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**Türkiye, while playing the role of mediator in times of crises, tries to realize its connectivity strategy**

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Türkiye, during the continuing new Cold War has avoided choosing sides in the rivalry of the great powers, and instead it has pursued a balancing and autonomous strategy that has avoided polarization between the groups of countries allied against each other, providing the third option. Ankara is determined to operate along the contours of its strategic autonomy – like the EU – especially in the conduct of foreign and security policy. It has given priority to diversifying relations with other countries as much as possible, be it in Asia, Middle East, Latin America, Africa, or Europe. Thanks to the pivotal geographical location of Türkiye until now it has acted successfully as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia as was witnessed in the case of the grain deal. Likewise, it can also play a constructive role for instance in terms of being a bridge in trade between the Euro-Atlantic world and Eurasia. In fact, this was a one of the central reasons for the recent visit of Türkiye’s president Erdoğan to Samarkand, Uzbekistan to attend the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Türkiye, certainly in its attempts to build diversified relations in its neighborhood by playing the role of facilitator or acting as a mediator between the conflictual sides, is aiming to contribute to the stabilization of conflicts in both the near and beyond regions. On the other hand, Ankara by building this role hopes to counteract its various political–economic problems – most notably rising economic concerns emanating from the Ukrainian war resulting in skyrocketing energy prices and destabilization of grain and other products supply chains - caused by the current geopolitical rivalry that is taking place between the great powers. So, in this brief analysis we try to explain which tools Ankara is using in the conduct of Türkiye’s foreign and security policy, especially in the case of achieving the grain deal and her current positioning in the SCO summit.

### **Türkiye’s Connectivity Strategy and SCO Connection**

Türkiye participated at the presidential level for the first time – since Ankara obtained dialogue partner status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2012 – in Samarkand, Uzbekistan on 15-16 September 2022. The SCO, established in 2001, aims to strengthen good neighborly relations and mutual trust among the eight member states. SCO is known to be the largest organization in the Eurasian region covering nearly 40 percent of the world’s population as well as 30 percent of the world’s economic production.

The recent SCO Summit has brought the presidents of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan together with the prime ministers of India and Pakistan which are the eight members of the organization. Iran recently upgraded to the level of member status and was also attending. Türkiye was invited as special guest together with presidents of other countries - Azerbaijan, Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Mongolia. On the sidelines of the SCO Summit, Turkish President Erdoğan was able to hold bilateral meetings with the leaders attending the summit, including Russian President Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Economic wise, Türkiye has recognized that it has a great opportunity to expand its trade relations and can increase its exports to SCO member states. The total trade volume of SCO member states presently has increased from 668.09 billion dollars in 2001 to 6.06 trillion dollars in 2020. Likewise, SCO member countries’ share of global trade has increased from 5.4 percent in 2001 to 17.5 in 2020. Hence, this summit brought a chance for Ankara to interact with the participating countries to develop viability and work on constructing

mutually beneficial economic conditions for both sides-facilitating Turkish companies to expand their presence and play a more active role in emerging economies<sup>1</sup>.

This visit of Türkiye's president to this most recent SCO summit can be explained through Ankara's connectivity strategy, which the government is lately using in the conduct of its foreign policy. Connectivity is known to be defined as "a multi-layered concept, combining aspects of cooperation, geopolitical competition as well as tremendous economic and strategic opportunities and challenges". In other words, "connectivity may be considered as a way of shaping the flows of globalization through strategic investments in infrastructure"<sup>2</sup>. This phrase is surely not new to the IR community, because it has been used not only by the EU towards the Asia-Pacific region but also by other countries around Türkiye's neighborhood and beyond. Hence, the concept of connectivity is by no means exclusive to the EU. In recent years, several major players within and outside the Asia-Pacific region have come forth with their own interpretation of the concept of connectivity. For instance, in the case of China, it is the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) that was launched in 2013. Others like India, Japan, the United States and South Korea have also pledged to enhance connectivity in Asia and the Indo-Pacific with different kinds of engagements<sup>3</sup>.

As is well known, Türkiye for some time has been investing in infrastructure, both at home and in its region. In this regard, Ankara is maximizing its cooperation with an increasing number of countries, especially in South Caucasus and Central Asia as well as beyond, with both bilateral and trilateral agreements so that it can strengthen connectivity throughout Eurasia. In this regard, the Middle Corridor – formally known as the Trans-Caspian-East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative – reflects Türkiye's dream of building links to China via the Caucasus and Central Asia. This Middle Corridor trade route project aims to connect China to Europe via Turkish railways and highways. What is most important, unlike the EU's connectivity strategy, Ankara's Middle Corridor is presented as complementary to China's BRI rather than as a competitor. Moreover, due to the continuing Ukrainian war, the Northern Corridor seems to be losing its chance of becoming operational while the Middle Corridor's chance seems to be increasing. In fact, the first cargo train from China to Europe using the Middle Corridor arrived in Türkiye in November 2019, likewise the first cargo train from Türkiye to China arrived in December 2020. Besides, the Bakü-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which was completed in 2017, is predicted to have carried 3 million travelers together with 17 million tons of cargo by 2034. Among these major projects is Canal İstanbul, which will be an artificial 45 km long shipping canal that will connect the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea. Therefore, Türkiye's engagement with SCO creates a crucial new opportunity for Ankara to coordinate its Middle Corridor Initiative with the SCO countries' connectivity strategy, for instance China's BRI. Furthermore, Türkiye is aiming to play a critical role in East-West rail trade. Ankara, acting in accordance with its connectivity strategy projected for this region, is also cooperating with South Caucasian and Central Asian countries- at the bilateral and

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<sup>1</sup> Yunis Sharifli, "Türkiye's Foreign Policy Priorities at SCO Summit, *Anadolu Agency Analysis*, 17 August 2022, [ANALYSIS - Türkiye's foreign policy priorities at SCO summit \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/2022/08/17/yunis-sharifli-turkey-s-foreign-policy-priorities-at-sco-summit), visited on 12 September 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Manuel Widman, "The EU Connectivity Strategy: Putting Words into Action", *EIAS Briefing Paper*, No: 2, August 2021, [The-EU-Connectivity-Strategy-.pdf](https://www.eias.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-08/20210821_EU_Connectivity_Strategy.pdf), visited on 2 September 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Plagemann, "Small States and Competing Connectivity Strategies: What Explains Bangladesh's Success in Relations with Asia's Major Powers?", *The Pacific Review*, Taylor and Francis online, Vol: 35, No: 4, pp. 736-764, 2022, [Small states and competing connectivity strategies: what explains Bangladesh's success in relations \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09653259.2022.2111111), visited on 11 September 2022.

trilateral levels- so that it will strengthen certain available connections in this part of Eurasia. Therefore, recent developments in September 2022 such as Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan and Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan trilateral cooperation are indicators of Ankara's newly launched connectivity strategy. Moreover, Türkiye's membership of the Turkic States organization is another avenue to pursue Ankara's aims of establishing a zone of friendship and cooperation in Eurasia. Moreover, the support Türkiye gave to Azerbaijan during and after the Second Karabagh War can primarily be explained by the special relationship between the two states described by the popular motto as "*one nation two states*". Furthermore, the EU decision to greatly reduce the amount of gas bought from Russia, due to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, has naturally led to an increase in the geopolitical and geo-economical importance of the Caucasus and Central Asia regions. This situation is therefore expected to further increase the Middle Corridor's importance. The attendance of both presidents Aliyev and Erdoğan to the recent opening of the second Zangilan airport<sup>4</sup> which was freed from Armenian occupation in the Second Karabagh war, is a sign of a new and strong will to activate the Zangezur Corridor in the near future.

All in all, these new efforts of rebuilding infrastructure- lately freed in the Karabagh region together with initiation of the Zangezur Corridor- is hoped to bring about new roads, railways and airports. The expectation is that both Türkiye and Azerbaijan will be the new centers of attraction in terms of introducing new options for transportation and energy routes which will link Europe to Asia.

However, the new regional cooperation efforts launched recently by Türkiye, whether at the bilateral level between Bakü-Ankara or trilateral and multi-lateral levels in Eurasia, be it under the roof of Turkic States Organization or SCO, does not necessarily mean that Ankara is moving away from West to the East. On the contrary, Ankara views its new stand in SCO as part of its objective of creating a connectivity strategy between East and West. The new actors in SCO like Turkic States Organization could be expected to bring new political and economic opportunities for Ankara especially at this time with the Ukrainian war, where every actor in the world is in search for alternative means of trade and energy. Most important of all, Ankara's recent efforts of building this new ring of friends beyond its borders to the East-West and North-South is clear evidence of its conduct in foreign and defense policy which can be described as strategic autonomy.

### **Türkiye's Mediator role in the Conclusion of the Grain Deal**

Türkiye, the UN, Russia, and Ukraine signed an agreement in Istanbul on July 22 to resume grain exports from three Ukrainian Black Sea ports, which had been blocked soon after the start of the Ukrainian war on 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. As of the 21<sup>st</sup> October, since the first ship left Ukraine under the grain deal on 1<sup>st</sup> of August, more than 363 ships with over 8 million tons of agricultural products had left ports<sup>5</sup>. After the blasts observed in the Kerch Strait

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<sup>4</sup> Diyar Güldoğan, "Turkish President to Visit Azerbaijan for Opening of Zangilan Airport", *Anadolu Agency*, 19 October 2022, [Turkish president to visit Azerbaijan for opening of Zangilan airport \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/azerbaijan/turkish-president-to-visit-azerbaijan-for-opening-of-zangilan-airport/2022-10-19), visited 20 October 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Diyar Güldoğan, "9 more Grain Ships Leave Ukraine under Istanbul Deal: Türkiye", *Anadolu Agency*, 21 October 2022, [9 more grain ships leave Ukraine under Istanbul deal: Türkiye \(aa.com.tr\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/ukraine/9-more-grain-ships-leave-ukraine-under-istanbul-deal-turkiye/2022-10-21), visited 22 October 2022.

Bridge, which resulted in a retaliation by Russia using massive numbers of missiles and Iranian origin suicide drone assaults that hit Ukrainian cities, the IR community developed doubts about whether it would be possible to extend the grain deal beyond its November 19, 2022, deadline. That is why a need arises here to talk briefly about why the grain deal's future is a concern within the IR community and what makes Türkiye's role important in this process. First, the warring sides for the first time during the Ukrainian war were able to conclude a grain agreement, despite the continuing fighting, due to Türkiye's remarkable success in reassuring both Moscow and Kyiv regarding the export of grain from Ukraine's ports, which had up to that time been blocked. Secondly, with the initiation of the grain deal the expected food crisis and food shortages especially in the global south were prevented- at least until now. Therefore, the likelihood of instability stemming from the looming shortages appeared to be prevented in places like Egypt, Lebanon and elsewhere. So, despite the Western critics who stated that Türkiye's strategy of maintaining a balancing act between Ukraine and Russia is dangerous while the war becomes more prolonged and brutal, this prediction has not come true. On the contrary, in times of war Ankara's insistence on keeping the channels of dialogue open with Moscow surely has yielded this important grain deal that was most desperately needed at the time. This grain agreement is of course directly related with Kyiv's and Moscow's trust in Türkiye that has been constructed over the years. Additionally, Ankara's conduct of a continuous balancing strategy regarding the two sides, together with its proactive diplomacy surely has helped to strengthen this feeling of trust towards Türkiye.

At this point, it would be beneficial to explain how Ankara has managed to pursue a balancing act towards Kyiv and Moscow during the Ukrainian war. First, on the side of Ukraine Türkiye has always supported the territorial integrity of the country. Ankara's relation with the Ukraine government was very close even before the eruption of war. In this regard, Ankara had not only provided TB2 armed unmanned aerial vehicles to the Kyiv government but had also signed a military agreement that it expected to facilitate Ukraine to produce drones domestically. Unfortunately, the war has hindered some of these plans that aimed to increase cooperation between Ankara and Kyiv. When Selçuk Bayraktar, during a video interview to CNN international, said that Ankara will not be selling its drone capacity to Moscow, it was another evidence of Türkiye's balancing act between the two warring sides. Furthermore, Türkiye after a few days of examining the Russian assaults, which started on February 24<sup>th</sup> in Ukraine, came to the legal conclusion that what was happening between the two sides can be defined as *war*. Hence, after this crucial decision Ankara applied one of the clauses of the 1936 Montreux Convention that gives Türkiye the right to close the Straits to the passage of warring sides. In this way, both the spillover effects of war to the Black Sea was prevented and when Ankara describes the situation in the Ukrainian terrain as war, it is legally able to deny the description of Russia's *special military operation* terminology. Although Ankara denounced the Russian attack on Ukraine as illegitimate, on the diplomatic front it continued trying to bring the two sides together both in the Antalya Diplomacy Forum and Istanbul meeting. The main objective of Ankara was then -via the use of diplomacy and maintaining the channel of communication with Moscow- to stop the war by seeking an honorable solution out of this impasse. Additionally, Ankara has continued to take a visible role in NATO exercises in the Black Sea with the objective of maintaining deterrence against Moscow but at the same time it has also abstained from following Western sanctions imposed on Russia. There are reasons why; first, Ankara is not a member of the EU and hence it does

not have any obligation to follow their policies. Secondly, Türkiye does not believe that these sanctions would help to persuade Moscow to stop its war in Ukraine<sup>6</sup>.

To summarize, due to the implication of its balancing strategy during the new Cold War era and of it conducting a pro-active diplomacy based on trust – between Ankara-Kyiv and Ankara-Moscow respectively – Türkiye has yielded a very productive outcome in the realization of the grain deal. Türkiye’s very precious neutral position during the Ukrainian war as well as its connectivity strategy – with maximal diversification of its relations with many countries in its neighborhood and beyond, including its Western allies – is aiming to create islands of stability and peace, so that the international community can have peace dividends in times of war and conflict.

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<sup>6</sup> Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney, “Food Corridor: Türkiye’s Role as Mediator”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol.23, No: 3 Summer 2022, pp. 43-51.