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# **The Global Reset: From the Old Order to New Realities**

# **The Global Reset:** **From the Old Order** **to New Realities**

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# Foreword

**T**he 2025 TRT World Forum, held from **31 October – 1 November**, brought together global leaders, policymakers, academics, and experts for two days of high-level dialogue on the rapidly evolving international landscape. We were honoured to have **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** inaugurate the Forum with an opening address that underscored the urgency of confronting today's global challenges through principled leadership, cooperation, and a renewed commitment to justice and stability.

The researchers of the **TRT World Research Centre** engaged deeply with the Forum's central themes, contributing to and shaping discussions that examined how shifts in economics, technology, media, and international law are redefining global governance. Organised by Türkiye's public broadcaster TRT, the Forum has long served as a trusted platform for elevating critical issues and interrogating the narratives that shape contemporary international affairs.

The international system has entered a period of profound transformation. Power balances have shifted, the multilateral order has come under strain, and long-standing institutions have been challenged by war, technological disruption, disinformation, economic uncertainty, and widening social divides. In this context of heightened volatility, the demand for inclusive, forward-looking, and solutions-oriented dialogue has become increasingly apparent.

It was within this dynamic global environment that the **2025 TRT World Forum** convened under the theme **"The Global Reset: From the Old Order to New Realities."** This theme captured the recognition that the world is not simply undergoing incremental change, but a structural transition. Across regions and sectors, new geopolitical and socio-economic realities are emerging, calling for new ideas, adaptive strategies, and responsible leadership.

**This year's publication reflects the forum's intellectual architecture.** Covering themes such as the reconfiguration of global alliances, shifting economic power centres, the revival of regional diplomacy, the governance of emerging technologies, and pathways to justice in conflict-affected regions, the chapters trace how a global "reset" is unfolding in real time. The publication embodies the event's analytical depth: rather than prescribing solutions, it provides a rigorous and balanced space where ideas can be examined with nuance and mutual respect.

In an era marked by turbulence and transformation, this publication stands as a testament to the belief that thoughtful, inclusive, and evidence-based dialogue is essential for advancing peace, justice, and effective global cooperation.

**Dr Tarek Cherkaoui**

Manager

TRT World Research Centre

# Executive Summary

**T**he TRT World Forum 2025 publication offers a timely examination of the profound transformations reshaping global politics, economics, technology, and society. Under the theme “The Global Reset: From the Old Order to New Realities”, the volume gathers contributions from multidisciplinary researchers to assess the breakdown of the post-Cold War consensus, the rise of multipolarity, and the reconfiguration of power across regions and institutions.

Spanning eleven chapters, the publication traces key dynamics driving this reset—from the ascent of middle powers and shifting U.S. foreign policy to the war in Gaza, the contestation of international law, and the ideological spread of the far right.

## Exploring the Global Chessboard

As great powers clash and global institutions falter, middle powers are stepping into the breach. Türkiye, Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa, and others are engaging in high-stakes diplomacy with increasing confidence and strategic clarity.

Chapter 1 traces the collapse of the post-Cold War consensus and the emergence of an international order defined by both multipolarity and unilateralism. While power diffusion opens space for new actors, unilateral practices by major powers risk deepening instability and undermining cooperation.

Chapter 2 highlights the return of non-aligned and semi-aligned states as mediators and norm entrepreneurs. It examines how middle powers navigate great power rivalries, build flexible alliances, and deploy economic, cultural, and strategic tools to influence outcomes. Their growing role in multilateral negotiations, ceasefire diplomacy, and regional leadership underscores a broader shift: strategic autonomy and regional agency are gradually replacing reliance on established hegemonic powers.

Chapter 3 examines the evolving nature of sanctions and trade wars, questioning their efficacy and highlighting their role in reconfiguring global market dynamics. The chapter draws attention to the weaponisation of economic tools and the backlash against global interdependence.

## Strategic Autonomy

Chapter 4 examines how Türkiye’s pursuit of strategic autonomy reflects a broader shift away from dependency on traditional alliances and defence architectures. This chapter analyses the country’s growing indigenous defence industry, assertive maritime strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the reconfiguration of its NATO posture. With investments in drone technology, missile systems, and fifth-generation aircraft (like KAAN), Türkiye is redefining its role in the global defence paradigm.

## The U.S. as Broker, Not Architect

Meanwhile, Chapter 5 argues that the return of Trumpism marks not just a change in U.S. leadership but a structural shift in how America projects power. Rather than sustaining alliances or defending liberal internationalism, Washington under Trump has embraced a transactional doctrine

where aid, mediation, and security guarantees are exchanged for tangible returns—minerals, corridors, contracts, or concessions. From the Ukraine mineral pact to the Gulf mega-deals, crises are reframed as opportunities to secure rents and leverage. While this approach delivers visible wins and flexibility, it risks eroding trust among allies and accelerating global fragmentation.

### **Gaza as a Test Case**

Israel's genocidal war on Gaza remains a powerful symbol of both profound suffering and unyielding resilience. Chapter 6 highlights the famine in Gaza as a test case for global humanitarian norms and political will. It situates the crisis within broader debates on international law, blockade politics, and the failure of accountability mechanisms. In doing so, the chapter situates Gaza as a moral and strategic epicentre in the global reconfiguration of justice narratives.

### **Technology, Law, and Governance**

Chapter 7 interrogates the politics of data and AI, challenging the myth of neutrality and highlighting how digital systems can serve both the public good and authoritarian control. It calls for a new digital social contract grounded in dignity, transparency, and collective governance, with blockchain explored as a potential democratic infrastructure.

Chapter 8 underscores the paradox of international law—adapting to new challenges like cyber conflict and climate change while failing to address wars, occupations, and genocides. From Ukraine to Gaza, the chapter exposes enforcement gaps and the ways states exploit legal frameworks, while outlining reforms to restore credibility through accountability, inclusivity, and institutional renewal.

### **Geopolitical Crossroads**

Chapter 9 analyses Central Asia's emergence as a pivotal arena of great-power competition, where Russia, China, the EU, and Türkiye advance competing visions of connectivity. Yet Central Asian states leverage multi-vector diplomacy to pursue strategic autonomy amid persistent vulnerabilities.

Chapter 10 explores the stalemate in Ukraine, mapping core demands of both Kyiv and Moscow, reviewing competing diplomatic initiatives, and arguing for a phased resolution built on credible security guarantees, reconstruction commitments, and transitional justice.

### **The Far Right Goes Global**

From Europe to the Americas, the far right has moved from the margins to the mainstream. Chapter 11 analyses this shift, highlighting how nationalist narratives, digital propaganda, and exclusionary platforms are reshaping democracies and exporting illiberal ideologies abroad. It examines the economic anxieties, cultural backlash, and algorithmic radicalisation fuelling electoral success and discursive dominance, while mapping transnational linkages from "great replacement" theories to anti-globalist narratives.

Together, these chapters form a cohesive and multifaceted portrait of a world in flux. This publication does not offer easy answers but instead equips readers with frameworks to understand, question, and navigate the disruptions and opportunities of this global reset. As TRT World Forum continues to act as a hub for critical dialogue, this volume captures the intellectual urgency of 2025 and serves as both a diagnostic and prescriptive guide to new global realities.

# About the Contributors

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Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui is the Director of the TRT World Research Centre. Dr. Cherkaoui is an expert in the field of strategic communications analysis. He is the author of “The News Media at War: The Clash of Western and Arab Networks in the Middle East” (I.B. Tauris, 2017). Dr Cherkaoui holds a master’s degree in strategic studies from the National University of Malaysia, and a PhD in media and communication from the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. He has various edited books and publications. His broader research themes include international relations, strategic communications, public diplomacy, and media-military relations—specifically within a Middle Eastern context.

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# **The End of Consensus?**

## Multipolarity, Unilateralism, and the Fracturing Global Order

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*Burak Elmalı*

## Introduction

**T**he post-Cold War international order—once described by Francis Fukuyama as marking the "end of history"—has undergone a profound transformation. In contrast to the relative unipolarity and normative consensus of the 1990s and early 2000s, the current global system is increasingly characterised by fragmentation. This fragmentation is driven by the growing influence of both great powers and emerging middle powers, each asserting distinct strategic positions and expanding their spheres of influence. Such a shift holds significant implications for scholars, policymakers, media analysts, and strategic communities alike. Notably, the rise of multipolarity is not occurring in isolation; it is accompanied—and in some cases, complicated—by a concurrent resurgence of unilateralism. The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency has amplified concerns regarding a drift away from multilateral cooperation toward unilateral foreign policy practices.

The intersection of multipolarity and unilateralism has the potential to erode mechanisms for diplo-

macy and collective action, thereby increasing the risk of geopolitical tensions and conflict. As global power diffusion accelerates, this dual dynamic is exerting pressure on the international system across multiple regions. Within this evolving landscape, Türkiye positions itself as a constructive middle power, pursuing a strategy of balanced diplomacy and cooperative engagement. This discussion paper argues three key points: First, that the international order is transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar configuration, marked by increased fragmentation; second, that unilateralism is re-emerging as a destabilising force within this environment, particularly among great powers; and third, that middle powers—through strategic autonomy, norm entrepreneurship, and regional engagement—can help stabilise this emerging order. The analysis unfolds across three sections: the conceptual and historical context of polarity and unilateralism, the agency and typologies of middle powers, and Türkiye's evolving role as a responsible middle power in this turbulent landscape.



(BM Pool - Anadolu Agency)



## Three Codes of the International System: Multipolarity, Unilateralism, and Middle Powers

In the study of international relations, polarity refers to the distribution of power among states in the international system. A unipolar system is one in which a single state—typically a superpower—dominates in terms of military, economic, and diplomatic influence, as was the case with U.S. hegemony after the Cold War. A multipolar system, by contrast, is characterised by the presence of multiple states—great powers and influential regional actors—that exert comparable levels of influence, creating a more diffuse and contested global order. This distinction has profound implications for global governance: Unipolarity tends to support more cohesive institutional leadership (though often centred around one dominant actor), whereas multipolarity invites competing visions, alliances, and institutional experimentation.

Unilateralism refers to a state's preference to act independently on the international stage, often without regard for the positions or participation of others. It stands in contrast to multilateralism, which emphasises collective decision-making and institutionalised cooperation. Importantly, unilateralism can manifest even in a multipolar context, particularly when major powers choose to circumvent established norms or institutions.

*Over the last three decades, we have seen a rapid transformation in the distribution of power around the world. We went from a bipolar configuration between 1945 and 1989 to a unipolar configuration between 1989 and 2008 before entering what we today could call "complex multipolarity".*

*Joseph Borrell Fontelles, Former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission*

The academic literature examining the global system through the lens of polarity and shifting power balances is both extensive and well-established (Jackson, 1978; Græger et al., 2022; Keersmaeker, 2015; Wardhani, 2021). These studies typically rely on a composite framework that integrates military, political, economic, and soft power indicators to classify the international order. Additionally, they often contextualise polarity through key historical epochs, including the Concert of Europe, the Interwar Period (1919–1939), the Cold War (1945–1990), and the post-Cold War era (1990–present). Regarding the evident shift from an American-led unipolarity toward a multi-centric power distribution, Peter (2023) underlines the role played by global market capitalism, which has started to concentrate more on the Asian economies, primarily China.

This body of scholarship demonstrates that the global order has historically transitioned through multiple phases of polarity. In the contemporary setting, the system can no longer be adequately described by a unipolar configuration centred solely around U.S. primacy. Instead, the international landscape is increasingly defined by the assertive roles of other major and middle powers—most notably China, Russia, India, the EU, Türkiye, and Brazil—contributing to a more diffuse and dynamic distribution of global influence. Therefore, the first prominent characteristic of the international system is *multipolarity*, at least for the majority of scholars and policymakers.

An increasingly salient characteristic of the evolving multipolar international system—albeit contrary to conventional expectations—is the resurgence of *unilateralism*, particularly visible during Donald Trump's first (2017–2021) and second (2025–) presidential administrations. Rather than reinforcing cooperative mechanisms within institutional frameworks such as the United Nations and its affiliated bodies, this trend has manifested in a preference for autonomous decision-making, signalling a departure from liberal institutionalist norms in favour of more individualistic and sovereignty-centred state behaviour.

The implications of this shift are significant. In a system where growing multipolarity would ideally incentivise greater multilateral engagement, unilateralism often proves counterproductive (Bertele & Mey, 1998). One prominent example is the Trump administration's initiation of tariff wars—especially targeting China—which intensified geopolitical friction and undermined opportunities for collaborative economic governance. The concurrent rise of unilateral behaviour and multipolarity poses a challenge to the US-led international order, facilitating the rise of counter-hegemonic narratives and actors (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2005). As unilateralism gains traction as a normalised state practice, it not only emboldens critical diplomatic discourse—particularly from China—but also legitimises similar assertive behaviour by other global actors.

Furthermore, as Falode et al. (2018) contend, unilateral foreign policy choices can exacerbate instability, as illustrated by the U.S. approach to Syria. In such cases, unilateral actions have undermined prospects for stabilisation that might have been achievable through coordinated multilateral engagement. Taken together, these developments underscore the tension between multipolarity and unilateralism and the risks this tension poses to global governance and order.

Following a concise review of the theoretical underpinnings of multipolarity and unilateralism, it is equally important to explore how these concepts have resonated

across academic discourse and media narratives. Historically, the notion of multipolarity failed to attract sustained attention within Western scholarly and policy circles. However, the 2008 global financial crisis marked a turning point. The structural vulnerabilities it revealed within the Western-led financial architecture and the broader disillusionment with global capitalism contributed to a growing receptivity toward alternative models of global order, thus catalysing a wider embrace of multipolarity (Degterev, 2019). Keersmaeker (2015) notes that interest in multipolarity has been especially prominent among the BRICS countries and within European policy debates, whereas the American discourse remains largely anchored in discussions of unipolarity. This divergence is evident in the U.S. foreign policy establishment's leading publications. For example, in a Foreign Affairs article, the authors employed the term "partial unipolarity" to describe the evolving international order, suggesting a qualified persistence of U.S. primacy despite growing multipolar dynamics (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2023). In the same publication, Bekkevold (2023) advances a narrative that actively questions or downplays the relevance of multipolarity, reflecting a broader scepticism within segments of the U.S. strategic community.



(Selçuk Acar - Anadolu Agency)

Conversely, China has institutionalised the language of multipolarity within its foreign policy, using it not only as a strategic vision but also as a tool to galvanise anti-hegemonic sentiment—particularly in opposition to U.S. global leadership. Beyond rhetorical posturing, both China and Russia have embraced the strategic opportunities afforded by a more multipolar international environment. Their support for a diversified global order stems less from normative commitment and more from a pragmatic calculation of national interest, especially in contrast to the United States' efforts to preserve a system characterised by unipolar dominance (Al-Anbari, 2024).

One of the structural dimensions of multipolarity is the increased strategic latitude it affords to so-called "middle

powers." Far from being merely countries that fall beneath superpowers yet retain notable spheres of influence, the middle power concept has been the subject of extensive theoretical debate. Jordaan (2003), for instance, distinguishes between "traditional" and "emerging" middle powers based on constitutive attributes and behavioural roles. In contrast, Holbraad (1971) offers a more basic typology, situating middle powers as states occupying an intermediate position within the global power hierarchy.

Jordan's (2003) classification is particularly useful in capturing the profile of "emerging" middle powers—states that exhibit openness to regional integration and cooperation, aspire to regional leadership, and seek not merely to legitimise the status quo but to play a constructive and at times, transformative role within global governance structures. In this regard, Türkiye's foreign policy orientation over the past two decades strongly aligns with the behavioural patterns typically attributed to emerging middle powers.

Within the broader context of global power redistribution and the evolving multipolar system discussed in this paper, middle powers stand out not only for their material capabilities but also for their diplomatic style—marked by pragmatism, compromise, and multilateral engagement (Stephen, 2013). This blend of capacity and conduct is essential, as middle power status is not defined solely by quantifiable resources but also by the qualitative impact a state generates within its regional and international environment (Efsthathopoulos, 2017). Moreover, Patience (2014) underscores the context-specific nature of middle power roles, introducing the concept of "niche diplomacy" to highlight the importance of sectoral specialisation in defining middle power identity in the post-Cold War multipolar order. According to this perspective, a state's middle power status may vary depending on the issue area or policy domain in which it exercises influence.

Within the literature, scholars distinguish between various types of middle powers. Traditional middle powers—such as Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands—are typically liberal democracies with stable institutions and a history of supporting multilateralism. These states often act as 'norm carriers' within the international system. Emerging middle powers, on the other hand, are states like Türkiye, Indonesia, Brazil, or South Africa that combine growing material capabilities with aspirations for regional leadership and reform of global governance structures. Unlike traditional middle powers, they may operate outside established Western institutions and often pursue strategic initiatives tailored to their unique regional and normative interests. This typology helps to understand Türkiye's position more precisely: it does not merely seek to uphold the status quo

but actively engages in norm-shaping behaviour, regional conflict mediation, and alternative connectivity frameworks that reflect a post-Western, pluralist vision of order. Also, the multipolar character of the international system allows simultaneous strategic alignments to exist, such as China-Russia (SCO) and the U.S.-India-Australia-Japan (QUAD).

In sum, the scholarly treatment of middle powers reflects more than definitional ambiguity—it reveals a multidimensional and evolving framework that enriches our understanding of contemporary multipolarity. The diverse typologies and approaches in the literature serve as valuable analytical tools for assessing the agency of non-superpower states within the global order. Concrete manifestations of the multipolarity and middle powers demonstrate different strategic alignments and diplomatic initiatives instead of a unipolar pattern through which, for instance, the U.S. unilaterally intervened in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

The interplay between multipolarity and unilateralism reveals a structural paradox: while the diffusion of power creates new opportunities for shared governance, the resurgence of unilateral practices by great powers often disrupts cooperative mechanisms. In this fractured setting, middle powers occupy a unique and increasingly consequential space. No longer peripheral actors, they are called upon to navigate and mitigate these systemic tensions—especially in regions where great power rivalry is most pronounced. The following section explores how middle powers, particularly Türkiye, are positioned to mediate between fragmentation and cooperation, offering pragmatic pathways to recalibrate international norms and maintain systemic cohesion.



(Murat Gök - Anadolu Agency)

## Three Premises for the International Order

The evolving international system, increasingly shaped by the interwoven dynamics of multipolarity, unilateralism, and the agency of middle powers, presents a complex landscape defined by both crises and strategic openings. This shifting order marks a departure from the liberal international framework that, before the current multipolar turn, derived its normative legitimacy from a constellation of liberal values. These included human rights, equality, justice, the promotion of global peace, and the responsibility to protect—underpinned by material and diplomatic norms such as free trade, cooperative engagement, diplomacy, dialogue, and negotiated compromise.

However, the liberal order has come under growing scrutiny, not least due to a perceived and, at times, flagrant dissonance between its normative claims and the behaviour of its principal architects. Nowhere is this erosion of credibility more apparent than in the international response—or lack thereof—to crises such as Israel's genocidal war in Gaza, which has severely undermined faith in the normative coherence and moral authority of the US-led system.

Against this backdrop, the emergence of a multipolar configuration of global power is not simply a matter of shifting geopolitical weight. Rather, it also raises fundamental questions about the values and institutional norms that should govern international conduct in a more decentralised global order. For multipolarity to serve as a stabilising rather than destabilising force, it must be embedded within a framework of shared principles. These would act as a normative ballast capable of counteracting the centrifugal tendencies of unilateral action and great power competition.

Accordingly, it is useful to articulate three foundational principles for a reimagined international order:

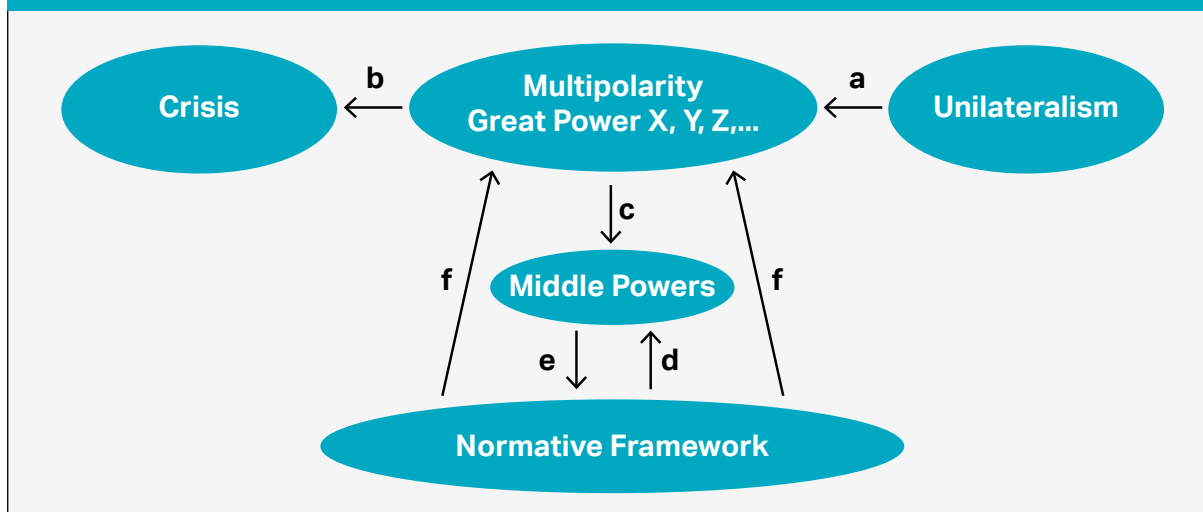
While multipolarity alone does not inherently generate instability, its convergence with an escalating trend of unilateralism—particularly among great powers expected to exercise responsibility commensurate with their capabilities—renders the international system increasingly susceptible to crisis. The absence of restraint and coordination among these actors undermines the potential for a balanced multipolar order and accelerates systemic fragmentation.

When viewed through the lens of responsible powerhood, middle powers must move beyond the role of passive actors oscillating between competing great power spheres. Instead, they should emerge as strategic interlocutors—facilitating dialogue, mediating tensions, and institutionalising cooperation across power hierarchies. In this capacity, they can function as integrative agents that uphold the cohesion of an otherwise diffuse multipolar system.

In the absence of a coherent normative framework that institutionalises cooperative engagement, the international order risks stagnating at the level of transactional economic interactions—many of which may themselves be plagued by fragmentation and competition. Without shared principles to guide political and diplomatic behaviour, the promise of deeper collaboration could paradoxically lead to heightened contestation and instability rather than a more durable multipolar consensus.

The interactive dynamics among multipolarity, unilateralism, and middle powers, as illustrated in the diagram

## Interactions Between Multipolarity, Unilateralism, and Middle Powers



above, offer a conceptual framework for understanding the evolving architecture of the international system. Beginning with Arrow a, the diagram underscores how unilateralism manifests within the competitive interactions of great powers (e.g., States X, Y, Z) in a multipolar environment. Arrow b then illustrates the potential consequence of this trend: the increased risk of systemic crises. These include trade disputes such as the U.S.-China trade war or coercive acts like territorial annexation and military occupation, which often stem from unconstrained unilateral behaviour. A salient example of how multipolarity and unilateralism intersect is the ongoing U.S.-China trade war, which began in 2018 and has continued in various forms. Characterised by tariffs, export controls, and retaliatory economic measures, the dispute illustrates how great powers in a multipolar system can unilaterally disrupt global supply chains, stoke uncertainty in global markets, and erode trust in international trade institutions such as the WTO. It also triggered strategic hedging among other powers, including middle powers like Türkiye, which have sought to diversify trade routes and assert more economic autonomy in the face of major power friction. Arrow c, indicating the emergence of middle powers from within the multipolar system, suggests that these actors are both a by-product and a structural necessity of multipolarity. Through Arrows d and e, the diagram highlights the dual relationship between middle powers and international norms: They may contribute to the normative framework of the global order or be shaped by it. This concept aligns with “norm entrepreneurship,” a term introduced by Mueller (1996) in the context of regime theory, referring to the capacity of states—particularly middle powers—to initiate, institutionalise, and diffuse norms within the international system.

Lastly, Arrow f reflects the foundational role of normative coherence in sustaining the viability of a multipolar inter-

national system. In contexts where unilateralism prevails, such a normative architecture is critical for ensuring effective oversight and accountability. In its absence, the system risks facing the same critiques currently directed at the perceived ineffectiveness of existing institutions, such as the United Nations. Thus, for multipolarity to mature into a stable and functional global order, its normative underpinnings must be robust, actionable, and collectively endorsed in the form of regional and global influence and pressure.

While mainstream international relations theory posits that no supranational hierarchy exists over sovereign states, the convergence of normative principles and the resultant collaborative pressure may still shape the decision-making calculus of relevant actors. A contemporary illustration of this dynamic is Israel’s persistent engagement in genocidal warfare despite ICJ’s interim measures ruling. Indeed, both South Africa’s litigation and the Court’s evidentiary and deliberative processes rest upon a normative framework that is, in principle, broadly acceptable. However, practical implementation reveals that the deficiency lies not in the normative architecture itself but in the inability of systemic actors to generate sufficient coercive influence to ensure compliance. Consequently, within a multipolar context, while initial manifestations may suggest escalating fragmentation and factionalism, the agency of middle powers—guided by the doctrine of responsible powerhood—could potentially catalyse transformative shifts in regional and global spheres of influence. One example of this character is Türkiye’s co-sponsorship of the Astana Peace Process alongside Russia and Iran, which highlights its diplomatic agility. While criticised for aligning with Russia, Türkiye leveraged the forum to push for localised ceasefires and manage refugee flows—actions that reflect pragmatic middle power behaviour in a complex multipolar conflict arena.

## Conclusion: Navigating Disorder Without Consensus

The evolution of the international system has carried the world far from the confidence of the 1990s, when unipolarity and liberal norms promised stability and predictability. What has emerged instead is a fractured order defined by two simultaneous trends: the diffusion of power into multiple poles and the resurgence of unilateralism among great powers. Multipolarity, in theory, should create incentives for cooperation; in practice, it is colliding with the assertive individualism of states unwilling to be bound by collective frameworks.

This paradox is at the heart of today's instability. Great powers, rather than restraining themselves for the sake of systemic balance, increasingly weaponize economic, technological, and military tools for unilateral advantage. Institutions built to manage disputes are weakened, while transnational challenges—from climate change to pandemics—struggle to find coordinated solutions. The credibility of the liberal order has been further eroded by glaring double standards, most notably in the global response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

Within this fractured context, middle powers have assumed renewed significance. They cannot overturn the structural realities of multipolar competition, but they can mitigate its worst excesses. By mediating conflicts, experimenting with new regional formats, and acting as norm entrepreneurs, states like Türkiye, Brazil, and Indonesia have the potential to prevent the slide into unchecked rivalry. Their diplomacy is often pragmatic rather than ideological, geared toward preserving room for manoeuvre while avoiding rigid blocs.

Yet the risks remain stark. Without a shared normative ballast, multipolarity could devolve into transactionalism and perpetual crisis management. A sustainable order requires more than balancing poles of power; it demands principles that constrain unilateralism and encourage responsible behaviour. Here lies the central challenge of our time: to rediscover forms of cooperation that are credible, inclusive, and resilient enough to withstand both the ambitions of great powers and the turbulence of global crises.

The “end of consensus” does not mean the end of order altogether. It signals the beginning of a difficult but necessary transition—away from a fading unipolar model and toward a pluralist system whose stability will depend less on hegemony than on the ability of diverse actors to share responsibility. Whether this transition produces a fragmented battlefield, or a rebalanced architecture of cooperation will hinge on the actions not only of the major powers but also of the middle powers willing to act as bridges in a fractured world.

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# Middle Powers as Agencies of Multipolarity: The Case of Türkiye

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*Burak Elmalı*

## Introduction

**A**s the post-Cold War consensus frays and the “rules-based order” loses moral authority, a different set of actors is moving from the margins to the centre of global politics. Middle powers—once defined largely by middling GDP or force structure—now have more weight in international relations because of what they do, not just what they have. Their leverage stems from entrepreneurial diplomacy, coalition-building, and norm-setting in spaces where great powers are gridlocked or disinterested. In this landscape, multipolarity does not simply disperse power; it multiplies opportunities for states with regional reach and institutional agility to shape outcomes.

This chapter argues that middle powers are becoming agencies of multipolarity: they buffer escalation, stitch together ad-hoc institutions, and refresh normative agendas that the liberal order can no longer credibly sustain on its own. Rather than choosing sides in a binary contest, they practice issue-by-issue alignment—mediating conflicts, brokering functional cooperation on food security, supply

chains, climate, and migration, and advancing reforms to make global governance more representative. Türkiye, Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa and others illustrate this shift: their diplomacy is pragmatic yet value-laden, aiming to convert regional legitimacy into system-level influence.

The discussion proceeds in three steps. First, the concept of the “middle power” is recast from a material category to a behavioural role, drawing on scholarship that emphasises mediation, coalition leadership, and norm entrepreneurship. Second, these roles are situated within a fragmenting order where unilateral great-power practices collide with complex interdependence, thereby creating both risks and entry points. Third, the case of Türkiye as a responsible middle power is developed—linking concrete initiatives (from UN reform advocacy to humanitarian statecraft and conflict mediation) to a broader strategy of principled, practical multilateralism. The result is a framework for understanding how middle powers can temper disorder not by restoring the old order, but by renewing its most functional and inclusive components.

# 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. Efstathiopoulos (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 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 ini-

tatives 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?



(Doaa Albaz - Anadolu Agency)

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 safe-

guarding 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 hegemons nor peripheral states, they are well-positioned to project principled, constructive diplomacy rooted in global responsibility.

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.



(Murat Gök - Anadolu Agency)

## Responsible Middle Powerhood: The Case of Türkiye

Periods marked by the waning influence of global hegemons 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**



(Anadolu Agency)

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 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 re-

form agenda exemplifies the intersection of middle power diplomacy, norm entrepreneurship, and strategic positioning in a fragmented global order.

## **Humanitarian Diplomacy**

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.

## **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 au-

tonomous 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.

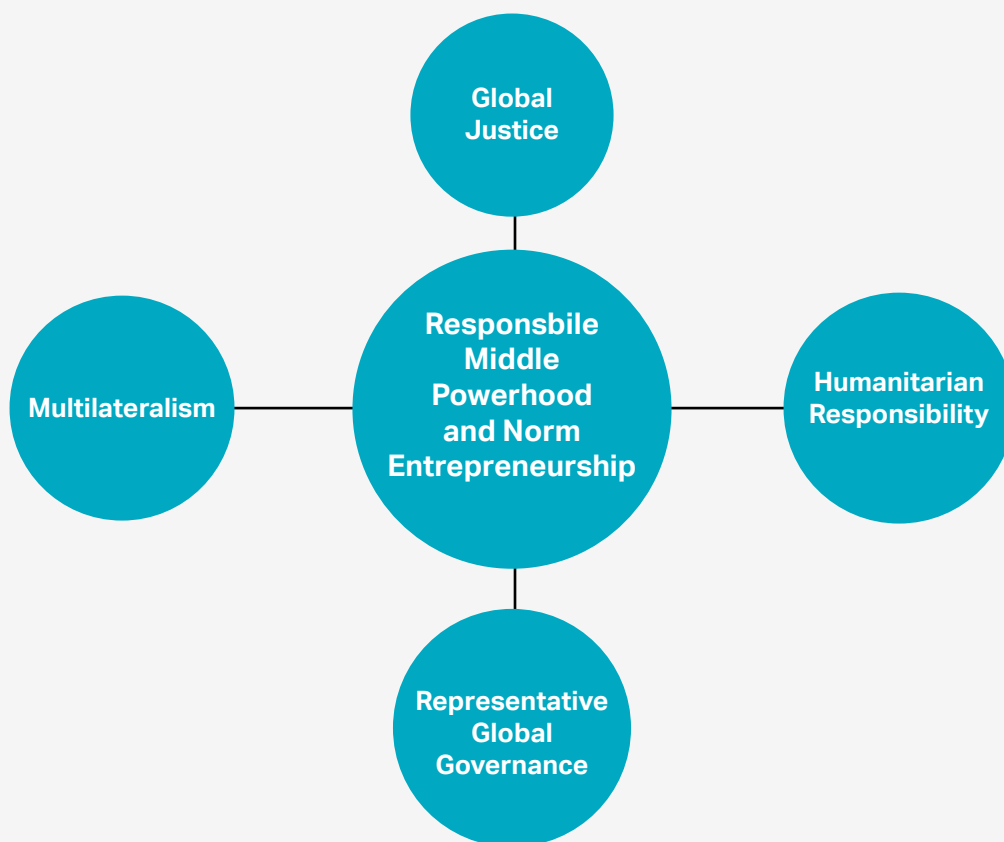
## **Support for the Palestinian Cause**

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 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,

## Four Key Pillars of Türkiye's Value Promotion Vision



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.

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***

This facet 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 chapter 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.



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# Breaking or Bending?

Rethinking Sanctions, Trade,  
and the Future of Global Markets

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*Şeymanur Yönt*

## Introduction

**E**conomic statecraft is on the rise, shaping the remaking of global order. Once mostly confined to the margins of diplomacy, crisis response, or pure economic concerns, economic tools such as sanctions, trade restrictions, and investment screening are now used proactively to re-shape geopolitical dynamics. For instance, the U.S. export controls on advanced semiconductors and chip-making equipment—particularly targeting China’s access to cutting-edge technology—show how economic tools are now deployed not just for commercial advantage but as a strategic effort to curb a rival’s technological rise and protect national security interests.

This marks a fundamental shift — global markets are no longer governed primarily by multilateral consensus or economic efficiency but increasingly by strategic calculations and national interests. As major powers weaponise interdependence and reconfigure global flows of capital, goods, and data, they are increasingly breaking the traditional boundaries that separate economics from security and politics, with the purpose of shaping global economic rules to their benefit. As a result, economic policy is more embedded in national security strategies, while trade policy, tariffs and sanctions serve as the

tools to limit rival economies. This is simultaneously followed by the rise of alternative systems, including China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and creditors such as Saudi Arabia, which challenge the dominance of a single economic model and ideology.

The result is a fragmented and competitive economic landscape where access, inclusion, and advantage are determined not by rules but by power. In this context, a state’s geopolitical weight, technological capabilities, and strategic alliances often matter more than adherence to multilateral norms. This shift leaves middle powers and developing economies particularly vulnerable, as they often lack the power or institutional leverage to shape the new rules and defend their interests. This transformation forces all states — especially middle powers and developing economies — to reconsider their positions, alliances, and strategies. To navigate this shift effectively, they should act strategically to build resilience — through economic literacy, diversification, and coalition-building — while also advancing the improvements in AI and tech to their benefit. Yet, achieving meaningful reform will require both time and the political will of major powers, without which global fragmentation may deepen further.



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## Economic Statecraft Reshapes the Global Order

Global economic order is under transformation – once again -with China and the U.S. at the lead. Both countries increasingly reshape their alliances and systems, breaking away from the post-Cold War world order. Their purpose is to be less dependent and self-sufficient while having a greater influence in shaping global economic rules. China, with its national rejuvenation mission, aims to play a broader global role and build influence in other nations (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025) while instituting new international rules that recognise its interests (Xiaotong & Keith, 2017). On the other hand, the U.S. wants to “make America safer, stronger and more prosperous” (Every, 2025, p. 2), enhancing its “industrial and technological advantages, as well as defending its “economic and national security” (Every, 2025, p. 2), even to the cost of alienating its allies. Moreover, due to the rise in economic output of some developing countries such as India and Brazil (Tan, 2014), developing countries increasingly influence the re-making of the global economic order by challenging established norms.

In the process of global economic remaking, economic statecraft is becoming more prevalent over traditional tools of diplomacy and security. In today's highly inter-

connected world, intervention in trade flows, imposing sanctions, and screening investment flows offer faster and lower risk to exert influence, filling the gap where military action is too costly and more difficult to justify or diplomacy is too slow. China uses several economic tools, including the BRI, which aims to position itself, not the U.S. or Western Europe, as a centre of global trade (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Its restrictions on rare earth material exports are another example of the tools that are among its economic statecraft instruments, serving China in asserting power. On the other hand, as part of the economic statecraft, the U.S. increasingly deploys tariffs and export controls not only for addressing high trade deficits but also addressing unlawful migration as well as “Chinese efforts to spread disinformation and collect sensitive information on Americans” (CFR.org Editors, 2025). Overall, discussions of new rules among smaller groups of allies (Rafih et al., 2024), with decisions often being made unilaterally or in limited, exclusive groups, take over discussions in multilateral settings.

With the growing prominence of economic statecraft, economic policymaking has become increasingly integrated with national security agendas. While economic statecraft

in the 90s prioritised diplomacy and institution-building, and economic policies were mostly about economic growth, this has changed. Today, economic policies are no longer mostly about growth — they are about national security, technological control, and influence-building. From export controls to the reshoring of industries, economic tools are being reimagined as levers of power, especially in critical sectors like tech, energy, and semiconductors. Accordingly, the U.S. introduced clean energy incentives and the CHIPS Act while imposing tariffs on steel and aluminium imports because the high volumes of imports threaten U.S. national security (Rosenberg et al., 2020). Beyond the U.S., India and South Korea introduced chip manufacturing incentives, while Saudi Arabia and Australia prioritised strategies on critical minerals (Rafih et al., 2024), not only to boost domestic capacities but also to reduce strategic vulnerabilities and secure national interests in an increasingly securitised global economic environment.

Moreover, sanctions evolved into a long-term system of economic governance. Since the end of World War II, the use of sanctions as a foreign policy tool has seen a phenomenal increase (Morgan, Syropoulos, & Yotov, 2023, p. 4). In the past, they used to be crisis tools targeting human rights violations or terrorism, but today, they are sustained strategies to shape rival economies. During the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, even expanded use of sanctions was about inventing new types of financial restrictions on Russia and addressing Iran's nuclear

activities; recently, the U.S. has started to use sanctions for pursuing a wider range of targets, "including cybercrime, intellectual property theft, and even the International Criminal Court" (Rosenberg et al., 2020). Sanctions' extraterritoriality is on the rise, too, affecting third countries and private companies by forcing them to act in a certain way. This is a soft break from the past when sanctions were mostly imposed on target states, with limited obligations on third parties. However, today, some countries externalise their policies and laws in a way that shapes third parties' actions as a new form of cross-border regulation.

In the meantime, parallel institutions and alternative systems are being developed to bypass existing structures. China's BRI is an alternative to the West's development paradigm, and IMF now competes with alternative debt financing options such as Gulf Countries (Diwan, 2024). BRICS' rising influence and de-dollarisation are other aspects that challenge the existing structures. Such efforts not only challenge the dollar's dominance in global trade but also existing order through increasing trade via local currencies or intensifying efforts to create new reserve currencies (Pistilli, 2025), establishing alternative payment systems and institutionalising local development banks. All of these dynamics, together with the changing nature of trade and sanctions, are eroding the unipolarity of the Bretton Woods system and paving the way for a multipolar reconfiguration of the global balance of economic power.

## Outcomes of Shifting Norms and the Future of Global Markets

The rise of multipolarity is challenging the dominance of a single economic model and ideology crafted by the West for the West (Patrick, 2024), leading to the fragmentation of global markets into competing blocs. However, these blocs are not rigidly defined; for many countries, alignment is not a binary choice but a strategic decision based on national interests and benefits due to their willingness to maintain ties with the West and its institutions as well as other multilateral venues (Patrick, 2024). As a result, instead of rigid blocs competing over dominance, we are likely to witness fluid blocs arising from a spaghetti of relations defined by interests. India's rapprochement with China within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in response to U.S. tariff impositions, can be seen as part of this approach, driven partly by necessity and partly by a search for alternatives.

Fluid blocs arise partly because middle powers and developing economies aim to avoid being associated with only one major power; however, this does not prevent them from becoming subjects of collateral damage due to the fierce competition between major powers. In light of this, and especially due to the rise of competition between China and the U.S., it becomes more critical for middle powers and developing economies to effectively navigate complex geopolitical landscapes under the threat of economic retaliation or political exclusion (Wyne & Glaser, 2019).

Critical as it is, navigating the complex geopolitical landscape will likely increase the risk of systemic inequality and exclusion. While the disregard for international rules and prioritisation of national interests grow, middle powers and developing economies are likely to face limited

choices and reduced access to critical resources and decision-making platforms. For example, South Korea is caught between its security guardian, with which it has strong economic ties, and its northern neighbour is increasingly forced to tilt its policies in one direction (Cha, 2019). However, South Korea cannot afford to lean too far toward either side as the U.S. is a strong ally of South Korea to counter Chinese threats with its strong military capacity and relations with North Korea (Cha, 2019). On the other hand, China is a strong economic partner for South Korea, and loosening ties with China would mean economic difficulty for Seoul (Cha, 2019).

Another reason for exclusion and inequality is that institutional legitimacy and rules-based order are under threat. For instance, starting with the Obama administration, the functioning of the Appellate Body of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is blocked, resulting in an impaired dispute settlement mechanism (Rathore & Bajpai, 2020). Just recently, Rep. Tom Tiffany introduced a bill to withdraw Congressional approval for the U.S. to be a WTO member, highlighting the significant departure of the U.S. from an institution and a system that it led to creation (Martel, 2025). The violation of international trade laws and their functioning, with the WTO being one of the main defenders, is further exacerbated by the extensive and unlawful use of tariffs, accompanied by export controls and sanctions. This creates significant inequalities, as trade disruptions result in a 3% decline in global merchandise trade volume compared to what it would be without recent policy shifts, particularly the U.S. tariffs announced in April 2025 (World Trade Organisation, 2025). These inequalities are further amplified by the uncertainties surrounding President Trump's reliance on the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to impose tariffs, as courts' challenges to the use of IEEPA in such circumstances create additional uncertainty. Such disruptions make it difficult for middle powers and developing economies to benefit from global trade. Moreover, due to the higher costs of exports from China to the U.S. resulting from the tariffs imposed by the U.S. on China, the products purposed for the U.S. market may end up in middle powers and developing economies. This, in turn, could disrupt local producers' operations, leading to further inequality.

In parallel with such disruptions to the multilateral functioning of the system, bilateral negotiations and arrangements are increasing. However, middle powers and developing economies do not have negotiation leverage in bilateral arrangements as much as they do in the formation of international laws and institutions (Sanghro, n.d.). In 2014, the implementation of the 2013 Bali Package stalled when India, representing key developing countries, re-

fused to finalise the Trade Facilitation Agreement unless they were permitted to maintain public food stockholding programs for food security without breaching the WTO rules (Gustafson, 2016). A similar scenario is less likely to happen in a bilateral setting, as in a bilateral setting, developing countries lack collective support against dominant partners' disregard for their developmental needs and policy flexibilities. As a result, they are likely to accept worse conditions that do not serve their interests.

In this context, the growing importance of AI and technology adds a new dimension to fluid blocs, to geopolitical rivalry, and to collateral damage. The escalating global competition over semiconductors – where technological self-sufficiency has become a national security priority, is central to export controls both to and from the U.S., impacting the pace of technological developments and the technology available in our hands and homes. AI is another field that shapes geopolitical rivalry, with countries increasingly positioning themselves as hubs for digital infrastructure, talent and research. For example, while China is filing an increasing number of patents in the field and introducing more STEM PhDs (Elliott, 2025), Kenya positions itself as a leading figure in AI-driven financial inclusion (Feakin, 2025).

Amid all this rivalry, AI and tech are expected to significantly transform global trade dynamics, driving innovation across various sectors. For instance, AI will likely accelerate the shift towards service-based economies and enable higher economic growth due to an increase in productivity (Meltzer, 2018). As industries adopt AI-driven solutions, there will be a shift in the skill types in demand, requiring employees to adapt to more technical and specialised roles, likely leading to disruptions in the workforce (Georgieva, 2024). Beyond AI's and technology's transformative impact on trade and the economy, they present a potential for developing countries that are part of fluid blocs amidst the competition between major powers to mitigate the effects of this rivalry and create new opportunities. As a result, developing economies and middle powers can leverage AI to diversify their economies, enhance industrial capacities, and connect with new markets, refraining from accepting the worse conditions that do not benefit them.

# What Can Be Done: Engage or Brace for Impact?

As the world moves toward a new economic order, middle powers and developing countries should adopt a strategic approach to global economic remaking, considering the dynamics of the competition between major powers and the benefits offered by advancing technologies. Accordingly, the first step for them is to take advantage of strategic economic literacy and coalitions to manage power imbalances and adopt grounded policies towards economic diversification (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2024). In the meantime, diversifying bilateral and regional coalitions can provide the leverage middle powers and developing countries need. As emphasised by World Bank President Ajay Banga, broad-based liberation and deeper regional integration among middle powers and developing countries may boost stable and diversified growth, offsetting the risks of exclusion and inequality (Fitzgerald, 2025). Finally, digitalisation, including through the use of AI and industrial diversification, can better prepare them for global shocks, bringing competitive advantage while upgrading their economic growth (United Nations, 2025). Even though country-specific structural restraints will shape such steps, if followed effectively, middle powers and developing countries may manage the new reality of global economic order effectively. This way, they can have a better advantage during negotiations while facing less pressure to incline towards a certain superpower. Otherwise, they risk becoming increasingly marginalised in a new global economic order, locked into low-value-added sectors, and subject to heightened economic volatility driven by external shocks and shifting alliances.

On the other hand, there is a pressing need for reforming trade, sanctions, and financial governance norms to address the multipolar, fragmented, and economically weaponised world – both to accommodate developing nations' interests and to reduce the risk of further disorder. Reforms should include WTO's rules and functioning, addressing the concerns of both the U.S. to address alleged judicial activism of the Appellate Body and middle powers and developing nations to strengthen special and differential treatment mechanisms, facilitating integration into the global trade ecosystem. Moreover, voting and decision-making processes of the WTO, IMF and similar organisations should be recalibrated to ensure inclusiveness. Reforms should also cover establishing new platforms to amplify coalitions like G20 and G33, as well as limiting the



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arbitrary use of unilateral sanctions. However, reform processes usually take long, and considering the current flow, major powers are likely to avoid such a process overall. Therefore, materialising reforms requires both political will and patience.

At this point, both China and the U.S. have a critical role to play—not only in protecting their interests but also in maintaining a stable international order. As the IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva states, “The world's two largest economies need(ed) to reduce uncertainty and agree on a fairer, rules-based trading system” (Lawder, 2025). Therefore, rather than deepening the bifurcation of the global economy, both powers should acknowledge their systemic responsibilities and pursue national security objectives without trying to exert dominance on other nations (Rodrik, 2024). This includes exercising strategic restraint in areas that could result in global instability, such as in global financial systems, supporting targeted institutional reforms rather than dismissing them overall, and committing to narrowly defined, transparent economic measures. If they fail to do so, regardless of who emerges victorious from China – U.S. competition, the world risks descending into irreversible fragmentation—an outcome that would ultimately undermine even their long-term interests.

## Conclusion

The global economic order, with the rise of economic statecraft, is undergoing a transformation, leading to a multilateral and fragmented order that is breaking away from its rules and institutions. Chinese and American approaches that prioritise their national interests not only challenge existing institutional structures but also undermine the foundations of international cooperation. In such an evolving landscape, middle powers and developing economies particularly face the risks of economic exclusion, instability, and strategic pressure while also being highly impacted by the changes and opportunities that AI and technology pose.

In the process of a new global economic order, middle powers and developing economies, rather than adopting the new rules, should take an active role in shaping the transformation, even though structural limitations may prove it not as easy. In overcoming such limitations and shaping the transformation, strategic literacy, multifaceted cooperation, and structural reform, all while benefitting from AI and technology, are essential. On the other hand,

navigating the multipolar, fragmented, and economically weaponised global order requires a strategic recalibration of trade, sanctions, and financial governance frameworks. Meaningful reform—particularly within institutions like the WTO and IMF—is necessary not only for ensuring inclusiveness and legitimacy but also for accommodating the interests of developing economies and middle powers.

Nonetheless, progress is dependent on the political will of major powers. In this regard, the U.S. and China, as the world's largest economies, have an important responsibility. Accordingly, rather than widening global divisions through economic coercion or excessive securitisation, they must prioritise stability by finding a way to negotiate while committing to transparent, rules-based approaches and supporting targeted reforms. Failure to do so risks triggering a deeper, more damaging fragmentation of the global economic order—one that would ultimately be detrimental to all, including the very powers seeking to shape the global economic order.



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# Technological Advances in the Turkish Defence Industry

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*Ravale Mohydin*

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, Türkiye has emerged as a key player in the global defence industry, transitioning from an importer of technology to an innovator and producer. This remarkable evolution has been driven by strategic investments in technology, robust public-private collaborations, and a forward-looking national defence strategy. Türkiye's integration of artificial intelligence (AI), advanced robotics, and cutting-edge weapon systems has not only bolstered its military capabilities but also elevated its position on the global stage.

Additionally, the industry's rapid growth has had a profound economic and diplomatic impact. By ex-

porting defence technologies to over 180 countries in 2024 with exports of more than 7.1B USD (Defense News, 2025), Türkiye has generated billions in revenue, contributing to GDP growth while strengthening geopolitical alliances. This dual focus on economic prosperity and strategic influence reflects Türkiye's broader aspirations for global leadership. This chapter delves into the technological milestones achieved by Türkiye's defence sector, focusing on the role of AI, autonomous systems, and digital infrastructure in transforming military operations. It also examines the contributions of leading defence firms, the integration of ethical principles in AI-driven systems, and Türkiye's ambitions to shape the future of warfare.



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# Foundations of Technological Advancements in Defence

## *Historical Context and Milestones*

Türkiye's defence industry has evolved through a series of historical milestones that have shaped its trajectory toward self-reliance and technological innovation. The Ottoman Empire laid the groundwork for military advancements, with its expertise in artillery and siege technology exemplified by innovations such as the Basilica cannon. This self-sufficient production of materials like gunpowder and cannonballs established a precedent for minimising reliance on external suppliers, a principle that would influence the Republic's defence strategy centuries later.

With the establishment of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk emphasised the importance of science and technological advancement in securing the country (Karagözoğlu, 1985). Early institutions such as the Turkish Aeronautical Association, founded in 1925, and TÜBİTAK, established in 1963, underscored this commitment. These organisations played pivotal roles in fostering technical expertise and research capabilities, particularly in aviation and defence-related fields. Türkiye's strong emphasis on aviation and aeronautical engineering, deeply ingrained in its national institutions and culture, has significantly contributed to the country's celebrated expertise in developing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The focus on industrialisation in the mid-20th century further bolstered Türkiye's defence sector. Key developments such as the Turkish Petroleum Corporation and Erdemir Steel Plant provided essential infrastructure for military production, while centralised economic planning ensured that resources were allocated to support both industrial and defence goals.

The 1980s marked a turning point with economic liberalisation policies under Turgut Özal, which integrated global technologies into Türkiye's defence framework (Öniş, 2004). Advancements in telecommunications and satellite technology, such as the adoption of GSM systems and the launch of TÜRKSAT, enhanced military command, control, and communication capabilities. These developments laid the groundwork for modernising Türkiye's defence sector and enabling greater technological independence. Another key moment came during the 1990s when Türkiye intensified efforts to reduce foreign dependency by establishing major joint ventures and forming defence

agreements with international allies. These collaborations accelerated the transfer of critical technologies, laying the groundwork for today's indigenous production.

The turn of the millennium, marked by the rise of the AK Parti government under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2002, brought a renewed focus on defence self-sufficiency. The establishment of the Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB) centralised efforts to oversee indigenous defence projects and align them with national security objectives. Under the SSB's guidance, Türkiye achieved significant milestones in defence technology, including the development of UAVs such as the Bayraktar TB2 and ANKA drones. These systems, recognised for their operational effectiveness in various conflicts, became symbols of Türkiye's technological capabilities and bolstered its position as a leading global supplier of UAVs.

Other key projects, such as the MILGEM naval program (Nugent, 2023) and the development of the ALTAY main battle tank and HISAR air defence systems, reflected Türkiye's commitment to indigenous production across all branches of defence. These efforts were supported by strategic policies that facilitated technology transfers while ensuring domestic control over production processes. By March 2024, Türkiye had become the 11th largest arms exporter globally, with defence products reaching markets in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024; Daily Sabah, 2025). These exports not only enhanced the economy but also elevated Türkiye's geopolitical influence.

## *Strategic Policies and Vision*

Türkiye's defence industry success is rooted in strategic policies and a regulatory framework that prioritised innovation, collaboration, and technological self-reliance (Yılmaz and Yorulmaz, 2023). The Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB) has been instrumental in coordinating these efforts, ensuring that projects align with national security objectives and fostering partnerships between government agencies, academia, and private firms. The *Technology Development Zones Law* (2001) facilitated the establishment of research hubs that became pivotal in advancing defence technologies, while tax incentives under *R&D Law No. 5746* (2008) encouraged private-sector investment in cutting-edge military systems (Yanıktepe and Tezcan, 2006).

The National Technology Initiative (NTI), launched in 2018, provided a structured framework for advancing high-tech industries, with particular focus on artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing (Coştu, 2022). Within the defence sector, the NTI emphasised reducing reliance on imported technologies and prioritising the development of critical platforms such as UAVs, naval vessels, and air defence systems. The 2021 launch of the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (NAIS) further integrated cutting-edge technologies into Türkiye's defence industry (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, Digital Transformation Office, 2021); (Mohyidin, 2024). This initiative aimed to position Türkiye as a global leader in AI applications, including military domains such as autonomous systems, intelligence analysis, and advanced robotics. By fostering collaboration among government agencies, private enterprises, and academic institutions, the NAIS ensured that Türkiye's defence systems leveraged the latest AI advancements to enhance operational efficiency and strategic decision-making. AI integration enabled the creation of autonomous systems, while advanced manufacturing techniques like 3D printing improved efficiency and reduced costs in military production. Cybersecurity also emerged as a critical focus, supported by public-private partnerships under initiatives like the Turkish Cyber Security Cluster (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2023). These efforts aimed to protect critical infrastructure and ensure resilience against emerging threats, aligning with Türkiye's broader goals of achieving technological self-sufficiency.

Export-oriented policies, such as *Law No. 5201 on the Control of Weapons, Ammunition, and Defence Equipment Exports*, enacted in 2004 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024), streamlined licensing and compliance procedures, enabling Türkiye to expand its defence exports significantly (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2020). These regulations supported the global success of platforms like the Bayraktar TB2, MILGEM-class ships, and HISAR systems, solidifying Türkiye's position as a key player in the international arms market. Turkish companies like Baykar Makina, Roketsan, and Aselsan became major exporters, contributing not only to Türkiye's economy but also to its geopolitical influence. Private companies such as Baykar Makina and Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAŞ) leveraged these resources to produce groundbreaking platforms like the Bayraktar TB2 UAV and ANKA drone as mentioned above, which have become symbols of Türkiye's defence capabilities (LeGrone, 2022). Public-private partnerships (PPPs) were another cornerstone of the government's strategy to engage the private sector.

Through a combination of visionary leadership, strategic policies and a forward-thinking regulatory framework, Türkiye has transitioned from a dependency on foreign suppliers to becoming a self-sufficient producer and exporter of advanced military technology (Bastian, 2024). This transformation underpins the nation's broader ambition to align national security with technological innovation, ensuring that its defence industry remains a cornerstone of Türkiye's strategic aspirations in the 21st century.

## Artificial Intelligence in Defence

Türkiye's transformation into a global leader in AI-powered defence technologies is the result of a comprehensive strategy combining government initiatives, private sector innovation, and international collaboration. The NAIS mentioned above serves as a cornerstone of these efforts, laying out a roadmap for achieving AI autonomy by fostering talent, innovation, and reducing dependency on foreign technologies. The strategy reflects Türkiye's broader commitment to technological self-sufficiency as part of its National Technology Initiative.

The Turkish government has actively supported the growth of AI applications in defence through financial incentives and regulatory frameworks. Laws like the *R&D Law No. 5746* provide tax exemptions and funding for private firms investing in cutting-edge technologies. Additionally, the 2001 Technology Development Zones Law es-

tablished innovation hubs to foster collaboration between academia and industry, creating an ecosystem conducive to high-tech advancements (Republic of Turkey, 2001). As a result, Türkiye now boasts nearly 1,200 AI firms, a dramatic increase from just five in 2000, with the AI sector projected to grow to 7.37 billion USD by 2030 (ERAI Turkey, 2024).

Key defence companies such as ASELSAN, HAVELSAN, and ROKETSAN have capitalised on these policies to develop groundbreaking AI-driven platforms. ASELSAN has introduced advanced radar systems, such as the AESA nose radar, which enhances combat aircraft capabilities with AI-enabled target recognition and multitarget tracking (Güngör, 2024). HAVELSAN developed the MAIN platform, prioritising data security for sensitive national operations, ensuring resilience against cyber threats. Additionally, through platforms like HAVELSAN's SimTech,

AI-driven wargames allow military personnel to train in hyper-realistic scenarios, enhancing decision-making and preparedness for complex operations (Defence Turkey, 2011). Additionally, as a member, Türkiye is leveraging AI to advance future soldier technologies as part of its focus on Emerging Disruptive Technologies (EDTs), aligning with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s modernisation goals. BITES, a subsidiary of ASELSAN, developed the AI-powered Military Tactical Operation Kit (ATOK), enhancing battlefield situational awareness and personnel security with wearable integrated systems. Additionally, BITES employs AI in virtual and augmented reality training environments, providing realistic simulations for improved troop readiness. ASELSAN's Military Exoskeleton further integrates AI to deliver adaptive leg support, reducing physical strain and enhancing combat performance. These innovations demonstrate Türkiye's commitment to using AI to redefine modern warfighting capabilities.

AI applications extend beyond traditional defence platforms to space awareness and surveillance technologies. Universities and research centres, such as UZAY supported by TÜBİTAK, are employing AI for satellite tracking and real-time analysis, contributing to Türkiye's space defence capabilities. RobotEye AI, a private Turkish firm specialising in AI-driven surveillance, has developed autonomous border security systems that enhance situational awareness in challenging environments, further exemplifying the private sector's contributions to national security even at a startup level (Defence Arabia, 2024).

Participation in European Union (EU)-funded AI projects has strengthened Türkiye's position in the global AI landscape, facilitating knowledge exchange and cross-border innovation (European External Action Service, 2024). These partnerships complement the country's robust export strategy, supported by streamlined licensing under *Law No. 5201 on the Control of Weapons, Ammunition, and Defence Equipment Exports* (Herdem Attorneys at Law, 2024). Turkish defence products, including UAVs, radar systems, and advanced weaponry, have gained international recognition, solidifying the country's geo-political influence. Furthermore, it is of significant importance that ethical considerations appear to be central to Türkiye's AI strategy (Council of Higher Education (YÖK), 2024). The government emphasises transparency, accountability, and fairness in AI development, aligning with global norms to build trust in its AI-driven systems. This approach not only ensures responsible deployment but also reinforces Türkiye's reputation as a reliable and innovative player in defence technologies. The results of these efforts are evident in the growing prominence of Turkish defence firms on the global stage.

## AI Powered Turkish Drones (UAVs)

Türkiye's UAV sector has seen significant advancements, establishing itself as a global leader in drone technology. A historic milestone was achieved with the Bayraktar TB3, developed by Baykar, which became the first UAV to autonomously take off and land on the TCG Anadolu, Türkiye's flagship amphibious assault ship (Baykar, 2024a). This innovation enhances the Turkish Navy's operational flexibility, particularly in naval operations. Further strengthening its capabilities, Türkiye has integrated air-launched ballistic missiles, such as the UAV-230, into its high-altitude, long-endurance AKINCI drone (Baykar, 2025). These advancements expand the mission profiles of Turkish UAVs, offering greater versatility in strike operations. Additionally, Turkish Aerospace Industries achieved a breakthrough with the ANKA-3, a flying wing-type stealth UAV that completed its maiden flight in December 2023 (Turkish Aerospace Industries, 2025). It has since undergone successful live-fire tests, showcasing its operational readiness.

On the international stage, Türkiye continues to expand its influence. Croatia recently approved an 86 million EUR purchase of Bayraktar TB2 drones, underscoring the growing demand for Turkish UAVs in Europe (Öztürk, 2024). Similarly, Albania announced plans to acquire Turkish kamikaze drones (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024), and Türkiye has engaged in discussions with Serbia about potential joint drone production, signalling its deepening defence collaborations in the Balkans (RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2024). To further solidify its UAV leadership, Baykar announced a 300 million USD investment to develop indigenous jet engines over the next five years, reducing reliance on foreign technology and enhancing UAV performance, particularly for advanced platforms like the Bayraktar Kızılelma, which is nearing serial production (Sezer, 2024).

These developments reflect Türkiye's commitment to innovation and its strategic approach to partnerships, exports, and self-reliance. This has enabled the country to contribute to regional and global security also. One notable success story involves the Akıncı drone's role in locating critical targets during a regional conflict. In May 2024, a Turkish Bayraktar Akıncı drone played a pivotal role in locating the crash site of a helicopter carrying Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahiyan (Baykar, 2024b). The helicopter had gone down in the mountainous part of Azerbaijan under adverse weather conditions. Upon receiving a request for assistance, Türkiye deployed the Akıncı UAV, which successfully identified a heat source suspected to be the wreckage and promptly

shared the coordinates with Iranian authorities, as reported by European media (Öztürk, 2024). This collaboration exemplified the operational capabilities of Turkish drones in search and rescue missions and underscored the importance of international cooperation in crisis situations.

## **AI Driven Space Surveillance and Reconnaissance**

AI-driven systems have been pivotal in Türkiye's space initiatives, significantly enhancing capabilities in satellite tracking, space object identification, and overall space awareness. A prominent example is the project led by professors at the Turkish Aeronautical Association University, which utilised AI technologies, including deep learning, to track spacecraft and objects traversing Turkish airspace. By integrating orbital mechanics with AI, this initiative enabled real-time identification and monitoring of satellites and other space objects. The rapid analysis provided by these AI-driven systems is crucial for maintaining national security, as it allows Türkiye to detect and respond to potential threats, such as spy satellites, while ensuring comprehensive surveillance of activities in orbit.

Another notable example is Türkiye's use of AI to predict and analyse the dynamics of space objects. By employing AI models trained on extensive datasets of orbital behaviour, Türkiye has developed systems capable of

anticipating potential collisions or interactions between satellites, contributing to safer and more efficient space operations. These systems enhance Türkiye's capacity to protect its assets in orbit and maintain uninterrupted access to critical space-based services. AI applications have also extended to the development of satellite technologies. Turkish firms and research institutions, such as TÜBİTAK UZAY, have incorporated AI algorithms into satellites for improved navigation, data processing, and communication. For instance, AI-driven software is used to process high-resolution images from Earth observation satellites, enabling quicker and more accurate interpretation for applications ranging from environmental monitoring to disaster response (TÜBİTAK Uzay, 2025).

These advancements are bolstered by collaborative efforts between academia, industry and governmental organisations. As noted above, national institutions like TÜBİTAK have played a central role in fostering partnerships that integrate AI expertise into space technologies, creating a robust ecosystem for innovation. In addition, Türkiye has leveraged its AI expertise to support global space missions. Collaborations with European Space Agency (ESA) initiatives have allowed Turkish engineers to contribute to AI algorithms used in asteroid tracking and planetary defence simulations (European Space Agency, 2021)

# **Advanced Defence Platforms and Systems**

## **Directed Energy Weapons, Radar Technology and Smart Ammunition**

Türkiye has made significant strides in directed energy weapons (DEWs), with ROKETSAN leading the charge in the development of cutting-edge systems like the ALKA laser weapon (Roketsan, 2022a). The ALKA system is specifically designed to neutralise asymmetric threats, including drones, missiles, and other aerial or ground-based targets. This capability is increasingly vital in modern warfare, where the use of swarms of drones or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by non-state actors presents complex challenges. ALKA employs advanced artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to detect, track, and engage multiple targets simultaneously, ensuring rapid response times and

precise targeting. The system can be deployed on a variety of platforms, from stationary defence installations to mobile units, providing comprehensive protection for critical infrastructure, military bases, and urban centres. Its ability to engage targets without expending traditional ammunition offers a cost-effective and sustainable solution for prolonged operations. Furthermore, ALKA's use of electromagnetic and laser technologies enhances its efficacy against threats at different ranges, contributing to Türkiye's layered defence strategy.

In next-generation radar technology advances, ASELSAN, one of Türkiye's leading defence contractors, has revolutionised radar technology with its Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar system (Güngör, 2024). This state-of-the-art technology integrates advanced AI algorithms to detect, track, and analyse multiple targets

in real time, offering unparalleled situational awareness. The AESA radar is a significant leap in Türkiye's air and ground defence capabilities, enhancing combat readiness across a range of platforms, including fighter jets, UAVs, and ground-based air defence systems. Its AI-powered capabilities allow it to adapt dynamically to changing battlefield conditions. For instance, the radar can prioritise high-threat targets, filter out irrelevant data, and provide operators with actionable insights, thereby reducing cognitive load and improving decision-making. This real-time adaptability is crucial in complex combat scenarios, where quick and accurate information can determine the outcome of engagements. The integration of this technology into platforms like the Akıncı and ANKA UAVs further enhances Türkiye's aerial capabilities. Beyond its immediate defence applications, the AESA radar's dual-use potential makes it valuable for civilian purposes, including air traffic control, weather monitoring, and border surveillance. This versatility demonstrates Türkiye's ability to develop technologies that address a wide array of needs, both military and civilian.

Türkiye has also emerged as a leader in smart ammunition and missile technology, with ROKETSAN at the forefront of these developments. One of the most notable innovations in this domain is the METE mini-missile (Roketsan, 2022b), renowned as the world's smallest precision-guided missile. The METE missile incorporates advanced AI algorithms to enhance targeting accuracy, making it particularly effective in urban and asymmetric warfare scenarios. The METE missile's compact size and precision capabilities allow it to be deployed in environments where collateral damage must be minimised. This makes it an invaluable asset for special operations forces, counterterrorism missions, and operations in densely populated areas. The missile's guidance system, powered by AI, enables it to adapt to dynamic conditions in real time, ensuring high levels of accuracy even against moving targets.

In addition to the METE missile, Türkiye has developed a range of other smart munitions that integrate AI for enhanced performance (Baykar, 2024c). These include laser-guided bombs, air-to-ground missiles, and stand-off weapons capable of engaging targets at extended ranges. The HGK, for example, is a GPS/INS guidance kit developed by TÜBİTAK-SAGE that converts conventional unguided bombs into precision-guided munitions. This system enhances the accuracy of air-to-ground munitions, allowing for effective engagement of targets with minimal collateral damage. Similar systems have been designed to function seamlessly with Türkiye's advanced UAVs and fighter jets, creating a cohesive and interoperable arsenal.

## ***Indigenous Propulsion Systems***

Türkiye's commitment to achieving technological sovereignty in defence has also driven significant advancements in the development of indigenous propulsion systems. The country focused on reducing dependency on foreign suppliers, ensuring uninterrupted access to advanced propulsion technologies. Tusaş Engine Industries (TEI) has been a leader in these efforts, developing key systems like the TEI-TF6000 turbofan engine, which delivers 6,000 pounds-force of thrust and powers advanced trainer aircraft, light combat aircraft, and UAVs (Defence Turkey, 2024). Building on this success, TEI is also developing the TF10000, a more powerful variant with afterburner capability for supersonic performance. In the rotary-wing domain, the TS1400 turboshaft engine, designed for Türkiye's domestically produced T625 GÖKBAY helicopter, demonstrates the ability to produce high-reliability engines for challenging environments (Aviation Turkey, 2020). It replaced the previously used LHTEC CTS800-4A turboshaft engines, produced by the Light Helicopter Turbine Engine Company (LHTEC), a joint venture between Rolls-Royce, a British company, and Honeywell, an American company, marking a significant step towards self-reliance (Anadolu Agency, 2015). UAV programs mentioned above have benefitted from domestically developed engines like the TEI-PD170, which enable high-altitude, long-endurance missions (TEI, 2024).

ROKETSAN has also further advanced propulsion systems for missiles and rockets, developing solid-fuel and hybrid technologies for tactical missiles and space launch vehicles (Defence Turkey, 2021). These advancements are underpinned by innovations in high-temperature materials, advanced manufacturing techniques, and additive manufacturing (3D printing), which have enhanced production efficiency and reduced costs. Türkiye's indigenous propulsion systems have far-reaching strategic implications, ensuring the seamless integration of engines into platforms like fighter jets, UAVs, and helicopters while strengthening operational reliability and independence. These advancements also position Türkiye as a competitive exporter of propulsion technologies, contributing to its global defence influence.

## ***Cybersecurity and Digital Defence***

The increasing digitisation of defence systems has created an urgent need for robust cybersecurity measures to protect critical military data domestically. Türkiye has risen to this challenge by integrating advanced AI-driven technologies into its secure communication platforms (Anadolu

Agency, 2024). One standout example is HAVELSAN's MAIN (Multifunctional Artificial Intelligence Network) platform, which prioritises data security through AI-powered encryption and anomaly detection systems (Havelsan, 2025). By operating within closed networks and utilising proprietary algorithms, MAIN ensures that sensitive information remains protected against unauthorised access, espionage, and cyberattacks.

AI-driven encryption technologies used in MAIN enhance the robustness of data transmission by continuously adapting to evolving cyber threats. These systems employ dynamic algorithms that can reconfigure encryption protocols in real time, making it exceptionally difficult for adversaries to breach. This capability is particularly vital for military operations, where the interception of communication could compromise missions or national security. MAIN's anomaly detection features further bolster security by identifying unusual patterns or behaviours within the network that may signal potential cyber threats. Using machine learning, these systems learn from historical data to differentiate between benign anomalies and genuine threats, enabling rapid and effective responses. HAVELSAN's focus on secure communication extends to integrating AI into data classification and access control measures. By categorising data based on its sensitivity, MAIN ensures that only authorised personnel can access specific information. AI-powered audit trails provide a transparent record of all data interactions, increasing accountability and minimising the risk of insider threats. These features are critical in maintaining the integrity and confidentiality of communication across Türkiye's defence systems.

Beyond defence infrastructure, Türkiye's investments in AI-powered cybersecurity tools are used to protect Türkiye's civilian critical infrastructure such as energy grids, transportation systems, and communication networks (Özker, 2022). For instance, machine learning models monitor sensor data from power grids to detect anomalies indicative of cyber intrusions targeting critical infrastructure. By demonstrating an ability to protect sensitive systems and data, Türkiye not only strengthens its own technological resilience but also enhances its geopolitical position as a reliable partner in international digital security collaborations.

## Blockchain Technologies and Cloud Computing

Blockchain technology is increasingly being utilised in cybersecurity for its ability to ensure secure, tamper-proof, and transparent data management, particularly in defence and critical infrastructure. In Türkiye, blockchain is inte-

grated into defence communication systems to secure the transmission of sensitive data, eliminating single points of failure and ensuring that military communications remain confidential and authentic. For instance, blockchain is being explored for securing UAV-C2 links (Riyaz, Khan and Rehmani, 2023).

Türkiye is making significant strides in developing a robust and secure cloud infrastructure to bolster its defence capabilities and enhance national security (Bulut, 2023). Recognising the critical role of cloud computing in modern military operations and defence systems, the country is focusing on building advanced data centres and leveraging partnerships with global and domestic cloud service providers to support its defence strategy.

The establishment of state-of-the-art data centres equipped with cutting-edge technologies is central to Türkiye's efforts to secure and manage sensitive defence data. These facilities provide localised data storage and processing, ensuring data sovereignty and reducing vulnerabilities associated with cross-border information transfers. By minimising latency and fortifying cyber defences, the infrastructure supports real-time decision-making and operational efficiency, critical for modern warfare and surveillance systems. Moreover, the integration of secure cloud solutions enables advanced applications such as AI-driven analytics, secure communication networks, and autonomous system management. With these investments, Türkiye is not only reinforcing its defence infrastructure but also positioning itself as a leader in the adoption of secure, high-tech solutions for military and national security purposes, ensuring resilience against evolving cyber and physical threats.



(CSSB - Anadolu Agency)

## Global Impact and Future Prospects of Türkiye's Defence Industry

Türkiye's defence industry has emerged as a global leader, leveraging technological advancements to strengthen its capabilities and influence. International collaborations have played a pivotal role in this transformation. Partnerships with global technology leaders like Microsoft and IBM have facilitated the transfer of knowledge and access to cutting-edge AI technologies, enhancing Türkiye's research and development ecosystem. Participation in EU-funded projects has further solidified its standing in the global defence landscape, focusing on ethical AI development and cross-border cooperation. These initiatives not only highlight Türkiye's commitment to responsible innovation but also align with its ambitions to lead in the global defence sector.

As a member of NATO, Türkiye's defence industry has positioned itself as a vital contributor to the alliance's collective defence capabilities. The export of defence systems to NATO member states has set benchmarks for Turkish companies, showcasing their ability to meet stringent quality and performance standards. Recent NATO-led joint exercises demonstrated the effectiveness of Türkiye's defence technologies. For instance, the Bayraktar TB2 UAV played a pivotal role in surveillance missions, earning recognition for its precision and cost-efficiency compared to Western counterparts. These contributions reinforce Türkiye's standing as a critical player within NATO. Cooperation with European nations has emerged as a strategic priority for the industry. The establishment of a ROKETSAN office in Skopje exemplifies this focus, enabling the Turkish defence firm to better serve the Balkan region. By offering cost-effective, high-quality solutions that align with NATO

requirements, the Turkish defence industry has demonstrated its adaptability to diverse global demands.

This growing recognition is underscored by the presence of seven Turkish defence firms on the prestigious Defence News Top 100 list by 2020 (Anadolu Agency, 2020). This achievement reflects Türkiye's increasing competitiveness in the international defence market, showcasing its ability to develop innovative, reliable, and cost-effective solutions that rival established global players. From UAVs to missile systems and cybersecurity platforms, Turkish defence products are shaping the future of warfare and gaining recognition for their effectiveness and ingenuity. However, while the Turkish defence sector is dynamic and rapidly evolving, marked by significant achievements, it is still facing challenges that require strategic solutions. One pressing vulnerability is its reliance on commercial semiconductors. Energy security is another area of concern. Addressing the shortage of skilled professionals is equally vital, as it poses a threat to sustained growth and innovation.

Looking ahead, Türkiye's defence industry is poised for transformative growth through strategic investments in research and development. The semiconductor dependency has prompted national efforts to develop and produce military-grade alternatives domestically to reduce foreign dependency and enhance operational security. The Turkish government and the energy sector are both investing heavily in domestic energy sources to ensure reliable operations in critical production environments. Initiatives such as various defence technologies academies have been launched to equip young engineers and scientists with ex-

pertise in AI, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing, reflecting a broader strategy to strengthen the workforce and meet the demands of emerging technologies and global competition. An example is the Defence Technologies Application and Research Centre, based in Atilim University, with the expressed purpose of meeting “the changing needs of the Turkish Armed Forces with original and domestic designs and free of foreign contributions” (Atilim University, n.d.). These efforts align with the recently announced Defence Vision 2023-2053, a long-term strategy that seeks to achieve full self-sufficiency, double defence exports, as well as position the country among the top 10 global defence exporters (TASAM, 2016). Despite current challenges, the defence sector’s adaptability, innovation, and commitment to self-reliance provide a strong foundation for realising these ambitious goals and sustaining its role as a competitive player on the global stage.

Expanding defence export markets is another key pillar of Türkiye’s future strategy. With a vision to double its defence exports by 2030, Türkiye is capitalising on its reputation for reliability and innovation (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2023). It appears to be well on its way to achieving this target: Türkiye’s defence and aerospace

industry has achieved record-breaking export revenues, reaching 5.8 billion USD (TL 201.55 billion), a month before the end of 2024 (Daily Sabah, 2023). Data from the Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM) revealed exports from January to November rose 19 percent year-over-year, totalling nearly 5.76 billion USD. Over the past 12 months, the sector’s exports increased by 18.4 percent compared to the previous year, amounting to 6.48 billion USD.

Strategic trade agreements and technology transfer partnerships will facilitate this growth, enabling Turkish defence firms to expand their global footprint and foster new alliances. By offering tailored solutions to meet diverse operational needs, Türkiye continues to strengthen its position as a trusted partner in the global defence ecosystem. Türkiye’s integration of cutting-edge technologies, strategic international collaborations, and investment in human capital reflects its ambitious vision for the future. As it continues to push the boundaries of defence innovation, Türkiye is not only solidifying its role as a key global player but also shaping the future of defence technologies in an increasingly interconnected and technologically driven world.

## Conclusion: From Projects to Posture

The recent delivery of Türkiye’s “Steel Dome” architecture (28 August 2025) is more than a procurement milestone; it is a declaration of posture (Associated Press, 2025). A decade of indigenous R&D, dispersed programs, and firm-level breakthroughs is now hardening into an integrated, national defence stack: missiles, sensors, electronic warfare, command-and-control, and unmanned systems fused into a single operating picture. That “system-of-systems” shift matters: it turns impressive platforms into a resilient network, elevates deterrence from point defence to layered coverage, and signals that Türkiye intends to compete in the world league not as a buyer of kits, but as a designer of architectures.

Institutionally, the scale of new facilities, workforce expansion, and production uplift points to enduring capacity rather than episodic success. Economically, the same integration logic that strengthens air defence also underwrites export credibility: partners do not just seek a drone, a radar, or a missile, instead, they seek interoperability, sustainment, and doctrine. Türkiye’s value proposition increasingly sits at that junction of hardware, software, and concept of operations, where “drone diplomacy,” naval as-

sertiveness and the KAAN ecosystem can be bundled as coherent, scalable solutions.

Strategically, Steel Dome crowns a broader pursuit of autonomy within alliances: interoperable with NATO where interests converge, self-reliant where supply chains or politics fray, and outward-looking where markets and partnerships multiply. It reinforces Ankara’s bid to anchor the Middle Corridor, to hedge in a fragmenting order, and to translate technology into leverage without surrendering decision-making to external dependencies.

None of this obviates the hard work ahead. Domestic semiconductors, energy resilience, deepening the engineering talent bench, and hardening cyber-physical links across the force. But the trajectory is clear. Türkiye has moved from assembling platforms to composing systems, from episodic exports to repeatable solutions, from offset recipients to standard setters. If sustained, that evolution will define not only how Türkiye defends its skies, seas, and data, but also how it shapes the next chapter of defence: at home, across its neighbourhood, and in the wider global market.

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# **Trumpism Reloaded:** America's Role in a Fragmenting World Order

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## Introduction

**T**here are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.” This famous adage aptly captures the disruptive force of Trumpism in global affairs. More than a fleeting political trend, Trumpism represents a structural shift in American political identity and its approach to global leadership. Whether embodied in Donald J. Trump himself or echoed by the broader ideological current reshaping the Republican Party, the return of Trumpism to the centre of U.S. power is once again sending shockwaves through the global order (Smith et al., 2025).

Trumpism thrives on disruption — of alliances, institutions, norms, and expectations (McManus et al., 2025). It reorients American foreign policy away from multilateralism and toward transactionalism; it sidelines traditional diplomacy in favour of personal rapport and mediated rhetorics; and it reframes global engagement through the prism of domestic political battles. In a world already marked by intensifying multipolarity, rising protectionism, and the erosion of the liberal international order, the resurgence of Trumpist ideology may not only accelerate global fragmentation but also redefine the very idea of American power.

This chapter examines the evolving role of the United States under the influence of Trumpism amid an increasingly volatile global landscape. It explores the recalibration of U.S. alliances, particularly transatlantic ties under the strain of NATO scepticism and European fears of abandonment. It evaluates the consequences of America's strategic ambivalence toward the Middle East, as Gulf powers hedge their bets between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. It also considers how America's pivot toward great-power rivalry with China fits uneasily within a Trumpist worldview often sceptical of military entanglements and multilateral trade frameworks.

Beyond geopolitics, Trumpism also projects domestic polarisation onto the global stage, with consequences for climate diplomacy, human rights advocacy, and the global information ecosystem. From Jerusalem to Kyiv, and from the Indo-Pacific to the corridors of the United Nations, America's choices are being watched not just for what they signal — but for what they normalise.

As the world adjusts to the possible institutionalisation of Trumpism, this chapter interrogates whether America can still serve as a stabilising force — or whether it is now a principal actor in the global reset, reshaping rules, allies, and expectations in its own image.



(Government of Canada - Anadolu Agency)

# Historical Context: Trump's First Term and Its Global Legacy

Donald J. Trump's first term (2017–2021) marked a sharp departure from decades of U.S. foreign policy orthodoxy. His tenure was characterised by a transactional approach to alliances, deep scepticism of multilateralism, and a populist ethos that disrupted long-standing diplomatic norms. From the outset, Trump's mantra of "America First" reshaped Washington's posture on global governance, trade, security, and strategic competition.

On the international stage, the Trump administration consistently framed its disengagement from international agreements and institutions as a defence of U.S. sovereignty and an effort to free the country from what it portrayed as unfair or burdensome commitments. One of the earliest and most visible examples was the 2017 withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. Trump argued that the accord placed an undue burden on American workers and businesses while giving countries such as China and India a comparative advantage.

In 2018, Washington exited the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran Nuclear Deal, contending that it failed to adequately address Iran's missile program and destabilising regional activities. Critics countered that the withdrawal worsened regional insecurity and alienated European allies (Diaz & Fox, 2018). Similarly, the U.S. suspended its relationship with the World Health Organisation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, accusing the body of being overly influenced by Beijing and ineffective in managing the crisis (BBC News, 2020). The move drew heavy criticism for undermining international coordination at a time of global emergency.

Trump also took the U.S. out of UNESCO in 2017, citing what his administration described as entrenched anti-Israel bias. This step built upon earlier decisions to halt funding after Palestine's admission to the organisation in 2011 but went further by abandoning membership altogether. In 2018, Washington cut funding to UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

Beyond funding withdrawals, the administration also targeted international judicial bodies. The International Criminal Court (ICC) came under sanctions for its investigation into alleged U.S. war crimes in Afghanistan and potential cases against Israel. Trump's team denounced the ICC as an illegitimate, politically motivated institution, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo branding it a "kangaroo court" (Reuters, 2020). In the same vein, the U.S. withdrew from

the UN Human Rights Council in 2018, dismissing it as an arena rife with hypocrisy where authoritarian states held seats and Israel was disproportionately condemned. Then-U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley went so far as to call the council a "cesspool of political bias" (Borger, 2018).

Across these decisions, the administration consistently employed rhetoric suggesting that the U.S. was being exploited by multilateral institutions, treaties, or foreign actors. While such measures played well with Trump's domestic base by projecting him as a staunch defender of national sovereignty, they also fuelled criticism that Washington was abdicating leadership, leaving space for competitors such as China to expand their influence. This posture of strategic withdrawal marked a sharp pivot toward unilateralism and signalled a reduced American commitment to the very global norms and institutions it once helped establish.

Trump also launched a full-fledged trade war with China, imposing tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of goods, redefining U.S.–China relations through confrontation rather than integration.

At the same time, Trump consistently criticised NATO allies for what he perceived as free-riding on American security guarantees (Imbach, 2024), leading to frayed transatlantic ties. His affinity for strongman leaders—from Russia's Vladimir Putin to North Korea's Kim Jong-un—raised alarms among U.S. allies, particularly in Europe and Asia, who feared an erosion of collective security arrangements.

Trump's tenure also blurred the lines between diplomacy and domestic politics. Foreign relations often reflected electoral calculations, with Cuba policy and Iran sanctions weaponised for domestic political gain. Additionally, the administration's dismantling of the State Department's capacity, chaotic turnover of national security officials, and erratic social media messaging undermined the coherence and predictability of U.S. global engagement.

Despite these ruptures, Trump's policies found resonance in many parts of the world. Some leaders admired his defiance of the dwindling liberal order, and certain middle powers welcomed the policy space opened by American retrenchment. Trump's scepticism of "forever wars" also tapped into public fatigue with military interventions, prompting a recalibration of America's global military footprint—particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

The cumulative effect of Trump's first term was a profound destabilisation of the post-Cold War consensus about America's global role. The multilateral frameworks built after World War II were weakened, and U.S. leadership came to be seen as volatile, conditional, and self-interested. Even after his electoral defeat in 2020, many of these dynamics have persisted, suggesting that "Trumpism" as a foreign policy outlook has outlived his presidency.

This legacy now serves as the foundation upon which the second Trump term builds, especially amid rising multipolarity and deepening global fragmentation. Understanding this historical context is crucial to evaluating how "Trumpism Reloaded" shapes the next phase of America's global strategy.

## Trump 2.0: US Alliances in Flux

The second coming of Trumpism does not simply echo the first—it intensifies its disruptive logic. From audacious suggestions of redrawing borders in Canada and Greenland (Wolf, 2025) to controversial ceasefire proposals in Ukraine, Trump's renewed foreign policy ambitions are shaking the foundations of the post-war liberal international order. One of the most consequential shifts lies in Washington's recalibrated posture toward great power competition—particularly with China, which now commands centre stage as America's principal strategic rival. Gone are the days of cautious engagement; bilateral relations have hardened into zero-sum rivalry, leaving minimal space for collaboration.

### *Europe's Unease Under Trump's Second Term*

Since January 2025, the transatlantic relationship has entered one of its most uncertain phases in decades. Traditionally, the U.S.–Europe partnership has weathered moments of tension through a shared commitment to democracy and collective security. However, Donald Trump's second presidency has pushed the alliance beyond familiar frictions.

For Trump, the European Union holds little strategic value. He notably described it as being conceived to "screw the United States" (Trump, 2025) and has repeatedly dismissed it as an obstacle to American interests, preferring bilateral dealings with individual member states. This shift undermines Brussels' capacity to act as a unified interlocutor and deepens European anxieties about being sidelined in global decision-making. The deterioration of U.S. democratic norms has only compounded European mistrust, especially following Vice President J.D. Vance's public accusations at the Munich Security Conference that European governments manipulate elections and suppress free speech (Wintour, 2025).

At the heart of Europe's concern lies NATO. For decades, the United States has been the indispensable guarantor of

Europe's defence: stationing troops, providing intelligence, and deterring Russia. Today, that assurance looks increasingly fragile. Trump's demand that European states raise defence spending to 5% of GDP has rattled allies, not least because it is paired with threats to scale back America's commitments if these demands go unmet. His attempt to negotiate directly with Russia—at times excluding European and Ukrainian representatives—has deepened fears of abandonment, echoing memories of 20th-century "great power deals" over Europe's head.

The economic dimension further widens the rift. Trump's tariff shocks—first a universal 10% rate on all trading partners, later raised to 20% for the EU, and now threatening 50% on European goods—have destabilised transatlantic trade. What once was a partnership rooted in shared prosperity is now framed in zero-sum terms, with Washington viewing Europe as a competitor as much as an ally.

For Europeans, this environment has forced a painful reckoning. Public opinion surveys reveal growing support for higher defence spending, greater strategic autonomy, and even the development of a European nuclear deterrent (Rankin, 2025). Long considered peripheral ideas, these are now entering mainstream debate in capitals from Berlin to Copenhagen. Nevertheless, a paradox remains: even as Europeans recognise the risks of U.S. disengagement, many still believe Trump will not fully withdraw troops or dismantle NATO—holding onto hope that the alliance will outlast his presidency.

Still, the trajectory is clear. Trump's second term has transformed NATO from a bedrock of European security into a source of uncertainty. The alliance's future no longer rests on shared values and predictable commitments but on transactional calculations. For Europe, the question is no longer whether to prepare for a world with less America, but how quickly it can build the capacity to defend itself should U.S. disengagement become a reality.

## ***The U.S. vs. the Russia–China partnership***

As Trump reasserts his ambitions to weaken the Russia–China partnership—once dubbed a “limitless friendship”—the question arises whether this is achievable or a strategic mirage. In an increasingly multipolar world, some realists argue that peeling Moscow away from Beijing could serve U.S. interests by dividing America’s adversaries. However, translating this theory into action has proven to be far more complex.

While Cold War analogies often dominate the discourse, the comparison falls short. The Sino-Soviet split was fuelled by ideological competition and power struggles within the communist world. Today, what binds Russia and China is not ideological solidarity but a shared resistance to U.S. primacy. Their relationship is underpinned by a pragmatic convergence around multipolarity—both nations seeking a world order less dominated by any single power, especially the United States. This anti-hegemonic sentiment is not reducible to anti-Americanism, nor is it simply a reflection of authoritarian tendencies. It represents a structural alignment grounded in mutual geopolitical interests.

In contemporary global politics, regime type matters less than strategic calculus. What motivates Beijing and Moscow is not ideological fraternity but the pursuit of influence in an international system that increasingly rewards bilateral leverage over bloc politics. The rigid bipolarism of the Cold War no longer applies. Instead, the U.S. faces two powerful states—one with vast economic heft, the other with nuclear capabilities and UN veto power—cooperating in a loose but durable partnership of convenience.

In early 2025, White House insiders (Bloomberg News, 2025) and political observers alike asserted that Donald Trump was quietly pursuing a “reverse Kissinger” strategy—aiming to decouple the strategic axis between Moscow and Beijing by courting Russia and driving a wedge between it and China. The ambition was to redraw the global map by replicating the 1970s playbook in reverse: isolating Beijing rather than Moscow. However, the unfolding geopolitical choreography has revealed a different reality. Rather than prying the Russia–China partnership apart, Trump’s tariffs and transactional diplomacy have inadvertently pushed Moscow and Beijing closer—alongside an increasingly assertive India. Images from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit, held in Tianjin from August 31 to September 1, 2025, revealed Putin, Xi, and Modi standing hand-in-hand in a show of multipolar solidarity (Pierson & Mashal, 2025).

The economic dimension further complicates any effort

to drive a wedge between Russia and China. As Western sanctions tighten, Beijing has become Moscow’s main economic partner, now accounting for nearly 40% of Russian imports. Energy ties—bolstered by projects like the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline—are deepening, giving the Kremlin a lifeline amid international isolation.

Although some in Moscow remain wary of overdependence and seek a greater trade balance with China, the economic partnership remains mutually beneficial.

## ***Short-lived Recalibration in the Middle East***

In the early days of his second presidency, Trump seemed to adopt a course of action that prioritises U.S. economic gains, de-risks regional flashpoints, and uses flexible bargaining over ideological red lines. During his May 13–16, 2025 tour, President Donald Trump skipped Israel and concentrated on Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE—an itinerary paired with splashy economic and diplomatic moves: a headline \$3.2 trillion Gulf package, and a meeting with Syria’s transitional president Ahmad al-Sharaa (alongside sanctions relief). Likewise, the White House engaged with Hamas directly, arranging the release of the last American Israeli hostage (Abualouf, 2025). It also negotiated a ceasefire with the Houthis to halt costly U.S. operations (Gritten, 2025)—both without Israeli participation and without obliging the Houthis to stop striking Israel. The immediate payoffs (hostage recovery, operational de-escalation) outweighed deference to Israel’s demands.

However, the U.S. Administration reverted once again to its alliance politics by participating to the strategic deception of Iran. President Trump’s public pronouncements promising a deliberative, two-week window for a decision on striking Iran were a calculated act of strategic deception. While his press secretary relayed messages emphasising diplomacy and his public meetings with non-interventionists like Steve Bannon created a convincing facade of hesitation, the military machinery for a complex attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities was already in motion. This elaborate misdirection was designed to lull Iranian officials into a false sense of security, obscuring the reality that the President had all but made up his mind to strike Iran in parallel to Israel’s own war on Iran (Mazzetti et al., 2025).

Moreover, the Trump administration’s muted response to Israel’s strike on Hamas negotiators in Doha (9 September 2025) signalled tacit approval of an operation that directly challenged the sovereignty of a major U.S. partner. Qatar, which hosts the largest American military base in the Middle East and has invested heavily in U.S. defence systems, was not shielded from an Israeli strike that killed Hamas of-

ficials alongside a Qatari security officer. By refraining from public condemnation, Washington appeared to prioritise its alignment with Israel over the sensitivities of a designated "major non-NATO ally" (White House, 2022). Ironically, Qatar hosted Hamas negotiators at the behest of the United States (Carlson, 2025). The bombing of Qatar's capital undermined the country's carefully cultivated role as a mediator in U.S.-backed ceasefire talks and raised questions among Gulf leaders about the credibility of American security guarantees. In effect, the Trump administration's tacit approval underscored a transactional approach in which alliance commitments were subordinated to short-term strategic coordination with Israel, even at the cost of eroding trust with other regional partners.

## ***The Mineral Agreement with Ukraine: Transactionalism in Practice***

The 2025 U.S.-Ukraine mineral agreement epitomises the transactional character of Donald Trump's foreign policy. Signed in April by Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko, the deal granted Washington sweeping rights over Ukraine's rare earth sector. In practice, this meant that half of Ukraine's mineral

revenues would be directed into U.S.-controlled accounts, with Washington retaining a right of first refusal on new mining projects and exemptions from future Ukrainian taxation.

The road to this agreement was anything but voluntary (Pizzi & Vishchyk, 2025). Facing battlefield setbacks and reliant on U.S. weapons and satellite systems, Kyiv was confronted with an ultimatum: sign or risk losing the military lifeline essential to survival. The suspension of American shipments and intelligence sharing underscored the coercive environment, leaving Ukraine with little room to manoeuvre. Critics in Europe and beyond denounced the arrangement as a form of economic duress, likening it to neo-colonial bargains (Norton, 2025).

However, for Trump, this was the very point. The mineral pact not only gave Washington privileged access to Ukraine's critical resources but also symbolised the administration's new doctrine: allies must "pay back" American support with tangible assets. Much like the Gulf mega-deals and sanctions relief tied to economic promises elsewhere, the Ukraine agreement showcased how the White House under Trump has recast U.S. alliances into hard-nosed exchanges of money, markets, or minerals.



(Ukrainian Presidency / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

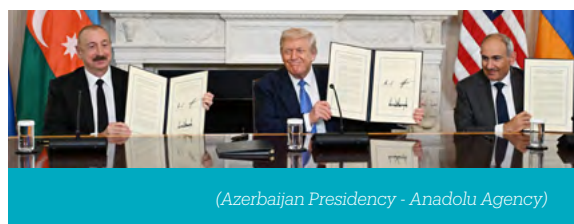
## TRIPP and the Zangezur Corridor

Another vivid example of Trump's transactional diplomacy is the recent Washington-brokered accord between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Packaged under the branding of the "*Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity*" (TRIPP), the deal granted the United States exclusive development rights to operate the Zangezur Corridor on commercial terms for 99 years. What might have once been a narrowly defined transport link is now a strategic asset—funded and overseen by Washington but embedded in Armenia's sovereign territory.

For Türkiye and Azerbaijan, the launch of the Kars-Iğdır-Aralık-Dilucu Railway Line is the practical spine of this corridor, linking the two allies directly for the first time. Backed by €2.4 billion in financing, the line will expand freight and passenger flows, positioning Türkiye more firmly at the centre of Eurasian trade while giving Baku seamless access to the West via Nakhchivan. For Armenia, the Zangezur Corridor is more than a strip of land — it is a strategic choice between lingering isolation and long-overdue reintegration into regional trade. The corridor offers Yerevan a rare opportunity to offset its geographic disadvantages by unlocking access to diversified markets and lowering the extreme costs of overland trade.

Nevertheless, for Washington, the corridor's significance goes far beyond steel tracks and fibre optics. It provides a durable U.S. foothold in the South Caucasus, checkmating Russia's fading monopoly, complicating Iran's transit ambitions, and presenting a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The Ukraine mineral pact and the TRIPP framework for the Caucasus exemplify a consistent Trumpian doctrine: geopolitical crises are repurposed as transactional opportunities to secure long-term commercial leverage. In both cases, infrastructure and natural resources are weaponised as bargaining chips, enabling a foreign policy that bypasses traditional alliance-based commitments in favour of a deal-making logic. This approach—further illustrated by Gulf mega-contracts—transforms instability into durable economic and geopolitical assets. Ultimately, these agreements are no longer anchored in shared security guarantees, but in deals designed to lock in economic rents, contracts, and strategic commodities for the United States.



(Azerbaijan Presidency - Anadolu Agency)

## Conclusion: Trumpism Reloaded and the Future of American Power

The return of Trumpism signals more than a change in leadership—it marks a fundamental shift in how the United States wields power. Replacing alliance-building and liberal internationalism with a fiercely transactional approach, Washington now operates under a simple creed: every agreement must deliver measurable returns, every partner must repay favours, and every intervention must secure American gains in resources, infrastructure, or influence.

Initiatives such as Gulf mega-contracts, the Ukraine mineral pact, and the TRIPP/Zangezur corridor embody this new doctrine. Each transforms geopolitical instability into a monetisable opportunity. Strategic assets—from rare earth minerals and transport routes to defence deals—become instruments of negotiation, recasting the U.S. not as a security guarantor but as a strategic shareholder in a global power marketplace.

This model offers both advantages and risks. It provides Washington with tangible wins and operational flexibility, appealing to a domestic audience weary of endless foreign entanglements. However, it also erodes trust among long-standing allies, who now see American commitments as unreliable and self-serving. To competitors like China and Russia, it portrays the U.S. not as a stabilising force but as a rival in a raw contest for resources and influence.

Ultimately, Trumpism does not so much end America's global role as redefine it. The nation is no longer the architect of a rules-based order, but rather a broker of leverage—monetising mediation, trading security for concessions, and embedding itself in critical regions from the Middle East to the South Caucasus—whether this approach sustains empire or hastens decline remains an open question.

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# Starvation as a Weapon of War in Gaza

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*Kübra Aktaş*

# Introduction

**G**aza is facing a genocidal war characterised by deliberate and intentional targeting of civilians combined with widespread hunger and deprivation. Nearly the entire population of 2.2 million has been plunged into acute food insecurity as a result of conflict and blockade. By late 2024, 100% of Gaza's residents were classified in "Emergency" (IPC Phase 4) food insecurity, with about 1.84 million people in Crisis or worse (IPC Phase 3+), including 133,000 in Catastrophe/Famine (IPC Phase 5) (WHO EMRO, 2025). Households are enduring extreme food shortages, exhaustion, and acute malnutrition rates have skyrocketed to ten times pre-war levels (WHO EMRO, 2025). Traditional safety nets have collapsed: small-scale farming and fishing – once vital sources of food – are largely crippled by access restrictions, with one-third of farmland declared a no-go zone and repeated military actions (like herbicide spraying near Gaza's perimeter) destroying crops (WHO EMRO, 2025).

As of mid-2025, over two-thirds of Palestinians in Gaza suffer significant food insecurity (WHO EMRO, 2025). Children – who form over half of Gaza's population – are especially vulnerable: chronic under-nutrition has led to stunted growth in around 20% of children under two even before the latest war (WHO EMRO, 2025). Since October 2023, conditions have sharply worsened. UN agencies report malnutrition-related deaths escalating – by August 2025, at least 269 people (including 112 children) had died from malnutrition or hunger-related conditions, with the majority of those deaths occurring in just the

prior several weeks (UNOCHA, 2025). Hospitals, already overwhelmed by war injuries, struggle to treat severe acute malnutrition amid critical shortages of therapeutic food and medical supplies (OCHA, 2025). The entire population is now aid-dependent for basic sustenance, yet relief convoys meet only a fraction of needs. For example, in summer 2025, humanitarian deliveries averaged only ~18,000 tons of food per month, far below the 62,000 tons needed to cover basic requirements (UNOCHA, 2025). Even with the World Food Programme pre-positioning supplies in the region, access constraints mean Gaza receives only a trickle of the aid required. Consequently, diets are extremely unbalanced and inadequate, heightening the risk of disease on top of starvation (UNOCHA, 2025).

Compounding the crisis, mass displacement and infrastructure destruction have left basic services in ruins. By mid-2025, roughly 90% of Gaza's population had been displaced at least once, often sheltering in overcrowded camps with little food or clean water (UNOCHA, 2025a). The lack of electricity, fuel, and safe water (all restricted under the blockade) further aggravates food insecurity and health risks. In short, Gaza's humanitarian emergency has reached a scale and severity that seasoned observers describe as "catastrophic starvation", with some aid agencies warning that hunger-related deaths could soon outnumber deaths from direct military violence (WHO EMRO, 2025). This dire situation provides the backdrop for examining how starvation and resource deprivation have been systematically employed as weapons of war in Gaza.

The IPC Food Security Scale



Source: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). <https://www.ipcinfo.org>

**Phase 1 None/Minimal**  
Households are able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in atypical and unsustainable strategies to access food and income.

**Phase 2 Stressed**  
Households have minimally adequate food consumption but are unable to afford some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in stress-coping strategies.

**Phase 3 Crisis**  
Households either:  
• Have food consumption gaps that are reflected by high or above-usual acute malnutrition; or  
• Are marginally able to meet minimum food needs but only by depleting essential livelihood assets or through crisis-coping strategies.

**Phase 4 Emergency**  
Households either:  
• Have large food consumption gaps which are reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality; or  
• Are able to mitigate large food consumption gaps but only by employing emergency livelihood strategies and asset liquidation.

**Phase 5 Catastrophe/ Famine**  
Households have an extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs even after full employment of coping strategies. Starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels are evident.  
(For Famine Classification, an area needs to have extreme critical levels of acute malnutrition and mortality.)

# International Legal Framework on Starvation Tactics

International law unequivocally prohibits the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare. This norm is codified in multiple instruments and recognised as customary humanitarian law. Article 54 of Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Geneva Conventions explicitly states that “*Starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited*” and forbids attacking or destroying objects indispensable to survival (such as food stocks, agriculture, or water infrastructure).

Likewise, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines the “intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare” as a war crime (Dannenbaum, 2022). In particular, Article 8(2) (b)(xxv) of the Rome Statute criminalises depriving civilians of objects indispensable for survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies (Dannenbaum, 2022). (Originally applicable to international armed conflicts, this prohibition was extended to non-international conflicts by unanimous amendment in 2019, reflecting the global consensus that starvation tactics are never permissible in war (Dannenbaum, 2022))

In addition, the UN Security Council, in Resolution 2417 (2018), strongly condemned the use of starvation of civilians as a weapon of war, underscoring that such acts violate international humanitarian law and “may constitute a war crime” (Global Rights Compliance, 2022). UNSC 2417 links conflict-induced food insecurity to internation-

al peace and security, and it calls on all parties to armed conflicts to comply with their obligations to spare civilians and allow unimpeded humanitarian access (Global Rights Compliance, 2022). This resolution also created an early-warning mechanism – the UN Secretary-General is tasked to alert the Council when the risk of conflict-driven famine and starvation arises. It was a landmark in norm-setting, signalling that the world is watching such abuses. Furthermore, customary law (as noted by the ICRC and others) reinforces that starvation tactics and attacks on objects indispensable to survival are prohibited in all conflicts. The prohibition is also tied to potential charges of crimes against humanity or even genocide if starvation is implemented with the intent to destroy a population “in whole or in part”. For instance, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about a group’s physical destruction (which includes withholding food and medicine) is listed as an act of genocide under Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention.

In summary, the international legal framework – from the Geneva Conventions to the ICC Statute and UNSC resolutions – bans starvation of civilians and related deprivations, calling them out as serious violations. In the context of Gaza, these laws provide a clear yardstick against which to measure the conduct of warring parties and occupying powers.



(Abdalkem Abu Riash - Anadolu Agency)



## Hunger as a Weapon: Mechanisms in the Case of Gaza

In Gaza, starvation and resource deprivation have not been unfortunate by-products of war – they have been deployed as deliberate instruments of policy and military strategy. Several interlocking mechanisms illustrate how hunger has been weaponised in this context.

### ***Blockade and Closure***

Since 2007, Israel has imposed a comprehensive land, sea, and air blockade on Gaza, drastically restricting the movement of people and goods. This blockade – described by human rights experts as a form of collective punishment (WHO EMRO, 2025) – gives the controlling power near-total say over Gaza’s “food basket.” Israeli authorities have tightly rationed imports of food, fuel, and other essentials, at times using secret directives to cap supplies. Notably, a court-disclosed document revealed that Israeli officials calculated the minimum calories per person to avoid malnutrition and then used that to limit the number of truckloads of food allowed into Gaza (WHO EMRO, 2025). Such micromanagement of calories effectively “puts Gaza on a diet,” in the words of one Israeli advisor (Guardian, 2006),

demonstrating an intent to weaponise basic necessities by keeping the population at the threshold of humanitarian catastrophe. The blockade’s impact has been devastating by 2018, over 80% of Gaza’s people depended on humanitarian aid for food (WHO EMRO, 2025), and today virtually the entire population does. Even during lulls in fighting, the blockade has stunted the economy and kept food insecurity high; during active conflict, it becomes a chokehold that can be tightened at will (as seen with repeated “complete siege” orders halting all supplies).

### ***Destruction of Agricultural Infrastructure***

Repeated military operations have systematically targeted Gaza’s capacity to produce or obtain food. A UN fact-finding mission after Operation *Cast Lead* (2008–2009) concluded that Israel pursued a “deliberate and systemic policy” of targeting food production in Gaza (WHO EMRO, 2025). The assault devastated almost all of Gaza’s 10,000 family farms, obliterated half a million fruit trees, killed tens of thousands of livestock animals, and destroyed over one

million chickens and other poultry (WHO EMRO, 2025). Subsequent wars (2012, 2014, 2021, and beyond) saw similar destruction: orchards, fishing boats, water wells, and food warehouses hit by airstrikes or artillery. Israel has also long enforced buffer zones that commandeer prime agricultural land (making farming perilous or impossible in those areas) and a strictly patrolled coastal limit that cripples the fishing industry. Under the blockade, farmers cannot freely import fertiliser, seeds, or equipment, nor export their produce. In some documented instances, Israeli forces sprayed herbicides along the Gaza fence to kill vegetation, damaging Palestinian crops deep inside Gaza (WHO EMRO, 2025). The cumulative effect over the years is the dismantling of Gaza's food production capacity, forcing dependence on external aid that is then tightly controlled.

## ***Control and Militarisation of Aid Distribution***

In the ongoing conflict, even lifesaving humanitarian aid has been used as a tool of coercion and control. Israeli authorities have repeatedly obstructed or delayed international relief efforts – for example, by banning fuel or certain food items, and by requiring onerous security checks and approvals. Since May 2025, Israel has imposed a “militarised” aid distribution scheme whereby Palestinians in Gaza must retrieve food and water from a few designated distribution points under Israeli military oversight (Amnesty International, 2025). This scheme not only limits and funnels aid to selected areas; it has also had deadly consequences. Desperate civilians trekking to aid convoys or crowding at distribution sites have come under fire. Between late May and mid-August 2025, at least 1,889 Palestinians – mostly young men and boys – were killed while

seeking food, including over 1,000 shot dead near the militarised distribution centres and hundreds more attacked along supply routes (UNOCHA, 2025). According to the UN, there is no indication these civilians were engaged in hostilities – they were killed simply trying to obtain bread or basic goods (UNOCHA, 2025). Amnesty International's investigations likewise describe how Israel's policies have “turned aid-seeking into a booby trap for desperate, starved Palestinians,” as troops deliberately target people collecting food and as the limited aid delivered is “way below” what the population needs (Amnesty International, 2025). Controlling the distribution of scarce aid allows the occupying power to wield hunger as leverage – effectively forcing civilians to choose between starvation and risking their lives to retrieve supplies.

Together, these tactics amount to a comprehensive strategy of using hunger as a means of subjugation. Gaza's people have been systematically deprived of resources essential for survival – food, clean water, medicine, fuel – through both active measures (bombing farms, blocking supplies) and passive ones (inaction on obligations to ensure the welfare of the occupied population). The intent, as observed by the current UN Special Rapporteur on Palestine, appears aimed at destroying Gaza's social fabric and resistance through exhaustion and malnutrition (WHO EMRO, 2025). Indeed, in October 2024, the Special Rapporteur reported that attacks on Gaza's food system indicate an intent to starve the population, acts she characterised as potentially genocidal (WHO EMRO, 2025). This grim assessment underscores that Gaza exemplifies how starvation is employed as a weapon in modern conflict – not a side-effect, but a deliberate *modus operandi*.

# **The Gaza Development Foundation (GDF) and the Militarisation of Humanitarian Aid**

## ***Establishment and Purpose***

The Gaza Development Foundation (GDF) was launched in early 2025 by Israel with U.S. support, officially presented as an “independent humanitarian initiative.” Its declared purpose was to bypass traditional UN-led mechanisms and deliver food directly to civilians in Gaza, on the

grounds that Hamas was allegedly diverting aid flows. GDF announced that it would establish “secure distribution centres” in southern Gaza to initially feed 1.2 million people, with the stated goal of eventually reaching the entire population. These centres were designed in coordination with the Israeli military, with security provided by private contractors.

## Criticism and Concerns

From the outset, GDF faced sharp criticism from humanitarian actors. UN agencies and international NGOs argued that it undermined existing humanitarian coordination systems, politicised relief, and lacked the operational capacity to address Gaza's massive needs. Former GDF executives themselves admitted that the initiative could not comply with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Aid organisations further warned that GDF was effectively dependent on Israeli authorities: its convoys were routed exclusively through Israeli-controlled crossings, while Palestinian institutions were excluded entirely from its governance and operations. Funding flows were opaque, with estimates of monthly operating costs exceeding \$140 million and allegations that much of this was underwritten by Israel, raising serious concerns about transparency and independence.

**Restrictions and Militarisation of Aid:** With GDF's rollout, humanitarian access in Gaza became increasingly restricted and politicised. Israel shut down hundreds of pre-existing aid distribution points across the Strip and replaced them with just a handful of militarised GDF centres in the south. This forced over two million civilians to trek long distances, often through conflict zones, to reach food distributions. At these sites, desperate crowds were funnelled into fenced enclosures under the watch of armed Israeli forces and private contractors. Documented incidents show that distribution regularly devolved into deadly chaos: civilians were fired upon, leading to hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries, including women and children. International NGOs have described the system as a "death trap" that leaves civilians with the impossible choice of starvation or risking being shot while trying to access food.

## A Compromised Initiative with Military Objectives

Though presented as a humanitarian initiative, GDF operates under close coordination with the Israeli government and military. Its distribution centres are fortified and militarised, while the absence of any Palestinian involvement underscores its lack of neutrality. Observers have emphasised that GDF functions less as an independent humanitarian actor and more as an extension of Israeli policy in Gaza, effectively weaponising aid distribution.

## International Reactions

The UN, humanitarian NGOs, and rights organisations have condemned GDF as a violation of humanitarian principles. UN experts called for its dissolution, describing it as a "so-called humanitarian mechanism" that actually entrenches the siege. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, Oxfam, MSF, and dozens of other organisations have denounced GDF as an attempt to use hunger as leverage in warfare. In July 2025, over 170 NGOs issued a joint statement urging the immediate suspension of GDF operations and a return to UN-led aid coordination. The International Committee of the Red Cross likewise refused to participate, citing violations of neutrality and independence.

The case of GDF demonstrates how humanitarian aid can be instrumentalised as a weapon of war. Instead of alleviating suffering, the foundation has been widely criticised for reinforcing siege conditions, restricting access, and exposing civilians to lethal risks. GDF thus exemplifies how starvation and deprivation can be institutionalised under the guise of aid delivery.



(Abdalkern Abu Riash - Anadolu Agency)

# Accountability Gap and Enforcement Challenges

Despite the clear legal prohibitions, holding perpetrators of starvation crimes accountable has proven exceedingly difficult. The case of Gaza highlights a serious gap between international law on paper and enforcement in practice. Multiple factors contribute to this accountability deficit.

## ***Political Shielding and Lack of Jurisdiction***

Israel is not a state party to the ICC, and while the ICC's Palestine investigation (opened in 2021) could, in theory, encompass war crimes in Gaza, there have been no charges to date specific to starvation or blockade tactics. Any attempt to prosecute Israeli officials for starvation-as-war-crime faces formidable political obstacles – including likely non-cooperation by Israel and diplomatic shielding by powerful allies in the UN Security Council. Thus, the ICC's legal framework exists, but activating it is a steep uphill battle. No individual perpetrators have yet been held to account for the deliberate deprivation policies in Gaza, emboldening their continuation.

## ***Defiance of International Court Orders***

Despite strong warnings from international courts and bodies, enforcement remains lacking. In January 2024, the International Court of Justice issued binding provisional measures ordering Israel to allow unhindered humanitarian relief into Gaza (WHO EMRO, 2025). Israeli authorities have brazenly defied these orders, continuing to block food, medicine, and fuel and even targeting aid convoys (WHO EMRO, 2025). UN Security Council resolutions – including 2417 – are similarly flouted without consequence, as divisions among major powers stymie effective Council action. The lack of a unified international response means there is little deterrent against using starvation tactics.

## ***Evidentiary and Attribution Challenges***

While the effects (mass hunger, malnutrition, death) are plainly documented, attributing criminal intent – required for a war crime conviction – can be challenging. States using starvation as a weapon often cloak it in security rationales (e.g. “siege necessary to isolate terrorists”). Proving *beyond a reasonable doubt* that officials intended to starve

civilians can require internal documents or statements. In Gaza's case, ample evidence of intentionality exists (the calorie calculations, explicit statements about “dieting” Gaza, etc.), but much of it is classified or denied. This, combined with limited access for investigators in an active conflict zone, complicates building legal cases.

## ***Global Precedent of Impunity***

Historically, starvation as a war tactic has rarely been prosecuted, leading to a culture of impunity. From Yemen to Syria, perpetrators of siege-starvation have mostly avoided legal consequences. This enforcement vacuum undermines the credibility of international law and fails to deter future violations. In Gaza, humanitarian and human rights organisations have raised the alarm – Amnesty International has explicitly accused Israel of committing the crime of starvation and even genocide against Palestinians in Gaza (Amnesty International, 2025) – yet these findings have not translated into formal sanctions or prosecutions. The UN's monitoring and naming-and-shaming mechanisms (e.g. reports by the Secretary-General or Special Rapporteurs) have not been matched by concrete punitive measures.

The result is an accountability gap: those employing starvation as a weapon operate with near impunity, and victims have no clear path to justice. This gap not only denies redress to Gazans but also weakens the deterrence value of international law globally. As starvation tactics resurge in conflicts worldwide (Dannenbaum, 2022), closing this enforcement gap is an urgent challenge for the international community.



(Abdalkem Abu Riash - Anadolu Agency)

## Conclusion: Starvation as a Weapon of War in Gaza

The systematic weaponisation of starvation in Gaza is not a tragic byproduct of war but a deliberate strategy engineered to break a population's will to exist. Through the blockade's calibrated deprivation, the destruction of agricultural self-sufficiency, and the militarised control of humanitarian aid—epitomised by the compromised Gaza Development Foundation—Israel has transformed food, water, and medicine into instruments of coercion and collective punishment. This policy, executed with precise intent, has precipitated a man-made famine in one of the most densely populated territories on earth, where children now die of malnutrition and families forage for scraps amid rubble.

International law unequivocally prohibits starvation as a method of warfare, yet the enforcement gap remains stark. The International Court of Justice's provisional measures have been ignored; UN Security Council resolutions are undermined by geopolitical paralysis; and the ICC's potential investigations collide with political shielding. This impunity perpetuates a global precedent: starvation crimes may be condemned on paper, but perpetrators face no consequences.

Gaza's agony exposes deeper truths about the architecture of international order—where power trumps justice, and where human rights frameworks crumble before strategic interests. It also underscores the urgent need for:

- 1. Legal Accountability:** Strengthening mechanisms to prosecute starvation crimes, from universal jurisdiction claims to ICC action.
- 2. Humanitarian Reform:** Demilitarising aid and centring neutral, UN-led distribution to prevent the instrumentalisation of survival.
- 3. Political Courage:** Challenging the diplomatic protection afforded to violators and amplifying grassroots and judicial pressure.

Above all, Gaza reminds us that starvation is not a natural disaster but a political choice. As Palestinians resist annihilation through *sumoud* (steadfastness), their struggle becomes a demand for a world where humanity is not conditional on geopolitics. The question is no longer whether the law prohibits starvation, but whether the international community has the will to enforce it—or will continue to watch in silence as a people are erased, meal by withheld meal.

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# Neutral but Not Innocent:

## Data, Power and the Public Good

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*Ravale Mohydin*

# The Rise of Data as a Political and Ethical Force

In the datafied world we inhabit, information has emerged as the foundation layer for governance, economic activity, healthcare, education and a lot more. With the proliferation of sensors, algorithms, and connected devices, the capacity to collect, process, and apply data at scale has increased dramatically. This shift has triggered profound ethical debates about surveillance, bias and manipulation, igniting fears that too much power is being ceded to data itself.

This discussion centres around the assertion that such concerns, while valid, often misplace the locus of ethical responsibility. Data is not inherently good or bad and can be considered to be a neutral resource. Its ethical valence emerges from how it is collected, structured, and applied, specifically by whom, under what conditions and to what ends. This position is explored by examining global examples where data has either empowered societies or been used to reinforce inequality and control, as well as interrogating the conditions under which its neutrality is compromised. A “devil’s advocate” lens is adopted to explore the limits of data neutrality: Can any dataset be truly objective? Can infrastructure built on inherently biased social systems ever be considered neutral in impact? These questions are evaluated through multiple lenses, including algorithmic design, data governance, power asymmetries, and public accountability.

To transition from theoretical framing to applied contexts, this section presents a series of international case examples illustrating how data systems can both serve the public good and reinforce systemic control. The discussion includes examples of successful public-good-oriented data systems, including Türkiye’s e-government platform, and calls for data ethics frameworks rooted in transparency, human rights and inclusivity. The paper ultimately argues that data must be governed, and not feared, for it to effectively serve the public good.

## ***The Emergence of Data as Political and Ethical Power***

Data metrics and scores appear to shape eligibility, risk and reputation in today’s world. As this dynamic deepens, it invites questions such as whether the danger is rooted in data’s sheer volume or its unaccountable deployment. The past two decades have witnessed a phenomenal transformation in how societies produce, consume, and

rely on information. It is not merely a byproduct of internet activity but has become central to how governments govern, markets function, and people live. Information is the oil of the 21st century, the lifeblood of the digital economy and a mirror of our collective behaviour. However, this increasing power has raised an existential question. Are we witnessing the beginning of an era in which algorithmic determination, predictive analysis, and behavioural nudging quietly but compellingly drive outcomes in disparate realms such as criminal justice and marketing?

It then becomes pertinent to ask: What sort of “rule” does data ever have? Agency vested in the data itself or in the actors who handle it? These are not theoretical questions. They are political, economic, and profoundly ethical. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of power/knowledge, we can understand data not as a neutral input but as a medium through which power circulates (Foucault, 1980). In this view, data production and interpretation are never outside the sphere of governance, for they shape and are shaped by institutional agendas. Nancy Fraser’s theory of “participatory parity” (Fraser, 2003, p.7) similarly offers a lens to critique data systems that claim neutrality but reproduce structural exclusions, particularly when access to data governance is restricted to elite or technocratic actors.

This analysis argues that data does not govern in any independent capacity. It is an amoral instrument, a tool offering much potential but no internal motive or moral compass. Data ethics come strictly from its utilisation and setting. A geospatial coordinate database can be applied to provide assistance in the case of a natural disaster or apply drone surveillance on a political activist. The data set remains unchanged; the morality is in the application. Nevertheless, neutrality is a tenuous and contested status. Even if raw data is neutral, its interpretation, collection, and use are always mediated by human judgment and institutional incentives. In this regard, neutrality should be considered a default, one that will need to be maintained through diligent stewardship rather than assumed.



(Muhammed Selim Korkutata - Anadolu Agency)

## The Devil's Advocate: Is True Neutrality Even Possible?

What is meant by the statement "data is neutral"? To say data is neutral is to say it has no moral valence of its own. This view disconnects data as input, a collection of facts, signals, or observations, from decisions or actions taken based on the input. It is a rule long taken for granted in information science and theory: that a fact by itself is neither immoral nor moral. Consider rainfall data collected over a decade. Governments may use these to design flood defences or by agricultural firms to design planting cycles. Their collection is not in itself biased toward one actor or another. It is their interpretation and use i.e. what models they inform and what decisions they ratify, that introduce moral deliberations. This neutrality is analytically helpful. It has the effect of depersonalising information and directing critical scrutiny where it belongs: power relations, intention, and responsibility. It also works against alarmist discourses that view information as inherently intrusive or threatening.

However, critics quickly counter that data is never collected in a void. Choices about what to measure, how to categorise it, and what not to include are more likely than not to be socially, politically or economically driven. Even the idea of "raw data" is a myth: all data is cooked by the processes that create and present it (Gitelman & Jackson, 2013, p.2), which leads to a paradox. Data may appear neutral, but its use is shaped by context, requiring strong institutions to construct and enforce genuine neutrality through representation, regulation and public accountability.

Even if we allow for the theoretical neutrality of data, can it ever be neutral in practice? Playing the devil's advocate, not

to disprove neutrality outright but to challenge its practical robustness can be enlightening in this case. To begin with, data is always construed by and for the collector's purpose. Variable definitions, choices, and sources are value-laden. Consider crime statistics. What constitutes a crime? Which neighbourhoods are more intensively patrolled? These delimit the dataset and, thereby, the algorithms trained upon it. Secondly, asymmetries of power shape data infrastructure (Milan & Treré, 2024). Billions-strong platforms have enormous power over what kinds of data are gathered and how they are leveraged. A nominally value-neutral dataset of user behaviour is translated into manipulative recommendation algorithms, ad targeting, or surveillance systems without users' knowledge or consent. Third, epistemic injustice is normally a result of groups being systematically excluded or misrepresented in data. Indigenous people, for example, regularly fall between the gaps of census and health data gathering. Their lack of visibility in data may lead them to be excluded from policy or resource distribution.

Therefore, neutrality is a norm, not an empirical fact. It's worth delineating an ethical ideal: that information should not be the preserve of the powerful, that it should be listened to with attention, and that its applications should be queried. Thus, defenders and advocates of data neutrality must be cautious, for neutrality is not a defence against criticism. It is an ethical obligation to protect the boundary between tool and weapon, of which data can be both.

# When Data Empowers and Harms

For all its dangers, data, when properly governed, can significantly impact human experiences globally. Examples abound worldwide. The first is Estonia's system of e-governance, which enables individuals to vote, view medical records, and digitally sign documents but still retain ownership of the data (Republic of Estonia e-Governance Academy, 2023). The access to one's personal data is monitored and viewable by the citizen, thus providing an open loop of accountability. Another example is Türkiye's e-Devlet portal, which has simplified access to hundreds of state services, ranging from health coverage to report cards, for all citizens and residents (Republic of Türkiye Digital Transformation Office, n.d.; AFAD, n.d.). Coupled with the seismic data systems that AFAD maintains, Türkiye leveraged data to cut red tape and respond more efficiently to earthquakes. These examples illustrate how data infrastructures when grounded in public interest regimes, can establish trust, lower costs, and save lives. Across the Global South, from Nairobi to Bogotá, cities are developing open data portals on transport, waste, and crime, which are enabling civic tech start-ups to enhance the governance of cities. It has become abundantly clear that data, if made available, anonymised, and properly structured, is a public good.

Nevertheless, information can become perilous in the absence of strong governance because its application lacks accountability. A well-known example is the Cambridge Analytica debacle. In 2018, it was discovered that political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica had harvested millions of Facebook users' personal data without their consent. This data was used to disseminate microtargeted political ads, possibly swaying the 2016 American presidential election (Rosenberg, Confessore & Cadwalladr, 2018). In this instance, data was used to exploit psychological vulnerabilities, not through fabricated data, but through the illegal use of real data, to the alleged detriment of democracy.

Another example is China's social credit and surveillance system, which pulls data from banks, public records, and social media to give citizens a score (Botsman, 2017). A low score can result in limits on employment, travel, or even attendance at school. The facts are accurate, but the moral question is a centralised punitive application with minimal provision for appeal. An example of a more systemic misuse of data is predictive policing in the United States, which has been guided historically by biased data and has led to the over-policing of communities of colour (Benbouzid, 2019). Facial recognition technology has inaccurately identified Black people at a disproportionately higher rate,

leading to wrongful arrests (Johnson & Johnson, 2023).

However, the deadliest example of data misuse is that of the Israeli military reportedly employing an artificial intelligence (AI) system known as "Where's Daddy?" during its operations in Gaza. This system is set up to track the movements of individuals who have been singled out as targets and, more particularly, to determine when targets are present in family households (Abraham, 2024). Strikes are timed to take place when targets are in their residences, which has the effect of resulting in civilian casualties, including the deaths of household members. It works in conjunction with another AI program, "Lavender," which sweeps through data from drone footage, intercepted phone calls, and geolocation devices. In Gaza alone, "Lavender" was said to have monitored more than 37,000 people. As of 16 April 2025, more than 51,000 Palestinians have been reported killed, according to Al Jazeera (Pietromarchi et al., 2025).

All the above examples of data misuse demonstrate both the potential and peril of data systems and prove that data neutrality can be masked by systemic bias. These are not flaws in the data itself but rather failures of transparency and, at times, a lack of capacity or willingness to question and challenge how data is used. Thus, it can be said that the answer to data neutrality is strong governance informed by efficacious policy. Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is considered to be the gold standard when it comes to how data can be used to enhance institutional accountability and, consequently, public acceptance of the extensive use of data in everyday life (European Data Protection Supervisor, n.d.). Many countries' national data policies have been modelled on that, including that of Türkiye. Another way to achieve effective governance is to ensure that organisations implementing auditing tools for both data and models are operating fairly across all population groups and that anyone can interpret and contest the resulting outcomes, particularly when it comes to hiring, lending, access to services, et cetera. There should be government bodies that overlook these institutional and organisational audits to provide fair compensation, as well as ensure model recalibration if any data-related harm is found to have been inflicted, and, ideally, regular audits for these government bodies as well.

With that said, Shoshana Zuboff's "Surveillance Capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 14) comes to mind recontextualising the neutrality of data as a fictional theory maintained by the opacity of proprietary algorithms and extraction-driven

business models that may benefit the state itself. She argues that user behaviour on social media is inherently autonomous and only becomes commodified through the retroactive appropriation and monetisation of personal data by platform companies. Related to this is "Platform Capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017), which captures how digital infrastructure has become a vehicle for data-driven profit extraction (Srnicek, 2017). Srnicek argues that platform capitalism is "a new way of accumulating capital" (Srnicek, 2017, p. 36) based upon a "massive new raw material to appropriate: data" (p. 88). Both Zuboff and Srnicek describe how behavioural data is monetised by turning users into sources of predictive products for state actors as well, similar to advertisers.

Given that, it is highly likely that states are not willing to police themselves or hold themselves accountable if they are the ones benefiting from misusing data to achieve particular objectives. Security is often considered a valid

enough reason to misuse data to suppress human rights. Across jurisdictions, governments deploy the language of safety to justify mass surveillance, predictive policing, biometric tracking, and algorithmic border control (European Parliament, 2024). This securitisation of data governance creates a permissive environment where rights are subordinated to risk, especially the risks defined by the state.

As Foucault stated, modern power often functions not through overt coercion but through the normalisation of surveillance as care. When surveillance is framed as protection, especially in the name of national security, it becomes culturally palatable and, at times, even desirable. Nevertheless, beneath this veneer lies a disciplinary regime that renders entire populations visible, sortable as well as governable, often without their consent. Then, data neutrality becomes a rhetorical tool rather than a technical reality as decisions about whom to watch, what to flag and how to intervene are very political in nature.

## To Whom Does Data Belong?

Data ownership, i.e. who owns the data, consequently, becomes critically important (Ruppert, Isin & Bigo, 2017). User activity transforms into proprietary information, which is exploited by technological behemoths such as Meta, Amazon, and Google for profit. Fundamental concerns, such as the following, are raised:

■ If people create information through their actions, should they not own it?

If people generate data through their actions, they should arguably have ownership over it. Yet, current systems favour platforms and governments that collect and monetise this data. Every action people perform on the internet, such as clicks, searches, and postings, creates data that drives the digital economy. Platform dominance, unclear or exploitative terms of service, and legal loopholes lead to users not having any say in their own data.

■ If people create information through their actions, shouldn't they gain from its value?

Tech giants such as Meta and Google profit from user-generated data by offering targeted advertisements and enhancing their services, raking in colossal revenues in the process. However, most users, the actual people creating this data, do not earn anything tangible. In terms of fairness and consent, this is clearly an ethical issue.

■ Should information on public activity (for example, city movement) be stored in unidentified foreign-controlled cloud systems?

It is risky to store public activity information, like city movement patterns, in cloud systems operated by foreigners. This type of data may contain sensitive details regarding national assets or private citizen information. Once stored in foreign jurisdictions, the information is under the control of foreign laws and possible eavesdropping, which undermines national sovereignty and privacy. In addition, using foreign cloud services may result in weaknesses such as unauthorised access and data breaches.

The Global South is increasingly taking an interest in data sovereignty to keep data that is created on their territory in national hands. At the same time, the EU's GAIA-X project proposed a federated, European-owned cloud infrastructure to lower dependence on American technology platforms (van der Schaaf, Hertweck & Moßgraber, 2022). In the meantime, academics suggest data trusts, i.e. organisations that possess and control data on behalf of a specified group, subject to fiduciary obligations, can be created. These forms can redistribute control in favour of citizens, putting data used in alignment with community interests instead of corporate gain. Short of a change in ownership, neutrality is difficult to attain since unaccountable authorities can weaponise information in ways that are invisible and irreversible.

# Towards a Digital Social Contract: When Data Rules, What Rules Data?

These evolving models of data governance, from national sovereignty to fiduciary trusts, reflect a growing realisation about data being a political asset alongside a technical one. As both individuals and communities demand greater agency over how their data is used, a foundation of shared ethical values surrounding data is needed. This brings about a deeper question: if data now mediates everything from pandemic control to college admissions, then what rules should govern its rule? In response, the case emerges for a new digital social contract. Such a contract would establish what rights people have over their data, what responsibilities institutions have in its utilisation, and, importantly, which public purposes justify exceptional use. Basic principles could be:

**Data Dignity:** Every human being should have the right to decide how information about them is used. It is based on the belief that personal data is a part of one's identity and that one needs to have control over its collection, usage as well as dissemination. Current practices where companies are looking to farm user data without consent or payment are considered to be ethical issues that need resolution.

**Collective Governance:** Collective high-stakes applications of data (for example, in welfare and policing) need to be co-governed by impacted communities and the public sector. This makes data-informed choices transparent, inclusive and responsive to community values and needs. It promotes participatory decision-making processes, making decisions less vulnerable to bias and systemic injustices.

**Mutual Value:** It is considered ethical practice to return value to communities from which information has been gathered, whether that is more access to governance or decision-making, actual monetary benefit, or any other benefit. This would ensure higher trust in a mutually beneficial relationship, as well as continued or expanded data sharing in the form of volunteering for data-sharing initiatives.

This stance neither fetishises nor fears information. It considers information infrastructure potent, necessary, and in need of constant democratic control. Just as physical infrastructures such as utilities and roads form the foundation for societal operation, digital information systems are the underlying frameworks of contemporary life. They inform healthcare, educational, governmental, and commercial decisions. Conceptualising information as infrastructure clarifies its role as a public good that must be controlled, tended and open to all. The implementation of the above key principles turns data from a commodity for exploitation into a resource governed for the common good. Needless to say, this paradigm shift necessitates continuous democratic stewardship, in which practices and policies are forged through accountability and public engagement. By framing and addressing data as infrastructure, its inherent value to society can be recognised and managed in a way that upholds democratic ideals and serves the interests of all.



(Abdullah Güçlü - Anadolu Agency)

# Blockchain as a Potential Foundation for a Democratic Data Infrastructure

Given that data is becoming the infrastructure of operations across societies, from education to public health programs, blockchain technology potentially offers a viable mechanism to underpin such an infrastructure, augmenting the above-mentioned principles forming the basis of a digital social contract: data dignity, collective governance, and mutual value (Esposito & Araral, 2025).

Firstly, due to the decentralised nature of blockchain technology, individuals own their own data. Moreover, smart contracts can enable a predefinition of conditions that can allow access and utilisation of said data, where consent is not just expressed but is highly enforceable, which is very much in line with the concept of data dignity. Secondly, in terms of collective governance, the immutable nature of blockchain technology ensures that all data transactions are transparent and non-tamperable. This is critical when it comes to governance structures of all kinds, but especially in the context of data infrastructure. For example, all users need to know how data is being used by a public institution such as the police for increased accountability

and acceptability, as audit trails create trust. Another use of blockchain technology for collective governance is Decentralised Autonomous Organisations (DAOs), which facilitate decentralised decision-making by requiring stakeholders to be directly involved in governance so that data systems are governed democratically (Tapscott & Tapscott, 2016; Allen & Berg, 2020).

Finally, when it comes to the creation of mutual value, blockchain technology is able to support data systems where data contributors can benefit directly from the value they create. An example of this is Farcaster, which is a decentralised social media protocol emphasising user privacy, autonomy and censorship resistance. It also allows its users to receive compensation for content as well as interactions, creating an ecosystem of mutual value generation (Coinbase, n.d.). All three features of blockchain technology (including being decentralised, immutable and focused on mutual value creation) can reorient data practices toward democratic values in a way that makes information serve the public good and not merely corporate interests.

## Conclusion

Instead of asking whether data is good or bad, it is more important to ask who has the power to collect, access, and act on data. Equitable data governance means foregrounding human rights, ensuring transparency in algorithmic systems, and developing participatory mechanisms that reflect diverse publics. While data itself can be considered neutral, maintaining this neutrality requires concerted effort. Neutrality must be designed into systems, safeguarded by laws, and underpinned by transparency and accountability for all stakeholders. Without this, data systems risk deepening digital authoritarianism and technocratic exclusion.

In this context, blockchain technology potentially emerges as a promising tool to develop democratic data infrastructures, featuring decentralisation, immutability, and the ability to create mutual value. All stakeholders' goal should be to make data work for society, not the other way around. By embedding principles of fairness, transparen-

cy, and collective benefit into our digital frameworks and then leveraging technologies like blockchain to support these principles, a more equitable and just digital society and world can be built.

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# Why International Law Still Matters in a Broken Order

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(Nikos Oikonomou - Anadolu Agency)

## The Evolutionary Imperative of International Law

Contemporary international law is engaged in a continuous adaptation process, striving to address the novel threats posed by the modern era—most notably, cyber conflicts and global environmental crises. This ongoing evolution is driven by the imperative to remain responsive to the changing needs of the international community and to accommodate the complexities introduced by technological and ecological transformations. (Schmitt, 2020)

The proliferation of non-state actors in cyberspace and the attendant escalation of risks have necessitated a fundamental re-examination of core concepts such as power, sovereignty, security, and legal subjectivity within international relations. (Korhan, 2018) The widespread accessibility and integration of information and communication technologies have eroded the traditional monopoly of states over various governmental functions, compelling international law to develop a more inclusive framework that recognises and regulates these emergent actors. For instance, the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts (UN GGE) has agreed on non-binding norms to guide state behaviour in cyberspace. It has affirmed the applicability of the UN Charter to cyber operations, reflecting an incremental but significant normative development in this domain.

In parallel, the multidimensional threats posed by global environmental crises—particularly climate change, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity—have challenged the adequacy of traditional international legal norms. Since the 1980s, international law has transformed, exemplified

by incorporating sustainable development in the 1987 Brundtland Report and adopting landmark instruments such as the 1992 Rio Summit (UNCED), the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and the 2015 Paris Agreement.

The Brundtland Report was a landmark in defining sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising future generations. It linked environmental degradation to poverty and unsustainable consumption, calling for an integrated approach to development and environmental protection (Jarvie, 2014). The report laid the groundwork for the 1992 Rio Summit, where 172 countries adopted key frameworks like the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, and launched three major international conventions: on biodiversity, climate change (UNFCCC), and desertification.

The 2015 Paris Agreement, despite political controversy, has delivered tangible progress in environmental protection by establishing a legal framework to limit global temperature rise to well below 2°C. It spurred major powers like Japan, China, and the EU to commit to carbon neutrality and net-zero emissions, fostering a culture of cooperation and aligning international efforts (Nahm, 2023). These developments have strengthened the global legal response to environmental challenges.

Furthermore, international judicial bodies, notably the International Court of Justice, have assumed a more active and determinative role in environmental disputes, as demonstrated in cases such as the 2006 Pulp Mills case.

## Persistent Inadequacies Amidst Traditional Threats

Despite these evolutionary and innovative strides, international law often proves inadequate in confronting 'traditional threats' to humanity and the international order. The inability of the existing international legal system to generate effective responses to conventional crises and conflicts—an inadequacy that has become increasingly apparent in recent decades—has fuelled critiques regarding the relevance and sufficiency of the post-1945 international order.

For instance, the ongoing crises in Ukraine and Gaza starkly illustrate the fragility of international law. Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territory and the ensuing conflict constitute a clear violation of the *jus cogens* prohibition on the use of force enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. The international community, and particularly the United Nations, has failed to establish an effective enforcement mechanism capable of compelling Russia to cease its aggression despite the widespread rejection of Russia's justifications based on 'genocide prevention' and 'self-defence' (Bellinger, 2022). This failure underscores in-

ternational law's systemic vulnerabilities and limitations in addressing acts of aggression by powerful states.

Similarly, the inadequacy of the current international legal framework is evident in the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Since October 7, 2023, Israel's ongoing military campaign has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, including women and children, and has left many more injured. These outcomes have persisted despite widespread international objections and the issuance of provisional measures by the International Court of Justice in the genocide proceedings initiated by South Africa. The inability to halt the violence—further exacerbated by the political and military support provided to Israel by Western governments, particularly the United States—exposes the profound limitations of the international order in preventing and responding to humanitarian crises arising from armed conflict.

However, this issue is by no means a wholly new phenomenon. Despite contemporary examples, there have been



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previous instances in which international mechanisms have failed to prevent or adequately respond to violations of international law. The U.S. intervention in Iraq is a key example of international law's failure to constrain powerful states.

Despite Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibiting the use of force—except in self-defence or with Security Council approval—the U.S. acted without either justification. This clear breach sidelined a core principle of the international system (Ercumen, 2016). Rather than upholding the law, the UN legitimised the occupation by recognising U.S. and allied forces as authorities, failing to address their violations (Goztepe, 2004). This episode exposed the UN's limited capacity to restrain unilateral actions by major powers and reinforced the enduring perception that “might make right” within international law.

Likewise, the UN's failure in Rwanda also stands as a stark illustration of the international community's inability to prevent or halt grave violations of international law, even in the face of unmistakable warning signs and binding legal obligations (Maritz, 2012). In 1994, Rwanda witnessed one of the most devastating genocides of the twentieth century, with between 800,000 and 1,000,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu systematically slaughtered over roughly 100 days. The violence was triggered by the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana, after which Hutu extremists initiated a premeditated campaign of mass murder targeting the Tutsi minority and moderate Hutu opponents.

In 1993, the UN established UNAMIR to oversee the Arusha Accords and monitor Rwanda's peace process, but it lacked the mandate to use force or protect civilians. Despite urgent warnings from UNAMIR commander General Roméo Dallaire about impending mass killings, the UN Security Council failed to act even reducing troop numbers from 2,500 to 270 at the height of the genocide.

This inaction stemmed from a lack of political will, shaped by the recent failure in Somalia and reluctance to intervene in what was seen as an internal African conflict. Mischaracterising the crisis as a civil war, the UN remained largely passive, offering limited refuge but unable to prevent the atrocities. The mission is now widely viewed as a failure, and Rwanda stands as a stark reminder of the international community's paralysis when political will is absent, despite obligations under the Genocide Convention.

In sum, while international law has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation in the face of new technological and environmental challenges, its persistent ineffectiveness in addressing traditional threats and crises calls into question the continued viability and legitimacy of the existing international legal order. The cases of Ukraine and Gaza serve as potent reminders of the enduring gap between normative evolution and practical enforcement, highlighting the urgent need for structural reforms to enhance the efficacy of international law in safeguarding global peace and security.

## **Ideological Foundations: Framing International Law as a Threat to Sovereignty**

A number of political actors contend that international law overly restricts state autonomy, most notably in the fields of environmental regulation, migration, and human rights. This narrative depicts multilateral agreements as instruments of a detached “global elite” indifferent to the populace's needs. For example, the Trump administration dismissed climate agreements like the Paris Agreement as detrimental to American workers, while Jair Bolsonaro characterised international efforts to protect the Amazon as foreign interference in Brazil's development. He dismissed concerns about Amazon deforestation, characterising them as fabrications or fantasies propagated by international elites to undermine Brazil's sovereignty.

Such rhetoric aligns with a broader strategy that undermines public trust in international legal frameworks by pitting “the people” against cosmopolitan institutions and creating an artificial conflict between “us” and “them”.

Certain leaders, such as Trump and Bolsonaro, use stark divisions between “self” and “other” to shape both domestic and foreign policy, including or excluding groups and institutions based on their alignment with their own agendas (Wehner, 2022). Framing legitimacy through loyalty, they challenge the international order with an anti-elitist stance.

Trump's 2016 Republican National Convention speech epitomised this approach, portraying himself as the voice of the neglected masses and railing against elites who, he claimed, had betrayed the nation for personal gain.

Similarly, in his inaugural address, Trump reinforced this narrative by portraying the American people as virtuous and the elite as self-serving. He accused Washington's establishment of enriching itself while ordinary citizens bore the cost, lost jobs, and faced economic decline.

Later on, Trump continued to reinforce the dichotomy of the people ("friends") versus the elite ("enemies"), just as he had during his campaign. These images became a cornerstone of both the advancement of U.S. foreign policy and

the construction of the country's role in international relations.

On the other hand, Bolsonaro has relatively updated the longstanding tradition in Brazil of treating foreign policy—typically regarded as a matter of state and one of the country's most stable policy areas—regardless of domestic turmoil. Upon assuming office, he adopted new roles for the Brazilian state and reinterpreted the execution of its existing functions. Bolsonaro first deployed the stereotypical imagery of "friends" and "enemies" during his election campaign, holding traditional elites responsible for the country's turbulent situation and initially directing hostility toward "global elites" on a domestic level (Wehner, 2022).

## Strategic Mechanisms of Delegitimisation

In this regard, certain political actors employ several strategies to undermine the legitimacy of international law:

■ **Cherry-Picking Compliance:** These actors adhere to international law only when it serves their immediate political interests. For instance, Venezuela under Hugo Chávez withdrew from the American Convention on Human Rights, citing resistance to "imperialist interference," yet remained party to other regional agreements that could be used strategically against political opponents. Similarly, Bolsonaro's Brazil violated the Paris Agreement by weakening Amazon protections but maintained membership in the Convention on Biological Diversity to access selective funding. (Lima, 2022) While rejecting the International Criminal Court's (ICC) jurisdiction over certain cases, Kenya continued participating in other international legal forums to advance its territorial claims.

■ **Attacking Multilateral Institutions:** These stakeholders also increasingly target international organisations, such as UN bodies and international courts, seeking to delegitimise them as undemocratic or biased. A notable example is Israel's nearly decade-long covert campaign to undermine the ICC's investigation into alleged war crimes in Palestine, which included surveillance, intimidation, and attempts to discredit both ICC officials and Palestinian submissions. At the political level, Israeli leaders have labelled the ICC as a "political court" and accused it of antisemitism, especially in response to decisions implicating Israeli officials. Similarly, Hungary openly defied its ICC obligations by hosting Israeli Prime Minister Net-

anyahu despite an ICC arrest warrant, and subsequently announced its withdrawal from the ICC, claiming the court had become politicised.

■ **Legislative Subversion:** Meanwhile, certain governments frequently enact domestic legislation to neutralise or circumvent their international obligations. For example, Poland's judicial reforms, initiated in 2015, centralised control over the judiciary and established a Disciplinary Chamber found by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to lack independence. These reforms, which prohibited national courts from reviewing compliance with EU standards for judicial independence, have been justified by Polish authorities as efforts to reclaim national sovereignty while dismissing EU interventions as illegitimate or politically motivated.

In summary, various stakeholders have sought to capitalise on the legitimacy crisis afflicting international law, often in ways that undermine its authority, portraying it as an external threat to national sovereignty, selectively complying with or attacking international institutions as suits their interests, and enacting domestic legislation to undermine supranational legal frameworks. These strategies collectively erode international law's authority while advancing populist political objectives.

# Reinvigorating International Law

It is a fact that the legitimacy and efficacy of international law are under unprecedented strain. Contemporary global crises—from climate change and armed conflict to the erosion of human rights—have exposed structural weaknesses in the international legal order. Some bad-faith actors and powerful states increasingly exploit these gaps, undermining the very foundations of multilateralism and the rule of law. Yet, the answer to these challenges is not the abandonment or instrumentalisation of international law but its strategic recalibration.

## Structural and Enforcement Gaps

The international legal system, rooted in the post-World War II order, was designed to foster predictable rules and cooperative frameworks among sovereign states. However, the system's horizontal structure—relying on voluntary state compliance—contrasts sharply with the vertical enforcement mechanisms characteristic of domestic legal systems (Nwotite, 2024). This fundamental divergence has created persistent enforcement gaps, allowing states to disregard or selectively interpret international obligations without meaningful consequence (Štulajter, 2017; Denegre, 2023). Recent developments illustrate the consequences of these deficiencies. The U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, justified on national interest grounds and facilitated by the agreement's lack of binding enforcement mechanisms, exemplifies how powerful states can evade collective responsibilities with minimal repercussions (Pullins & Knijnenburg, 2022). Similarly, manipulating international legal principles for political gain—so-called “lawfare”—enables state and non-state actors to weaponise legal frameworks, further eroding the system's credibility. Consequently, one of the cornerstones of making international law effective again will be to prevent its selective application by states.

## Recalibrating Accountability

To restore international law's authority, reforms must also prioritise robust accountability mechanisms that deter exploitation and ensure that actions, not rhetoric, measure adherence. Key proposals may include:

■ **Binding Compliance Mechanisms:** Introducing tiered penalties—such as suspension from global financial systems or exclusion from trade blocs—can deter violations while minimising collateral harm to civilian populations. Such measures would transform compliance from a voluntary act into a strategic imperative, leveraging states' reliance on global integration. (Bradford & Ben-Sharar, 2015)

## ■ Judicial Independence and Universal Jurisdiction:

Strengthening the jurisdiction of international courts, notably the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, is essential. In addition, the universal jurisdiction model, which empowers domestic courts to prosecute international crimes, might offer a decentralised enforcement blueprint that can reduce reliance on state cooperation and legislative delays.

■ **Decentralised Enforcement:** Empowering domestic courts to apply international norms directly, particularly in dualist systems, can bridge the gap between international obligations and domestic implementation. Systematic cooperation between international and domestic judicial bodies—such as using ICJ advisory opinions by domestic courts—would harmonise legal interpretations and reduce jurisdictional conflicts. (Iwasawa, 2023)

In parallel, the voluntary nature of international law remains a central obstacle to effective enforcement. To address this, reforms should:

■ **Legislative Alignment:** Require states to codify international treaties into domestic law, as advocated in the UN's Pact for the Future. (Hasegawa & Leitner & Kosnakos, 2025) This would mitigate delays inherent in dualist systems and ensure timely adherence to international commitments.

■ **Leveraging Interdependence:** Modern states' dependence on global trade, technology, and multilateral institutions creates significant leverage for enforcing compliance. Isolation strategies—such as suspending voting rights in international bodies or restricting access to international funding—can serve as powerful deterrents against non-compliance, as demonstrated by recent proceedings against states defying ICC arrest warrants.

## ■ Innovative Enforcement Mechanisms:

The concept of “reversible rewards,” which combines incentives and penalties, offers a cost-effective and credible approach to enforcement. (Bradford & Ben-Sharar, 2015) By pre-committing resources that can be used either as rewards for compliance or as funding for sanctions, this mechanism doubles the incentive for states to adhere to international obligations.

# Institutional Reforms for a Multipolar World

The emergence of new power centres and the diffusion of global influence necessitate institutional reforms that reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. The United Nations, in particular, must evolve beyond the power dynamics of 1945 to maintain legitimacy and efficacy.

■ **Security Council Reform:** Expanding representation on the Security Council and reconsidering the veto power are critical steps. Proposals can include enlarging the Council, introducing renewable term seats, and establishing mechanisms such as a Parliamentary Assembly to monitor the performance of long-term members. (Hasegawa & Leitner & Kosnakos, 2025) While abolishing the veto right entirely faces significant resistance, incremental reforms—such as limiting its use to vital national security issues—could enhance the Council's accountability and responsiveness.

■ **New Institutions for Emerging Challenges:** Initiatives such as the proposed [International Anti-Corruption Court \(IACC\)](#) and the Global Digital Compact demonstrate the need for specialised institutions capable of addressing transnational threats, from grand corruption to digital governance. The IACC, for instance, would fill a crucial enforcement gap by prosecuting kleptocrats and deterring grand corruption when national systems are unwilling or unable to act.

■ **Strengthening Human Rights Frameworks:** Robust oversight from bodies like the Venice Commission and implementing recommendations from national human rights institutions are essential to prevent the erosion of civil society.

The legitimacy crisis currently confronting international law does not necessitate its abandonment; rather, it calls for a deliberate and inclusive restructuring of the system. Such a recalibration must be grounded in a set of core principles aimed at restoring trust, enhancing effectiveness, and maintaining the relevance of international law in an increasingly dynamic global environment.

The establishment of robust accountability mechanisms is imperative. Effective, transparent, and preventive systems of accountability—designed to be regularly reviewed and revised—are critical for upholding the rule of law and deterring violations. As emphasised in recent United Nations

reports and academic discussions, strengthening both normative and institutional frameworks of accountability can significantly bolster efforts toward justice and reinforce the legal foundation for holding states and individuals responsible for breaches of international obligations. These mechanisms must be adequately funded, enjoy broad jurisdictional legitimacy, and possess the flexibility to adapt to emerging transnational challenges.

Furthermore, fostering a culture of rights and legal compliance is indispensable. States should be encouraged—and where necessary, compelled—to implement the recommendations of international human rights bodies and incorporate international legal norms into their domestic legal systems. This is particularly urgent in domains such as border control and migration policy, where adherence to international standards is often most contested. Embedding international law into national practice not only strengthens the domestic rule of law but also bridges the gap between international commitments and local realities.

Finally, the Future of international law depends on revitalising inclusive multilateralism. The legitimacy of international legal regimes increasingly hinges on their capacity to reflect the interests and voices of a broad spectrum of actors, including states, civil society, the private sector, and technical communities. Only through such inclusivity can multilateralism adapt to the realities of a multipolar world and preserve its credibility and efficacy.



(Zuhal Demirci - Anadolu Agency)

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# Central Asia at a Crossroads: Spheres of Influence and the New Great Game

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*Çağdaş Yüksel*

## Introduction

**C**entral Asia, historically shaped under the shadow of various empires, has transcended its traditional role as a mere transit zone and is increasingly emerging as a critical geopolitical space, defined by both its economic potential and socio-political structures. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the states of the region—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—embarked upon nation-building processes. While striving to adopt outward-oriented development models, they simultaneously confronted complex domestic dynamics characterised by authoritarian governance structures and persistent ethnic and societal tensions.

Economically, despite Central Asia's abundant natural resources, the management of these assets has largely been framed by externally dependent economic relations and narrowly focused development paradigms. Although these resource-based economies, reliant primarily on energy and mineral exports, have facilitated integration into global markets, they have also engendered significant socio-economic challenges, including income inequality, structural unemployment, and the outward migration of younger populations.

From a sociological perspective, the tension between modernisation processes and entrenched

traditional social structures has generated a profound identity crisis, particularly among younger generations. This crisis has produced notable gaps in social cohesion and political representation, exacerbating existing societal vulnerabilities.

Politically, the foreign policies of Central Asian states have been predominantly guided by a principle of "multi-vector balancing," wherein governments seek to cultivate simultaneous and strategic relations with multiple global power centres, including China, Russia, the United States, Türkiye, and the European Union. However, this multi-directional engagement has rendered the region not merely an object of great power competition but increasingly a set of autonomous actors endeavouring to navigate and influence the contours of this rivalry in pursuit of their national interests.

This article aims to conceptualise Central Asia not solely as a battleground for external powers but as a region where internal dynamics actively shape and redefine the terms of geopolitical competition. Through an examination of sociological fragilities, economic dependencies, and political trajectories, the analysis will explore the evolving contours of the "New Great Game," the principal actors involved, the strategies employed, and the profound implications for the peoples of the region.



(Uzbek Prime Ministry - Anadolu Agency)

# Historical Background and the Soviet Legacy

Understanding the current political and socio-economic structures of Central Asia requires a critical examination of the structural legacy inherited from the Soviet era. The Soviet legacy has generated structural vulnerabilities in the region, particularly through unresolved border disputes, monocultural production systems, debt-based economic models, and the institutionalisation of non-democratic political cultures (Şahin, 2023).

First, the nation-building policies implemented along Stalinist lines from the 1920s not only shaped geographic boundaries but also redefined ethnic and identity structures to align with Soviet ideological imperatives. When the USSR divided Central Asia into five republics, it deliberately drew boundaries that exacerbated ethnic fragmentation and cross-border minority issues rather than promoting ethnic homogeneity (Maimaitiaili, 2020).

The Fergana Valley, for example, was left as a region where Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik populations were intricately interwoven. These artificial borders created a persistent tension between citizenship and ethnic identity, providing fertile ground for regional nationalisms. This structural issue has been the root cause of contemporary border conflicts, such as those between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and between Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan. Notably, the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan clashes in 2022 resulted in over 100 civilian deaths and the displacement of approximately 30,000 people (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Economically, Central Asian structures were designed during the Soviet period to support monocultural production. Soviet central planning transformed the republics into specialised production zones for specific commodities, notably cotton production in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and hydroelectric power generation in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This strategy inhibited economic diversification and entrenched external dependencies (Pomfret, 2010). For instance, Uzbekistan was coerced into heavy dependence on cotton cultivation, which in turn contributed to a catastrophic environmental disaster: nearly 90% of the Aral Sea, located between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, has dried up, leading to severe public health crises and mass migration in the region (Utemisov, Kaypnazarova, & Nagmetov, 2024). Similarly, Tajikistan's economy became narrowly defined by its hydroelectric potential, with little industrial diversification (Timur, 2008).

The Soviet-era economic model caused systemic shocks during the post-1991 transition to market economies. According to IMF data, between 1992 and 1996, Tajikistan's GDP contracted by 60%, Kyrgyzstan's industrial output fell by 50%, and unemployment in Kazakhstan officially approached 25% (International Monetary Fund, 2001).

The Soviet period also witnessed the instrumental transformation of collective memory. Communist ideology actively suppressed religious structures, particularly Islam, and secularised societal memory, thereby undermining traditional local leadership. This weakening of traditional authority continues to render contemporary state-society relations fragile (Khalid, 2007). In the post-Soviet era, political elites largely emerged from former Communist Party cadres, leading to governance structures characterised by bureaucratic centralisation, security apparatus-based regimes, and extensive patronage networks.

The model of "central investment in exchange for political loyalty" developed during the Soviet era continues to influence the political economies of Central Asia. Many regimes today exhibit a high degree of responsiveness to external investment and support, perpetuating a "dependency cycle" in their foreign policy behaviours (Clarke, 2004). A recent illustration of this dynamic was the Samarkand Summit, held on April 4, 2025, during which the European Union pledged a €12 billion investment package for Central Asia. At the summit, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan reaffirmed their commitment to United Nations Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550, while the existence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was conspicuously omitted (European Commission, 2025).

# Russia's Role in Central Asia: A Flexibility Strategy Anchored in Sovereignty

Russia continues to be one of the most influential and enduring actors in the post-Soviet order of Central Asia. Historically perceiving the region as its “backyard,” Moscow has sought to maintain its influence through various institutional mechanisms since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Today, in the face of China’s ascendancy, the West’s soft diplomatic engagements, and the growing regional assertiveness of powers such as Türkiye, Russia has adopted a more flexible yet calculated strategy of influence.

Primarily, Moscow sustains its military footprint in the region through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, in particular, have institutionalised their military cooperation with Russia via CSTO membership. The deployment of CSTO forces during the 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan underscored Moscow’s role as the “ultimate guarantor” of regime security in the region (BBC News, 2022).

Russia’s economic engagement with Central Asia extends beyond bilateral trade to encompass energy networks and labour migration flows. For instance, 80% of Kazakhstan’s oil exports are transported through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, which remains under Russian control (Yüksel & Topbaş, 2023). Although Turkmenistan sells most of its natural gas to China, it continues to rely on Russia for technical consultancy, equipment supply, and transit security. These energy infrastructure dependencies afford Moscow not only economic leverage but also a political instrument, allowing it to exert pressure through energy disruptions or pricing interventions (Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2024).

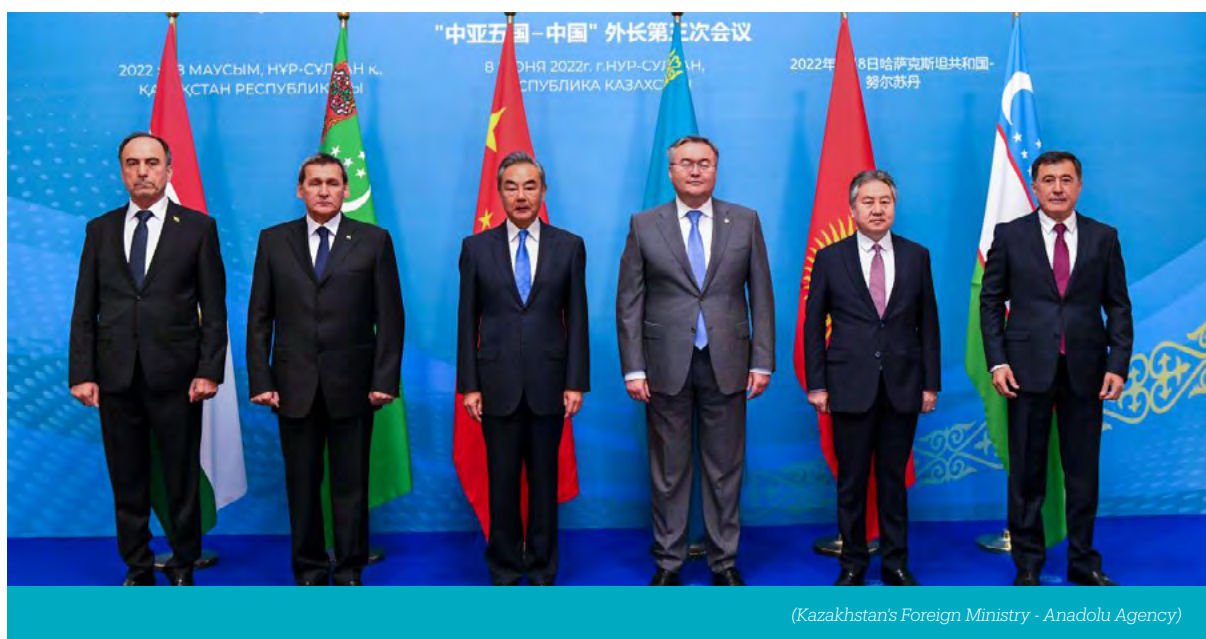
Labour migration from Central Asia to Russia constitutes both a socio-economic lifeline and a political lever. Approximately 15% of Tajikistan’s population and 10% of Kyrgyzstan’s population reside temporarily or permanently in Russia. According to World Bank data, remittances account for 31% of Kyrgyzstan’s GDP, and in 2023, more than 40% of Tajik households relied on remittances — with 80% of these funds originating from Russia (Popławski, 2024).

In parallel, Russia maintains its cultural influence in Central Asia through language, media, and educational channels. Russian remains either an official language or widely used

in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, facilitating Moscow’s cultural and informational outreach. Russian media outlets such as RT, Sputnik, and Rossiya 24 continue to enjoy broad audiences across the region (Beishaliev, 2024).

During the Central Asia Economic Forum held in Dushanbe in July 2025, Russia underscored its intention to maintain a multidimensional presence in the region. The forum highlighted not only energy cooperation but also Russian-backed cultural programs and proposals for expanded educational exchanges, signalling Moscow’s effort to counterbalance China’s growing financial dominance and the European Union’s normative appeal (SpecialEurasia, 2025).

Russia has constructed a mechanism of “soft tutelage” over Central Asia by leveraging energy infrastructures, military alliances, media influence, and labour migration policies. However, the war in Ukraine has created significant cracks in the hegemonic framework underpinning this influence. All five Central Asian governments have officially maintained neutrality in the Ukraine conflict and have not recognised Russia’s claims over Ukrainian territory. In the first UN General Assembly resolution on March 2, 2022, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan abstained, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan did not vote. In subsequent resolutions, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan consistently abstained, whereas Turkmenistan continued to refrain from voting. This pattern illustrates that, while avoiding sanctions on Moscow, regional states have developed a more cautious and autonomous diplomatic discourse. Indeed, countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have actively sought to diversify their foreign relations by strengthening engagement with China, the West, and the Organisation of Turkic States (Yüksel, 2023).



## China's Role in Central Asia

Over the past two decades, the People's Republic of China has emerged as the fastest-rising external actor in Central Asia. China's strategy in the region has not been limited to energy security and infrastructure investments; it has also expanded into efforts to establish digital sovereignty,

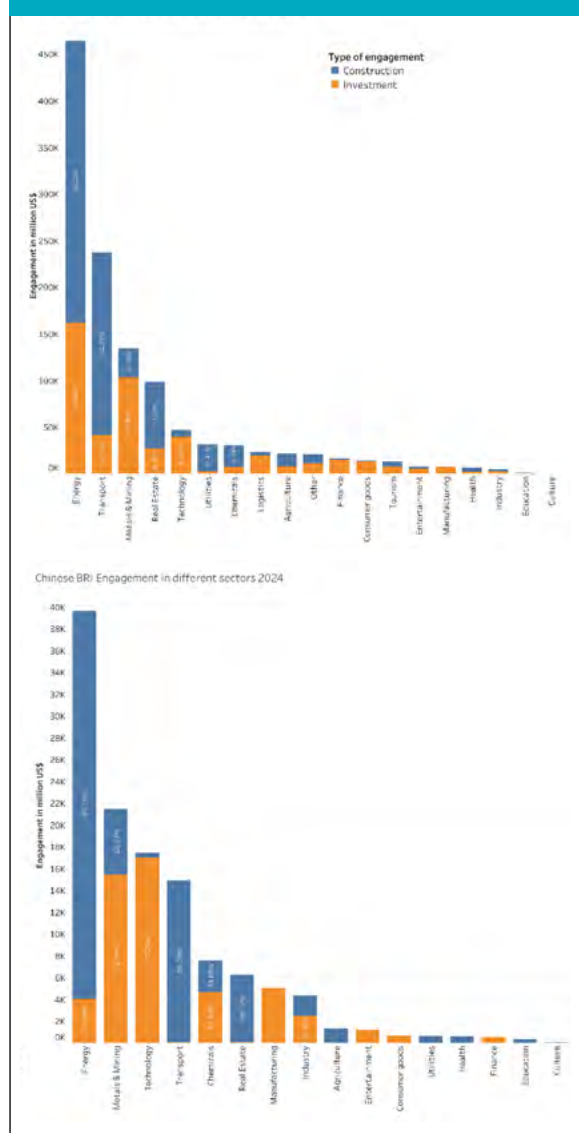
cultural influence, and new security architectures. This approach can be characterised as an "investment-backed authority projection," distinguishing it from classical forms of hegemony (Vakulchuk et al., 2019).

**Figure 1. Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese modern Silk Road project (Hussain, 2021)**



Within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's investments in Central Asia have exceeded \$40 billion. According to the 2024 China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report by the Green Finance & Development Centre (GFDC), investments in the Central Asian region increased by 40% compared to the previous year. These investments have primarily focused on energy infrastructure, railway projects, and cross-border logistics (Nedopil, 2025).

**Figure 2. Chinese BRI Engagement in different sectors since 2013 and Chinese BRI Engagement in different sectors 2024 (Nedopil, 2025).**



Initiated in 2013, the BRI framework also encompasses earlier projects such as the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline, which began operations in 2009 and has since transported over 500 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China (Xinhua, 2024). During this period, six major railway projects were completed in Kazakhstan, three energy plants were constructed in Uzbekistan, and substantial natural gas infrastructure investments were made in Turkmenistan. In 2024, Kazakhstan and China signed over 40 agreements worth a combined \$3.7 billion. Meanwhile, China has become the destination for over 70% of Turkmenistan's total natural gas exports. Of Ashgabat's \$14.17 billion in total gas revenue in 2023, \$9.6 billion was generated through sales to China. Although 2024 export data have yet to be fully released, a projected 5% growth rate suggests that China's share in Turkmenistan's total exports could rise to approximately 64%, significantly increasing Turkmenistan's dependency on Chinese buyers (Dayar, 2025).

Within this framework, Chinese investments have sparked various debates. Proponents emphasise positive impacts such as job creation, increased transit revenues, and improvements in infrastructure. Critics, however, point to risks related to debt dependency, the lack of transparency in contractual agreements, and the potential geopolitical costs of excessive reliance on Beijing, as illustrated in the case of Turkmenistan.

Tajikistan's external debt to China's Exim Bank amounts to 27.8% of its GDP. For Kyrgyzstan, this figure stands at 36.7%, and for Uzbekistan, it is 13%. While Turkmenistan's figures remain opaque, Kazakhstan has the lowest relative debt burden to China, with Chinese loans amounting to approximately 3.5% of its GDP. The case of Tajikistan is particularly illustrative: In 2011, Tajikistan ceded 1,000 square kilometres of border territory to China in partial settlement of its debt obligations (Cummings, 2012).

China's influence in Central Asia has increasingly extended beyond physical infrastructure to include digital surveillance systems and smart city initiatives. Companies such as Huawei and ZTE have built "Safe City" projects in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, installing facial recognition systems, traffic monitoring cameras, and cybersecurity infrastructures. In Kazakhstan alone, more than 30,000 facial recognition cameras had been installed through Chinese grants as of 2023. According to some critics, these technologies raise concerns about cyber sovereignty and facilitate authoritarian-leaning regimes' abilities to monitor and control domestic dissent (Bobokhonov & Bekturganov, 2023).

Militarily, China has also deepened its security cooperation with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan under the pretext

of counterterrorism efforts. Given their shared borders with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, these relationships hold strategic importance for China's internal security interests. In Tajikistan, joint border security bases, partly staffed by Chinese military advisors, have been established. Similarly, China and Uzbekistan have signed memorandums of understanding to create joint data centres focusing on border security and digital surveillance (Yousuf, 2024).

At the same time, Beijing has demonstrated renewed ambition to transform its economic weight into financial and technological dominance. During the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Tianjin in September 2025, President Xi Jinping proposed the creation of an SCO Development Bank, announced a 2-billion-yuan (\$280.4 million) aid package for member states, and opened the BeiDou satellite navigation system to SCO partners. In parallel, Chinese officials promoted the idea of an "electro-yuan" system to support energy trade and infrastructure finance, signalling Beijing's intent to internationalise its currency in

Central Asia (Wu, 2025). Complementing these financial tools, China also pledged \$1.4 billion in credit lines for regional projects over the next three years.

Moreover, connectivity initiatives have accelerated: in June 2025, China and Central Asian governments agreed to expand overland corridors and increase direct flights to enhance trade and mobility (Reuters, 2025). Alongside traditional infrastructure, Beijing has become increasingly involved in renewable energy: in mid-2025, multiple agreements were signed in Uzbekistan to construct solar and wind plants with a combined capacity exceeding 1,000 MW, reflecting China's growing role in the region's green transition (Central Asia Climate Information Portal, 2025).

Finally, China has been systematically expanding its soft power in Central Asia. Through the establishment of Confucius Institutes and scholarship programs, China has sought to cultivate cultural and educational influence. As of 2024, 14 Confucius Institutes are operating across the Central Asian region (Buyar, 2025).

## U.S. and European Strategies

Although Western policies toward Central Asia have been framed rhetorically around values such as "democracy-building, human rights, and market economy" since the 1990s, in practice, these narratives have often been supplanted by concerns over energy security, regional stability, and efforts to limit Chinese and Russian influence. This dual structure constitutes one of the key factors explaining the West's limited influence, fragile legitimacy, and the prevailing mistrust it faces among regional governments.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, U.S. assistance to the region was primarily channelled through USAID projects and democracy-focused NGO support initiatives. However, after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the United States became a more visible actor in Central Asia, with the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan symbolising its heightened security engagement. Nevertheless, the closure of the base in 2014 and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 resulted in a dramatic decline in American influence throughout the region (Côté, 2014).

Currently, among the tariffs imposed by the United States on Central Asia, exports from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan face a baseline tax of 10%, while Kazakhstan has been subject to a 25% customs duty since August 1. However, since most of Kazakhstan's exports to the U.S.—such as oil, uranium, and silver—are exempt, the

main rate has affected only a relatively small share of shipments. Nevertheless, it has increased compliance costs for non-resource exporters and prompted the Kazakh government to lobby Washington to mitigate the impact. Across the region, the tariffs are unlikely to upend overall trade volumes, but they could redirect supply chains and financing, especially if the U.S. begins imposing 100% "secondary" tariffs targeting Russia-related dependencies (Abuova, 2025).

These tariffs, while economically limited in their direct impact, underscored a shift in U.S. strategy: rather than shaping the region's development with new initiatives, Washington has increasingly positioned itself as a reactive power, seeking to constrain rival influence through punitive measures. For Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan, the U.S. approach reinforced the rationale for pursuing "multi-vector" foreign policies—balancing relations with China, Russia, and Europe to mitigate the risks of overdependence on any single partner. In this sense, the United States remains a significant, yet predominantly negative, factor in regional calculations: less a proactive architect of integration than a constraint and counterweight in the emerging multipolar order.

For its part, the European Union long approached Central Asia as a low-profile development actor. However, in

the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU significantly intensified its engagement with the region in an effort to reduce its energy dependency on Moscow. Under the Global Gateway program, the EU signed multilateral agreements with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, focusing on energy efficiency, water management, and digitalisation. Additionally, through its 79-Point Central Asia Action Plan, the EU aims to increase trade with the region by 50% and triple renewable energy investments by 2030 (Council of the European Union, 2025).

Following the military coup in Niger in July 2023, France lost its second-largest uranium supplier. Consequently, France, as the world's leading uranium exporter, turned its attention to Kazakhstan, which accounts for 40% of global

uranium production. In this context, following President Emmanuel Macron's 2023 visit to Kazakhstan, the French state energy company Orano launched a new uranium mining project in the Stepnogorsk region (Yüksel, 2023).

Finally, the Samarkand Summit held in April 2025 marked a significant step toward deepening economic and strategic cooperation between Europe and Central Asia. During the summit, a €12 billion fund was established to support infrastructure modernisation, renewable energy investment, digital transformation, and sustainable development projects. The fund is expected to prioritise initiatives aimed at modernising transport corridors, expanding renewable energy capacity, and strengthening regional integration (Mikhailidi, 2025).



(Uzbek Prime Ministry - Anadolu Agency)

## Regional Powers' Strategic Dynamics

Beyond traditional major players such as China, Russia, the United States, and Europe, Central Asia has increasingly attracted the attention of emerging regional powers. Countries like Türkiye, Iran, and the Gulf states are seeking to establish a foothold in the region for various reasons, including historical ties, cultural affinities, energy security, and strategic positioning. These new actors often engage with Central Asia through more flexible, targeted, and bilateral relations, deepening the region's complex geopolitical landscape without necessarily operating under the shadow of larger powers.

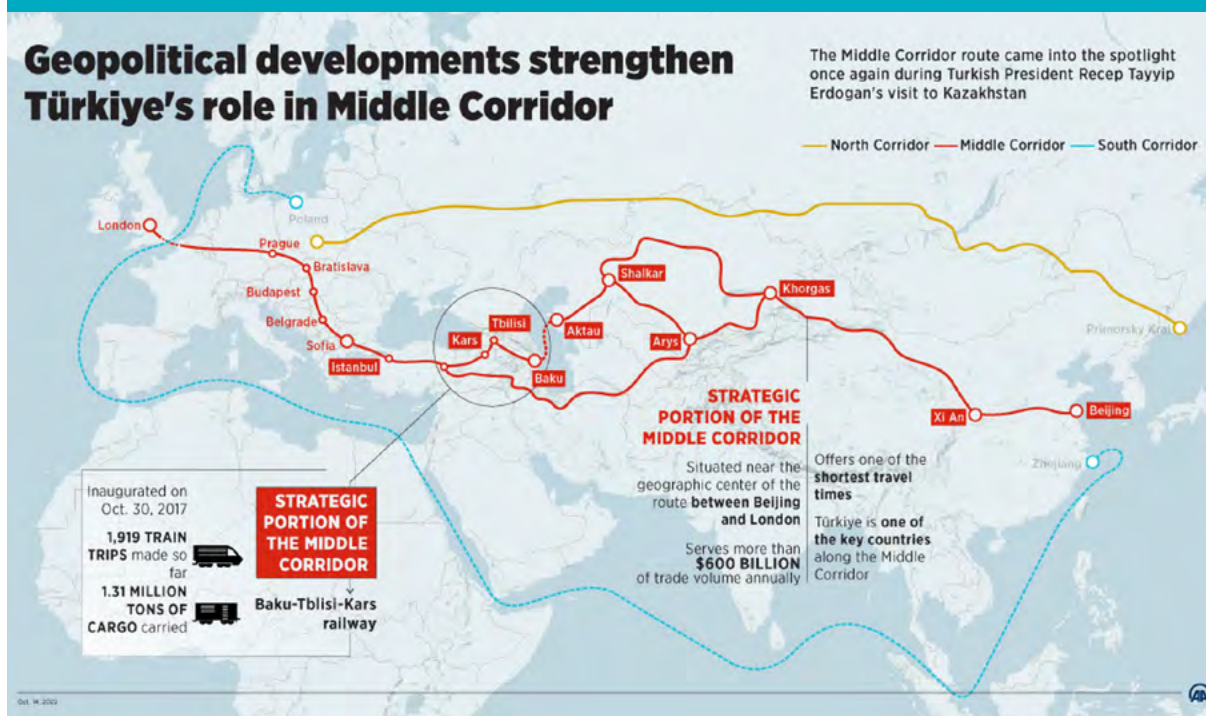
Türkiye was among the first countries to recognise the independence of Central Asian states in 1991, establishing special ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan based on cultural and linguistic commonalities. Since the 2010s, these relations have been institutionalised through structured regional cooperation models. In 2021, the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) evolved into a formal structure, aiming to enhance political coordination and develop common platforms in areas such as defence, education, digital transformation, and transportation (Sherstyukov, 2024).

Türkiye's foreign policy toward Central Asia is largely shaped by development diplomacy, cultural engagement, and logistical connectivity initiatives such as the "Middle Corridor" strategy. This approach positions Central Asia as a key transit hub between China's Belt and Road Initiative and Europe, offering a geostrategic alternative that bypasses Russia.

Iran, on the other hand, continues to exert cultural influence in Persian-speaking countries like Tajikistan while simultaneously seeking to expand energy and logistics cooperation with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. However, Iran's influence remains constrained due to Western sanctions and domestic economic instability. As a result, Tehran's engagement is typically limited to cultural diplomacy and bilateral energy agreements (Umarova, 2024).

Recent developments, however, point to Tehran's efforts to diversify its regional role. In early 2025, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Türkiye finalised an arrangement for the transit of Turkmen gas to Türkiye via Iranian territory, providing a pragmatic bypass of Russian-controlled routes (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2025). In addition, a new Xi'an-Tehran rail

**Figure 3. The Middle Corridor route (Anadolu Agency, 2022)**





(TUR Presidency/Murat Kula - Anadolu Agency)

link inaugurated in May 2025 significantly reduced transit times compared to maritime alternatives, and Tehran signalled plans for an Iran-Afghanistan-China corridor that could link with Central Asian transport hubs. Parallel to these initiatives, Iran has also advanced talks with Kazakhstan on the eastern branch of the International North-South Transport Corridor, further embedding Central Asia into Gulf and Indian Ocean trade networks (Terner, 2025).

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have also demonstrated growing interest in Central Asia by investing in local development projects and providing humanitarian aid. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have become increasingly active in the region, driven by factors such as energy security, economic diversifica-

tion, investment opportunities, security cooperation, and geopolitical ambition. The Gulf monarchies view Central Asia as a region where they can extend their geopolitical reach. Through establishing diplomatic relations, participating in multilateral forums, and offering development assistance, they aim to strengthen their presence in a region historically dominated by Russia and China. According to RISE Research, venture capital investments from the UAE in Central Asia reached \$96 million in 2024, marking a 7% increase compared to 2023. Additionally, the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) has financed \$160.25 million for education projects in Uzbekistan and provided \$129.11 million for three projects in Kyrgyzstan in the fields of agriculture, energy, and education (Zhanturina, 2025).

## Local Dynamics and Points of Resilience

The multi-vector balancing strategies adopted by the Central Asian states in foreign policy are not merely a reflection of geopolitical preferences, nor are these states passive actors moving exclusively in line with the visions imposed by external powers. Rather, their foreign policy choices are intimately linked to domestic political dynamics, regime security, social stability, and elite consolidation. In this regard, each country has developed its own “points of resilience”—structures and reflexes deemed critical for the sustainability of the regime—rooted in their unique historical and socio-political contexts.

Kazakhstan, as the region's largest economy and most institutionalised state, possesses the greatest capacity to pursue a diversified foreign policy. Nonetheless, the Zhanaozen protests of 2022 exposed persistent socio-economic inequalities, elite distrust, and underlying social vulnerabilities. In the realm of foreign affairs, Kazakhstan continues to maintain a delicate balance between China, the West, and Russia; it has expanded institutional cooperation with the Organisation of Turkic States and the European Union, sustained Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects with China, and preserved military ties with Russia (Yüksel, 2023).

Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed office in 2016, Uzbekistan has embarked upon a relative opening process characterised by anti-corruption initiatives, the promotion of the private sector, and improvements in cross-border relations. The country has established new channels of dialogue with key actors such as China, Türkiye, the European Union, and the Gulf states. Moreover, by hosting the EU-Central Asia Summit in Samarkand in 2025, Uzbekistan has further bolstered its emerging profile as a regional mediator (European Commission, 2025).

Despite being home to the most institutionalised multi-party political system in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan continues to experience frequent episodes of regime crises and elite fragmentation. Power transitions in 2005, 2010, and 2020 have underscored the fragility of regime security. Furthermore, tensions with Tajikistan over border disputes escalated into violent confrontations in 2021 and 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2022). In June 2025, the Kyrgyz parliament adopted new legislation requiring all media outlets to register with state authorities, expanding government control over the press and raising serious concerns about freedom of expression. This development highlighted the persistent fragility of democratic institutions and the regime's reliance on restrictive measures to manage dissent (Putz, 2025).

Beyond regime structures, symbolic transformations in the public sphere have also become part of the resilience narrative. In June 2025, authorities in Kyrgyzstan's southern city of Osh removed the country's largest Lenin statue, signalling a gradual but notable shift away from the visible remnants of the Soviet legacy (BBC News, 2025). The act not only carried symbolic weight in redefining collective memory but also underscored the reorientation of national narratives toward greater autonomy and cultural self-definition.

Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, in contrast, represent the region's most closed political models, marked by dynastic succession and the pervasive presence of repressive security apparatuses.

All things considered, while Central Asian regimes distinguish themselves through diversified foreign policy initiatives and major infrastructure investments, their domestic political environments remain characterised by high degrees of fragility and limited institutional adaptability. Political reforms are frequently deferred due to prevailing security concerns, societal demands are confined to narrowly defined spaces of representation, and regime legitimacy is often sustained through external support mechanisms.

## Conclusion: Conflicting Visions and the Strategic Crossroads of Central Asia

Central Asia has increasingly emerged as a region of strategic significance due to its geopolitical fluidity, abundant energy resources, and youthful demographic structure. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Türkiye's Middle Corridor strategy, the European Union's Global Gateway program, and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) project each offer distinct development visions for the region. While these initiatives collectively promote regional connectivity and economic integration, they simultaneously redraw the invisible boundaries of geopolitical competition.

Launched in Kazakhstan in 2013, China's BRI positions Central Asia at the heart of a land-based trade corridor connecting China to Europe. However, many of the projects initiated under the BRI framework operate on a "debt-for-infrastructure" model, creating potential risks of debt dependency, particularly for low-income countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, the expan-

sion of digital surveillance infrastructures under Chinese initiatives has generated new vulnerabilities in the realms of data security and digital sovereignty.

By contrast, Türkiye's Middle Corridor strategy presents not an alternative but a complementary—and arguably more autonomous—route to China's BRI. Promoted as the shortest pathway linking China to Europe via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Caspian Sea crossing, the Middle Corridor is further reinforced through institutional mechanisms such as the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). Beyond economic collaboration, Türkiye's approach encompasses cultural and political convergence, offering the Central Asian countries a model grounded in shared historical narratives, mutual recognition, and cultural affinity. In this context, Türkiye's vision is perceived as more humane and egalitarian compared to China's more technical and transactional engagement.

The European Union, through its 2021 Global Gateway initiative, has redefined its strategy towards Central Asia by proposing a model of “normative development” centred on sustainability, digital transformation, renewable energy transitions, and the promotion of human rights. Following the Russia-Ukraine war, the region has gained renewed importance for the EU’s energy diversification efforts. Nevertheless, the EU’s operational effectiveness remains limited compared to China and Türkiye, and its normative demands risk generating unease among the region’s authoritarian-leaning governments.

Russia, as the principal successor of the Soviet Union, continues to maintain political, economic, and cultural influence in Central Asia. Through the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia offers advantages such as customs union benefits and labour mobility while also preserving control over key energy infrastructures. Moreover, events such as the 2022 intervention in Kazakhstan demonstrate Russia’s willingness to exert military influence when necessary. However, the sanctions imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine have significantly weakened Moscow’s capacity to sustain regional integration.

At the same time, recent developments suggest that Russia’s position may evolve further. Should Moscow emerge from the war in Ukraine with strategic gains, its ability to exert pressure on Central Asian states—both economically and politically—could intensify. Such a scenario would reinforce Russia’s role as a coercive power in the region, compelling local governments to navigate an even narrower space for multi-vector balancing.

Similarly, the European Union’s financial commitments, while welcomed, come with normative strings attached. In exchange for multi-billion-euro investment packages, Brussels has signalled expectations for reforms in human rights and rule of law. This dynamic may confront authoritarian-leaning regimes with a delicate dilemma: accept normative concessions to secure vital funding, or resist at the cost of losing access to capital needed for infrastructure and energy transitions.

In sum, Central Asia is navigating among competing visions of development and integration offered by four major external powers. These engagements sometimes manifest as complementary collaborations but at other times exacerbate geopolitical fault lines. China’s financial power, Türkiye’s cultural proximity, the EU’s institutional frameworks, and Russia’s historical networks coexist as overlapping spheres of influence rather than mutually exclusive alternatives. Yet this multifaceted connectivity also restricts the strategic autonomy of Central Asian states, increasingly subjecting them to complex external pressures.

Looking ahead, the future of Central Asia will be shaped by three interwoven trajectories: first, the rise of renewable energy and digital infrastructure as new arenas of competition and cooperation; second, the region’s capacity to institutionalise resilience through inclusive governance and diversified partnerships; and third, the ability of societies to redefine identity and political legitimacy in the shadow of great power rivalries. The interplay between external ambitions and internal fragilities will determine whether Central Asia becomes a laboratory for sustainable multipolarity or remains a battlefield of competing hegemonies.

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# **Endgame in Ukraine:** Exploring Diplomatic Solutions to a Global Crisis

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*Hüseyin Özdemir*

## Introduction

**T**he Ukraine-Russia conflict, now in its eleventh year since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, has evolved into a protracted and devastating war with no clear end in sight. After Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the conflict rapidly escalated into the largest land war in Europe since World War II, resulting in massive casualties, widespread destruction, and repeated cycles of military offensives and stalemates. As of September 2025, the frontlines remain highly active, with Russian forces recently launching the largest drone and missile strikes against Kyiv to date and making incremental territorial gains in eastern Ukraine and along the northern border. Despite these offensives, neither side has achieved a decisive breakthrough, and the fighting continues to exact a heavy toll on both militaries and civilian populations.

The conflict's global implications are profound. Humanitarian crises persist, with millions displaced

and critical infrastructure repeatedly targeted. The economic fallout has reverberated worldwide, disrupting food and energy supplies, driving inflation, and straining national budgets across Europe and beyond. Security concerns have intensified as the war has heightened fears of escalation between NATO and Russia, raised nuclear risks, and prompted a re-evaluation of defence postures throughout the West.

In this context, the necessity for a diplomatic solution has become increasingly urgent. The limits of military victory are evident: both Ukraine and Russia face mounting losses and war fatigue, while the risk of further escalation remains ever-present. Analysts widely regard a negotiated settlement as the only viable path to long-term stability since it can address not only the immediate end to hostilities but also the underlying security, political, and humanitarian challenges.



(Turkish Foreign Ministry / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

# The Current Battlefield and Geopolitical Landscape

As of September 2025, the Ukraine-Russia conflict remains a grinding war of attrition, defined by fluctuating frontlines and mounting geopolitical ramifications across Europe and beyond. Fighting persists along the 1,000-kilometre frontline, where Russian forces have achieved notable territorial gains in the Donetsk region throughout 2024. The captures of Avdiivka and Vuhledar, as well as the ongoing fighting near Pokrovsk, Novopavlivka, and Maryinka, mark significant milestones in Moscow's campaign (Carey & Gak, 2025). Despite attempting to grab Russian territory in the Kursk region at the end of 2024, Ukrainian troops have struggled to retain hold over these advances. By late April, Russian authorities formally announced the "full liberation" of the Kursk region from Ukrainian control. However, Ukrainian sources suggest that isolated pockets of resistance continue to operate near the border (Teslova, 2025).

The human cost of this war has been devastating for both sides. Reports indicate enormous casualties, with each military enduring profound losses since the full-scale invasion began. Independent analyses suggest hundreds of thousands have been killed or wounded, though precise numbers remain difficult to verify amid the fog of war. The expanding deployment of advanced technologies like drones, unmanned aerial vehicles, and precision-guided missile strikes further compounds the attritional character of the war. These tools have revolutionised both offensive and defensive operations on the battlefield and contributed to the prevailing stalemate. The extensive use of drone swarms, electronic warfare, and cyberattacks has not only shaped tactical engagements but has also created additional humanitarian crises, with countless civilians displaced and infrastructure shattered across the combat zones (Gurung, 2025, pp. 5-7).

Domestically, Ukraine endures a climate of resilience under extreme hardship. President Zelenskyy's administration continues to enjoy broad popular legitimacy, yet the country faces steep economic challenges and a protracted humanitarian emergency. Martial law remains in effect, precluding the possibility of elections and intensifying feelings of uncertainty among citizens (European Parliament, 2025). Millions remain internally displaced, and ongoing Russian missile strikes frequently target critical infrastructure, exacerbating energy shortages and threatening civilian livelihoods.

In Russia, the war has coincided with a tightening of domestic policies. The government has responded by intensifying restrictions on dissent, expanding military recruitment, and allocating significant state resources to the conflict. While these measures have reinforced centralised control, they also raise questions about Russia's capacity to sustain the war (Mirovalev, 2025). Additionally, these actions have drawn criticism from civil society groups and contributed to strained relations with many Western nations.

On the international stage, the geopolitical environment is increasingly fraught. The inauguration of the new Trump administration in the United States has prompted a recalibration of American policy. Washington has suspended military aid and intelligence sharing with Kyiv and is now signalling a preference for renewed ceasefire negotiations—a shift that has unsettled both Ukrainian leaders and European allies. While the European Union has reaffirmed its steadfast support for Ukraine, internal divisions and economic pressures threaten the bloc's unity and its ability to sustain long-term assistance (European Parliament, 2025). China, for its part, continues to advocate for a negotiated settlement, positioning itself as a potential peace broker while opposing Western sanctions and maintaining strong economic ties with Moscow, as noted by the U.S.-China Economic AND Security Review Commission (2025). Türkiye remains an active diplomatic player, leveraging its strategic position to host talks and preserve relations with both belligerents (Ozdemir, 2024).

The conflict's repercussions are felt globally, disrupting energy and food supply chains, elevating nuclear risks, and pushing NATO and its partners to reassess security postures. As the war drags on with no decisive military breakthrough on the horizon, the dangers of escalation—including the use of nuclear weapons and wider regional destabilisation—grow ever more acute. This ongoing interplay of military deadlock, domestic strain, and shifting international alignments underscores both the urgency and the formidable complexity of forging a diplomatic resolution.



(Cem Özdel - Anadolu Agency)

## Defining the Endgame: Competing Visions and Core Demands

The search for an endgame in Ukraine remains dominated by sharply divergent objectives, entrenched mistrust, and a web of interests involving multiple external actors. As of September 2025, the principal players—Ukraine, Russia, and their international backers—have yet to fully reconcile their core demands. However, the protracted stalemate on the battlefield, combined with the mounting human, economic, and political costs on all sides, has started to give rise to discussions about potential compromises.

For Ukraine, the overarching goal remains the full restoration of its pre-2014 borders, including Crimea and all occupied territories in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson—a demand etched into the national consciousness. While this position reflects the unwavering will of the Ukrainian people, the reality on the battlefield presents formidable challenges. Kyiv's stance is rooted in principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, but military constraints and shifting frontlines complicate its realisation. Beyond territorial recovery, Ukraine seeks binding security guarantees to deter future aggression, though geopolitical negotiations progress unevenly. EU integration remains a strategic priority, yet accession faces institutional hurdles despite broad public support. Justice and reparations are non-negotiable for a society scarred by war crimes, though legal mechanisms move slower than the hunger for accountability. These pillars—territorial restoration, security, European integration, and justice—define Ukraine's position, even as the gap between aspiration and operational realities persists (German & Tyushka, 2024).

On the Russian side, the Kremlin's objectives are just as resolute, though fundamentally at odds with Ukraine's aspirations. Moscow insists on maintaining its hold over Crimea and the additional territories it annexed in 2022, seeking international recognition of these conquests as

Russian sovereign land. Russian leadership further demands a neutral or non-aligned status for Ukraine, effectively precluding any future NATO membership or significant Western military presence. The Kremlin also links any potential settlement to the lifting of Western sanctions, security guarantees against further NATO expansion, and legal protections for Russian-speaking populations within Ukraine's borders. President Putin has framed these demands as existential for Russian security and regional clout, leaving little room for flexibility.

A sense of urgency has surfaced in Western circles, driven by fears of escalation, including nuclear risks and long-term economic turbulence. While the West remains committed to deterring further Russian expansion and upholding international law, there is growing recognition of the need for a sustainable, enforceable peace, one that carefully balances justice, security, and the practicalities of compromise.

Despite the deep divides, some tentative pathways toward negotiation have emerged through diplomatic contacts and Track II dialogues. These include phased agreements on territorial status, incremental or conditional security guarantees and a stepwise lifting of sanctions in exchange for verified Russian withdrawals. Internationalised processes for justice and reconstruction are also being cautiously discussed, provided they uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and credibility.

Defining the endgame in Ukraine will inevitably require closing wide gaps in vision, addressing legitimate security concerns for all sides, and crafting an agreement that is both just and enduring. Whether creative diplomacy and political determination can overcome years of bloodshed and suspicion remains the central question as this crisis grinds onward.

# Diplomatic Pathways and Peace Proposals

As the Ukraine-Russia conflict endures into its third year of full-scale warfare, diplomatic efforts have intensified, yet a durable, consensus-driven peace remains elusive. The ongoing hostilities have galvanised multiple actors-Ukraine, Russia, the United States, European powers, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia-to advance a variety of peace frameworks, each reflecting distinct priorities and red lines (Maad, 2025). Despite the proliferation of proposals, the challenge lies in balancing the core demands of both Kyiv and Moscow, safeguarding Ukrainian sovereignty, and forging an agreement that upholds security, justice, and humanitarian needs.

A central feature of the most recent peace initiatives is the call for a comprehensive ceasefire spanning land, air, and sea. Ukrainian and European plans, unveiled in London in April 2025, propose that the United States and its European allies oversee the technical discussions, monitoring, and enforcement of any ceasefire, with the U.S. assuming a leading supervisory role (Reuters, 2025b). These proposals also demand the unconditional return of deported Ukrainian children and the exchange of prisoners of war and civilian detainees, reflecting the deep humanitarian concerns that have come to the fore during the conflict. Russia, while signalling an openness to direct talks, insists any diplomatic roadmap must accommodate its principal objectives: recognition of Crimea's annexation, restrictions on Ukrainian sovereignty, and the gradual removal of Western sanctions.

The Istanbul peace talks, hosted in May 2025, marked a significant moment in recent diplomatic efforts. While the negotiations did not yield a breakthrough on a permanent ceasefire or a direct summit between Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy, they did result in an agreement to carry out the largest prisoner exchange since the war began, with 1,000 detainees from each side set for release. This humanitarian achievement underscores the value of sustained dialogue, even when immediate political solutions remain out of reach. The talks also led to a commitment to exchange written proposals for a potential ceasefire and to reconvene for further negotiations.

Security guarantees for Ukraine remain among the most contentious issues in current negotiations. Kyiv and its European supporters strongly advocate for robust, NATO-like assurances, including the unrestricted presence and operations of allied forces on Ukrainian territory. How-

ever, the new U.S. administration has expressed hesitation, proposing instead that European powers become the primary guarantors of Ukraine's security while Kyiv pursues EU membership and retains its right to self-defence. This divergence underscores the complex balancing act faced by Western leaders, who were caught between reassuring Ukraine and maintaining broader alliance unity.

Territorial questions-particularly the fate of Crimea and Donbas-are to be addressed only after a ceasefire has been solidified. Ukrainian proposals call for negotiations starting from the current line of contact, with the explicit goal of reclaiming strategic sites and infrastructure, such as the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and the Kakhovka Dam and restoring access to the Dnieper River (Reuters, 2025b). In contrast, Russia aims to consolidate its control over occupied territories, demanding international recognition of its sovereignty over Crimea and parts of Donbas as part of any final agreement.

Economic recovery and reparations also play a critical role in peace discussions. Ukraine and its partners call for a comprehensive reconstruction initiative to be partially funded by Russian sovereign assets frozen abroad. Sanction relief for Russia is envisioned as a phased process linked to performance against the terms of the peace agreement, with a "snapback" mechanism to reinstate sanctions in the event of violation (Reuters, 2025b). Addressing justice and accountability is equally vital: proposals have included hybrid tribunals, reparations funds, and international oversight of post-war justice, all aimed at ensuring that civilian suffering and alleged war crimes do not go unaddressed.

While a ceasefire along existing frontlines is one scenario under active discussion, it risks codifying Russian territorial gains and fostering a prolonged, unstable "grey zone" akin to the post-2014 Donbas. More expansive proposals involve phased or conditional peace settlements, perhaps trading some measure of international recognition for Russian withdrawal from certain regions, backed by legally binding security guarantees for Ukraine. The most ambitious conceivable framework for resolution would involve a comprehensive settlement underwritten by principal international stakeholders, potentially including the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, and possibly China. Such an agreement would need to systematically address multiple interdependent dimen-

sions: territorial considerations, sustainable security architectures, postwar economic rehabilitation, and transitional justice mechanisms. Such a complex settlement would demand robust international oversight and phased implementation.

Through all these proposals, the firmness of Ukraine's stance is unmistakable. Ukrainian leaders insist that any agreement must secure a "real and just" peace, firmly opposing arrangements that would normalise Russian territorial advances or erode their country's sovereignty. Meanwhile, Russia leverages its battlefield position and exploits international divisions to press for more advantageous terms. The United States, seeking a swift resolution, must balance its support for Kyiv with the need to maintain unity

among European allies and avoid undermining Ukraine's negotiating leverage (Weir, 2025). Each party continues to advance its core interests, contributing to the complexity of the ongoing diplomatic process.

In summary, the outlines of a potential diplomatic settlement are becoming clearer: a comprehensive ceasefire, phased negotiations over contested territories, carefully calibrated security guarantees, and major commitments to post-war reconstruction and justice. Yet, entrenched disagreements and mutual distrust persist, making the prospect of a genuine, lasting peace uncertain. The coming months will be a critical test of the willingness and flexibility of all parties as they traverse the complex landscape of diplomacy in search of an end to the war.

## Obstacles to Peace and Diplomatic Challenges

Despite renewed diplomatic efforts in 2025, the prospects for peace in Ukraine remain distant, hindered by deeply entrenched political, strategic, and societal barriers. Years of violence and broken promises have generated profound mistrust on both sides, making compromise seem perilously remote. Russia demands recognition of its control over Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine, guarantees that Ukraine will not join NATO, and the lifting of Western sanctions-preconditions Ukraine and its Western allies, for now, refuse to accept. Meanwhile, Ukraine's unwavering demands for complete Russian withdrawal, full restoration of territorial integrity, prosecution of war crimes, and strong security guarantees are requirements that Moscow regards as unacceptable (Schwartz & Entous, 2025).

Domestic politics reinforce the intransigence of both protagonists. In Ukraine, public outrage stemming from Russian atrocities, such as the Bucha events and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, has hardened resistance to any territorial compromise or concessions on sovereignty (Davlikanova & Ogryzko, 2025). President Zelenskyy faces scrutiny from civil society, opposition parties, and veterans' groups, who view any perceived concessions with considerable unease. In Russia, President Putin operates within a complex political landscape where hardline factions exert significant influence. These groups are deeply committed to maintaining territorial gains, viewing any potential retreat as a threat not just to national interests but also to regime stability. As a result, Putin must carefully balance geopolitical pragmatism with domestic pressures,

making concessions politically risky. This mutual intransigence leaves little room for meaningful negotiation or middle ground.

Another complication lies in external actors who, wittingly or unwittingly, impede the peace process. The United States, under the Trump administration, has pressed for a rapid settlement but faces resistance from European governments and Ukrainian officials concerned that American proposals might legitimise Russian aggression or undermine Ukraine's sovereignty (Reuters, 2025a). The European Union and NATO prioritise the defence of Ukraine's territorial rights, while other global powers, such as China, emphasise stability and the avoidance of escalation. This divergence of international interests makes it difficult to forge a coherent approach, impeding mediation and the design of enforceable agreements.

Even if compromise were possible, the practical challenges of enforcing and monitoring any peace deal are formidable. The legacy of failed ceasefires-such as the troubled Minsk process and 2025's short-lived "Easter truce"-has demonstrated the difficulty of ensuring compliance in an environment rife with mutual suspicion. The heavily militarised, constantly shifting frontlines are littered with mines and fortifications, undermining prospects for stable demilitarised zones. Robust, impartial monitoring mechanisms would be required, yet both sides remain sceptical of outside oversight and are likely to dispute the neutrality of international monitors.

Strategic risks loom over every stage of negotiation. Ukrainians and their allies fear that a settlement too favourable to Russia could not only embolden Moscow to act aggressively in the future but set a dangerous precedent for other conflicts, undermining the basic international norm against territorial conquest. On the other hand, the absence of agreement perpetuates the threat of further escalation—including, in the worst-case scenario, the use of nuclear weapons by Russia, whose leaders periodically issue thinly veiled threats (Davlikanova & Ogryzko, 2025).

A further source of frustration is the occasional exclusion of Ukraine's representatives from key negotiations, which breeds perceptions of injustice and fuels scepticism about

the legitimacy of outside-imposed solutions. Experts argue that all key stakeholders, including Ukrainian civil society, must engage to make any peace deal sustainable (Bauer, 2024), and universal values such as justice, dignity, and accountability must be upheld.

In sum, the road to peace in Ukraine is obstructed by a daunting array of obstacles: mutual mistrust, irreconcilable objectives, powerful domestic and international pressures, and immense practical challenges in implementing any future deal. Creative diplomacy and persistent, inclusive engagement, guided by the lessons of past failures, must work toward a durable, just, and legitimate settlement.

## Strategic Recommendations for a Credible Diplomatic Endgame

Achieving a sustainable diplomatic resolution to the Ukraine conflict requires a comprehensive and pragmatic strategy that balances justice, security, and the necessity of difficult compromise. The lessons of past peace processes and the complexities of the current conflict point toward an approach grounded as much in realism as in principle, seeking not only a cessation of violence but the transformative underpinnings of a durable peace.

The immediate priority must be a mutually agreed ceasefire, brokered by trusted and experienced international mediators such as the United Nations or Türkiye. This ceasefire should be enforced by a robust, impartial international monitoring mission to verify compliance, monitor violations, and provide early warning against renewed hostilities. Secure, internationally supervised humanitarian corridors must be established to facilitate the evacuation of civilians, the delivery of aid, and the safe return of displaced persons. These urgent steps are vital for halting bloodshed, rebuilding a minimum of mutual trust, and demonstrating the tangible benefits of peace to exhausted communities (Beebe & Lieven, 2024, pp. 44-46).

Upon securing a ceasefire, negotiations should proceed within a transparent and structured framework marked by phased milestones and reciprocal measures. The process must be inclusive, ensuring meaningful participation by civil society, local governments, and communities directly affected by the conflict, thereby enhancing legitimacy and public support. Negotiations may be informed by established proposals, such as the Istanbul talks, which outline

core elements to reach a sustainable peace agreement. Implementation should advance in stages, with coordinated troop withdrawals, gradual adjustment of sanctions, and restoration of economic relations linked to verified progress.

International oversight is essential to manage financial aid, technical assistance, and anti-corruption initiatives that underpin post-conflict stabilisation and recovery. A multilateral oversight body—potentially composed of the EU, U.S., UN, and additional key actors, including neutral parties such as Türkiye, China, or representatives from the Global South—could help bridge divides, strengthen legitimacy, and ensure coherent support for the peace process. The United Nations, in collaboration with regional organisations and specialised agencies, should play a central role in supporting negotiations, humanitarian efforts, and reconstruction initiatives.

Sustainable stability in the region will be contingent upon establishing verifiable security assurances for Ukraine. Potential institutional frameworks may encompass NATO integration, alternative multilateral security architectures, or legally binding bilateral agreements that equitably address the strategic concerns of all relevant state actors. A critical distinction must be maintained between provisional cessation-of-hostility measures and enduring security arrangements to prevent conflict protraction and mitigate risks of subsequent escalation.

Transitional justice mechanisms must retain institutional autonomy from political negotiation processes. A com-

prehensive peace settlement should integrate structured accountability frameworks, including internationalised judicial proceedings for atrocity crimes, compensatory justice instruments, and context-specific truth verification initiatives. Such mechanisms require a dual focus on individual criminal responsibility and inter-state obligations, particularly regarding cases of forced population transfers and grave breaches of international humanitarian law.

Post-conflict societal reconstruction necessitates participatory engagement methodologies incorporating affected civilian populations, tertiary educational establishments, and traditionally marginalised demographic groups. This multi-stakeholder approach facilitates restorative dialogue, enhances social capital, and develops institutional capacity for sustainable peacebuilding.

A transparent and well-managed economic reconstruction effort will be essential, drawing on lessons from past post-war recoveries. Priorities should include rebuilding critical infrastructure, assisting affected communities, and

strengthening governance in line with international standards. The responsible use of available resources—including any frozen assets, where legally permissible—could help support long-term stability and development.

Finally, Humanitarian and environmental challenges, such as displacement, food security, and ecological recovery, should be central to any lasting resolution. A sustainable approach must prioritise the safe return of affected communities and the restoration of damaged ecosystems.

In summary, a credible diplomatic endgame for Ukraine requires immediate humanitarian action, structured and inclusive negotiations, awareness of the actual situation on the battleground, phased reciprocal implementation, strong security guarantees, comprehensive reconstruction, meaningful justice, and sustained international engagement. Only through such a fully integrated and internationally supported strategy can the foundation for a just and lasting peace be established.

## Conclusion

The imperative for a diplomatic resolution to the Ukraine crisis has never been greater. After years of devastating warfare, mounting casualties, and escalating global risks, sustainable peace cannot be achieved through military means alone. The stakes extend far beyond Ukraine's borders: the outcome of this conflict will shape the future of European security, the credibility of international norms against aggression, and the resilience of the global order.

Ukraine's struggle has become a defining test case for 21st-century conflict resolution. The lessons drawn from this crisis—about the necessity of robust security guarantees, the challenges of balancing justice with compromise, and the importance of inclusive, internationally supported diplomacy—will inform responses to future crises worldwide. Achieving a credible diplomatic endgame will require vision, patience, and unprecedented cooperation among global actors. Only by learning from the past and committing to a comprehensive, principled approach can the international community help Ukraine secure a just and lasting peace, setting a new standard for resolving conflicts in an increasingly turbulent world.

Although the direct talks between the parties in Istanbul after three years mark a hopeful step towards ending the war, they also underscore the need for sustained and stra-

tegic diplomatic engagement. To move beyond symbolic gestures towards meaningful resolution, greater responsibility now lies with international actors capable of facilitating structured negotiations and addressing the underlying causes of the conflict.



(TUR Presidency/ Murat Cetinmuhurdar - Anadolu Agency)

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# Facing the Structural Forces Behind the Rise of the Global Far Right

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*Ömer Sevim*

# Introduction

**F**or much of the post-war era, the political stability of Western Europe was often regarded with admiration in countries such as Türkiye, where political life is typically marked by greater intensity. Episodes that might otherwise be interpreted as dysfunction—such as extended periods without a functioning government or persistently low voter turnout—were instead valorised as signs of institutional resilience and democratic maturity. Low participation rates, for example, which in more authoritarian settings might suggest disillusionment with politics, were reframed in the Western European context as indicators of public trust in the continuity of governance regardless of electoral cycles.

In recent years, however, this image of Western Europe as a bastion of political equilibrium has been unsettled by the accelerating rise of far-right movements. This development has introduced a new layer of volatility into political systems long perceived as stable, reshaping public debates and exposing structural vulnerabilities in the European democratic model. What was once admired as a sign of calm endurance is now giving way to a more contentious and polarised political landscape, with implications not only for domestic governance but also for the broader trajectory of European integration and liberal democracy. This phenomenon has reverberated in many different corners of the world.

Despite the large publicity it gets as a political trend, the concept of the “far right” itself remains far from clearly defined. As Pirro (2022) notes, the term works well as an umbrella category, but the positions it encompasses vary considerably. Movements that accept democratic principles yet distance themselves from liberal values, as well as explicitly anti-democratic currents, are all included within this label.

Beyond this theoretical ambiguity, in practice, far-right parties can be divided into those in power and those in opposition. Far-right movements frequently employ populist and exclusionary rhetoric to mobilise electoral support. Yet once in power, these parties often demonstrate a notable capacity to adapt to prevailing institutional and policy constraints. Italy’s current government under Giorgia Meloni illustrates this dynamic: while elected on a hardline platform, it has shown pragmatism in aligning with European Union commitments and NATO obligations. A similar recalibration can be observed in France, where Marine Le Pen’s deliberate moderation of her party’s discourse has translated into broader electoral gains, underscoring how the normal-

isation of rhetoric can expand political legitimacy. The so-called “detoxification” process—which even included distancing the party from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen—illustrates how the path to power often entails a relative move toward the political centre. At the same time, it is difficult to claim that centrist parties remain untouched by the far right’s rise. The political centre itself appears to be drifting rightward. The periodic convergence of Germany’s centre-right CDU with the far-right AfD is one such case (Anadolu, 2025).

It is important to stress that this political dynamism in Europe does not stem from a fundamental challenge to the socio-economic order. The far right does not represent a broad reform agenda aimed at advancing the interests of a particular class or identity group. Instead, it limits itself to populist themes: hostility toward elites, criticism of bureaucracy and the establishment, and anti-immigrant campaigns. These remain primarily pragmatic tools for electoral success rather than coherent reform projects.

The far right’s rapidly shifting rhetoric, its alliances lacking ideological consistency, and its practices often at odds with its discourse all demonstrate this pragmatism. For example, although its campaigns frequently invoke the language of defending workers, Benito’s (2024) report shows that the Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament, composed of far-right parties, voted against or abstained in 64% of pro-labour legislative proposals.

Despite its lack of ideological coherence or concrete reform proposals, the global rise of the far right has become one of the central issues of contemporary politics. Its ability to influence political dynamics at both national and international levels should not be underestimated. Furthermore, far-right movements learn from one another, spread across borders, and form transnational alliances.

The current context that enables this rise—and allows these movements to reinforce each other—can be understood on three main grounds. First, the world today is more than ever integrated into a shared political-economic regime. Second, communication technologies have advanced and proved highly functional as instruments of manipulation. Third, powerful actors have noticed that they are capable of exploiting current conditions to their own advantage. Together, these three factors keep the far right at the forefront of the global political agenda.

# The Global Socio-Political and Economic Grounds of the Far-Right

The recent surge of far-right parties across diverse regions is not merely a regional anomaly but rather a response to structural global dynamics. Two overarching dimensions—economic and cultural—constitute the common ground upon which far-right movements flourish. Understanding these dimensions helps explain both the similarities and divergences observed across national contexts.

The first dimension is rooted in neoliberalism's global reach. Neoliberal restructuring has exposed nations to similar socio-economic predicaments, including rising inequality, precarious labour markets, and the erosion of social safety nets. On the other hand, according to Colin Crouch (2004), under the neoliberal order, democracy is increasingly confined to the act of voting and to a technocratic form of trust that mediates the relationship between governments and their citizens. As governance becomes technocratic and bureaucratic, efficiency overshadows democratic responsiveness, and large segments of society feel excluded from political processes. This sense of alienation, along with the socio-economic problems, has provided fertile ground for far-right actors, who frame their populist discourses as a rebellion against entrenched elites.

The shift of certain segments of traditional working-class voters from the left to the far right exemplifies this process. Once the backbone of social democratic parties, sections of the industrial and post-industrial working classes have turned toward parties such as France's National Rally or Germany's Alternative für Deutschland. Gidron & Hall (2017) have noted that economic dislocation, combined with a perception of being abandoned by the left, has re-oriented these voters toward the far-right, which appears more attentive to their grievances. The far-right thus capitalises on a class-based resentment, translating socio-economic insecurity into political mobilisation.

The second dimension is cultural. Far-right movements have moved beyond the confines of traditional biological racism toward what is called "cultural superiority" narratives. Hostility toward immigrants and protectionist rhetoric now draw upon discourses of defending national culture, values, and identity. In this sense, new forms of nationalism combine with populism to frame migrants and minorities as existential threats to a superior cultural order.

This cultural terrain is not uniform but rather context-dependent. In Western Europe, secular forms of nationalism

have increasingly fused with liberal stances on gender and sexuality, giving rise to what Puar (2007) describes as "homonationalism." Similarly, Sara Farris (2017) identifies "femonationalism," wherein far-right actors instrumentalise women's rights to justify exclusivist policies. These formations demonstrate how far-right movements adapt progressive discourses to exclusionary ends, producing new repertoires of legitimacy.

On the other hand, in countries like the Netherlands or Germany, manipulating gender and sexuality issues has become a notable feature, whereas in Hungary or Poland, far-right politics has remained firmly rooted in conservative religious traditions. Nevertheless, these ideological divergences do not prevent strategic alliances. For example, far-right parties with different cultural stances frequently congratulate each other's electoral successes (Körömi, 2024).

Secularism has emerged as an unexpected cultural resource for far-right actors beyond the Christian world. Dutch far-right leader Geert Wilders offers a striking example. Despite his staunch Islamophobia, Wilders has praised Kemalist secularism in Türkiye, presenting it as a form of "acceptable Turkishness" (Koç, 2023). In doing so, he re-frames the debate: the dividing line is not biology but values. Western orientation, secularism, and "enlightenment" ideals are elevated as signs of cultural worth, while "backward Islamic values" are cast as threats. This framing allows Wilders to maintain his Islamophobic stance while selectively endorsing a Turkish tradition he associates with modernity. Such rhetoric also resonates within Türkiye's own secular far-right nationalism, where Islamophobia is translated into exclusionary politics directed not at Muslims as a whole but specifically at Arabs and Kurds. In this way, secular nationalism becomes a shared ideological bridge, showing how the far right can learn from and adapt to each other across national contexts.

In this light, the far-right's global resurgence cannot be explained solely by domestic conditions. Rather, it is situated within a shared political economy of neoliberal exclusion and a transnational cultural discourse of superiority. These two dimensions not only facilitate the mobilisation of disaffected constituencies but also foster cross-national learning and cooperation among far-right actors. Recognising this dual foundation is essential for understanding the resilience and adaptability of far-right politics in the contemporary era.

# Communication Technologies, Manipulation, and the Far-Right

The exponential development of communication technologies has fundamentally altered the dynamics of political discourse and mobilisation. With virtually every corner of the globe accessible at the touch of a screen, the present era can be compared to earlier moments of profound communicative transformation, such as the invention of the printing press. In principle, these technologies enable a democratisation of knowledge, breaking down barriers to information and allowing for the creation of transnational public spheres. However, the ownership and governance of these digital infrastructures remain concentrated in the hands of powerful private corporations and wealthy individuals. This concentration of communicative power raises fundamental concerns about accountability, transparency, and the potential for manipulation.

As one of the first indicators, the Cambridge Analytica scandal exemplified the vulnerability of contemporary societies to such manipulation. By harvesting personal data and micro-targeting voters with tailored political messages, the scandal demonstrated how digital platforms could be weaponised to influence democratic processes (Isaak & Hanna, 2018). Rather than serving as neutral channels of information, communication technologies have increasingly become tools for shaping perceptions and preferences, often through opaque means. For far-right movements, this dynamic provides both a source of rhetorical ammunition and a practical mechanism of mobilisation. On the one hand, the concentration of communicative power in corporate hands bolsters their anti-elite narratives, as they portray themselves as defenders of ordinary people against unaccountable global actors. On the other hand, far-right organisations themselves exploit these very tools to propagate conspiracy theories, delegitimise mainstream media, and erode the value of objective truth (Waisbord, 2018).

Recent developments at X (formerly Twitter) following Elon Musk's acquisition illustrate the interplay between technological concentration and political manipulation. Musk's emphasis on "free speech absolutism" has been hailed by supporters as a corrective to perceived liberal bias, while critics argue it encourages hate speech and misinformation (Spring, 2024). For far-right actors, these shifts represent both opportunity and validation: they reinforce claims of mainstream bias while providing less restricted spaces for far-right discourse. The Musk-Twitter case thus shows

how corporate control can reshape the balance between content regulation and political expression, with significant implications for far-right communication strategies.

This paradox—far-right movements criticising elite control of digital platforms while simultaneously thriving on them—highlights the ambivalent role of technology in politics. Far-right actors exploit virality and algorithmic amplification to circulate emotive narratives that bypass traditional gatekeepers. The rise of "post-truth" politics, which prioritises emotional resonance over factual accuracy, further strengthens these strategies (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

Ultimately, communication technologies do not merely provide platforms for information exchange but also shape the epistemic foundations of democracy itself. Their concentration in private hands, susceptibility to manipulation, and resonance with far-right strategies highlight the urgent need for critical governance mechanisms. Without such measures, the very tools that promise democratization risk deepening polarisation, empowering extremist actors, and undermining trust in democratic institutions. In this regard, it is important to note that media manipulation and similar political tactics are not exclusive to the far-right agenda. Democratic institutions, including the media, have already lost credibility and eroded public trust.



(Aytuğ Can Sencar - Anadolu Agency)

## External Political and Economic Actors in the Strengthening of the Far-Right

Beyond domestic socio-economic and cultural dynamics, the rise of far-right movements has also been facilitated by external political and economic actors that find strategic value in their growth. These actors often view far-right movements not as ideological allies but as instrumental partners for advancing specific geopolitical or domestic interests. By supporting these movements, external powers secure cooperative actors within foreign political landscapes, amplify narratives aligned with their strategic agendas, and exert pressure on established democratic systems. Among the most prominent examples are Russia and Israel, both of which have cultivated relationships with far-right forces across different contexts.

Russia's engagement with far-right movements in Europe illustrates the geopolitical utility of such alliances. Moscow has long sought to expand its sphere of influence in the European continent by destabilising the cohesion of the European Union and weakening NATO's political front. One effective strategy has been the cultivation of financial and political ties with far-right parties such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and the Rassemblement

National (RN) in France. Investigative reports and academic analyses have uncovered evidence of financial loans and covert connections between Russian institutions and Marine Le Pen's RN, which received substantial loans from Russian banks in the mid-2010s (Gatehouse, 2017). In return, far-right leaders have often taken stances favourable to Russia's foreign policy. Le Pen, for instance, openly legitimised Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (ibid.). Such positions demonstrate how external backing not only supports far-right movements financially but also aligns their discursive repertoires with the geopolitical aims of powerful states.

Israel's engagement with far-right forces represents another dimension of this dynamic, though its logic differs from Russia's geopolitical destabilisation strategy. Since the late 20th century, Israel has actively cultivated ties with far-right governments and parties to secure international support for its policies in Palestine. Examples also include Israel's warm relations with non-Western allies like Narendra Modi's India and Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, both governed by right-wing populist administrations sympathetic to Israel's security narrative and supportive of its international standing. These alliances extend beyond pragmatic diplomacy, functioning as mechanisms for legitimising Israel's controversial occupation policies and its broader framing of Palestinian resistance as terrorism.

The roots of this discursive strategy can be traced to the mid-1970s, when the ascendance of right-wing parties within Israel accelerated the production of a cultural and political narrative that conflated Islam and terrorism. As Deepa Kumar (2021) has shown, Israeli political elites and supportive lobbying networks played an instrumental role in embedding the discourse of "Islamic terrorism" into Western imaginaries, particularly in the United States. Through cultural production—such as film and media portrayals—as well as sustained political rhetoric, Muslim identities were increasingly framed as synonymous with violence and threat. Similarly, pro-Israel lobby organisations in Europe, such as the European Coalition for Israel (ECI), invested in amplifying the narrative of Muslims as existential threats to Western civilisation (King, 2016). This narrative construction not only aligned with Israel's strategic objectives but also provided ideological ammu-



(Russian Presidential - Anadolu Agency)

dition that far-right movements across Europe and North America readily adopted. In this sense, Israel's discursive interventions can be seen as constitutive of far-right worldviews, even if not intentionally designed to serve them.

These external interventions underscore the importance of considering transnational linkages in the study of far-right politics. While economic discontent and cultural anxieties explain much of the domestic appeal of these movements, their institutional survival and discursive power are often enhanced by external sponsorship and ideological reinforcement. Russia provides material and geopolitical resources, while Israel offers a discursive framework that legitimises exclusionary politics under the guise of security and counterterrorism. These two countries serve as prominent examples in this regard. However,

this domain remains highly vulnerable to similar abuses. Together, these cases demonstrate that far-right politics cannot be understood solely within the boundaries of the nation-state. Instead, they emerge within transnational networks where economic, political, and cultural resources are exchanged and adapted.

In conclusion, external actors have played a significant role in shaping and empowering far-right movements across the globe. Whether through direct financial assistance, geopolitical alignment, or the production of ideological narratives, these actors expand the reach and resilience of far-right politics. Recognising this dimension is essential for understanding the persistence and global spread of far-right movements in the twenty-first century.

## Conclusion

The far right, leaving aside certain exceptional contexts, neither constitutes an autonomous ideological framework capable of sustaining itself globally nor genuinely represents a coherent social group. However, one of its greatest achievements lies in constructing discursive tools that exploit the alienation of lower classes from democratic regimes—a condition produced by the neoliberal mode of governance that steadily undermines democracy. This success has been amplified by the far right's ability to access the necessary medium through contemporary communication technologies. At the same time, the involvement of states and interest groups, which deploy these movements as instruments of attack and propaganda, provides the far right with significant resources.

As a result, the far right contributes to the exclusionary reconfiguration of democracies, the normalisation of both overt and covert forms of racism, and the growing prominence of securitised narratives in domestic and foreign policy. Nevertheless, the structural conditions that gave rise to the far right also hold national and international politics captive.

Both national establishments and the international system exhibit significant weaknesses in listening to people's demands and translating these into action. The very reason the far right proves effective, after all, is that it channels mass mobilisation through populism against bureaucracies stripped of political agency, only to redirect that energy toward new constellations of vested interests.

Unless international law and communication function properly, unless the socio-economic inequalities that constitute the primary drivers of migration and class resentment are addressed, and unless democratic institutions are reshaped into mechanisms through which popular voices directly influence politics—rather than stagnant bureaucracies in the hands of technocrats—the far right and similar movements will continue to find fertile ground for exploitation. Furthermore, the capture of communication tools by economic and political interest groups enables large-scale manipulation of public opinion. By contrast, an egalitarian, free, yet effectively regulated global communication sphere could provide the conditions for replacing polarisation and exclusionary rhetoric with a democratic global public sphere.



(Haim Zach / GPO / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

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