



# **Turkey:** An Emerging Middle Power in a Changing World?

**BUĞRA SÜSLER**



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## INTRODUCTION

**F**rom the European refugee crisis to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi to China's treatment of the Uighurs of Xinjiang to the fate of the Venezuelan regime, Turkey has significantly increased its presence in international politics in the last decade and sought to extend its global outreach. With rising populism at home and the Syrian civil war at its borders, Turkey and its relations with the world are more in need of analysis than ever before.

As the international system is going through a major transformation, with the balance of power rapidly shifting towards the "rest", many observers have begun discussing multipolarity as the defining characteristic of a new world (dis)order, questioning whether emerging economies will challenge or uphold the existing liberal order. Most of the academic debate tends to revolve around the implications of the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) for the future of the international system while smaller emerging powers such as Turkey get much less attention. Since the end of the Cold War, Turkish decision makers have advocated the idea that Turkey should play a pivotal role in a newly forming world order and scholars have increasingly portrayed Turkey as a "middle power" along the lines of Brazil and India emphasising Turkey's ambitions to shape global politics.

In this report, I discuss Turkey's engagement with international politics through the lens of the concept of "middle power", questioning whether and how Turkey fits into the international system as an "emerging middle power". I argue that although the Turkish government has been able to identify niche areas in global governance, domestic challenges such as setbacks in democratisation and economic performance have limited Turkey's soft power capabilities.

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## IDENTIFYING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MIDDLE POWER FOREIGN POLICY

There is contentious debate in International Relations (IR) on what a “middle power” is and whether the term is useful at all to categorise and differentiate between states with varying degrees of capabilities and resources. Broadly speaking, a middle power is a state that is neither a great nor a small power. However, a particular problem with this definition is that there is a wide set of states which can potentially qualify for the middle-ranking category making it difficult to provide an entirely satisfactory description of what a neither-great-nor-small power looks like.

The idea of hierarchically classifying states in terms of their relative power has been around for centuries and featured most famously in the Italian political philosopher Botero’s 16<sup>th</sup> century description of the European state system as consisting of three types of powers: *grandissime, mezzano and piccioli*. In mainstream IR, it became popular in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with Organski’s power transition theory (1958), which postulated a power hierarchy formed of dominant, great, middle, and small powers. Organski’s typology recognised the middle power grouping as consisting of states which are able to exert influence on a regional, and to some degree, global scale, though his analysis tended to treat states in this category as peripheral actors and focused rather on the predominance of greater powers in world politics (Cooper, 2011: 318). According to Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993: 17), such a structural definition based on the position of middle powers in the international hierarchy “has its problems, particularly its dependence on quantifiable measures of power, but it does satisfy the intuitive desire to differentiate between those states which are clearly not great powers but are not minor powers either”.

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In the literature, illustrative archetypes of middle powers traditionally included Canada and Australia as well as the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) and the Netherlands. These states are typically described as guardians of the global balance of power protecting peace and order in the international system (Holbraad, 1984: 205). They are widely accepted to be bridge-builders, striving to link up different clusters of states built around certain interests and ideas, and consensus-seeking interlocutors who “pursue multilateral solutions to international problems” and embrace “notions of ‘good international citizenship’ to guide their diplomacy” (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993: 19). India under Nehru’s leadership, for example, engaged in this kind of inter-bloc diplomacy and played an important role in the Non-Aligned Movement trying to defuse tension between dominant powers during the Cold War. Middle powers practice “niche diplomacy” concentrating their energy and resources in specific issue areas likely to yield the most results as they have limited resources for pursuing a grand global strategy (ibid.: 19, 145). The Norwegians, for instance, have assumed the role of mediator in complex international conflicts and are heavily invested in the idea of using their Scandinavian identity as a neutral country to pursue peace-making diplomacy.

Recent literature differentiates between traditional and emerging middle powers (Jordaan, 2003, 2017). Traditional middle

powers are understood to be wealthy, stable, and egalitarian social democracies and promoters of a liberal international order. Emerging middle powers, on the other hand, are often states that have assumed internationalist postures after the post-Cold War and in many cases have a lower quality of development and democratisation experiences. Furthermore, emerging middle powers tend to have semi-peripheral roles in the global economy coupled with significant income inequality in the domestic arena. They often approach global governance with structural concerns about the international power hierarchy (Alden and Vieira, 2005: 1081) and they can be hesitant to promote liberal internationalism. As Öniş and Kutlay (2017: 2) put it, they face “a dilemma that they are both critical of the existing liberal order dominated by the established Western powers and, at the same time, have an incentive to be a part of an international order based on liberal norms”.

Turkey is a good example of a state which has faced this dilemma: Turkish decision makers have often criticised the Western-dominated international order, especially for structural inequalities, but at the same time recognised the incentives of having a greater say in the same order. Successive Turkish governments have criticised decision-making processes in international institutions, for example the UN for failing to take effective steps to bring peace to Israel-Palestine (e.g., Erdoğan, 2018d). President Erdoğan’s slogan “The World Is Bigger than Five” –

referring to the permanent members of the UN Security Council with veto rights – encapsulates the Turkish government’s critique of the existing international system and, in the words of Erdoğan (2018c), this motto is “the biggest-ever rise against global injustice” and exploitation of the world economy. However, while voicing criticism of the existing order, as Kirişçi and Bülbül (2018) observed, Turkey has benefited greatly from participating in the liberal international system since “[m]embership to NATO, the G-20, the World Trade Organization, and other connections with the trans-Atlantic alliance became key components of Turkey’s rising soft power in the early 2000s”. Furthermore, in his speech at the 73<sup>rd</sup> session of the UN General Assembly and in an op-ed in *Foreign Policy*, Erdoğan himself defended multilateralism and free trade and even criticised the Trump administration for undermining the liberal international order (Erdoğan, 2018b, 2018a).

## THE CASE OF TURKEY

Since the end of the Cold War, scholars have discussed Turkey’s ambition to expand its area of influence in its neighbourhood and the middle power concept has been widely used to describe Turkey’s engagement with the international system (e.g., Müftüler and Yüksel, 1997; see also Hale, 1992). For example, Hale (2013: 1) argues that using the term middle power is the most realistic way of conceptualising Turkey’s international role to explain Turkish policies, defining power as “the ability to oblige other states to take actions that they would not otherwise have taken and to resist pressure to do so from other states”. In the Turkish case, this means that while Turkey is not a great power, it has considerable ability to act independently, resist pressure from great powers, and exert influence as a regional actor.

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Turkish foreign policy over the last decade has shown behavioural characteristics of an emerging middle power in a number of ways. First, as Jordaan (2003: 172-73; 2017: 404) points out, one of the common features of emerging middle powers is that they are “eager, and often leading, participants in regional structures” and frequently identified as regional powers. A main objective of Turkish foreign policy in the Justice and Development Party (“AKP”) period has been to position Turkey as a regional power and to increase Turkey’s presence in regional as well as global initiatives. To this end, Turkish decision makers attempted to improve Turkey’s relations with Middle Eastern states with Muslim-majority populations, established closer ties with regional organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and strove to generate soft power using Turkey’s history and identity. This policy was particularly successful in the early 2000s, especially when the Turkish government was able to boost Turkey’s image as a role model for the Muslim world; however, it then faced significant setbacks with a decline in the AKP’s performance in terms of economic development and democratisation (Öniş and Kutlay, 2017: 8-15; Kuru, 2015).

Second, emerging middle powers tend to exhibit status-seeking behaviour. That is to say, they pursue enhanced international standing and aim to climb the ranks of the global power hierarchy (Chapnick, 1999: 76; Karim, 2018; Wood, 1988: 19-20; Larson and Shevchenko, 2014). As Wohlforth, et al. (2017: 528) highlight, “status is intrinsically coupled with the concept of *recognition*”. One of the main aspirations of Turkey is to be recognised as a global actor, or as a “pivotal state” as Davutoğlu (2001: 91) termed. Becoming a middle power and a regional leader has been seen by Turkish decision makers as a natural step on the way to this goal (Sandal, 2014: 702). Similar tendencies are present in other emerging states,



for example Brazil has pursued policies to become first a regional and then a world power (Sandal, 2014: 702; Larson and Shevchenko, 2019: 4, 12).

Third, Turkish foreign policy makers have attempted to practice niche diplomacy using Turkey's unique geographical and cultural position between the East and the West and presenting themselves as bridge-builders. Davutoğlu, for example, often emphasised that Turkey has access to both the global north and south, and he identified mediation and humanitarian diplomacy as the key components in gaining Turkey a greater say in global governance (Davutoğlu, 2013a, 2013b). Turkey sought to build coalitions with other middle powers and most notably took part in MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia), a cross-regional consultative forum which aims to "play a bridging role between developed and developing countries to promote global governance and complement the efforts of regionalism" (MIKTA, 2015; see also Gök and Karadeniz, 2018).

As Wohlforth, et al. (2017: 533) argue, one of the strategies middle powers use to seek status is formulating policies which will allow them to be perceived as a "good power" with foreign policies that have a moral dimension. Turkey is a good example in the sense that Turkish decision makers have tried to develop the moral dimension of Turkish foreign policy investing in Turkey's image as a mediator and a humanitarian power.

Accordingly, Turkey assumed the role of a mediator in a number of international conflicts, mostly in its immediate neighbourhood, and was an eager participant in multilateral initiatives on peace making. Most notably, it launched indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria in 2008 (Davutoğlu, 2013b: 85), negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran in 2010 working in collaboration with Brazil (Barrionuevo and Arsu, 2010), and set up the Group of Friends of Mediation under the UN framework in 2010 in a joint effort with Finland for peaceful settlement of disputes and conflict prevention (Davutoğlu and Tuomioja, 2012).

Moreover, the Turkish government helped establish informal dialogue between various political groups in Middle Eastern conflicts and presented itself as a valuable asset to the international community because of its networks in the region. For example, in the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Turkey bilaterally approached the Syrian government in order to call for de-escalation of violence, played an active role in the Friends of Syria Group with an aim to establish an international consensus for the solution to the conflict, and facilitated informal talks between the international community and various actors involved in the conflict (Süsler, 2016: 227-30, 42-45). The EU, for instance, recognised Turkey as a valuable strategic partner during the course of the Syrian uprising because of Turkey's expertise in the region. As the advisor on Turkey to the EU High Representative at

the time commented, Turkey had “niche connections” with regional actors that the EU did not and this was instrumental in terms of communication with the Syrian opposition. When Turkey hosted the Syrian opposition, for instance, the EU used Turkey to pass its messages, such as its calls to the opposition to be more inclusive (ibid.: 351).

Turkish foreign policy decision makers also concentrated their efforts to develop what they called Turkey’s “humanitarian diplomacy”, increasing Turkey’s assistance to developing nations and responding to major humanitarian crises around the world (Davutoğlu, 2013a; Çavuşoğlu, 2016). Turkey eagerly took part in international initiatives to discuss the global humanitarian system. For example, it hosted the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and promoted its image as a humanitarian actor in international forums, underlining that it hosts the largest refugee population in the world which includes more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2018, 2016).

The Turkish government emphasised the humanitarian dimension of Turkish foreign policy when engaging with the developing world. For example, as Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu (2016) explained, “[h]umanitarian diplomacy is one of the main components of Turkey’s approach towards Africa”. Scholars have highlighted Turkey’s transformation from an aid recipient to an aid donor country and characterised Turkey as a “new

humanitarian power” (Ali, 2011; see also Özkan, 2013b; Özkan, 2013a; Habiyaemye and Oğuzlu, 2014). The government complemented its “humanitarian diplomacy” with a policy aimed to increase trade and cultural exchanges with African nations. As a result, Ankara’s approach gained Turkey considerable soft power and was welcomed particularly by African governments which depended on Turkish aid the most.

The middle power concept provides a useful analytical framework especially in light of these tendencies in Turkish foreign policy in recent years and helps explain Turkey’s engagement with the international system as well as the policies it has pursued to increase its international standing. However, one should also note that successful middle powers are influencers, not only regionally but also globally, and they possess an ability to shape the international agenda. In this respect, even though Turkey has shown political willingness to play a middle power role, its middle power capabilities are considerably limited in terms of its global reach and ability to shape the direction of international politics.

As Öniş and Kutlay (2017: 3) stress, to conduct effective foreign policy, emerging middle powers need to have “the ability to serve as role models based on their soft-power resources – i.e. the quality of their developmental and democratic credentials”. In this regard, major domestic setbacks Turkey has faced in recent years, including a decline in democratisation

and economic performance, have limited Turkey's attractiveness on the global stage and constrained the abilities of Turkish foreign policy to exercise soft power to shape politics beyond its borders (see e.g., Kuru, 2015). The weakening of the Turkish Lira, coupled with the consolidation of power by the government, has diminished Turkey's middle power image along with its capacity to serve as a role model. This is in contrast with the pre-Arab Spring Turkish foreign policy when Turkey boosted its soft power in its neighbourhood and when there was a debate in popular and academic circles in the Western world on whether Middle Eastern states could follow the "Turkish model" and whether Turkey's experience with democratisation and economic development may have a demonstration effect on the other countries in the region (e.g., Ülgen, 2011; Taşpınar, 2012).

The term "emerging middle power" signifies recognition of a state's capabilities as well as limitations, and the success of states in this grouping in terms making constructive impact on global governance tend to be dependent upon their ability to avoid a "mismatch of expectations and capabilities" (Öniş and Kutlay, 2017: 16-17). The case of Turkey is a good example in the sense that the foreign policy rhetoric used in Ankara has not always matched Turkey's capabilities. For example, when the Arab Spring began, the Turkish government had the ambition to be recognised as an order-setting power in the Middle East which led to Turkey's increasing involvement in Arab Spring conflicts (ibid.:13). However, the government faced significant challenges in terms of influencing the politics of the region in line with its interests. For example, it was unable to achieve its goal of regime change in Syria, its closest ally Egyptian president Morsi was no longer in power, and it had diplomatic crises with the military regime in Egypt leading the Turkish ambassador in Cairo to be declared *persona non grata* in 2013 (see e.g., Kuru, 2015).

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## CONCLUSION

Turkey's ambitions to increase its international standing in the post-Cold War era and willingness to play a greater role in regional and global governance have attracted considerable academic attention. The concept of an "emerging middle power" in the literature provides a useful analytical framework for explaining various aspects of Turkish foreign policy behaviour and the way in which Turkish decision makers have sought to position Turkey as a global actor.

Turkish foreign policy has shown the behavioural characteristics of an "emerging middle power" in a number of ways. Specifically, Turkey played an eager role in regional and global initiatives, such as MIKTA, presented itself as a mediator and a bridge-builder using its unique identity, and emphasised humanitarian diplomacy as a fundamental aspect of its foreign policy approach.

However, although Turkey has showed a willingness to play a middle power role, its ability to shape the international agenda has been considerably limited. In the domestic arena, setbacks in democratisation and economic development have limited Turkey's soft power capabilities and attractiveness in the eyes of regional and international actors.

Repairing relations with Western allies, focusing on reforms that can provide long-term economic stability, and making progress on the democratisation front can not only boost Turkey's soft power but also develop Turkey's ability to play a bridge-builder role in global governance. ■

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In this Strategic Update, Dr Buğra Süsler discusses Turkey's engagement with global politics, questioning whether and how Turkey fits into the international system as an "emerging middle power".

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