

SOFT BALANCING IN TÜRKİYE-U.S. RELATIONS DURING THE BIDEN ERA: AN ANALYSIS IN TERMS OF MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY AND ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

BİDEN DÖNEMİNDE TÜRKİYE-ABD İLİŞKİLERİNDE YUMUŞAK Dengeleme: ÇOK TARAFLI DİPLOMASİ VE EKONOMİK ÇEŞİTLENDİRME BOYUTLARIYLA BİR ANALİZ

İbrahim KURNAZ

Selçuk Üniversitesi

İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi

ibrahimkrnz@selcuk.edu.tr

ORCID: 0000-0001-7228-6536

ABSTRACT

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This study examines the impact of US foreign policy on Turkish foreign policy during the Joe Biden era (2021-2025) in the context of the soft balancing strategy. This study aims to analyze the strategic orientations that emerged in Türkiye's foreign policy during the Biden era and to theoretically position these orientations within the framework of a soft balancing approach shaped by multilateral diplomacy and economic diversification practices. Based on Paul and Pape's soft balancing approach as a theoretical framework, the study adopts a descriptive-interpretive foreign policy analysis approach using a qualitative research method through foreign policy discourses, official documents, international organization reports and academic literature. The findings reveal that during the Biden era, Türkiye avoided direct conflict and tried to limit the influence of the US through multilateral diplomacy, institutional cooperation (NATO, SCO, OIC, TDT, D-8), and economic tools. This strategy provided Türkiye with the opportunity to both remain within the Western alliance and gain autonomy at the regional level. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that Türkiye's soft balancing strategy, unlike classical military balancing, operates through institutional, normative and diplomatic tools. Thus, the study hereof reveals that Türkiye has strengthened its capacity to produce strategic autonomy as a medium-sized state.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Joe Biden dönemi (2021-2025) ABD dış politikasının Türk dış politikası üzerindeki etkilerini yumuşak dengeleme stratejisi bağlamında incelemektedir. Çalışma, Biden dönemiyle birlikte Türkiye'nin dış politikasında beliren stratejik yönelimleri analiz etmeyi ve bu yönelimleri çok taraflı diplomasi ile ekonomik çeşitlendirme pratiklerinin şekillendirdiği yumuşak dengeleme yaklaşımı çerçevesinde kuramsal olarak konumlandırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Teorik çerçeve olarak Paul'un ve Pape'nin yumuşak dengeleme yaklaşımını esas alan çalışma, nitel bir araştırma yöntemi kullanarak, dış politika söylemleri, resmi belgeler, uluslararası örgüt raporları ve akademik literatür üzerinden açıklayıcı-yorumlayıcı dış politika analizi yaklaşımını benimsemektedir. Bulgular, Türkiye'nin Biden döneminde doğrudan çatışmadan kaçınarak çok taraflı diplomasi, kurumsal işbirlikleri (NATO, ŞİÖ, İİT, TDT, D-8) ve ekonomik araçlar aracılığıyla ABD'nin etkisini sınırlamaya çalıştığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu strateji, Türkiye'ye hem Batı ittifakı içinde kalma hem de bölgesel düzeyde özerklik kazanma olanağı sağlamıştır. Sonuç olarak çalışma, Türkiye'nin yumuşak dengeleme stratejisinin klasik askeri dengelemeden farklı olarak kurumsal, normatif ve diplomatik araçlar üzerinden işlediğini; böylece orta ölçekli bir devlet olarak stratejik otonomi üretme kapasitesini güçlendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

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Introduction

The changing global and regional balance of power in the post-Cold War era has increased the need for flexibility and diversity in states' foreign policy strategies. In this context, the indirect and cautious management of relations with great powers, particularly by medium-sized states, rather than direct conflict, has been analyzed through the concept of soft balancing in the International Relations (IR) literature (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2002; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005; Saltzman, 2012). Discussions on soft balancing since the 1990s have rekindled since the 2000s, particularly with the rise of powers such as China and Russia, and a significant literature discussing foreign policy analyses around this concept has emerged (Dursun-Özkanca, 2023; He, 2015; Paul et al., 2025). This literature has analyzed the attempts of actors such as France, China, Russia and the European Union (EU) to limit the United States' (US) room for maneuver through institutional, economic and diplomatic means. However, this approach does not offer a comprehensive explanation of how soft balancing behaviors are shaped in the foreign policies of middle-sized states. Indeed, several studies (Flemes, 2009; He & Feng, 2008; Wivel, 2020) have highlighted this shortcoming but have largely discussed the theoretical limitations of the concept within the context of great power dynamics. This leaves a gap in understanding how soft balancing operates for middle powers that remain within alliances but seek strategic autonomy. The Turkish case presents a unique case that could fill this gap, as Türkiye maintains ties with the Western alliance while simultaneously developing an intra-alliance soft balancing strategy by diversifying its relations with alternative regional actors (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2022; Yegin & Çevik, 2024). Furthermore, traditional soft balancing literature is often described through economic and diplomatic tools to reduce military costs. Türkiye's example, particularly because it operates through multilateral diplomacy and institutional norm generation, such as the OIC, TDT, D-8, NATO veto, and SCO observation, contributes to strengthening the concept's normative and institutional dimensions. Finally, this study demonstrates that soft balancing strategies function not only to limit the hegemon's unilateral actions but also to grant strategic autonomy to medium-sized states. In the literature, strategic autonomy has generally been discussed in the context of the European Union and has not been directly linked to soft balancing theory (Biscop, 2020; Störmer et al., 2021). However, the Turkish example demonstrates that the logic of soft balancing is essentially geared towards generating strategic autonomy. In this respect, the study offers a conceptual expansion to the soft balancing literature and integrates the concept of strategic autonomy into this theoretical framework. This broadens the theoretical scope of the concept and strengthens its capacity to explain middle powers' foreign policy behavior. Therefore, this study aims to reassess soft balancing theory in the context of Türkiye's foreign policy during the Biden era, expanding the literature's great power-centric approach with a middle power behavior perspective.

This theoretical framework is functional in explaining Türkiye's foreign policy approach within the framework of its relations with the US during the Biden era. Having maintained close cooperation with the US for a long time due to its position within the Western alliance, Türkiye developed a more autonomous and multi-dimensional orientation from the 2010s onwards, influenced by great power competition. During the Biden era, this orientation became evident as a soft balancing strategy aimed at limiting the influence of US regional policies without directly challenging them. The intersection of the Biden administration's stance on democratic values, human rights and security policies with developments in the international system strengthened Türkiye's search for an alternative and pluralistic balancing act in its relations with the US (Yegin and Çevik, 2024, p. 1). With Biden's inauguration in 2021, renewed engagement with allies and the strengthening of the liberal international order gained priority in US foreign policy (Bechev, 2020; Brands, 2021; Wright, 2021), leading Türkiye to reassess its policies towards the US.

The study's central argument is that, since the Biden era, Türkiye has adopted a soft balancing strategy in its relations with the US, emphasizing multilateral diplomacy, regional cooperation, and strategic autonomy, utilizing international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements, rather than traditional military balancing. Within this framework, the study analyzes Türkiye's efforts to maintain its position within NATO while simultaneously deepening bilateral relations with Russia, China, Iran, and the Gulf countries; its distancing itself from certain US-led global initiatives, and its shift towards alternative regional cooperation platforms from a soft balancing perspective. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap in the soft balancing literature through the example of Türkiye, and offers a conceptual expansion by integrating the concept of strategic autonomy into this framework. To solidify this theoretical contribution, the study uses Paul's soft balancing approach as the theoretical framework and evaluates how Türkiye has implemented this strategy

through key foreign policy tools such as multilateral diplomacy and institutions, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy. In this context, Türkiye's foreign policy actions during the Biden era will be systematically analyzed from both a bilateral relations perspective and the context of global power competition.

In this context, the first section of this study provides a detailed discussion of the evolution of balancing theory and the literature on the concept of soft balancing, establishing the theoretical basis for the study. The second section examines the Biden administration's foreign policy priorities and approach to Türkiye within a historical and discursive context. The third section analyzes how Türkiye has embodied the soft balancing strategy in the Biden era's foreign policy, within the framework of multilateral diplomacy, institutional tools and the economic diversifications.

Conceptual Framework: Soft Balancing Theory

In IR, balancing is defined as the effort of a state to limit the power of another state by increasing its military, political, and economic capacity against perceived threats in the international system (Walt, 1987; Waltz, 1979). According to the neo-realist approach, states must balance their power to survive in an anarchic system, and this balancing is often security-focused (Waltz, 1979). However, in the post-Cold War era, classical military balancing strategies became costly and restrictive for second-tier states due to the unipolarity of the United States (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2002; Yeşiltaş, 2009). This situation forced states to turn to alternative, low-cost, and indirect strategies.

The concept of soft balancing was developed by Walt (2006) to illustrate the difference between hard and soft balancing and was revised by Pape and Paul. Pape (2005) and Paul (2005) introduced this concept to the literature in the post-Cold War era to explain the strategies used by states to limit the influence of hegemonic powers through diplomatic, economic and institutional means rather than forming direct military alliances. Soft balancing is implemented outside of formal alliances using methods such as limited armament, ad hoc cooperation exercises and cooperation in international institutions. It can evolve into hard balancing when security competition intensifies.

Although the concept is often discussed in the context of the unipolar system following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Paul (2018) examined historical records and emphasized that soft balancing has been used in various power configurations since the 19th century. Soft balancing relies on states constraining aggressive policies through international institutions, diplomacy and economic sanctions, making it difficult to achieve strategic objectives. During the unipolar era, middle and great powers employed this strategy to protect their autonomy against US hegemony without the risk of harsh military competition.

Soft balancing differs from classical military countermeasures in that it prioritizes international legitimacy tools, creates pressure through economic dependencies, and aims to narrow the hegemonic power's maneuverability through multilateral forums and institutions. It is a flexible strategic tool for small and medium-sized powers to project power while avoiding costly direct conflict. Pape (2005) cited secondary countries such as France, China, Germany, Russia and Japan as examples. China and Russia's use of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) against the US-centered unipolar system is a contemporary example of soft balancing. Similarly, soft balancing is also employed within the West and in South-South cooperation processes against the US (Flemes, 2009; He, 2008).

Soft balancing aims to establish strategic limits against US hegemonic power through non-military means, to narrow the room for maneuver through international institutions and diplomacy, and to increase strategic autonomy (Hurrell, 2006; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005). It offers a rational alternative for states under conditions of an anarchic international system and high economic interdependence (He & Feng, 2008). Through strategic partnerships and international institutions, second-tier and small states can increase their influence vis-a-vis great powers. Therefore, soft balancing is an important conceptual tool not only for understanding great powers but also for explaining the regional and diplomatic strategies of medium-sized and small states (Paul et al., 2025).

US Perception of Türkiye During the Biden Era

Joe Biden, believing that the U.S.'s role as “the leader of the free World” had weakened during the Trump era, adopted a more interventionist foreign policy approach during his presidency, emphasizing democracy and human rights, with the aim of re-establishing this position (Yegin & Çevik, 2024; Wright, 2021). Since taking office in 2021, the Biden administration has grounded U.S. foreign policy on values and reframed international politics through the narrative of “the struggle between democracies and authoritarian regimes” (Biden, 2020). This approach has significantly impacted how traditional allies like Türkiye are perceived by the U.S. A 2024 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report, prepared by the U.S. Department of State and submitted to Congress, reveals that Türkiye was evaluated from a more critical perspective during the Biden era (U.S. Department of State, 2024). In the report, democracy, human rights, and authoritarianism were highlighted as tools of pressure against Türkiye not only in bilateral relations, but also in multilateral platforms. This situation created deep disappointment in Türkiye regarding relations with the US and reinforced the perception of distance in Türkiye's relations with the Western alliance.

Biden's ideological background and political affiliation played a significant role in shaping the perception of Türkiye. Having served in the US Senate for 36 years, starting in 1972 and holding a long seat on the Foreign Relations Committee, Biden drew attention from an early age for his anti-Türkiye stance. His active opposition during the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, his close relationships with Greek and Armenian lobbies and his role in attempts to impose sanctions on Türkiye formed the historical background of this perception (Lomis, 2021). Biden's confrontation with then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, despite the balance of power within NATO, and his attempts to lift Türkiye's veto on the Cyprus issue are concrete examples of this approach.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Biden was among the senators who brought Türkiye to the forefront with criticisms centered on Cyprus and Greece; he also participated in initiatives supporting “Armenian genocide” resolutions. Therefore, he has been considered part of the group known in Turkish public opinion as the “front of those who do not like Türkiye” (AA, 2020). Biden's stance continued during his time as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; the tense dialogue he had with Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit and Foreign Minister İsmail Cem in 1999 received widespread coverage in the Turkish press (Hürriyet, 1999; Milliyet, 1999). Biden's opposition to arms sales and credit mechanisms to Türkiye during the same period also demonstrated the continuity of this line (Hürriyet, 2008).

Biden's critical approach towards Türkiye was clearly evident during his presidential campaign. In a 2019 interview with The New York Times, he argued that the opposition in Türkiye should be supported, described President Erdoğan as an autocrat, and implied that the US should be more directly involved in Türkiye's domestic politics (Biden, 2019). These statements were considered controversial in terms of international diplomatic norms and caused serious unease in Türkiye. In the context of the Eastern Mediterranean, Biden argued that Türkiye's regional activities should be limited in cooperation with allies (Biden, 2019). The fact that Biden's first phone call with President Erdoğan after assuming office was delayed by three months was perceived as an exclusion in Türkiye (BBC, 2021). Assessments published in Foreign Policy suggest that this delay was interpreted as a sign that Washington was adopting a more distant and institutional diplomatic stance towards Türkiye (Foreign Policy, 2021). In comparison to previous periods, such as Obama's address to the Turkish Grand National Assembly and Trump's close relationship with Erdoğan based on personal diplomacy, the distance between leaders during the Biden era is noteworthy. During this process, reciprocal rhetoric has also been shaped in accordance with a soft balancing act; diplomatic distance and discursive autonomy have come to the forefront.

Disagreements in the field of defense and security were also among the key factors that strained relations during the Biden administration. Türkiye's purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia led to sanctions under CAATSA and deepened the trust crisis between the two NATO allies (U.S. Department of State, 2020; EveryCRS Report, 2020). Unlike the Trump administration, the Biden administration adopted a stricter stance on this issue and supported Türkiye's removal from the F-35 program (Brookings, 2024). The Brookings and CRS reports indicate that Türkiye's defense and energy collaborations with Russia were perceived by the US as an “intra-alliance stress test.” In this context, Türkiye was defined by the Biden administration as a “necessary but problematic partner” (Brookings, 2024; CRS, 2023).

Think tank reports in the US indicate that a structural distrust of Türkiye persisted during the Biden era, and that bilateral relations can be explained by the concept of “sustainable estrangement” (Brookings, 2024; SWP, 2024). Türkiye’s military operations in Syria, its energy activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, and its engagement in Libya led to Ankara being perceived as a “problem-creating ally” in the US public opinion (SWP Comment, 2020). This perception facilitated the Biden administration’s development of an indirect balancing strategy against Türkiye by deepening relations with Greece (Foreign Policy, 2021; Yeşiltaş, 2023).

From Türkiye’s perspective, the US support for the YPG and its policies close to Greece and Southern Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean have increased security and sovereignty concerns (SETA, 2023). This situation has led Ankara to adopt soft balancing strategies instead of direct counterbalancing. Türkiye has preferred to increase cooperation with alternative actors, expand multilateral diplomatic channels and generate discursive resistance instead of using hard power against US regional policies. In this context, the US policy towards the YPG stands out as a structural factor in the institutionalization of Türkiye’s soft balancing strategies.

The Biden administration’s critical approach centered on democracy and human rights narrowed Türkiye’s traditional maneuvering space; the flexible diplomacy based on personal relationships during the Trump era has given way to a more institutionalized and normative language (Foreign Policy, 2021). Under these conditions Türkiye, considering the costs of an open break with the US, has preferred soft balancing strategies; while maintaining relations with Russia and China, it has sought alternative security perspectives within NATO and deepened its relations with regional actors within the framework of strategic autonomy.

Despite this, the Biden administration did not pursue a policy of complete rupture with Türkiye. Türkiye’s position within NATO, its mediating role in the Ukraine War and its strategic importance for energy security have necessitated the US maintaining relations with Ankara through controlled tension (Barkey, 2023; O’Rourke, 2022). CRS reports reveal that Türkiye is positioned as a partner criticized at the normative level, but indispensable at the strategic level (U.S. State Department, 2023). Consequently, the US perception of Türkiye during the Biden era has been shaped by a controlled tension and autonomy framework, going beyond the classical understanding of alliance. For the US, Türkiye is no longer merely a balancing factor but an autonomous actor developing its own balancing strategies. This transformation signals a structural change that legitimizes both Türkiye’s discourse on strategic autonomy and its soft balancing practices.

Discussion: Türkiye’s Soft Balancing Strategy Towards the US During the Biden Administration

This section discusses Türkiye’s soft balancing strategies in Biden-era Türkiye-US relations, focusing on multilateral diplomacy and economic diversification. The findings indicate that instead of a directly confrontational approach, Türkiye adopted a strategy of managing risks and increasing foreign policy flexibility using economic and institutional tools. These strategies are seen as concrete reflections of Türkiye’s efforts to reduce external dependence and create greater room for maneuver in decision-making processes. Overall, the findings suggest that Türkiye is pursuing its search for balance in the current international conjuncture through economic and diplomatic mechanisms rather than military means.

Multilateral Diplomacy and the Use of Institutional Frameworks

Multilateral diplomacy is an institutionalized form of diplomatic interaction in which multiple states seek solutions to common problems through international organizations, summits, and regional mechanisms. These platforms offer states the opportunity to have a say in global governance, create norms and act collectively in crisis management. They also provide an institutional space where large and medium-sized powers can constrain each other without resorting to hard balancing. Therefore, the proliferation of multilateral institutions serves both a visibility and status-enhancing function, particularly for rising powers. China’s increasing influence in organizations such as the UN, WTO, IMF and World Bank, as well as new institutional initiatives such as the BRICS and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are prominent examples of this trend (Paul, 2018).

In this respect, multilateral diplomacy is becoming one of the most effective tools of soft balancing, as international institutions both generate legitimacy and offer low-cost and flexible responses (Paul et al., 2018). Medium-sized or emerging powers attempt to build balancing capacity through multilateral organizations to counter hegemonic tendencies without engaging in direct conflict. ASEAN’s diplomatic initiatives to strengthen regional solidarity against China, or the EU’s development of alternative normative arrangements within the

UN and global forums to counter the US's unilateral policies are typical examples of this strategy. Such practices aim to indirectly limit the hegemonic power's scope of action and establish a balancing institutional framework within the international system.

In this context, Türkiye, during the Biden era, developed strategies to balance its strategic and political disagreements with the US (e.g., Syria and Eastern Mediterranean policy, support for the YPG/PYD, expulsion from the F-35 program, and threats of sanctions) without escalating into open conflict using multilateral diplomatic channels. Türkiye's steps to deepen its relations with the SCO during the Biden era are a significant example of a soft balancing act against US regional influence. The process, initiated by Türkiye in 2012 as a dialogue partner, continues today with Erdoğan, who attended the SCO Heads of State Summit at Putin's invitation and explicitly stated his intention to join the SCO (Spancerska, 2022). In other words, the SCO process gained momentum during the Biden era by strengthening its institutional status. As of 2023, Türkiye positioned itself closer to the organization as an observer state. This accession occurred at a time when the US was attempting to diplomatically isolate Russia due to the Ukraine war. Therefore, Türkiye's participation in this platform can be interpreted not only as a symbolic soft balancing act aimed at limiting US policies, but also as a diplomatic channel through which non-Western areas of cooperation are being seriously considered. While Türkiye has opened up diplomatic space for itself through the SCO, it has also sought to develop potential for cooperation particularly with China and Russia, in areas such as energy security, transportation corridors and trade diversification. This initiative aims to create flexibility in response to the US's dominant role in global energy policies (Aslam, 2024).

By turning to multilateral structures like the SCO, Türkiye has on the one hand implied its rapprochement with the Eurasian axis, while on the other using these diplomatic moves to increase its own bargaining power vis-a-vis the US. This approach, rather than directly challenging the US, has strategic objectives such as countering US leverage, establishing alternative diplomatic relations and contributing to the pursuit of a multipolar system (Middle East Eye, 2024). During the Biden era, Türkiye-SCO relations emerged as a concrete manifestation of the soft balancing strategy. Through this platform, Türkiye has sought to strengthen its strategic autonomy without severing its ties with the Western alliance. Thus it has both increased its bargaining capacity and actively integrated itself into the multipolar debates within the global system. Of course, the sustainability of this process depends on the extent to which Türkiye can manage the alliance balances with the West. Furthermore, the Biden administration's foreign policy discourse, based on the democracy and human rights alliance was frequently criticized by Türkiye as unilateral and interventionist. In speeches delivered on SCO platforms, Türkiye has demonstrated a softer form of shifting to an alternative value system against Western-centric normative discourse by emphasizing sovereignty, mutual respect and a multipolar order. In short, the SCO has served as an important institutional tool of soft balancing by opening alternative dialogue channels for Türkiye on the diplomatic level, by establishing new trade and energy partnerships that reduce dependence on the US on the economic level, and by providing Türkiye with a legitimacy base that supports its multipolar vision on the normative level.

One institutional example of Türkiye's soft balancing strategy against US and Western-centric multilateral diplomatic initiatives is the D-8 Organization, of which it is a founding member. During the Biden administration, Türkiye took steps to revitalize the D-8 platform, which had long remained low-profile. By hosting the 2021 D-8 Istanbul Summit, it updated the organization's agenda (D-8 Summit Declaration, 2021). At the summit, Türkiye positioned the D-8 as a complementary element of a fair, inclusive, and multipolar global order, drawing attention to the problems of representation and inequality created by Western-centric global governance structures. This approach reflects the discursive dimension of soft balancing, offering an alternative normative framework based on development and equality against the US's democracy-centric foreign policy discourse.

The reactivation of the D-8 is not only an initiative to increase economic cooperation for Türkiye, but also part of a broader diplomatic diversification strategy aimed at reducing dependence on US-centric alliances and institutional structures. Through this platform, Türkiye aimed to strengthen economic and political cooperation networks centered on the Islamic world, develop alternative financial and institutional mechanisms and increase its normative leadership capacity. In this context, the D-8 contributed to Türkiye's ability to demonstrate its

multifaceted foreign policy capacity to Western public opinion during the Biden era and to position itself as an indirect and non-confrontational balancing tool against US influence in the Middle East and the Islamic world. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) offers Ankara the basis for building an alternative identity policy vis-à-vis the West as a new strategic initiative within the OTS. In this respect, it functions as a soft balancing tool through its “civilizationist foreign policy discourse” in Türkiye’s tensions with the West in normative areas such as democracy and human rights. Through OTS, Türkiye aims to transcend cultural and identity-based solidarity and institutionalize its relations with the Turkic states in Central Asia, deepen regional cooperation, and thereby increasing its multilateral diplomatic influence in Eurasia. This trend, which gained momentum particularly after the 2020 Karabakh War, allowed Türkiye to fill power gaps in the region during the Biden era, considering the limited influence of the US in Central Asia and to assume a balancing role rather than involve in direct competition with China and Russia (Erşen, 2022; Kahveci & Bonnenfant, 2023). Indeed, within this framework, Türkiye has undertaken these agreements and collaborations in transportation and logistics through the *Agreement on International Combined Freight Transport*, which envisions supporting transportation lines such as the Middle Corridor and combined freight transport through cooperation with the Turkish Airlines; in economic and investment through increased investment relations among member states, SME support mechanisms and digital/green transformation collaborations; in human capital and human resources through the inclusion of “Human Resources” within the scope of the OTS starting in 2022, and the establishment of protocols in areas such as joint training and digital human resources systems; and finally in institutional and strategic cooperation through the renaming of the OTS, the adoption of a strategic roadmap and steps to increase the organization’s institutional capacity (Organization of Turkic States, 2024). These agreements and collaborations reflect Türkiye’s goals of achieving multifaceted integration with the Turkic world through the OTS, strengthening economic and logistical ties and joint action in the field of human capital. Thus, OTS has become a tool for Türkiye to develop a multilateral diplomatic discourse outside the bloc, acting relatively autonomously from the West.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) served as a central institutional platform in Türkiye’s soft balancing strategy towards the US during the Biden administration. Faced with the US administration’s rhetoric centered on democracy and human rights while simultaneously providing strong support to Israel, Türkiye has been able to generate collective discourse, secure normative legitimacy, and utilize multilateral diplomatic tools through the OIC without directly engaging in conflict. The OIC has provided Türkiye with usable normative arguments at the United Nations level through declarations, observation missions, and initiatives based on international law, creating an alternative maneuvering space against US-centered diplomatic pressures (OIC, 2024; Spicer & Gümrükçü, 2024).

In this context, Türkiye has used the OIC as a platform for collective norm production on issues such as the Gaza crisis, the Palestinian question, and debates on Islamophobia. It has instrumentalized these decisions in its diplomatic contacts with Western capitals, presenting them as the “common position of the Islamic World”. The calls for mediation and resolution voiced within the OIC framework during the crises in Afghanistan and Sudan also demonstrate Türkiye’s active engagement of non-Western diplomatic channels. This approach has contributed to Ankara’s expansion of its diplomatic influence beyond the framework defined by Western institutions. Consequently, the OIC served as a leverage point for Türkiye throughout the Biden era, providing opportunities to generate legitimacy, exert normative pressure and utilize humanitarian/legal tools in a cost-effective manner. In this respect, the organization can be considered a crucial component of Türkiye’s soft balancing strategy, enabling it to compensate for the limitations it faces in Western-centric structures such as NATO and the EU through alternative multilateral platforms.

Finally and most importantly, Türkiye is observed to be engaging in institutional soft balancing initiatives through NATO. Türkiye’s position within NATO has been central to this strategy. Despite various bilateral issues with the US, Türkiye has maintained its commitments within NATO. It has played an active role in matters such as the evacuation process in Afghanistan, support initiatives in the context of the Ukraine War and basing responsibilities on the Alliance’s southern flank. Thus, Türkiye has used a multilateral platform as a strategic tool to emphasize its indispensability within NATO and demonstrate that it has not completely broken away from the Western world.

Rather than opting for direct conflict in its tensions with the Biden administration, Türkiye employed diplomatic crisis management and bargaining strategies to implement soft balancing within the NATO context, utilizing the accession processes of Sweden and Finland. By instrumentalizing consensus in decision-making processes within NATO (e.g., expansion and defense plans), Türkiye adopted a soft balancing strategy through institutional balancing. In 2022, it objected to Finland and Sweden's NATO membership applications, citing their ties to terrorist organizations (PKK/YPG), and conditioned the accession process with a veto threat. Türkiye directly linked this position to US policies in Syria, thereby posing an indirect challenge to US security perceptions (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). It also used the process of approving the two countries' membership as a bargaining chip to highlight Western policy inconsistencies and perceived double standards in the fight against terrorism. This stance limited US pressure on Türkiye while giving Ankara a rhetorical advantage within the alliance. Türkiye did not directly oppose the membership of these two countries (it did not resort to hard balancing), but rather, by slowing down alliance decisions, it brought its own security priorities onto the NATO agenda. This process exemplifies Türkiye's efforts to increase its bargaining power by creating a crisis on a multilateral platform and to gain strategic gains from Western actors, including the U.S. By defining NATO as an institution of justice and equality as well as alliance solidarity, Türkiye engaged in a rhetorical balancing act against the US-centric hierarchy. This stance can be interpreted as a soft balancing strategy whereby Türkiye uses institutional tools within NATO to exert pressure on the US without directly challenging it. With NATO's southern flank and Türkiye's regional security agenda, Türkiye uses its position on NATO's southern flank as strategic leverage and intervenes in multilateral security agendas to constrain US policies particularly in Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Despite discontent among NATO members, Türkiye's continued involvement in the internal security structure was crucial, given its defensive capabilities and possession of NATO's second-largest army. In addition to hard power elements, Türkiye's ability to use soft power in its mediation role with the UN Grain Agreement being the culmination of this process helped generate goodwill for Türkiye and also effectively shielded the country from selective criticism from the West regarding human rights violations and democratic backsliding (Brookings, 2024; Öniş & Uluyol, 2025).

Another development demonstrating Türkiye's practice of soft balancing through NATO occurred with the Ukraine-Russia war. Türkiye was the only NATO member to simultaneously support NATO decisions against Russia's invasion of Ukraine while simultaneously keeping diplomatic channels open with Russia. *The Grain Corridor Agreement* (2022) demonstrated that Türkiye had developed an alternative dialogue model to the West's strategy of completely excluding Russia without undermining NATO solidarity. This is a classic example of soft balancing, which involves creating intra-system autonomy by expanding diplomatic space while remaining within the military bloc (Dursun-Özkanca, 2023; Paul et al., 2025).

Türkiye has also pursued a soft balancing strategy through its defense industry and strategic autonomy discourse. Despite the US's expulsion from the F-35 program and CAATSA sanctions, Türkiye remained in NATO. However, it strengthened its emphasis on autonomy with domestic defense projects such as the Bayraktar TB2, Kızılelma and TCG Anadolu (Düzgüt, Kutlay & Keyman, 2025, p. 12). Thus, Türkiye has focused on balancing power asymmetries within NATO and enhancing its decision-making capacity without breaking away from the alliance. Foreign Minister Fidan's emphasis on strategic autonomy, and President Erdoğan's rhetoric about being a "country that conducts its own defense" (SAM, 2023; Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2023) have become the political expression of this approach. The defense industry initiative has provided Türkiye with the opportunity to provide institutional balance against US manipulations, increase its bargaining power on NATO's southern flank and build intra-system autonomy without resorting to a sharp break. Thus, the defense industry has become one of the most visible policy areas of Türkiye's soft balancing strategy.

The US continued to be uneasy about Türkiye taking such steps to establish its independence in foreign policy during the Biden era. As a result of the S-400 and F-35 crises between Türkiye and the US, in particular, the profound transformation of relations, Türkiye (Yetim & Hazar, 2023) no longer identifies its own interests with American ones, as it did during the Cold War or the 1990s. Consequently, Türkiye has ceased to be a pivotal power in US policies particularly in the Middle East, but has instead become a disruptive power. During the Biden era, the US insisted on coercion and pressure strategies, using its extensive influence to force Türkiye to play the pivotal role in its policies as it once did. Türkiye; however, has resisted this by employing a balancing

strategy, as it has in every crisis where it has faced a conflict of interest with the US since the Syrian crisis. In this context, Türkiye has sought to protect its conflicting interests with the US through the soft balancing strategy of multilateral diplomacy and institutional frameworks.

Official US State Department documents and assessments of NATO processes highlight the importance of Türkiye's roles in multilateral platforms. Ankara's positions in Black Sea security, grain corridor diplomacy and the NATO membership processes of Sweden and Finland point to a soft balancing strategy that both reaffirms Türkiye's alliance and enhances its bargaining power. Institutional channels such as strategic mechanisms facilitate the management of tensions by bringing crises between the parties into the institutional framework. This demonstrates the central role played by multilateral diplomacy and institutional tools in Türkiye's balancing strategy.

Economic Diversification: The Quest for Economic and Strategic Autonomy

One of the most visible tools of soft balancing in Türkiye's foreign policy during the Biden era was economic diversification (Pape, 2005, p. 36). This strategy aims to create alternative trade and financial networks by reducing external dependence, thereby generating economic-based strategic autonomy (Flemes, 2009; He & Feng, 2008). In the soft balancing literature, economic diversification is viewed as one of the primary methods of limiting the influence of hegemonic power through non-military means (He & Wivel, 2020; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2018). In this context, Türkiye has turned to developing new economic partnerships and institutional alternatives to reduce its complete dependence on the US and Western-centric financial and commercial system. Economic diversification operates at three levels: expanding trade geographically, reducing finance and energy dependence and establishing new cooperation platforms alongside Western-centric institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Thus, the economy has moved beyond being a developmental tool and transformed into an active soft balancing mechanism that enhances Türkiye's autonomy in foreign policy decision-making.

From a soft balancing perspective, economic diversification is one of the key tools for strengthening a state's foreign policy independence. Through economic diversification, interdependence on a single actor is balanced through new trade partners, alternative financing channels and energy supply lines, thereby reducing the potential for hegemonic pressure. Flemes (2009) defines such initiatives as a way for regional powers to moderate hegemonic influence. Similarly, Wivel (2020) emphasizes the complementary role that multilateral economic institutions and diversification play in the process of generating strategic autonomy for middle powers. The shift observed in Türkiye's foreign trade partners and market orientations since the 2000s is a concrete indicator of this strategic reorientation (Kurtaran & Yazıcı, 2025). Such downward trends are an empirical sign that Türkiye's trade profile is diversifying from the West toward Asia, the Middle East and Africa. This geographic diversification reflects Türkiye's structural effort to limit its traditional Western-centric economic dependence.

One concrete example of this economic rebalancing is Türkiye's growing trade relations with China. Total trade volume between the two countries rose from around 1 billion dollar in 2001 to approximately 43-45 billion dollar in 2023 (China Briefing, 2024; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Commerce, 2024). This increase is a significant trend supporting Türkiye's integration into Asian markets and reducing its relative dependence on the West. Türkiye has increased its infrastructure, logistics and transportation investments within the scope of the China Belt and Road (BRI) initiative, creating alternative routes to Western-centric supply chains. By expanding its economic cooperation with China, Türkiye has strengthened its position as a transit hub at the Western end of the BRI initiative (Chaziza, 2021). Investments in transportation and logistics infrastructure (e.g., the Middle Corridor Project) have increased Türkiye's capacity to balance trade dependence between Asia and Europe. Expanding trade and infrastructure connections with China (e.g., logistics investments within the context of the Middle Corridor) allow Türkiye to create alternatives in its supply chains. This limits the instrumental effectiveness of US-based economic pressures (China Briefing, 2024). Türkiye has a significant number of China-backed projects underway, including the recent 1 billion dollar investment by Chinese electric vehicle giant BYD in Mersin. In addition, as of the beginning of 2024, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has approved approximately 4.3 billion dollars worth of projects. This demonstrates Türkiye's efforts to diversify its investment and credit sources (Öniş & Uluyol, 2025, pp. 9-10). In this context, the BRICS (representing Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), shaped under China's leadership, has become an

important tool for Ankara in balancing global power hierarchies and increasing economic and diplomatic diversity. Türkiye's application for full membership in the BRICS in 2024 is a concrete indicator of this strategic orientation. Despite its institutionalized alliance with the West, Türkiye has increasingly managed to occupy a unique position closely resembling that held by much of the global south, represented by the BRICS economies (Öniş & Uluyol, 2025). BRICS has become an active participant in the international arena, where leading countries in the global south have developed their economic capacity (Öniş & Kutlay, 2021). The financial crisis, often referred to as the collapse of US-led unipolarity, also signaled the strengthening of the strategic alliance between Russia and China to support each other against the West (Kaczmarek, 2015; Kirshner, 2014). The emergence of expansionist instruments such as the BRI from China and initiatives such as the BRICS have significantly challenged US dominance, intensifying the geopolitical rivalry between the two superpowers (Hosen & Biswas, 2025; Jasmin et al., 2025; Reuters, 2024). Indeed, Türkiye's approach to the Ukraine War was much closer to the stances of the BRICS countries, including China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. Contacts with the BRICS serve a multifaceted function for Türkiye. First, they open alternative cooperation channels to the dominant Western institutions in the global economy and finance (the IMF, the World Bank, etc.) and create new opportunities, particularly in the areas of trade, energy and investment. This strengthens Türkiye's negotiating position by relatively reducing its economic dependence on the West. Second, cooperation within the BRICS framework allows Türkiye to develop a diplomatic profile aligned with the global South narrative and position itself beyond the Western-centric order.

In parallel, the increasing economic and investment relations with Gulf countries in recent years have served to diversify Türkiye's financial and investment channels. With the normalization of relations between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar after 2021, comprehensive agreements were signed in the areas of energy, finance and infrastructure (Çubukçuoğlu & Almarzooqi, 2023). This development has created an economic balancing area that reduces indirect dependence on the US financial system. In particular, the comprehensive free trade and cooperation arrangements signed with the United Arab Emirates and the increased direct investments (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Economy and Tourism, 2023) should be interpreted as part of Ankara's strategy to reduce its dependence on US-dollar-based financing. The implementation of CEPA-like arrangements in 2023 and the rapid increase in bilateral trade demonstrate the practical results of this economic diversification strategy (Deloitte, 2023; UAE Ministry of Economy, 2023). The defense industry and energy cooperation agreements signed with Saudi Arabia are indicators of Türkiye's efforts to reduce its dependence on the U.S dollar system and create alternative financing channels (Saudi Gazette, 2023). This financial diversification aligns perfectly with the soft economic resistance mechanism defined by Pape (2005). Thus, Türkiye is attempting to increase its resilience to US diplomatic and economic pressure tools by shifting the focus of its economic relations from unilateral to multilateral.

The Africa initiative is one of the institutionalized dimensions of Türkiye's soft balancing strategy on a global scale. By coordinating economic diplomacy tools such as TİKA, Turkish Airlines and Eximbank, Türkiye has built a multifaceted interaction model that limits the traditional influence of the U.S and the EU by developing alternative economic and political partnerships on the African continent (AA, 2024). This institutionalization is concretized by the increase in Türkiye's trade volume with Africa from 5.4 billion in 2003 to approximately 40 billion by 2023. This demonstrates that Türkiye has strengthened its southward economic diversification trend (Altunışık, 2020; DEİK, 2023).

The soft balancing dimension of the Africa initiative relies on soft power elements such as development aid, humanitarian diplomacy, education collaborations and investment partnerships, rather than military tools. TİKA's projects in Africa and Türkiye's multilateral diplomatic initiatives; for example, the 2021 Istanbul Africa Partnership Summit have enabled the development of institutionalized cooperation frameworks with African countries. These frameworks have enabled Türkiye to develop international cooperation without being fully dependent on US-centric economic systems. At the same time, they have transformed Africa into a complementary area for Türkiye's global economic balancing strategy, alongside being an export market (Düzgüt et al., 2025). In this respect, the Africa initiative can be considered one of the key elements strengthening Türkiye's capacity to generate strategic autonomy through its economic diversification strategy.

In this context, a prime example of Türkiye's proactive foreign policy motivated by strong strategic autonomy, and demonstrating soft balancing during the Biden era can be seen in Russia's Ukraine war. Throughout this

war, Türkiye, thanks to the strong economic, diplomatic and security relations it has established with both sides, has adopted an active, instrumental and multifaceted soft balancing strategy rather than its traditional neutrality strategy. The aim here is to gain recognition as an international peacekeeper by participating in the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, and to pragmatically maintain economic relations with Russia as part of these peace efforts. In this regard, as a NATO member, Türkiye has sought to maintain a careful balance to avoid confrontation with the US and other Western powers for violating Western sanctions, while avoiding imposing sanctions on Russia. The uninterrupted operation of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant project, Russia's largest foreign investment project near Mersin, reflects this balance. Conversely, the strong personal relationship between Erdoğan and Putin has continued uninterrupted during this period, and Türkiye has been identified as a friendly country with which economic and diplomatic relations would continue in normal times. Putin has also considered the possibility of using Türkiye as an energy hub to export natural gas to Europe in the future (Reuters, 2022). Indeed, by postponing payments for the natural gas imported from Türkiye, Putin has displayed a relatively friendly attitude towards Türkiye, providing relief for the Turkish government during a period of economic crises and pressures. To this end, Türkiye's soft balancing strategy, which has been multidimensional, active and instrumental in its implementation of various developments in the Russia-Ukraine war can be observed through various developments. Chief among these developments was Türkiye's implementation of the provisions of the *Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits* in February 2022, taking into account the state of war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2022). Accordingly, Türkiye, which limited the passage of vessels between warring parties, exempted only those "returning to base" from this rule. This policy prevented conflict in the Black Sea, minimized risks (including NATO), and opened space for Türkiye. Thus, Türkiye fulfilled its role as a regional order-builder without escalating the conflict. The selective and immediate implementation of the Montreux Convention and Türkiye's equal distance from both Russia and NATO contributed to the legal instrument aspect of soft balancing.

Through this war, *Türkiye's Grain Initiative*, implemented through the *Joint Coordination Center* in Istanbul, enabled the implementation of mediation and multilateral diplomacy within the context of soft balancing. By establishing the *Black Sea Grain Initiative* with the UN, Türkiye secured food exports from Ukrainian ports. This initiative not only provided Türkiye with global legitimacy through its human security discourse (Gülboy & Çoruk, 2023, pp. 729-776), but also ensured Türkiye's negotiating leadership on the Russia-Ukraine front. This platform enabled Türkiye to engage simultaneously with the West and Russia (United Nations, 2022). The grain corridor agreement demonstrated Türkiye's instrumental mediation capacity, combining conflict resolution and supply chain security. For Türkiye, this agreement also generated global common benefits for soft balancing. Furthermore, through this war, Türkiye was able to implement its soft balancing strategy in defense, industry and security. While the TB2 cooperation and procurement provided military-political morale and tactical support to Ukraine, Türkiye implemented this procurement through a private sector export and joint production strategy (Congressional Research Service, 2022; Jennings, 2022). This limited Türkiye's direct involvement. Meanwhile, Türkiye made its alliance solidarity visible by establishing a Black Sea mine countermeasures task force with Bulgaria and Romania within NATO. This fostered a narrow-scoped security cooperation without conflicting with the Montreux framework. Ultimately, the Turkish foreign policy established a balance of intra-alliance responsibility and bilateral defense industry cooperation without exceeding the threshold of a rigid balancing act in the military file.

Alongside and in conjunction with these issues, Türkiye has generally tried to carefully manage its relations with Russia. This process, which began with the purchase of the S-400 air defense system, continued with energy cooperation such as the TurkStream Project and coordination mechanisms in Syria. However, while Ankara has cultivated close ties with Moscow, it has also been careful not to completely turn its back on the West within the framework of its NATO membership. This dual balancing policy can be interpreted as part of Türkiye's efforts to achieve strategic autonomy from both the West and Russia (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). The Biden era simultaneously reveals the limits and opportunities of this strategy. The US viewed Türkiye's independent maneuvers within NATO as potential deviations that could weaken the West's deterrent capacity vis-à-vis Russia. However, to avoid a direct crisis with Washington, Türkiye has developed an approach that can be called counterbalancing. Through this soft balancing, Türkiye has fulfilled its alliance commitments while maintaining cooperation with Russia in energy and trade, thereby strengthening its position as an indispensable actor in the eyes of both the West and Moscow. Türkiye's strategy throughout the war, referred to as active neutrality, is

essentially a strategy based on the logic of soft balancing which minimizes risks through institutions and laws, increasing legitimacy and visibility through mediation, managing costs through selective economic alignment, and generating leverage through defense and energy portfolios. This combination advanced Türkiye's quest for strategic autonomy without creating sharp rifts against either Russia or the West. While this multilayered balancing between Russia and the West provided Ankara with short-term strategic flexibility, it became clear that long-term sustainability could only be achieved through economic diversification and institutional engagement. Consequently, Türkiye turned to complementing geopolitical soft balancing with geoeconomic tools (Guşa, 2024; Ülgen, 2021).

This strategic orientation toward limiting economic dependence on the US demonstrates that Türkiye's soft balancing efforts are not merely a short-term balancing policy, but on the contrary, a precursor to building strategic autonomy through long-term economic diversification. Soft balancing theory posits that middle powers can create autonomous maneuvering space through economic and diplomatic means, rather than direct conflict to limit hegemonic pressure (Flemes, 2009; He & Wivel, 2020; Paul, 2018). In Türkiye's case, this process has been shaped by reducing dependence on US and Western-centric economic networks while simultaneously deepening economic ties with new regional axes such as Africa, the Gulf and Central Asia. These steps have not only brought Türkiye economic gains, but also granted it greater political flexibility and autonomy in its foreign policy decisions.

As a result, Türkiye's economic diversification policy has become not only a tool for soft balancing, but also the institutional infrastructure for a transition to strategic autonomy. This strategy creates a space for flexible independence in Türkiye's foreign policy, limits the US's economic leverage, and transforms Türkiye into an autonomous middle power actor in a multipolar system. In this respect, economic diversification represents a new foreign policy paradigm evolving from soft balancing to strategic autonomy in Türkiye's foreign policy during the Biden era.

Conclusion: The Continuation of Soft Balancing in Türkiye-US relations

This study examines Turkish foreign policy during the Biden era within the framework of the soft balancing strategy, and attempts to explain the transformation that has emerged in Türkiye's management of its relations with the US. The analysis reveals that Türkiye did not opt for a sharp break or open conflict with the Biden administration's value-based and institutionalist foreign policy approach; on the contrary, it sought to create autonomous maneuverability by diversifying its relations with Russia, China, and other regional actors while maintaining its NATO membership and position within the Western alliance. This orientation can be considered a manifestation of the soft balancing strategy, which relies on institutional, diplomatic and economic tools rather than traditional military balancing.

The study's findings demonstrate that soft balancing is not only a concept that explains competition among great powers, but also offers a functional analytical tool for understanding the flexible strategic adaptations developed by medium-sized states vis-à-vis hegemonic powers. The policy of active neutrality adopted in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war allowed Türkiye, despite being a NATO member, to undertake functions such as mediation, energy corridor and crisis management. This demonstrates that soft balancing is not merely a reactive strategy, but also a norm-generating and actor-building capacity. The leadership and governance displayed by Türkiye in the OIC and CIS during the Biden era demonstrate that this strategy implemented through multilateral institutions is not only pragmatic, but also part of a post-hegemonic vision of order.

In conclusion, Türkiye's soft balancing strategy is a typical reflection of the dilemmas faced by medium-sized powers in today's international order. In the post-unipolar era, Türkiye, without resorting directly to hard balancing, integrates itself into alternative power networks through multilateral institutions and regional organizations, thus continuing to build strategic autonomy as part of a post-hegemonic multipolarity. In this respect, Türkiye's experience contributes not only to its own foreign policy trajectory, but also to more general theoretical discussions about how medium-sized states position themselves in global politics.

However, the Turkish example contributes to the soft balancing literature in two ways. First, it demonstrates that the concept can be applied not only against US unilateralism, but also in managing intra-alliance tensions.

In this respect, the Turkish example adds a new dimension to the soft balancing literature in the context of asymmetric intra-alliance relations. Second, Türkiye's multilateral diplomacy and economic diversification and its resulting strategic autonomy initiatives demonstrate that soft balancing can be sustained through institutional and normative tools rather than military deterrence. However, Türkiye's soft balancing strategy also has its limits. The costs of a direct break with the US, security dependencies within NATO, and economic vulnerabilities limit Türkiye's room for maneuver. Furthermore, the sustainability of Türkiye's relations with non-Western actors depends on both regional geopolitical balances and the course of its relations with the West. Therefore, Türkiye's foreign policy during the Biden era can be described as neither complete anti-Westernism nor complete harmonization. Instead, it can be characterized by a pragmatic and cost-effective soft balancing strategy.

In conclusion, this study argues that interpreting Turkish foreign policy during the Biden era through the lens of a soft balancing strategy makes a unique contribution both to conceptual debates in the literature and to understanding Türkiye's foreign policy practices. In the future, the sustainability of Türkiye's balancing instruments in its relations with the West, its position in regional crises, and its role in global power competition will determine the future of soft balancing. In this respect, the Turkish example offers a current and valuable case in understanding the strategic behavior of medium-sized states vis-à-vis hegemonic powers.

In this context, the soft balancing practice observed during the Biden era should be considered not merely a specific adjustment strategy unique to a particular administration, but rather an indicator of a broader structural transformation in Turkish-American relations. Türkiye's multifaceted and multilateral foreign policy during this period suggests that relations between the two countries will not continue on the basis of classical alliance alignment nor full normative convergence in the future. Instead, relations are expected to be shaped more through area-based cooperation and managed competition dynamics.

The institutionalization of soft balancing necessitates a reassessment of the nature of the US's instruments of influence for future Turkish-American relations. Türkiye's effective use of multilateral diplomatic platforms and regional cooperation mechanisms while maintaining its NATO membership creates a balancing area that limits the US's capacity to exert pressure on Türkiye. This situation demonstrates that asymmetric power distribution is no longer the sole determining factor in relations between the two countries, and that institutional, normative, and diplomatic elements are playing a more prominent role.

The deepening of economic and diplomatic diversification policies constitutes the most enduring dimension of soft balancing for the future. Türkiye's development of commercial, financial, and political partnerships in different geographies is weakening the one-sided dependency relationships in Turkish-American relations. This reduces the capacity of future political crises to completely hold the relationship between the two countries hostage; it shifts the relationship to a more flexible, yet also more complex foundation. In this context, soft balancing, for Türkiye, is not a strategy based on severing relations with the US nor directly challenging it, but rather, a rational form of adaptation aimed at expanding its maneuvering space in an increasingly uncertain international system. In the coming period, areas of cooperation in Turkish-American relations will not completely disappear; however, this cooperation will progress within a framework where mutual dependence is managed, normative conformity remains limited, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy is decisive. Therefore, the period examined in this study is of particular analytical importance because it demonstrates that soft balancing is not a temporary policy choice in Turkish-American relations, but rather a harbinger of a long-term interaction model.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Joe Biden yönetimi (2021-2025) döneminde Türkiye-ABD ilişkilerinin dönüşümünü yumuşak dengeleme teorisinin analitik bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Uluslararası ilişkiler alanındaki daha geniş tartışmalara dayanan yumuşak dengeleme kavramı, orta ölçekli güçlerin askeri çatışma yerine diplomatik, kurumsal ve ekonomik yollarla hegemonik devletlerin etkisini nasıl sınırlamaya çalıştıklarını anlamak için bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Çalışmanın temel amacı, Biden döneminde Türkiye'nin dış politikadaki stratejik yönelimlerini analiz etmek ve bu yönelimleri çok taraflı diplomasi ve ekonomik çeşitlendirmenin şekillendirdiği teorik bir yapı içinde konumlandırmaktır. Bunu yaparken, araştırma, geleneksel olarak büyük güç rekabetine odaklanan yumuşak dengeleme teorisini, stratejik özerklik arayan orta ölçekli devletlerin dış politika davranışlarına uygulanabilirliğini göstererek genişletmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Çalışma söylem analizi, belge analizi ve yorumlayıcı dış politika analizini birleştiren nitel bir yöntemle sahiptir. Çalışmada Türkiye'nin dengeleme stratejilerinin evrimini değerlendirmek için dış politika konuşmalarından, resmi belgelerden, uluslararası kuruluş raporlarından ve akademik literatürden yararlanılmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım, çalışmanın hem uluslararası sistemdeki yapısal dinamikleri hem de Türk dış politikasındaki kurum odaklı düzenlemeleri ele almasını sağlamaktadır.

Bulgular, Biden yönetiminin Türkiye'ye yaklaşımının önemli ölçüde farklı olduğunu göstermektedir. Demokrasiyi, insan haklarını ve ittifak dinamiklerini vurgulayan Biden'ın değer odaklı dış politikası, Türkiye'nin manevra alanını daraltmış ve özellikle S-400 krizi, ABD'nin Suriye'de YPG'ye verdiği destek ve Doğu Akdeniz'deki siyasi anlaşmazlıklar gibi konularda gerginliği artırmıştır. Biden'ın Türkiye'ye yönelik tarihsel eleştirel duruşu -uzun Senato kariyeri, Yunan ve Ermeni lobileriyle yakınlığı ve Türk liderlerle geçmişte yaşadığı çatışmalar tarafından şekillendirilmiş- karşılıklı güvensizliğe daha da katkıda bulunmuştur. Kongre Araştırma Servisi raporları da dâhil olmak üzere resmi ABD değerlendirmeleri, Türkiye'yi giderek daha fazla "gerekli ancak sorunlu bir ortak" olarak nitelendirerek, Türkiye'yi geleneksel bir müttefik olarak görmekten, dikkatli yönetim gerektiren özerk bir aktör olarak etiketlemeye yönelmiştir.

Bu bağlamda Türkiye, ABD ile doğrudan bir çatışmadan kaçınırken stratejik çıkarlarını korumayı amaçlayan ölçülü bir yumuşak dengeleme stratejisi benimsemiştir. Türkiye, ABD'ye askeri olarak meydan okumak veya Batılı kurumlardan çekilmek yerine, ABD'nin etkisini sınırlamak ve daha fazla dış politika özerkliği sağlamak için çok taraflı diplomasi, kurumsal dengeleme ve ekonomik çeşitlendirme stratejilerini pratiğe dökmüştür.

Bu stratejinin önemli bir boyutu, Türkiye'nin çok taraflı kuruluşlarla aktif etkileşimidir. NATO içinde Türkiye, ABD'ye karşı çatışmacı olmayan bir şekilde baskı kurmak için kurumsal mekanizmaları kullanmıştır. İsveç ve Finlandiya'nın NATO üyeliğine yönelik koşullu yaklaşımı (onayı terörle mücadele konularına endekslemesi), Ankara'nın güvenlik gündemlerini şekillendirmek için ittifak dinamiklerini yumuşak dengeleme çerçevesinde kullanabileceğini gösterdi. Türkiye aynı zamanda, Afganistan, Karadeniz güvenliği ve Ukrayna çatışması gibi NATO misyonlarına önemli katkılarda bulunmuş ve özerkliğini savunurken aynı zamanda kendisini vazgeçilmez bir konuma getirmiştir.

Türkiye ayrıca, yumuşak dengeleme stratejisinin bir parçası olarak Batı dışı kurumlarla ilişkilerini de genişletmiştir. Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü (ŞİÖ) ile üst düzey zirvelere katılım ve gelecekteki üyelik konusunda diyalog gibi etkileşimler, stratejik ortaklıkları Batı çerçevelerinin ötesinde çeşitlendirmeye olan ilginin bir göstergesi olmuştur. Benzer şekilde Türkiye, D-8 Ekonomik İşbirliği Teşkilatı'nı yeniden canlandırmış ve Türk Devletleri Örgütü'ndeki etkinliğini artırarak Avrasya'daki diplomatik ve ekonomik varlığını güçlendirmiştir. Türkiye, İslam İşbirliği Teşkilatı aracılığıyla, ABD'nin Orta Doğu'daki tutumlarının aksine Filistin, İslamofobi ve insani konularda kolektif tutumları teşvik ederek normatif bir dengeleme politikası izlemiştir. Bu çok taraflı platformlar, Türkiye'ye Batı ittifakından kopmasını gerektirmeden alternatif meşruiyet ve nüfuz alanları sağlamıştır.

Türkiye'nin yumuşak dengeleme stratejisinin bir diğer ayağı da ekonomik çeşitlendirmedir. Çalışma, Türkiye'nin Çin, Körfez ülkeleri ve Afrika ülkeleriyle genişletilmiş ekonomik ilişkiler yoluyla Batı merkezli finansal sistemlere ve ticaret ağlarına olan bağımlılığını azaltmaya çalıştığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çin ile güçlenen bağlar (artan ticaret hacmi, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'ne entegrasyon ve genişleyen yatırım akışları şeklinde yansımıştır), ABD baskısına karşı kırılganlığı azaltan tamamlayıcı bir ekonomik alan yaratmıştır. Türkiye'nin Körfez ülkeleriyle özellikle BAE, Katar ve Suudi Arabistan ile büyüyen ortaklıkları alternatif finansal kanallar, yatırım fırsatları ve savunma sanayi

iş birliği sağlamıştır. Eş zamanlı olarak, Afrika Girişimi, kalkınma yardımları, insani programlar ve ikili ekonomik projeler aracılığıyla Türkiye'nin ihracat pazarlarını, diplomatik varlığını ve yumuşak güce dayalı angajmanını genişletmiştir. Bu çeşitlendirme çabaları, Türkiye'nin potansiyel ABD ekonomik baskılarına karşı dayanıklılığını artırmış ve stratejik özerkliğini güçlendirmiştir.

Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı, Türkiye'nin yumuşak dengeleme stratejisinin somutlaştığı kritik bir sınama olmuştur. Ankara, NATO üyesi olarak Rusya'nın işgalini kınayıp ittifakın caydırıcı adımlarını desteklerken, aynı anda Moskova ile diplomatik temaslarını sürdürerek kendine özgü bir manevra alanı yaratmıştır. Montrö Sözleşmesi'nin tarafsız biçimde uygulanması ve Karadeniz Tahıl Girişimi'nde üstlenilen arabulucu rolü, Türkiye'nin uluslararası hukuk ve kriz yönetimi üzerinden meşruiyet üreterek sistem içi etkisini artırdığını göstermiştir. Buna karşılık, Batı yaptırımlarına katılmama ve enerji iş birliğini devam ettirme tercihleri Türkiye'nin ekonomik kırılganlıklarını gözetken ve maliyetleri düşük tutan bir denge arayışına işaret eder. Böylece Türkiye, iki blok arasında kopuşa yol açmadan hem diplomatik esnekliğini hem de bölgesel nüfuzunu koruyarak yumuşak dengelemenin tipik özelliklerini sergilemiştir.

Çalışma, Türkiye'nin Biden dönemindeki dengeleyici davranışının, geleneksel gerçekçi askeri dengeleme veya taraf değiştirme anlayışlarıyla tam olarak örtüşmediği sonucuna varmaktadır. Aksine, bulgular Türkiye'nin ittifak yapısı içinde kalırken ABD etkisini sınırlamak için diplomatik, kurumsal ve ekonomik araçlardan yararlanan, çok katmanlı bir yumuşak denge stratejisi izlediğini göstermektedir. Bu stratejiler yumuşak dengelemenin yalnızca büyük güçlerin bir stratejisi olmadığını, giderek çok kutuplu hale gelen bir dünyada stratejik özerklik arayan orta ölçekli güçler için uygulanabilir bir mekanizma olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Türkiye'nin deneyimi, yumuşak dengelemenin kurumsal katılım, ekonomik çeşitlendirme ve jeopolitik pragmatizm kesişiminde nasıl işlediğini göstererek teorik tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışmanın Türkiye örneği yalnızca yumuşak dengeleme teorisinin kavramsal sınırlarını genişletmekle kalmamakta, aynı zamanda orta ölçekli devletlerin artan sistemik belirsizlik dönemlerinde nasıl hareket ettiğine dair anlayışı da geliştirmektedir.