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Wandering in the in-between

What does Turkey's bid to join BRICS mean, and can Ankara be a partner for all?

Turkey's foreign policy under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has always been characterised by an emphasised independence from its allies, with its own interests always remaining at its core — irrespective of whether they contradict the general policy of its Western partners.

As far as the EU is concerned, this divergence can be justified by the absence of formal commitments between Ankara and Brussels, as Turkey's EU membership negotiations were frozen back in 2017 after decades of waiting until they were opened. (According to the European Commission's 2023 data, Turkey supported only 10 per cent of EU foreign and security policy decisions.) At the same time, within NATO, Ankara's 'autonomous' position on a number of fundamental issues has repeatedly provoked criticism from other Alliance members. It is worth recalling the acquisition of Russian S-400 systems by the country, its refusal to join sanctions against Russia after the start of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or the additional conditions put forward by Erdoğan on the way to the membership of Finland and Sweden in the Alliance.

Now, if Turkey officially applies for BRICS membership, it could become the first NATO country to join the bloc with Russia, China and Iran — authoritarian regimes that see the organisation as an opportunity to create an alternative to the 'unjust Western world order'. A world order that, in their understanding, is epitomised by NATO.

Does this mean that Turkey is making a geopolitical U-turn to the east and is abandoning traditional Euro-Atlantic partnerships? Not at all. Rather, it speaks to the consistency of Ankara's foreign policy course, which under the current government is based on three basic principles: pragmatism, balancing and dialogue with everyone, whether they be opposing parties in a state of hot war (like Russia and Ukraine) or Ankara's own recent enemies (such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia or the Assad regime in Syria, with whom Turkey is trying to normalise relations after long conflicts).

Seeking solutions for domestic troubles

For the incumbent government, a potential BRICS membership must fulfil quite specific objectives. First of all, it should allow Turkey to *get out of the twisted economic* doldrums into which Erdoğan's unorthodox fiscal policies have driven the country in previous years.

Although the current, pro-Western Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek is working hard to bring the economy back to pre-crisis levels and restore the confidence of international partners, his 'shock therapy' has so far failed to produce the expected results. Inflation is estimated at 70-80 per cent, the Turkish lira continues to lose value, and the increase in the discount rate from eight per cent to 50 per cent in less than six months has made credit virtually unaffordable for small and medium-sized businesses. According to the Association of Chambers of Commerce and Exchanges of Turkey, more than 15 000 companies have been forced to close since the beginning of 2024 alone, a 28 per cent increase from 2023. Even more are on the verge of bankruptcy. All of this calls for new decisive steps from the government, especially against the backdrop of opposition calls for early elections as soon as next year.

Ankara expects that expanding trade and economic co-operation with Brazil, India, China and other major emerging economies will allow it to enter new markets and bring new investments into the country. Turkey's participation in regional transport corridors and energy projects, particularly with Russia, Egypt and the UAE, is also considered an important prospect.

The only real security guarantee for Turkey remains its membership in NATO, while BRICS is not a military-political bloc, and some of its members (primarily Russia and Iran) directly threaten Ankara's interests in the region.

However, we should not forget that Ankara's main foreign trade partner remains the European Union, which accounts for almost a third of its trade (in 2022, trade turnover was about €200 billion, or 31.4 per cent). By comparison, this figure is 11 per cent with Russia and seven per cent with China. Also, despite the significant increase in the share of Arab capital in recent years, the stability of the Turkish economy depends primarily on the steady inflow of American and European investments.

The security situation is even more revealing. The only real security guarantee for Turkey remains its membership in NATO, while BRICS is not a military-political bloc, and some of its members (primarily Russia and Iran) directly threaten Ankara's interests in the region. At the same

time, the discussions around Turkey's possible BRICS membership should *send a clear political message to its Western partners*: the lack of progress in negotiations with the EU is pushing the country to seek alternative alliances. Erdoğan has repeatedly grumbled that he 'will not tolerate any new demands or conditions on Turkey's accession to the EU', which 'has kept the country waiting at the door for 40 years'.

Erdoğan's famous slogan 'The world is bigger than five countries' (the permanent members of the UN Security Council) not only reflects the aspirations of the countries of the notional Global South to have greater representation in international organisations, but also resonates well with Russian and Chinese narratives about the need to fight 'American hegemony', creating a common ideological platform for all BRICS members. But outright anti-American rhetoric in no way prevents the Turkish leadership from consistently building political dialogue and military-technical cooperation with the United States and other Western partners.

At present, Ankara continues to skilfully balance between the two countries, trading with Russia and developing cooperation in defence and strategic industries with Ukraine.

Moreover, Turkish experts note that its simultaneous presence in 'both camps' would have advantages for the West. In particular, Ankara could play a kind of 'friend among strangers' role, conducting shuttle diplomacy between the two blocs, mediating negotiations and helping to de-escalate tensions between NATO, on the one hand, and Iran, Russia and China, on the other.

Not least mentioned in this context is the role Turkey could play in future negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow, if or when they take place. At present, Ankara continues to skilfully balance between the two countries, trading (often bypassing Western sanctions) with Russia and developing cooperation in defence and strategic industries with Ukraine. Turkey's own security considerations require it to prevent Russia from winning; its geopolitical calculations and economic interests do not allow Russia to lose crushingly.

And although the country's potential membership in BRICS carries significant risks for Ukraine (it should be recalled that Turkey, India and China are currently the largest buyers of Russian 'offshore' oil), we should not expect any fundamental changes in Ankara's policy in the Ukrainian direction. Crimea is and will remain Ukrainian for Turkey. Not only because the norms of international law stipulate it, but also because Turkey's long-term interests in the Black Sea require it.



Yevgeniya Gaber
Kyiv

Yevgeniya Gaber is a PhD candidate in political science and senior analyst at the Centre for Contemporary Turkey Studies at Carleton University (Canada). She was formerly deputy director of the Ukrainian Diplomatic Academy. Her main area of interest is the foreign policy of Ukraine, Turkey, and the security problems of the Black Sea region.

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