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The Geo-Positioning of Turkey in Eurasia in the 21st Century

Ayla GÖL¹

Abstract

Looking through the lens of critical geopolitics, the article challenges Turkey's so-called 'bridge' position and the binary opposition of Europe and Asia by arguing that the vision of Turkish foreign policy has been imagined geographically and geopositioned contextually. In this article, for the first time, I apply the term 'geopositioning' to describe Turkey's 'in-between' geographical location between Europe and Asia by evaluating geostrategic, geoeconomics and geopolitical variables together from a new perspective. I argue that Turkey's evolving foreign policy towards Eurasia is a consequence of the Ankara governments' search for an alternative vision that led to geopositioning in post-Cold War international relations. Therefore, the article critically analyses whether the goals of Turkish foreign policy were shaped by material or ideational interests and how they influenced Turkey's geopositioning in Eurasia. For the last two decades, the change of traditional Turkish foreign policy by evolving multi-dimensionally and engaging actively in the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa has been the empirical evidence of such geopositioning. After describing a new theoretical framework in the introduction and summarizing emerging opportunities in post-Cold War international politics, the second part examines the implementation of multidimensional foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership since 2002. The article concludes that the geopositioning of Turkey in the twenty-first century has been shaped by both material and ideational interests and evolved paradoxically around collaboration and competition with Russia, China, and Iran.

Keywords: Eurasia, Geopositioning, Turkey, Russia, China, Iran

21. Yüzyılda Türkiye'nin Avrasya'da Jeokonumlandırımı

Özet

Bu makale eleştirel jeopolitiğin merceğinden bakarak, Türk dış politika vizyonunun coğrafyaya bağımlı tasavvur edilerek ve bağlamsal olarak jeokonumlandırıldığını öne sürerek, Türkiye'nin sözde 'köprü' konumuna ve Avrupa ile Asya arasındaki ikili karşıtlığını tartışmaya açıyor. Bu makalede ilk kez, 'jeokonumlandırma' terimini jeostratejik, jeoekonomik ve jeopolitik değişkenleri bir arada değerlendirerek, Türkiye'nin Avrupa ile Asya arasındaki 'iki arada kalmış' coğrafi konumunu yeni bir bakış açısından tanımlamak için kullandım. Türkiye'nin Avrasya'ya yönelik değişken dış politikasının, Ankara hükümetlerinin Soğuk Savaş sonrası uluslararası ilişkilerde jeokonumlandırmaya yol açan alternatif vizyon arayışlarının bir sonucu olduğunu ileri sürüyorum. Bu nedenle, bu makale Türk dış politikasının amaçlarının maddi ya da ideolojik çıkarlar bağlamında şekillenip şekillenmediğini ve bunların Türkiye'nin Avrasya'daki jeokonumlandırılmasını nasıl etkilediğini eleştirel açıdan analiz etmektedir. Son yirmi yıldır, geleneksel Türk dış politikasının çok boyutlu bir şekilde gelişerek ve Kafkasya, Orta Asya, Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika'ya yönelerek değişmesi, bu jeokonumlandırmanın ampirik bir kanıtıdır. Yeni teorik çerçeveyi girişte tanımlayarak ve Soğuk Savaş sonrası uluslararası ilişkilerdeki değişen olanakları özetledikten sonra, ikinci kısım 2002 yılından itibaren, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) liderliğindeki çok boyutlu Türk dış politikasını irdeliyor. Makale, Türkiye'nin yirmi birinci yüzyıldaki yeni jeokonumlandırılmasının maddi ve fikirsal çıkarlara dayanarak belirlendiği ve paradoksal bir şekilde Rusya, Çin ve İran ile iş birliği ve rekabet çerçevesinde değiştiği sonucuna varıyor.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrasya, jeokonum, Türkiye, Rusya, Çin, İran

Introduction

The unexpected and challenging world events in the twenty-first century have never lost momentum in international politics since the end of the Cold War. In 2001, the unprecedented atrocities of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US have had global implications. Relations between the West and the Muslim Middle East were turned on its head while Islam was identified as the main threat to the Western world. One year later in Turkey, a country perceived as the historical bastion of Western secularism in the Muslim world, the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP*) was democratically elected.² The survival of the AKP regime for two decades was unrivalled. Meanwhile, international politics has been challenged by the global pandemic of Covid-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 and the recent Israel-Hamas war since October 2023. Such uncertainties of international and regional (dis)order will have political and socio-economic implications for the future of Turkish domestic and foreign policies.

Throughout the twentieth century, Turkey's geostrategic position had traditionally been perceived as a 'bridge' between Europe and Asia, Islam and the West.³ Looking through the lens of critical geopolitics, the article challenges Turkey's so-called 'bridge' position and the binary opposition of Europe and Asia. I argue that the vision of Turkish foreign policy has been imagined geographically and geopositioned contextually. The position of the Straits in-between two continents and cultures – Europe and Asia Minor – is the best illustration of this geographical imagination that described Turkey as a bridge the context of Islam and the West. In this article, for the first time, I apply the term 'geopositioning', which is borrowed from navigation (Global Positioning System – GPS), planetary and space sciences⁴, to describe Turkey's 'in-between' geographic location between Europe and Asia by evaluating geostrategic, geoeconomics and geopolitical variables together from a new perspective. The main assumption of this critical analysis is that geopositioning ties all these variables – material and ideational – together to explain why decision-makers position – and reposition – the country to pursue certain foreign policy visions in changing regional and international contexts. Therefore, the theoretical framework of geopositioning helps us to historicise and contextualise the analysis of Turkish foreign policy. Historically, Russia's desire to reach

² Ayla Göl, "The Identity of Turkey: Muslim and Secular," *Third World Quarterly*, 30:4 (2009), 795.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁴ Bin Lie and et al., "Geopositioning Precision Analysis of Multiple Image Triangulation Using LROC NAC Lunar Images," *Planetary and Space Science* (2017): 20-30; Jianli Wei and Alper Yilmaz, "A Visual Odometry Pipeline for Real-Time UAS Geopositioning," *Drones*, 7 (2023): 569.



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‘warm waters’ of the Mediterranean Sea via the Turkish Straits constrained Turkey’s decisions to search for Western alliances and shaped its pro-Western foreign policy for the last two centuries. Contextually, I argue that Turkey’s evolving foreign policy towards Eurasia is a consequence of the Ankara governments’ search for an alternative vision at the end of Cold War international politics that led to its ge positioning in Eurasia.

The alternative framework furthermore conceptually differentiates between geopolitics, geostrategy, and geoeconomics to explain how they together inform the ge positioning of Turkey in Eurasia. Originally, since Schuman used it in 1942, geopolitics refers to the impact of geographical factors on political decisions, while geostrategy ‘merges strategic considerations with political ones’ to exercise power over particularly critical spaces.⁵ For the analysis of this article, geostrategy refers to the alternative geographic direction of Turkish foreign policy towards Eurasia as a critical space for achieving strategic goals.⁶ Geoeconomics is a relatively recent concept often attributed to Luttwak, who introduced ‘the theory and practice of geo-economics’ by separating it from geopolitics in the post-Cold War context.⁷ Although there is no agreed definition of geoeconomics, it focuses on employing economic tools to promote national goals and produce efficient geopolitical outcomes.⁸ The best example in the context of Eurasia is the objectives of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. This article, therefore, offers a novel theoretical framework of ge positioning to understand ‘Turkey’s pivot to Eurasia’ by bringing geostrategic, geoeconomics and geopolitical variables together from a new perspective in post-Cold War politics. The theoretical framework is also useful for analysing whether the national goals of Turkish foreign policy were shaped by material or ideational interests.⁹ While material interests relate to economic, security and strategic factors, ideational interests include culture, identity and religion. After summarizing the uncertainties of post-Cold War politics, the second part examines the implementation of multidimensional Turkish foreign policy under the AKP to evaluate Turkey’s ge positioning in an emerging multipolar order: the empirical evidence is traced through Turkey’s

⁵ Frederick L. Schuman, “Let Us Learn Our Geopolitics,” *Current History*, 2:9 (1942): 161-165; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Gand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 40.

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Game Plan: A Geostrategic Framework for the Conduct of the US-Soviet Contest* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), xiv.

⁷ Edward N. Luttwak, *Turbo-Capitalism: Winners and Losers in the Global Economy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999): 127-151

⁸ Ofir Angel, “Navigating Between Geopolitics and Geoeconomics: A Strategic Guide for International Companies,” *Auren News*, 18 November 2023 (Accessed at <https://auren.com/il/news/navigating-between-geopolitics-and-geoeconomics-a-strategic-guide-for-international-companies/#>: on 20 April 2024)

⁹ Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem (eds.), *Turkey’s Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order* (London: Routledge, 2015).



geostrategic partnership with Russia, increasing geo-economic relations with China based on material interests, and the changing geopolitics of Ankara's relations with Iran as an ideational 'frenemy' in regional and international relations.

1. Emerging Opportunities in the Post-Cold War International Relations

The theoretical framework of ge positioning helps us to understand why Turkey had a pro-Western orientation during the twentieth century and how this has been challenged in the post-Cold War era. Following the Soviet threat to the Turkish straits, the previous Ankara governments decided to join Western alliances (the Council of Europe, NATO and EU) after the Second World War. Similarly, within the East-West ideological divide of the Cold War, successive Ankara governments, irrespective of their political ideologies, continued with "pro-Western foreign policy orientation".¹⁰ The end of the Cold War era provided emerging opportunities to search for an alternative vision and new alliances beyond the West. On the one hand, the bipolar world order was replaced by a multipolar international system, within which Eurasia emerged as a contender to Europe. Specifically, the diversification of energy resources and ongoing uncertainties about Turkey's candidacy for the EU since the 1960s has raised concerns about Turkey's one-dimensional politics.¹¹ On the other hand, the post-Cold War era created unprecedented challenges and also emerging opportunities for increasing Turkey's sphere of influence in the South Caucasus and the Turkic Republics of Central Asia. Since the 1990s, different governments in Ankara have considered the dawn of Eurasia to pursue different goals and promote Turkey's ideational —cultural, religious, and social— and material —economic, strategic, and security— interests in the post-Soviet space and surrounding regions.

1.1. The dawn of Eurasia in the twenty-first century

Since the 1990s, critical geopolitics theories have argued that geopolitics is not a one-dimensional linear concept but the result of historical context, discourse, positionality and the subjective viewpoint of the observer.¹² In this sense, Eurasia is a relatively recent term used for the first time in 1885 by an Australian geologist, Eduard Suess, to describe Asia and Europe as a

¹⁰ Tarik Oğuzlu, "Turkey and the West: Geopolitical Shifts in the AK Party Era," in *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia*, 15.

¹¹ Ayla Gol, "The Identity of Turkey: Muslim and Secular," *Third World Quarterly*, 30:4 (2009): 776.

¹² G. O. Tuathail, and J. Agnew, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy," *Political Geography Quarterly*, 11:2 (1992): 190-204; G. O. Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitical: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996); Laura Jones and Daniel Sage, "New Directions in Critical Geopolitics: An Introduction," *GeoJournal*, 75:4 (2010): 315-325; Sara Koopman et al, "Critical Geopolitics/critical geopolitics 25 years on," *Political Geography* (2021).



whole landmass.¹³ While the changing positionalities of Western powers – Great Britain and the US - on geopolitical and military space first manifested in the geostrategic definitions of regions, they produced specific discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, in 1902, the US Navy admiral Alfred Mahan first coined the term ‘Middle East’ in a debate with H. Mackinder, a lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).¹⁴ While Mahan used the word “to define the maritime and adjacent land area between European and British India”, Mackinder emphasized the significant landmasses of the world, in particular on the Central Asian “heartland”.¹⁵ Two years later, in his article titled The ‘Geographical Pivot of History’, Mackinder proposed the Heartland Theory and the conception of Eurasia¹⁶: who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island of Eurasia; who rules the World Island commands the world. The ‘heartland’ was also referred to as the ‘pivot area’ and the core of Eurasia, which consisted of all landmass of Europe and Asia that Mackinder considered the World Island. He also argued that technological developments, particularly railways, “had the effect of making larger political units both possible and more dominant”.¹⁷ While Mackinder’s Heartland Theory highlighted the conflict between land and sea powers, which was outdated during the Cold War, such discourse has also drawn attention to Russia’s position in conquering Central Asia’s ‘pivot area’.¹⁸

At the end of the twentieth century, Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis produced another narrative by emphasising the ideological conflict between the East and the West, within which Russia was identified as a torn country. Historically, Russia’s economic, demographic and ideological milieu has been closely intertwined with Europe for three centuries. Eurocentrism has been part of a considerable portion of traditional Russian elites.¹⁹ Moscow borrowed from the European system of military organization and high culture, and it has a large landmass in Asia. Like Russians, for Turks, although European states have always

¹³ M. Bassin, “Eurasia,” in *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*, ed. D. Mishkova and B. Trencsenyi (New York: Berghahn, 2017), 211.

¹⁴ Ayla Gol, ‘Imagining the Middle East: the State, Nationalism and Regional International Society’, *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, 5: 3 (2015): 379-394.

¹⁵ F. Halliday, “The Middle East and Conceptions of ‘International Society’,” in *International Society and the Middle East*, eds. Buzan B., Gonzalez-Pelaez A. (Palgrave, 2009), 14.

¹⁶ H. J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal*, 23:4 (904), 422-31.

¹⁷ H. J. Mackinder, (1919) *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (Suffolk: Pelican Books, 1944); Lucian M. Ashworth, “Realism and the Spirit of 1919: Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics and the Reality of the League of Nations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:1 (2010), 286.

¹⁸ Mackinder, ‘Geographical Pivot’, 432-33.

¹⁹ Pepe Escobar, “How the New Silk Roads are Merging into Greater Eurasia,” *Global Research*, April 16, 2019, [Avaliable at <https://transnational.live/2019/04/16/how-the-new-silk-roads-are-merging-into-greater-eurasia/>] (Accessed on 20 April 2024).



struggled to see the Ottoman Empire as part of Europe, pro-Western policies were the core of Turkey's path. Despite the evidence of European aspirations in Russian and Turkish history, neither Russians nor Turks are perceived as part of the West. Russia and Turkey shared portions of Huntington's 'torn country' status between two continents and two civilizations. Their in-between positions are seen as a disadvantage, not an advantage of a civilizational bridge as a connectivity point in Eurasia. The resolution of ideological divides between Ankara and Moscow at the end of the Cold War was a game-changer for Turkish-Russian relations. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Eurasia received attention because it reinstated the political agency of 'in-between-states' in international relations and created space for bringing material and ideational considerations together.²⁰ Moreover, the emergence of Eurasia presents it as "a patchwork of states and peoples whose relationships are shifting rapidly", and neither European nor Asian states, including Russia, "have the hegemony of controlling this process alone" while "China's New Silk Roads" initiative introduced the urgency of "regional co-ownership of these processes".²¹ The next section, therefore, explains why Turkish leaders were lured to the dawn of Eurasia, revived by Russia beyond the post-Soviet space and ideological divisions in the post-Cold War era.

1.2. An alternative vision of Turkish foreign policy as an 'Energy Hub'

The foundations of Turkey's Eurasian vision were laid in the 1990s before the AKP came to power. Under the leadership of Turgut Özal, Prime Minister (1983-1989) and then President (1989-1993), Turkey initiated discussions on cultural and social ties with the Turkic Republics in Central Asia and South Caucasus. The collapse of the Soviet Union heralded the end of the Cold War and bipolar world order and initiated a tectonic shift in Eurasian affairs. One of Özal's ambitions was to realize a 'Turkic age' that resembled the expansionist policies of the Ottoman Empire. Many scholars argued that Ankara's renewed ideational interests via cultural and religious ties with Turkic Republics steered a shift from its material interests in pro-Western foreign policy orientation towards Eurasia, specifically Central Asia, the Caucasus and Russia, since the 1990s.²² Turkey's engagement has brought emerging opportunities, from regional security and trade to cultural and energy issues, by pursuing cooperation and regional power alliances.

²⁰ Moritz Pieper, *The Making of Eurasia: Competition and Cooperation between China's Belt and Road Initiative*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2021), 1.

²¹ Macaes, *Dawn of Eurasia*, 51; Pieper, *Making of Eurasia*, 14.

²² B. Aras, *The New Geopolitics of Eurasia and Turkey's Position* (London: Frank Cass, 2002); B. Aras and H. Fidan, "Turkey and Eurasia: Frontiers of a New Geographic Imagination," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40 (2009), 193-215; A. Çeçen, *Türkiye ve Avrasya: Türkiye'nin Stratejik Arayışları*, (Istanbul: Doğu Kütüphanesi, 2015); Ersen and Köstem, (ed.), *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia*, *ibid.*



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Turkey's pivot to Eurasia undoubtedly raised concerns about a renewal of 'pan-Turkism' and 'neo-Ottomanism' even before the AKP leadership revived the idea.²³ Özal's expansionist vision was never achieved partly because of his premature death and partly due to Turkey's limited economic power despite its cultural and religious gravity. Hence, an emerging 'Turkic age' never went beyond the dreams of pan-Turkism and was doomed to failure. Nevertheless, several projects based on material interests in developing energy, transport and transit networks commenced in the post-Cold War era.²⁴ In particular, Özal's initiatives put Eurasian energy on Turkey's political agenda. His successor, Tansu Çiller (Prime Minister between 1993-96 and then Foreign Minister 1996-97), initiated the geostrategic vision of making Turkey an 'energy hub' at the crossroads of East-West, and North-South energy corridors, which laid the building blocks for successor governments, including the AKP.²⁵

Çiller's successor, Ismail Cem (Ministry of Culture in 1995 and Foreign Minister between 1997–2002), originally proposed the notion of 'Avrasya' (Eurasia).²⁶ In line with the changing post-Cold War politics, Cem's initiatives aimed at positioning Turkey as the Heartland of the 'geography of civilizations'. His vision explored how Turkey's geostrategic location could be utilized to become a 'world state', and this laid the groundwork for the idea of 'zero problems with neighbours'.²⁷ Some scholars highlight that the AKP governments under Erdogan have continued Özal and his successors' Eurasian vision.²⁸ However, others argued that the AKP governments followed 'anti-Özal' policies.²⁹ This article's analysis shows

²³ C. Hoffman, "Neo-Ottomanism, Eurasianism or Securing the Region? A Longer View on Turkey's Interventionism," *Conflict, Security and Development*, 19:3 (2019), 301-307.

²⁴ U. Cevikoz, "Turkey in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Foreign Economic and Security Interests," *Centre For Strategic and International Studies* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 24.

²⁵ P. Bilgin and A. Bilgic, "Turkey's 'New' Foreign Policy toward Eurasia," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 52:2 (2013), 186 fn 27.

²⁶ Ayla Gol, 'Turkey's Search for Identity: A Eurasian and Islamic Country?' in *'Euro-Asia' at the Crossroads: Geopolitics, Identities and Dialogues*, J. Kakonen, S. Chaturvedi and A. Sengupta, eds., (New Delhi: Shipra, 2011): 108-128.

²⁷ I. Cem, (2004) *Türkiye, Avrupa ve Avrasya*. Vol. 1: Strateji, Yunanistan, Kıbrıs (Turkey, Europe and Eurasia. Vol.1: Strategy, Greece, Cyprus) (Istanbul: Bilgi Üniversitesi, 2004), 33 & 59.

²⁸ M. B. Altunışık, "Worldview and Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40 (2009), pp. 169-172; Z. Öniş, "Multiple Faces of the 'new' Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique," *Insight Turkey*, 13:1 (2011), 47-65; Bilgin and Bilgic, Turkey's "New" Foreign, 192 fn 36.

²⁹ Şener Aktürk, "Turkish- Russian relations after the Cold War (1992–2002)," *Turkish Studies*, 7:3 (2006), 337–64; Cevikoz, *Turkey in reconnecting*, 20.



that the AKP both continued and changed the vision and policies of previous governments towards Eurasia.

The crucial area of continuity was Ankara's increasing geostrategic partnership with Moscow, while the change would follow later by establishing geoeconomic relations with Beijing. During the pre-AKP period, Turkey's relations with Russia significantly diverged from the traditional Cold War politics based on ideological conflict. An Ankara-Moscow rapprochement had already been enhanced in geoeconomic ties, technical cooperation and the exchange of scientific and military know-how, despite the tensions related to the Chechen and Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts in the Caucasus.³⁰

In particular, four pre-2001 agreements indicate how the AKP governments have continued to implement the policies of previous governments but changed relations from ideational to material considerations: Firstly, the EU-sponsored Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) program was established in 1993 at the Brussels Conference with the participation of the EU Commission and the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The TRACECA forum is one of the infrastructure projects along the East-West corridor that connects Europe to Central Asia, the Caspian basin and the Black Sea, ending at the borders of China and Afghanistan. Turkey has been one of the most active members of TRACECA since 2000.³¹ Secondly, the Ankara and Moscow governments signed a bilateral agreement in 1997 to supply Russian natural gas to Turkey via Blue Stream (*Mavi Akım*) for twenty-five years, which became operational in 2003.³² Thirdly, Turkey implemented a deliberate balancing act concerning energy networks, which was extended to other security issues when a Joint Turkish-Russian Declaration on the Fight against Terrorism was signed in 1999.³³ Fourthly, in 2001, 'the Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Eurasia' signed between Ankara and Moscow was "the most significant document to enhance bilateral coordination and cooperation in the

³⁰ J. Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022, 140-1

³¹ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey, [Avaliable at www.mfa.gov.tr/traceca.en.mfa] (Accessed on 29 April 2024). Ukraine and Moldova joined in 1996, then Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey in 2000, followed by Iran in 2009.

³² Republic of Turkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAF 2009), 'Joint Declaration between the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation on Progress Towards a New Stage in Relations and Further Deepening Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership' Unofficial Translation, 2009 [Avaliable at <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-declaration-between-the-republic-of-turkey-and-the-russian-federation-on-progress-towards-a-new-stage-in-relations-and-further-deepening-of-friendship-and-multidimensional-partnership-moscow-13-february-2009.en.mfa>] (Accessed on 29 April 2024).

³³ Şener Aktürk, "Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War (1992–2002)," *Turkish Studies*, 7:3 (2006), 337–64.



region”.³⁴ Consequently, the increasing geostrategic partnership between Turkey and Russia was the first variable of an alternative vision of Turkish foreign policy in Eurasia that had already been established by previous Ankara governments.³⁵ The pro-Islamic AKP government continued to base relations on material interests despite the ideational differences in terms of their culture and religion. The second section of the article evaluates Turkey’s geopositioning in Eurasia as part of the AKP’s multidimensional foreign policy: increasing geostrategic partnership with Russia, improving geoeconomic relations with China and changing geopolitics of relations with Iran.

2. The Implementation of Multidimensional Foreign Policy under the AKP

The first AKP government was formed by Abdullah Gül, who was briefly Prime Minister (2002-03), then Foreign Minister (2003-07), and who expressed a commitment to pursuing a delicate balance in “good-neighbourly practices with the Russian Federation” and cultural affinity with the Turkic republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus.³⁶ During the AKP’s first term in power (2002-07), Turkey continued implementing good neighbourly relations with Russia and promoting the sustainability of energy networks. In particular, Ankara and Moscow governments signed relevant security agreements with Azerbaijan and Georgia in January 2002, while the Blue Stream gas pipeline construction was completed five months later, and natural gas supplies started the following year. The 2004-2005 Consultations Program established Turkish-Russian cooperation in counter-terrorism, security, economy, and consular work. When President Vladimir Putin (1999-2008) visited Turkey, “the Joint Declaration on the Intensification of Friendship and Multi-dimensional Partnership” was signed in 2004. Four years later, Ankara and Moscow agreed to simplify customs procedures and then signed another joint declaration on ‘Progress Towards a New Stage in Relations and Further Deepening Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership’ in Moscow in February 2009.³⁷

It is crucial to emphasise that the AKP government seized the opportunity to improve relations with Russia when Washington tacitly agreed to allow the Eurasian landscape to be redesigned by Moscow in post-9/11 politics. Meanwhile, the Middle East gained priority in

³⁴ Cevikoz, *Turkey in reconnecting*, 20.

³⁵ E. Ersen, “Turkey-Russian Relations in the New Century,” in *Turkey in the 21st Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy*, O. Z. Oktav (ed.) (London: Routledge: 2011): 95-114.

³⁶ Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAF 2020a) ‘Türkiye-Rusya Federasyonu Siyasi İlişkileri (Turkey’s Political Relations with the Russian Federation)’, 2020 [Available at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-rusya-siyasi-iliskileri.tr.mfa>]; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAF 2020b) ‘Turkey’s Relations with Central Asian Republics’, 2020 [Available at https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa] (Accessed on 29 April 2024).

³⁷ MAF 2009, *ibid.*



line with increasing international concerns about the Muslim world. When the AKP leaders consolidated their power in internal affairs, they revisited Özal's ambitions in creating a 'Turkic age'. The AKP leaders also attempted to revive the idea of 'neo-Ottomanism', interpreted as indications of revisiting Turkey's pan-Islamic aspirations with alternative vision of Turkish 'Eurasianism'.³⁸

Ahmet Davutoğlu, a professor of International Relations and an advisor to Prime Minister Erdoğan, advanced Cem's idea of 'zero problems' with neighbours and developed a 'strategic depth' theory, which has been extensively discussed in the literature.³⁹ Davutoğlu's ambitious theory focused on creating a new sphere of influence in Turkey's natural hinterland in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Africa, thereby suggesting the idea of Afro-Eurasia. Cem's notion of 'zero problems' was revisited and developed in the 1990s, but Davutoğlu's ideas could not be implemented then because Turkey was not ready to play for regional leadership.⁴⁰ Ankara's unresolved 'Armenian question,' in particular, has prevented Turkey from fulfilling its role as an honest broker in the South Caucasus. In Central Asia, the US-Russian competition over oil and gas sources lost its intensity, but the control of energy transportation has remained on the agenda. However, the changing regional and international context created favourable conditions for revitalizing Çiller's vision of making Turkey an East-West energy hub.

Gül's successor, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Prime Minister between 2003 and 2014, and since 2014, the 12th President of Turkey), had both a desire and a distinct ambition. He sought to revive previous policies to transform Turkey into an energy hub. The crucial change of earlier policies was based on the disappointments of Özal's vision in the 1990s:⁴¹ the Caspian region and energy network were prioritized over cultural ties with Central Asia.

After that, the AKP government intensified bilateral relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia with the Blue Stream gas pipeline project in 2005, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline in 2006 and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) natural gas pipeline in 2007. As of 2024, the TRACECA international transport program connects Asia, reaching Bulgaria and Romania in Europe via Turkey and the South Caucasus transport routes of the Baku-Tbilisi-

³⁸ Hoffman, "Neo-Ottomanism, Eurasianism", *op. cit.*

³⁹ A. Davutoglu *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position) (İstanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2001); E. Ersen, "Geopolitical Codes in Davutoglu's Views toward the Middle East," *Insight Turkey*, 16:1 (2014), 85-101; O. Tufekci, *The Foreign Policy of Modern Turkey: Power and the Ideology of Eurasianism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

⁴⁰ A. Davutoğlu *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim world* (İstanbul, BSV Yayınları, 1994); A. Davutoğlu, "The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World (dis)Order," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, 2:4 (1997).

⁴¹ Bilgin and Bilgic, Turkey's 'New' Foreign, 187.



Batumi and Baku-Tbilisi-Poti railroads. The pipeline routes and the transit infrastructure of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) Railroad Project, which became operational in 2017, resulted in Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan being closely tied through energy, communications and transport links in the South Caucasus.

While balancing Turkey’s traditional pro-Western commitments with these new ties Ankara under Gül’s Presidency (2007-14) turned towards a more ambitious foreign policy during the second (2007-11) and third (2011-15) terms of AKP governments. One of the main goals was to achieve Turkey’s full participation in the liberal international economy, Turkey’s geostrategic role between (Western) Europe and (Central) Asia was seen as a competitive advantage in making the ‘new’ Turkey the energy hub of the 21st century and therefore setting the stage for the AKP’s vision of ‘National Foreign Policy at the Turkish Century’ to establish regional peace and security.⁴²

In the Eurasian regional context, Ankara established bilateral relations with hydrocarbon-rich Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in Central Asia, which became the core pattern of broader regional integration schemes among Turkic-speaking countries.⁴³ Turkey’s initiative led to the establishment of a ‘Commonwealth of Turkic-speaking Countries’ with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. When Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan dropped out, partly due to their mistrust of Ankara’s expansionist policies and concerns for their sovereignty, Ankara had to change its strategy again. The Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States was signed between Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and the Council was formally established in 2009.

Under Davutoğlu’s leadership as Foreign Minister (2009–2014) and Prime Minister (2014–2016), the AKP governments put his theory of ‘strategic depth’ and ‘multi-dimensional foreign policy’ into practice.⁴⁴ The first variable of Turkey’s geopositioning in Eurasia was prioritizing geostrategic partnership with Moscow despite Turkey’s pro-Western commitments as a NATO member.

2.1. Geostrategic Partnership between Turkey and Russia in Eurasia

As part of Turkey’s geopositioning in Eurasia, Ankara’s relations with Moscow continued to improve under the AKP governance. Ankara proposed the so-called Caucasus

⁴² Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “‘Türkiye Yuzyilinda’nda Dis Politika” [Available at <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/dis-politika-genel.tr.mfa>] (Accessed on 29 April 2024).

⁴³ There are six Turkic-speaking countries: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

⁴⁴ A. Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: an Assessment of 2007,” *Insight Turkey*, 10:1(2008), 77–96.



Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP), which aimed at multilateral cooperation in the South Caucasus after the Georgian-Russian War of 2008. The CSCP brought the leaders of Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia together in three successive meetings. However, it failed to establish a successful forum for enhancing regional understanding and confidence.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the CSCP created a momentum of diplomatic meetings among the heads of states.

In their joint declaration of 2009, both states agreed that “bilateral relations and cooperation between the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation serve the interests of both countries and contribute considerably to peace, security, stability and development throughout the vast Eurasian geography as well as at the international level.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Ankara and Moscow governments agreed in principle to develop the South Stream Gas Pipeline, to be constructed under the Black Sea in 2009. Despite the EU’s opposition, Turkey initially permitted the launching of a feasibility study of the South Stream in 2011 but then suspended it four years later. The Council of High Level of Cooperation between the Russian Federation and Turkey was established during Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev’s (2008-12) visit to Turkey in 2010. Ankara and Moscow agreed to two deals that accepted reciprocal visa-free travel, and Russia supported the construction of Turkey’s first nuclear power station in Akkuyu, near Mersin.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Russian-Turkish cooperation advanced in trade and energy so that “around 65 per cent of Turkey’s energy imports [we]re comprised of Russian oil and gas”.⁴⁸

During the third (2011-15) and fourth (2015-18) terms of the AKP government, Turkey’s engagement in Eurasia gained further momentum at a time when Moscow promoted a Russian-led ‘Greater Eurasia’.⁴⁹ After Putin first publicly spoke of a ‘Greater Eurasia’ in 2013, his vision became strategically linked to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁵⁰ This has put Eurasia, where Turkey has a natural place, at the centre of shaping the regional order. Putin has expressed his desire to see Ankara develop its relations with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Turkey responded cautiously, given its alliances and commitments to the West. Furthermore, political conflicts and disagreements over Ukraine and Syria in the Middle East damaged Russian-Turkish economic and energy relations. In the Syrian war, Ankara claimed that Russian military aircraft violated Turkish airspace, resulting

⁴⁵ Cevikoz, *Turkey in a Reconnecting*, 20.

⁴⁶ MAF 2009, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ MAF 2020a, *ibid.*; Cevikoz, *Turkey in a Reconnecting*, 20.

⁴⁸ Cevikoz, *Turkey in a Reconnecting*, 20.

⁴⁹ Pieper, *Making of Eurasia*, 33.

⁵⁰ Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia*, 76-7.



in the downing of a Russian SU-24 by the Turkish Air Force on 24 November 2015.⁵¹ Turkish-Russian ‘good neighbourly’ relations were derailed, but the geostrategic partnership was rescued by two energy projects: TANAP and TurkStream.

On the one hand, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) was designed as the backbone of the EU’s Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) to reduce European dependence on Russian gas.⁵² TANAP ensures gas transfer from the Caspian region directly via Turkey to Europe and is dubbed the ‘Silk Road of Energy’.⁵³ Despite many hurdles, the successful completion of the TANAP project in 2018 and the formal transportation of Azeri natural gas through the pipeline in 2020 contributed towards Ankara’s goal of becoming Europe’s energy security supplier.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the most ambitious project of the Ankara-Moscow strategic partnership is TurkStream (TurkAkım), to link Russia with Turkey with a gas pipeline under the Black Sea. This was initially considered as an alternative to the South Stream gas project after the EU blocked the development of that project. At the time, the Turkish government displayed diplomatic mastery in negotiating an understanding with Russia, persuading Moscow to abandon the South Stream while gaining credits from the EU. President Putin acknowledged the cancellation of South Stream during his official visit to Ankara in December 2014.⁵⁵ When the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian bomber in late 2015, the souring of Ankara-Moscow political affairs briefly put the TurkStream project on the shelf for five years.

Despite disagreements in the Middle East, the Russian-Turkish strategic partnership further developed. After the failed coup attempt of July 2016 in Turkey, Putin expressed his strong support for Erdoğan. Ankara abandoned its anti-Assad position in a significant U-turn and became part of the Russian-led Astana peace process in Syria. In energy cooperation, Erdoğan and Putin signed a deal on 10 October 2016 to realize the TurkStream project despite the increasing political, technical and financial challenges involved in the project. The EU

⁵¹ Cevikoz, *Turkey in a Reconnecting*, 21.

⁵² The international agreement of the TANAP project was signed between the governments of Azerbaijan and Turkey in 2012 and began operating in 2020. [Available at <https://www.tanap.com/en/tanap-project>] (Accessed on 24 April 2024).

⁵³ “Dubbed as ‘Silk Road of Energy,’ TANAP begins gas delivery,” *Daily Sabah*, 12 June 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2018/06/12/dubbed-the-silk-road-of-energy-tanap-begins-gas-delivery>. (Accessed on 24 April 2024).

⁵⁴ “Turkey and Azerbaijan mark completion of TANAP pipeline to take gas to Europe,” *Reuters*, November 30, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-energy-tanap-idUSKBN1Y40CP> (Accessed on 24 April 2024).

⁵⁵ Ersen & Celikpala, *Turkey and the changing energy*, 585.



competition rules that ended South Stream are still valid and pose a continuing challenge to TurkStream. In 2019, Turkey received the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system from Russia. This led to a diplomatic crisis with Washington, given that Turkey is a member of NATO.

When international politics was put on hold during the Covid-19 pandemic, Ankara and Moscow found themselves at the centre of a local conflict in 2020. The Nagorno-Karabagh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia tested the Russian-Turkish strategic partnership. With the signature of the Russian-brokered peace agreement between Baku and Yerevan, it became clear that Russia and Turkey are in a low-impact competition for power, prestige and influence in the South Caucasus.⁵⁶ Although Turkey was not directly included in peace arrangements, Ankara's participation on the ground was recognized. The Azerbaijani President referred to the role of neighbouring countries in establishing transportation connections. As Hale argues, "in broad strategic terms, Putin saw a rapprochement with Turkey and Azerbaijan as more beneficial for Russia than an exclusive alliance with Armenia."⁵⁷ In short, as defined by their geostrategic partnership in Eurasia, neither Ankara nor Moscow wanted to be drawn into another conflict in the broader regional context. While the TurkStream pipeline project was suspended during the Covid-19 pandemic, it has started carrying Russian gas through two strings since January 2020: first to Turkey and second to Europe via Bulgaria.⁵⁸ As of March 2024, Turkey continues with its ambitious vision to become a regional energy hub while TurkStream continues to carry around 60 percent of Ankara's Russian gas imports.⁵⁹ More importantly, the Turkish-Russian geostrategic partnership paved the way for improving geoeconomic relations between Ankara and Beijing as the second variable of Turkey's geopositioning in Eurasia at the Turkish Century.

2.2. Geoeconomic Relations between Turkey and China in the 21st Century

One of Putin's achievements has been the inclusion of China into the idea of Greater

⁵⁶ Ayla Göl, "The Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Impact of COVID-19 on International Diplomacy", *LSE Blog*, November 2020, [Avaliable at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/11/11/the-conflict-in-nagorno-karabakh-and-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-international-diplomacy/>] (Accessed on 30 April 2024).

⁵⁷ William Hale, "Turkey, Russia and the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Events, consequences and prospects", *Turkish Area Studies Review*, No.37 (Spring 2021), 15.

⁵⁸ "TurkStream gas link operation 'secured' after Dutch permit return: Hungary," *S&P Global Commodity Insights*, October 19, 2022, [Avaliable at <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/natural-gas/101922-turkstream-gas-link-operation-secured-after-dutch-permit-return-hungary>] (Accessed on 24 April 2024).

⁵⁹ Y. Gaber, "Turkey can become an energy hub – but not by going all-in on Russian gas," *Atlantic Council*, December 7, 2022. [Avaliable at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/turkey-can-become-an-energy-hub-but-not-by-going-all-in-on-russian-gas/>] (Accessed on 30 April 2024).



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Eurasia.⁶⁰ China's historical networks of the Silk Road and the Spice Route were collectively renamed as 'One Belt, One Road' and later as 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI).⁶¹ While China has confirmed its leading role in the global economy, it regionally looks towards Central Asia to reach out to the Caspian and the Middle East to gain access to energy supplies and international markets.⁶² China's BRI lures not only most of the Central Asian republics favourably but also extends to the Middle East and the South Caucasus, where Turkey has a pivotal role.⁶³ Three critical areas of the BRI connectivity projects are related to transport (railways, roads and ports), energy (pipeline routes and hydropower dams) and information and communication technologies (mobile networks and digital links) that Turkey has already expressed interest in. The BRI embodies the physical connectivity of Eurasian projects from the Pacific to the Atlantic, some of which are part of Turkey's ambition for becoming the East-West energy hub. Moreover, Beijing's leading role in the Shanghai Corporation Organisation (SCO) brings Turkey closer to China.⁶⁴

Established in 2001, the SCO is a crucial forum for Eurasian regionalism.⁶⁵ Erdogan frequently referred to the SCO as 'the new direction of Turkey'.⁶⁶ Turkey has had a dialogue partner status since 2012, and Ankara desires to expand participation in regional security issues and economic and cultural cooperation. Under the shadow of Turkey's deteriorating relations with the West and 'democratic backsliding' during the AKP's fourth term,⁶⁷ Ankara's decision to develop an institutional relationship with the SCO raised severe concerns among its NATO allies. However, when the issue was addressed, the Secretary-General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, stated that there were no contradictions.⁶⁸ Moreover, the EU has also developed relations with SCO since 2012. The Special

⁶⁰ G. Diesen, "Russia, China and the 'balance of dependence' in Greater Eurasia", *Valdai Papers, Russia in Global Affairs*, (11 April 2017), [Avaliable at <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-china-and-balance-of-dependence-in-greater-eurasia/>] (Accessed On 30 April 2024); Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia*, 79.

⁶¹ N. Rolland, "A concise guide to the Belt and Road initiative", *National Bureau of Asian Research*, (11 April 2019), [Avaliable at <https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-guide-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>] (Accessed on 30 April 2024).

⁶² Cevikoz, *Turkey in reconnecting*, 23.

⁶³ Tim Summers, "Geo-cultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Road for the Twenty-first Century," *International Affairs* 96:1 (May 2020), 844-545; Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia*, 104.

⁶⁴ Acharya, *End of American*, 88; Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia*, 76.

⁶⁵ The Shanghai Corporation Organisation currently has six members (China and Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), five observer states (Afghanistan, Mongolia, Iran, India, and Pakistan) and three dialogue partners (Turkey since 2012, Sri Lanka, and Belarus).

⁶⁶ Cevikoz, *Turkey in reconnecting*, 25.

⁶⁷ C. B. Tansel, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey: Beyond the Narratives of Progress," *South European Society and Politics*, 23: 2 (2018) 197.

⁶⁸ Cevikoz, *Turkey in reconnecting*, 26 fn 3.



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Representative for Central Asia acknowledged that ‘other European states’ might also consider establishing closer ties with the SCO in future. If Turkey is considered part of ‘other European states’, Ankara was given the green light for SCO membership. EU and NATO statements indicate that Turkey’s Western and Eurasian orientations are not contradictory. However, Ankara has not yet applied for full membership or observer status at the SCO. Ankara keeps this option open to be re-assessed depending on the future of Turkey’s EU membership. It is reasonable to argue that Erdogan’s above statement can be turned from mere rhetoric into policy if Ankara has to reconsider alternatives to EU membership in the emerging post-Western order.⁶⁹

Therefore, Ankara’s increasing geoeconomic relation with Beijing is the second variable of Turkey’s geositioning in Eurasia.⁷⁰ Turkey officially became a BRI member country in 2015 and has become a significant partner in the BRI projects to connect China to Europe through Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁷¹ One of the obstacles in Turkish-Chinese relations has been the diplomatic tension over the ethnic Uyghur Turks⁷². In the past, Erdogan repeatedly criticized the Chinese treatment of its Uyghur minority but had a U-turn that stopped criticisms after improving economic relations in 2009 and 2019. The two-way trade between Ankara and Beijing has increased from \$1 billion in 2000 to \$10 billion in 2009, \$23 billion in 2018 and \$32 billion in 2021.⁷³ In the telecommunication sector, while the Chinese company Huawei has a 30% share of the Turkish market, ZTE bought 48% of a Turkish company in 2016, Netas, a key telecom manufacturer.⁷⁴ Chinese companies have also entered Turkey’s logistics market by investing in the country’s third-largest container terminal and the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge across the Bosphorus. As of 2020, Chinese freight trains regularly cross the Bosphorus through the Marmaray railway tunnel connecting Asia to Europe. Currently, more than a thousand Chinese companies are active in the Turkish market.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ J. Ikenberry, “The End of a Liberal Order,” *International Affairs*, 94: 1 (2018), 7.

⁷⁰ P. Honghui, “Prospects for Sino-Turkish Relations: Unlikely Partnership or Uncertain Complex?,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 2:1 (2016), 101.

⁷¹ B. Gurel and M. Kozluca,, “Chinese Investment in turkey: The Belt and Road Initiative, Rising Expectations and Ground Realities,” *European Review*, 30:6 (2022): 806-834.

⁷² Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia*, 104.

⁷³ K. Temiz, *Turkey-China Relations: Ankara Must Balance Complications on Many Fronts*, MERICS, August 18, 2022 [Avaliable at <https://merics.org/en/turkey-china-relations-ankara-must-balance-complications-many-fronts>] (Accessed on 24 April 2024).

⁷⁴ A. Alemdaroglu and S. Tepe, “Erdogan is Turning Turkey into a Chinese Client State,” *Foreign Policy*, (16 September 2020), [Avaliable at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/16/erdogan-is-turning-turkey-into-a-chinese-client-state/>] (Accessed on 24 April 2024).

⁷⁵ R. Kraemar, “Courting Danger, Erdogan Ramps up Reliance on China,” *Middle East Initiative*, September 21, 2021, [Avaliable at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/courting-danger-erdogan-ramps-reliance-china>] (Accessed on 24 April 2024).



Increasing Sino-Turkish geoeconomic relations serve to actualize Ankara's vision of becoming the East-West energy hub. This vision is particularly evident in three geo-projects between 2000 and 2020: TRACECA, BTK and TANAP.

Firstly, as explained earlier, Turkey has been one of the leading members of the EU-sponsored TRACECA since 2000.⁷⁶ The TRACECA corridor connects Asia, reaching Bulgaria and Romania in Europe via Turkey and the South Caucasus transport routes of the Baku-Tbilisi-Batumi and Baku-Tbilisi-Poti railroads. Secondly, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway (BTK) route was established between Turkey and Georgia in 2007 and became operational in 2017. Despite the clash of interests and initial challenges, the BTK is one of the strategic connectivity projects along the East-West corridor because it is "intended to constitute an integral part of the 'Iron Silk Road' of the twenty-first century". The main aim is to integrate the project with China's BRI in the long run.⁷⁷ Thirdly, the successful completion of TANAP projects Ankara's goal of becoming Europe's energy security supplier. As part of Turkey's increasing role in Eurasia, Ankara also seeks to feed Turkmen gas into TANAP. Although many were sceptical of its achievement, Turkey signed a new natural gas agreement with Turkmenistan in March 2024.⁷⁸ This progress indicates that Ankara is getting closer to realising its vision of becoming a crucial East-West 'energy hub' and its ambition of projecting the 'Middle Corridor Initiative' in pursuing geostrategic, geoeconomics and geopolitical objectives in the 'Turkish Century'.⁷⁹ Given the fact that China has special relations with Iran, the new Turkish foreign policy vision has ultimately led Ankara to change its view of traditional rivalry with Iran in the region. Therefore, the third variable of Turkey's ge positioning in Eurasia is the changing geopolitics of Ankara's relations with Tehran.

2.3. The changing geopolitics of Turkey's relations with Iran

As the third variable of ge positioning in Eurasia, Turkey's increasing geostrategic and

⁷⁶ TRACECA program was established in 1993 at the Brussels Conference with the participation of the EU Commission and the Governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Ukraine and Moldova joined in 1996, then Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey in 2000, followed by Iran in 2009. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey, [Available at www.mfa.gov.tr/traceca.en.mfa] (Accessed on 24 April 2024).

⁷⁷ Cevikoz, *Turkey in reconnecting*, 27.

⁷⁸ M. Akin, "New Natural Gas Agreement between Türkiye and Turkmenistan," Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies (ANKASAM), 3 March 2024 (Available at <https://merics.org/en/turkey-china-relations-ankara-must-balance-complications-many-fronts>) [Accessed on 24 April 2024].

⁷⁹ Cevikoz, *Turkey in a Reconnecting*, pp., 27-29; E. Ersen and M. Celikpala "Turkey and the Changing Energy Geopolitics of Eurasia," *Energy Policy*, 128 (2019), 588; E. Hussain, "The Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle Corridor: Complementarity or Competition?," *Insight Turkey*, 23:3 (2021): 233-250; Pieper, *Making of Eurasia*, 40.



economic partnerships with Russia and China within BRI networks led to an unprecedented change in perceptions and Turco-Iran relations. Moscow and Beijing have traditionally valued ties with Tehran, which is also drawn to the BRI projects.⁸⁰ Historically, Turkey and Iran, the region's two non-Arab countries and representatives of two branches of Islam —Sunni and Shia— have been traditionally engaged in a rivalry influenced by ideational factors —culture, identity, and religion— for leadership in the Middle East. Therefore, the change in Turkish foreign policy towards Iran is shaped by the geopolitics of Turkey's ge positioning in Eurasia. As Jenkins argued, relations between Turkey and Iran were determined by historical rivalry interrupted by brief periods of rapprochement.⁸¹ Despite its pro-Islamic orientation, the AKP has continued perceiving Iran as a rival rather than a political partner in the Middle East. During the first two terms of the AKP governments, Ankara's relations with Tehran oscillated from collision due to the US-led invasion of Iraq to cooperation because of the Kurdish question, especially collaboration against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in Turkey and its offshoot PJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan) in Iran.⁸²

Within the context of regional geopolitics, both sides sustained relations with caution around bilateral trade and investments during the first decade of the 21st Century. The Arab Spring changed the international dynamics, and Iran was suspicious of Turkey's increasing neo-Ottomanism for regional leadership.⁸³ While continuing civil war in Syria and deepening sectarian divides in Iraq led to the reemergence of the Ankara-Tehran rivalry in the Middle East, the threat of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) between 2013-19 added another tension that brought two historically rival states together to collaborate. As Akbarzadeh and Barry argue, their historical perceptions have altered as “not quite enemies but less than friends”, which is conceptualized as ‘frenemies’ in their analysis. Furthermore, if Iran is perceived as part of Eurasia, where Ankara has already improved geostrategic and geoeconomic relations with two major players, Russia and China, the AKP leadership considered the possibilities of collaboration without direct confrontation with Tehran.

⁸⁰ Kulsoom Belal, “China-Iran Relations: Prospects and Complexities,” *Policy Perspectives*, 17:2 (2020), 47-66; Pieper, *Making of Eurasia*, 83.

⁸¹ Gareth H. Jenkins, “Occasional Allies, Enduring Rivals: Turkey's Relations with Iran”, *Silk Road Paper* (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, May 2012), 10.

[Available at https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2012_05_SRP_Jenkins_Turkey-Iran.pdf] (Accessed on 30 April 2024).

⁸² After the PKK launched its first terrorist attack in Turkey in 1984, Ankara and Teheran agreed to prevent any activity within their borders that would threaten each other's security. When a group of Iranian Kurds affiliated with the PKK formed the PJAK in 2004, they promised more rights for Iran's Kurdish minority. Jenkins, *Occasional Allies*, 32.

⁸³ Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, “Iran and Turkey: Not Quite Enemies but Less than Friends,” *Third World Quarterly*, 38:4, 2017, 980-995.



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Three specific events are highlighted to indicate the complexity of geopolitical relations between Ankara and Tehran: the Syrian conflict, the Kurdish issue and the nuclear deal with the West. The differences between Iran and Turkey over regional affairs are the strongest in Syria, where Tehran's aim (along with Moscow's) was to keep Asad in power. At the same time, Ankara supported the groups to topple down his regime. The failed coup attempt of 2016 in Turkey was a turning point for tightening geopolitical ties between the Ankara and Tehran governments because Iran (along with Putin) surprisingly supported the AKP and Erdogan.⁸⁴ The next U-turn came from Turkey when its priorities in Syria changed when Ankara also realized its efforts failed to topple the Asad regime. In 2016, Turkey and Iran signed the Astana Agreement with Russia to try to end the Syrian conflict. In 2017, there was another sign of acting as frenemies when they rejected the Kurdistan Regional Government's referendum for independence in Northern Iraq.

In addition to this regional context, increasingly assertive alignment between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates draws Ankara and Tehran closer. The following events proved the continuity of the historical trend: "Turkish-Iranian relations have always been multi-layered" as 'occasional allies' by 'enduring rivalries'.⁸⁵ In May 2018, when former US President Donald Trump imposed heavy sanctions on Iran and withdrew Washington from Iran's nuclear agreement, Turkey played an active role in mediating between Iran and the West. In June 2020, when Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Ankara, Zarif agreed that Iran would back Turkey's preferred side in the Libyan conflict. In return, Erdoğan called on the United States to withdraw sanctions on Iran. In June 2021, interestingly Erdogan congratulated Iran's President-elect Ebrahim Raisi and expressed his hopes to further strengthen relations between Ankara and Tehran during Raisi's Presidency.⁸⁶ It is reasonable to argue that despite being on the opposite side of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of 2020 in the South Caucasus, where Iran supports Armenia and Turkey is pro-Azerbaijani, the renewal of Azerbaijani military offensive in September 2023 added new regional tensions, which continue testing relations between two Ankara and Tehran. Furthermore, Turkish-Iranian relations in the near future will depend on emerging regional challenges and the involvement of international actors following the recent ongoing Israel-Hamas war since October 2023. Accordingly, relations between Ankara and Tehran will continue swinging between

⁸⁴ M. B. Altunışık, "Iran-Turkey Relations: between Rivalry and Competition," in *Shocks and rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Imad Mansour and William R. Thompson (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 139-141.

⁸⁵ Jenkins, *Occasional Allies*, 70.

⁸⁶ Ali Bakir, "How Raisi's Victory will Impact Turkey's Relations with Iran?," *MENAFFAIRS, Middle East, North Africa and Global Affairs*, July 2, 2021. [Available at <https://menaaffairs.com/how-raisis-victory-will-impact-turkeys-relations-with-iran/>] (Accessed on 30 April 2024).



collaboration and competition, avoiding confrontation that might harm their mutual economic interests in a fragile region.

Conclusion: Collaboration and Competition in Eurasia

The critical analysis of this article offered a new theoretical framework of ge positioning to challenge Turkey's bridge position as a result of binary oppositions between Europe and Asia. By tracing the empirical evidence of three variables – geostrategic, geoeconomic and geopolitical – in Turkish foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, this article's findings suggest that Turkey's Eurasian vision was not a grand strategy designed by the AKP leaders initially, but rather Ankara governments search for alternative repositioning from its pro-Western orientation to respond the changing regional and international context in post-Cold War era. While Turkey's geostrategic partnership with Russia continued to shape Turkish foreign policy, the rise of China in Eurasia has introduced a new material variable of geoeconomic relations with Beijing and a changing ideational vision of geopolitical relations with Tehran. On the one hand, Turkey has continued to recognise Russia as the leading geostrategic partner in energy security in Eurasia. On the other hand, Ankara has increased geoeconomic relations with China and the BRI projects, ultimately contributing to changing Ankara's multifaceted geopolitics with Iran.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis of this article further showed how both material – economic, security and strategic – and ideational – culture, identity and religious – interests shaped Turkey's ge positioning in Eurasia and why these considerations led to Ankara's implementation of a multidimensional foreign policy. While the AKP governments focused on making Turkey an 'energy hub' and projecting the twenty-first century as the 'Turkish Century', Ankara's relations evolved around collaboration and competition with Moscow, Beijing and Tehran in an attempt to reshape the Eurasian political landscape. Following tensions over Syria, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the reoccurring Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the most recent Israel-Hamas war proved to be the acid test of Turkey's ge positioning in Eurasia. Within an emerging multipolar world (dis)order, Turkey's challenge is balancing its Western alliances – EU, NATO and US – and its bilateral non-Western relations with Russia, China and Iran as the three influential players in Eurasia. Maintaining such equilibrium depends on how Turkey's future leaders will embrace its Eurasian identity, and new geo-positioning to determine the future of Turkish politics remains to be seen for the rest of the twenty-first century.