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Türkiye's “-lateralisms” in Asia: A Multi-Vectorial Analysis

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ABSTRACT *This study aims to illustrate that multi-vectorial approaches in foreign policy could not only be practical but also productive for middle powers. With this aim, the study conceptualizes Turkish foreign policy in Asia with multi-vectorism, a foreign policy behavioral pattern that has been mainly utilized for post-Soviet countries' concurrent interactions with the West (the EU, the U.S.) and the non-West (Russia). The study, firstly, argues that Asian international relations require a more composite re-definition of multi-vectorism, since in Asia, due to the intra-regional fragmentations and diversions, there are more than the conventional two vectors, the West and the non-West. By considering this argument the study applies multi-vectorism to Türkiye's foreign policy in Asia by comparing the practicability of different interaction patterns, e.g., multilateralism, minilateralism, and bilateralism. The study, secondly, argues that Türkiye's multi-vectorial foreign policy in Asia is particularly successful in its bilateral relations and less so in its multilateral and minilateral interactions.*

Keywords: Türkiye, Asia, Foreign Policy, Multi-Vectorism, Bilateralism, Minilateralism, Multilateralism

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Introduction

This study examines Türkiye's relations with the South, Southeast, and East Asian sub-regions of the Asian continent¹ from the perspective of multi-vectorial foreign policy. Multi-vectorism is not clearly defined or widely applied in international affairs of particularly proactive middle powers. In addition to its limited usage, it has a specific focus on the foreign policies of the post-Soviet space states. This article aims to offer a more comprehensive explanation of multi-vectorism by focusing on various schemes of interactions.

Two articles specifically applied multi-vectorism to Turkish foreign policy. The first one by Agnes Nicolescu, which was published more than a decade ago, examined Türkiye's multilateralism with its Euro-Atlantic and Middle Eastern partners with an emphasis on "Neo-Ottomanism" as an element of Türkiye's identity search.² A more recent one by Igor V. Vokhmintsev and Razil I. Guzaerov utilized an applied quantitative method to analyze Türkiye's foreign policy between 2014 and 2022. The study used the President of the Republic of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign policy contacts on the Presidency of Türkiye website.³ The first study is not only outdated but also disregards a very significant component of Türkiye's multi-vectorial foreign policy, which is Asia. The second work, due to its quantitative analytical focus, disregards the interaction between historical, cultural, commercial, and non-state elements of Türkiye's foreign policy, which has been very significant and motivating for deepening multi-vectorial relations in Asia.

Considering this gap in the literature, this study aims to achieve theoretical and empirical aims. Theoretically, it focuses on unfolding the concept of multi-vectorism and its significance for middle powers' foreign policies. Secondly, it also links this significance to the practical value of three different inter-state interaction schemes, e.g., multilateralism, unilateralism, and bilateralism. It enquires which of these schemes would suit the multi-vectorial foreign policy patterns of middle powers better. Thirdly, it conceptualizes Türkiye's foreign policy in Asia as multi-vectorial by applying multi-vectorism to Türkiye's multilateral, unilateral, and bilateral interactions in the region. In this application, the study compares the practicability and effectiveness of these different types of interactions in Türkiye's different foreign policy attempts and instruments in Asia.

Via these aims, the study underlines that multi-vectorism in Asia is more complex than its conventional usage, which focuses mainly on the foreign policies of post-Soviet states. The conventional usage of the concept puts forward two main vectors: the West and the non-West, which is also applicable in Asia. There are Western (the U.S., Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) and non-Western (China, Russia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangla-

desh) elements/vectors that interact in the region. Yet, a mere West and non-West dichotomy is inadequate due to the intra-regional and sub-regional diversions and conflicts in Asia. In other words, there are many more vectors in Asia due to these diversions. This requires a much more multi-faceted and multi-layered foreign policy approach when/if a middle power wants to engage with the region successfully. This study argues that Türkiye's relations with Asia fit into the conceptual framework of multi-vectorial foreign policy, although they have not been conceptualized with this concept so far. Türkiye has been developing relations with the Asian actors on both the West/non-West and Asia-specific multiplicity of vectors. The West/non-West and Asia-specific fragmentations and diversions have not been holding back Türkiye to deepen its relations with the region. Yet, this success is not the same for each type of interaction scheme, i.e., multilateralism, minilateralism, and bilateralism. The study argues that bilateralism, due to its less institutional and ruled-based and, therefore, more flexible structuring, which better absorbs power asymmetries, has been a more productive scheme for Türkiye's multi-vectorism in Asia.

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The study follows this line of argument via three sub-sections. The first underlines the theoretical relevance of multi-vectorism for middle powers. The second section defines multilateralism, minilateralism, and bilateralism and compares their advantages for multi-vectorial foreign policies of middle powers. The last section conceptualizes Turkish foreign policy as multi-vectorial and examines this concept's influence on the multilateral, minilateral, and bilateral interactions of Türkiye in Asia.

Multi-Vector Foreign Policy: Theoretical Relevance

Multi-vectorism has been mostly used to define the foreign policy behavior of the post-Soviet states in the 2000s, more particularly for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Mongolia, Armenia, and Ukraine.⁴ The behavior signifies their alternate cooperation with the EU and Russia. It is a foreign policy pattern relying on “cooperation and cohabitation”⁵ by prioritizing cooperation over rivalry and tension. This cooperation is not necessarily built up with like-mindedness but pragmatism, which “is motivated solely by the perceived interests of the state in achieving its [foreign] policy objectives.”⁶ Due to the erratic nature of pragmatism in international relations, multi-vector foreign policies could also be “shifting, incoherent, and ideologically vacuous.”⁷ Regarding

Utilizing multi-vectorism only on Central Asian states' non-ideological and pragmatism-oriented foreign policy applications overlooks the concept's explanatory power on current foreign policy trends

and liberal models of state behavior. Particularly due to its multifaceted nature, multi-vectorism leads to a “diversification of trade partners”⁹ for middle powers. This could be particularly economically and strategically lucrative for countries like Kazakhstan and Türkiye, which are situated between the Asian and European markets. Such diversification could also increase the autonomy of these middle powers vis-a-vis the requirements of their great power alliances.

However, utilizing multi-vectorism only on Central Asian states' non-ideological and pragmatism-oriented foreign policy applications overlooks the concept's explanatory power on current foreign policy trends. Since today's international relations are more multi-polar and interdependent, multi-vectorism now has more relevance in theorizing foreign policies of middle and small powers.¹⁰

After the Second World War, the two main vectors in global politics can be labeled as the West and the non-West. Yet, especially in the 2000s, both are no longer rigidly aligned within themselves. This gives multi-vectorism an additional application. Working with the West and the non-West at the same time, due to these two groups' inner fragmentations, makes almost any country's foreign policy multi-vector. To be more precise, the members of the Western vector, are members of a variety of institutional schemes, e.g., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe, and ANZUS. Yet, in quite a few international issues, such as the Iraq War (2003), the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, the rise of China, and even the war in Ukraine, they are not in complete consensus.¹¹ Although the members of the non-West, particularly in Asia, are not as institutionally rigidly aligned as the Western vector, they still participate in several regional organizations as partners, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations +6 (ASEAN+6), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and

the post-Soviet states, these shifts were the results of the EU and Russia's pushing and pulling of these states in opposite directions.⁸ On the other hand, although there was a clear asymmetrical power status between these states vis-à-vis Russia and the EU, none of these great powers successfully managed to pull these small-middle powers into their strategic and economic orbits.

Multi-vectorism with its pragmatic nature, its focus on self-interest, and the significance of multifaceted cooperation for commercial benefits fits into both realist

the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) Asia and Pacific Regional Organization (APRO). Like the non-West, their interests do not necessarily coincide regarding the issues in the South China Sea, territorial boundaries (India and China, India and Pakistan), maritime security issues (between Japan and China), and conflicts over natural resources, particularly water.¹² In short, today's complex multipolarity and intertwined nature of regional issues have been contributing to the applications of multi-vectorism in the foreign policy of the countries that are concurrently collaborating with the West and the non-West.

Multi-vectorism enables middle and small powers to maintain a pragmatic equal distance to greater powers without necessarily putting too much diplomatic energy into balancing their relations with them. Via multi-vectorism, they can switch from one great power to another depending on their contextual pragmatic interests. Although the relationship between a middle/small and great power is naturally asymmetrical, with this switching, the former could "mitigate the dilemmas of dependence."¹³

Due to such practicability, although multi-vectorism has been conceptually used to define the post-Soviet Central Asian states, it has been rationally utilized by many other middle and small powers. Yet, the literature used different concepts to define this utilization. For example, Southeast and East Asian states' diplomatic strategies regarding their relations with the U.S. and China, which could also fall into multi-vectorism, are conceptualized with omni-entmeshment and complex balancing. These states have not become members of strict institutional alliances either with China or the U.S., but instead, they created a "web of sustained exchanges and relationships,"¹⁴ including all major powers that aimed to formulate "overlapping spheres of influence in the region that are competitive but positive-sum."¹⁵ With complex balancing, Southeast Asian middle powers increase the "number of major states that have a stake in regional security."¹⁶ Hedging, which is "a middle way between balancing and bandwagoning [as] a third strategic choice,"¹⁷ is also used to define these middle and small powers' relations with the U.S. and China. Hedging is not "passive neutrality" for these powers but looking for opportunities "to pursue deep engagement with external"¹⁸ powers. With these strategies, which are multi-vectorial at the same time,¹⁹ these middle and small powers not only avoided violent interactions/competition between great powers but also maintained successful and profitable relations with them.²⁰ On the other hand, this outcome is not only a result of these middle powers' skillful diplomacies but also a product of the competition between great powers. This competition increases middle powers' values and leverage as alliance partners for great powers and enlarges their area of maneuvering, i.e., to swing/switch between these rival great powers. Their aim with such a switch is to extract more pragmatic interests or favorable deals from the competing sides.



Turkish Deputy
Minister of
Foreign Affairs
Bozay (C), Turkish
Director General
for Multilateral
Economic Affairs
Altuğ (3R), and
Ambassador of
Mexico Hernandez
(3L) attend the
MIKTA meeting
within the Antalya
Diplomacy Forum
in Antalya, Türkiye
on March 3, 2024.

CEMAL YURTTAŞ /
AA

Since the 2000s, due to middle and small powers' increased value, great power alliances became not the only valuable and profitable diplomatic instruments for their foreign policy aims. In other words, middle and small powers have also become beneficial allies for each other, sometimes even more than their great power partners. This very fact led to the increase of complex bilateral, unilateral, and multilateral cooperation schemes between these lesser powers, particularly in Asia. ASEAN is possibly one of the oldest and the most well-known ones. It focuses on "economic growth, social progress, and cultural development" and promoting "regional peace and stability" in Southeast Asia. It has quite a large spectrum of collaboration between members covering "economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields."²¹ MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Türkiye, and Australia) is another example that created a transregional grouping with a multifaceted agenda covering "international economic cooperation, economic-security linkages, and traditional international security."²² The group aims to underline the opportunities for middle powers through which they can contribute to global governance by underlining the importance of confidence-building measures to augment the like-mindedness among its members.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to argue that great powers completely lost their significance for middle and small powers in their multi-vector policies. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) brings the U.S., China, and Russia together with Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, and several other Asian middle powers to "support

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sustainable economic growth and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region” and to develop free and open trade in the region to encourage economic and technical cooperation for regional economic integration.²³ The East Asia Summit similarly brings the Western and non-Western vectors together, e.g., the U.S., Russia, China, India, Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, with other small and middle powers such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei. The summit has a similar aim of “dialogue and cooperation on broad strategic, political, and economic issues of common interest and concern to promote peace, stability, and economic prosperity in East Asia.”²⁴ Another similar structure is the G20, which brings the Western and non-Western vectors together by congregating the U.S., Germany, France, Italy, Japan, the UK, Canada, and Australia with China, Russia, India, Türkiye, Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Republic of Korea and South Africa. The G20 also has a multiplicity of objectives ranging from balanced global growth to energy, employment, and anti-corruption.²⁵

The number of these schemes, their members, and the issues that they cover show that multi-vectorism has become an unspoken trend. An important commonality of these schemes is their emphasis on classical realism’s “low politics” elements, such as trade, environment, energy, education, finance, and global health trade cooperation. Strategic and defense relations do not necessarily top the agenda of multi-vectorism.

Although it seems like a very advantageous strategy for middle and small powers, certain restrictions could halt multi-vectorism’s practical success. The multi-faceted nature that enables middle and small powers to switch between great powers is the main advantage of multi-vectorism. Yet, this advantage can be interrupted by formal rules put in place by great powers in their cooperation with lesser powers. Since great powers, as rule makers, often establish and enforce rules that support their interests in their relations with smaller powers, ruled-based institutional cooperation would decrease the bargaining power of lesser states.²⁶ Regarding multi-vectorism, these rules would bind the middle and small powers and significantly restrict their multi-faceted behavior and switching between different vectors. Therefore, no type of cooperation/interaction scheme is useful for multi-vectorial foreign policies. The very nature of multi-vectorism led this study to examine the types of interactions, i.e., “-lateralisms,” to uncover which type(s) could be more useful for the effective employment of this foreign policy approach.

“-lateralisms” in Foreign Policy: A Comparison of Interactional Schemes

Three main interaction schemes can be taken into consideration regarding middle and small powers’ foreign policies: multilateralism, minilateralism, and bilateralism. Each scheme’s value, usefulness, and practicability for multi-vectorism of middle and small powers are different.

Multilateralism could be defined both quantitatively and qualitatively. The former definition focuses on the number of parties, either negotiating or collaborating, and the interaction between three or more actors, state or non-state, is recognized as multilateral. The qualitative definition underlines more distinctive elements,²⁷ which have a particular emphasis on inter-state affairs. States via multilateralism coordinate their interactions “through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions.”²⁸ Through these arrangements and institutions, multilateral schemes not only exert generalized organizing principles, or even rules but also indivisibility on their members. These also create diffuse reciprocity between the members. Especially generalized organizing principles “specify appropriate conduct for” certain inter-state “actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence.”²⁹ Indivisibility refers to the existence of public goods recognized and accepted by the members. Diffuse reciprocity is an expectation of the parties in a multilateral scheme that there would be a “rough equivalence of benefits.”³⁰ In short, multilateralism requires “agreed-upon rules and principles” eventually causing “some reduction in policy autonomy” of the members.³¹ This lack of autonomy also underlines the restrictive nature of multilateralism, especially for middle and small powers, since the actions of actors, the goods at stake, and even the benefits to be achieved need to be specified and agreed upon by every member and changing this specification and agreement would require at least a majority of members. During the negotiations of these changes, middle and small powers could be manipulated or even purged by the great powers due to their asymmetrical power status.

Especially with the rise of middle powers, the popularity of multilateral schemes has been in decline together with stagnation in their reforms, fulfillment of the objectives, and attempts to deepen global cooperation.³² The above-stated formal institutional structuring of multilateral schemes is furthered “tightened by their bureaucracies and complex mixtures of national interests [that] slow down decision-making processes and taking prompt actions.”³³ Since the development levels, trade potentials, and threat perceptions of the middle and small powers are significantly varied in Asia, institutionalized multilateral schemes have been losing ground in the region. The variation of economic, political, and security capabilities of their members, which has been an issue since the *détente* era of the Cold War, further weakens these schemes due to the inequitable financial and strategic support of the members. This

disproportionate burden-sharing has been resulting in opportunism and free riding of lesser powers.³⁴ Another reason wearying multilateralism is the rise of nationalism, the far right, and the nation-state, which became clearer with the COVID-19 crisis.³⁵ The last but not least reason is the continuing challenge of the non-Western powers on the Western ruled-based system and its institutions. The trade war between the U.S. and China, which goes hand in hand with Beijing's efforts to alter Western liberal norms, demonstrates this challenge.³⁶ In addition, the failure of the UN agencies and the EU on a variety of issues also shows the decreasing functionality of multilateralism.³⁷ The multilateral agendas of these institutions could not meet the expectations regarding climate change, cybersecurity, asylum seekers, and pandemics.³⁸ These very reasons have not only been reducing the efficacy of multilateral schemes but also making them counterproductive.³⁹

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A more flexible and less institutional pattern of interaction is minilateralism. Regarding its quantitative definition, there is no specific number of members. The concept is defined as “multilateralism with small numbers.”⁴⁰ A “magical” number for minilateralism is also claimed as between a dozen and 20.⁴¹ Yet when this comes to Asia, this number goes down to “three or four.”⁴² Due to the various types of state and non-state interactions, it would not be quite precise to give a certain number of members of minilaterals, but it can still be argued that three is acceptable for this scheme.⁴³ What makes minilateralism more appealing to the middle and small powers is its qualitative value. These schemes do not have rigid rule-based institutionalism, which allows its members the option to engage with state and non-state actors at the same time with an array of policy aims. Together with this, their small number of parties leads to fewer national interests in negotiations, which makes these schemes easier to establish and maintain.⁴⁴ The emphasis here is that regarding the number of members, the smaller the scheme the better for commitment to a “joint vision, and clear and time-bound aims.”⁴⁵ Thus, minilateral schemes have recently been more frequently used in international trade and security interactions.⁴⁶

It is not only the number of members that differentiates minilateralism from multilateralism. The former aims for more practical, short-term results rather than generalized organizing principles and indivisibility. This informality makes minilaterals appealing for cooperation. They aim for “the largest

What makes bilateral schemes more of a fashion is the less need to develop rules or norms to specify appropriate conduct for their members

possible impact on solving a particular problem” with the smallest possible number.⁴⁷ Therefore, in unilateral schemes, the parties do not necessarily maintain their arrangement or cooperation after this particular problem is collaboratively solved.⁴⁸ Since unilaterals are mostly preferred by middle and small powers, they are more resilient to “power asymmetries.”⁴⁹ Therefore, unilateralism is after efficacy and efficiency more than equity.⁵⁰ It proved its efficiency in various areas, ranging from supply chain resilience to blockchain, and economy to climate change due to its ease in decision-making.⁵¹ It

is even more preferable in the security realm, especially for non-traditional threats. The reason for this preference puts forward another advantage of unilateralism over multilateralism. Unilateral interactions in the security realm prevent the manipulation of small and middle powers’ threat perceptions and national interests in general by the great powers, as is frequently seen in multilateral schemes between great, middle, and small powers. With these features, unilateralism especially between the middle and small powers challenges multilateralism.⁵² Via functional unilateral schemes, middle and small powers can increase their strategic and economic influence⁵³ on certain sectors of global affairs⁵⁴ “incommensurate” with their power status.⁵⁵

Unilateralism is particularly preferred in Asia⁵⁶ due to two main reasons. Firstly, unilateralism’s less institutional and even informal interaction patterns are more suitable for the foreign policy behavior of Asian middle and small powers. Secondly, and more distinctively, the rivalry between the U.S. and China has been weakening the multilateral schemes in the region and motivating lesser actors to organize themselves in unilaterals.⁵⁷

The third and even more widely used scheme in Asian inter-state affairs is bilateralism. In the last decade, it has been used in a variety of interactions in investment, security, and trade.⁵⁸ These schemes are even less unilateral, as they are composed of two members, and even more exclusionist than unilaterals. In bilateralism, two state actors “give particular privileges to one another that they do not give to other countries.”⁵⁹ During bilateral interactions, these actors develop a normative belief that their issues should be dealt with by one-to-one links, without involving the private sector, or multilateral schemes.

What makes bilateral schemes more of a fashion is the less need to develop rules or norms to specify appropriate conduct for their members. In these schemes, the relations are formulated depending on the expectations, needs, and requirements of only two parties on a case-by-case basis.⁶⁰ A rough equivalence or diffuse reciprocity is not truly required for unilaterals, rather there needs to be

a “simultaneous balancing of specific quids-pro-quo by each party.”⁶¹ Bilateral schemes “can be asymmetric due either to an imperfect balance of power or, alternatively, to a difference in the nature of actors.”⁶² States come together in bilateralism as long as the relationship satisfies their expectations. This makes bilaterals less vulnerable compared to multilaterals since the latter can be easily weakened by intra-organizational divides or disagreements. Such “pragmatic robustness” makes bilateralism preferable “to advance commercial interests.”⁶³

The comparison of the three schemes above shows that middle and small powers’ foreign policy aims can be restrained by two important elements. One is the great powers’ asymmetrical power status, and two, the rigidity of the rules that are also adopted and enforced by these great powers. Multilateral schemes set up by great powers therefore could easily impose these restrictions on middle and small powers. Even in Asian multilaterals, e.g., ASEAN, the SCO, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which do not operate with strict rules or strong institutionalization, great powers’ foreign policy aims and needs, still inflict such restrictions on middle and small-power members. Although there are power asymmetries between great and small powers and even middle powers themselves, unilateral and bilateral schemes have less of a potential to exert similar restrictions since they are more flexible, short-termed, narrow-focused, issue-based and can easily be dismantled without damaging their parties’ relations in general.

Since multi-vectorism requires flexibility to work with the “multiple vectors” of the West and the non-West, unilateral and bilateral schemes could be more productive. The comparison of Türkiye’s multilateral, unilateral, and bilateral interactions in Asia provides an example of this productivity.

Influence of Multi-Vectorism on Türkiye’s “-lateralisms” in Asia

Although Türkiye has been institutionally well-aligned with the Western vector as being one of the most significant members of NATO, its comprehensive commercial relations with the EU, its membership in the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, it also has a rising interest and engagement in Asia. This interest and engagement used to be elaborated via the “shift-of-axis” in Turkish foreign policy and alongside the lines of developing political and economic relations with Russia and China. This tendency has become clearer after the failed coup of July 2016, which increased the rift between Türkiye and its Western allies, particularly the U.S.⁶⁴ Although Türkiye does not specifically aim to be a staunch ally of the anti-Western geopolitical and geoeconomic alliance led by Russia and China, there has been “frustration” within the Turkish leadership with Western values. These frustrations have been amplified by Türkiye’s well-known and unsatisfactorily

ongoing engagement with the EU for full membership. President Erdoğan's criticisms against the Western-led international order and his "native-and-national" emphasis underlining the need to improve Türkiye's self-sufficiency in every sphere⁶⁵ also show the necessity to develop a foreign policy paradigm that will increase Türkiye's influence in the non-West. This need has been bolstered by President Erdoğan's "The World Is Bigger than Five" discourse.⁶⁶ Although these emphases and developments are not an exhaustive list of reasons for Türkiye's multi-vectorial foreign policy,⁶⁷ they give the background of Ankara's general tendency to deepen its foreign policy focus in Asia.

The most concrete and official result of this general tendency was the Asia Anew Initiative launched in August 2019.⁶⁸ The initiative is also a good example of multi-vectorism. Although Asia Anew has multifaceted aims, its overwhelming objective is to re-design Türkiye's relations with both Western and non-Western actors interacting in Asia. The initiative might sound more like a political and strategic apparatus, but its main impetus is to deal with Türkiye's trade asymmetries with the regional actors.⁶⁹ Thus, the initiative aims to increase the cooperation and engagement of the Turkish actors with their Asian, i.e., non-Western, counterparts both in the sectors that Türkiye has a relative advantage such as tourism, conventional defense technology, and construction but also in the ones that its capabilities have still been developing, e.g., high-tech, finance, infrastructure, and energy. Multi-vectorism influences Turkish foreign policy, especially in Asia, have been leading Ankara to open new paths and new patterns of interaction with the non-Western elements in the region.

Multi-vectorial foreign policy has a particular significance regarding the international relations of Asia. This pattern does not operate in the region only in terms of the vectorial divisions between the West and the non-West but also concerning intra-regional/sub-regional divisions. In other words, the divisions in Asia are not only a result of the non-West and West dichotomy but also of the enduring inter-state issues between Asian actors. Thus, the vectors in Asia are not only Western and non-Western but due to the conflicting interests and enduring conflicts between Asian actors, they are also multidirectional. As stated above, even within Asian regional organizations these intra-regional issues, although tacitly, have influence. Some very well-known of them are the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan,⁷⁰ the border disputes between India and China,⁷¹ territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam,⁷² the Taiwan Strait conflict between South Korea and China,⁷³ the disputed islands (Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan) issue in the East China Sea between Japan and China,⁷⁴ and Myanmar and Bangladesh maritime boundary dispute.⁷⁵ These divisions between Asian actors would require extra-regional actors, like Türkiye, to approach the region with a multi-vectorial foreign policy, which Ankara has been utilizing in the last decade. This enables Türkiye to work and

cooperate with a variety of Asian actors regardless of their conflicts or tensions between each other.

On the other hand, multi-vectorial foreign policy does not produce the same level of success on every "-lateral" interaction. The above-stated restrictions of multilateralism can be observed in Türkiye's interactions with Asian multilaterals. Regarding minilateral interactions, these limitations are much less influential. When it comes to bilateralism, the flexibility of the pattern helps Türkiye to carry out multi-vectorism more effectively.

Two particular examples highlight the restrictions that Türkiye's multi-vectorial approach faced regarding Asian multilaterals. As examined above, multilaterals, especially under the influence of great powers, are not particularly fruitful for middle and small powers to comprehensively fulfill their foreign policy objectives. The multi-vectorial influence on Turkish foreign policy regarding Asian multilaterals is seemingly non-Western. The first case is Ankara's efforts to be a member of the SCO. Türkiye's stalled EU accession process has led President Erdoğan to intermittently emphasize the strategic value of the SCO, almost as an alternative to the EU.⁷⁶ Although the SCO's charter does not specifically define its region, its membership requirement states that "the SCO membership shall be open for other states in the region that undertake to respect the objectives and principles of [the] Charter and to comply with the provisions of the other international treaties and instruments adopted in the framework of the SCO."⁷⁷ Ankara's efforts to be a full member of the SCO have not borne fruit. Türkiye was only accepted as a dialogue partner in 2012 as well as the presidency of the SCO Energy Club in 2017.⁷⁸ In addition to "not belonging" to the above-said SCO region, Türkiye's systematic and institutionally continuing strategic and economic relations with the Western vector mainly through NATO and the EU is another limitation to its potential membership in the SCO. This limitation was expressed by the previous Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in August 2017, pointing out that Ankara's prospects of deepening its links with the SCO are "quite limited."⁷⁹ The other multilateral that Türkiye similarly emphasized its significance has been ASEAN, in which the outlook for Ankara is even duller. Although ASEAN is not necessarily under the influence of great powers, a parallel region-based exclusion limits Türkiye's expectations to be a full member. ASEAN's charter is clearer than the SCO's regarding the definition of its region. It states that the admission of new members shall be based on the "location in the recognized geographical region of Southeast Asia."⁸⁰ Although President Erdoğan stated Türkiye's readi-

Regarding bilateral examples of Türkiye's interactions with its Asian counterparts, we observe its approach to working with both Western and non-Western actors and with Asia-specific fragmented vectors

In East Asia, in addition to relations with China and ASEAN, Türkiye's relations with Japan follow an upward-sloping curve, although under a slightly different influence of culture and commerce, which is not as significant as in South Asia

South Korea, and Australia, represent all these vectors. The first represents non-Western, the second non-Western and Western, and Australia profoundly represents the Western vector. Via its flexible institutional structure and unambitious aims, MIKTA is a non-threatening and innovative partnership framework. What makes MIKTA particularly important for multi-vectorism is its position displaying that multiple-vector representatives could cooperate on the same platform. MIKTA has been “deepening the degree of familiarity and trust”⁸² between its members and as a niche grouping and since its foundation in 2013, has been functioning quite smoothly. Since Türkiye is a founding member of this grouping, it was not restrained by any sort of institutional requirement but due to the “lack of subject specificity,”⁸³ to what extent it has been contributing to Türkiye's clout in Asia is a question mark.

Regarding bilateral examples of Türkiye's interactions with its Asian counterparts, we observe its approach to working with both Western and non-Western actors and with the above-mentioned Asia-specific fragmented vectors. This specific pattern in Ankara's relations with the region has been ostensibly more numerous and voluminous.⁸⁴ Türkiye's two foremost non-West bilateralisms in the region are with Russia and China. Even if the former is not a part of South, Southeast, and East Asia via the SCO, it has an influence, especially on South Asia.⁸⁵ Although these two great powers of Asia rhetorically and practically challenge the Western world order, Türkiye's multi-factorial foreign policy prevents it from completely detaching itself from the West.

One very significant example of the multi-vectorial influences on Türkiye's bilateralism in Asia is the deepening of its relations with Russia, especially after the 2016 failed coup. Strained relations with Washington due to its reluctance to support Ankara's struggle to eliminate Fetullah Gülen's clandestine movement, which was listed as a terrorist organization after the coup attempt and

ness for full membership in 2015, Ankara so far only achieved sectoral dialogue partnership and observer status in ASEAN's multinational police force.⁸¹ Those principles of these Asian multilaterals have been limiting the multi-vectorial boost for Turkish foreign policy objectives in Asia.

Regarding minilaterals, one example is MIKTA. This scheme, particularly regarding its Asia (and Pacific) members, is a clear example of multi-vectorial influence since it has non-Western and Western vectors collaborate at the same time. The Asia-Pacific members of the scheme, Indonesia,



Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan (R) attends the 24th MIKTA Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New York, U.S. on September 23, 2023.

TUR FOREIGN MINISTRY / MUSTAFA AYGUN / AA

Russia's outlawing this movement's institutions as early as 2006 by underlining their ties with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency brought Türkiye and Russia together relatively quickly.⁸⁶ This affinity was deepened by Türkiye's purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems regardless of the U.S. reaction.⁸⁷ The other very significant non-Western vector in Türkiye's bilateralism in Asia has been obviously with China. Like other middle powers in the region, Türkiye has also been interested in participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with an expectation to attract at least a segment of the \$900 billion Chinese investment program together with the BRI's potential to reduce the transportation time of Turkish products to East and South Asia.⁸⁸ To increase its role in the “Middle Corridor” (or the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative) within the BRI, Türkiye carried out several noteworthy infrastructure and transport projects like the Yavuz Sultan Selim and Osmangazi bridges, the Eurasia Tunnel, the Marmaray commuter rail line, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the Edirne-Kars railway, and Filyos, Çandarlı, and Mersin container ports.

Regarding lesser non-Western powers of Asia, the multi-vectorial influence on Türkiye's foreign policy has been operating via two factors: cultural affinities and commercial opportunities. In these bilaterals, Türkiye has been utilizing both state elements, such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), and the Türkiye Scholarships Program of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and non-state elements, particularly its construction, tourism, and defense firms. Türkiye interactions with Southeast Asia are good

examples of multi-vectorism since the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Türkiye (DEİK), one leading Turkish business associations, launched a working group with the business councils of Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Singapore. The working group aimed to develop links with these countries in the fields of e-commerce, energy, tourism, and investment.⁸⁹ As a result of these efforts, the Philippines became an important client of Turkish defense technology.⁹⁰ The free trade agreements with Malaysia and Singapore between 2015 and 2017 increased Turkish foreign trade in the region by 16 percent.⁹¹ Malaysia also became an important client of the Turkish Baykar company's Bayraktar TB2 drones, together with T129 ATAK helicopters, PARS armored vehicles, and MUHAFAZ remote-controlled weapon systems.⁹² In Türkiye's bilateral relations, particularly with Malaysia, the significance of historical links that date back to the 16th century to the Malay Sultan Ahmed Shah era should also be underlined.⁹³ Türkiye's bilateral relations with Indonesia have also been strengthening due to the impact of these cultural affinities, which particularly have a religious focus. In 2020, the two countries concluded a memorandum of understanding to deepen bilateral diplomatic relations that had a special emphasis on standing together against the rising Islamophobia and supporting the cohesion of the Ummah.⁹⁴ Although the 2017 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement targeted a bilateral trade volume of \$10 billion for 2023, the trade volume between Türkiye and Indonesia reached about \$2 billion in 2021. In this trade volume, Türkiye's imports from Indonesia were \$1.6 billion, which surpassed its exports, which were \$271 million.⁹⁵

In South Asia, the cultural influence on Türkiye's multi-vectorial bilateralisms is even more prominent.⁹⁶ One obvious example is Pakistan. Especially due to the historical links, Türkiye and Pakistan have been enduring relations.⁹⁷ Like Malaysia, Pakistan has also been an important client of Turkish defense industry products.⁹⁸ Yet, this does not mean Türkiye's relations with India are completely aloof. In India, similar to Pakistan, TİKA and *Diyanet* have been providing humanitarian assistance to deepen Türkiye's humanitarian and cultural diplomacy footprint.⁹⁹ The bilateral trade volume with India has also been rising. In the previous decade, it rose from \$635 million to \$4.01 billion.¹⁰⁰ In Bangladesh, religious closeness played an important role when the relations were strained due to the execution of the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami in 2016.¹⁰¹ Yet the continuing high-level visits of Türkiye, which emphasize the unifying role of the Ummah and the support to the multilateral struggle for Rohingya refugees revitalized the relations.¹⁰²

In East Asia, in addition to relations with China and ASEAN, Türkiye's relations with Japan follow an upward-sloping curve, although under a slightly different influence of culture and commerce, which is not as significant as in South Asia. Both countries' relations with the West during their modernization

periods and later becoming two staunch Western allies during the Cold War created a West-oriented commonality.¹⁰³ Therefore, Türkiye's bilateralism with Japan represents the Western vector of its foreign policy's multi-vectorism. Relatedly, in the diplomatic realm, Türkiye is a prominent element of Japan's strategic calculations as a gateway and major partner in the Middle East.¹⁰⁴ In 2015, to deepen this bilateralism, Japan opened an independent office specializing in Türkiye within its Foreign Ministry.¹⁰⁵

Ankara's multi-vectorial approach in Asia, boosted by culture and commerce, increased Türkiye's value in the strategic realm as well. In 2010, Türkiye's relations with China, Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore were upgraded to a level of strategic partnership.¹⁰⁶ This strategic value was also transformed into another multi-vectorial process in the defense realm. Türkiye concluded defense cooperation agreements with Indonesia,¹⁰⁷ Malaysia,¹⁰⁸ South Korea,¹⁰⁹ and Pakistan.¹¹⁰ These bilateral practices aim to increase both Türkiye's conventional arms sales to these actors and its technology sharing with joint production in defense.

In short, multi-vectorial foreign policy has been a general tendency of Ankara in the last decade with specific applications in Asia. One principal consequence of these applications is that they operate more effectively via bilateral and some minilateral schemes rather than multilaterals.

Conclusion

Türkiye's deepening interactions with Asia are a composite result of international and domestic factors and developments. Internationally Asia, including the Pacific, has been in the strategic calculations of almost every great and proactive middle power not only regarding the low cost of production in the region but also its gigantic domestic markets. The rising powers of the region both great and middle, also appeal to extra-regional actors due to their various cooperation potentials. The tension between China and the U.S. in the region also opens a variety of options for the middle powers since both great powers need extra and intra-regional middle and small powers to consolidate their positions. Domestically, Türkiye's foreign policy profile has become more composite than ever before. Since the last decade, Türkiye is not merely a West-

Türkiye's multi-vectorial cooperation with almost every great, middle, and small power in the region consolidates its position as a reliable partner in defense cooperation, a conventional warfare equipment provider, a humanitarian diplomacy actor, and an important representative of the *ummah*

Türkiye as an extra-regional actor proved its capacity to work with any actor on a bilateral level without being too restricted by the Asia-specific vectorial diversions in addition to the general non-West and West dichotomy in the region

ern power or as a cliché says a “bridge” between the West and the East. The country has become a significant actor in many regions of the world, including Asia, as an independent and proactive middle power. With this composite profile, it carries out multi-leveled and multi-faceted relations, particularly on bilateral terms with Asian actors. The West and non-West divisions and also other intra-regional fragmentations have not been damaging Türkiye’s relations with the regional actors, which snugly fits into the concept of multi-vectorism.

This fit is not only valid in terms of the conventional usage of the concept but also its peculiar setting in Asia.

Türkiye’s multi-vectorial foreign policy applications in Asia are successful, especially in the diplomatic, humanitarian, and cultural realms. Türkiye’s multi-vectorial cooperation with almost every great, middle, and small power in the region consolidates its position as a reliable partner in defense cooperation, a conventional warfare equipment provider, a humanitarian diplomacy actor, and an important representative of the *ummah*.

Although Türkiye has been successfully applying multi-vectorial foreign policy in the region, especially in the commercial realm, Ankara’s expectations have still not been met. In this sense, Türkiye’s commercial bilateralism with China is a good example. In Türkiye’s trade deficit with Asia, China has the biggest share. In 2020, Turkish imports from China totaled \$2.7 billion and the exports were \$22 billion.¹¹¹ More generally, the Turkish Ministry of Trade records in 2020 show that the share of Asian countries in Türkiye’s exports was 14.3 percent, and in its imports was 33.7 percent. Thus, the Asian countries play a significant role in Türkiye’s trade deficit. To reduce this imbalance, Türkiye has prioritized increasing cooperation in blockchain, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, cloud computing, 5G services, and the sharing economy.¹¹²

As almost any middle power, Türkiye’s multilateral and even minilateral multi-vectorism in Asia has been restrained by the general structural features of these interaction schemes. However, regardless of such deficiencies, Türkiye as an extra-regional actor proved its capacity to work with any actor on a bilateral level without being too restricted by the Asia-specific vectorial diversions in addition to the general non-West and West dichotomy in the region. As an example, Türkiye develops relations with China, India, Pakistan, Japan, South

Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar at multiple state and non-state levels, regardless of their tensions with each other in dyadic or multilateral forms. ■

Endnotes

1. There are two reasons that this study focuses on these sub-regions but not Central Asia. First, Ankara's relations with Central Asia have been on a different institutional, historical, and cultural scale, which would exceed the focus of this study. Second, Central Asia is not within the regional foci of this special issue.
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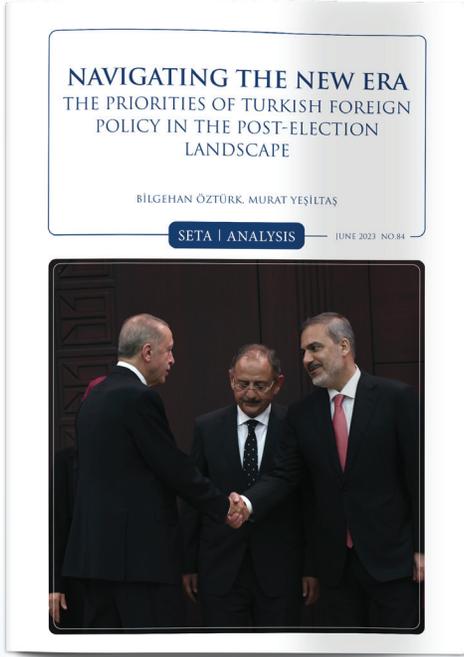
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