



DISCUSSION PAPER

# End of the Liberal Ethos or a Normative Deficit?

Responsible Powerhood  
and The Case of Türkiye

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**DESIGN**

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**PUBLISHER**

TRT TRAINING AND RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

May 2025

**TRT TRAINING AND RESEARCH DEPARTMENT**

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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## Introduction

**T**he post-Cold War unipolar order, long characterised by the United States' predominance, is giving way to an increasingly multipolar international system.

This shift is driven by China's economic ascent, the rising influence of regional and global middle powers, and a discernible reorientation of capital flows toward Asian markets. Multipolarity is no longer a speculative projection; it is fast becoming a structural reality of global politics. Yet, multipolarity should not be understood solely as the multiplication of centres of material power. It also raises critical uncertainties about the normative foundations of the international order. The selective application of liberal norms by dominant Western powers has undermined the credibility of the liberal international order, eroding its legitimacy and opening a normative vacuum. In this emerging void, the strategic importance of middle powers is rising. Their potential to serve as responsible brokers of global norms and to contribute to constructing a more representative and resilient international

order makes the adoption of a principled and proactive "middle powerhood" not only desirable but imperative.

Understanding the future of the international system requires more than mapping material capabilities; it necessitates examining the ideational and normative structures that sustain it. This paper offers a critical examination of the potential normative configurations of a multipolar world, advancing two central arguments. First, liberal values cannot be fully comprehended outside the context of the power structures that have historically supported them. Their global reach and legitimacy have been deeply intertwined with the dominance of particular state actors. Second, the challenge facing the liberal order today is not inherent to the values themselves but rather to the growing resistance against their exclusive representation by a single power or bloc. In this context, the case of Türkiye can be used as a useful example to understand how responsible powerhood would constructively yield benefits to the wider system.

## Value Systems and Power Structures

The international system may be conceptualised as a superstructure composed of sovereign states, institutional frameworks (e.g., the United Nations and its affiliated bodies), international regimes (governing domains such as free trade, climate change, and transboundary water management), and multinational corporations. Within this framework, value systems function as regulatory mechanisms for interaction and engagement among international actors. These systems are intrinsically embedded in and shaped by prevailing power structures. Accordingly, the structure of the international order is fundamentally contingent upon the global distribution of power (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Historically, the post-Second World War period was characterised by the existence of two distinct and competing ideological systems: liberal values aligned with the United States and socialist values aligned with the Soviet Union. During the Cold War's bipolar structure, these competing value systems coexisted within a broader strategic rivalry, precluding the establishment of a singular liberal international order. Following the end of the Cold War, the United States emerged with the requisite material and ideational capacity to institutionalise a liberal normative framework, often referred to as the "liberal international order" or the "U.S.-led rules-based order." This reflects not the triumph of liberalism as the ultimate ideological destination in a linear historical process, as suggested by Fukuyama's (1989) "end of history" argument, but rather a victory made possible by the superior material capacity of the power promoting those values.

Rather than representing a truly global normative structure during the Cold War, liberal values were limited primarily to Western-aligned states and represented a bloc-based understanding, which is far from having an internationally accepted character. A further dimension of the interplay between value systems and power structures concerns the strategic instrumentalisation of norms by dominant actors. The postulated correlation between capitalist economic development and liberal democracy—articulated by proponents of modernisation theory such as Huntington and Lipset—functioned as an ideological instrument of U.S. geopolitical strategy during the Cold War. Modernisation theory thus operated as a product of the prevailing power configurations, offering a prescriptive framework in opposition to the Soviet model.

The liberal rules-based order has also been normatively constrained by its alignment with a Western-centric

conceptualisation of democracy, which has facilitated a binary classification of states as either democratic or non-democratic. This dichotomy has been reinforced through standardised democracy indices that often overlook specific historical and contextual variables (Elmalı, 2022). In other words, the course of democratisation in a country is expected to follow the same pattern as other instances.

The framing of the liberal international order as a universal normative framework invites critical scrutiny regarding its genuinely international character. Although presented as global, its continuity and stability have been heavily reliant on the strategic performance and normative commitment of the United States and Europe (Ikenberry, 2018). The contemporary trajectory of the order is increasingly assessed in relation to the systemic rise of China, whose future role—whether integrative or revisionist—poses fundamental questions about the order's resilience. As noted by Ikenberry (2011), it would be paradoxical if China were to become the principal proponent of the World Trade Organisation's norms amid declining Western support. While some interpret the current legitimacy crisis of the liberal order as a function of its prior success, others, following Mearsheimer, argue that the order is inherently flawed and ultimately unsustainable.

Linking the future of the liberal order to China's behaviour underscores the weakness of its normative universality. China's approach to economic integration, particularly its engagement with the WTO, reflects a realist orientation. Since the early 2000s, China has selectively engaged with the liberal economic architecture while refraining from adopting the order's broader normative commitments, thus illustrating the contingent and incomplete nature of universalist claims about value systems. The BRICS platform further exemplifies these dynamics. China's active role within BRICS, a formation grounded in liberal economic openness yet independent of Western democratic norms, reflects an alternative model of multilateralism. Therefore, to the extent that liberal values align with economic interests, the liberal international order may be considered international in a limited and functional sense.

A close examination of global governance patterns reveals a recurring logic: value systems that dominate the international sphere tend to mirror the interests of the most powerful actor within the prevailing geopolitical configuration. Far from being neutral or universally accepted, the values embedded in international

institutions, treaties, and norms are frequently constructed or co-opted by the hegemon to serve its strategic goals.

Consider the post-Cold War liberal international order, which ascended in tandem with the United States' unchallenged dominance. In the 1990s and early 2000s, U.S. foreign policy leveraged liberal democratic rhetoric to legitimise a wide array of interventions and global leadership claims. This was not merely rhetorical posturing; it shaped real policy and institutional behaviour. For instance, the U.S.-led NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was conducted without UN Security Council authorisation. Justified on humanitarian grounds, the operation set a precedent for bypassing international legal structures when they were seen as obstacles to strategic or moral imperatives defined by the West. Similarly, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, premised on the supposed existence of weapons of mass destruction, was another instance of the U.S. invoking liberal norms—democracy promotion, regional stability, human rights—to legitimise actions that had little multilateral backing and ultimately destabilised the region. These interventions were deeply contested but illustrate how liberal values were used instrumentally rather than consistently.

The United States' selective approach to international justice further underscores this pattern. Although the U.S. was a key advocate for the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the 1990s, it later withdrew its signature from the Rome Statute in 2002 under the Bush administration. Washington feared politically motivated prosecutions of U.S. personnel. In 2020, the Trump administration even imposed sanctions on ICC officials investigating potential war crimes in Afghanistan. Another example of American selectivity can be found in the U.S. response to the ICC's pursuit of accountability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) during the early 2000s. The ICC began investigations into atrocities committed during the Second Congo War, including crimes by warlords such as Thomas Lubanga and Germain Katanga. While the U.S. did not obstruct these proceedings—and in some instances offered intelligence support—it remained largely disengaged diplomatically. Despite the severity of the crimes, which included child soldier recruitment and mass killings, Washington maintained a low profile, partly due to the peripheral strategic importance of the DRC to U.S. foreign policy at the time. The absence of strong support for justice efforts in the Congo contrasts sharply with more assertive U.S. backing of international legal action when vital interests or adversarial regimes are involved. This quiet detachment once again illustrates how justice is not only a matter of values but also of variable geopolitical significance. This

selective embrace of international justice mechanisms illustrates that liberal norms are only upheld when aligned with strategic interests.

Climate change governance offers another revealing case study. In the 1990s, the U.S. was instrumental in establishing the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and shaping the Kyoto Protocol. However, the 1997 Byrd-Hagel Resolution, passed unanimously by the U.S. Senate, pre-emptively rejected any international climate agreement that did not include binding commitments for developing countries like China and India. This position reflected economic anxieties and a reluctance to shoulder asymmetric burdens, even though the U.S. remained the world's largest emitter at the time.

Fast forward to 2015, when the Obama administration played a key role in negotiating the Paris Agreement, reflecting a temporary alignment between domestic political will and global climate norms. Yet just two years later, the Trump administration announced its withdrawal from the agreement, arguing that it disadvantaged American workers and undermined U.S. sovereignty. The reversal demonstrated how even well-established international regimes could be undermined when they clashed with shifting national interests, particularly under leadership that viewed multilateralism with suspicion.

This selective adherence is also visible in the U.S. stance on trade and economic governance. Washington was a key architect of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), promoting rules-based global trade. However, when China's rise through the WTO framework began to threaten U.S. industrial and technological dominance, Washington shifted course. Under both Trump and Biden, the U.S. blocked WTO Appellate Body appointments, effectively paralysing the organisation's dispute settlement mechanism. Moreover, unilateral tariffs were imposed on China outside WTO channels, signalling that liberal trade norms would be upheld only when they served U.S. strategic objectives.

The treatment of allies and adversaries in the context of human rights further illustrates this point. U.S. administrations routinely criticise adversaries like Iran, Venezuela, or Russia for human rights violations while downplaying or overlooking abuses by strategic partners such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Israel. For example, while Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen has led to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, U.S. support continued for years, including arms sales and intelligence cooperation. Similarly, the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 led to global condemnation, yet U.S.-Saudi relations remained largely intact.

In Europe, NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe—particularly the inclusion of countries like Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states—was framed as a liberal project aimed at stabilising post-Communist democracies. However, it also served clear strategic interests by extending U.S. influence and limiting Russia's geopolitical space. When Russia responded with aggression, notably in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014 and 2022), the West condemned the violations of international law but largely ignored how NATO expansion itself had created security dilemmas for Moscow. Here again, liberal norms were invoked selectively: they justified expansion but failed to account for or address the broader strategic implications.

Even in the digital sphere, value systems reflect power asymmetries. The U.S. has long promoted internet freedom and open cyberspace, but it also engages in pervasive surveillance operations, as revealed by the Snowden disclosures. American tech companies dominate global platforms, and the regulatory norms they export are often contested, especially by countries that see them as vehicles of U.S. soft power or data imperialism that would be characterised as digital fascism.

Taken together, these cases suggest that the liberal international order has not operated based on consistent

norm application. Instead, liberal values have functioned as flexible instruments—deployed to legitimise certain actions while ignored when inconvenient. This is not to suggest that these values are without merit, but rather to highlight their conditionality: they are upheld when aligned with hegemonic interests and sidelined when they are not.

Understanding this pattern is essential for analysts and policymakers alike, particularly in a world increasingly characterised by multipolar competition. The liberal order's legitimacy crisis—exacerbated by its selective application and hegemonic underpinnings—has opened space for alternative norm-setters to emerge. As powers such as China, India, Türkiye, and Brazil seek greater influence over the rules of global governance, they are unlikely to accept inherited norms that function as tools of Western dominance. Instead, they are actively shaping alternative normative discourses. In this context, future regimes—from climate finance and AI governance to global health security—will require broader legitimacy and more symmetrical power-sharing. The following section delves into this normative reconfiguration and the rising role of middle powers as key agents of transformation in a fragmented order.

## Middle Powers as Agencies of Multipolarity

As the liberal international order's normative authority continues to erode due to its perceived inconsistencies and hegemonic bias, the ongoing reconfiguration of the international system demands closer scrutiny of middle powers, not only in material terms but also in their growing capacity to shape normative discourse and institutional practices. The weakening of liberal universalism has created space for new actors to propose more inclusive, regionally grounded, and pragmatic frameworks. In this context, middle powers are emerging not just as strategic buffers but as potential sources of normative regeneration.

Traditionally, the concept of a middle power was defined primarily through material metrics, often referencing states with moderate economic or military strength positioned between major powers and weaker states. However, scholarship has since advanced toward more nuanced, behaviour-oriented definitions. For example, Holbraad (1971) described middle powers as occupying an intermediate place in the power hierarchy, particularly

capable of strategic manoeuvring during periods of heightened great power rivalry. Jordaan (2003) advanced the discussion by distinguishing between "traditional" and "emerging" middle powers. The latter, he argued, are often post-Cold War states with aspirations of regional leadership, an inclination toward global reformism, and a desire to be recognised as legitimate contributors to the international order. Stephen (2013) took a relativist approach, emphasising the context- and issue-specific actions of middle powers rather than fixed characteristics. Efsthopoulos (2018) expanded this behavioural lens further by including functional roles such as crisis mediation, coalition-building, entrepreneurial diplomacy, and leadership in multilateral negotiations.

These scholarly contributions collectively suggest that middle powers are not merely defined by material capacity but also by their normative ambitions and diplomatic agility. Countries like Türkiye, Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa—each with distinct regional leverage—demonstrate



(TUR Presidency/ Mustafa Kamaci - Anadolu Agency)

how middle powers increasingly act as intellectual and normative entrepreneurs within the international system.

The rising relevance of middle powers must also be understood in the context of a fragmented global order, characterised by overlapping spheres of influence. The post-Cold War unipolar moment has given way to a more complex geopolitical landscape dominated by the competing agendas of the United States, China, and Russia. Within this competitive structure, the functional utility of middle powers has grown significantly. Their resources, regional influence, geopolitical positioning, and diplomatic credibility are frequently instrumental to the ambitions of great powers.

For example, Türkiye's mediation between Russia and Ukraine in the 2022 grain corridor negotiations and prisoner swap deals highlighted its ability to act as a credible intermediary between warring sides—an ability reinforced by its balanced diplomatic relations with both Moscow and Kyiv. Similarly, Brazil's leadership in pushing for environmental governance reform during the Amazon Summit in 2023 underscored its role in amplifying Global South concerns in multilateral climate frameworks. South Africa's chairing of BRICS and its advocacy for alternative global governance structures, including UN Security Council reform, demonstrate a persistent effort to challenge Western-dominated institutional arrangements through legitimate, structured channels.

In the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia has carved out a role for itself as a diplomatic broker, especially in ASEAN forums where it promotes a "non-aligned" but constructive posture between China and the U.S. Its leadership in crafting the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) signalled an effort to insert a regional, values-driven alternative to exclusive bloc-based alignments.

Such examples demonstrate that middle powers are not passive actors or mere facilitators of great power ambitions. Rather, they often operate as pragmatic reformists—simultaneously safeguarding their national interests while promoting more inclusive global norms. With the diffusion of global power, the pivotal question is no longer whether middle powers have a role to play, but how they exercise normative leadership. In this context, pacifism or passivity cannot define middle power behaviour. Instead, active engagement—whether through diplomacy, coalition-building, or conflict mediation—is a behavioural necessity. Middle powers, therefore, become both natural outcomes and natural actors of the multipolarity.

Türkiye provides a particularly illustrative case. In addition to its Ukraine-Russia mediation, Ankara has played a prominent role in advocating for reform of the UN system, particularly on behalf of developing nations. Through initiatives like the "The World Is Bigger Than Five" campaign, Türkiye has consistently challenged the legitimacy of the Security Council's structure, advocating for greater representativeness in global decision-making. Simultaneously, its engagement in Africa—through development partnerships, peacekeeping contributions, and multilateral forums like the Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit—demonstrates an intent to project normative influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

In sum, today, middle powers are not simply shaped by structural conditions—they are shaping them. Their ability to act as normative agents, institutional innovators, and diplomatic intermediaries is not only redefining their role in global affairs but also challenging the ideological monopoly of the liberal international order, thereby opening up a debate on how they could contribute to the normative re-making of the multipolar order as responsible actors.

# A Crisis of Values: End of the Liberal Ethos?

The transformation of the global system is not only marked by shifts in power configurations but also by a deeper crisis in the normative foundations that once underpinned the liberal international order. The so-called rules-based system—founded on liberal principles such as human rights, free trade, multilateralism, and global cooperation—is increasingly losing both its normative clarity and practical relevance under the weight of raw power politics and the rise of offensive realism.

This erosion is visible across multiple domains. International judicial institutions, ostensibly tasked with safeguarding peace and human rights, face selective enforcement and outright disregard. The International Court of Justice's provisional measures calling on Israel to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza have not only gone unheeded but have triggered diplomatic retaliation against the states, such as South Africa, that initiated legal proceedings. Similarly, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has faced politicised pushback for its investigations into war crimes committed by actors in powerful countries, including the United States' vociferous opposition to inquiries into war crimes in Afghanistan.

Environmental norms rooted in scientific consensus—particularly regarding emissions reduction and global climate responsibility—are being undermined by economic short-termism. Despite the Paris Agreement's goals, major carbon emitters like China, India, and the United States have struggled to commit to or implement effective long-term strategies. The rollback of environmental regulations under U.S. President Donald Trump and Australia's support for coal exports under the Morrison government are emblematic of the trade-offs many countries make between growth and sustainability.

In trade, the foundational liberal ideal of open markets is being replaced by protectionist policies and tariff wars. The U.S.-China trade war, which began in 2018 under the first Trump administration and continues under the second Trump administration now, exemplifies how economic nationalism is eclipsing multilateral cooperation. Both sides imposed hundreds of billions of dollars in tariffs, undermining WTO norms and disrupting global supply chains. The European Union, too, has introduced carbon border adjustment mechanisms and strategic autonomy rhetoric, moving away from pure free trade in favour of protecting internal competitiveness.

Humanitarian crises—from the Sahel and Tigray to Myanmar and Yemen—are increasingly met with disengagement. Regional peace efforts, such as those led by the African Union in Ethiopia or ASEAN in Myanmar, often receive little material or diplomatic support from the broader international community. In Syria, during more than a decade of conflict, humanitarian aid corridors remain heavily politicised, and Western actors have been reluctant to coordinate with regional players like Türkiye despite its central logistical and humanitarian role. Now, the new Syria stands as an opportunity for the states to build a new framework different from the past.

At the institutional level, the UN Security Council (UNSC) embodies the most acute contradictions. Its structural lack of democratic representation continues to sow uncertainty in global governance. The Council's inability to agree on resolutions concerning crises in Syria, Palestine, and Ukraine, due to vetoes by permanent members, has eroded trust in its effectiveness. For instance, multiple resolutions condemning Israeli military actions in Gaza or proposing ceasefires have been blocked by U.S. vetoes. Similarly, Russia has repeatedly vetoed actions related to Ukraine and chemical weapons use in Syria.

Once envisioned as the cornerstone of liberal institutionalism, the United Nations and its affiliated bodies now risk becoming symbols of normative hypocrisy. Their failure to act consistently and equitably has not only weakened trust in global governance but has accelerated a broader crisis of legitimacy in the liberal ethos. The withdrawal of countries like the United States from UN organisations (e.g., UNESCO and the Human Rights Council under the Trump administration) and the politicisation of global health bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., U.S. and China disputes over the WHO) further illustrate the crumbling consensus around shared values.

Against this backdrop of selective norm application and declining legitimacy, the liberal international order has generated a normative vacuum—one that middle powers are uniquely positioned to address. The failure of hegemonic actors to consistently uphold the very values they champion has created both the need and the opportunity for middle powers to step forward. As neither global hegemon nor peripheral states, they are well-positioned to project principled, constructive diplomacy rooted in global responsibility.



*(Doaa Albaz - Anadolu Agency)*

Some countries are already attempting to fill this gap. For instance, Türkiye has played a proactive role in mediating between Russia and Ukraine during the early stages of the war in 2022, facilitating prisoner exchanges and the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which was crucial for alleviating global food insecurity. Similarly, South Korea has emerged as a leader in digital governance and global health diplomacy, particularly through its pandemic aid and vaccine diplomacy efforts in Southeast Asia and Africa. Qatar has played a critical role in negotiating between the Taliban and Western countries while positioning itself as a humanitarian intermediary in Gaza.

While such approaches may not immediately reverse the structural deficiencies of the current order, they offer a pragmatic starting point. Through targeted initiatives—such as mediation in conflict zones, leadership in climate diplomacy, or advocacy for institutional reform—middle powers can help restore credibility to global governance and incrementally re-anchor international politics in a renewed, values-based framework. A concerted and strategic adoption of responsible middle powerhood by these actors could catalyse normative regeneration in the international system. In doing so, they reinforce their relevance and offer the kind of steady, principled leadership that today's fragmented world urgently needs.



(Fatih Aktaş - Anadolu Agency)

## Responsible Middle Powerhood: The Case of Türkiye

Periods marked by the waning influence of global hegemony tend to elevate the strategic and normative relevance of middle powers in international affairs (Moeini et al., 2022). Within this evolving landscape, Türkiye emerges as a compelling case of a responsible middle power, a state that not only deals with geopolitical complexity but also offers constructive responses to the international system's prevailing values deficit. As Mott (2024) notes, Türkiye's capacity to articulate alternative frameworks for global engagement positions it as an "exemplary middle power." Earlier instances, most notably during the Arab Spring, illustrate how Ankara projected itself as a promoter of democratic governance and human rights within the MENA region, underscoring its normative aspirations.

Türkiye's foreign policy approach reflects what Keyman (2017) aptly describes as proactive moral realism, a strategic posture that blends principled engagement with

geopolitical pragmatism. This formulation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of middle powerhood—an otherwise ambiguous category in international relations by highlighting the potential for a state to combine normative agency with realpolitik considerations. In an era of intensifying multipolarity, such middle powers play a pivotal role not only in balancing regional dynamics but also in recalibrating the normative architecture of the international order. Their ability to sustain a values-based critique of systemic deficiencies, while offering feasible pathways for reform, translates into tangible contributions to the renewal of a rules-based international order. For such states, this responsibility transcends reputational gains; it becomes integral to their foreign policy identity and operational code.

In this context, the concept of norm entrepreneurship offers an important analytical lens through which to assess Türkiye's international conduct. Rooted in regime theory

and constructivist scholarship, norm entrepreneurship captures the role of actors—state or non-state—that seek to advance specific normative agendas. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) "norm life cycle" framework—comprising norm emergence, cascade, and internalisation—situates these entrepreneurs as initiators and catalysts of normative change. Constructivist perspectives emphasise that international norms are not exogenously given but are socially constructed through intersubjective processes. Consequently, norm entrepreneurs require institutional platforms—domestically and internationally—to embed values in policy practice and generate legitimacy. This interplay between agency, norms, and institutional infrastructure positions middle powers as vital stakeholders in shaping the normative contours of global governance.

Based on this theoretical foundation, Türkiye's evolving foreign policy reflects a deliberate effort to act as a norm entrepreneur within and beyond its immediate region. Several concrete cases underscore its transition toward responsible middle powerhood:

### **UN Security Council Reform Advocacy**

One of Türkiye's most prominent normative initiatives is President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's longstanding critique of the current composition of the United Nations Security Council. His repeated assertion that "The world is bigger than five" and "A fairer world is possible" challenges the legitimacy of a global governance structure rooted in post-WWII power asymmetries. By calling for a more representative and democratic international system, Türkiye positions itself as a normative challenger advocating for systemic inclusivity. President Erdoğan's critique is rooted in both normative and structural arguments. Normatively, he argues that the current configuration of the UNSC, dominated by five permanent members (P5) with veto power, does not reflect the geopolitical, demographic, or cultural realities of the 21st century. Structurally, he underscores the institutional paralysis that results from the veto system, which often obstructs consensus on urgent global issues such as



(Fatih Aktaş - Anadolu Agency)

humanitarian crises, conflict resolution, and climate change. Beyond critique, President Erdoğan has advanced a concrete reform proposal centred around three interrelated elements:

### **1. Expanding Membership and Representation**

President Erdoğan advocates for an enlarged Security Council that includes permanent representation from Africa, Latin America, the Islamic world, and underrepresented regions. He argues that regional rotation mechanisms could ensure fairer representation without replicating the entrenched privileges of the current P5.

### **2. Abolishing or Restricting the Use of Veto Power:**

A core feature of President Erdoğan's reform agenda is the limitation—or ideally, the elimination—of unilateral veto power. He has argued that no single country should have the authority to block decisions that affect the collective will of the international community, especially in cases involving crimes against humanity or mass atrocities. This normative stance aligns Türkiye with broader global calls, especially from the Global South, for a more democratic and accountable UN system.

### **3. Institutionalising a Rules-Based and Value-Oriented Multilateralism:**

President Erdoğan's rhetoric is often framed in terms of justice, equality, and moral responsibility. He has explicitly connected UNSC reform with the idea of building a "fairer world order", proposing a shift from great power prerogatives to universal principles of justice and inclusivity. This positions Türkiye as a normative actor, seeking not just institutional rearrangement but systemic transformation.

This proposal has found resonance among a broad coalition of states, particularly in the Global South. Türkiye has utilised multiple platforms, such as the United Nations General Assembly, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the G20, to advocate for these reforms, thereby embedding the norm of democratic multilateralism within international discourse.

While President Erdoğan's formula may face considerable resistance from entrenched powers within the P5, its strategic and symbolic value is significant. It enables Türkiye to act as a norm entrepreneur for underrepresented nations, enhancing its reputation as a responsible middle power and strengthening its diplomatic capital across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Moreover, Türkiye's approach aligns with its broader foreign policy strategy of challenging status quo institutionalism and promoting multipolar engagement, one that seeks not only influence but also legitimacy through norm-driven leadership. In this sense, President Erdoğan's UNSC reform agenda exemplifies the intersection of middle power diplomacy, norm entrepreneurship, and strategic positioning in a fragmented global order.

### ***Humanitarian Diplomacy via TİKA and AFAD***

Türkiye has also distinguished itself through an expansive and institutionalised approach to humanitarian diplomacy, underpinned by a narrative of moral responsibility and international solidarity. This approach, formalised through the work of institutions such as AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority) and TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), combines direct humanitarian assistance with development-oriented statecraft.

Since the onset of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye has hosted nearly four million refugees, making it the world's largest refugee-hosting country. While geopolitical and security concerns were certainly factors, Ankara has consistently framed this policy as a normative obligation rooted in shared humanity, cultural affinity, and historical ties. This position contrasts with the securitised and deterrent-based approaches often adopted by Western states, positioning Türkiye as a moral stakeholder in the evolving global refugee regime.

Beyond its immediate neighbourhood, Türkiye has become a top humanitarian donor globally, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and conflict-affected regions such as Somalia and Myanmar. Through its Africa Partnership Policy, Türkiye has opened more than 40 embassies across the continent, accompanied by health, education, and food security initiatives that are not purely transactional but embedded in long-term development logic.

In projecting soft power through humanitarian aid, Türkiye seeks not only reputational dividends but also to contribute to the moral reconstruction of international engagement, where empathy, dignity, and resilience become as valuable as strategic calculation. This reinforces its claim to responsible middle powerhood and norm entrepreneurship.



(Ukraine Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Anadolu Agency)

### **Mediation and Conflict Resolution during the Russia-Ukraine War**

Türkiye has increasingly positioned itself as a diplomatic mediator, most recently exemplified by its facilitation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative between Ukraine and Russia. This initiative not only alleviated global food security concerns but also showcased Türkiye's ability to broker complex negotiations based on trust, neutrality, and normative appeals to global welfare. Türkiye's geographic proximity, longstanding ties with both parties, and reputation for autonomous diplomacy enabled it to act as a credible interlocutor. The success of the agreement underscored Türkiye's capacity to leverage regional leverage for global public goods, enhancing its normative legitimacy.

Another particularly illustrative case is Türkiye's central role in convening direct talks between Russia and Ukraine in the early phases of the 2022 war. The Antalya Diplomacy Forum hosted the first high-level trilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of Türkiye, Ukraine, and Russia in March 2022, marking a rare moment of face-to-face diplomacy during an otherwise escalatory conflict. This was followed by the Istanbul talks later that month, where Türkiye hosted negotiation teams from both countries in Dolmabahçe Palace. The Istanbul round produced tentative outlines for a ceasefire framework, including provisions for neutrality, security guarantees, and humanitarian corridors. Although these negotiations ultimately did not yield a lasting settlement, their significance lies in Türkiye's ability to convene adversaries in a neutral setting and to propose actionable formats for de-escalation. Türkiye's position as a NATO member maintaining open communication channels with Moscow enabled it to act as a credible and impartial facilitator, one of the few actors trusted by both parties at a time of high polarisation.

### **Support for the Palestinian Cause**

Türkiye's unwavering support for Palestinian self-determination represents a core pillar of its value-driven foreign policy and its efforts to align itself with broader struggles for global justice. In the context of heightened violence in Gaza and the enduring failure of the peace process, Türkiye has emerged as one of the most vocal state actors challenging the international community's inertia.

Ankara's diplomatic posture blends legal critique, humanitarian advocacy, and normative consistency. President Erdoğan and senior Turkish officials have consistently condemned Israeli settlement expansion, civilian targeting, and violations of international humanitarian law. Türkiye has also called for the international recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of



(Aytuğ Can Sencar - Anadolu Agency)

Palestine. Ankara has advocated for the internationalisation of the peace process, including through multilateral forums such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the UN General Assembly.

Türkiye's support extends beyond rhetorical solidarity. It has provided significant humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, supported education and health services, and facilitated international awareness campaigns through civil society channels. This multidimensional engagement reflects Türkiye's broader ambition to act as a representative voice for the Global South, challenging the selective application of international norms and advocating for an equitable international legal order.

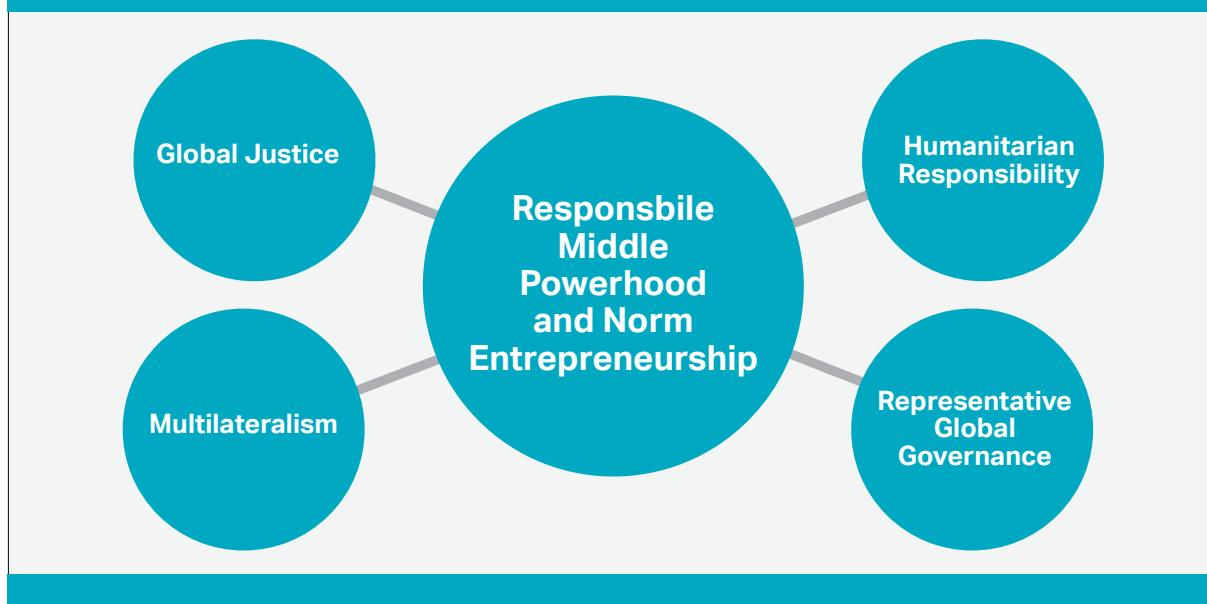
By framing the Palestinian question not solely as a regional dispute but as a test case for global justice, Türkiye seeks to reposition normative debates around sovereignty, occupation, and human rights. In these areas, the current international order has shown structural inconsistency. This underscores its identity as a norm-driven actor striving for a more balanced and principled multilateralism (Ataman, 2023; Fidan, 2023)

Türkiye's evolving foreign policy approach reflects its aspirations to act as a responsible middle power and a norm entrepreneur in the emerging multipolar international order. This vision is shaped by four core normative elements: global justice, representative global governance,

humanitarian responsibility, and multilateralism (See Chart 1). These elements articulate Türkiye's diplomatic ethos and represent a broader call for a more inclusive and equitable global system in response to structural inequalities and unilateral tendencies that persist in global governance frameworks.

The principles of **global justice** and **representative global governance** form the normative backbone of Türkiye's engagement with international institutions. These values are particularly evident in Türkiye's critique of the current configuration of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), whose structure—designed by the victors of the Second World War—grants disproportionate power to the five permanent members. Türkiye has consistently argued that this arrangement no longer reflects the realities of the contemporary international system. President Erdoğan's repeated invocation of the phrase "The world is bigger than five" underscores a sustained diplomatic campaign to highlight the need for more equitable representation in global decision-making mechanisms. Türkiye's call for reform is not abstract rhetoric; it has been articulated in concrete terms through policy proposals and initiatives presented at major international forums, including the UN General Assembly and the G20. These efforts aim to empower a broader range of states, particularly those from the Global South, to participate meaningfully in shaping international norms and responses to global challenges.

**Chart 1: Four Key Pillars of Türkiye's Value Promotion Vision**



Crucially, Türkiye's role as a norm entrepreneur is not limited to critique but extends to the formulation and dissemination of viable solutions. Rather than stopping at identifying deficiencies in the international system, Türkiye puts forward constructive alternatives rooted in democratic principles and inclusive governance, as in the case of UN reform advocacy. Its engagement in multilateral reform debates has helped reposition Türkiye as a bridge-builder between the developed and developing worlds, as well as between global institutions and conflict-affected regions. By voicing these concerns consistently at venues such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the D-8, and the United Nations, Türkiye has elevated its normative agenda beyond regional confines.

**Humanitarian responsibility** represents another foundational pillar of Türkiye's normative identity. This principle is grounded in a human-centred approach that prioritises the protection of civilian populations, particularly in the context of armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies. One of the most notable manifestations of this commitment has been Türkiye's open-door policy toward Syrians displaced by the civil war that began in 2011. Throughout the conflict, Türkiye hosted over 3.5 million Syrian refugees, making it the world's largest refugee-hosting country. This policy, maintained unwaveringly until the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, was framed not merely as a strategic or security imperative but as a moral obligation. President Erdoğan consistently emphasised that Türkiye's approach to the Syrian refugee crisis was a matter of conscience, setting a global standard for refugee protection at a time when many nations were turning inward or tending to behave selectively.

Türkiye's humanitarian commitment has also been evident in its response to the ongoing crisis in Gaza. Since the outbreak of what has been widely recognised as a genocidal military campaign, Türkiye has adopted a vocal and principled stance, demanding an immediate ceasefire, accountability for war crimes, and the establishment of humanitarian corridors. These demands have been reiterated in all diplomatic platforms, from the UN General Assembly to bilateral engagements with regional and global powers. In doing so, Türkiye has consistently invoked humanitarian responsibility as a universal value, urging the international community to adopt a more collective and morally coherent stance in the face of large-scale civilian suffering.

Türkiye's normative commitment extends to environmental stewardship, as exemplified by the global recognition of the Zero Waste Project initiated by First Lady Emine Erdoğan. This initiative, launched in 2017 and later

endorsed by the United Nations, advocates for sustainable consumption, waste reduction, and the promotion of circular economy practices (Gürpınar & Birtepe, 2023). The project has not only influenced national policies within Türkiye but has also inspired similar programs in other countries, reflecting Türkiye's capacity to lead global normative change in non-traditional domains such as environmental diplomacy. By integrating environmental responsibility into its broader foreign policy agenda, Türkiye reinforces its image as a state that aligns national initiatives with global public goods.

Multilateralism serves as both a strategic and normative response to the risks associated with an increasingly fragmented international system. While multipolarity can enable a more balanced distribution of power, it also has the potential to generate instability if accompanied by rising unilateralism. Türkiye has positioned itself against such tendencies by advocating for cooperative and rules-based regional orders. It views multilateral engagement as a necessary antidote to geopolitical rivalries and as a mechanism for managing transboundary challenges such as climate change, irregular migration, terrorism, and cross-border crime.

In practice, Türkiye operationalises this multilateral vision through a series of regional and inter-regional initiatives. From its role in the Astana Process on Syria to its active participation in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Türkiye demonstrates a consistent commitment to collaborative problem-solving. It has supported regional investment projects such as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which not only enhances energy connectivity but also promotes economic interdependence and diplomatic dialogue. Likewise, Türkiye's cooperative efforts in areas like counterterrorism, anti-smuggling operations, and narcotics control highlight its preference for collective security over unilateral action.

Taken together, these four normative pillars—global justice, representative governance, humanitarian responsibility, and multilateralism form the foundation of Türkiye's identity as a responsible middle power. They enable Türkiye to adapt to the shifting currents of international politics with a principled, solutions-oriented outlook. In an era marked by geopolitical polarisation and institutional fatigue, Türkiye's approach underscores the continued relevance of values-based diplomacy. By aligning its foreign policy conduct with global norms while simultaneously advocating for the reform of those norms, Türkiye is contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and resilient international order.

## Conclusion

This discussion paper has argued that the liberal order's normative crisis—driven by its selective application and strategic instrumentalisation—has created a legitimacy deficit that middle powers are increasingly called upon to fill. In this context, Türkiye's trajectory offers a concrete example of how a middle power can respond to the failures of hegemonic norm-setting by advancing an alternative, values-based approach grounded in global justice, humanitarian responsibility, representative governance, and multilateralism. The case of Türkiye has demonstrated that Ankara does not limit its rising material and geopolitical significance to conventional parameters, but it also adopts a value-based approach to global challenges

by proposing reforms grounded in normative principles. Türkiye's foreign policy reflects this through its embrace of norm entrepreneurship—projecting its vision of global justice, humanitarian responsibility, representative global governance, and multilateralism, as encapsulated in President Erdoğan's statements "A fairer world is possible" and "The world is bigger than five." In doing so, Türkiye positions itself as a responsible actor that seeks to reshape the international order in line with evolving realities, ensuring that liberal values are not monopolised by any single power or bloc, but sustained through the normative agency of responsible middle powers.



*(Mustafa Kamacı - Anadolu Agency)*

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