

INSTITUTIONAL BALANCING AS DIPLOMACY: TÜRKİYE'S DUAL-TRACK ENGAGEMENT IN A MULTIPOLAR ORDER

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Abstract

This study analyses Türkiye's foreign policy strategy within the framework of institutional balancing theory, a period marked by the increasing prominence of multipolarity and institutional pluralism in the post-Cold War international system. In the study, Türkiye's increasing interaction with regional institutional structures, such as the SCO and OTS, while maintaining its relations with Western-centred institutions like NATO and the EU, is examined in the context of its search for strategic autonomy. Türkiye's dual-track foreign policy approach is evaluated not only as an axis shift but as a multi-vector and multi-layered foreign policy model. Theoretically, based on the institutional balancing approach developed by Kai He, this study reveals that Türkiye employs both inclusive and exclusive institutional strategies to limit the influence of great powers. In this context, Türkiye's historical relations with NATO and the EU, as well as its institutional orientations within the framework of the SCO and OTS, are comparatively examined, and it is claimed that it is seeking balance at the military, diplomatic, economic, and normative levels. Along with being a passive regional actor, Türkiye's strategy demonstrates its multifaceted foreign policy approach and its emergence as a middle power that actively participates in the normative and structural processes of the international system. In this context, Türkiye's institutional balancing practices provide an important example for understanding the new roles that medium-sized states can play in the changing international order.

Keywords

Institutional Balancing, Turkish Foreign Policy, Multi-layered Diplomacy, Emerging Middle Powers, Western and Regional Institutions.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a estratégia de política externa da Turquia no âmbito da teoria do equilíbrio institucional, um período marcado pelo aumento da proeminência da multipolaridade e do pluralismo institucional no sistema internacional pós-Guerra Fria. No estudo, a crescente interação da Turquia com estruturas institucionais regionais, como a SCO e a OTS, mantendo as suas relações com instituições centradas no Ocidente, como a OTAN e a UE, é examinada no contexto da sua busca por autonomia estratégica. A abordagem de política externa de dupla via da Turquia é avaliada não apenas como uma mudança de eixo, mas como um modelo de política externa multivetorial e multifacetado. Teoricamente, com



base na abordagem de equilíbrio institucional desenvolvida por Kai He, este estudo revela que a Turquia emprega estratégias institucionais inclusivas e exclusivas para limitar a influência das grandes potências. Neste contexto, as relações históricas da Turquia com a OTAN e a UE, bem como as suas orientações institucionais no âmbito da SCO e da OTS, são examinadas comparativamente, e afirma-se que ela procura o equilíbrio nos níveis militar, diplomático, económico e normativo. Além de ser um ator regional passivo, a estratégia da Turquia demonstra a sua abordagem multifacetada da política externa e a sua emergência como uma potência média que participa ativamente nos processos normativos e estruturais do sistema internacional. Neste contexto, as práticas de equilíbrio institucional da Turquia fornecem um exemplo importante para compreender os novos papéis que os Estados de média dimensão podem desempenhar na ordem internacional em mudança.

Palavras-chave

Equilíbrio institucional, política externa turca, diplomacia multifacetada, potências médias emergentes, instituições ocidentais e regionais.

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Introduction

The international system has evolved into a multi-centred and dynamic structure in the distribution of power and the functioning of institutions after the Cold War. The increasing questioning of the unipolar order led by the U.S. has shifted towards new strategic pursuits and alternative alliance structures at both regional and global levels. This transformation heralds a period in which emerging and medium-sized powers, especially, are turning to balancing great power influence with more flexible, multi-layered, and institutional tools instead of direct military confrontation. This tendency is explained by the concept of "institutional balancing" and refers to the strategies developed by states through institutions to limit the influence of great powers.

This study examines the institutional balancing practices in the context of Türkiye's multi-level foreign policy strategy. Türkiye's foreign policy orientation is evaluated not only as an axis shift from the West to the East but as a multi-vector, flexible and strategic autonomy-focused diplomacy to maximise its interests. While Türkiye continues its relations with Western-centred institutions such as NATO and the European Union (EU), it also turns to alternative regional institutional structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) and increasingly develops engagement with these structures. This strategy allows Türkiye to redefine its position in the international system and protect its security and economic interests on multilateral platforms.

In this context, the study seeks answers to the following fundamental questions: Why and how does Türkiye develop engagement with alternative regional institutions while maintaining its position in Western-centred institutional structures? What forms of institutional balancing theory do Türkiye's relations with institutions such as the SCO and OTS overlap with? How does Türkiye's multi-level institutional strategy shape its status in the international system, regional influence, and search for strategic autonomy?

The study's theoretical framework, which aims to address these issues, is founded on Kai He's institutional balancing method. To minimise the impact of big powers or safeguard their own interests, governments try to reform current institutions or lead the creation of new regional structures. Türkiye's continuation of its relations with NATO and the EU,



while increasing its interaction with institutions such as the SCO and the OTS, can be considered an empirical example of this theoretical approach.

The study evaluates Türkiye's institutional engagements with NATO and the EU historically and contextually. Then, it analyses its alternative regional institutional orientations within the SCO and the OTS framework. This comparative analysis reveals that Türkiye simultaneously adopts inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing forms and has a strategic orientation to increase its autonomy within the multipolar system. The findings reveal that Türkiye is trying to establish institutional balance not only in the military but also at diplomatic, economic, and normative levels. Comparable strategies are visible beyond Türkiye. India's concurrent engagement with BRICS, Indonesia's ASEAN-centric multilateralism, and Brazil's regional institutionalisation for status politics each illustrate a wider pattern of dual-track institutional leverage. Framing Türkiye within this global repertoire clarifies both its commonalities and its specific mix of instruments.

As a result, Türkiye's institutional strategy reflects a multi-layered foreign policy model that enables it to both maintain its engagement with traditional Western structures and to take an active role in alternative institutionalisation processes at the regional level. This model shows that Türkiye is positioned not only as a passive actor in the international system but also as an "emerging middle power" that intervenes in normative and structural transformation processes. Rather than depicting Türkiye as merely defensive, this article shows that institutional balancing simultaneously constrains great-power influence and enables game-setting behaviour. In the Turkish case, NATO/EU function as channels of inclusive balancing, while SCO/OTS operate as exclusive balancing; together, they yield not only constraint but also status enhancement and a broader autonomy-producing policy space. The remainder of the study will discuss the empirical implications of this strategy in detail.

Theoretical Framework and Its Relevance

The traditional balance of power theory claims that states try to balance against their rivals by forming alliances or arming themselves to ensure security (Waltz, 1979: 127). Although there is a general acceptance in the literature that states follow balancing strategies, it is argued that balancing can be achieved for different reasons (threat balancing) (Walt, 1985) or with various methods (Pape, 2005; David, 1991; Paul, 2005). In the post-Cold War era, states favoured cost-effective and flexible strategies over direct military balancing as the international economic system became more integrated. In this context, institutional balancing emerged, describing how emerging powers use international and regional institutions to enhance their standing and mitigate great powers' influence (He, 2008). This transition also underlines a theoretical shift: whereas balance of power and balance of threat approaches in the realist tradition primarily emphasise military capabilities and threat perceptions, institutional balancing—drawing on a more liberal understanding—highlights the role of institutions in shaping state behaviour. In today's interconnected order, where direct military balancing is costly and often counterproductive, institutional balancing provides a more convincing explanation of how states seek influence and security through multilateral frameworks.



Emerging powers in the international system develop strategies to gain more influence and status and reflect their regional priorities within the dominant order without completely rejecting the norms and institutions of the existing order. One of these strategies is institutional balancing, which enables power competition within the system to be conducted through softer institutional tools, thereby avoiding military conflict.

Theoretically, this approach is based on the institutional balancing theory developed by Kai He. According to this theory, emerging powers aim to strengthen their positions within the international system not by directly challenging the military dominance of great powers but by engaging with multilateral international and regional institutions (He, 2008: 492). This approach seeks to ensure their security while also working towards establishing a more equitable global order. It is argued that this balancing strategy is used to achieve the following goals: Balancing global power asymmetries, seeking international status, and establishing regional leadership. Emerging powers try to balance the institutional advantages of great powers by turning to regional organisations to overcome the limitations they face in Western-centred international institutions for various reasons. Moreover, the gains achieved also bring symbolic gains such as recognition and prestige to these states. Thus, the limitations and limited influence in the system are increased through flexible and regional structures designed to suit their positions (He, 2022: 1112).

Institutional balancing occurs in two forms: inclusive, where a targeted power's influence is limited through norms within institutions that include it, and exclusive, where a rival is prevented from participation in new or alternative structures (He, 2008: 493). Emerging powers favour these strategies for security, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability. This approach gains legitimacy in contexts where military force is less preferred (He and Feng, 2020: 493). Türkiye exemplifies this framework by maintaining ties with Western institutions like NATO and the EU while also pursuing regional priorities through organisations like OTS and SCO. Thus, Türkiye is not simply an emerging power distancing itself from the West but rather balancing its interests through bilateral engagement and a multi-level foreign policy strategy.

The international system after the Cold War and in the 21st century has significantly impacted institutional balancing, becoming a widespread balancing strategy. As a result, the US-led short-term liberal order has developed into a more intricate and multipolar framework (Peters, 2023: 1653). This dynamic results from changes in the distribution of material power and is also impacted by expanding debates on the validity and operation of the existing institutional framework. As a result, not only the major powers but also the emerging ones now possess the ability to shape the institutional framework within this new multipolar system. The new multipolar environment shows that the distribution of power is concentrated in multiple centres, and the hegemonic superiority of a single actor has disappeared (Peters, 2023: 1661-62). This transition process has required re-establishing the balance of power, redefining institutional arrangements, and creating new norms and rules. This situation points to a phase in which the emerging powers have mainly taken on new roles: demands for reform in existing institutions and the search for an alternative order through new institutions. Based on the claim that the current order is Western-centred and under the control of Western states, the emerging powers' demands for more active participation in decision-making processes and the



desire to determine new norms are on the agenda of contemporary international politics (Stephen, 2017: 490). On the other hand, situations where existing limitations cannot be overcome lead emerging powers to turn to options such as building regional or thematic institutions under their leadership or engaging with existing non-Western institutions. Thus, the institutional basis of multipolarity is strengthened by creating institutional pluralism.

In this context, it becomes clear that emerging powers' basic strategy is institutional balancing. This more complex strategy is now implemented to balance the hegemon and shape cooperation or competition behaviours with other emerging powers. Therefore, the general character of the new multipolar system is evolving not only into military or economic but also into institutional competition and normative struggle.

Türkiye's strategy, presented in the next section, provides a unique example of this approach. Türkiye, which pursues a dual strategy, continues its NATO membership and EU candidacy process on the one hand. On the other hand, it created new relationships with SCO and led the way in the creation of regional organisations like OTS. This strategy strengthens Türkiye's economic and security interests while fostering a multifaceted identity in a multipolar environment. By aiming to be a more active player in the international order, Türkiye and other emerging powers seek to influence the system's normative and administrative structures through various institutional engagements.

The dual strategy and the inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing approaches significantly impact emerging powers' roles in international politics. According to the general approach in the literature, it is claimed that the balancing strategy pursued through Western-centred institutions and non-Western structures brings two different roles to emerging powers: complementary and competitive roles (Roy, 2022: 5; Voeten, 2017; Hettne and Söderbaum, 2006). According to the complementary role approach, while Western-centred international institutions aim to set norms and provide solutions to global problem areas, regional institutions are motivated to respond to individual needs through geographical, cultural and political goals. For this reason, a division of labour emerges between the two types of institutional structures. When evaluating the institutions with which Türkiye is engaged, NATO envisions a security architecture based on collective security and deterrence. However, it cannot create flexibility for its members' different regional security perspectives. Similarly, the EU, while presenting an economic and political integration model, may conflict with the individual economic and political realities of its members. In this context, new regional institutions such as OTS provide alternative multilateral platforms in terms of regional solidarity, soft power practices, and the construction of a common identity; and the SCO provides alternative multilateral platforms in areas such as regional security cooperation and energy diplomacy with a Eurasia-centred perspective.

On the other hand, the competitive role approach claims that newly established or institutionalised regional institutions are alternative structures developed for emerging powers experiencing global representation crises or unable to find solutions to their problems. In alternative ways, these organisations serve as hubs for regional influence and institutional agendas. It is widely acknowledged that these two positions can live peacefully. When viewed from the example of Türkiye, both being a permanent and active member of NATO and maintaining its relations with the EU at a strategic level reflect



Türkiye's traditional approach. However, taking a leading position in the TDT and developing institutional relations with the SCO provides the opportunity to produce new solutions to the problems encountered and, simultaneously, flexibility, diversity, and autonomy in its foreign policy strategy. Therefore, Türkiye's institutional balance strategy can be evaluated as combining complementary and competitive approaches.

In summary, the theory of institutional balancing offers a strong framework to explain the strategies and choices of emerging powers within international and regional organisations. For Türkiye, maintaining its position in existing institutions (such as NATO and the EU) and deepening relations with alternative formations (such as the TDT and the SCO) reflect a multi-layered and multifaceted strategy. The use of inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing strategies together and assuming both complementary and competitive roles at the same time shows that Türkiye is an active emerging power that tries to shape the norms and functioning of the order of the changing international system. In the next section, the foreign policy reflections of Türkiye's different institutional engagements and strategies will be examined empirically through this theoretical framework.

Türkiye's Engagement with Western Institutions

As an emerging middle power, Türkiye follows a dual foreign policy engaging both Western and non-Western institutions. Institutional balancing suggests that states use international organisations to offset great power influence through cooperation rather than confrontation. Regionalisation similarly stresses collaboration among proximate states within the global system (Held et al., 2004: 19). In today's order, globalisation and stronger regional dynamics push states toward multi-layered strategies.

This dual strategy is reflected in Türkiye's EU candidacy and NATO membership. It cultivates regional connections through the OTS and the SCO while simultaneously pursuing security and legitimacy through Western institutions. This approach seeks to advance national interests on several levels while striking a balance between big powers and regional alternatives rather than indicating an "axis shift." Through the prisms of regionalisation and institutional balance, the following sections examine the tenets and difficulties of Türkiye's NATO membership and its EU accession path.

Türkiye's NATO Membership

Amid post-World War II security concerns and a desire to connect with the West, Türkiye joined NATO in 1952. Faced with Soviet pressure over the Straits and eastern borders, Ankara turned decisively toward the Western bloc. U.S. support under the 1947 Truman Doctrine reinforced Türkiye's role as a key barrier to Soviet expansion (McGhee, 1990: 21). Having stayed neutral during most of the war, Türkiye abandoned this stance as Cold War tensions grew. To meet Western expectations, it accelerated democratic reforms and economic liberalisation. Despite doubts about its democratic maturity, Türkiye's dispatch of troops to Korea in 1950 and its heavy losses there were decisive in gaining NATO's approval (Zürcher, 2005: 235). It became a full member in February 1952, just three years after NATO's creation.



Türkiye's main strategic goal in joining NATO was to secure protection against the Soviet Union under the Alliance's collective defence, particularly through Article 5's guarantee of U.S. and European support (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). Membership also affirmed Türkiye's political and identity-based alignment with the West, solidifying its role as a frontline state (Oğuzlu, 2013: 3). This integration enhanced its international status and accelerated military modernisation through aid, equipment, and training (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). As a full member, Türkiye also gained a platform to assert its security priorities within NATO decision-making structures (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019).

Türkiye has played a key military and strategic role in NATO (Oğuzlu, 2013: 3). Its geography made it a forward post on the Alliance's southern flank during the Cold War. With NATO's second-largest army, Türkiye helped deter Soviet expansion from the 1950s to the 1980s. Bases like İncirlik were central to NATO operations; the Jupiter missiles deployed there, for example, were crucial in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Turkish airspace and intelligence infrastructure also provided vital surveillance against Soviet activities.

Since the Cold War's end, Türkiye has supported NATO's evolving missions. In the 1990s, it contributed to UN-backed peacekeeping in Bosnia and Kosovo. Post-2001, Türkiye twice led ISAF in Afghanistan and maintained troops there for years (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). It supported NATO's 2011 Libya mission with logistics and naval assets and hosted Patriot missiles against threats from Iraq and Syria. Türkiye also provided an early-warning radar for NATO's missile defence. These efforts reflect its continued commitment as a contributor, not just a beneficiary, within the Alliance. Türkiye's NATO role includes key political engagement alongside its military contributions. Despite the 1974 Cyprus intervention and ensuing U.S. arms embargo, Türkiye upheld alliance solidarity. Even during the 1980s military coup, NATO membership remained central to its foreign policy, reinforcing international legitimacy (Kınacıoğlu, 2017). Due to this stance, Türkiye's regional influence has grown, allowing it to manage disputes in the Middle East and the Caucasus while preserving its reputation as a trustworthy Western ally.

Türkiye's relations with NATO countries have become more strained in recent years. Its security emphasis changed after the Cold War from the Soviet threat to Middle Eastern instability and PKK terrorism (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). NATO's limited response to these concerns led to doubts about its relevance. The 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War, for instance, created a power vacuum in northern Iraq exploited by the PKK, while U.S. support fell short of Turkish expectations (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). U.S. backing of the PYD/YPG in Syria—groups Türkiye links to the PKK—further deepened mistrust. These dynamics have pushed Türkiye to seek greater autonomy in addressing its security needs.

A major recent crisis in Türkiye-NATO relations was Ankara's 2017 purchase of Russia's S-400 air-defence system (Kibaroğlu, 2019). After unsuccessful efforts to acquire U.S. Patriots on favourable terms, Türkiye turned to Moscow and received the first S-400 units in 2019, which was the first deployment of such a system by a NATO member. This move violated NATO protocols and raised concerns over interoperability and intelligence security (Ünlühisarcıklı, 2019). The U.S. claimed the S-400s jeopardised NATO systems, especially the F-35, and responded by excluding Türkiye from the F-35 program and



imposing sanctions. While some saw this as a pivot toward Russia, Ankara maintained its NATO commitment, citing national defence needs as the sole motive.

Beyond the S-400 dispute, Türkiye has clashed with NATO allies over Syria policy, Eastern Mediterranean issues, and democratic standards (Bardakçı, 2021). Tensions escalated after the 2016 coup attempt, with Western criticism growing over Ankara's cooperation with Russia and Iran through the Astana process, further straining alliance trust (Armutlu, 2023: 5). Regarding their positions on PKK/PYD activity, Türkiye postponed Sweden's and Finland's NATO bids in 2022 (Aslan, 2024: 750). Finland's membership was only accepted after certain security guarantees were obtained. This event confirmed Türkiye's ongoing strategic influence inside the Alliance and demonstrated how it uses the consensus rule of NATO to further its objectives.

There are two strategies reflected in Türkiye's present NATO stance. Ankara seeks strategic autonomy through deeper connections with non-NATO countries like China and Russia, even as it upholds Alliance unity and supports initiatives like NATO's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This reflects factors like Türkiye's reliance on Russian natural gas as well as geopolitical calculations. From an institutional-balancing view, Türkiye engages with NATO for security and legitimacy while using platforms like the SCO and BRICS to counterbalance Western influence. Erdoğan's "the world is bigger than five" rhetoric and participation in BRICS and SCO summits highlight Ankara's goal of asserting itself in a multipolar world.

A hybrid engagement paradigm that integrates both types of institutional balance is demonstrated by Türkiye's relationship with NATO. NATO membership served as a means of achieving both political and normative integration with the West and security assurances during the Cold War. It can be viewed as an illustration of inclusive institutional balance in this regard. Nevertheless, as security threats have changed and tensions with allies have increased in the post-Cold War era, Türkiye has begun looking into non-Western institutional options. Its participation in SCO and BRICS is indicative of an attempt to increase its strategic independence and is consistent with alternative or exclusive institutional balancing tactics meant to thwart Western limitations. Thus, Türkiye's involvement within the NATO framework demonstrates that institutional balancing is not limited to great powers but can also be flexibly employed by middle powers, which is an empirical contribution to the theoretical framework.

Türkiye's EU Accession Process

Türkiye's relationship with the EU has been intermittent, focused on economic and political integration rather than security. It began with Türkiye's 1959 application for associate membership in the European Economic Community (EEC), followed by the 1963 Ankara Agreement, which set a phased path toward full membership (Ünver Noi, 2025: 138–139). Article 28 of the Agreement proposed accession once relations had sufficiently advanced. The 1970 Additional Protocol laid the groundwork for a customs union and policy alignment. However, the 1971 military intervention and rising nationalist-leftist opposition to the EEC stalled momentum. After the 1974 Cyprus intervention, ties deteriorated further, and the process was suspended. Although relations improved in the 1980s, the 1980 coup and subsequent human rights concerns drew EU criticism (Akgül-



Açıkmeşe and Triantaphyllou, 2012). In 1987, the Özal government applied for full membership, but the 1989 Commission report rejected negotiations due to Türkiye's economic and democratic shortcomings. Still, by the early 1990s, relations had normalised. The end of the Cold War and the expansion of European integration changed the geopolitical positioning of Türkiye. Deep economic integration short of membership was fostered in 1995 when the Customs Union agreement matched Türkiye's external tariffs with the EU and provided Turkish industrial goods tariff-free access (Hale & Avcı, 2001).

A turning point came at the 1997 Luxembourg summit, which excluded Türkiye from the first wave of Eastern enlargements. This setback was reversed at the 1999 Helsinki summit, where Türkiye was granted candidate status (Müftüler-Baç, 2017: 421) "on equal footing" with other aspirants. Ankara responded with major reforms under the 2001 National Programme: abolishing the death penalty, expanding Kurdish-language broadcasting, and reducing military influence to meet the Copenhagen criteria. Recognising these steps, the 2004 Brussels European Council agreed to begin accession talks on 3 October 2005 (Öniş, 2003). Despite early momentum, negotiations stalled after 2006, mainly due to the Cyprus issue. Türkiye refused to recognise the Republic of Cyprus or open its ports until the EU lifted restrictions on Northern Cyprus (Tetik, 2021: 382). In response, the EU froze eight chapters. Subsequently, countries like France and Germany imposed further political blocks, proposing alternatives such as "privileged partnership." By the 2010s, talks had effectively stalled: only 16 of 35 chapters were opened, with no progress amid concerns over democratic backsliding and rule-of-law violations.

The 2016 coup attempt and ensuing emergency measures severely strained Türkiye-EU relations (Akçay & Deniş, 2022). The European Parliament recommended suspending accession talks, and by 2018, the Commission declared them effectively frozen (European Parliament, 2019). Although Türkiye remains a candidate, no meaningful progress has occurred since. Nevertheless, there were significant benefits to the process: EU-led reforms in the early 2000s improved both internal stability and international reputation. By supporting "zero problems" diplomacy, strengthening relations with Greece, and enabling Turkish support for the 2004 Cyprus referendum, these changes enhanced Ankara's reputation as a positive regional player (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2009: 9–10).

Türkiye's economic foreign policy has also been impacted by the EU process. By increasing trade and EU foreign direct investment, the 1996 Customs Union improved Türkiye's soft power and regional economic attractiveness. While the prospect of membership enhanced Türkiye's reputation as a democratic, Western-oriented country, conforming to EU criteria also helped relations with neighbours. This "model country" perception in the 2000s enabled Türkiye to project soft power in the Middle East and adopt a more confident foreign policy before the Arab Uprisings.

The EU process has given Türkiye diplomatic leverage. During the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, Ankara utilised its candidate status to negotiate an agreement with the EU that includes negotiations on visa liberalisation, financial help, and an update to the Customs Union. This demonstrated how influence over regional issues may result from EU alignment. Additionally, perceptions of EU proximity improved Türkiye's credibility in the area of foreign policy. Frustration has been heightened by the slow admittance process,



though. Long-term delays have made people and elites more sceptical of Europe; by the 2010s, support for EU membership had drastically decreased (Aydin-Düzgit, 2016: 4). This change promoted a more independent, nationalist foreign policy and undermined Türkiye's Europe-focused diplomacy. Calls for "strategic autonomy" after 2010 reflect growing disillusionment with the EU path (Waldman & Çalışkan, 2017), prompting Ankara to focus more on its own regional agenda.

The EU accession process has also limited Türkiye's foreign-policy autonomy. As a candidate, Türkiye was expected to align with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, including sanctions on Iran and positions in the Middle East. Similarly, the 1996 Customs Union boosted trade but bound Türkiye to the EU trade policy. When the EU signed free-trade agreements with countries like South Korea or Canada, Türkiye had to open its market without gaining reciprocal access. Attempts to negotiate bilateral deals often failed, as these countries already benefited from duty-free entry. Thus, deep integration without membership came at a sovereignty cost: Türkiye followed rules it could not influence.

The prolonged and uncertain EU accession process has, at times, enabled democratic backsliding in Türkiye. While reform efforts were strong until 2005, stalled talks eroded momentum. From the 2010s, authoritarian tendencies deepened despite EU criticism, which lost influence as membership prospects dimmed. The weakening of the EU "anchor" harmed Türkiye's democratic image and raised concerns in the West. This uncertainty has contributed to Türkiye's turn toward more nationalist and isolationist policies.

With EU accession prospects fading, Türkiye has deepened ties with regional organisations. Erdoğan's 2013 remark, "Invite us into the Shanghai Five and we'll bid the EU farewell", reflected this pivot (Daily Sabah, 2013). Türkiye became a dialogue partner of the SCO in 2012 and has since engaged with BRICS, joining its 2022 BRICS+ meeting. As an active member and former chair of the OTS, Ankara has also reinforced cooperation with Turkic republics. These actions, which are occasionally viewed as EU alternatives, show an institutional balancing strategy: By strengthening its regional power and maintaining EU links, Türkiye positions itself as a major actor in a multipolar world.

Türkiye's dual engagement with NATO and the EU exemplifies institutional balancing: while NATO offers security and the EU provides normative and economic legitimacy, Ankara also cultivates strategic autonomy through ties with the SCO, BRICS, and the OTS. This approach reflects a flexible, multi-vector diplomacy suited to a middle power navigating a multipolar world (He, 2008). By expanding its influence through regional platforms and acting independently, Türkiye's actions demonstrate its intention to not only conform to Western ideals but also to widen institutional balancing beyond the military to encompass diplomatic and economic aspects.

Türkiye's Engagement with Non-Western Regional Institutions

Türkiye's foreign policy seeks multidimensional ties with both global and regional actors. Its involvement in the OTS and the SCO enhances regional influence while offsetting great power dominance. From institutional balancing and regionalisation perspectives,



such engagement expands Türkiye's geopolitical space. Notably, a 2022 survey named Türkiye the most trusted external actor in Central Asia (Purtaş, 2025: 115).

Türkiye's Relations with the Organisation of Turkic States

The OTS, founded in 2009 and renamed in 2021, functions as a regional cooperation platform. According to institutional-balancing theory, states use such bodies to counter rival powers (He, 2009: 17), while regionalisation refers to growing integration within specific geographies (Hurrell, 1995: 345). Led by Türkiye and framed by pan-Turkic rhetoric, the OTS aims to expand Ankara's strategic reach. Though Türkiye promotes itself as the leader of the Turkic world, invoking slogans like "from the Adriatic to the Great Wall," its engagement remains pragmatic. Pan-Turkism serves as a legitimising narrative, but cooperation is driven by political and economic interests (Krzyżanowska, 2024).

Pan-Turkist discourse provides the ideological foundation of the OTS, highlighting shared language, culture, and history among Turkic peoples. In Türkiye, it has gained traction in the 2020s, notably during support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict (Krzyżanowska, 2024; Matveev, 2025). Its broad societal appeal gives legitimacy to Türkiye's regional initiatives and is embraced across the political spectrum (Krzyżanowska, 2024). However, modern Pan-Turkism remains symbolic; Ankara avoids irredentism and respects sovereignty (Matveev, 2025). Even while supporting Turkic minorities such as Crimean Tatars and Uyghurs, Türkiye avoids taking any steps that would sour relations with Russia or China. Rather, Pan-Turkism serves as a cultural and public diplomacy instrument that strengthens Türkiye's position as the world's leading nation.

The OTS prioritises economic cooperation and transport connectivity, aiming to ease trade and develop transcontinental routes (Krzyżanowska, 2024). Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which disrupted the Northern Corridor, the Middle Corridor via Türkiye gained strategic significance. OTS members have advanced Caspian transit projects to create a seamless Europe-Asia link, with Türkiye at the centre (Demir, 2022). A €10 billion commitment from international institutions in 2024 highlights the corridor's geoeconomic promise (European Commission, 2024). These efforts not only boost Türkiye's regional influence but also offer Central Asian states an institutional alternative to Russian dominance, reinforcing Türkiye's institutional balancing strategy (Krzyżanowska, 2024).

For Türkiye, the OTS functions as a geopolitical tool to strengthen its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Regionalisation through the OTS enables Ankara to expand its institutional presence in Eurasia, alongside its Western ties. Granting observer status to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 2022 demonstrates how Türkiye integrates its national interests into the organisation's agenda (Krzyżanowska, 2024). Similarly, naming Shusha the "cultural capital of the Turkic world" after Azerbaijan's Karabakh victory reflects how Türkiye and Azerbaijan advance shared goals within the OTS. These moves reinforce Turkish leadership while accommodating diverse member priorities.



While Türkiye leads the OTS, member states like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan maintain strategic balances with Russia, China, and the West. Türkiye's early recognition of these states in the 1990s did not translate into immediate regional influence. Kazakhstan resisted deeper integration in favour of a multi-vector policy, and Uzbekistan remained cautious of Türkiye's ambitions (Matveev, 2025). As a result, Türkiye's role is not hegemonic but based on soft power and consent (Wilson, 2023). Through TİKA aid, scholarships, and cultural diplomacy, Ankara has built influence and fostered long-term ties since the early 1990s (Krzyżanowska, 2024). The OTS thus operates as a flexible platform where pan-Turkic identity supports economic and diplomatic collaboration. In institutional-balancing terms, Türkiye uses the OTS to counter major powers through regional solidarity. From a regionalisation perspective, the OTS marks a new power centre, positioning Türkiye and its allies in the shifting global order.

The OTS represents a key platform for Türkiye's institutional balancing at the regional level. Through the OTS, Ankara builds institutional influence in Eurasia while aligning pan-Turkist discourse with its geopolitical and economic interests, reinforcing its multi-vector foreign policy. The OTS complements Türkiye's engagement with Western alliances by offering a regional counterweight and greater autonomy in Central Asia amid great-power competition. This scenario demonstrates that institutional balance is applicable to intermediate powers like Türkiye's attempts to establish regional order as well as to great powers.

Türkiye's Relations with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Türkiye's involvement in the SCO is indicative of its multifaceted foreign strategy and emphasis on Eurasia. As a "dialogue partner" since 2012 (Güpgüpoğlu, 2019), Ankara has shown occasional interest in full membership. From an institutional balancing view, this engagement expands Türkiye's diplomatic space beyond Western alliances (He, 2009: 88). Regionally, it signals a strategy of embracing overlapping identities and alliances beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

Post-Cold War Eurasianist ideology in Türkiye has fueled calls to pivot away from the West (Aksu, 2022). Popular among nationalist circles, this discourse advocates exiting NATO, abandoning EU aspirations, and aligning with an "anti-imperialist" bloc led by Russia and China (Çolakoğlu, 2019). Figures like Doğu Perinçek argue that Türkiye is a subordinate in the Atlantic but an equal partner in Eurasia, urging ties with Moscow and Beijing. Eurasianists welcomed joint military exercises with China and the S-400 missile deal with Russia as steps against Western dominance (Çolakoğlu, 2019). From the mid-2010s, especially after the 2016 coup attempt and tensions with the West, the AK Party adopted elements of this outlook. In late 2016, amid stalled EU talks, President Erdoğan asked, "Why shouldn't Türkiye be in the Shanghai Five?" (Reuters, 2016), prompting concerns in the West. Being the first NATO member to join the SCO, full Turkish participation might change the internal dynamics of the alliance (Falk, 2022). Such discourse gave their stance some political validity by echoing Eurasianist demands for a strategic rupture from the West.

There are more than simply ideological reasons for Türkiye's involvement in the SCO. First, the SCO provides a forum for regional security cooperation by focusing on



counterterrorism, separatism, and extremism, which is in line with Türkiye's worries about the PKK and extremist organisations. Second, important motivators are energy and economic links. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and related SCO projects present Türkiye with new markets and investment opportunities, supporting its goal to integrate into Eurasian infrastructure and energy networks. Third, frustration with the West—stemming from stalled EU accession, tensions with European states, and U.S. disputes over Syria and sanctions—has pushed Ankara to explore alternatives. According to Erdoğan, SCO membership might provide political sovereignty without the EU's democratic and human rights conditions (Dalay, 2013). The SCO was a desirable alternative, particularly after 2016, because of its adaptable rules and emphasis on sovereignty, which matched Türkiye's changing foreign policy objectives.

It is incorrect to see Türkiye's participation in the SCO as a complete rupture with the West. From an institutional balancing perspective, Ankara seeks equilibrium—remaining in the Western alliance while building ties with Russia and China to navigate great-power dynamics. This reflects a "soft balancing" or "multi-vector" strategy (Falk, 2022; Erşen, 2022). While Erdoğan's support for full membership and participation at the 2022 SCO summit demonstrated intent (Falk, 2022), he quickly reiterated NATO's centrality to Turkish strategy, asserting that the SCO and BRICS are not alternatives. Ankara's diplomacy is characterised by this two-pronged strategy, which uses both the East and the West for strategic and financial gain.

NATO partners have expressed worry about Türkiye's geopolitical course because of its growing connections with the SCO. The U.S. sanctions that followed the 2017 acquisition of S-400 missiles were interpreted as evidence of growing Eurasianist influence (Çolakoğlu, 2019). However, Türkiye has avoided entirely distancing itself from NATO and supplied drones to Ukraine and mediated between Moscow and Kyiv during the Ukraine War, even while abstaining from Western sanctions. This reflects Türkiye's strategy of engaging multiple power centres to preserve flexibility. According to the institutional balance theory, nations use this kind of activity to further their interests by preserving their connections across rival blocs (He, 2009: 92). This dual-track strategy is demonstrated by Türkiye's membership in both NATO and the SCO, which allows it to act independently within conflicting geopolitical frameworks.

The interaction between Türkiye and the SCO is a prime example of institutional balance. Ankara uses other forums, including the SCO, to increase strategic adaptability and pursue a multi-vector foreign strategy while preserving its place in the Western alliance. The SCO increases Türkiye's political clout by providing economic cooperation and security without stringent normative requirements. This engagement reflects Ankara's effort to avoid full Western dependence and establish institutional pluralism in Eurasia to operate more autonomously.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study analyses Türkiye's foreign policy from an institutional balancing perspective, evaluating its multi-level institutional engagements with both Western-centred institutions (NATO, EU) and non-Western alternative structures (SCO, OTS) within their strategic context. The findings indicate that Türkiye's foreign policy preferences are



shaped not by a mere change of direction or an axis shift but by a search for strategic autonomy as an emerging power in an environment of increasing competition and uncertainty within the multipolar international system.

At a theoretical level, Türkiye's behaviour aligns with both inclusive and exclusive strategies as defined by Kai He in the institutional balancing model. While relations with NATO and the EU indicate a search for legitimacy, normative harmony and security guarantees, ties developed with regional forums such as the SCO and OTS indicate Türkiye's efforts to create alternative institutional spaces to balance pressures and limitations coming from the West. This situation reveals that Türkiye is not only an actor trying to adapt to the current international order but also an emerging power that desires to reshape regional and global norms.

Türkiye's emerging power position is reinforced not only by its economic capacity but also by its institutional initiative, multi-vector diplomacy and the mediation roles it has developed in times of crisis. While the EU membership process provides Türkiye with long-term strategic advantages through economic arrangements and reform processes, such as the Customs Union, structures like the SCO and the OTS strengthen Türkiye's leadership position in Eurasia and the Turkic world at both symbolic and functional levels. Through this diverse involvement, Türkiye can increase its adaptability and influence within the global power structure.

As a result, Türkiye, an emerging middle power, is creating an institutional balancing plan to safeguard its interests in multilateral institutions and reduce the dominance of superpowers in the shifting global landscape. This approach reflects Ankara's claim to be an actor that not only adapts but also shapes. The Turkish example demonstrates that institutional balancing provides a valid and meaningful strategic model not only for great powers but also for emerging actors with regional influence.

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