

Strategic Leverage and Regional Balancing: Türkiye's Role in Trump's Middle East Agenda and The Shifting Architecture of Regional Power

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Abstract: This paper explores the shifting role of Türkiye in the Middle East during Donald Trump, outlining how Ankara utilized an evolving regional and global context to rebrand itself as a regional power. Trump's foreign policy was a radical break from liberal internationalism and embraced instead the neorealist policies of selective engagement, strategic refusal, and transactional diplomacy. Here, the recharted geography, Türkiye navigated the fine line between NATO alliance obligations and burgeoning relationships with Russia, China, and regional actors, asserting its national sovereignty and strategic involvement. Analyzing Türkiye's balancing acts in key theatres — from post-Assad Syria and nuclear diplomacy with Iran to defense-industrial cooperation in the Gulf — through the prisms of neorealist and neoclassical realist lenses, this paper argues that. It argues that Trump's strategic strategy inadvertently encouraged middle powers like Türkiye to push their leverage to the fullest extent while meeting Washington's burden sharing expectations.

Keywords: Trump Doctrine, Türkiye, Middle Powers, Neorealism, Strategic Balancing, Middle East Policy, Regional Influence, U.S. Foreign Policy, Geopolitical Repositioning.

Introduction: Over the past decade, the Middle East has undergone a series of transformations, serving as a persistent region for shifting power dynamics, systemic transitions, and the contentious formation of modern nation-states. Today, global powers are once again becoming deeply engaged with the evolving new security architecture of the Middle East. The strategic balance in the region is deteriorating rapidly, with tensions escalating toward the prospect of open military confrontation - most notably between Iran and Israel, whose rivalry now threatens to burn a broader regional conflict. The Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7 represented more than a periodic intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; it served as a compound for a broader structural shift in the Middle East's security planning, exposing deeper regional fault lines and accelerating geopolitical realignments. In addition, regime change in Syria led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham which substantially supported by Türkiye, has prompted regional powers to urgently reassess the strategic consequences and broader

regional implications of this unexpected shift. These dramatic turn of events marks not only the dissolution of a longstanding political order but also the beginning of a fundamental reconfiguration of power relations across the region.

Following these, the region faces profound socio-economic emergencies with the high level of unemployment, food and water shortages, inflation and debt. According to World bank data the region has witnessed an extreme reduction in poverty rates between the 2024 and 2025 poverty estimation periods. World Bank estimates based on revised purchasing power parity (PPP) levels, the extreme poverty rate went up from 6.1% (September 2024, \$2.15/day) to 8.5% (June 2025, \$3.00/day). Statistically, the number of people living in extreme poverty went up from 26.1 million to 37.1 million, indicating an ever-deepening socioeconomic crisis. These factors show the complex nature of the region's transformation, with wide-ranging implications for both regional stability and broader international security

In this background, Türkiye posits itself as a rising middle power by showing its mediatory efforts. Firstly, the geopolitical influence of Türkiye is in the shape of its geography. Located at the intersection between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Türkiye is a passage to energy, commerce, and immigration, as well as a buffer region between hot spots. One of the biggest challenges in this turbulence period for Türkiye is to reconcile its regional ambitions with the needs and limitations of its formal alignments. Secondly, Erdoğan's figure plays a key role to reshape Türkiye's foreign policy. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is repositioning himself as a major player on a number of different geopolitical fronts. During the days since the signing of a historic peace agreement that put an end to a four-decade-long insurgency by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Erdoğan was personally thanked by President Donald Trump for his key role in bringing about the removal of U.S. sanctions against Syria. Erdoğan's political influence was also evident when Trump made his initial official foreign trip of his second term, during which the U.S. president met with Syria's acting president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, in Riyadh—a historic summit attributed to Turkish involvement. Thirdly, Ankara was turned into a center of multilateral diplomacy through successful Iranian nuclear negotiations with European states and sporadic and delicate war-related talks between Russian and Ukrainian leaders. As Trump seeks to reassert U.S. diplomatic leadership on these thorny matters, Erdoğan is now the leader who possesses the credibility, regional influence, and strategic corridor to execute Washington's goals—on his terms. Being a member of NATO Türkiye needs resolve the contradictions between its security commitments and its independent policy choices.

Geopolitical Balancing and Economic Statecraft in Trump's Middle East Policy

Donald Trump's presidency was a distinct departure from the foreign policy of the United States towards the Middle East that had defined some of his precursors, diverging sharply from the liberal internationalist tradition that it embodied. Whereas past administrations had ranked multilateralism first, promotion of democracy, and rule-based order, Trump's policy accepted neorealism's fundamental tenets, by which state survival, relative gains, and the readjustment of commitments are most vital in a world order that is anarchic. This diversion favored bilateral over multilateral engagement and prioritized transactional benefit over normative objectives. Critics characterized his policy as random and coercive, but closer review reveals a measured rebalancing of U.S. regional engagement within the constraints of a rapidly

changing multipolar Middle East. This policy sought to shift the U.S. from open-ended military involvement toward influence exercised through selective coercion, economic statecraft, and alliance rebalancing.

Neorealism, and particularly the Waltz's version thereof, views the international system as anarchic, compelling states to act as rational unitary actors with a desire for survival and power balancing. Trump's Middle East policy was informed by this logic in its emphasis on burden-sharing, strategic restraint, and the building of bilateral relationships that could serve as force multipliers of U.S. interests. At times his policy aligned with defensive realism, evidenced by his reluctance to escalate military engagement in such crises as post-October 2023 escalation in the region; at times it was similar to offensive realism, as was the case with the "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran, intended to alter the power balance in the region in America's favor through coercion. The coherence of Trump's strategy therefore depended less on ideologically driven dogmatic loyalty and more on a practical application of realist principles agreed to evolving structural dynamics in the region.

By Trump's second term, indications of strategic restraint were increasingly apparent. The October 7, 2023, Hamas strike against Israel triggered a swift regional escalation as Israel launched "Operation Rising Lion," a large-scale campaign against Iranian proxy networks in Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen and targeting key Iranian nuclear and military targets. In previous eras, such escalation could have been met with further U.S. military involvement. With Trump, however, America responded in a more measured way: diplomatically supporting Israel, launching targeted bombing of Iranian nuclear sites in Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan but, at the same time, enabling de-escalation through third-party mediators in Oman and Qatar. One of the most typical features of Trump's about-face was the substitution of economic statecraft with the vast military presence that had so long defined U.S. engagement in the region. This shift was amply demonstrated during his 2025 Gulf tour, which had included Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). On the journey, the government launched prospective transactions worth more than \$2 trillion, such as a \$142 billion arms package agreement with the UAE, a \$96 billion aircraft purchase agreement with Qatar, and a \$1.4 trillion artificial intelligence and infrastructure agreement with the UAE. A majority of them were non-committals or follow-ups on previous arrangements, but they carried great symbolic value, which was a reflection of a strategic realignment towards integrating the U.S. into the defense and economic networks of the Gulf through technology

transfers, defense sales, and infrastructure investment. Besides reinforcing bilateral security ties, it positioned the U.S. as a balance to China's emerging economic and technological influence across the region.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) occupied the core of President Donald Trump's Middle East policy during his second term both for geopolitical and economic reasons. Energy security remained a top priority, with Saudi Arabia—the world's largest oil exporter—exerting a decisive influence on global price stability and on the policy course of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+), considerations having direct bearing on U.S. domestic inflation and energy prices. From the perspective of strategic energy diplomacy, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were invaluable allies due to their capacity to impact the global energy market during the Russia-Ukraine war. While Moscow employed its energy exports as a geopolitical tool on Europe, the Trump administration relied on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to neutralize Russia's influence by stabilizing oil prices and production.

This alignment was a component of Trump's broader realpolitik strategy, in which energy cooperation was indirect means to degrade the geopolitical standing of competitors. Saudi leadership of OPEC+ and the UAE's expanding portfolio of energy investments in European and Asian markets enabled the United States to strangle Russian energy revenues without directly acting. Trump's personal diplomacy—manifested in the form of huge arms sales, transfers of advanced technology, and targeted economic incentives—also undergirded the Gulf cooperation, kept the supply chains secure and the oil prices at a level damaging to Russia's fiscal well-being. This was a subtle combination of geostrategic and economic power, embedding the Gulf states as key partners in a U.S. grand strategy aimed at curbing Russian power via market-based mechanisms rather than overt force.

Trump's deal-making foreign policy paid dividends in the form of what is broadly regarded as one of the greatest diplomatic achievements of his presidency: the Abraham Accords of 15 September 2020, establishing formal diplomatic ties between Israel and four Arab states—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. The agreements were not the outcome of lengthy multilateral peace talks, but of targeted bilateral negotiations where Washington acted as a facilitating actor and driven by a robust transactional logic. In exchange for normalization, the participating states were promised mixed strategic and material incentives: increased security cooperation against perceived common threats, mainly the Islamic Republic of Iran; improved access to trade, technology,

and investment with Israel; and, in some instances, direct American incentives like arms sales, cancellation of debt, or explicit acknowledgement of contested sovereignty claims

According to the neorealist theoretical framework, the Abraham Accords depict external balancing—formation of alliances to counter a shared threat in an anarchic international system. Here, Israel and its new Arab partners change their strategic orientation to create de facto anti-Iran coalition and set aside long-standing power struggle over the Palestinian cause in an offer to confront what they perceived to be a high pressing systemic challenge. This is in accordance with Stephen Waltz's "balance of threat" thesis, which is directed towards the observation that states group together not only against power, but against states whose capabilities are weighted by perceived aggressive intentions. The Arab partner states evaluated Iran's neighborhood behavior—its nuclear policy, proliferation of ballistic missiles, and support of Hezbollah- and Hamas-style proxy militias in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq—as threatening such as to require unprecedented strategic reorientation.

President Trump expanded United States military aid to Israel, a sharp revival of unconditional alignment. The administration formally notified Congress of a possible sale of more than \$7.4 billion in bombs, missiles, and other military gear, including thousands of 2,000-pound class bombs. Simultaneously, the Congressional Research Service reports that annual U.S. military aid to Israel, under the current Memorandum of Understanding parameters, remains robust at approximately \$3.3 billion per year until 2028. From a neorealist perspective, this deepened arms relationship cements the U.S.–Israel alliance as a strategic bulwark against regional aggression, specifically Iran and its proxy networks. Yet, such reinforcement has strategic costs: in the absence of a well-defined Israeli policy on Palestinian statehood or regional integration in the long term, this unconditional support risks limiting U.S. strategic flexibility, alienating Arab allies, and diminishing America's long-term credibility as honest broker in the search for peace.

Israeli–Iran Confrontation as a Case

The escalation of the Israeli–Iran confrontation between late 2023 and mid-2025 is among the most significant strategic developments in the Middle East since the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war. Until now, hostilities between the two countries had for years been confined largely to indirect conflicts—secret operations, cyberwar, and proxy wars. However, the sequence of events since the October 7, 2023 Hamas-lead assault on Israel, which claimed approximately

1,200 lives and saw some 250 hostages were seized, has altered this model in the direction of extended direct military confrontation. Iran's strategic depth in the Levant and beyond has historically rested on its "axis of resistance"—a network of armed non-state actors including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen. The October 2023 attack, backed by Iranian material and strategic support, spurred a hastened escalation of this network's operations. Between October 2023 and February 2024, Iran-aligned militias launched over 200 attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets in Iraq and Syria, while Hezbollah ramped up cross-border rocket attacks and the Houthis disrupted maritime trade in the Red Sea

The United States responded with a intended show of strength—first striking two Iran-backed facilities in Syria on October 26, 2023, and then striking 85 Iran-affiliated sites in Iraq and Syria on February 2, 2024. Yet the turning point in the war came on April 1, 2024, when an apparently Israeli air strike on an Iranian consular compound in Damascus killed two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) generals and five advisers. This was a symbolic breach of Iran's diplomatic preserve and formed Iran's first direct large-scale attack on Israel with more than 300 drones and missiles, most of which were intercepted by Israeli and allied defenses. The way forward from here charted a clear spiral of escalation. In response to Israel's assassination of senior Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, Iran fired 180 ballistic missiles in October 2024, which invited Israel's biggest-ever direct strike on Iranian territory—against air defenses, missile factories, and strategic industries. These attacks, combined with the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, effectively degraded Iran's forward-operating capability and changed the regional balance of military power.

When President Donald Trump returned to office in January 2025, he restarted his "maximum pressure" sanctions policy while also restarting the first direct U.S.–Iran nuclear talks since he pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. Israel opposed these negotiations, arguing that Iranian nuclear advancements posed an existential threat to its survival. The showdown took a turn for the worse on June 12, 2025, when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that Iran was breaching its Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations for the first time in two decades.

On the following day, Israel unleashed a coordinated attack against Iranian nuclear installations, missile factories, top military officials, and nuclear scientists. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi condemned the operation as "an act of war," retaliating with waves of drones and ballistic missiles. The Trump

administration escalated on June 21, 2025, when it hit three Iranian nuclear plants—Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz—with U.S. bunker-busters, rendering Trump the first U.S. president to openly engage in an Israeli attack on another country's nuclear program. Though Washington claimed the strikes delayed Iran's enrichment capacity by much, the IAEA approximated the delay as "only a matter of months". Iran's June 23 retaliatory missile strike against the U.S. Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar was bloodless, and a Trump-brokered ceasefire later that day temporarily froze the war.

This hierarchy is logical from a neorealist perspective, which reflects the reasoning of states behaving in an anarchic order, whereby survival and preservation of relative capability fuel strategic behavior. Israel's preemptive strikes on Iran's nuclear capabilities adhered to Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, where states align or act against perceived threats based on a composite of capability, geographical proximity, and threatening intent. Iran's combination of nuclear ambitions and proxy networks represented a systemic threat that Israel could not accept. Iran's reprisal strikes were also rational under neorealist theory, intended to sustain deterrence credibility and exhibit resilience amidst material losses. For America, Trump's collaboration with Israel, recourse to coercive diplomacy, and military escalation were all within a power-balancing calculus. Notably, this was a clear departure from liberal institutionalist policies that emphasize multilateral agreements and norm-based conflict resolution.

The clash also underscores the security dilemma—where one state's defense is perceived as offensive threats by others, triggering a self-reinforcing spiral of escalation. Israel's strikes, though legitimized in Jerusalem as preventive defense, reinforced Tehran's sense of existential threat, thus accelerating Iran's preparedness for direct use of force. Likewise, Iran's missile and drone attacks, depicted domestically as retaliatory deterrence, embedded Israeli and American determination for preemptive strike. Strategically, the 2023–2025 Israeli–Iran war rearranged the regional balance of power. Iran's "axis of resistance" was severely downgraded, Israel demonstrated extended strike capabilities into Iran, and U.S. willingness to engage directly in high-intensity interstate war in the Middle East was reaffirmed. Yet these tactical gains came at the cost of greater volatility and reduced diplomatic space—conditions neorealism expects are difficult to reverse under a multipolar, threat-driven regional order.

Türkiye's Strategic Repositioning in the Middle East.

Within the Turkish foreign policy establishment, the

emergence of an international system of multipolarity is widely regarded as an opportunity to increase strategic influence and broaden foreign policy options. Here, a powerful Russia is not just a competitor, but a valuable counterweight to Western dominance, and China is a sleeping “strategic reserve”—a reserve alignment that can be brought in to balance against reliance on the United States and Europe. This perspective positions multipolarity as a structural fact that widens Ankara's action space, reducing the necessity of unilateral alignment with the West, while maintaining its institutional mooring in NATO and economic space of the EU.

Türkiye's long-term strategic vision is in support of a “more balanced distribution of power” at both the international and regional levels, aspiring to be an actor in reconfiguring regional order. Its geopolitical narrative underscores its central strategic location at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa; its proximity to principal sites of conflict; and its dominion over key maritime chokepoints, including the Turkish Straits that control access from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. This geographical importance is matched by deep historical and cultural affinities with the Balkans, the Middle East, and the broader Islamic world—political capital Ankara frequently invokes in the cause of a more assertive role in EU foreign and security policy-making. From a neorealist view, Türkiye's position is a classic hedging policy seeking to balance the risks of over-reliance on one power group by cultivating alternative alignments. From a neoclassical realist view, the internal political inducements—specifically the AKP's support for an authoritarian-majoritarian conception of politics—intersect with systemic transformation to produce a foreign policy that is transactional toward the West and open to engagement with non-Western groupings.

Türkiye's evolving foreign policy objectives are increasingly backed by its expanding defense industrial capability. Türkiye's stunning breakthroughs in local military technologies—particularly unmanned aerial systems (UAS), missile systems, and electronic warfare—have enabled Ankara to demonstrate strategic autonomy and pursue a more assertive regional policy. This shift reflects not merely a rethinking of national security policy, but also Türkiye's deliberate attempt at being a revolutionary power in the evolution of the next-generation military systems and in their export. The intersection of geopolitical politics and technological innovation therefore becomes the critical underpinning of Türkiye's grander project to reinvent itself in the Middle East and beyond. Baykar, Türkiye's leading defense manufacturer, controls the world UAV marketplace—almost 65% of

unmanned aerial vehicle exports globally—while making around US \$1.8 billion in export sales in 2024, including sales of its Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı drone platforms. More broadly, Türkiye's exports of defense and aerospace increased significantly, to about US \$3.6 billion during the first half of 2025, a 25% year-on-year increase that reflects the country's growing role within the global defense-industrial complex.

From this stand point, the Trump administration viewed Türkiye as a pivotal partner in advancing its strategic objectives in the Middle East. As Washington recalibrated its military footprint in the region and adopted a strategy of offshore balancing, cooperation with capable middle powers became essential. Türkiye, with NATO's second-largest army and extensive experience in cross-border operations in Syria and Iraq, emerged as a natural candidate to fill the vacuum created by U.S. retrenchment. President Donald Trump's close personal relationship with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan further facilitated bilateral engagement, often bypassing bureaucratic hurdles typical of transatlantic alliances. Within Syria, Türkiye's local agency has increased since the fall of Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, as troops led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) commander Ahmed al-Sharaa took interim control. Türkiye's multilateral role—ranging from military deployments and buffer-zone creation to post-conflict transformation diplomacy—had an important part to play in brokering this evolution. The May 2025 Erdoğan-al-Sharaa encounter, which followed a virtual trilateral meeting with Trump, was a revealing intersection of strategic interests. Trump's decision to lift U.S. sanctions on Syria, describing al-Sharaa as “a true leader,” not only reflected Washington's willingness to renegotiate its policy on Syria but also endorsed Türkiye's mediation role in the region. Neorealism views this transformation as a fleeting intersection of strategic interests rather than a durable partnership, dependent on convergent threat perceptions and mutual benefit.

Outside these areas of overlap, there are long-standing structural tensions. Most prominent among them is American support for the YPG, the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, a terror organization Türkiye officially designates. Even though Trump's first term saw partial U.S. withdrawals from Syria and modest concessions to Turkish security interests, the March 2025 U.S.–YPG agreement shows that the issue is a hidden potential for tension. Similarly, the unresolved issue over Türkiye's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system—its exclusion from the F-35 program and CAATSA sanctions—is an extension for defense cooperation. In neoclassical realist terms, such controversies illustrate the limited nature of systemic

agreement should domestic political priorities and deeply ingrained security convention be at odds. The Gülenist network (FETÖ) crisis similarly remains a trust deficit in the bilateral relationship. While the political exigency of extraditing Fethullah Gülen ceased with his death, continued Ankara suspicion of U.S.-based FETÖ institutions continues to create perceptions of American hesitancy to fully address Turkish security problems.

The Middle Eastern political consequences of Israel's Operation Rising Lion, a strategic bombing of Iranian military and nuclear facilities in June 2025, reverberated throughout the region. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 45-minute call with U.S. President Donald Trump at the NATO Summit in The Hague was the result of Ankara's low-keyed diplomacy. Erdoğan hailed American mediated ceasefire and stressed that more talks were needed not just in calming Iran-Israel tensions but also in overcoming simultaneous crises, such as the Gaza war and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Türkiye's approach since the start was guided by the strategic thinking that the Israel-Iran clash was a personal challenge to its political interests and national security. Erdoğan criticized Israel's airstrikes as an "obvious provocation" and international law infringement, arguing that Tel Aviv's action destabilized the region and most probably intended to spark a regional war. Ankara has also strongly advocated for Iran's right to self-defense, part of Türkiye's broader adherence to a multipolar regional balance of power and diplomatic settlement of nuclear conflicts. Diplomacy by Türkiye exceeded condemnation. Erdoğan participated in multilateral backchannel diplomacy, including two direct phone calls with President Trump and one with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan publicly declared Türkiye's encouragement of U.S.-led nuclear talks, highlighting them as the only solution to the regional stalemate. Axios reported that Erdoğan and Trump had sought to negotiate secret U.S.-Iranian talks in Istanbul, although these broke down because Ayatollah Khamenei was unavailable.

By doing so, the action of Türkiye illustrates middle powers' ability to be geopolitical balancers during periods of system change. Taking advantage of its NATO membership, regional ties, and geographic location, Ankara has positioned itself not merely as an agent but also as a beneficiary of American abandonment of regional leadership. This is part of a larger trend in international politics, as middle powers take advantage of the strategic emptiness left by retreating unipolarity to amplify their relative regional position. Türkiye's approach to Iran during the Trump era was shaped by a pragmatic balancing of regional

stability, strategic autonomy, and alliance coordination. Despite the adversarial tone of Trump's Iran policy, Ankara remained committed to opposing nuclear proliferation while resisting any military escalation that could destabilize the region. As a country historically averse to regional instability, Türkiye signaled support for diplomatic efforts aimed at preventing Iran's reconstitution of its nuclear weapons capability, while avoiding endorsement of aggressive U.S. or Israeli military initiatives aimed at regime change. In this context, Ankara demonstrated a willingness to tighten economic sanctions and curb circumvention mechanisms—such as illicit banking activities—that could enable Iran to skirt U.S. restrictions. Simultaneously, Türkiye was positioning itself as a potential mediator in post-escalation diplomacy between Washington and Tehran. The "strategic sweet spot" envisioned by Ankara lay in assurances that U.S. pressure on Tehran was aimed not at regime collapse but at compelling a permanent rollback of Iran's nuclear ambitions—an outcome compatible with Türkiye's regional security priorities.

The unique personal rapport between President Erdoğan and President Trump further underpinned this potential alignment. Erdoğan was particularly appreciative of Trump's suspension of Syria-related sanctions, which contributed to the stabilization of Türkiye's southern border and helped consolidate its sphere of influence in post-conflict Syria. Moreover, Trump's general aversion to full-scale regime changes echoed Ankara's longstanding red line regarding the preservation of state structures in fragile neighboring states.

Despite these converging diplomatic interests, Türkiye remained unwilling to support, much less participate in, military action against Iran. The Islamic Republic, already weakened following the 12-day war with Israel and ongoing domestic unrest, appeared vulnerable to collapse under sustained pressure. Ankara feared that a disintegration of Iran could create uncontrollable spillover effects, including refugee flows, sectarian violence, and security vacuums along its eastern border. In the event of renewed Israeli airstrikes or unilateral U.S. operations, Türkiye risked either misalignment with U.S. policy or marginalization from a future regional settlement. To mitigate this risk, the Trump administration increasingly relied on direct presidential diplomacy. Frequent high-level communications between Trump and Erdoğan were seen as critical in preventing misunderstandings or miscalculations that could escalate into diplomatic crises. In parallel, U.S. policymakers explored confidence-building measures between Israel and Türkiye to ease tensions over their competing activities

in Syria—particularly in the southern (Israeli) and northern (Turkish) zones of influence. These efforts were aimed at fostering a more coherent regional security architecture among America's key partners while preserving U.S. retrenchment goals.

Against the background of public weariness with protracted U.S. involvement in the military, particularly in the Middle East, Washington's foreign policy has increasingly turned towards burden-sharing and regional coalitions more than direct intervention. According to a 2025 YouGov/Economist poll, 60% of Americans opposed U.S. intervention in the Iran–Israel conflict, and slightly more than 69% believe that the United States should stay out of future military interventions in the region unless directly threatened. This shifting public sentiment has been accompanied by a dramatic drawdown of U.S. military presence. While there were in excess of 250,000 American troops deployed in the Middle East during the peak of the Global War on Terror, now this deployments number less than 30,000—a strategic drawdown that is an articulation of the necessity for powerful, effective regional partners.

In the transforming world, Türkiye is particularly valuable as a partner through its growing regional influence, robust military-industrial potential, and congruence with leading U.S. strategic interests. Türkiye's defense exports totaled a record \$7.1 billion in 2024, an impressive increase from \$5.5 billion in the previous year, and its proportion of world arms exports doubled in the past half-decade—from 0.8% in 2015–2019 to 1.7% in 2020–2024. In the first half of 2025, the country exported over \$3.6 billion worth of defense and aerospace technology, a 25% year-on-year increase. Such metrics not only reflect Türkiye's growing operational autonomy, but also its rise as an effective stabilizing influence in the region.

In addition to its defense positioning, Türkiye also aims to become a strategic player in the high-tech technologies sector, including semiconductors and artificial intelligence. Through its National Technology Initiative and Türkiye 2030 Industry and Technology Strategy, Ankara aims to reduce technological dependency on foreign powers, diversify its economic base, and step into high-value industries. While its own local semiconductor capacity remains in nascent stages in Türkiye, its aspirations to be a regional manufacturing hub are watched by both Western and Eastern powers with equal interest. With Washington's overall strategic initiative focused on decoupling the Middle East from Chinese technology infrastructure, Türkiye's geopolitical position, its NATO membership, and its twin access to both European and Asian markets transform it into a key node in emerging U.S.-led

technology decoupling architectures. Thus, Türkiye is serving several U.S. foreign policy agendas concurrently: stabilizing Syria and northern Iraq through coordination of proxies; as a forward defense buffer for preventing Russia and Iran encroachment; and enabling a pragmatic, cost-effective model of engagement appealing to U.S. retrenchment desires. Ankara's mediating role—politically with Iran, militarily in Syria, economically with Arab Gulf nations—increases its value not only as a regional great power but as a strategic American enabler of interests on the terms of limited U.S. commitment.

CONCLUSION

The Trump administration's departure from liberal internationalist norms and its embrace of a transactional, realist foreign policy framework created both constraints and opportunities for regional actors in the Middle East. For Türkiye, this systemic recalibration represented a critical moment for strategic repositioning. Rather than passively adapting to U.S. retrenchment, Ankara actively leveraged the structural shifts brought about by Trump's doctrine—characterized by strategic restraint, bilateralism, and selective coercion—to assert its influence as a regional middle power. Anchored in a neorealist logic and tempered by domestic priorities consistent with neoclassical realism, Türkiye adopted a multi-vector foreign policy that combined alliance diplomacy, geopolitical balancing, and regional activism. Throughout Trump's presidency, Türkiye demonstrated its capacity to function simultaneously as a NATO ally, a mediator in conflict-prone zones, and a pragmatic actor engaging Russia, Iran, and emerging Eurasian powers. Its assertiveness in Syria, diplomatic role during the Iran–Israel escalation, and nuanced approach to the U.S. "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran illustrate a deliberate strategy of maximizing national autonomy while avoiding direct entanglement in superpower rivalry. Türkiye's positioning was also shaped by structural divergences—particularly over the YPG issue, S-400 sanctions, and differing regional threat perceptions—which exposed the limits of U.S.–Türkiye alignment in the absence of institutional trust and convergent strategic cultures.

The Trump era thus served as a revealing case for understanding how middle powers operate in a volatile and transitional international order. Türkiye's actions reflect key tenets of neorealism: state survival, relative gains, and power balancing. Yet, its behavior also substantiates the neoclassical realist view that foreign policy outcomes are shaped not merely by systemic incentives but also by leadership perceptions, identity politics, and internal strategic narratives. Türkiye emerged not as a client state nor a revisionist outlier

but as an autonomous and indispensable regional actor navigating the fluid terrain between declining U.S. primacy and rising regional multipolarity. In broader theoretical terms, the Türkiye–Trump era dynamics underscore the adaptive strategies of middle powers in an age of unipolar withdrawal. Türkiye’s ability to fill strategic vacuums, mediate in great power standoffs, and recalibrate alliances confirms that systemic uncertainty—when paired with institutional memory and strategic flexibility—can be turned into opportunity. As such, Türkiye’s experience offers valuable insights into the evolving nature of middle power diplomacy and the shifting architecture of the post-American Middle East.

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