

ESTABLISHING THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND STRATEGIC INTERDEPENDENCE: THE CASE OF TÜRKIYE

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In current academic and policy discussions on international politics, there is a general understanding that the international order is undergoing profound changes. In these discussions, the distribution of capabilities among powerful states that produce large structures is explained by the concept of polarity, and the language of unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar has been widely used in public discourse for at least half a century.

In simple terms, a unipolar system has one extremely powerful state, a bipolar system has two states, and a multipolar system has three or more states. While competing perceptions of polarity persist in popular and academic discourse, a growing consensus is emerging among scholars and policymakers that the world is shifting toward a multipolar order. It is argued that within this change, the emergence of new centers of power, at least at the regional level, challenges the structure and normative foundations of the prevailing international order since the Second World War. It is noted that alliance patterns, development paradigms, and foreign policy orientations have begun to change as we move towards a multipolar world. In this context, some scholars argue that a multipolar international order is being welcomed more enthusiastically in the non-Western world in the era of the post-Western international order.

Strategic Autonomy

One of the most striking novel concepts introduced in the multipolarity discussions is strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy can be briefly described as the ability of a state to pursue its national interests and make independent decisions in key areas, particularly in defense, foreign policy, and critical technologies, without excessive reliance on external actors. It is argued in this regard that medium-sized powers, which favor a multipolar order, seek to avoid costly entanglements with the major powers, thereby maintaining all

their options open for maximum flexibility. These countries are portrayed as pursuing a strategy of hedging because they view the future distribution of global power as uncertain and wish to avoid commitments that would be difficult to fulfill.

Türkiye is cited as one of the notable countries to seek strategic autonomy. As a NATO member country and simultaneously characterized as a country seeking strategic autonomy, it is not surprising that Türkiye occupies a privileged and remarkable position in discussions on this issue. In this sense, academic and political international circles, which unquestioningly defend the superiority of the Western world and consider Eurocentrism/Western-centrism thinking sacrosanct, are skeptical of Türkiye's strategic autonomy efforts and approach this attitude cautiously. What stands out in these discussions is that while the issue is generally put forward as an observation and treated cautiously in Western sources, some Turkish academics and politicians find this pursuit unrealistic, associate it directly with Türkiye's domestic politics, and in some cases, heavily criticize it from an overly pro-Western perspective. It is noteworthy that this approach is sometimes expressed in a tone more royalist than the king's.

When we approach the studies on this subject in terms of their content, we see that some scholars examine Türkiyes strategic autonomy drive from a hedging strategy perspective or in the context of the changing balance of power dynamics between rival hierarchical orders. Others argue that Türkiyes strategic autonomy drive stems not only from hedging considerations but also from the realities of geopolitical imperatives at a time when power shifts are shaping global politics. Some others, as mentioned above, describe these efforts as a tool of the government to regulate domestic politics. Among this group, there are some extremely politicized academics who characterize this drive as an effort of the current Turkish government to maintain the regimes existence.

European Union (EU) strategic autonomy: From concept to capacity

While examining the anatomy of the strategic autonomy concept, it would be opportune to remember that the EU has offered the most well-known articulation of the idea of strategic autonomy in recent years. The EU Parliament briefing paper refers to the EU's capacity to act autonomously that is, without being dependent on other countries in strategically essential policy areas. These can range from defense policy to the economy and the capacity to uphold democratic values. From 2013 to 2016, it was primarily viewed as an approach to security and defense matters. From 2017 to 2019, strategic autonomy was considered as a way to defend European interests in a hostile geopolitical environment. It should be underlined that out of the 27 EU member states, 23 are also members of NATO. As can be understood from this example, despite being NATO members, 23 countries have seen no harm in developing a strategic autonomy among themselves, independent of NATO.

Who is Bothered by Türkiye's Efforts to Achieve Strategic Autonomy and Why?

It is obvious that the international order has been changing radically. In such an environment, it would be beneficial to scholarly examine why Türkiye's efforts to take measures to strengthen its self-defense system without breaking away from the Western world, of which it is a part, and without harming the NATO alliance of which it is a loyal ally, create such discomfort, especially in certain academic circles. It must be acknowledged that some Turkish academics face significant challenges in publishing scholarly articles that defend Türkiye's strategic autonomy or impartially assess efforts in this direction in international publishing houses, which predominantly uphold the superiority of the West. Nevertheless, in the context of grey literature, it is thought that it is possible to approach the issue as fairly as possible within the parameters of one's political view and try to establish a balance between strategic autonomy and strategic interdependency without over-politicizing the issue.

For instance, in an article titled "Türkiye's identity, Ankara's foreign policy" published recently in an online newspaper, it was stated that the search for strategic autonomy can only be achieved by making a loud voice and having a convincing attitude within the alliances and organizations of which it is a member and by acting accordingly. It is understood from this statement that Türkiye's quest for strategic autonomy is not opposed, but rather that it is suggested that this should be achieved by making a strong voice within the security-related institutions and alliances of which Türkiye is a member.

Although the proposal may seem sensible when first read in the context of stereotyped ideas from the past, careful consideration should be given to how such a proposal can be implemented in practice and what kind of reactions it may receive in an environment intolerant of hearing any thought other than Western supremacy. The period we are in and the hideous facts we are witnessing in the Middle East demonstrate that Türkiye cannot hand over its security destiny to those who prioritize Western supremacy above all else blindly. Dreams are not designs. Effectiveness in national security should not be expected without a historical consciousness and a future vision. A country cannot build its future by blindly adopting the dreams of others as its own. We cannot create a secure future by imposing on future generations the dreams other countries have set for us.

We believe that it is the primary duty of all Turkish administrations, regardless of which political party is in the helm, to take measures to strengthen and diversify Türkiyes strategic autonomy.

**Picture: Anadolu Agency and Anadolu Agency*

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