

## **Turkish Geopolitical School**

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**Abstract:** Today, Turkey holds a significant position in global politics. It is strategically located, bordered by the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, which places it in a pivotal position for fostering trade, economic, cultural, humanitarian, and political relations with countries spanning three continents. In the context of contemporary world politics, Turkey has a distinctive stance and approach. These positions often play a decisive role in international affairs. Turkey frequently claims neutrality in world politics. However, questions remain as to how long this neutrality will persist and at what point Turkey will face a crucial geopolitical decision. Turkey enjoys strong relations with both Western and Eastern countries. This paper delves into Turkey's geopolitical approaches, its role in international relations, the opportunities it faces, as well as several challenges that need further attention.

**Keywords:** Neo-Ottomanism, Pan-Turkism, the Modernist path or Liberal Democracy, Pan-Islamism, NATO, Step toward the EU, Arab Spring, Secular system, the Kurdish issue, the Shi'a factor.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, Turkey has undergone continuous political and socio-economic development, much of which is attributed to the transformative leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. His presidency was marked by comprehensive reforms and progressive initiatives that played a vital role not only in the country's recovery from the devastations of the First World War but also in rebuilding a functional state out of the remnants of a collapsed imperial system. In contemporary Turkey, several ideological currents shape the country's trajectory in international affairs. These ideological orientations are broadly represented by three major groups: the Modernists, the Islamists, and the Conservatives. The Conservatives advocate for the revival of Neo-Ottomanism, a vision rooted in traditional Ottoman values and imperial nostalgia. This ideology seeks to restore Turkey's former influence, reminiscent of the Ottoman Empire's dominance across three continents. Additionally, many conservatives embrace Pan-Turkism, an ambition to unify Turkic nations under a shared ethnic and cultural identity. The Islamists prioritize deeper engagement with the Arab-Muslim world rather than with Western institutions. They support the doctrine of Pan-Islamism, which aspires to foster solidarity among Muslim-majority countries and position Turkey as a leading force in the Islamic world, particularly in the Middle East. In contrast, the Modernists are oriented toward integration with the West. Their approach stems from the legacy of Western reforms introduced after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, alongside the gradual adoption of European cultural norms and lifestyles, which have become increasingly influential in shaping modern Turkish society. Supporters of this path have long advocated for Turkey's accession to the European Union, and the country has already obtained candidate status. Since the late 20th century, Turkey has been actively striving to join this organization. One of the key reasons behind this ambition is Turkey's existing membership in NATO, the transatlantic military alliance comprising European

and American states. Consequently, proponents of this orientation perceive Turkey as a natural part of the European family—and they believe there are sufficient grounds to support this view...

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology for the article on the Turkish Geopolitical School is rooted in a qualitative, interpretative approach that synthesizes historical, political, and cultural perspectives to explore the evolution and strategic dimensions of Turkey's geopolitical thought. The research relies primarily on a comprehensive literature review of academic texts, policy documents, speeches by key political figures, and strategic doctrine publications from Turkish institutions. Through content analysis, the study identifies recurring themes, strategic priorities, and regional orientations that define the contours of Turkish geopolitical thinking. Special attention is paid to the works of foundational thinkers such as Ahmet Davutoğlu and others who have shaped modern Turkish strategic culture. The research also incorporates a comparative lens, contrasting Turkish geopolitical narratives with those of neighboring powers to highlight unique characteristics and divergences. Primary and secondary sources in both Turkish and English are evaluated to ensure depth and accuracy, with critical discourse analysis used to unpack the ideological underpinnings of state rhetoric and academic scholarship. Furthermore, the methodology includes the contextualization of geopolitical developments within broader regional and international frameworks, such as NATO, Eurasian integration, and Middle Eastern dynamics. This allows the study to trace shifts in Turkish geopolitical strategy across different political eras, from the Ottoman legacy to the Republican period and the post-Cold War era. Ultimately, this approach enables a nuanced understanding of how Turkey's geopolitical school has been constructed, contested, and recalibrated over time in response to changing global and domestic variables.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

First and foremost, the geographical factor plays a crucial role. Istanbul, considered the economic and cultural heart of Turkey, is geographically located in the European region. Moreover, the country itself serves as a bridge between Europe and Asia[1]. Should Turkey gain full membership in the European Union, it would be strategically positioned to enhance, develop, and expand the EU's relations with energy-rich regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as with the newly reshaped Middle Eastern states in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Today, Turkey's unique geostrategic position, coupled with its role as the second-largest contributor to NATO forces, continues to make a significant contribution to European security.

Secondly, the political factor plays a crucial role in Turkey's geopolitical approach. In the present era, Turkey is on the path to democracy. The country's aspirations for European Union (EU) membership, the establishment of human rights, and the development of political pluralism have driven forward Turkey's democratic progress. Although President Erdoğan has been criticized for steering Turkey towards "liberal democracy," some argue that he is consolidating his administration by suppressing opposition voices through legal means. However, EU membership remains a significant force that will "eliminate" any form of authoritarianism and serve as a foundation for the establishment of full democracy.

Additionally, Turkey is a strong and loyal member of NATO[2]. Exiting NATO would be seen as a direct challenge to Europe, potentially leading to the destruction of Turkey's growing economy and diplomatic influence. Furthermore, Turkey remains situated in a volatile region where European interests intersect, which poses both risks and opportunities for the country. Turkey has already applied for EU membership and has been granted candidate status. If Turkey were to suddenly halt or revoke this process, it could severely damage Europe's trust in Turkey and undermine future relations.

Thirdly, the economic factor also plays a crucial role in Turkey's geopolitical position. Today, Turkey's economy is flourishing. Its GDP growth in 2014 averaged 3.5%, which stands out as a

positive achievement when compared to many European countries[3]. Unlike many of its European counterparts, Turkey managed to turn the global economic crisis to its advantage. Furthermore, the economic stability of the Turkish people is something to be admired, especially when compared to the nations of Southern Europe, where economic challenges remain prevalent. The per capita income in Turkey has increased by more than sixfold, positioning the average Turkish citizen with better economic indicators compared to the populations of EU countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. However, Istanbul does not compete with cities like New York, London, and Moscow in this regard, as these cities have a significantly larger number of billionaires than Turkey[4]. Nevertheless, Turkey's current economic strength, coupled with its potential membership in the European Union, brings a new dynamic to the organization, while also incorporating 85 million consumers into a unified market.

The potential for Turkey's integration into the European Union sends a significant signal, not only to Europe but also to the broader Muslim world. As a prosperous and developed country in the Islamic world, Turkey's EU membership would symbolize a bridging of the gap between the Islamic world and Europe, offering a model for cooperation between both religious and secular nations. Turkey's successful membership in the EU could stand as a testament to the potential harmony between secular and Islamic countries, from Morocco to Indonesia. Historically, the Ottoman Empire has had a deep and intertwined relationship with Europe since the 14th century, following the Ottomans' crossing of the Bosphorus[2]. Since the establishment of the Republic in 1922, Turkey has steadily cultivated a "Western" worldview, which has continued to evolve and mature. The contemporary Turkish state, while retaining its deep cultural roots, differs significantly from the Ottoman Empire, operating under a modern political system with a distinct national identity[5]. Furthermore, Turkey is not only a country with a rich cultural heritage but is also undeniably aligned with European values in many aspects. Turkey's EU membership could serve as a crucial catalyst for resolving longstanding issues, such as the Cyprus dispute, the Armenian conflict, and the significant Kurdish problem. In this way, EU membership would not only advance Turkey's political and economic integration with Europe but also act as a means of addressing critical domestic and regional challenges.

The current Turkish government also harbors ambitions to unite Muslims, supporting the ideology of *pan-Islamism* and positioning Turkey as a leading country in the Islamic world[6]. In this regard, Turkey has undertaken numerous strategic initiatives, one of the most notable being the recent transformation of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque. The Hagia Sophia, a grand architectural monument of Byzantine (Eastern Roman Empire) heritage, was built between 532 and 537. Until 1453, it served as a Greek Orthodox church. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, it functioned as a mosque until 1935, when it was converted into a museum. In 2020, upon the initiative of President Erdoğan, the Hagia Sophia was reconverted into a mosque, marking a significant move that reflects Turkey's ongoing efforts to strengthen its position as a key player in the Muslim world and a symbol of its pan-Islamic ambitions[7].

In addition, the Turks today possess significant economic and military power among Asian countries. Furthermore, in the past, the Ottoman Turkish rulers were simultaneously honored with the title of caliph (custodian of the two holy mosques), which added to their influence and prestige within the Islamic world. Before the Ottomans, the rulers of the Arab Caliphate held this title. The two holy mosques are Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and Masjid an-Nabawi in Medina[8]. This indicates that today, as in the past, the Turks strive for leadership within the Muslim world.

Other countries also possess the potential to rival Turkey in this regard, but they have several noticeable weaknesses: Firstly, Indonesia, which today hosts the largest Muslim population, is located quite far from other Islamic nations, limiting its ability to exert influence. Next, Egypt—both a religious and secular state—houses the unmatched religious institution "Al-Azhar" in Cairo, which for years has served as a center for Muslims from all over the world seeking religious education[9]. However, politically, Egypt is now a client state of the United States. Pakistan, despite being the only nuclear-armed Islamic state, faces numerous challenges, such as its ongoing territorial dispute with India over Kashmir, ethnic conflicts, and consistent domestic

protests, which have significantly weakened its economy. Saudi Arabia, home to the religious centers of Mecca and Medina, annually attracts millions of Muslims, and while it is an oil-rich nation, it shares its political and security interests with the United States. Iran, with its strategic geographical position, military strength, including its nuclear program, and substantial energy resources, has managed to survive many years of US sanctions, faring better than many other sanctioned nations. Despite frequent protests in Iran, similar to Pakistan, the government and economy are less affected, and this has become a normal state of affairs[10]. In foreign policy, Iran has developed multilateral cooperation with Russia and China in various sectors. However, despite being a Muslim-majority country, Iran's significant Shia population creates challenges, particularly in its relations with other nations. While Shia populations in regions like Saudi Arabia's oil-rich areas hold strategic importance, there are persistent conflicts between Shia-dominated Iran and other countries, including Afghanistan, Turkey, and Azerbaijan, where border disputes and tensions continuously hinder Iran's claim to leadership in the Muslim world. Additionally, Iran's relations with the US-led collective West and Israel remain very tense, and it consistently supports Palestine, a stance not shared by many other Arab-Muslim nations.

Since the Ottoman era, Turkey has considered Iran its primary enemy, and the same can be said for Iran. One example is from 1513, when Ottoman Sultan Selim I, under the banner of fighting against Shia Islam, ordered the mass execution of 40,000-45,000 Shia individuals living in the Ottoman Empire[11]. Today, Iran has become one of Turkey's main challenges as it actively supports Kurdish separatism (PUK) — the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

Issues in such countries may, in fact, benefit Turkey's pursuit of leadership within the Islamic world. As mentioned earlier, Turkey possesses sufficient potential in this regard to play a leading role.

However, there are certain factors that could hinder Turkey's aspirations for leadership. For example, despite Turkey's economic and military capabilities, it cannot independently resolve regional issues. While Turkey has conducted several military operations in the Middle East, it is difficult to say that these have been fully successful[12]. Furthermore, Turkey is a member of NATO (the second-largest contributor of troops to NATO after the U.S.) and has been attempting to join the EU for years. This situation complicates efforts to unite the fragmented Arab states of the Middle East. A case in point is the military operation "Claw-Lock" that the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) launched on April 18 in northern Iraq. At the same time, Turkey escalated its military activities in Syria. Additionally, on May 23, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Turkey would soon launch a new military operation in Syria. These actions reflect Turkey's new military strategy aimed at gaining control over areas held by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)[13]. Initially, this new approach has led to military success. However, the military successes also reinforce the tendency to address the Kurdish issue from a security and military perspective, excluding long-term political solutions. Meanwhile, Europe will need to continue supporting efforts that explore solutions considering the political dimensions of the issue[3].

Another geopolitical event occurred in February 2011, when Erdoğan urged Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak to "take into account the people's calls and their most humane demands." Later, unexpectedly, Turkey emphasized the need to take advantage of the "Arab Spring." This statement proved to be a tragic one.

The shift in Turkey's rhetoric, from calling for Mubarak to respond to the people's demands to advocating for utilizing the Arab Spring, highlighted the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of Turkey's foreign policy[14]. While Turkey had positioned itself as a leader and supporter of democratic change in the Arab world, this shift revealed the challenges it faced in navigating the regional upheavals and the consequences of taking advantage of such political transitions for its own strategic interests. Erdoğan essentially jeopardized all of Turkey's political

and economic achievements in the Arab world up until that point.<sup>1</sup> In fact, three years later, Turkey found itself completely isolated in the region and deeply involved in the ongoing civil war in neighboring Syria.

This shift in Turkey's approach, from a more cautious diplomatic strategy to active involvement in regional conflicts, led to significant repercussions. The once-promising relations with Arab countries, which had been cultivated through a policy of soft power and mutual cooperation, became strained as Turkey's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict and its stance on other regional issues alienated many in the Arab world. As a result, Turkey faced not only geopolitical isolation but also internal challenges related to its foreign policy direction and the growing complexities of the Syrian civil war.

Turkey's decision to engage with the "Arab Spring" can be understood through the lens of the Islamic ideology prevalent among Ankara's foreign policymakers. This decision, in retrospect, appears to have been a perilous one. Specifically, analysts argue that in light of the longstanding role of Islamic principles in Turkey's political culture, it is essential to re-evaluate the political framework that informs the foreign policy of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP), which is shaped by an Islamic-oriented leadership. For the Turkish Sunni Islamists within the AKP, the "Arab Spring" represented a significant symbol of Islamic transformations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), seen as a momentous opportunity for regional and economic realignment[15].

This Islamic conceptual framework, deeply embedded in Turkey's political and foreign policies, guided the country's actions during the Arab uprisings, seeking to align Turkey with what was perceived as a broader movement of Islamic change in the region. However, such a perspective necessitates a deeper critical analysis of how the pursuit of regional influence through Islamic solidarity impacted Turkey's broader foreign policy trajectory, and whether such a strategy truly aligned with the nation's long-term interests in a geopolitically volatile region.

## CONCLUSION

Today, Turkey stands at a crossroads in its geopolitical choices. As highlighted earlier, despite Turkey's pursuit of neutrality in international relations, the question remains: how long can this neutrality continue? Such questions remain unresolved. Currently, Turkey's government maintains equal and friendly relations with both Western and Eastern Muslim countries, striving to preserve these connections. Despite various criticisms and pressures from Western countries, Turkey has continued this course with confidence, playing a significant role in many crucial situations in global politics. Turkey remains one of NATO's most reliable and loyal members, and it continues to contribute significantly to European security. The current Turkish government has implemented several reforms that define the country's path, particularly in domestic and foreign policies. One of the most successful reforms was limiting the influence and interference of the military in the country's political affairs. Despite criticisms and pressures, President Erdoğan's government has maintained its position of power. However, questions remain: if a change in leadership occurs and more drastic reforms are introduced, what direction will Turkey take in international relations? Will the country pivot towards the East, abandoning NATO, or could military influence resurge? These questions are not without reason, as there are similar calls within the country, and such challenges could significantly alter Turkey's current trajectory. However, Turkey is not only a key actor in the regional context but also plays a significant role in global politics. Most importantly, Turkey has successfully established good relations with its neighbors and allies. It maintains friendly relations with both Europe and America, as well as with Arab-Muslim and Turkic countries. Despite some shortcomings, Turkey manages to maintain a balance among these various states, ensuring stable diplomatic ties.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/turkeys-pan-islamist-foreign-policy/>

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