'daki geleneksel ortaklar ve müttefiklerle bağları yeniden kalibre etmeyi gerektirdiği de belirtiliyor. Donald Trump döneminde Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ile yaşanan gerilim, Türkiye'deki ekonomik kriz, Covid Pandemisi, S400 krizi ve Rusya'nın Ukrayna'yı işgali Türkiye'nin politika reformlarını etkileyen önemli kırılma noktalarıdır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye, dış politika, ticaret, pragmatizm, stratejik özerklik, Asya Pasifik.

## Introduction

On January 25, 2021, a plane carrying around 6.5 million jabs of a novel coronavirus (Covid-19) vaccine landed in Istanbul Airport. This was the second batch of doses delivered to Türkiye and by that time close to 5 million Turkish citizens were already vaccinated. One year later, as of the time of writing, a total of 139.2 million doses were administered with 23.4 million Turks having already received their third jabs,<sup>1</sup> and the country ranked thirteenth worldwide in terms of vaccine doses administered, with China, India and the United States leading the list (Our World in Data, 2022).

Vaccination in Türkiye, however, did not come without controversy, and while this was partly due to general anti-vaccine arguments, the main reason was the origin of the vaccine. Türkiye is using CoronaVac, the inactivated virus Covid-19 vaccine developed by Sinovac Biotech, a biopharmaceutical company based in China. Most Turks were hesitant to receive the “Chinese vaccine”,<sup>2</sup> while insufficient trial data and transparency issues made the whole picture even more complicated. The anti-Chinese sentiments in Türkiye led public opinion to side against the “Chinese vaccine” to a large extent while at the same time the Chinese side initiated a massive series of news and campaigns to promote Sinovac in Türkiye with the help of government dominated media (Üngör, 2022). According to Çağdaş Üngör, possible technical advantages and health-based discussion related to Chinese vaccination remained under the shadow of political polarization in Türkiye, as the opposition parties used “Chinese vaccination” to symbolize the government’s own “authoritarian tendencies” and “Eurasian foreign policy” (ibid). In time,

1 The first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine was administered in Türkiye on January 13, 2021.

2 In a survey held in Türkiye, 51.3 percent of the participants said that they were hesitant to get the Chinese vaccine as they did not trust the country where the vaccine was developed. Moreover, 62.8 percent of those who declared that they were not hesitant to get vaccinated said that they would prefer the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine developed by a German-US partnership, due to their trust in the country of origin (Bağlar, 2021).

however, parallel to the expansion of the inoculation campaign in Türkiye, popular concerns about the origin of the vaccine at the domestic level came to fade, although Türkiye's opting for CoronaVac came to be scrutinized, particularly at the international level, with regard to whether Türkiye's decision was politically motivated, i.e. represented a move getting closer to China and becoming part of China's so-called "vaccine diplomacy" at a time when political difficulties mark Türkiye's relations with Western countries, some of which are also developing Covid-19 vaccines. The "vaccine diplomacy" of China was actually a part of a sectoral part of the Belt and Road Initiative to expand China's influence zone by medical aid as announced by President Xi Jinping by "China's Health Silk Road" in 2016 (Demir, 2021). Covid-19 vaccination is only a recent link in a long-running chain of discussions related to Türkiye's standing in international affairs, mostly based on an outdated dichotomy of East versus the West. It is true that Türkiye's decision to receive the Chinese vaccine has not only come as a part of wider efforts to establish stronger relations with Asian countries in general and China in particular, but it occurred also at a time when the country's relations with the United States and the European Union (EU) are at a historical low. However, there does not necessarily have to exist causality between these two propositions.

Defining Türkiye's (or any other countries for that matter) relations with a certain country or a group of country as a function of the same country's relations with others leads only to false dichotomies and misperceived Cold War-like binary choices, such as the East or the West, which cause a further ontological complication. It was mainly within the Western academia where the understanding of a western-centric unipolar system depending on the interdependency and cooperation was developed after the dissolution of Soviet Union, and it was claimed that the concepts like the "East" and the "West" were fluid constructs defying objective definition.

A major crisis of the post-Cold War period has been Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. What had started as a territorial crisis in Donbass region was expected to turn into a frozen conflict between local pro-Russian forces and the Ukrainian government, however the massive invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces changed the whole play giving cause to debates on a possible "New Cold War". Although Türkiye officially supports Ukraine through diplomatic and material means, the latter particularly through the provision of armed drones, Ankara did not close doors to Russia completely as the European Union did and kept the diplomatic channels open, positioning itself as a neutral mediator within the international system. Türkiye mediated the grain deal between Russia and Ukraine in the autumn of 2022, which aimed to maintain grain supply lines from Ukrainian ports through the Black Sea (Wintour, 2022). At a time when the authoritarianism debates affected foreign relations of Türkiye negatively, and while Europe and the whole West had completely closed the doors to Russia, Ankara's assumption of such a role increased Türkiye's reputation both in the Western world and on the Russian front. Türkiye, which openly supports Ukraine with drone sales and aid, has also created a reasonable environment for the West to negotiate with Russia. It can be said very clearly that Türkiye's stance in this crisis shows that Ankara will not position itself completely under one pole in a potential "New Cold War" dichotomy. It is understandable that Türkiye with its unique geographical and cultural position between different continents and its "identity caught between East and West"

(Kirişci, 2018, s.14) reflecting onto political, social and economic trajectories that the country is taking is especially prone to such arguments. However, such arguments can only offer poor if any explanations regarding Türkiye's foreign policy stance.

Moving beyond the Covid-19 issue, this article will argue that despite fluctuations in the relationship Türkiye remains deeply entrenched in the West, and its efforts to establish and maintain stronger links with the East do not represent a political preference to steer the country away from the former and closer to the latter. In Turkish political discourse, the "West" is predominantly defined as the United States and Western Europe combined and this article will adhere to this definition. The "East", however, can mean many things, and while at the ideational level it can be defined as the anti-thesis of the West, geographical and political definitions usually depend on the context. The discourse on "Türkiye's encounters with the East" has so far focused, depending on Türkiye's foreign policy priorities at the time being, on the Islamic world, and on Russia as well as the republics of the former Soviet Union, and lately it does more so on the Asia-Pacific, and particularly on China. When discussing the "East", this article will principally refer to the Asia-Pacific, including China. Although the other geographies mentioned above maintain their significance for its foreign policy, Türkiye has been investing significant efforts and resources in improving relations with this region, which is deemed as the world's new center of economic gravity.

The article proposes that rather than a binary choice trying to improve relations with a group of countries at the expense of others, such efforts can be more accurately interpreted as pragmatic foreign policy activism aimed at diversifying Türkiye's relations with a focus on economic considerations and priorities. The article will start by looking in detail at Türkiye's rapprochement with the Asia-Pacific, it will then investigate the current turbulence in Türkiye's relations with the United States and the EU, and conclude with an analysis of why these two do not define each other and to what extent Türkiye's current foreign policy stance represents a globe-wide diversification of the country's external relations. The article also presents Türkiye's economic relations with Asian countries with a focus on bilateral trade and foreign direct investment, making a connection between the economic and political realism. While Türkiye's relationship with the Asia-Pacific is evaluated in article within a comparative perspective reflecting on variations with regard to different time periods and different sub-regions of the larger Asian continent, discourses developed vis-à-vis Asian countries during the ups and downs in Türkiye's relations with the United States of America and Europe are also touched upon. In sum, based on economic data and policy analysis, the article aims to reach conclusions with respect to Türkiye's positioning of itself in international relations between the East and the West.

## **2. Türkiye's Improving Relations with the Asia-Pacific**

Historical roots of Türkiye's relations with the Asia-Pacific can be traced back to the later periods of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, when the government in Istanbul began to look at

the farther located countries of Asia, not only because it wished to strengthen linkages with the Muslim populations of the continent, but also because domestic and international developments related to modernization and European colonization necessitated such an outward look, especially towards the Empire of Japan (Pehlivantürk, 2017). The key event which affected the relations between Asia and the Ottoman Empire was the Ertuğrul Frigate Incident in 1890. The Ertuğrul Frigate was sent to Japan by Sultan Abdülhamid II with a crew of 609 men to launch diplomatic relations with Japan which was seen as the “Rising star of the East”. The sunk of the frigate after a successful visit and the rescue mission which was initiated by Japan left a mark in the Türkiye-Japan Relations (Esenbel, 2011, s. 132). Relations continued after the founding of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, however due to impact of colonization, conflict and war plaguing the Asian continent in these early periods, and insufficient means of communication and transportation over long distances, Türkiye’s relations with the Asia-Pacific remained limited, and low in both quality and quantity. As a result, the name of the region remained “Uzakdoğu”, Turkish for “Far East”, indicating a hard-to-reach distance in both geographical and ideational terms. Moreover, the Cold War and Türkiye’s place in the Western alliance meant the country’s relations with this part of the world were to shape within the constraints of the bipolar world order. Turkish forces served with the United Nations Command during the Korean War between 1950 and 1953, however the coming decades brought little interaction between Türkiye and the Asia-Pacific. Türkiye did not recognize the People’s Republic of China until 1971 before the American rapprochement with China. Before this time, the perception of China was negative in Türkiye because of the legacy of the Korean War and the Uyghur intellectuals who migrated to Türkiye (Temiz, 2021). The diplomatic visits began in the 1980s with the visit of the Turkish president Kenan Evren to China and, the mutual visits of the Turkish prime minister Turgut Özal and the Chinese premier Zhao Ziyang in 1985 and 1986. The main goal of these visits was establishing the economic ties between these countries (ibid, 2021).

1980s brought a certain degree of momentum to Türkiye’s relations with the Asia-Pacific. The rise of the economic powerhouses of East Asia and Türkiye’s move from an import-substitution industrialization strategy towards export orientation and integration with global markets brought significant activity in the economic field, with a number of Japanese and South Korean companies investing in Türkiye. This process further accelerated in the 1990s with continuing economic development on both sides and the end of the Cold War opening up new opportunities for cross-border cooperation around the world. In the late 1990s, Türkiye’s foreign policy activism began to take a turn, engaging with regions that have hitherto been outside the scope of its priorities. With the taking of office by the Justice and Development Party as a single-party government in 2002, this stance turned into a fully-fledged multifaceted proactive policy objective. In this period, Türkiye began to invest more energy in relations with countries other than its traditional partners and allies in the West, and while in this early period greater focus was on the near neighborhood including the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia, the Asia-Pacific has also entered into the orbit of Turkish foreign policy.

Following the Arab Uprisings of 2011, Türkiye embarked on an assertive transformative regional foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East region with the aim “to bring about a new regional order, with Türkiye playing a leading role in strengthening representative democracy and regionalism,” however as the region itself descended into violence and chaos, and the political environment became increasingly complicated with the involvement of external factors such as the United States and Russia, it became “clear that the gap between Türkiye’s ends and means was too difficult to bridge in the short-term” (Oğuzlu, 2020, s.134). This disappointment with regard to foreign policy objectives in the Middle East, together with deteriorating relations with the United States and growing disillusionment about the EU accession process, led to a paradigm shift in Turkish foreign policy towards the direction of non-Western rising powers, and given the vital necessity of securing external markets as well as sources of foreign investment in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, the economic powerhouses of the Asia-Pacific came to be prioritized as foreign policy targets by Turkish decision makers.

Türkiye’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs evaluates the importance of the region as follows: “Türkiye has a special place in the region, as it is also an Asian country, among its many vocations. Türkiye has historic, cultural, linguistic and religious ties with a wide range of countries along the ancient Silk Road. In line with its multi-dimensional foreign policy and in view of the growing economic and political significance of Asia-Pacific, Türkiye has put into effect policies geared towards opening up to the region, which has gained considerable depth in recent years” (MFA, n.d.) This “depth” that Türkiye’s policy towards the Asia-Pacific has gained recently has multiple facets. On the economic side, trade and investment relations between Türkiye and the countries of the Asia-Pacific are on the rise. Türkiye has elevated its relations to strategic partnership with China, Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore, and on the diplomacy front not only have the numbers of high-level official visits between Türkiye and the region have increased, but Türkiye has also expanded the network of its diplomatic missions.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Türkiye is also actively cooperating with the countries of the Asia-Pacific in several multilateral platforms, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) where Türkiye is a sectoral dialogue partner since 2010,<sup>4</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (dialogue partner since 2012), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) (member since 2013), and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) (forum dialogue partner since 2014).

Türkiye’s approach to the Asia-Pacific region gained further momentum in 2019, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launching the “Asia Anew” initiative, a comprehensive and holistic set of policies encompassing a wide range of issue areas including trade, investments, technology,

3 As of 2022, Türkiye has 15 diplomatic representations in the Asia-Pacific region. The most recently opened embassies are in Naypidaw (2012), Phnom Penh (2013), Bandar Seri Begawan (2013), and Vientiane (2018). There are also plans to open an embassy in Fiji in the near future.

4 In July 2019, at the ASEAN-Türkiye Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee meeting held in Jakarta, Türkiye and ASEAN confirmed a roadmap for the period between 2019 and 2023 in order to achieve practical cooperation outcomes in areas including trade, investment, electronic commerce, public-private partnerships, tourism, renewable energy technology and finance.

defense industry, educational exchanges, political and cultural dialogue, among others. Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's introduction provides a clear insight into the motivation behind the initiative:

Once again, the pendulum of history is swinging towards Asia. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be an era shaped by the developments in Asia. In other words, Asia is rising again, and we need to consider, us being Asians, how to position ourselves in the face of this development. We need to focus on Asia, not for the first time but once again, through the lens of our entrepreneurial and humanitarian foreign diplomacy. This is why we titled our new initiative as 'Asia Anew' ("Yeniden Asya", 2019).

Although "Asia Anew" is a multidimensional enterprise, there is an explicit focus on economic relations, as "Türkiye intends to capitalize on the glittering emergence of Asia as a new center of productivity and prosperity in the global economy" (Alperen & Ersoy, 2019). This prioritization of economic and commercial relations with the Asia-Pacific is not only a choice made by Türkiye, but it is also, and mainly, a result of systemic changes in the region and the global economy as strong industrialization and economic growth performance achieved by the major economies of the Asia-Pacific, especially China over the past few decades, shifted the gravity center of the global economy from the West to the East, while at the same time the position of Asian countries in global political and security equilibriums became more pronounced parallel to their strong economic growth (Atl, 2022).

There are three major features that define Türkiye's economic relations with the Asia-Pacific. Firstly, in terms of merchandise trade volumes, Türkiye has a deficit with almost all of the countries in the region. In 2021, Türkiye's merchandise trade volume with the Asia-Pacific was \$87.8 billion, and this figure included \$18.4 billion of Turkish exports as opposed to \$69.4 billion worth of imports (TÜİK, 2022). Türkiye's economy has a chronic current account deficit, and trade with the Asia-Pacific is a major source for that deficit.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, there is a similarly unbalanced situation in terms of the composition of Türkiye's merchandise trade with the Asia-Pacific. Turkish exports have in general a lower degree of product diversification compared with imports, and Türkiye mainly exports low value-added manufacturing products and raw materials to the Asia-Pacific, while it imports higher value added, capital and technology intensive products.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, given the unbalanced trade relationship with the Asia-Pacific, Türkiye aims to establish some sort of equilibrium by creating a surplus on the capital side of the equation, i.e. by drawing

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5 Türkiye has free trade agreements with South Korea (signed in 2013), Malaysia (2015) and Singapore (2017), actively negotiating new free trade agreements with Japan, Thailand and Indonesia, and it has also expressed intention to start negotiations with Vietnam and India. However, so far, the existing free trade agreements have done little to narrow Türkiye's trade deficit with the countries of the Asia-Pacific.

6 For instance, Türkiye's main export item to China is unprocessed marble, while its main imports from this country are telephone sets and data processing machines. Similarly, the main export item to Japan is tuna fish, while the main imports are parts of motor vehicles.



in more investments from the countries of the Asia-Pacific (Atlı, 2022). The idea here for the Turkish economy is to make the best of its export potential and narrow the deficit to the extent it is possible, while at the same time securing increased amounts of foreign direct investment from the Asia-Pacific that would contribute to the Turkish economy not only through their effect on the balance of payments, but also, and more importantly, by facilitating the flows of technology, know-how and infrastructure which would contribute significantly to Türkiye's pursuit of sustainable economic development. Starting as early as the 1980s, Japanese and Korean investment have benefited the Turkish economy in this way, and more recently, although still at early stages, Chinese investment is following the same path, with rising expectations on Türkiye's behalf from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as will be discussed below.

Japan is at the moment the largest source of foreign direct investment from the Asia-Pacific in Türkiye,<sup>7</sup> and Japanese involvement in Turkish industry dating back to the 1980s. Several Japanese corporations such as Toyota, Honda, Isuzu, Bridgestone, Mitsui, Sumitomo, and Marubeni have entered the Turkish market, in most cases through joint ventures with Turkish partners, established production facilities in Türkiye, selling their products in both the domestic market and overseas markets. These investments have played a key role in utilizing Japanese technology in Türkiye, and this has especially been the case in electronics and the automotive industries. For more than three decades now, Japanese companies have also actively taken part in several major infrastructure projects in Türkiye, including the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge over the Bosphorus, the Golden Horn Bridge, the Marmaray subway system crossing underneath the Bosphorus, and the Osmangazi Bridge spanning the Izmit Bay. All these projects have brought to Türkiye Japanese technology and knowhow as well as Japanese finance, through institutions like the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). As another major case of technological cooperation, the Türksat-4A satellite, which was launched by Türkiye into orbit in February 2014, was a joint project undertaken by Mitsubishi Electric Corporation with the participation of Turkish engineers trained in Japan. In the meantime, the two sides agreed, in 2017, to establish the Turkish-Japanese Technology University in Istanbul, with the aim "to produce ideas that will serve as basis for the welfare, development and strategic priorities of the Republic of Türkiye and Japan, and develop projects, do research and play a leading role in accordance with this purpose" (TJU, n.d.). As Japanese authorities have explicitly stated, the expectation is that "Japanese technology will prove useful for the future of Türkiye" (MFA, 2017).

The trajectory of South Korean investment to Türkiye has resembled that of Japan. Companies like Hyundai, Daewoo, LG, Samsung and Korea Tobacco have formed joint ventures with Turkish

7 According to data released by the Turkish Ministry of Industry and Technology (n.d.), as of September 2022, the cumulative amount of Japanese foreign direct investment was \$3.34 billion and there were 254 companies with Japanese capital in Türkiye. China (including Hong Kong SAR) has \$2.53 billions of investment and 1,308 companies, and in a comparative perspective these figures show that while Japan's investment in Türkiye is concentrated in a smaller number of large companies and multinationals, Chinese investment materializes in a larger number of relatively smaller scaled companies. As sources of foreign direct investment from the Asia-Pacific to Türkiye, Japan and China are followed by South Korea (\$1.29 billions of investment through 381 companies) and Malaysia (\$896 millions of investment through 61 companies).



partners, focusing mainly on the automotive sector, electrical appliances, electronics, and energy. Korean companies have also participated in large infrastructure projects such as the Eurasia Tunnel connecting the European and Asian sides of Istanbul and Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge over the Bosphorus, and the 1915 Çanakkale Bridge connecting the two sides of the Dardanelles strait. All these investment projects facilitate a transfer of knowhow, technology and skills from Korea to Türkiye. In addition to these projects, one of the largest investment initiatives by a Korean company in Türkiye was in the entertainment sector, with CJ CGV having purchased Mars Entertainment Group, Türkiye's largest chain of movie theaters.

Chinese investment into Türkiye is not as high as Japanese investment in terms of the total worth, at least for the moment, however it is increasing fast, and expanding into a wider range of sectors of the Turkish economy (Atlı, 2022). The BRI has in this sense brought a fresh momentum by opening up new opportunities for Chinese involvement and investment in Türkiye's infrastructure and connectivity projects. Türkiye aims to improve its transportation infrastructure and the BRI offers significant prospects not only for developing the transportation network within Türkiye's boundaries, but also for enhancing Turkish economy's linkages with overseas markets and consolidating Türkiye's position as an economic hub between different continents. Governments and business communities on both sides have repeatedly expressed interest in cooperation through the BRI at the level of both governments and the business sectors, and the two sides have also signed a number of agreements to prepare the groundwork for this cooperation.<sup>8</sup> However, it must be noted that so far, the BRI has been more about expectations rather than actual outcomes for Türkiye. For the moment the only major Chinese investment in Türkiye that can be considered within the BRI framework is the Kumport container port near Istanbul, where a consortium of Chinese companies led by COSCO Pacific purchased a 65 percent stake in the port for 940 million dollars. The new owners expanded the port with further investments, turning Kumport into the fifth largest container port of Türkiye playing a vital role for Istanbul's merchandise trade with the rest of Türkiye and the world, offering a strategic hub between the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea, and creating added value by investing heavily on research and development.

Chinese involvement in Türkiye's large-scale infrastructure projects predates the BRI. Companies like China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC) entered the Turkish market as early as the 1980s, undertaking a number of hydro energy, solar energy, and coal mine infrastructure projects. CSUN Eurasia, a manufacturer of solar energy cells, is the Chinese company with the highest level of annual sales in Türkiye, while Hunutlu Thermal Power Station, where China's State

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8 Two agreements were concluded by Turkish and Chinese governments in 2015. These are: i.) "Agreement on Harmonizing the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with the Middle Corridor Initiative", which covers a wide range of areas including policy dialogue on major development strategies, plans and policies; cooperation in bilateral infrastructure projects in Türkiye, China and third countries including highway, railroad, civil aviation, ports as well as oil and gas pipelines, power grids and telecommunication networks; mutual efforts to open up markets to each other and to expand two-way flow of trade; financial integration and the use of home currencies in trade and investment; and the promotion of people-to-people exchanges; and ii) "Rail Transport Cooperation Agreement", which covers the entire range of activities related to the development of railroad including a proposed high-speed railway line that will span the country's entire width connecting Türkiye's easternmost point in Kars with its border to Europe at Edirne.

Power Investment Corporation is majority shareholder through its subsidiary Shanghai Electric Power, will be crowned as the largest Chinese investment in Türkiye when its construction in the province of Adana is completed. In the meantime, nuclear energy is also emerging as a new area of cooperation between the two countries. The Turkish-Chinese Agreement for Cooperation in Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy that has entered into effect in June 2016 covers a whole range of joint activities including designing, constructing and operating nuclear plants, joint research and development, mining and waste management. Türkiye's objective, as a country dependent on imported hydrocarbons, is to achieve greater self-sufficiency in terms of energy supply security, and this necessitates relevant technological capabilities and know-how that will ensure sustainability in the long run. Energy cooperation with China ensures diversification of partners for Türkiye providing a source for transfer of technology and knowhow in this field.

Telecommunication and information technologies are another field where Chinese companies have been increasing their investment in Türkiye over the recent years. Huawei, which has become the focal point of great power competition between the United States and China and facing restrictions in Western countries due to "national security" reasons, has been active in Türkiye since 2002. In addition to supplying telecommunication infrastructure equipment and services for Turkish landline and GSM operators, the company has opened a research and development center in Istanbul in 2010, its second largest center of this kind outside China. With the participation of Turkish personnel, this center, which employs 690 researchers and engineers, designs and implements new technologies, which have so far been exported to more than 30 countries. The company has launched another research lab in cooperation with Istanbul Technical University, which is also contributing to joint technological development between Türkiye and China, and plans to establish a Smart Cities Research Lab to be opened in the Information Valley, the innovation and technology hub launched by Türkiye's Ministry of Industry and Technology. Another Chinese telecommunications company, ZTE, has purchased a 48 percent stake in Turkish company Netaş, and is actively pursuing projects including those in research and development. The most recent Chinese entrant into Türkiye's telecommunications sector is Xiaomi, whose new factory in Istanbul commenced manufacturing of mobile handsets in the first quarter of 2021. All of these enterprises contribute to Türkiye's efforts to develop its own technological capacities. In the meantime, Alibaba's purchase of one of Türkiye's largest digital commerce platforms, Trendyol, in 2018 marked a milestone in Turkish-Chinese collaboration in the digital economy.

Chinese direct investment into Türkiye develops in tandem with the development of financial linkages between the two countries. Two Chinese banks, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and the Bank of China are operating in Türkiye, offering banking services and developing financial facilities for investment projects including those potentially related to the BRI. Over the past few years, Turkish commercial banks have signed a number of loan deals with these two banks and also other Chinese financial institutions such as Chinese Eximbank, China Development Bank, and Sinosure. Other dimensions of Turkish-Chinese financial cooperation are Türkiye's participation in the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which Türkiye joined the bank as a founding member in 2016, contributing \$2.61 billion to the bank's

capital, and the bilateral currency swap agreements signed between the Turkish and Chinese central banks in 2012, and renewed in 2015, 2019 and 2021 providing Turkish lira and Chinese renminbi liquidity for the two sides and helping to reduce foreign currency conversion costs, which is useful particularly for the conduct of bilateral trade in local currencies, a practice which is encouraged by both governments.

Türkiye's economic relations with the Asia-Pacific do not take place in void; there is a political framework involved. Unlike Türkiye's relations with the Western countries, Ankara's political relations with the countries of the Asia-Pacific are relatively stable and uneventful. It is common for politicians and pundits to argue that there are "no political problems between Türkiye and Japan whatsoever" (İdiz, 2008). The roots of cordial relations between Türkiye and Japan are traced to the late Ottoman period, even to a particular event in 1890, when a Turkish frigate visiting Japan encountered a typhoon off the coast and sank, losing more than 500 sailors and officers. The survivors, 69 of them, were salvaged by the Japanese villagers and they were returned to Istanbul on Japanese corvettes. Similarly, the Turkish-Korean relationship is often defined as one of "blood brotherhood" as the shared heritage of the Korean War is the foundation stone of Turkish-Korean friendship. So is the memory of the Gallipoli campaign in 1915 for the cordiality between Türkiye, Australia and New Zealand. In the meantime, the role of Islam is crucial for understanding the relations between Türkiye and the predominantly Muslim populated countries of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

There is, however, a different story between Türkiye and China. Despite increasing dialogue and diplomatic exchanges over the past years, the Uyghur issue remains a source of contention, undermining mutual trust and confidence, and even jeopardizing economic relations. As a recent development, in February 2019, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that "the policy of systematic assimilation against the Uyghur Turks carried out by the authorities of China is a great shame for humanity," and invited the Chinese authorities "to respect the fundamental human rights of Uyghur Turks and to close the internment camps" (MFA, 2019). China's response was equally harsh, with the Chinese ambassador in Ankara stating "criticizing your friend publicly everywhere is not a constructive approach, if you choose a non-constructive path, it will negatively affect mutual trust and understanding, and this will be reflected in commercial and economic relations" ("Çinden Türkiye'ye", 2019). From the Turkish perspective, negative developments with respect to the Uyghurs draws significant publicity in Türkiye, and Turkish policy makers cannot afford to ignore the situation of the Uyghurs. At the same time, Ankara needs to draw a fine balance here, and this is not only because failure to do so would put Turkish economic interests vis-à-vis China under threat. Türkiye realizes that nothing can be gained for its own benefit or for the Uyghurs by confronting China and contradicting Beijing's interests on this issue. The only option is to have some degree of understanding between Ankara and Beijing on the issue, and this is why the Turkish government is frequently emphasizing its support for China's struggle against terrorism and separatism, as well as the sanctity of its territorial integrity, while at the same time speaking up for Uyghurs' rights.

### 3. Türkiye's Rift with the West

Türkiye's relations with the countries of the Asia-Pacific are on the rise, with a strong economic focus, and this is happening at a time when Türkiye's relations with the West are in a decline. Before questioning whether this represents a binary choice on behalf of Türkiye, the current rift between Türkiye and the West should be explained.

Traditionally Türkiye has relied closely on the United States and NATO for defense cooperation. However, over the past years, particularly after the Arab Uprisings of 2011, increasingly complicated situations in Türkiye's neighboring regions led the Turkish policy makers to assume an increasingly independent and assertive role in regional affairs, which in many instances—such as Türkiye's involvement in the Syrian conflict; its energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean and the tension it caused in relations with countries like Greece, Cyprus and Israel; its agreement with Libya's Government of National Accord on maritime boundaries; and its rapprochement with Russia—has clashed with the priorities and interests of the United States in the region. As a result there has been a number of crises in the relationship in a matter of only a few years, which are summarized by Galip Dalay (2021) as follows: Türkiye's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense systems and the ensuing American sanctions on Türkiye, the Syrian Kurds, the Eastern Mediterranean crisis, the court case against Türkiye's state-owned Halkbank related to American sanctions on Iran, and the new president Joe Biden's views on Türkiye's democratic regression.

The United States questions, as explicitly stated in a report to the Congress, "the two countries' alliance, as well as Türkiye's commitment to NATO and its Western orientation" (Zanotti & Thomas, 2020, s.16). This "questioning" of Türkiye's "Western orientation" has also a certain degree of relevance with regards to Türkiye's improving relations with the Asia-Pacific, and American concerns in this respect are directed towards Türkiye's relations with those parts of the Asia-Pacific that are not deemed as parts of the "West". In other words, it is mainly China and Ankara's growing relations with Beijing that are causing raised eyebrows in Washington D.C. On the other hand, as a product of Turkish foreign policy pragmatism, Türkiye considered Trump's war against China as an opportunity at first sense. While Trump questioned the West's commitment to China in terms of production in 2018, he advocated the idea of opening up to new areas for cheap labor. Leading business circles in Türkiye saw this stance as an opportunity to attract investment from the West to Türkiye and to revive the Turkish economy, which has been deteriorating for years with high inflation and the depreciation of the Turkish lira (Daily Sabah, 2022). However, both Türkiye's Syria policy and the public opinion in the United States against Türkiye prevented such a project from being realized.

Türkiye's purchase of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system, with deliveries having started as of July 2019, led to its removal by the United States from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program, and there has been debates in Washington D.C. on possible sanctions against Türkiye. The concern here is that if Türkiye transitions to major Russian weapons platforms with multi-decade

lifespans, it won't stay closely integrated with NATO on defense matters (ibid, s.16). The deal with Russia, however, was preceded by negotiations with China for Türkiye's procurement of a missile defense system. In 2013, the Turkish government had opened negotiations with China Precision Machinery Export-Import Corporation (CPMIEC) to jointly develop a long-range air and missile defense system, and this had drawn a similar reaction from the United States because the Chinese company in question was under sanctions for violating the Iran, North Korea and Syria Nonproliferation Act, and also because the system proposed by the Chinese company was incompatible with the NATO missile defense shield already installed on Turkish territory. In this case, Türkiye was primarily aiming to "gain know-how to develop its own long-range missile system and to expand the indigenous capabilities" in a move that "astounded (Türkiye's) transatlantic allies, (yet) cohered perfectly with Türkiye's broader defense industrial strategy" (Kıbaroğlu & Sazak, 2016). After more than two years of negotiations, Ankara decided to annul the tender because the Chinese offer was not fulfilling expectations. After this event, Türkiye moved on to negotiate the procurement of a missile defense system with the Russians. So, from the viewpoint of the United States, China was part of the same problem before the Russian S-400's was and given a long history of defense industry cooperation between Türkiye and China, it is likely to remain as such.

The purchase of the S-400 surface-to-air defense system was the key point in the discussion of the axis shift of Türkiye. With the Arab Spring, especially with the Syrian Crisis, when it became apparent that Türkiye and the Western world had different interests in the international arena, a debate about a shift in axis started in the Turkish public opinion. When the axis shift debate broke out for the first time in 2010, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rejected these allegations and stated that Türkiye did not have an axis shift agenda (CNNTürk, 2018 December 11). However, especially in the military operations carried out by Türkiye in Syria, the support of the PYD/YPG forces, which Türkiye openly considered as a terrorist organization by the USA and the EU, has caused great controversy in the Turkish public. However, after the decision of military material sanctions against Türkiye, Türkiye openly warned the Western world with the "axis shift" debate. President Erdoğan harshly criticized the presentation of Türkiye's relatively positive relations with China and Russia as an axis shift in 2018, and while explaining Türkiye's diplomatic initiatives: "Some circles try to portray it as an axis shift, whereas Türkiye is not an axis shift. It strengthens its own axis by succeeding in carrying out its very different diplomatic relations in the world at the same time within the framework of our national interests." used expressions (Yazıcıoğlu, 2022 October 1). Unlike the regional security perspective, the axis shift problem has also gained a different context with the economic crises Türkiye has faced in recent years. In response to the weakening of the Turkish lira against the dollar and high inflation, Türkiye started to discuss joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for economic development. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan went to Uzbekistan for the 22nd Summit of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and attended the summit. He stated that Türkiye's goal at this summit is full membership to the SCO (Independent Türkçe, 2022 September 17). On the other hand, there were discussions about transitioning to the Chinese type of economic model

in 2022 in Türkiye, and the provision of foreign investment and cheap labor to combat inflation was discussed in public. As a result, although the interests of Türkiye and the Western world conflict at certain points, both economically and politically, it is not possible and consistent for Türkiye to take a stance against the Western world in the “eastern” bloc when social codes are evaluated. Türkiye has aimed to develop good relations with both the West and Russia, China, Iran and Central Asian countries under an assertiveness that it has developed to defend its own interests. However, both economically and politically, Türkiye has internalized democracy and liberal economy, which are the values of the Western world. This assimilation, which has taken place fully since the 1980s, is very unlikely to result in an axis shift. Political initiatives, which are considered as the axis debate, are an example of pragmatism that increases Türkiye’s ability to construct a balanced foreign policy and negotiate its interests. The best example of this pragmatism is Türkiye’s mediator role in the Russia-Ukraine War. He was in the same diplomatic position with the Western bloc, of which he was officially a member, and managed to maintain relations with both countries and had the international community accept his mediation on important issues such as the grain agreement.

George Marshall Lerner (2020) accurately wrote that “for the civil servants in Washington D.C., the emerging influence of China into the economy of a NATO member is deeply unsettling.” Growing Chinese economic clout over Türkiye has been a concern for the United States, especially at a time when the Turkish economy is going through turbulent times, since the currency crash of summer 2018. Lerner questioned, as Türkiye battles debt and a currency crisis, whether Chinese investment can “save the day”. According to David P. Goldman (2018), Chinese finance flowing to Türkiye, as an alternative to loans from Western-led international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, could turn Türkiye into “an economic satrapy of China”. To what extent Chinese finance can help Türkiye to solve its balance of payments problems is questionable, however from the perspective of the United States, all the Chinese investment and money coming to Türkiye, and Türkiye’s enthusiastic engagement with China-led initiative such as the BRI and the AIIB, are further steps that continue to challenge Türkiye’s Western orientation.

Both China and Türkiye, and the relationship between them, continue to be a concern for the United States under the Biden Administration. A statement released by the White House following a call by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s with the European Commission’s Head of Cabinet, Bjoern Seibert revealed that the United States and the EU have “agreed to work together on issues of mutual concern, including China and Türkiye” (The White House, 2021). While it is through that the EU has “concerns” of its own regarding Türkiye, for Brussels this relationship has more dimensions compared with the view of Washington D.C., which “sees the relationship (with Türkiye) almost solely through a security lens” (Lesser, 2020). Türkiye’s EU accession process, which had started in 1963 with the association agreement signed with the European Economic Community (EEC), is in a deadlock, causing profound resentment on behalf of the Turks. From the European perspective, “EU-Türkiye relations have suffered due to a deterioration of democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law in Türkiye” and “Türkiye’s military operations in Syria, Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, coupled with its



maritime disputes with Greece and Cyprus, further eroded its relations with the EU” (Stanicek, 2020). However, there are also issues that force Türkiye and the EU to engage with each other. To start with, the EU is by far Türkiye’s not only the biggest but also the most sophisticated trade market, and mutual benefits are at stake. On the other hand, Türkiye hosts four million refugees from Syria and numerous others from countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. For most of them, Türkiye is a stepping-stone for a further trip to Europe, which makes refugees a common issue for Türkiye and the EU. At the moment, Türkiye is receiving large amounts of EU support while Europe is spared the prospect of dealing with millions of refugees. However, to what extent this deal is sustainable can be questioned. Relations between Türkiye and the EU are at a low level, however there is enough reason for both sides to improve.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As explained in detail above, Türkiye’s relations with the countries of the Asia-Pacific are on the rise, there is a strong focus on the economic dimension of the relations, and at the same time Türkiye’s relations with the West are going through turbulent times. This, however, does not necessarily mean that Türkiye is “choosing” to get closer with the East and to turn its back to the West. It is not a political preference, instead Türkiye’s approach is more pragmatic as it aims to diversify its relationships and to gain a certain degree of strategic autonomy, avoiding excessive dependence on any party.

Türkiye has historical and strategic ties with Western countries, and a more multifaceted and global outlook to effectively include the Asia-Pacific does not have to necessitate severing these ties with the West. Moreover, Türkiye remains deeply anchored to the West economically, and it is simply impossible for Türkiye’s economic relations with the Asia-Pacific to reach the level of relations with the West in the foreseeable future. As of September 2022, 72.7 percent of the total foreign direct investment stock in the Turkish economy originated from Europe, and 8 percent from the United States. The share of the Asia-Pacific was 5.4 percent, and China’s share was less than one percent (MoIT, n.d.). Despite eagerness on Türkiye’s behalf to source more technology transfer from Asian countries, it is still the United States and the EU who are Türkiye’s main technology partners. In 2021, 72 percent of Turkish exports were destined to European markets (both EU and non-EU), and 7 percent to the United States. The share of the entire Asia-Pacific region in Türkiye’s exports was only 8 percent (TÜİK, 2022).

Türkiye’s foreign policy pragmatism and its quest for strategic autonomy require not only an improvement in relations with the Asia-Pacific, but also re-strengthening ties with the West, which is at the moment the missing part. Galip Dalay (2021) warns that “in its application (strategic autonomy) effectively means reducing Türkiye’s dependency on the West rather than making Türkiye an autonomous or independent actor altogether in international affairs.” If the latter is Türkiye’s objective, then revitalizing Türkiye’s relations with its allies in the West is a sine qua non condition.



There are signs on the Turkish side for a potential renewed rapprochement with the West. The action plan issued by the Office of the President of the Republic of Türkiye (2018), set “improvement and development of our bilateral relations with the United States of America” explicitly as a priority target (s.15). Murat Yeşiltaş (2021) argues that relations can be restored if “both sides do their homework” where the United States needs to rethink its expectation of a one-sided asymmetrical relationship, and Türkiye needs to establish “a strategic framework within which it can design its relations on a realistic basis”.

Türkiye has also sufficient reason to put its relations with the EU back on track, regardless of the current prospects of formal membership accession. As of early 2021, Türkiye is making overtures to the EU, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that “2021 is the year to set things right with the EU” and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu embarked on a charm offensive tour to European capitals. As İlke Toygür (2021) writes that “many in Europe are skeptical, since the current state of democracy and rule of law in Türkiye falls well short of the requirements for a candidate country”, however Türkiye as an accession candidate, neighbor and strategic ally is vital for European interests, and the ultimate goal should be the reshaping of the relationship in a cooperative and reciprocal way based on mutual strategic interests.

Türkiye is said to be the “the easternmost European, and the westernmost Asian country” (“Yeniden Asya”, 2019). In today’s globalized world defined by interconnectedness and interdependence, this proposition can assume a meaning beyond its geographical premise. Türkiye’s rapprochement with the countries is an effort to this end, it is not a political choice of improving relations with a group of countries at the expense of others, but it is a pragmatic kind of foreign policy activism aiming at diversifying globe-wide relations and achieving strategic autonomy, which, under the circumstances, also necessitates a restoration of Türkiye’s ties with its Western allies. If Türkiye’s policy-making capacities will fully match the objectives and produce the desired results remains to be seen.

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