

To bother or not to bother with the middle power concept? The case of Türkiye

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The current transformation of the world order has led to a renewed interest in the role of states that do not fall into the category of great powers, but whose foreign policy choices nevertheless matter. These are discussed under the heading of ‘middle powers’, and also referred to as ‘global swing states’. The role of such states appears to be crucial, but in what way precisely remains unclear. A review of the middle power debate suggests that much of the ambiguity of the concept has to do with the desire to offer a solution without agreeing on what the problem is. Using the case of Türkiye, this article argues that, in order to understand the foreign policy choices of states that matter, it is helpful to look at how they themselves perceive their place and role in the international arena. The article thus seeks to contrast the concept of a middle power with the concept of a central country, as developed in official Ankara’s foreign policy discourse. The analysis shows that one of the key limits of the middle power concept lies in its statism, whereas a focus on the self-understanding of actors would provide a dynamic view of their foreign policy preferences, highlighting the impact of regional developments and systemic transformation.

Keywords: Türkiye, Middle Power, Global Swing States, International Order



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Introduction

The ongoing war in Ukraine has polarised the world, with the escalating confrontation between Russia and the West framed along the lines of “you are either with us or against us”. However, the global response to the war has not lived up to this expectation. The reluctance of many states to take sides has already led to a rethinking of the usual division between “the West and the rest”.¹ In addition, the systemic rivalry between the United States and China adds another layer to the need to understand likely and unlikely changes in alignments. In particular, the role of middle powers has received increasing attention, especially in regions that are no longer seen as just ‘the rest’, but as the Global South, and ‘fence sitters’ are now suddenly treated as ‘global swing states’ whose foreign policy choices can influence the ongoing transformation of the world order.²

It is questionable, however, to what extent the middle power concept can advance our understanding of those states that matter more than small states, but still less than great powers. A review of the middle power debate suggests that much of the ambiguity surrounding the concept has to do with the desire to offer a solution without agreeing on what the problem is. Using the case of Türkiye, this article argues that, in order to understand the foreign policy choices of middle powers, it is helpful to look at how they themselves perceive their place and

1 Fry, R., “The West and the Rest: Where Did It All Go Wrong?”, *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, August 22, 2022, Available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/west-and-rest-where-did-it-all-go-wrong>; Karaganov, S., “Ot Ne-Zapada K Mirovomu Bol’shinstvu (From Non-West to World Majority)”, *Russia in Global Affairs* 20, no. 5 (2022): 6–18, September 1, 2022, Available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-ne-zapada-k-bolshinstvu/>; Öniş, Z., “The West Versus the Rest: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Crisis of the “Post-Western” Order”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, no. 4 (2023): 33–52, March 1, 2023, Available at: <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1179/the-west-versus-the-rest-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-and-the-crisis-of-the-post-western-order> (All the sources accessed: September 30, 2023)

2 Kupchan, C., “6 Swing States Will Decide the Future of Geopolitics: These Middle Powers of the Global South Should Be the Focus of the U.S. Policy”, *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2023, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/06/geopolitics-global-south-middle-powers-swing-states-india-brazil-turkey-indonesia-saudi-arabia-south-africa/>; Conley, H., et al. “Alliances in a Shifting Global Order: Rethinking Transatlantic Engagement with Global Swing States”, *German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/alliances-shifting-global-order-rethinking-transatlantic-engagement-global-swing-states> (All the sources accessed: September 30, 2023)

role in the international arena. As a conceptual framework, such a perspective draws on the Weberian idea of ‘subjectively intended meaning’ (*subjektiv gemeinter Sinn*), whereby a social action needs to be contextualised in reference to “that meaning in terms of which a real, ‘concrete’ individual understands his or her own action.”³ The current article thus seeks to contrast the concept of a middle power with the concept of a central country, as developed in official Ankara’s foreign policy discourse. It shows that one of the key limits of the middle power concept lies in its statism, whereas the focus on the self-understanding of actors accounts for a dynamic view of their foreign policy preferences, highlighting the impact of regional developments and systemic transformation.

What is at stake in the middle power debate?

The debate on middle powers revolves around the key issues of international relations, such as power, hierarchy, status, and agency. However, the concept itself is notorious for its lack of clarity and definition.⁴ A loose understanding has emerged that views middle powers as having “a certain degree of heft – in economic, geographic, demographic or military terms,” whereby “some relatively small states can vault into the category as a function of their international activism and influence.”⁵ It is precisely their activism that seems to give rise to the challenge that the middle powers, by virtue of their ambitions and perceived willingness to take risks, may eventually pose. Such states are, thus, equally likely to either “contribute to stability by providing additional sources of balance and diplomacy” or “exacerbate other

3 Rosenberg, M., “Generally Intended Meaning, the ‘Average’ Actor, and Max Weber’s Interpretive Sociology”, *Max Weber Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013): 39–63.

4 Robertson, J. “Middle-Power Definitions: Confusion Reigns Supreme”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (2017): 355–70; Chapnick, A., “The Middle Power”, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 7, no. 2 (1999): 73–82; Jordaan, E., “The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing Between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers”, *Politikon* 30, no. 1 (2003): 165–81; Cooper, D. “Somewhere Between Great and Small: Disentangling the Conceptual Jumble of Middle, Regional, and Niche Powers”, *Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 14, no. 2 (2013): 23–35.

5 Sweijs, T. and Mazarr, M., “Mind the Middle Powers”, *War on the Rocks*, April 4, 2023, Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2023/04/mind-the-middle-powers/> (Accessed: September 30, 2023)

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rising instabilities of the international system.”⁶ At issue is thus the question of how predictable, and how reliable, middle powers are.

The concept of a middle power, in its current usage, has its origins in the post-1945 world order. It is therefore important to look at its underlying assumptions, and more specifically at the context, and the problems it was used to address at the time. The driving forces behind the promotion of the middle power idea at that time were the policymakers of Canada and Australia, as they were seeking a fitting place and striving to “contribute to international, multilateral forums to address common problems.”⁷ The concept was eventually captured by a normatively functional idea, with Jeffrey Robertson and Andrew Carr pointing out “that middle powers are *International* in focus, *Multilateral* in method, and *Good Citizens* in conduct.”⁸ The authors argue that such a view does not reflect the fundamental changes in today’s international environment, and the concept itself is therefore no longer relevant.⁹

In an attempt to rescue the middle power concept and adapt it to contemporary realities, other scholars have focused on the importance of the regional dimension. In their recent study “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World”, Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin, and David Polansky suggest that middle powers are characterised by “1) enduring regional presence and geographic rootedness, 2) considerable economic and military capacity relative to neighbors, 3) historical and cultural pedigree as civilizational states, 4) the regionally-focused, limited extent of their ambitions – they seek not world domination but a sphere of influence in their near-abroad matching their historical range and scope.”¹⁰ Given the diversity of states that fall into the category of middle powers, the authors suggest distinguishing between “status quo middle powers”, such as Japan and Germany, and “revisionist middle powers”, such as Türkiye and Iran. The regional focus is indeed useful

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Robertson, J. and Carr, A. “Is Anyone a Middle Power? The Case for Historicization”, *International Theory* (2023): 1–25.

⁸ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Moeini, A., Mott, C., Paikin, Z., and Polansky, D., “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World”, White Paper, *Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*, March 26, 2022, <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/03/26/middle-powers-in-the-multipolar-world/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

for understanding the foreign policy choices of states such as Türkiye. But the suggested framework is not without its shortcomings.

First, as encompassing as it aspires to be, this conception is not dynamic enough and lacks explanatory power to account for changes. As the authors themselves point out, “Ankara’s geopolitical moves in recent years show how easy it can be for a middle power to pivot from status quo to revisionist as well as to change the direction of its strategic focus.”¹¹ However, it remains unclear how to explain this shift and, more importantly, how strategic it actually is. Second, although Ankara’s foreign policy is indeed based on regionalised thinking, the idea of a regional security complex, which is the basis of the adjusted concept, does not fully take into account Türkiye’s geographical position, as it straddles several regions.¹² By implication, this leaves out the question of how developments in one region are likely to affect Türkiye’s policies in other regional neighbourhoods.¹³ In short, the proposed concept provides a descriptive and a static account of Turkish foreign policy, but does not fully explain Türkiye’s foreign policy choices and whether these choices are situational or structural in nature. A similar tendency can be observed in academic research on Türkiye as a middle power, where Türkiye’s seeming incompatibility with the concept is adjusted with appropriate adjectives such as, to name a few, modified, emerging, or second-generation middle power.¹⁴

11 *Ibid*, p. 22.

12 Kardaş, Ş., “Turkey: A Regional Power Facing a Changing International System”, *Turkish Studies* 14, no. 4 (2013): 637–60.

13 How Turkey’s policy in the Black Sea region has been affected by the developments in the Middle East see, among others, Kınıklıoğlu, S., “Turkey’s Black Sea Policy: Strategic Interplay at a Critical Junction”, in R.D. Asmus (ed), *Next Steps in Forging a Euroatlantic Strategy for the Wider Black Sea*, 55–64 (Washington, DC, The German Marshall Fund, 2006); On the connections between the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean see, among others, Dalay, G., “Turkey’s Middle East Reset: A Precursor for Re-Escalation?”, Policy Paper, *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, August 9, 2022, Available at: <https://mecouncil.org/publication/turkeys-middle-east-reset-a-precursor-for-re-escalation/> (Accessed: January 5, 2024).

14 Sandal, N., “Middle Powerhood as a Legitimation Strategy in the Developing World: The Cases of Brazil and Turkey”, *International Politics* 51, no. 6 (2014): 693–708; Öniş, Z., and Kutlay, M. “The Dynamics of Emerging Middle-Power Influence in Regional and Global Governance: The Paradoxical Case of Turkey”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (2017): 164–83; Altunışık, M. “The Trajectory of a Modified Middle Power: An Attempt to Make Sense of Turkey’s Foreign Policy in Its Centennial”, *Turkish Studies*, 2022, 1–15; Sucu, A.E., Safranchuk, I., Nesmashnyi, A., and Iskandarov, Q., “Transformation of Middle Powers with the Decline of World Hegemony: The Case

Changes and continuities in Ankara's quest for agency

If the debate on middle powers is about how to understand their foreign policy choices and whether middle powers are likely to change their strategic orientation, this paper argues it is necessary to look at how a particular state itself perceives its role, be it in its regional neighbourhood or in the international arena. In the case of Türkiye, it is helpful to examine the idea of a 'central country' (*merkez ülke*), as elaborated by Turkish academic and politician, Ahmet Davutoğlu. The concept of a central country provides important insights into the question of how the quest for agency manifests itself in the case of Türkiye, as well as the contextual interplay of regional dynamics and systemic transformation that informs Ankara's aspiration for autonomous action.

From Davutoğlu's doctrine of strategic depth, the idea of zero problems with zero neighbours has gained the most prominence. In contrast, his concept of a central country has received far less attention, but, as this paper suggests, has considerable explanatory potential for understanding Türkiye's foreign-policy moves and agency manifestation. What makes Türkiye a central country is, in the words of Davutoğlu, its multi-regional geographic location: "As a major country in the midst of the Afro-Eurasia landmass, Türkiye is a central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one, unified category. In terms of its sphere of influence, Türkiye is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country all at the same time."¹⁵ What Davutoğlu was addressing with this assertively ambitious definition of Türkiye was a reassessment of Ankara's self-perception of its role, in particular in relation to the West. In other words, it expressed dissatisfaction with the perception of Türkiye's role as a 'bridge' between East and West, which was too narrow, because it limited Ankara's agency.¹⁶

Indeed, Türkiye has played many roles in its relations with the West.

of Turkey", *Strategic Analysis* 45, no. 4 (2021): 307–20; Oğuzlu, H.T., "Turkey as a Restrained Middle Power", *Turkish Studies*, 2023, 1–18.

15 Davutoğlu, A., "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 1 (2008): 77–96 (77).

16 Erşen, E., and Çelikpala, M., "Turkey and the Changing Energy Geopolitics of Eurasia", *Energy Policy* 128 (2019): 584–92; Yanık, L., "The Making of Turkish Exceptionalism: The West, the Rest and Unreconciled Issues from the Past", *Turkish Studies* 24, 3–4 (2023): 640–57.

During the Cold War, since Ankara joined NATO in 1952, it has been the “last patrol on the southern flank” of the Western alliance.¹⁷ In the 1980s, even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, this role became less important and Ankara, as Washington’s ‘forgotten ally’ back then, was to become “a strategic link between Europe and the turbulent Middle East.”¹⁸

After the end of the Cold War, there was uncertainty in Ankara about the future of its relations with the West, especially against the background of its rejected application for membership of the European Economic Community.¹⁹ On the one hand, Türkiye seized the opportunity to create its own ‘unipolar moment’ in the early 1990s by taking the lead in the regional integration project that later became the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.²⁰ On the other hand, Ankara also played along with other roles conceived by its Western allies after the end of the Cold War.

In the early 1990s, the Western media extensively reported about and celebrated Türkiye as “the ‘epicenter’ of an emerging Turkic world”. Ankara was to serve as a secular and democratic model for Central Asia, as the West was worrying about potential instability and the spread of radical Islam in the region.²¹ In the period 2003–2005, the Turkish model was again useful for the West, this time “to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with democracy.”²² With the developments in the Middle East in 2010–2012, Türkiye was seen as a ‘model’ by both the West and the countries of the region. In its turn Ankara, in the words of

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17 Erhan, Ç., and Sıvış, E., “Determinants of Turkish-American Relations and Prospects for the Future”, *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 89–116.

18 Rustow, D., *Turkey. America’s Forgotten Ally* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 1989), p. 109.

19 Aydın, M., “Geographical Blessing versus Geopolitical Curse: Great Power Security Agendas for the Black Sea Region and a Turkish Alternative”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 271–85.

20 Isachenko, D., “Turkey in the Black Sea Region: Ankara’s Reactions to the War in Ukraine Against the Background of Regional Dynamics and Global Confrontation”, SWP Research Paper RP 12, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), October 17, 2023, Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkey-in-the-black-sea-region> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

21 Dar, E.P., and Erşen, E., “Reassessing the “Turkish Model” in the Post-Cold War Era: A Role Theory Perspective”, *Turkish Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014): 258–82, p. 264.

22 *Ibid*, p. 267

Brief review of Türkiye's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era suggests that there are several persistent themes in Ankara's self-perception that cannot be fully explained by a middle power concept.

Davutoğlu, the then foreign minister of Türkiye, saw itself as an “order instituting actor.”²³ In the context of the Arab Spring, Davutoğlu's aspiration was that “Turkey would be both the pioneer and speaker of this order of peace.”²⁴ In the post-Davutoğlu period, especially since 2016, Turkish foreign policy has become more security-driven.²⁵ Yet, Ankara's quest for agency remains a key feature in its foreign policy and finds its current expression in the idea that it is possible to “remain within the West and act autonomously”.²⁶

What this brief review of Türkiye's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era suggests is that there are several persistent themes in Ankara's self-perception that cannot be fully explained by a middle power concept. First, Ankara's foreign-policy choices can be seen as resulting from the interplay between regional dynamics and systemic geopolitical change, which may have a different impact on self-understanding and the manifestation of agency. Davutoğlu's definition of Türkiye as a central country is perhaps the most explicit conceptual attempt, but similar grand narratives can also be traced back to Turgut Özal's vision of the 21st century as “a Turkish century” and Süleyman Demirel's idea of a

23 Davutoğlu, A., “Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring”, *Türkiye Ekonomi Politikaları Araştırma Vakfı/Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey* (TEPAV), 2012, Available at: www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1336135395-4.Principles_of_Turkish_Foreign_Policy_and_Regional_Political_Structuring_by_Ahmet_Davutoglu.pdf (Accessed: January 5, 2020)

24 Quoted in Özcan, G., “If the Crisis Is What We Make of It: Turkey and the Uprisings in Syria”, in F.Aksu and H.Sarı Ertem (eds), *Analyzing Foreign Policy Crises in Turkey: Conceptual Theoretical and Practical Discussions*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 178–98, p. 184.

25 Keyman, E.F., “A New Turkish Foreign Policy: Towards Proactive “Moral Realism””, *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 55–69; Altunışık, M., “The New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities”, IAI Papers 20, *Instituto Affari Internazionali* (IAI), July 17, 2020, Available at: <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/new-turn-turkeys-foreign-policy-middle-east-regional-and-domestic-insecurities> (Accessed: January 5, 2024); Gümüş, A., “Increasing Realism in Turkish Foreign Policy During Post-Davutoğlu Era”, *Insight Turkey* 24, no. 4 (2022): 167–85.

26 Ergin, S., “Turkish Foreign Policy in 2023 (6) Main Direction: Staying in the West while Acting Autonomously (translation from Turkish)”, *Hürriyet*, January 12, 2024, Available at: <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/2023te-turk-dis-politikasi-6-ana-yonelis-bati-icinde-kalip-ozerk-hareket-etmek-42389530> (Accessed: January 12, 2024).

Turkic World “from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China”.²⁷ As far as Ankara’s grand narratives are concerned, while acknowledging regional embeddedness and historical legacy, the middle power concept does not explain the coexistence of paradoxical trends in Ankara’s foreign-policy thinking, such as greatness and encirclement, or Türkiye’s simultaneous post-imperial identity and post-colonial features.²⁸ Second, Türkiye’s quest for agency cannot be fully understood in isolation from Ankara’s ambivalent relationship with the West.²⁹ Ankara’s current balancing is often seen as pivoting away from the West. However, this ignores questions such as what role the West has historically played in Turkish foreign policy thinking, that is, why Türkiye sought a Western orientation in the first place, and the multiple meanings that the West currently holds for Türkiye.³⁰ In other words, such a pivoting framework with an inbuilt binary of either with or against the West is unable to accommodate Ankara’s perception of its role within the West while at the same time striving for autonomous action.

Implications

Two final observations on the concept of a middle power are worth highlighting. First, amid the current uncertainty about the emerging and declining poles in the transformation of the world order, there is a tendency to think about the positioning of states in terms of the bloc paradigm, as implied by references to ‘fence sitters’, or ‘global swing

27 Dalay, G., “Post-Imperial State Ego and Foreign Policy (translation from Turkish)”. *Perspektif*, January 11, 2021, Available at: <https://www.perspektif.online/post-emperyal-devlet-egosu-ve-dis-politika/> (Accessed: January 12, 2024)

28 *Ibid.*

29 Yanık, L. “The Making of Turkish Exceptionalism: The West, the Rest and Unreconciled Issues from the Past”, *Turkish Studies* 24, 3-4 (2023): 640–57.

30 Isachenko, D., “Turkey and Russia: The Logic of Conflictual Cooperation”, SWP Research Paper 2021/RP 07, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), October 28, 2021, Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkey-and-russia>; Dalay, G., “Turkey’s Recurring Quest for Security, Status, and Geopolitical Identity”, Insights on Turkey, *German Marshall Fund of the United States* (GMF), April 1, 2022, Available at: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-recurring-quest-security-status-and-geopolitical-identity>; Dalay, G., “Deciphering Turkey’s Geopolitical Balancing and Anti-Westernism in Its Relations with Russia.” SWP Comment 2022/C 35, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), May 20, 2022, Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/deciphering-turkeys-geopolitical-balancing-and-anti-westernism-in-its-relations-with-russia> (Accessed: January 12, 2024)

states’, or even the ‘Global South’. The current growing interest in the concept of middle powers can be seen as an attempt to categorise important states into a group and thereby, while recognising their weight in the international arena, at the same time limiting their agency by expecting them to follow one of the blocs. Second, because the middle power concept as it is currently used was developed in a specific context and for specific purposes, it does not help to answer the question of what concerns middle power states today, namely what influences their foreign policy choices and whether they are likely to contribute to stability or instability. As a result, the case of Türkiye as a middle power does not seem to fit into the lines of inquiry on either basis.

However, if we look at how Türkiye’s self-perception has evolved historically, some light can be shed on Ankara’s foreign-policy choices. For example, one can examine how the idea of a central country is also linked to the concept of regional ownership that has been similarly present in Ankara’s foreign-policy thinking, as well as observing how Türkiye’s view of NATO transformed from following the NATO agenda into the desire to sit at the table and set its agenda.³¹ In short, the focus on self-perception allows for a dynamic understanding of foreign policy choices, so that the fact that Türkiye, as a NATO member, buys Russian anti-aircraft missile systems; does not consider the Ukraine war as Cold War 2.0; and supplies Ukraine with military equipment while Moscow accepts Ankara as a mediator, may no longer seem surprising.

31 Kardaş, Ş., “Turkey on NATO’s Role in the MENA: Perspectives from a “Central Country””, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2012, Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kardas_Brief.pdf (Accessed: January 3, 2024).