

COMPLEMENTARY OR CONTRADICTORY? TÜRKİYE'S EMERGING MIDDLE POWER INTERACTIONS WITH THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether Türkiye's policies towards the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) are complementary or contradictory, situating the analysis within the broader discourse of emerging middle power diplomacy and the regionalisation of globalisation. Emerging or third-wave middle powers are pivotal in acting between regional and global governance structures, utilising multilateral frameworks to address complex international challenges as well as regional issues. Türkiye's foreign policy has often been interpreted through the lens of its hybrid identity, positioning at the intersection of multiple regions conceptualised as a "cusp state" or "liminal" state. Türkiye's growing engagement with the UN and long-standing normative and behavioural efforts of being a member of the EU exemplify its emerging middle power status, where regional efforts intersect with global ambitions. While the UN provides a universal platform for addressing global issues and gaining status in global governance, the EU offers more focused, normative, and region-specific opportunities. This paper evaluates the question of whether Türkiye's dual institutional engagement with the EU and the UN represents alignment or tension, thereby enriching the ongoing discussion on the regionalisation of globalisation. In order to do that, the paper utilises a comparative analysis of policy documents, official statements, and diplomatic efforts in certain niche areas of Türkiye's multilateral strategies in the UN and the EU throughout the 2000s. In doing so, it speaks to a growing body of work that calls into question linear or harmonious assumptions about the interplay between regionalism and multilateralism in emerging middle power strategies and their implications for middle power theory.

Keywords

Türkiye, Emerging Middle Powers, European Union, United Nations, Regional and Global Governance.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa se as políticas da Turquia em relação às Nações Unidas (ONU) e à União Europeia (UE) são complementares ou contraditórias, situando a análise no âmbito mais



amplo do discurso sobre a diplomacia emergente das potências médias e a regionalização da globalização. As potências médias emergentes ou da terceira vaga são fundamentais na interação entre as estruturas de governação regional e global, utilizando quadros multilaterais para abordar desafios internacionais complexos, bem como questões regionais. A política externa da Turquia tem sido frequentemente interpretada através da lente da sua identidade híbrida, posicionando-se na intersecção de várias regiões concebidas como um «Estado liminar» ou «Estado limítrofe». O crescente envolvimento da Turquia com a ONU e os esforços normativos e comportamentais de longa data para ser membro da UE exemplificam o seu estatuto emergente de potência média, onde os esforços regionais se cruzam com as ambições globais. Enquanto a ONU fornece uma plataforma universal para abordar questões globais e ganhar status na governança global, a UE oferece oportunidades mais focadas, normativas e específicas para cada região. Este artigo avalia a questão de saber se o duplo envolvimento institucional da Turquia com a UE e a ONU representa alinhamento ou tensão, enriquecendo assim a discussão em curso sobre a regionalização da globalização. Para tal, o artigo utiliza uma análise comparativa de documentos políticos, declarações oficiais e esforços diplomáticos em determinadas áreas específicas das estratégias multilaterais da Turquia na ONU e na UE ao longo da década de 2000. Ao fazê-lo, refere-se a um conjunto crescente de trabalhos que questionam pressupostos lineares ou harmoniosos sobre a interação entre regionalismo e multilateralismo nas estratégias das potências médias emergentes e as suas implicações para a teoria das potências médias.

Palavras-chave

Turquia, potências médias emergentes, União Europeia, Nações Unidas, governação regional e global.

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Introduction

The growing scholarly attention to emerging middle powers reflects a broader interest in understanding how states situated between traditional great powers and developing countries shape the evolving architecture of regional and global governance. Traditional middle powers are frequently conceptualised as constructive and stabilising actors, operating within multilateral frameworks and contributing to the legitimacy and functionality of existing international institutions (Joordan, 2003). Conceptualised as "Southern middle powers", states like Brazil and South Africa increasingly pursue selective multilateralism, either by engaging only in regimes aligned with their national interests or by playing a catalytic role through niche diplomacy to support and revitalise the liberal international order (Efstatopoulos, 2021). Joordan (2017) argued very early that the emerging middle power concept has lost its analytical value, as emerging states increasingly defy the behavioural expectations historically tied to this category. He suggests abandoning the term in favour of more precise tools that reflect the strategic diversity of countries like Turkey, Brazil, and India. (Joordan, 2017). Most recently, Robertson & Carr (2023) called for the historization of the middle power concept, asking, "Is anyone a middle power?" Emerging middle powers are frequently characterised by their regional influence and their capacity to "punch above their weight" in international affairs. The literature often assumes that not only regional activism reinforces middle powers' global influence, but the fate of the liberal international order is also highly tied to the role and influence of regional powers (Aydin, 2021).

Within this debate, Türkiye emerges as a particularly salient case, given its multiple identities, shifting regional and multilateral alignments, and increasingly complex engagement with formal and informal global governance institutions. This paper interrogates the extent to which the regional and global roles of emerging middle powers align or potentially conflict, particularly at a time in which the liberal international order and its norms and institutions, as well as conceptualisations, are being contested. In order to answer that question, this paper investigates Türkiye's engagement with the UN



and the EU as an emerging middle power throughout the 2000s. These two formal platforms differ in terms of geographic scope, normative foundations, and institutional logic, yet both have served as key arenas in which Ankara has continuously projected its international identity and pursued recognition of its status.

Much of the literature has focused on various dimensions of Türkiye's middle power efforts (Parlar Dal, & Dipama, 2024; Sarı, & Sula, 2024; Islam and Nyadera, 2024; Kutlay and Öniş, 2021), including specific regions such as Asia (Üngör, 2025), the Middle East (Öniş and Kutlay, 2017) and Europe/EU (Düzgit, 2025; Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol, 2023), as well as efforts in the UN platform as an emerging middle power, more broadly. This study attempts to direct specific attention to a relatively understudied area by analysing Türkiye's middle power efforts in the EU and the UN in a comparative perspective. Despite not attaining full membership status, Türkiye has maintained an enduring engagement with the EU, spanning decades of institutional alignment, economic interdependence, and norm-driven dialogue. As Senem Aydin-Düzgit (2023) argues, Ankara's relationship with the EU serves not only as a regional anchor but also as a litmus test for its alignment with liberal international norms, especially in periods marked by global democratic retreat. The EU's emphasis on democratic norms and normative institutional convergence aligns closely with the ideational aspects of middle power theory, while the economic interdependence between Türkiye and the EU contributes significantly to the material foundation of Ankara's regional and international presence (Düzgit, 2023; Aydin, 2021). Hence, Türkiye's candidacy status and institutionalised ties with the EU provide a unique empirical setting to assess key dimensions of emerging middle power role, including material capacities such as trade and economic integration, as well as ideational dynamics, particularly in relation to democratic reforms specifically and normative role more generally. In this respect, juxtaposing Türkiye's engagement with both the EU and the UN allows for a more careful examination of whether regional and global institutional roles of middle powers align or diverge. While existing studies have explored Türkiye's regional diplomacy or its normative contestation with the EU individually (Düzgit, 2023), to the best of our knowledge, none have assessed how these dual institutional engagements in the UN and the EU interact under the evolving conditions of the post-hegemonic international order. This study aims to contribute by treating the UN and the EU not as isolated arenas but as intersecting formal international platforms through which Türkiye's middle power role is articulated, constrained, or reinforced.

In order to do this, the paper builds on the widely accepted definition of the middle power role that encompasses material, ideational, and behavioural dimensions. Material capacity, particularly economic development, remains a foundational element of the middle power role, but is increasingly insufficient on its own. Ideational dimension is highly related to domestic democratic practices and normative discourse, and has been a critical dimension of middle power conceptualisations in literature. Lastly, behavioural elements are defined as active participation in multilateral institutions, coalition-building, and niche diplomacy, among others (Carr, 2014).



Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative document-based research design to examine Türkiye's middle power role in its engagements with the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). The analysis draws on official speeches, policy documents, and diplomatic initiatives from the early 2000s to the present. Sources were selected according to three criteria: (i) relevance to Türkiye's multilateral strategies in either the UN or EU; (ii) significance within one of the three historical periods (2001–2009, 2010–2015, 2016–present); and (iii) availability as official and verifiable primary material.

The periodisation reflects critical turning points in Turkey's middle power role in both institutions, shaped by systemic, regional, and domestic transformations. The first period (2001/2–2009/10) corresponds to EU-driven reforms and active multilateral diplomacy culminating in Türkiye's election to the UN Security Council in 2009. The second period (2010–2015/16) was marked by regional turbulence following the Arab uprisings and by Türkiye's unsuccessful UN bid, reflecting growing scepticism about its trajectory. The third period (2016–present) has unfolded in the context of democratic regression, economic fragility, and the broader retreat of liberal internationalism. Framing the analysis through these periods makes it possible to compare how systemic, regional, and domestic factors have shaped Türkiye's middle power role across the UN and EU, and whether its strategies produced complementarity or contradiction.

Türkiye's middle power role was assessed through the comparative lens of complementarity and contradiction, structured along the material, ideational, and behavioural dimensions. To make these concepts analytically clear, each dimension was connected to observable indicators drawn from the selected policy materials. The material dimension was examined through budgetary commitments, institutional contributions, and support for multilateral initiatives, such as financial or logistical backing for UN and EU programs. The ideational dimension focused on Türkiye's stance on democracy, human rights, and broader normative commitments in both the UN and the EU, as well as the role it sought to assume within these organisations. The behavioural dimension was analysed through diplomatic activism, which included assuming leadership in specific niche areas, coalition-building within the UN and the EU, and the ability to generate outcomes such as election to positions like the UNSC seat or the inability to create outcomes in mediating the Ianina Nuclear Issue on the UN platform. Analyses of "complementarity" refer to instances where Türkiye's material, ideational and behavioural dimensions of the middle power role in the UN and EU reinforced each other (e.g. EU-driven reforms enhancing credibility in UN forums), while "contradiction" refers to divergences across the two institutions (e.g. reformist rhetoric at the UN coinciding with democratic backsliding and stalled EU accession). Informal practices and non-public records were excluded in order to focus on formal, institutionalised policy initiatives and outputs. As another limitation, the voting behaviours in both organisations were not examined in detail, as the study prioritises declared policies and initiatives over formal roll-call records. These decisions inevitably introduce limitations, since reliance on official discourse may overstate coherence and underrepresent informal or contradictory practices, but the analysis was situated within the broader literature on emerging middle powers.



Emerging Middle Powers in between Regional and Global Governance

The concept of middle power has evolved significantly within the field of international relations. Traditionally, middle powers have been defined as states that are neither great nor small but possess sufficient material resources and diplomatic capacity to exert influence in multilateral settings. These states tend to favour rules-based international order, multilateral engagement and are often seen as stabilisers within the global system as "good international citizens" (Cooper, 2011). Nye's smart power index conceptualises national power as a deliberate mix of hard power (e.g. military and economic might) and soft power (cultural and diplomatic influence) to yield effective influence (Nye, 2011). Similarly, Cline's capability measures aggregate tangible resources - such as population size, economic strength, and military force - and then scales them by intangible factors like strategic purpose and national will in an equation for "perceived power" (Cline, 1977). While these tools offer a quantifiable measure of a state's overall power assets, their relevance for analysing Türkiye's middle power role is limited. Middle power status is not determined by raw capabilities alone; it is also defined by how states like Türkiye leverage their capabilities through active diplomacy, coalition-building, and normative leadership in international forums - dimensions that static indices struggle to capture (Cooper & Parlar Dal, 2016; Jordaan, 2017). In Türkiye's case, its ability to "punch above its weight" in regional and multilateral settings owes as much to policy entrepreneurship and strategic alignments as it does to measurable resources, underscoring the need to look beyond composite power indices when assessing its middle power role (Jordaan, 2017).

While early middle-power conceptualisations focused largely on countries like Canada and Australia, contemporary scholarship recognises the emergence of a diverse group of "emerging middle powers," particularly from the Global South, including Mexico, Indonesia, and South Korea, among others. These states differ from traditional middle powers not only in terms of geography and political culture but also in their preferences and institutional behaviour. A key distinction among middle powers lies in their material, ideational, and behavioural dimensions (Karadeniz and Oğuz Gök, 2019). Materially, emerging middle powers possess growing economic capabilities and regional influence, enabling participation in platforms like the G20 and MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Türkiye, and Australia). Ideationally, however, many of these states exhibit democratic fragility or normative ambiguity, sometimes conceptualised as hybrid regimes (Öniş, 2017), authoritarian middle powers (Aydin-Düzgit, 2023) or awkward ones (Abbondanza and Wilkins, 2022), making their commitment to liberal values less clear-cut than their traditional counterparts. Behaviorally, they often engage in coalition-building, mediation and engage with niche diplomacy areas. In recent years, emerging middle powers such as Türkiye have increasingly turned to military capacity and defence industry activism as instruments to elevate their status within the shifting international order (Parlar Dal and Dipama, 2024). However, although the use of military technology is a defining element of emerging middle powers, it mostly has boosting effects on domestic regime survival (Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol, 2023).

The middle power's dual role in the regional-global nexus has also been discussed in the literature. Nolte (2010) earlier argued that regional leadership could serve as a platform for global engagement for middle powers. Aydin (2021) suggests that emerging middle



powers tend to contribute to the liberal international order in complex ways, especially through their regional policies as democratic role models in support of institutional norms. However, some recent empirical cases challenge this assumption. For instance, South Korea's middle power identity is deeply conditioned by regional security dynamics and U.S.-China rivalry, which constrain its global positioning despite high levels of institutional engagement (Mo, 2017). Furthermore, some potential regional powers might not exercise leadership as demonstrated by Brazil's detachment from South America following Cardoso and Lula presidencies (Nolte and Schenoni, 2024). Emerging middle powers often oscillate between regional activism and global aspiration, creating a fragmented and sometimes contradictory foreign policy profile.

Scholars increasingly underscore the need to include the domestic and systemic constraints for exercising regional roles more systematically (Nolte and Schenoni, 2024). The 2008 global financial crisis, the rise of BRICS, and shifting patterns of power distribution have created new spaces for middle power activism but also exposed the limits of formal IOs. Hynd (2025) introduces a timely and critical refinement to middle power theory by analysing how these states seek repositioning in hierarchies of international status and order. Rather than merely acting as norm entrepreneurs or institutional supporters, middle powers today engage in a form of order navigation, alternating between revisionist tendencies and status quo alignment. Through the case of South Korea, Hynd (2025) also shows how elite-driven narratives and structural change enable states to reposition themselves within global hierarchies. Therefore, the relationship between regional and global roles for middle powers is neither linear nor harmonious. As Efstathopoulos (2023) and Hynd (2025) both suggest, emerging middle powers represent a hybrid category that might be both conformist and disruptive at the same time. Understanding this complexity requires moving beyond binary typologies and recognising the fragmented nature of contemporary middle power diplomacy (Efstathopoulos, 2023).

Türkiye as an Emerging Middle Power in Regional and Global Governance

Historically, the foundations for Türkiye's middle power behaviour can be observed earlier than the post-Cold War period. Barlas (2005) conceptualises Turkey's very early regional diplomatic activism in the 1930s, particularly in the Balkans and Mediterranean, as middle power activism. Despite limited material capacity, Ankara employed regional coalition-building efforts in the Balkans, which culminated in the Balkan Pact, while not being successful in the Mediterranean region. During the Cold War, Türkiye's role as a middle power in coalition-building was limited due to systemic constraints stemming from superpower rivalry. While it served multiple terms as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and aligned closely with Western allies, its multilateral engagements largely reflected the priorities of the transatlantic order (Aral, 2004). In the post-Cold War period, however, Ankara began to adopt a more active regional and global diplomacy. Beginning in the 1980s, Türkiye integrated into the neoliberal economy and began to search for a more active role in its immediate region and beyond during the Turgut Özal Era. In the 1990s, it sought to address crises such as the Bosnian War by engaging in intense diplomacy in the UN. Toward the end of the decade, this activism



was further shaped by then Foreign Minister İsmail Cem's "world state" or "global state" vision¹, which emphasised improving relations with neighbouring countries, stressing Ankara's historical and cultural legacy. These developments laid the groundwork for Turkey's regional and global middle power diplomacy in the 2000s.

Emergence of a Middle Power Role in the UN (2000-2011)

Türkiye's economic performance in the 2000s contributed to its growing involvement in multilateral platforms. After the 2001 financial crisis, the JDP (Justice and Development Party) governments implemented economic reforms, achieving annual growth rates averaging 5-7% (Gök and Karadeniz, 2018). Improved economic indicators allowed Ankara to project a more confident profile in regional and global issues. Türkiye successfully campaigned for a non-permanent UN Security Council seat for 2009–2010, securing 151 votes. Ankara's measurable material and personal contributions to the UN increased but remained relatively modest compared to rising states such as BRICS (Parlar Dal and Kurşun, 2018). Normatively, during the early 2000s, Türkiye's foreign policy discourse was characterised by a deliberate emphasis on democratic reforms and proactive multilateralism. The early JDP government prioritised alignment with EU norms, judicial reforms, and the decentralisation of state institutions.

Türkiye's diplomatic behaviour from 2002 to 2010 increasingly reflected classic middle power activism, focused on the quest for mediation, humanitarian diplomacy, and coalition-building efforts. Initiatives such as the co-sponsorship of the "Alliance of Civilisations" in 2005 provided a symbolic platform through which Ankara sought to bridge intercultural divides and promote mutual understanding in a post-9/11 environment. During this period, Turkish policymakers strived to be a mediator in various regional conflicts, often in coordination with UN efforts (Karadeniz and Gök, 2024). A notable example was Türkiye's mediation between Israel and Syria from 2007 to 2008, wherein Ankara hosted several rounds of indirect peace talks. Türkiye (in partnership with Brazil) took a role in the Iran nuclear issue in 2010 and brokered the Tehran Declaration in May 2010. This initiative demonstrated Ankara's willingness to take the initiative in the UN together with other rising powers such as Brazil. While these efforts contributed to Ankara's visibility within the UN system, they have been quite limited in terms of achieving concrete outcomes (Sever and Gök, 2016). When the deal failed to gain full traction, Turkish policymakers did not hesitate to take the step of voting against UN Security Council Resolution 1929 (June 2010), which imposed a new round of sanctions on Iran.² This was a crucial moment for Türkiye's middle power efforts at the UN. On one hand, it underscored Türkiye's mediation-first attitude, but on the other, it put Ankara at odds with the P5 consensus, revealing a potential rift between Ankara's independent activism and great power expectations. It also demonstrated the limits of its middle power activism in the UN platform due to structural factors (Gök and Sever, 2016) as well as bilateral relations with the US (Sarı Ertem, H., & Karadeniz, R. F., 2019). Nevertheless, as Sarı and Sula (2024) note, Türkiye's pursuit of initiatives in UN forums

¹ <https://www.sam.gov.tr/media/perceptions/archive/vol2/19970900/IsmailCem1.pdf>

² <https://press.un.org/en/2010/sc9948.doc.htm#:~:text=,be%20allowed%20for%20its%20implementation>



reflects a broader pattern of middle power strategies aiming to amplify normative presence despite structural constraints.

Middle Power Diplomacy under Domestic and Regional Constraints (2011-2016)

Türkiye's material power continued to grow in the early 2010s but faced mixed fortunes by mid-decade. Economically, Ankara initially enjoyed relative growth after the 2008 global financial crisis. Its GDP climbed from around \$730 billion in 2010 to over \$950 billion by 2013 (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021). This encouraged Ankara's confidence and resources to pursue projects at the UN. Türkiye elevated its profile in the G20 during this time, hosting the Antalya Summit in 2015, where the Women 20 (W20) initiative was introduced. It also joined the informal MIKTA group established in 2013, aligning with peer traditional and emerging middle powers. However, from the mid-2010s onward, Türkiye's economy began to face setbacks as domestic democratic backlash, political instability and external factors, including the Arap uprisings and regional turmoil, led to currency depreciation and slower growth rates (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021). Despite these setbacks, in 2013–2015, Türkiye contributed voluntarily to UN programs from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to United Nations Development Program (UNDP) projects. During the early 2010s, Ankara gradually increased its assessed contributions to the UN regular budget, rising from 0.62% in 2012 to 0.75% by 2014. This upward trend facilitated its entry into the Geneva Group, which comprises major financial contributors to the UN system (United Nations, 2017). Additionally, the Syrian civil war in 2011 imposed huge humanitarian burdens on Ankara and by 2015, Türkiye hosted over 2 million Syrian refugees, the largest refugee population in the world at that time. Türkiye ranked among the top 3 humanitarian aid providers in 2013– 2015 and was the most generous relative to GDP. Such figures underscore that Türkiye was using its material means to gain influence in the humanitarian field. Militarily, Ankara's hard power capacity also grew more evident in this period. Türkiye began investing in defence industries, including drone technology. It undertook cross-border military operations, especially from 2015 onward, which indicated Ankara's willingness to exercise hard power when deemed necessary. In UN peacekeeping, Türkiye's troop/police contributions fluctuated but remained steady (Kaya Uyar and Sezgin, 2024).

During 2010–2015, Türkiye's normative role experienced significant challenges, which had ambivalent effects on its middle power role at the UN. In the early part of this period, Ankara initially welcomed uprisings in Arab countries, framing itself as an advocate for democratic transitions. However, as the Arab Uprisings turned more complex, with civil wars in Libya and Syria, a military coup in Egypt, Türkiye's stance became more contested. Ankara's attempt to position itself as both a regional and global actor is exemplified and tested in its engagement with regional crises, including Syria (Dağ, 2022). Consequently, Türkiye's normative credibility suffered criticisms, and Türkiye's failure to secure a UN Security Council seat in the October 2014 election, a surprising loss to Spain, was widely attributed to diminished support due to Ankara's controversial regional policies and concerns about its internal politics.



Türkiye's ideational posture was reflected in its growing critique of the UN Security Council's structure during this period. President Erdoğan began voicing the slogan "the world is bigger than five" in the UN speeches (Aral, 2019). This rhetorical stance appealed to many nations frustrated with great-power dominance, thus potentially strengthening Türkiye's image as a reformist middle power. Yet as Ankara advocated democratic values abroad, at home, there were growing criticisms of its domestic democratic credentials as well as its policy choices towards the Arap uprisings. Therefore, its normative discourse at the UN both supported and constrained its middle power role in this period. It supported it by giving Türkiye a distinctive identity (a democracy advocating for reform and humanitarianism) that set it apart from both Western great powers and non-Western authoritarian powers. But it constrained it by putting doubt on Türkiye's consistency and reliability, which adheres to the values it preaches. This tension would only grow in the next period as Ankara's domestic regime transformed and its economy faced growing tensions.

In behavioural terms, since 2010, Turkish policy makers have further institutionalised mediation efforts on the global stage (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2011). In September 2010, Türkiye and Finland jointly launched the "Mediation for Peace" initiative at the UN, creating a Group of Friends of Mediation to promote the peaceful settlement of disputes. This led to the UN General Assembly's first-ever resolution on mediation (A/RES/65/283) in 2011. Türkiye's leadership was pivotal in co-sponsoring the resolution and subsequently co-chaired the Friends of Mediation group (Sofos, 2022). In June 2012, the UN, with input from Türkiye, issued the "United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation", a handbook of best practices for mediators. Ankara showcased this as an achievement of its niche diplomacy, even translating the guidance into Turkish (the first non-UN language version) (Karadeniz and Gök, 2024). The outbreak of the Syrian civil war tested Ankara's mediation and humanitarian efforts, as Türkiye kept its border open to Syrian refugees and worked closely with UN agencies UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), WFP (World Food Programme), and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) to manage refugee camps. By contributing over \$2 billion per year in humanitarian aid by 2014–2015 (much of it for Syrians), Türkiye became the world's second-largest humanitarian donor after the U.S. in 2014. Ankara continued its willingness to be a major player at the UN in the humanitarian field by hosting the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016. In addition to these coalition-building and mediation efforts, Türkiye's behaviour in this period was not free of contradictions. As regional conflicts intensified, Ankara continued to choose to use hard power sources and take sides in the Syrian civil war, which will intensify in the next period.

An Asymmetrical Middle Power in Search for Strategic Autonomy in the UN (2016–Present)

Since 2016, Türkiye's material capacity as a middle power has been marked by asymmetrical trends as it continues to be strong in certain areas and highly vulnerable in others, all unfolding in a more multipolar global economic and normative context. On the one hand, Türkiye remains a sizable economy as Türkiye's status in the G20 is undiminished. Additionally, Ankara has invested in the defence industry in the past



decade and developed indigenous high-tech drone weapons. On the other hand, Türkiye's economy in the late 2010s and early 2020s has been volatile and fragile. A currency crisis in 2018 and subsequent inflation surges eroded some of Türkiye's economic gains. GDP per capita in USD terms fell, and foreign investment waned due to perceived political and financial risks. Ankara finds itself in a difficult situation of slow growth, high inflation and chronic unemployment (Öniş and Kutlay, 2021). However, Türkiye's defence expenditures and military power keep growing even at the expense of other sectors (Parlar Dal and Dipama, 2024). As of 2025, Turkey continues to contribute 117 personnel to UN Peace Operations.³

The ideational dimension of Türkiye's UN engagement since 2016 has been defined by profound domestic political changes. Domestically, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 2016, Turkish rulers adopted emergency rule, which paved the way for a new executive presidency. By 2018, Ankara had transitioned from a parliamentary democracy with substantial checks and balances to a highly centralised presidential system with power concentrated in the President. This period also saw Türkiye's Freedom House and V-Dem democracy ratings downgraded as Ankara was now classified as "not free".⁴ The rise of populist and authoritarian-leaning governments worldwide and a general retreat of liberal internationalist rhetoric meant Türkiye's democratic backlash was somewhat in parallel with the broader international trend. In this context, Ankara has reframed its ideational narrative at the UN in two main ways. First, Ankara emphasises sovereignty and non-interference as pluralist values. Turkish policymakers refer to strategic autonomy in foreign policy, which underpins their efforts to position themselves as an independent diplomatic actor, distinct from traditional Western alignments (Tüfekçi, 2025). However, there has not been a dramatic shift from its voting orientation as it continues to be mostly in common with Western states on issues related to human rights in general (Aral, 2022). Ideationally, Ankara's discourse begins to embrace a more explicitly Islamic and nationalist tone, positioning Türkiye as a voice for the Muslim world and the oppressed in the UN as President Erdoğan argued that "Islamic country with veto power on UN Security Council is no longer just a need, but an imperative".⁵ Türkiye started to demonstrate willingness to align more with a broader coalition of states (Russia, China, many in the global South) including BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).

Türkiye's diplomatic behavior in the UN arena has been characterized by various initiatives, defined as an "unusual middle power activism" that mixes cooperation with unilateralism (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021). Chief among these was the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022 which was an UN-brokered deal Türkiye facilitated between Russia and Ukraine to safely export Ukrainian grain during the ongoing war. Ankara hosted and mediated the talks in Istanbul and the resulting agreement allowed nearly 33 million tons

³https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/01_contributions_to_un_peacekeeping_operations_by_country_and_post_86_may_2025.pdf

⁴<https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey>

⁵ President Erdoğan's address to foreign ambassadors serving in the capital Ankara, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/muslims-who-make-up-1-4-of-world-must-be-justly-represented-in-global-decision-making-bodies-turkish-president/3498834>



of grain to reach global markets.⁶ Another initiative has been promoting environmental sustainability through the "Zero Waste" project brought into the UN. In December 2022, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) unanimously adopted Türkiye's draft resolution declaring March 30 the International Day of Zero Waste, co-sponsored by 105 countries.⁷ Zero Waste has broadened Türkiye's diplomatic portfolio beyond conflict-related topics, into environment. This kind of "eco-diplomacy" is a newer behavioral dimension for Ankara. Türkiye has also sustained its earlier commitments since the late 2010s as it remains co-chair of the Group of Friends of Mediation, convening annual ministerial meetings. It works in coalitions to influence debates, and it often acts as a mediator, as seen not only in Ukraine but also in conflicts like Somalia (hosting Somalia-Somaliland talks in 2019) and between Serbia and Bosnia (facilitating meetings in 2018–2021).

In sum, Ankara's middle power efforts especially in the last decade is characterized by asymmetries across its material, ideational, and behavioral dimensions. Materially, Türkiye exhibits a paradoxical mixture of significant military and indigenous defense industry capabilities alongside persistent economic and technological dependencies. Ideationally, its foreign policy discourse is shaped by reference to a new world order, engaging selectively with established liberal norms. This manifests in a re-conceptualization of "justice" that often contests dominant interpretations, and a rhetoric that collides human rights advocacy with a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, and increasingly pluralist elements. Behaviorally, Türkiye employs a foreign policy toolkit, encompassing hard power resources together with coalition building and preventive measure, balancing efforts across competing power blocs and growing criticism towards current order while being predominantly on the side of western powers in its voting orientation towards issues at the UNGA platform. These patterns, increasingly involving informal engagements in addition to formal ones arise not merely from tactical responses but also from Türkiye's unique regional embeddedness and the inherent dynamism of the contemporary global order especially since 2010s. Ankara's foreign policy in dual institutional settings in the post-2015 presents an example of what can be conceptualized as an "Asymmetrical Middle Power."⁸

Türkiye's Middle Power Engagement with the European Union

Türkiye's relations with the European Union (EU) have had a long trajectory. As a middle power, Türkiye's engagement with the EU includes various political, economic, and diplomatic factors that can be explained in material, ideational and behavioral dimensions in middle power theory. Although recently the relations have reached a standstill in accession negotiations, in historical perspective, Ankara has sought closer ties with the EU as part of its modernization project in political and economic terms, and to enhance

⁶ The Black Sea Grain Initiative: What it is, and why it is important for the world." United Nations News. September 16, 2022. Accessed date April, 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1126811>. Tingyang, Zhao. All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order, translated by Joseph E. Harroff. California: University of California Press, 2021.

⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/zero-waste-day#:~:text=On%202014%20December%202022%2C%20the,Waste%2C%20to%20be%20observed%20annually>.

⁸ Author's own conceptualization



its international standing in alignment with liberal international norms. Considering the deep trade relations between Türkiye and the EU, geopolitical significance, long lasting intercultural mobility between the two communities over the years, Türkiye's middle power status allows it to assert significant influence in its interactions with the EU. However, the process has been stalled with challenges and complex accession negotiations in the past decade.

Turkey's Alignment with the EU: Wide ranging Economic and Political Reforms, Optimistic Dialogue, and Strategic Positioning (2001-2009)

After 1999 Helsinki Summit when Türkiye was granted the candidacy status, the political relations between Ankara and the EU were intensified. Thus, between 2001 and 2009, Ankara's engagement with the EU was marked by significant political, economic, and diplomatic developments with some emerging challenges after 2006. This period was crucial in shaping Türkiye's aspirations for EU membership and understanding its position as a middle power within the European context.

Specifically, the period between 2001 and 2004 was also known as "the virtuous circle" (Öniş and Kutlay, 2016) or "golden age of Europeanization" (Müftüler-Baç, 2005). In this period, Türkiye adopted significant political reforms to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria and progress in its accession path to the EU. The political reforms were partly a response to the 2001 economic crisis in Türkiye, which triggered political instability and calls for reform. Under these domestic circumstances, based on 2001 National Program for the adoption of *the acquis communautaire*, Ankara adopted wide-ranging political reforms between 2001 and 2004 to expand fundamental human rights, freedoms, and democratization. These reforms can be classified as "increased legal protection of fundamental human rights of all Turkish citizens irrespective of religious and ethnic origin, the role of military in Turkish politics and the freedom of expression in Türkiye" (Müftüler-Baç, 2005: 22). There were also judicial reforms to enhance the independence of the judiciary. In addition, reforms concerning civil society and political participation were encouraged to have a more vibrant civil society. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) became more active in promoting democratic values and monitoring government actions (Öniş, 2003; Eralp, 2009). Müftüler-Baç (2005) argues that the EU acted as a powerful external catalyst for these internal political and legal reforms, intensifying the Europeanization process in this period. Öniş and Kutlay (2016) claim that the virtuous cycle in this period boosted Ankara's capacity as a role model in ideational terms and that the EU membership process had a transformative impact on that.

In addition to the high pace of political reforms mentioned above, in the period between 2001 and 2004, Türkiye adopted critical economic reforms following the severe economic crisis of 2001. The economic reforms required to fulfil the Copenhagen economic criteria, particularly in relation to its pursuit of EU membership, were closely aligned with the expectations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) programs. These reforms focused on achieving fiscal discipline and structural adjustments within the Turkish economy. Key areas of focus included the control of public expenditure to ensure fiscal stability and reduce



deficits (Öniş, 2003). In the financial sector, reforms had the objective of establishing greater transparency and promoting stability. In addition to the reform of agricultural subsidies, progress in privatisation was essential to shift towards a more market-oriented economy (Öniş, 2003). These economic reforms were crucial for Türkiye's alignment with EU economic norms and enhanced its middle power activism materially.

Ankara formally began its accession negotiations in October 2005, a critical milestone that underscored the relationship's complexities (European Commission, 2005). In 2004, the accession of South Cyprus to the EU without a resolution to the Cyprus issue created a significant impediment to Türkiye's EU accession path (Eralp, 2009). It led directly to the stall of a substantial part of the accession negotiations and undermined Ankara's political will for reform. Thus, in the first few years following accession negotiations, Türkiye continued its political reforms at a rather slow pace as part of its commitment to the Copenhagen criteria: democracy, rule of law, human rights, protection of minorities, and a functioning market economy (Eralp, 2009; Özer, 2015). The 2007 constitutional reforms exemplified Ankara's efforts to bolster political pluralism and judicial independence. These reforms had the objective of addressing human rights concerns and combating corruption (European Commission, 2008). Despite progress, there were criticisms, particularly in the implementation of human rights and freedom of expression (European Commission, 2009). Although the effectiveness and long-term implementation of these reforms faced constant challenges and scrutiny, the political reforms during this period were considered significant as Ankara attempted to meet the EU membership conditions. The dynamics between the EU and Türkiye were complex, marked by both cooperation in reform efforts and criticism over the issues of human rights and democratic governance.

Türkiye-EU relations between 2001 and 2009 were marked by optimistic engagement and dialogue in behavioural terms, focusing on the accession process and the required reforms. Ankara also engaged in security cooperation with the EU during this period, mostly within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Ankara actively participated in the crisis management missions headed by the EU, such as the EU mission in Kosovo (EULEX) and the EU Force Operation in Bosnia Herzegovina (European Commission, 2009) and provided support for the second EU police mission in Bosnia Herzegovina. According to EU officials, Türkiye's strategic significance was further strengthened by its proactive involvement in international peacekeeping and conflict resolution, which complemented the EU's regional security goals. Despite progress in many areas, there were persistent challenges, including the Cyprus issue and human rights concerns in this period.

Changing Dynamics in Türkiye-EU Relations: Slow Down and Stagnation of Accession Negotiations, Complex Diplomacy, and Regional Challenges (2010-2016)

In this period, accession negotiations slowed down considerably due to political tensions and disputes over issues such as Cyprus, human rights, and setbacks and retreats on democratic norms (Müftüler-Baç, 2016; Özer, 2015). Türkiye attained a crucial position



in regional geopolitics because of the instability caused by the Syrian civil war, the emergence of ISIS, and the 2015 refugee crisis. Thus, Türkiye-EU relations during this period were marked by the EU's growing perception of Türkiye as an essential partner in dealing with these challenges.

Between 2010 and 2016, in behavioural terms, the diplomatic landscape between Türkiye and the EU was marked by both cooperation and persistent challenges. Although Ankara and the EU reached a migration deal in 2016 to control irregular migration as a result of efforts to manage the refugee crisis (European Council, 2016), the July 2016 coup attempt severely altered Türkiye's political climate. In this period, the diplomatic relations became increasingly contentious due to disagreements over Ankara's military actions and tension in the Eastern Mediterranean. Throughout this period, the EU raised concerns about human rights violations, freedom of the press, and the independence of the judiciary in Türkiye (European Commission, 2016).

In spite of these obstacles, materially, the Turkish economy grew rapidly during this time, strengthening its standing as a middle power (World Bank, 2016). Ankara became an important economic partner of the EU as a result of the Customs Union with the EU, which was completed in 1996, and it allowed for increased trade relations between the two parties (Müftüler-Baç, 2016). Furthermore, Türkiye became an essential transit route for diversifying energy supplies due to its strategic location, especially regarding the Southern Gas Corridor. This indicates that bilateral relations have become more interdependent in energy-related matters (European Commission, 2012).

One of the most urgent issues in EU-Türkiye relations was the migration crisis. In 2015, Europe faced a massive influx of refugees, many of whom crossed through Ankara. This situation prompted the EU to engage with Türkiye more closely on migration issues. With the support of Germany, Türkiye, and the EU, they agreed on a Joint Action Plan in October 2015 to work together on migration (European Commission, 2015). Then, as part of this initiative, in March 2016, Ankara and the EU *agreed on* a migration deal to manage the refugee crisis. The March 2016 deal aimed to curtail the influx of migrants into Europe and marked a significant turning point in Türkiye's bargaining position with the EU. In exchange for cooperation in controlling migration, the EU committed to providing financial aid and reviving accession negotiations, illustrating a transactional nature in their engagement (European Council, 2016). Beyond these issues, Ankara's large population and persistent economic instability raise concerns for the EU. As a result, while there were opportunities for cooperation, they were frequently overshadowed by mutual distrust and divergent priorities. Saatçioğlu (2019) argues that in the post-2015 refugee crisis, Turkey-EU relations transformed into functionalism, which was marked by a strategic partnership based on interdependence and a retreat from the EU's conditionality approach.

Transactional Relationship with the EU: Economic Ties, Security dilemmas, and strategic partnership (2016-Present)

In the period between 2016 and 2025, Türkiye's engagement with the EU can be described as a significant interaction between a middle power and a regional bloc that



encompasses a variety of factors, including political dynamics, economic ties, and regional security concerns. Important changes occurred during this period, as illustrated by strategic partnerships, Türkiye's domestic issues, shifting EU priorities, and geopolitical challenges.

Ankara's relations with the EU entered a period of stagnation after the July 2016 coup attempt. Türkiye's strategic priorities often clashed with the EU's significant concerns about human rights and the decline of democratic norms in Türkiye (European Commission, 2016). During this period, Ankara's internal political trajectory and the EU's ongoing emphasis on conditionality with regard to the rule of law and fundamental rights diverged significantly (European Commission, 2017; Öniş, 2023). In ideational terms, Türkiye's increasing distance from the EU was highlighted in the European Council's December 2016 conclusions, which resulted in a formal halt to accession negotiations with no new chapters being opened or closed (European Commission, 2024). Despite these obstacles, Ankara made efforts to re-establish itself as the EU's vital ally in tackling difficult regional issues, especially the migration crisis, which came to the fore.

The EU and Türkiye continued to interact in the field of migration, even after the (de facto) freezing of accession negotiations. Thus, the 2015 refugee crisis continued to play a crucial role in bilateral relations. Although there were fewer irregular crossings at first, there were still implementation issues and humanitarian concerns regarding the migration crisis (Saatçioğlu, 2019; Kaya, 2020; Kirişçi, 2014). As previously noted, the EU and Türkiye came to a major agreement in March 2016 whereby Ankara agreed to control the refugee flow to Europe in return for political and financial concessions (European Council, 2016). This arrangement solidified Ankara's position as a key transit country while enabling it to exert influence within EU decision-making realms. In this period, the EU continued to provide financial aid to Türkiye for hosting refugees. However, there were debates regarding the adequacy and timeliness of this support, and Ankara often criticised the EU for not fulfilling its financial commitments swiftly (Kaya, 2020). Currently, the migration deal is not in effect, which came to a halt in 2020 due to political dynamics and complexities of border control issues.

From the economic perspective, Türkiye was consistently perceived as an emerging market with substantial economic prospects, rendering it an attractive partner for the EU in material terms (European Commission, 2024). Economic cooperation continued, especially in the areas of trade and investment, despite persistent political tensions. The EU continued to be Ankara's largest trading partner. As a candidate country to the EU, Ankara sought to enhance these economic ties to influence EU policy frameworks in ways that could facilitate its economic growth and stability. Debates around updating the Customs Union started, focusing on areas like services and agricultural products, though no significant breakthroughs were made by 2024. Özer (2020) argues that modernising the EU-Türkiye Customs Union is a pragmatic initiative driven by shared economic interest and vital for a cooperative and functional relationship. Türkiye's potential as a regional economic hub, particularly in the areas of infrastructure and energy, has been recognised by the EU. However, the political climate and economic crisis affected investment sentiment from European companies (European Commission, 2024).



Ankara has a crucial role in tackling regional security issues because of its strategic location at the intersection of Europe and Asia. The rise of terrorism and instability in neighbouring regions underscored Ankara's importance as a middle power (European Commission, 2024). Engagement with the EU encompassed discussions on security cooperation, counter-terrorism measures, and the management of issues pertaining to the Middle East, particularly the Syrian civil war. Additionally, bilateral relations were further strained by tensions over energy exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in the context of disputes with Greece and Cyprus (European Commission, 2022).

In this period between 2016 and the present, despite facing major obstacles arising from political issues, security dilemmas, and conflicting views on fundamental human rights, Türkiye attempted to use its position as a middle power to strengthen its ties with the EU, albeit at a low level. Ankara's middle power engagement with the EU during this period was defined by a functional, strategy-oriented partnership based on common interests. In addition, in the post-2016 period, in behavioural terms, high-level dialogue meetings continued to form a significant aspect of the relations, particularly on areas of migration, security, energy, agriculture and trade (European Commission, 2024). These meetings, together with official contacts between the two sides, indicate a sustained attempt to put the relations on practical cooperation and find solutions to common problems, despite the wider political hindrances and standstill in the accession negotiations.

In Guise of Conclusion: Turkey's Middle Power Role in the Regional-Global Nexus

Turkey's evolving role in the UN and EU over the past two decades reflects key insights for middle power theory, especially regarding how material, ideational, and behavioural dimensions are shaped by systemic and domestic changes. At the UN, Turkey's contributions fluctuated across time, marked by heightened activism in the early 2000s and 2010s, but a gradual shift toward selective engagement in the post-2016 period. Although economic interdependence remained steady in Turkey-EU relations, democratic backsliding strained ideational alignment, transforming the relationship from aspirational integration to transactional cooperation. Despite Turkey's engagements in both settings, its behavioural strategies at the UN allowed for more flexible, albeit limited, influence, especially in humanitarian and mediation initiatives. Within the EU, however, formal structures imposed stricter conditionalities and thus constrained Turkey's capacity to act autonomously.

During the 2000–2015 period, Turkey's engagement in both arenas displayed parallel intensifications in visibility and initiative-taking, particularly in mediation diplomacy and norm adherence. Yet, this did not always translate into tangible influence. In the UN, despite active campaigning for Security Council membership and increased budgetary contributions, limitations in decision-making, which are often dominated by permanent members, restricted Turkey's capacity to shape outcomes (Sever and Gök, 2016). Within the EU, by contrast, while Turkey adopted significant political, legal and economic



reforms to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria and to align with *acquis communautaire*, the accession negotiation process stalled, limiting its normative influence and complicating its status as a transformative actor (Table 1).

During the post-2016 period, one can trace a clearer divergence between its middle power role in both institutions (Table 1). In the UN, Turkey has continued to participate in multilateral settings and champion certain humanitarian initiatives (e.g., grain corridor diplomacy), yet with a more state-centric and nationalist tone, relying increasingly on hard power instruments. In the EU, engagement has increasingly been characterised by transactional cooperation, strategic partnership, and bilateralism, marking a shift from previous transformative ambitions (Düzgit, 2021).

These divergent dynamics suggest that middle power strategies are context-dependent and that institutions like the UN and EU expose different facets of middle power diplomacy for Türkiye. While middle power theory often assumes coherence between regional and global behaviours, the Turkish case illustrates a fragmented pattern shaped by asymmetries in institutional constraints, domestic and regional conditions. From a theoretical standpoint, this supports the view that emerging middle powers are not homogenous actors but vary according to institutional contexts and domestic factors (Hynd, 2025).

The asymmetry between Turkey and the EU in terms of institutional hierarchy and normative expectations contrasts with the more flexible setting of the UN, except for platforms such as the UN Security Council. This, in turn, suggests that while Turkey continues to behave as a middle power in both arenas, the forms and degrees of its influence differ to a large extent (Table 2). Furthermore, the comparison highlights that regional activism does not always reinforce global activism and vice versa. In the UN, Turkey's policies on regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Syrian crisis elevated its visibility but occasionally constrained its ability to build broader coalitions due to structural limitations of the UN. In the EU, regional neighbourhood policy instruments offered opportunities for deeper cooperation, yet political divergences in the post-2013 period weakened the credibility of its normative claims. Ultimately, Turkey's case illustrates the variation and context-specificity of middle power diplomacy (Efstathopoulos, 2023), reinforcing arguments that rising and emerging powers, especially those with hybrid or liminal identities, occupy an ambivalent position in global governance. This underscores the need to rethink — if not say goodbye — the emerging middle power frameworks by accounting for the specific interplay between domestic transformation and institutional embeddedness.

While Türkiye's proactive diplomacy and EU-driven reforms enhanced its credibility in multilateral forums, direct evidence of reputational payoffs remains uneven. For instance, Turkey's election to the UN Security Council in 2009 reflected broad diplomatic support (UN General Assembly voting records), while EU progress reports of the early 2000s acknowledged democratic and institutional reforms. Yet systematic third-party evaluations of Türkiye's normative influence within the UN remain limited, which could be further explored in future research.

Future research could further deepen this analysis by systematically examining UN voting records to assess how Turkey's coalition-building strategies shape its middle power role.



Such an approach could clarify whether Turkey acts as a consistent coalition partner or adopts issue-based leadership in specific niche areas. In addition, exploring the regional dimension of coalition building may provide valuable insights, particularly given that the European Union itself represents a complex set of regional perspectives. Analyses that connect Turkey's regional leadership roles with its broader global positioning in both the UN and the EU could offer a deeper understanding of how emerging middle powers balance regional influence and global ambitions.

Appendix

Table 1. Comparative Outlook of Turkey's Emerging Middle Power Efforts towards the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU)

Dimension	2001/2–2009/10		2010–2015/16		2016–Present	
	UN	EU	UN	EU	UN	EU
Material	Increased financial contributions to the UN; G20 membership	Notable improvements in macroeconomic indicators, structural reforms	Increased UN budget contribution; Geneva Group membership	Robust economic growth; enhanced trade relations; growing energy interdependence	Continued but stable UN budget, moderate economic strain, economic volatility and uncertainty	Continued trade cooperation; customs union update discussions; regional economic hub potential
Ideational	Liberal multilateralism rhetoric	Wide-ranging political reforms; high pace of Europeanization (2001–2004)	Justice-based discourse calls for UNSC Reform (e.g., the world is bigger than five)	Setback in democratic reforms; slow down and stagnation in accession negotiations	Selective normative engagement leans towards more pluralist elements (e.g. sovereignty)	Democratic backsliding; (de facto) frozen accession negotiations
Behavioral	Non-permanent UNSC seat, Mediation, Alliance of Civilisations	Intensive government-civil society interaction; optimistic engagement	Friends of Mediation, regional initiatives on Gaza and Syria; Brazil cooperation on Iran; limited impact on UNSC outcomes	Cooperation on migration, diplomatic tensions	Selective multilateralism, Mediation efforts; use of military hard power (e.g., Syria operations); new niche areas like environment (e.g., Zero Waste)	Security & migration cooperation; strategic, transactional partnership; high-level dialogue meetings

The table indicates the interactions of the evolving role of Turkey's middle power efforts towards the UN and the EU in material, ideational and behavioural dimensions.

**Table 2.** Turkey's Middle Power Role in the Regional-Global Nexus

		2001/2-2009/10	2010-2015/16	2016-Present
UN	Material	Medium	High	Medium
	Ideational	High	Medium	Low
	Behavioral	High	Medium	Medium
EU	Material	High	High	Medium
	Ideational	High	Medium	Low
	Behavioral	High	Medium	Medium

The table indicates the extent of Turkey's middle power role in the regional and global nexus in material, ideational and behavioural dimensions.

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