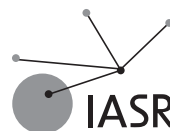




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Article

Changing Geopolitical Environment and Foreign Policy: The Transformation of Türkiye’s Geopolitical Code

Joosong Lee

Institute of International Relations (IDIS), Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Greece

Jaebeom Kwon*

Division of Language & Diplomacy, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Republic of Korea

Abstract

This study examines how Türkiye has employed symbolic expressions and phrases in the formulation and implementation of its foreign policy since the establishment of the Republic, using them as implicit representations of its vision and strategic objectives. Colin Flint conceptualized such deliberate constructions—through which a state legitimizes and garners support for its policy goals and strategies—as a “Geopolitical Code.” Türkiye offers a compelling case of this phenomenon. Whenever facing rapid geopolitical shifts or crises, Türkiye has persistently designed and articulated new Geopolitical Codes to present its evolving grand strategy and political vision. Using the concept of the Geopolitical Code as a theoretical framework, this paper traces how Türkiye has constructed and utilized these Codes in response to changes in its geopolitical environment, and analyzes the meanings embedded in each phase. To achieve this, the study conducts a secondary data analysis of official government documents and relevant secondary sources. The analysis reveals that Türkiye’s foreign policy cannot be explained solely by material power or structural constraints. More crucial is understanding how the state defines its national interests, identifies allies and adversaries, and constructs symbolic narratives to justify strategic behavior. Continuous examination of these processes not only aids in forecasting Türkiye’s future diplomatic and strategic trajectories, but also contributes to the scholarly understanding of the discursive dimension of foreign policy analysis.

Keywords

Türkiye, Geopolitical code, Foreign policy, Geopolitics

Corresponding author:

* Email: kwonjaebeom1983@gmail.com

Introduction

In discussions of Türkiye's foreign policy and grand strategy, terms such as *Kemalism* and *Neo-Ottomanism* are frequently invoked. Notably, during the centennial celebrations of the Republic in 2023, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan employed the phrase *The Century of Türkiye*. Whether deliberately promoted by the Turkish government or ascribed externally, such expressions symbolically and implicitly represent Türkiye's national vision, policy objectives, and overarching strategic orientation. As Flint conceptualizes, such evocative terms developed and utilized to advance specific strategic agendas constitute a 'Geopolitical Code,' which he defines as "the manner in which a country orientates itself toward the world" (Flint, 2006, p. 55). In essence, this refers to a state's attempt to encapsulate its policy goals and strategic outlook in concise symbolic discourse, and to publicly communicate these both domestically and internationally in order to generate legitimacy and mobilize support.

Long before the term Geopolitical Code was conceptualized by Flint, Türkiye had already exhibited comparable forms of symbolic articulation in its statecraft. Since the foundation of the Republic in 1923, Türkiye has recurrently employed condensed and evocative expressions to articulate new national visions and grand strategies, particularly in response to geopolitical transformations or external crises. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding president and architect of the modern Turkish state, undertook a series of reformist policies to restore order and rebuild the nation in the aftermath of the War of Independence and the establishment of the republican system. Domestically and internationally, these efforts came to be encapsulated under the term *Kemalism*, derived from his name. Entering the 1950s and the early Cold War era, Türkiye positioned itself as the *Guardian of the Free World* and confronted the Soviet Union on the frontlines as a member of NATO. Following the end of the Cold War, Türkiye adopted the image of the *Big Brother of the Turkic World*, aiming to extend its influence and incorporate the newly independent post-Soviet states into its sphere of influence.

In the twenty-first century, the Erdoğan administration has increasingly demonstrated a more sophisticated and assertive design and utilization of Geopolitical Codes to serve its foreign policy objectives. Around 2010, through the 'Look East Policy,' Türkiye initiated strategic engagement with the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus—regions once under the influence of the Ottoman Empire and sharing historical and cultural affinities. In this context, despite being primarily labeled by Western media, the Turkish government came to embody the so-called *Neo-Ottomanist* Geopolitical Code (Yavuz, 2020, pp. 162-164). A decade later, in 2019, the government officially launched the '*Asia Anew* (Yeniden Asya) Initiative.' This move reflected a geopolitical recalibration recognizing the limits of achieving its long-sought *European* identity and the insufficiency of relying solely on existing spheres of influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Instead, Türkiye sought to expand cooperation and exchange with East Asian states by invoking a shared *Asian* identity. In essence, this represented the articulation of a new Geopolitical Code aimed at redefining and institutionalizing Türkiye's relations with the broader Asian region (Oh & Lee, 2022, p. 9).

Despite the proclamation of this renewed vision, persistent economic challenges and limited progress in foreign relations led President Erdoğan to introduce yet another Geopolitical Code on the occasion of the Republic's Centenary in 2023—*The Century of Türkiye*. While economic recovery has been sluggish, this initiative signaled an attempt to revitalize Türkiye's diplomatic influence through sustained Soft Power, mediation roles in the Ukraine and Gaza wars, and efforts to reinforce its international standing (Ataman, 2023, pp. 74-76). Through this reframing, the Erdoğan administration sought to consolidate regime legitimacy domestically while clarifying and reaffirming the overarching objectives of its foreign policy. This trajectory exemplifies a

conscious and systematic application of the underlying logic of Geopolitical Code design and deployment as theorized by Flint (2006).

As outlined above, this study aims to trace how Türkiye has formulated its grand strategies and policy objectives in response to shifts in the geopolitical environment, and how it has sought to represent these both domestically and internationally. This inquiry is situated within a theoretical framework grounded in the concept of Geopolitical Code and employs a secondary data analysis methodology, drawing primarily on official documents issued by the Turkish government and relevant secondary literature. Based on these materials, key components constituting Türkiye's Geopolitical Codes will be extracted, conceptualized, and reconstructed for each historical period. When Geopolitical Codes have been explicitly articulated by the Turkish government, the analysis will adopt them as officially defined; conversely, in cases where they have not been formally declared, the study will conceptualize them through interpretive analysis of secondary sources and the author's own analytical framework.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework: Geopolitical Code and Foreign Policy

The concept of the Geopolitical Code is not a widely recognized terminology within academia. In particular, compared to the principal theories and approaches that dominate theoretical frameworks in the field of international relations, studies based on geopolitical theory or such frameworks remain relatively limited. Consequently, many mainstream scholars of international relations tend to view geopolitics primarily as an adjunct to realist approaches (Scholvin, 2016). In other words, realist theorists regard geopolitical theory as providing supplementary insight into how geographical conditions or the spatial distribution of power influence balance and conflict within the international system, thereby complementing or supplying key empirical examples for their theoretical perspectives (Park, 2023).

Literature Review

Although the concept of *Geopolitical Code* remains less dominant than mainstream theoretical approaches in international relations, scholarly interest in its analytical potential has grown steadily, particularly as states increasingly rely on symbolic discourse, identity narratives, and strategic messaging in foreign policy.

A review of existing literature reveals that the majority of studies employing the concept of Geopolitical Code have done so to analyze the foreign policies of specific states. Regarding the United States (the U.S.)—the country where the concept of Geopolitical Code was originally conceptualized—several notable works have traced changes in the American Geopolitical Code between 1998 and 2008 (Flint et al., 2009) and examined its Middle East policy through this framework (Lee & Paik, 2021). Numerous studies have also analyzed China's Geopolitical Code (Flint & Noorali, 2023; Godehardt, 2024; Pérez, 2024), alongside a considerable body of work focusing on India (Adhikari et al., 2008; Noorali et al., 2025). Similarly, research has been conducted on the Geopolitical Codes of Russia (Kim, 2017; Okunev, 2013), the South China Sea littoral states (Musiol, 2019), Korea (Oh & Lee, 2020), Ukraine (Pishgahifard & Shiravand, 2018), Kazakhstan (Sciorati, 2021), and Iran (Mahdiee & Salehabadi, 2023). Furthermore, beyond country-specific analyses, a number of studies have employed the notion of Geopolitical Code to explore major international issues, such as its implications for cybersecurity (Frąszczak et al., 2025), terrorism (Rae, 2007), and political economy (Noorali, 2024).

However, to date, no study has been found that specifically focuses on the Geopolitical Code of Türkiye. While numerous studies examine Türkiye's geopolitical environment, geopolitical value, and strategic calculations, only one work has applied the concept of Geopolitical Code to its analysis. Erşen (2014) analyzed the discourse of Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as Türkiye's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2009 to 2014, through the lens of Geopolitical Code. Yet, this study does not provide a comprehensive examination of Türkiye's overall Geopolitical Code; rather, it remains limited to analyzing the foreign policy strategies of a particular policymaker during a specific period. Accordingly, this paper seeks to reconstruct and conceptualize Türkiye's geopolitical calculations and foreign policy strategies by employing the theoretical framework of Geopolitical Code.

Geopolitical Code and Foreign Policy

The concept of Geopolitical Code was first introduced by Colin Flint, in his book *Introduction to Geopolitics* (2006). Flint defined Geopolitical Code as "The manner in which a country orientates itself toward the world" (Flint, 2006, p. 55). This concept refers to the *code* through which a state articulates its national objectives, methods of foreign policy implementation, and the rationale behind its geopolitical calculations—both domestically and internationally—in order to secure legitimacy and public support for its policies. According to Flint, Geopolitical Code consists of four key components: identifying current allies and enemies, recognizing potential allies and enemies, determining strategies for managing allies and confronting enemies, and legitimizing these strategic choices to both domestic and international audiences (Flint, 2006, p. 55). In brief, these can be summarized under the key dimensions of enemy perception, alliance orientation, and the justification of foreign policy.

For a state to design an accurate and timely Geopolitical Code, it must first conduct a precise calculation of its current and potential national interests. This requires comprehensive assessments of what constitutes its core interests, who poses threats to those interests (enemy perception), which alliances can support its confrontation with primary adversaries, and how these strategic goals are to be pursued through a coherent grand strategy. In the case of the U.S., national interests are officially categorized into three tiers—vital, very important, and important (Art, 2003, p. 79). Among these, the foremost priority lies in the defense of the homeland, defined as a vital national interest. Accordingly, terrorism and transnational organized crime are perceived as principal threats, prompting the U.S. to pursue cooperative policies with its allies aimed at prevention and deterrence. Furthermore, to safeguard what are considered very important interests—such as the maintenance of peace in the Eurasian region and the stable supply of oil from the Gulf—the U.S. has consistently engaged in proactive Middle Eastern policies, often in coordination with NATO and, when necessary, through direct military intervention.

Another crucial dimension of the Geopolitical Code is its representational aspect. For a state, the Geopolitical Code must carry symbolic and communicative meaning—domestically, to secure public support and parliamentary approval, and internationally, to deter adversaries and mobilize allies. The legitimacy of a state's foreign policy stems not from coercion but from shared understanding and consent; therefore, governments must construct historical and ideological narratives that foster national resonance and collective identification. To this end, states often employ identity politics, emphasize prevailing *zeitgeist*, or highlight principal adversaries that pose existential threats to national security. The U.S. administration, in particular, has frequently demonstrated a sophisticated design of its Geopolitical Code by incorporating theoretical perspectives developed by leading scholars (Lee, 2018, pp. 60-67). Once formulated, such meticulously constructed Geopolitical Codes are disseminated through official government documents, public speeches, media channels, and certain academic discourses, organically

translating into the conduct of foreign policy.

Flint (2006) particularly observed that in the case of the U.S., the representation of its Geopolitical Code is systematically articulated through a range of official government documents. The U.S. regularly publishes the so-called four major strategic documents of the executive branch—the National Security Strategy, Quadrennial Homeland Security Review, Nuclear Posture Review, and Defense White Papers—which explicitly and symbolically delineate the nation’s interests, perceptions of adversaries, perspectives on alliances, and overarching grand strategy. Through these documents, the U.S. government communicates to its citizens how the state intends to confront its enemies and what forms of preparedness are required, while simultaneously appealing to Congress for the authorization and budgetary support of its foreign and defense policies. Moreover, because these documents are publicly disseminated, they serve not only to reassure allies but also to signal deterrence toward potential adversaries (Lee & Paik, 2021, p. 38). In addition to these materials, White House press briefings, promotional publications, and, more recently, the practice of digital diplomacy through social media—particularly since the advent of the Trump administration—function as active instruments of Geopolitical Code representation. Through these processes, policies and discourses that resonate with public opinion tend to evolve into assertive foreign policy actions, whereas those lacking sufficient domestic support are often managed more discreetly.

Flint regards the formation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy as one of the most representative examples of the design and application of a Geopolitical Code. He argues that American foreign policy consistently embodies the formulation, operationalization, and representation of such a Geopolitical Code, which in turn serves as the foundation upon which its grand strategy has been constructed and executed (Taylor & Flint, 2000, p. 62). Historically, even before the concept of Geopolitical Code was formally introduced, the U.S. had engaged in analogous processes of policy design. In particular, successive administrations have deliberately disseminated symbolically charged messages to foster public support for their policies. Following independence, for instance, the administration of George Washington advanced the Geopolitical Code commonly referred to as the *Non-Entangling Alliance*, which sought to maintain alliances while refraining from involvement in European affairs (Siracusa & Warren, 2016, pp. 15-22). Subsequently, in the aftermath of the Pacific War, the administration of George Herring declared what came to be known as *The Dawn of the American Century*, signaling a new Geopolitical Code that projected the U.S. as an emerging global power (Herring, 2008, p. 1).

The Geopolitical Code of the U.S. became increasingly explicit and structured during the two World Wars. The Woodrow Wilson administration’s *A World Safe for Democracy* and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s *War against the Fascist and the Militarists* both vividly encapsulated the evolving American national interests, enemy perceptions, and overarching grand strategy as the country consolidated its status as a global leader. The most symbolically powerful and overt expression of the U.S. Geopolitical Code, however, emerged under the Ronald Reagan administration. The Cold War slogan *War on the Evil Empire* represented not only an ideological confrontation but also a rhetorically potent codification of the U.S.’ external orientation and moral positioning in the international system (Lee & Paik, 2021, p. 41). Following the end of the Cold War, the Geopolitical Code of *The Clash of Civilizations*, developed through historical contextualization and theoretical reconstruction by several scholars, introduced a new horizon in defining future adversaries. This eventually culminated in the emergence of the *War on Terror* as a dominant Geopolitical Code under the George W. Bush administration (Lee & Paik, 2021, pp. 41-43). More recently, the Trump administration projected one of the most direct and populist articulations of a Geopolitical Code through the slogan *Make America Great Again*, symbolizing a reassertion of national primacy and ushering in a new era of global uncertainty.

As examined above, Flint developed the concept of Geopolitical Code through his analysis of the background, formation, and implementation processes of U.S. foreign policy. Although the framework lacks theoretical sophistication in certain respects and offers limited predictive or evaluative capacity, Flint's Geopolitical Code approach remains analytically compelling in synthesizing and interpreting a wide range of historically grounded cases. Consequently, the concept—originating from the U.S. experience—has been increasingly applied to explain and interpret the foreign policy behavior of major states such as China, India, and others in recent years. In this context, applying the concept of Geopolitical Code to the case of Türkiye is expected to provide meaningful analytical insight and significant academic value.

Changing Geopolitical Environment and Türkiye's Geopolitical Code: From the Foundation of the Republic to the Early 2000s

Applying Flint's framework, the analysis examines how Türkiye has constructed and represented its geopolitical orientations across different historical phases through national interest formation, enemy perception, and strategic discourse. Türkiye's geopolitical trajectory can be understood through three formative phases: the foundational Kemalist state-building project, the Cold War alignment with the Western bloc, and the post-Cold War expansion toward Turkic, Islamic, and Asian geopolitical spaces.

Kemalism: State Rebuilding and Reformation

Atatürk's assumption of the presidency occurred during a profoundly challenging geopolitical environment for Türkiye. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the territory was fragmented, with foreign interventions and incursions dismantling the imperial system, leaving the population in despair. Over four and a half years of Independence War led by Atatürk devastated the country and shook the very foundations of the nascent state. In this context, upon his election as president, Atatürk prioritized internal reforms and reconstruction over assertive foreign policy design, focusing on strengthening the state's capacities to adapt and *survive* within a transformed geopolitical landscape. This period reflects a strategic emphasis on state consolidation and resiliency in the face of an adverse international environment, laying the groundwork for future geopolitical positioning and national interest articulation within Türkiye's Geopolitical Code.

In this context, the nascent Republic prioritized survival as its paramount national interest, leading Atatürk to pursue an isolationist foreign policy while concentrating on internal reconstruction and reforms (Göl, 1993, pp. 57-58). The greatest obstacle to this pursuit of national interest was the *past* (Ahmad, 2014). Although neighboring countries, which had been adversaries during the War of Independence, continued to present tangible threats, Atatürk regarded the more pressing challenge as presenting a differentiated vision for the new republican regime (Alaranta, 2015). Specifically, Islam, as the dominant identity deeply rooted over six centuries in the lives of the populace under the Ottoman Empire, became the primary target of reform. Atatürk frequently emphasized in major public speeches and keynote addresses that the fundamental cause of the Ottoman Empire's collapse was the anachronistic nature of Islam and religion cannot be the true order for the republic ("Türkiye Cumhuriyeti şeyhler, dervişler, müritler memleketi olamaz. En doğru, en hakiki tarikat, medeniyet tarikatıdır") (Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 2024).¹ In doing so, he officially declared the Geopolitical Code he envisioned, both domestically and internationally. To implement this representation, Atatürk expelled the Ottoman royal family abroad in 1924

and abolished the Caliphate, the symbolic leadership based on religion. Simultaneously, Atatürk abolished the Sharia legal system along with religious courts and educational institutions, thereby instituting a rigorously secular framework. His reform agenda further entailed measures to eradicate Islamic cultural symbols, including prohibiting the hijab, discontinuing the Islamic calendar, and substituting the Arabic script in the Turkish language with the Latin alphabet, all underscoring his firm commitment to secularization (Ahmad, 2014, p. 85).

To sever ties with the past, another major axis of reform was the emphasis on ethnic identity (Morin & Lee, 2010, p. 488). Atatürk, in his 1928 keynote address at the Grand National Assembly, famously declared, “How happy is the one who says I am a Türk (Ne mutlu Türküm diyene),” underscoring pride and value in the Türk ethnic identity (Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 2024). As part of this endeavor, the Ministry of Education in Türkiye actively promoted national pride through history and language textbooks, literary works, and media. All these efforts were calculated to naturally represent the Geopolitical Code both to the public domestically and externally.

Atatürk regarded secularism, nationalism, and reformism as the most essential principles to replace the Islamic identity that was perceived as an obstacle to achieving his ultimate goals of national reconstruction and reform. The Republican People’s Party (CHP: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), founded by Atatürk, incorporated these three principles together with populism, republicanism, and statism, and designated them collectively as the *Six Arrows* (Altı Ok). These Six Arrows represented the central orientation underlying both the domestic and foreign policies reflected in Atatürk’s speeches and writings, thereby constituting the grand strategy that articulated his Geopolitical Code. Moreover, as intellectuals and journalists such as Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu and Ahmet Cevat Emre began referring to this ideological framework as *Atatürkism* (Atatürkçülük), the concept gradually evolved into a distinct doctrinal term known as *Kemalism* (Albayrak, 2010). Ultimately, the unique Geopolitical Code that Atatürk proactively designed following the establishment of the Republic acquired its enduring symbolic significance through the label *Kemalism* coined by subsequent generations.

The Guardian of the Free World: Formulation of an European Identity

Following the establishment of the republic, Türkiye maintained a diplomatic strategy of isolationism that persisted up to and during much of World War II. Throughout this period, Türkiye largely adhered to a stance of neutrality rather than aligning with any specific bloc, dedicating itself to internal reconstruction and social integration (Göl, 1993). However, after the conclusion of World War II and as the global order gradually shifted towards a bipolar structure dominated by the U.S. and the Soviet Union, Türkiye began to move away from its neutral diplomatic posture and incrementally leaned towards one bloc (Oran, 2010, p. 311). Having actively embraced secularism to dilute an Islamic identity, Türkiye progressively sought to construct a Western-style democratic system rooted in republicanism, orienting itself increasingly towards a Western model. Within this new geopolitical environment, Türkiye began to cultivate a *European* identity, culminating in its integration into the Western bloc (Bingöl, 2019, p. 55). Notably, in 1952, Türkiye joined NATO to maximize its geopolitical value and accepted the role of *Guardian*, defending the easternmost frontier from a European standpoint (Günay, 2019).

Türkiye’s geopolitical calculation was fundamentally linked to maximizing national interests. At that time, Türkiye faced three strategic options: aligning with the Western bloc, aligning with the communist bloc, or maintaining neutrality. Faced with such difficult choices, Türkiye definitively clarified its stance by joining NATO. Maintaining neutrality offered no tangible benefits, while joining the communist bloc was discounted as it would not significantly advance Türkiye’s national interests. Historically, deep mistrust and conflict existed due to border disputes

and maritime jurisdiction issues, and Türkiye's values fundamentally diverged from the Soviet system. Conversely, joining the Western bloc was calculated to reinforce Türkiye's previously pursued European identity and yield substantial military and economic advantages. Through NATO membership, Türkiye could secure military support enabling modernization of its armed forces, which would strengthen national security over the medium and long term. Additionally, the US-provided Marshall Plan offered opportunities to revive the national economy and accelerate societal modernization (Atmaca, 2014).

Due to these calculations, in 1945, when the Cold War atmosphere was intensifying, then-Türkiye President Mustafa İsmet İnönü expressed concerns over the communist threat and pressure by stating, "We will not accept Soviet domination," thereby demonstrating a strong tradition of democracy and a commitment to Westernization (Giritli, 2011). Notably, Türkiye's participation in the Korean War served as concrete evidence that its declaration to become the *Guardian* of the free world was not mere rhetoric. Ultimately, the Geopolitical Code adopted by the Turkish government during the Cold War, identified the communist bloc as its principal enemy and the Western liberal bloc as its clear ally, reflecting a meticulous calculation of national interests. Although Türkiye's limited national power constrained its ability to expand external influence or pursue an active foreign policy, it nonetheless pursued a grand strategy of actively engaging in bloc diplomacy to fulfill its role (Günay, 2019). The Turkish government particularly emphasized its strategic position as a pivotal link between Europe and Asia, serving as a bulwark against Soviet westward and southward expansion, while also asserting responsibility for international security through the protection of the two straits connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean (Atmaca, 2014).

This Geopolitical Code was actively represented to both the domestic population and the international community through various government documents and speeches. During Türkiye's accession to NATO in 1952, then-President Celal Bayar clearly articulated this stance by declaring, "Türkiye will play a critical role in the defense and maintenance of peace in the free world, and will exert its utmost efforts for collective defense alongside its allies" (Abou-El-Fadl, 2018). Additionally, numerous materials emphasizing the irrationality and brutality of the Soviet Union were produced by the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and distributed to the public (Öztan & Özekmekçi, 2014). The Turkish government also skillfully embodied its Geopolitical Code through media and cultural works; it produced short films and documentaries highlighting the superiority of liberal democracy and Türkiye's democratic system, distributing them via public broadcasting and rural community centers (Akın, 2021). Anti-communist messages were further disseminated through children's comic books and magazines (Solomonovich, 2023). Ultimately, the Geopolitical Code of *The Guardian of the Free World* can be understood as having been continuously reproduced and expanded until the early 1990s, when the Cold War formally came to an end.

The Big Brother of the Türk World: The End of the Cold War and Geopolitical Expansion

The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of new opportunities for Türkiye. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new independent states sharing a common Turkic identity emerged, and countries previously under the Ottoman Empire's sphere of influence reemerged on the international stage. Türkiye actively sought to capitalize on these opportunities to maximize its national interests. It perceived the post-Cold War environment as conducive to broadening its diplomatic horizons and diversifying its foreign policy, moving away from its earlier isolationist and passive approaches (Sayari, 2000, p. 173). The U.S. and the Western bloc welcomed Türkiye's assertiveness, as they preferred that these newly independent states be managed in a

stable manner. Having successfully achieved democratization and established an ideal model emphasizing secular values akin to Western states, Türkiye's *Turkish Model* was viewed as a blueprint that these post-Soviet states could follow, facilitating a smooth transition in the new geopolitical landscape (Walker, 2005, p. 15).

Türkiye's Geopolitical Code in response to these new geopolitical shifts was designed around assuming the role of the *Big Brother in the Turkic World*. This revised Geopolitical Code places greater emphasis on national interests and alliance relations rather than on defining a principal adversary. By actively supporting and expanding exchanges with Central Asian and Caucasian states that share linguistic, religious, and cultural identities, Türkiye seeks to expand its influence and maximize national interests in these regions (Oh & Lee, 2022). The abundant natural resources in Central Asia provide opportunities not only to secure energy supplies and enhance economic gains through new market access but also to exert political influence as a regional hegemon.

To this end, then-President Süleyman Demirel actively visited Central Asia and the Balkans, strengthening relations and cultivating goodwill by providing substantial aid. This support was framed not as a political or strategic gain, but as fraternal assistance to the *overseas kin*, focusing more on building points of contact and fostering a friendly atmosphere rather than arousing suspicion (Ünver, 2023). Since 1992, Türkiye has proactively expanded the scope of its alliances by hosting annual summits with the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). In the relative peace that followed the dissolution of its principal adversary, the Soviet Union, Türkiye maintained its alliances with NATO and European countries while simultaneously securing new cooperative partnerships.

In order to reinforce this momentum of cooperation, the Turkish government established the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA: Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı) in 1992. Serving as the principal institution responsible for providing official development assistance (ODA) and implementing exchange and cooperation projects, TIKA diligently fulfilled its initial roles in public diplomacy and economic support. According to TIKA statistics, from the early 1990s through approximately a decade, Türkiye's annual ODA to Central Asian countries averaged around 80 million USD (Türkiye MOFA, 2025). For these countries, which faced the challenge of filling the power vacuum left by the Soviet Union, Türkiye's proactive engagement and support were welcomed, leading to increased frequency and depth of cooperation.

Türkiye's Geopolitical Code as the *Big Brother of the Turkic World* has been actively represented through various diplomatic and rhetorical efforts. Presidents and Foreign Ministers of Türkiye consistently conveyed messages emphasizing fraternal cooperation with Central Asian countries during summits and multilateral meetings, portraying Türkiye's role as that of an elder brother willing to provide support. Additionally, key think tanks and prominent scholars affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have frequently promoted and reinforced this new Geopolitical Code as part of Türkiye's regional strategy (Baez, 2025; Kahveci & Bonnenfant, 2023).

Table 1. Geopolitical code of Türkiye: From the foundation of the Republic to the early 2000s

Geopolitical environment	Geopolitical code	Notes
Foundation of the Republic	Kemalism	State Building and Reformation
Entering the Cold War Period	The Guardian of the Free World	Formulation of the European Identity and creating a pivotal link between Europe & Asia
End of the Cold War & Dawn of the New World Order	The Big Brother of the Türk World	Geopolitical Expansion and Foreign Policy Diversification

Source: Compiled and conceptualized by the author.

A New Century, a New Geopolitical Code: The Erdoğan Administration's Geopolitical Calculus

The Geopolitical Code of Türkiye became increasingly articulated and consolidated following the rise of Prime Minister Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) in the early 2000s, after overcoming the economic crisis and presenting a new vision. The Erdoğan administration, confronted with multiple shifts in the geopolitical environment and adverse circumstances, began to demonstrate a clear intention to construct a Geopolitical Code with greater appeal and symbolic significance as a means of breaking through these challenges (Oh & Lee, 2022, p. 6). In particular, after consolidating its position as the ruling party, the AKP has shown a more proactive approach in designing a Geopolitical Code aimed at maximizing national interests compared to the previous period.

Neo-Ottomanism: Look East Policy and the Islamic Community

The development of a new Geopolitical Code in response to a new era does not imply the disappearance or nullification of preexisting Geopolitical Codes. Even after the Erdoğan administration began to actively formulate and implement its own distinctive Geopolitical Code in foreign policy, *Kemalism* has continued to serve as the foundational basis of the state (Demiriz, 2023). Furthermore, the pro-Western orientation and legacy established during the Cold War persist into the twenty-first century—an era characterized by the absence of clearly defined adversaries—as Türkiye remains both a member of NATO and an ally of Europe. In addition, Türkiye's status as the *Big brother* of Turkic peoples has been reinforced through sustained interaction and cooperation, as well as through institutional mechanisms such as the establishment of the Turkic Council in 2009 (Demir, 2022, p. 44).

On this foundation, the Erdoğan administration, from the outset of its tenure, pursued comprehensive reforms of Türkiye's state system through close cooperation with the West (Yılmaz & Bashirov, 2018, p. 1816). This was motivated by the desire to maximize the *European* identity long aspired to since the era of Atatürk, and to secure not only security but also economic and political benefits as a new member of the European Union. Building on this, the ultimate objective was to ascend to the status of a regional pivot state, serving as a geopolitical bridge between Europe and Asia (Oh & Lee, 2022, p. 6). However, Türkiye faced limitations in pursuing this grand strategy due to its relatively weak national power. Economic recovery was sluggish, and accession to the European Union, despite having applied in 1999 and attaining candidate status in 2004, made no further progress. In particular, as the European Union repeatedly imposed cultural and political criteria demanding endless reforms, the Turkish government ultimately declared the suspension of negotiations in 2005 (Erşen & Köstem, 2019, p. 4).

As the prospect of strengthening Türkiye's European identity grew increasingly distant, the Erdoğan administration came to recognize the necessity of seeking a new Geopolitical Code capable of driving the dynamics of the 21st century. While maintaining the foundational model of secular liberal democracy, Erdoğan concluded that rather than persistently aspiring toward a Europe that continued to marginalize it, redirecting its orientation toward regions where Türkiye could exercise a degree of leadership would better serve the maximization of national interests. Within this context, the Erdoğan government announced a new guiding principle, the *Look East Policy*. Its focus lay on the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus—regions with which Türkiye shared historical and cultural identities and where it perceived itself in a position of relative superiority. To consolidate its influence, the administration began emphasizing a form of “Islamic Community” (Yavuz, 2020, pp. 162-164). Foreign scholars

labeled this strategy *Neo-Ottomanism*, and the Erdoğan administration readily adopted the term as its Geopolitical Code.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, a scholar-turned-politician and then Foreign Minister, played a crucial role in propelling the Erdoğan administration's new Geopolitical Code. Following the pattern of post-Cold War U.S. international relations scholars contributing to government Geopolitical Codes, Davutoğlu's comprehensive vision guided Türkiye's strategic foreign relations. Prioritizing the restoration of ties with formerly estranged Middle Eastern countries, Türkiye actively pursued rapprochement with its neighbors. Arab states that established governments centered on Islamist parties after the Arab Spring sought to learn from the Turkish case, which was perceived as having successfully reconciled secularism and moderate Islamism while achieving democratization and economic development. Türkiye's model garnered acclaim as a *Turkish Model* by leaders emerging post-Arab Spring (Kirişçi, 2013). This simultaneously led Türkiye to enhancing engagement and cooperation with other Arab states (Steil & Walker, 2010). Türkiye's trade volume with Arab countries more than doubled from 9% in 2002 to 19% in 2009, reaching \$19.2 billion (Türkiye Export Assembly, 2025). Additionally, Türkiye elevated its international standing by positioning itself as a mediator in chronic Middle Eastern conflicts, such as the Palestinian issue (Davutoğlu, 2009, p. 403). While maintaining alliances with NATO and Europe and strong sociocultural bonds with Central Asian states, Türkiye successfully established new potential alliances with Middle Eastern Arab countries within this framework of its Geopolitical Code.

President Erdoğan actively emphasized Türkiye's new Geopolitical Code on the international stage, showcasing the country's goals and vision both domestically and abroad. This strategy gradually earned recognition as contributing to the enhancement of Türkiye's national prestige. In 2010, Türkiye entered the Brand Finance Nation Brand Index rankings for the first time at 21st place and has consistently remained within the top 20 since then (Brand Finance, 2025). The Erdoğan administration's national interest objective of becoming a genuine regional hub through increased influence in its vicinity has thus seen considerable progress. To represent this new and successful Geopolitical Code rooted in soft power, the administration continuously utilized the existing TİKA and maintained a visible presence through social media and presidential briefings.

Asia Anew: From 'Look East' to 'Turn to East'

The Geopolitical Code of *Neo-Ottomanism*, formulated in 2009, provided Türkiye with the opportunity to extend its influence beyond its traditional Central Asian sphere to various Middle Eastern countries. This expansion was achieved through increased political cooperation and economic exchange, which enhanced Türkiye's regional influence and concurrently expanded its soft power (Kirişçi, 2013). However, Türkiye's principal adversary and greatest obstacle remained its economy. From the mid-2010s, Türkiye's economic situation began to deteriorate gradually, culminating in a severe currency and debt crisis in 2018. This crisis triggered a sharp depreciation of the Turkish lira, rampant inflation, and a significant surge in national debt (Akçay & Güngen, 2019). Consequently, the core aspect of the *Neo-Ottoman* Geopolitical Code—comprehensive support for *brotherly* nations—became practically unfeasible. The collapse of key bilateral relations, notably with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, exacerbated the energy and foreign exchange crises (Oh & Lee, 2022, p. 8). Ultimately, the perceived external enemies were overshadowed by domestic economic vulnerabilities, and none of the alliances Türkiye had formed provided effective solutions to confront these internal challenges.

In the context of accumulating crises and limitations, the Erdoğan administration introduced a new strategic card: diversification of its diplomatic horizons. With the prospect of securing

a European identity effectively foreclosed, Türkiye began to emphasize its *Asian* identity by engaging with East Asian and Southeast Asian countries. To formally announce this shift in Geopolitical Code, then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu unveiled the *Asia Anew* Initiative at the 11th Ambassadors' Conference in 2019. In his opening remarks, Çavuşoğlu declared that "Türkiye is the country located at the westernmost edge of Asia," signaling a clear departure from past Westernization policies toward a reoriented focus on Asia (Gürbüz, 2019). Further, the Turkish government specified that the *Asia Anew* Geopolitical Code would principally target Southeast and Northeast Asia. Southeast Asia was identified as a market for investment and trade expansion, while Northeast Asia was expected to be a source of advanced technology transfer and a partner in developing more sophisticated cooperation frameworks. Concrete plans encompassed initial collaborations in defense industries, infrastructure, logistics, and energy, with a mid-to-long-term vision extending into education, tourism, arts, and sports (Gürbüz, 2019). This initiative reflects a comprehensive recalibration of Türkiye's foreign policy within the framework of its evolving Geopolitical Code.

To represent this new Geopolitical Code, President Erdoğan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began actively engaging in external promotion and cooperative exchanges. High-level visits included trips to East Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan, as well as visits by senior officials to Vietnam, Singapore, and others (Oh & Lee, 2022, pp. 8-9). During various summits and meetings, these officials consistently conveyed the message of uniting with Asia economically, diplomatically, and culturally over the mid-to-long term, based on their shared *Asian identity*, thereby publicly disseminating Türkiye's Geopolitical Code (Çelik, 2021, p. 3). Concurrently, practical workshops were held to implement the *Asia Anew* vision (Yüzbaşıoğlu, 2021), and institutions central to economic public diplomacy—such as TİKA and the Turkish Investment Office—and the cultural diplomacy—Yunus Emre Institute—have been driving long-term grand strategies in education, tourism, arts, and culture (Işık, 2022). Alongside these efforts, the Directorate of Communications was established in 2018 under the Presidential Office to serve as the control tower for this new Geopolitical Code. Additionally, an Asia Cooperation Ambassador (Dışişleri Bakanlığı Yeniden Asya Koordinatörü Büyükelçi) position was created within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support these initiatives. The Directorate conducts seminars across various countries and engages with governments and academia in Asian states, promoting Türkiye's new Geopolitical Code both domestically and internationally.

The Century of Türkiye: Vision for a New Türkiye

On May 31, 2023, President Erdoğan, during an event commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Republic, declared that the next century will be the *Century of Türkiye* (Türkiye Yüzyılı) (TCCB, 2023). The year 2023 also marks the centennial of the Treaty of Lausanne, which symbolized the lifting of constraints imposed on defeated Türkiye after World War I, representing a liberation from past burdens (Syah, 2023). In this symbolic context, President Erdoğan asserted that the newly proclaimed Geopolitical Code represents a comprehensive roadmap aimed at forging a *New Türkiye* that transcends existing civilizations and moves toward greater goals (TCCB, 2023).

The new Geopolitical Code announced in 2023, just four years after the 2019 *Asia Anew*, was driven by domestic political factors including economic crisis and elections. President Erdoğan secured a narrow victory by only 4% in the May 2023 presidential election and subsequently faced the largest defeat since 2002 in the March 2024 local elections (Sharp, 2024). Meanwhile, inflation averaged 63%, with the Turkish lira steadily depreciating by 95% compared to a decade earlier (Jones et al., 2024). Overcoming persistent economic challenges, long regarded as

Türkiye's principal internal adversary, and restoring the country's damaged international standing became directly linked to the regime's survival. In this context, the economic crisis fundamentally shapes both Türkiye's national interest perception and its conception of principal enemies.

President Erdoğan's newly articulated Geopolitical Code does not appear to significantly diverge from prior frameworks. The existing Geopolitical Code, as represented by the Erdoğan administration, continues to emphasize soft power grounded in historical and cultural heritage, close cooperation and solidarity with Turkic *brother* nations, and national unity to support these aims. Beyond declarative slogans such as "A New Century, A New Türkiye," the new Geopolitical Code lacks substantive specificity (Ataman, 2023, pp. 74-75). Rather than crafting a concrete mid- to long-term Geopolitical Code following the Asia Anew, the declaration appears largely motivated by the symbolic necessity of marking the centennial of the Republic with a novel political message.

The Erdoğan administration has prominently highlighted its contributions to the normalization of Syria and the dismantling of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan), asserting that it has created a "Terror-free Türkiye" (Turkey Studies Unit, 2025). With the prolongation of the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, Türkiye has also proclaimed its capability to serve as a decisive mediator. Consequently, the Geopolitical Code declared by President Erdoğan as the *Century of Türkiye* is expected to continue the trajectory of the existing national brand and strategic vision. However, as evidenced by Türkiye's NATO membership alongside its expressed intentions to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, it is likely to increasingly adopt a diplomatic stance characterized by swinging between multiple blocs, thereby enhancing its role as a *swing state* in international relations (Fidan, 2023).

Table 2. Geopolitical code of Türkiye: From the early 2000s to the Present

Geopolitical environment	Geopolitical code	Notes
Economic Crisis & Repeated Failures in accession to the EU	Neo-Ottomanism	Look East Policy & Encompass the Islamic Community
Continued Economic Crisis & Collapse of Key Bilateral Relations (U.S. & KSA)	Asia Anew	Transformation from 'Look East' to 'Turn to East'
100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Republic	The Century of Türkiye	Comprehensive Roadmap for New Türkiye

Source: Compiled and conceptualized by the author.

Conclusion & Implication

Türkiye's evolving foreign policy demonstrates how geopolitical orientation is continuously reshaped as domestic priorities, leadership styles, and external strategic environments change. Applying Flint's concept of the Geopolitical Code has shown that Türkiye's foreign policy cannot be fully explained through material power or structural constraints alone. Rather, understanding how the state identifies allies and adversaries, defines national interests, and deploys symbolic narratives is essential for interpreting its strategic behavior. In this sense, the framework provides analytical value by revealing the representational and discursive dimensions of foreign policy that conventional realist or institutionalist lenses may overlook.

Since the establishment of the republic and into the early twenty-first century, Türkiye's Geopolitical Code has undergone multifaceted transformations in response to shifts in its

geopolitical environment, evolving calculations of national interest, and changing perceptions of principal enemies and alliances. The message of prioritizing internal reconstruction and reform, as proclaimed both domestically and internationally through *Kemalism*; the adoption of the Geopolitical Code of *The Guardian of the Free World* during the Cold War, whereby Türkiye sought to cultivate a *European* identity as the front line of the Western bloc; and, following the end of the Cold War, the formulation and representation of the Geopolitical Code of *The Big Brother of the Türk World*, with an ambition to broaden Türkiye's geopolitical horizon and exert greater influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus—regions sharing historical and civilizational legacies—were all constructed and represented as key frameworks.

The Geopolitical Code of Türkiye became increasingly consolidated in the early 2000s, after overcoming the economic crisis and presenting a new vision. The Erdoğan administration began to demonstrate a clear intention to construct a Geopolitical Code with greater appeal and symbolic significance as a means of breaking through multiple shifts in the geopolitical environment and adverse circumstances. The Erdoğan administration designed a *Neo-Ottomanism* Geopolitical Code aimed at overcoming the economic crisis and the repeated setbacks in the EU accession process. By incorporating regions such as the Middle East and Central Asia, the government sought to expand its geopolitical influence and thereby maximize national interests. Subsequently, as the economic crisis deepened and relations with key diplomatic partners deteriorated, the administration shifted its foreign policy focus toward East and Southeast Asia in an effort to break through these constraints. This reorientation was articulated as the so-called *Asia Anew* Geopolitical Code. In 2023, marking the centennial of the Republic, the government introduced a new Geopolitical Code, *The Century of Türkiye*, proclaiming a vision to inaugurate a new era grounded in Türkiye's accumulated influence and soft power.

The historical trajectory examined in this study illustrates three formative phases: the foundational Kemalist project rooted in secular nationalism and Western modernity; the Cold War role as a frontline NATO member guarding the “Free World”; and the post-Cold War expansion toward Turkic, Islamic, and Asian geopolitical spheres under shifting civilizational and strategic narratives. Although these transitions signify significant ideological and normative adjustments, continuity exists in Türkiye's aspiration for strategic autonomy and recognition as a pivotal regional power.

While the Geopolitical Code framework offers conceptual clarity and interpretive depth, it also carries limitations. It does not constitute a predictive theory and possesses limited explanatory power for assessing whether geopolitical rhetoric translates into policy implementation. Particularly in Türkiye's case, the gap between proclaimed geopolitical codes and actual policy outcomes—shaped by domestic economic constraints, alliance pressures, and leadership calculations—demonstrates that Geopolitical Codes function more as performative and legitimizing narratives rather than fixed strategic doctrines. Future research could incorporate quantitative discourse analysis, longitudinal policy tracking, or comparative studies to enhance methodological rigor and improve the framework's evaluative capacity.

Despite its theoretical modesty, the framework holds policy relevance. Monitoring Türkiye's evolving geopolitical narratives can provide early signals of diplomatic repositioning, emerging areas of alignment or friction, and potential shifts in threat perception or alliance formation. This is increasingly important as Türkiye positions itself simultaneously within Western security architecture and emerging Eurasian platforms such as the SCO or BRICS. For external policy actors—including South Korea—engagement strategies that acknowledge both the symbolic and strategic dimensions of Türkiye's geopolitical self-understanding may prove more effective than those relying solely on material or transactional assessments.

Ultimately, Türkiye's geopolitical code continues to evolve as both a tool of foreign policy

communication and an expression of national identity. Understanding its fluidity, embedded historical layers, and performative logic remains essential for interpreting Türkiye's role in a rapidly transforming international order.

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ORCID iD

Joosong Lee  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8268-8595>

Jaebeom Kwon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0151-6346>

Notes

1. Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi is an institution established directly under the Prime Ministry to honor President Atatürk and the history of Türkiye. It holds original speeches and writings of President Atatürk and shares them with the public. Notably, it produced the Atatürk Encyclopedia in 2024 to enhance accessibility, which was actively utilized as a primary source in this paper. For more detail, refer to: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi (2024). *Atatürk Ansiklopedisi Mobil Uygulaması*, Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu. <https://ataturkansiklopedisi.gov.tr/mobile>.

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