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# A Bridge No More? Türkiye's Geopolitical Significance in the Twenty-first Century

**Çağdaş Üngör**

Türkiye's geopolitical significance was in little doubt during the Cold War. The country joined the US-led NATO alliance in 1952 and shared a border with the Soviet Union, placing it at the centre of this ideological confrontation.<sup>1</sup> The conviction that Türkiye's geographical location continues to confer unique strategic leverage lingers in Ankara today.<sup>2</sup> The Turkish Straits are seen to embody the country's ongoing status as a 'bridge' between Europe and Asia at a time when China's economic rise, growing Sino-US rivalry, and technological shifts brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and global decarbonisation efforts appear to be ushering in an 'Asia-Pacific century'.<sup>3</sup> Although Türkiye is still a NATO member and partner to the United States, it is questionable whether the country's physical geography is enough to shore up its leverage in a new cold war between China and the US.

## **A bridge no more?**

Ankara is not particularly close to either China or the US. This is true both in the geographical sense and in terms of the norms and values these countries espouse. Disagreements over regional and global issues between Washington and Ankara in the last decade have created substantial divisions between them. Unlike during the Cold War, Türkiye and the US do not

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necessarily view the same countries as either friends or foes. Most notably, the Turkish government does not view China as a threat, a fact that leaves no room for Türkiye in the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy that has been promoted by the Trump and Biden administrations. This can be seen, for example, in Türkiye's absence from the Washington-backed India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which was announced at the G20 summit in New Delhi in 2023.<sup>4</sup>

It does not follow, however, that Türkiye's distance from the US means it enjoys closer ties with China. Although Sino-Turkish relations have become friendlier since the 2010s, China has not emerged as a direct substitute for Türkiye's souring relations with the

West.<sup>5</sup> Türkiye's NATO membership still limits its ability to develop strong ties with Beijing through institutional mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This is especially true since NATO revealed its most recent strategic concept at the Madrid Summit in 2022, which painted China as a rival to the Alliance. At an SCO summit in November 2023, Türkiye was excluded

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*Türkiye and the US do not view the same countries as foes*

from an agreement envisaging a transport corridor linking China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus.<sup>6</sup> China–Türkiye relations have also been impeded by the domestically sensitive Uyghur issue. Although Ankara has lowered its voice on China's human-rights violations in Xinjiang in recent years, Türkiye still ranks lower than several other Middle Eastern countries in Beijing's hierarchy of diplomatic partnerships.

The Turkish Straits may still provide Ankara with substantial leverage over real and perceived enemies (while serving as an important maritime choke point, particularly for Russian oil shipments), but the Malacca Strait and Suez Canal are far more important in terms of Asia–Europe trade flows. Likewise, no Turkish locations are listed among the world's busiest maritime ports, many of which are found in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>7</sup> Türkiye's relatively insignificant role in China's land-based Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) casts further doubt on its bridge status.<sup>8</sup> Despite the popularity of token projects such as the Ankara–Istanbul high-speed railway or Kumport container

terminal, China's BRI has so far delivered little in the way of life-changing development to Turkiye.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that the Middle Corridor (also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), which aims to connect China and Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and Turkiye, may revive Turkiye's bridge status in the future. This initiative has gained new appeal in Western countries seeking alternatives to the Northern Corridor and the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway in the wake of the war in Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Substantial financial investment and overall policy coordination for the corridor are still lacking, however.<sup>11</sup>

Another major transformation that is likely to lessen Turkiye's geopolitical significance is the global push to achieve zero carbon. Turkish governments have long taken pride in the country's ability to physically connect the energy-rich Central Asian countries with European markets. Previous pipeline projects in Turkiye, such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (BTE) pipeline, TurkStream or the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project (TANAP), have facilitated this role. But the European Union's net-zero outlook, goal of becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 and declining demand for fossil fuels may take a toll on Ankara's ambition to turn Turkiye into an energy hub and undermine its bridge status in the energy sector. Russia's invasion of Ukraine may have created a short-term boost in European demand for Caspian oil and gas, but Europe's green transition is expected to leave China the biggest market for these resources.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Turkiye is not among the pioneering nations of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the technological products of which are shaping global geopolitics as well as economic rivalries. Despite its considerable advances in drone technology, Turkiye has displayed little progress in key areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics or quantum computing.<sup>13</sup> In 2023, Turkiye was ranked 39th out of 62 countries in an index measuring investment, innovation and implementation in the field of AI.<sup>14</sup> Scholarly works cite Turkiye's domestic political dynamics, such as the increasing politicisation of state institutions and prevalent nepotism at its research centres, among the factors impeding the country's progress in AI technologies.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Taiwan, Turkiye does not excel in strategically important items suited for a digitalised world, such as semiconductors. Nor does Turkiye

have abundant mine and mineral resources that could be used to develop renewable technologies.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Türkiye's first electric vehicle – the TOGG – is not expected to become a globally competitive brand any time soon, despite its popularity in Turkish pro-government circles.<sup>17</sup>

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How can Türkiye remain geopolitically relevant in a world focused on technological development and the Asia-Pacific? Türkiye is not geographically close to either of the two poles in the emerging US–China rivalry, nor does it appear to enjoy a privileged relationship with Washington or Beijing. With the bulk of Asia–Europe trade flowing via maritime routes to Türkiye's south and railways to its north, the country's bridge status seems to have diminished substantially in the twenty-first century. New connectivity projects, such as the Middle Corridor or the Türkiye–Iraq Development Road, may partially remedy this problem, but their completion remains a long-term prospect. To gain geopolitical leverage, therefore, Ankara needs to invest in its human resources, key technologies and niche products. The international success of Turkish drone technology and TV productions can be replicated in other areas. This will, of course, require a fresh look at Türkiye's educational and research institutions, which are currently haemorrhaging highly skilled workers to other countries. To prevent Türkiye's further slide into the world's geopolitical periphery, solutions will be needed for the country's democratic backsliding and economic downturn. Granting autonomy to the country's universities, eliminating nepotism and rewarding merit in the scientific–technological sphere will also be crucial in reversing Türkiye's brain drain and restoring its creative spirit.

## Notes

- 1 See Ian O. Lesser, 'Turkey, the United States and the Delusion of Geopolitics', *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 3, Autumn 2006, pp. 83–96.
- 2 For a discussion of the notion that Türkiye's geographical location confers unique strategic leverage, see Pınar Bilgin, "'Only Strong States Can Survive in Turkey's Geography': The Uses of "Geographical Truths" in Turkey', *Political Geography*, vol. 26, no. 7, 2007, pp. 740–56.
- 3 For a discussion of how the Turkish Straits have been seen to embody

- Türkiye's status as a 'bridge' between Europe and Asia, see Lerna K. Yanık, 'The Metamorphosis of Metaphors of Vision: "Bridging" Turkey's Location, Role and Identity After the End of the Cold War', *Geopolitics*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2009, pp. 531–49.
- <sup>4</sup> See Çağdaş Üngör, 'Asya ve Avrupa'yı Türkiye'siz Bağlamak', *UİK Panorama*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2023/09/14/cu-6/>; and Ragıp Soylu, 'Turkey's Erdogan Opposes India–Middle East Transport Project', *Middle East Eye*, 11 September 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-erdogan-opposes-india-middle-east-corridor>.
- <sup>5</sup> See Ziya Öniş and Maimaiti Yalikul, 'Emerging Partnership in a Post-Western World? The Political Economy of China–Türkiye Relations', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2021, pp. 507–29.
- <sup>6</sup> See Dana Omirgazy, 'Kazakhstan Takes Part in First SCO Transport Forum in Tashkent', *Astana Times*, 2 November 2023, <https://astanatimes.com/2023/11/kazakhstan-takes-part-in-first-sco-transport-forum-in-tashkent/>.
- <sup>7</sup> World Shipping Council, 'The Top 50 Container Ports', 2021, <https://www.worldshipping.org/top-50-ports>.
- <sup>8</sup> See Nilgün Eliküçük Yıldırım and Gözde Yılmaz, 'Use/Misuse of Chinese BRI Investment? BRI-related Crony Capitalism in Turkey', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2023, pp. 365–83; and Christoph Nedopil Wang, 'China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023 H1', Green Finance and Development Center, FISF Fudan University, Shanghai, July 2023, <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2023-h1/>.
- <sup>9</sup> See Yalkun Uluyol, 'Partnership with Limits: China–Turkey Relations in the Late AKP Era', Heinrich Böll Foundation, 20 March 2024, <https://tr.boell.org/en/2024/03/20/partnership-limits-china-turkey-relations-late-akp-era>.
- <sup>10</sup> See European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 'Sustainable Transport Connections Between Europe and Central Asia', June 2023, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/publications/special-reports/sustainable-transport-connections-between-europe-and-central-asia.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> See Tuba Eldem, 'Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity: Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey', SWP, 28 October 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C64/>; and Suat Beylur et al., *Tarihi İpek Yolunun Yeniden Canlandırılmasında Orta Koridor: Mevcut Durum, Potansiyel, Güncel Meseleler* (Ankara: Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Uluslararası Türk-Kazak Üniversitesi, 2022).
- <sup>12</sup> See Gabriele Cassetti et al., 'Reinforcing the Paris Agreement: Ambitious Scenarios for the Decarbonisation of the Central Asian and Caspian Region', *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Transition*, vol. 3, August 2023, p. 10; and Morgan Bazilian et al., 'Four Scenarios of the Energy Transition: Drivers, Consequences, and Implications for Geopolitics',

- Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, 'Droning On in the Middle East', *American Purpose*, 5 April 2021, <https://www.americanpurpose.com/blog/fukuyama/droning-on/>; 'Meet the World's New Arms Dealers', *The Economist*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.economist.com/international/2023/09/19/meet-the-worlds-new-arms-dealers>; and Soumitra Dutta et al. (eds), 'Global Innovation Index 2022: What Is the Future of Innovation-driven Growth? 15th Edition', World Intellectual Property Organization, Geneva, <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo-pub-2000-2022-en-main-report-global-innovation-index-2022-15th-edition.pdf>.
- <sup>14</sup> Tortoise Media, 'The Global AI Index', 28 June 2023, <https://www.tortoisemedia.com/intelligence/global-ai/>.
- <sup>15</sup> See, for example, Muhammed Can, 'Under the Leadership of Our President: "Potemkin AI" and the Turkish Approach to Artificial Intelligence', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2023, pp. 356–76.
- <sup>16</sup> See IRENA, 'Geopolitics of the Energy Transition: Critical Materials', 12 July 2023, <https://www.irena.org/Digital-Report/Geopolitics-of-the-Energy-Transition-Critical-Materials>.
- <sup>17</sup> See Greig Mordue and Erman Sener, 'Upgrading in the Automotive Periphery: Turkey's Battery Electric Vehicle Maker Togg', *Development and Change*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2022, pp. 760–95.