

# Navigating the International Power Struggle: A Comparative Study of Türkiye, Germany, and Iran

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## Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of the foreign policies of Türkiye, Germany, and Iran with regard to the changing global political landscape. While all three countries have endeavored to safeguard their national interests through a balance of power strategy, Türkiye has emerged as a more assertive actor in this regard. Türkiye has benefited from the rising influence of Asia and growing competition with the West, while Iran has faced challenges from US sanctions and Germany's balance of power approach has been tested by the conflict in Ukraine. Utilizing economic, foreign policy, and military spending data, this article elucidates how these actors respond to global shifts to carve their independent spheres. Ultimately, the article posits that Türkiye has made greater strides in expanding the scope of its foreign policy compared to Germany and Iran over the past two decades

**Keywords:** Iran, Germany, Türkiye, Balance of Power, Autonomy

## Introduction

The primary purpose of this article is to compare the reactions of Türkiye, Germany, and Iran, actors all considered regional powers, to the ruptures in the global political system. The main argument in this framework is that all three countries have tried to protect their national interests through a policy of balance of power in the last few decades, but Türkiye became more assertive than the other two countries in implementing this balance policy, especially in recent years. While Türkiye turned the increasingly tough power struggle between the US, China, and Russia into an opportunity and acted more independently in foreign policy, Germany increasingly relied on the United States and Iran on China and Russia, moving away from the balance policy and therefore, the possibility of acting more independently.

The growing influence of Asia and Russia's increased competition with the West has allowed Türkiye to adopt a more autonomous foreign policy, resisting pressure and imposition from the US and Europe. The Western nations, preoccupied with rivals such as China and Russia in the global power dynamic, were unable to steer Türkiye, which is now acting more independently, towards policies aligned with their interests. Ankara's deepening ties with Middle Eastern and Asian nations as well as with Russia in the economic arena have diminished Türkiye's dependence on the West. Additionally, Türkiye's progress in building its own economic and military capabilities over the past 20 years has made it more resilient to external pressures.

On the other hand, Iran and Germany have struggled to carry out the balance policy they desire. The main cause of Iran's difficulties is American sanctions. The Tehran administration, which had the opportunity to relieve Western pressure with the nuclear agreement signed during the Obama administration, was planning to become the greatest power in the Middle East by balancing its relations with European powers and Eastern partners. However, Iran's plans were thwarted when Donald Trump became US president and preferred working closely with the Israeli lobby on Iran. With Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the reintroduction of harsher sanctions on Iran, it has become nearly impossible for the Tehran administration to pursue a balanced foreign policy.

The transformation of the tension with Russia into an armed conflict on the Ukrainian front challenged Germany's balance of power policy. Although the Berlin administration appeared to be on Washington's side in the rivalry between the US and Russia, it always pursued a cautious policy to keep the rivalry from reaching such proportions that it would harm the German economy and Russia from becoming a security threat to Germany (Mackow, 2022). However, following Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the anti-Moscow atmosphere in European public opinion, combined with US pressure, forced Berlin to abandon its balance-of-power policy and align with the US against Russia.

A similar process is taking place in the US-China rivalry. Germany, which has been hesitant to follow Washington's harsh policy against the country to avoid jeopardizing its economic relations with China, is gradually weakening its chances of pursuing a balanced policy toward the US-China rivalry. Because, as the US escalates tensions

with China, it forces its Western allies to adopt similar policies in this regard.

Without a doubt, many factors influence the three countries' policies in the escalating conflict between the United States, which remains the most powerful actor in the international system, and China and Russia, which are challenging it. One of these parameters is Asia's rise. In this regard, it is critical to note that 21 East, South, and Southeast Asian countries have surpassed 34 Western countries in terms of GDP per purchasing power parity. This situation, which marks the end of the phenomenon known as "Western Supremacy," has altered the foreign policies of all countries around the world. It also deeply affects the foreign policies of Türkiye, Iran, and Germany. Unarguably, challenges to the West's superiority and US leadership are perceived differently in these three countries, as are the reactions.

<b>Table 1.</b> Regions' GDP shares by purchasing power parity (PPP) 1990-2022 (billion USD / %)			
	1990	2022	Increase between 1990-2022
<b><i>World Total</i></b>	<b><i>29.311</i></b>	<b><i>164.160</i></b>	<b><i>5.6 times</i></b>
<b>East, South, and Southeast Asia</b> (21 Countries)	6.855 23%	65.948 % 40,2	9.6 times
<b>Western World</b> (34 Countries - US, EU, UK, Norway, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, New Zeland)	13.372 45.6%	58.946 % 35,9	4.4 times

**Source:** World Bank

Along with Asia's rise, there is an increase in mutual economic dependence between Asian countries, particularly China, and the rest of the world. This increase will undoubtedly have an impact on foreign policy formulation. As a result, the article compares China's and Russia's growing share of foreign trade and foreign direct investment in Türkiye, Iran, and Germany to the United States' share.

### **Interdependence levels of the three countries in their relationships with global actors**

#### *Economic dimension*

When we examine Türkiye's, Germany's, and Iran's foreign economic relations, we can

see that there have been significant changes in terms of foreign trade in the last 20 years. According to 2022 data, while China remains the largest trading partner for both Germany and Iran, it has shifted to the third-largest trading partner for Turkey. This data is significant in terms of demonstrating the extent of economic interdependence between Beijing and Ankara, Berlin and Tehran. These trade figures are an indicator that sheds light on Germany's reservations about joining the West's trade war against China, particularly under the leadership of the United States.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, the fact that Europe and the United States still account for two-thirds of Germany's total foreign trade suggests that, if such a trade conflict were to occur, Berlin would likely align with the West.

Although its importance in German foreign trade has gradually declined in comparison to China, the United States continued to be the country to which Germany exported the most in 2021. However, despite this, the share of the US in Germany's exports decreased from 10.26 per cent to 9.89 per cent between 2000-2022. In the same period, the share of the US in Germany's imports decreased from 8.54 per cent to 6.17 per cent (Table 2). Looking at Russia's share of German foreign trade, it is clear that it lags far behind China and the United States, with a rate of around 1.5 per cent. Although Russia once played a critical role in supplying key energy resources such as natural gas and oil to Germany, accounting for 1.9 percent of Germany's imports, it no longer holds a significant position in Germany's energy resource landscape. The "sanctions wars" between Russia and European countries during the Ukraine War show how fragile Germany was in this regard (Reinhardt, 2022).

In terms of its foreign trade structure, Türkiye appears to be similar to Germany. Like Germany, the United States' share of Türkiye's foreign trade has declined in the last 20 years, while China's share has increased significantly. Between 2000 and 2022, China's share of Turkish imports increased from 2.44 per cent to 11.37 per cent, while imports from the United States fell from 7.18 per cent to 4.19 per cent. A similar pattern was observed in Türkiye's exports to these countries. The roughly 120 per cent increase in Russia's share of Turkish imports during the same period is closely related to the fact that Russia is Türkiye's primary energy supplier. Although Russia had a significant

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<sup>11</sup> As early as 2016, China had already become Germany's largest trading partner.

share of Türkiye's natural gas and oil imports by 2021, its share of Türkiye's energy imports has recently decreased. In 2005, Türkiye imported 66 per cent of its natural gas and 30 per cent of its crude oil from this country; by 2021, these rates would be 45 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively. Although this development broadens Ankara's options in dealing with Moscow, it is clear that Türkiye should take steps to become more independent of Russia, particularly in the field of natural gas.

Although the share of China and Russia in Turkish foreign trade has increased significantly since 2000, the share of Western countries in Turkish foreign trade remained at around 43 per cent as of 2021. Asia and Russia, on the other hand, account for approximately 35 per cent of the total. Furthermore, Türkiye's significant trade deficits with countries like China and Russia make the European Union and the United States—partners with whom it maintains more balanced trade relationships—more important commercial allies for Ankara. Nonetheless, it is possible to conclude that Europe and the United States are very important partners in terms of Türkiye's export market, and Russia and China are very important partners in terms of imports.

Iran's relations with the West, particularly the United States, have been strained since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and this tension escalated in the 2000s. As a result, Iran now conducts about 75 per cent of its international trade with Asian countries. The problems with Western countries pushed the Tehran administration to increase its mutual economic ties with Asia to very high levels. According to 2021 data, while the share of Asia in Iran's exports was 67.6 per cent, its share in imports was 78.5 per cent. In the same year, China accounted for about 25 per cent of Iran's foreign trade, making it Iran's largest trading partner. As of 2021, the share of Europe and America in Iran's exports dropped to 2.3 per cent, and their share in imports fell to 18.7 per cent. This suggests that economic ties between Iran and the West are gradually weakening over time.

Although Russia has close security ties with Iran, its share in Iran's foreign trade has decreased since 2000. Russia's share in Iran's imports fell from 5.9 per cent to 2.6 per cent between 2000 and 2022, while its share in Iran's total exports increased from 0.2 per cent to 0.8 per cent during the same period. Meanwhile, trade between Iran and the US, which has long imposed sanctions on Iran, has remained insignificant. In both 2000 and 2022, the US' share in Iran's foreign trade was below 1 per cent.

**Table 2. Development of Türkiye, Germany and Iran's trade with global powers 2000-2022 (million \$)**

		Türkiye		Germany		Iran	
		2000	2022	2000	2022	2000	2022
US	Export	3.074	16.882	56.392	163.978	73	0.113
	%	11.18	6.64	10.26	9.89	0.26	0.00014
	Import	3.887	15.228	42.789	97.015	88.2	88
	%	7.18	4.19	8.54	6.17	0.65	0.15
Russia	Export	639	9.343	6.092	15.523	71,0	692
	%	2.33	3.67	1.11	0.93	0.25	0.85
	Import	3.880	58.853	13.364	30.301	803.7	1.526
	%	7.17	16.18	2.67	1.93	5.90	2.59
China	Export	91	3.281	8.609	112.640	143.1	22.425
	%	0.33	1.29	1.57	6.79	0.50	27.72
	Import	1.321	41.354	16.879	201.747	634.4	15.562
	%	2.44	11.37	3.37	12.84	4.66	26.49
Largest Export Partner		Germany 18.81%	Germany 8.32%	France 11.43%	US 9.89%	Japan 17.53%	China 27.72%
Largest Import Partner		Germany 13.23%	Russia 16.18%	France 9.57%	China 12.84%	Germany 10.21%	UAE 30.66%

**Source:** International Trade Centre; World Bank

Over the last 20 years, the importance of Asia, particularly China, has been increasing for the three countries in terms of foreign trade. However, the situation is different when it comes to investments, which is another significant aspect of the economy, especially for Germany and Türkiye. European countries and the US continue to have significant shares in foreign direct investments in both countries. In 2021, Europe and the US accounted for 68.5 per cent of foreign direct investments in Türkiye, while Asian countries made up only 25.7 per cent, with the majority of this coming from the Middle East. Emerging Asian countries such as China and India contributed less than 1 per cent to foreign direct investments in Türkiye. A similar trend is also evident in foreign direct investments from Türkiye, where 84 per cent of the investments come from Europe and the US, with a very low share from East Asia.

Germany's foreign direct investment figures show that Europe and the US have a significant presence. In 2020, Europe accounted for 64.6 per cent of Germany's foreign direct investment stock, while the US contributed 22.2 per cent. Meanwhile, Asian countries made up only 9.8 per cent of foreign direct investments in Germany, with China contributing only 1.6 per cent. German companies' foreign direct investments in China accounted for 6.6 per cent of China's total FDI. On the other hand, Europe and the US' share in foreign direct investments originating from Germany was 80.4 per cent.

Foreign direct investments in Iran also show that this country is gradually shifting to the non-Western world. Iranian Deputy Minister of Economy, Ali Fekri, stated that between August 2021, when Ibrahim Reisi took office, and January 2023, Iran attracted \$5.95 billion in foreign direct investment. Russia accounted for \$2.7 billion of these investments, making it the largest investor in Iran. Following Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, China, and Afghanistan were the top investors in Iran (Financial Tribune, 2023). Notably, Iran has struggled to attract direct investment from Western countries and has mostly relied on investments from non-Western countries to drive its economy.

**Table 3. Türkiye and Germany's investment relations with global actors (foreign direct investment stock)<sup>12</sup>**

			US	Russia	China <sup>13</sup>	Europe	Asia
Türkiye	Foreign Investment	Million \$	4.052	6.843	583	78.924	24.443
		Share %	3.3	5.6	0.5	65.2	20.2
	Outward Investment	Million \$	2.272	1.094	195	34.395	4.019
		Share %	5.3	2.5	0.4	79.6	9.3
Germany	Foreign Investment	Million €	187.794	5.690	13.499	546.499	82.732
		Share %	22.2	0.7	1.6	64.6	9.8
	Outward Investment	Million €	282.991	19.965	90.380	857.640	163.321

<sup>12</sup> The figures for Türkiye are for 2021, the figures for Germany are for 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Hongkong included.

		Share %	20.5	1.4	6.6	59.1	11.6
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**Source:** Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye, Deutsche Bundesbank

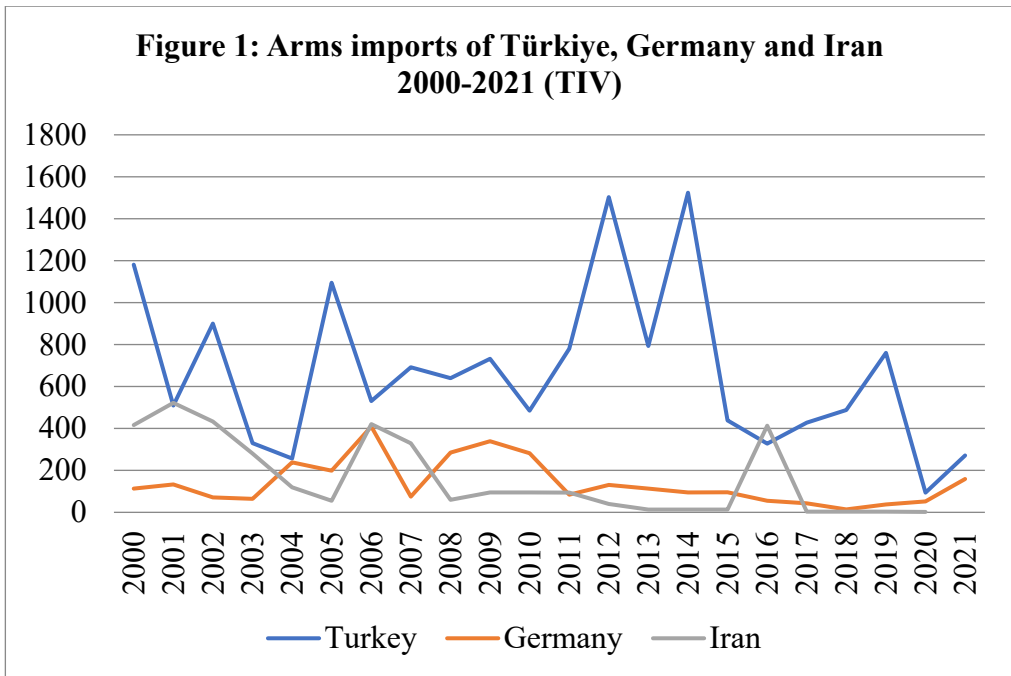
### *Military dimension*

The arms procurement policies of Türkiye, Germany, and Iran are important indicators of their military dependency on the US, China, and Russia. Upon examining their arms supplies, it is evident that Türkiye has recently become a larger arms importer compared to Germany and Iran. Between 2000 and 2021, Türkiye imported 4.8 times more weapons than Germany and 4.3 times more than Iran (Figure 1). The US was Türkiye's largest arms supplier with a share of about 38 per cent, while the share of arms imports from China and Russia remained minimal. Although the S-400 air defence system that Russia supplied in 2019 is a significant development for Russian-Turkish military relations, it did not establish a strong dependency relationship between the two countries. The supply of the S-400 system was a quick solution to an urgent need.

In contrast, Türkiye has had a strong dependence on the US for arms supply, which began after World War II and increased with NATO membership. However, with the rapid development of the Turkish defence industry in recent years, Türkiye's arms procurement policies and dependence on the US have significantly changed. The increase in the rate of meeting the military power needs through domestic means has enabled Türkiye to reduce its arms imports (Özer, 2021).

While Türkiye is making significant strides in reducing its military reliance on the United States, it's important to note that this dependence will persist in certain areas that demand advanced technology. Air power is among the critical domains where this dependence will continue. Despite Türkiye's ongoing efforts to produce its own combat aircraft, these projects necessitate a lengthy development process. Consequently, Ankara turned to the US to fulfil its air power requirements. In October 2021, Türkiye requested modernization kits for its existing F-16s and the procurement of new F-16s from the US. As of December 2022, negotiations for the arms deal are ongoing and anticipated to be valued at approximately \$6 billion (Güldoğan, 2022).





**Source:** Compiled from SIPRI (2022a) data.

Despite the fact that Russia and China did not have a role in Germany's arms imports between 2000 and 2021, the United States holds a 47 per cent share. Germany, on the other hand, is one of the world's largest arms exporters, with a roughly 12 per cent share of US arms imports during the same period (SIPRI, 2022b). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Germany's security concerns escalated, prompting it to enhance its military capabilities. The acquisition of the F-35 from the United States was one of the most significant steps taken to achieve this goal. The agreement, valued at approximately \$8.4 billion, represents a significant step in the military dependency relationship between Germany and the United States (Mache, 2022).

**Table 4. Shares of US, China, and Russia in arms imports of Türkiye, Germany and Iran 2000-2021 (Percentage)**

	Türkiye	Germany	Iran
US	37.7	47	-
China	1.9	-	22.8
Russia	2.6	-	60.5

**Source:** Compiled from (SIPRI, 2022a) data.

The arms trade between Germany and the United States has the potential to create some level of dependency, but the primary factor contributing to the military dependency

relationship between the two countries is the American military presence in Germany, rather than arms sales. Since the end of World War II, Germany has served as the hub of US military deployment in Europe, and this role has continued to the present day (Lanoszka and Simon, 2021: 204). As of 2020, roughly 34,000 American troops were stationed in Germany, making it the second-largest host of US soldiers worldwide, after Japan (Hussein and Haddad, 2021).

While Russia has been Iran's largest arms supplier in recent years, Tehran's arms imports remained at a limited level due to Washington's economic pressure on Iran and the long-standing United Nations arms embargo. As a result, it can be argued that there is not an intense military dependency relationship between Russia and Iran. It is possible to say that after the revolution, Iran's military relations with China followed a similar course to its relations with Russia. Since the early 1980s, China has become one of Iran's largest arms suppliers, especially in missile technology. However, the increasing military relations between the two countries were perceived as a threat by the US in the 1990s, leading to Washington's intervention. As a result, China stopped supporting Iran's nuclear and missile programmes (Currier and Dorraj, 2010: 56). Although China has been the second-largest arms supplier to Iran after Russia, the limited level of arms imports due to US pressure and the UN arms embargo has prevented an intense military dependency relationship between the two countries. Nonetheless, China's rising global competition with the US has opened up new opportunities for military cooperation with Iran, in contrast to Russia. Consequently, the recent increase in military relations between Iran and China has the potential to create a strong dependency relationship between the two countries in the future (Mehdi, 2022).

### **Policies towards Russia-Ukraine War and US-Russian rivalry**

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has had a significant impact on Germany's foreign policy, rendering Berlin's pursuit of a balanced approach challenging in the short term (Crome, 2022; WirtschaftsWoche, 2022). Initially, Germany sought to exercise caution in light of its ties with Russia, particularly in the energy sector, despite the latter's belligerent actions. However, Germany eventually adopted a hard-line stance against Russia in subsequent stages of the conflict, signifying a departure from its previous policy of avoiding direct involvement in the contest between the United States and Russia (and

China) by anchoring itself to the solid ground of the European Union. At present, Germany appears to have aligned itself with the United States, the leader of the Western bloc, in the power struggle against Russia.

Despite initial hesitations, Germany's European partners and the influence of its own public opinion prompted the country to take a position against Russia. However, this decision had negative short-term consequences for Germany. Despite the country's dependence on Russia for natural gas, the power struggle with Moscow, through sanctions and arms shipments to Ukraine, led to a severe energy crisis in Germany during the winter of 2022/2023. The minister of economy announced that public buildings could only be heated to 19 degrees in winter, and Chancellor Scholz sought energy supplies in the Gulf. As a result of Russia cutting off gas shipments to Germany and the increase in energy and food prices due to the war, Germany faced inflation rates not seen for half a century.

Germany's decision to bandwagon the US on its stance towards Russia has come at a cost. Notably, Germany has had to procure natural gas as liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the US, resulting in higher costs. Although this may lead to new dependencies in the energy sector in the short term, Germany's recent announcement to acquire 35 American F-35 warplanes through its newly declared armament programme could potentially undermine the armament initiatives established by the European Union (EU) aimed at attaining military autonomy. Nevertheless, in the medium and long term, Germany is expected to prioritize effective armament measures under the leadership of Germany and France within the EU framework, even as it cooperates closely with the US to meet its immediate defence needs. Germany's previous negative experiences with the US during Trump's presidency have demonstrated that "trust" in the US has limits. Given this, it is reasonable to assume that Berlin, whose confidence in the US has been eroded by past shocks, will approach demands from Germany and France more cordially, with the aim of establishing a security architecture unique to Europe following Russia's assault on Ukraine (Bunde, 2022).

Germany, which had viewed Russia as both an economic partner and a respected security actor despite its actions in Georgia and Crimea, was compelled to choose sides in the US-Russia rivalry following Russia's assault on Ukraine. Although, there is still some debate within Germany on this matter, it appears that many German politicians

are in favour of a tougher stance towards Russia. While there are still discussions on the extent and nature of this hardening, Germany, backed by the junior coalition partners of the Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), appears to be aligned with Washington's policy towards Russia in the present stage. The voices of those advocating for more cautious measures, such as the utilization of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, have been stifled by the attack on these pipelines. Consequently, it is evident that Germany has, at least temporarily, abandoned its policy of balance in the US-Russia competition and has taken a position with the US.

In contrast to Germany's approach, Türkiye has pursued a policy of maintaining balance in the competition between Russia and the United States since the outset of the Ukraine War. Russia's efforts to expand its sphere of influence in Türkiye's immediate region have raised Ankara's security concerns, which are supported by historical evidence of the countries' relations. However, Türkiye has pursued a policy of balance since the 2008 Georgia War, which led to global crises between Moscow and the West. As a member of NATO and with close security relations with the United States and the West, Türkiye has developed a significant impact on its policy, particularly since the start of the 21st century. The policy of balance is also influenced by Türkiye's dependence on Russia for a significant proportion of its energy needs and the construction of the Mersin Akkuyu nuclear power plant by Russia.

Türkiye's response to the Russia-Ukraine War, which has escalated the already-tense relationship between the United States and Russia, has been to adopt a strategy of equilibrium that aligns with its national interests. Early on in the conflict, Türkiye announced that it would not join the international community in imposing sanctions on Russia (Deveci and Kabakçı, 2022). Additionally, Türkiye's implementation of the Montreux Convention served as an additional demonstration of its approach to the conflict. The Convention served Türkiye's objective of forestalling any major crises in the Black Sea that the war may trigger, while also promoting peace and stability in the region (Acer, 2022: 5).

Numerous countries, such as China, India, and Israel, attempted to mediate between the warring parties during the conflict. However, Türkiye emerged as the most successful mediator, achieving concrete results (Shurrab, 2022). This success can be attributed to President Erdoğan's statement before the war, in which he stated that "it is impossible

for us to give up on both" warring parties. This sentiment reveals the key reason for Türkiye's effective mediation diplomacy during the conflict (NTV, 2022). Unlike Western countries, Türkiye maintained balanced relations with both Russia and Ukraine, establishing Ankara as a reliable mediator in the eyes of both Moscow and Kyiv. Türkiye's mediation efforts resulted in several tangible outcomes, including the March 2022 meeting between the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine, the agreement allowing for safe transportation of Ukrainian grain to international markets, and the prisoner exchange between the parties in September, all of which can be attributed to the initiatives of President Erdoğan (TRT Haber, 2022).

Türkiye's foreign policy of balance, which prioritizes its own interests, has played a significant role in facilitating negotiations between conflicting parties and contributing to efforts to end the war. However, the war's prolonged duration and increased pressure from the West, particularly the United States, on Russia have strained Ankara's relations with Moscow and prompted a reassessment of Türkiye's policy (Cropsy, 2022). The US has recently intensified pressure on Türkiye, particularly since September 2022, amid concerns that Türkiye's relationship with Russia could hinder the effectiveness of sanctions imposed on Russia. As a result of pressure on Türkiye's banking sector, banks using Russia's Mir payment system left the system by the end of September 2022 (Jones, 2022). This example highlights the limitations of Türkiye's policy of balance. Despite this, Türkiye maintains its policy of balancing relations with both Western countries and Russia, neither siding with the US like Germany nor supporting Russia like Iran during the Ukraine War. Instead, Türkiye takes a neutral stance, navigating the delicate geopolitical landscape to protect its own interests.

Iran's foreign policy towards Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the US-Russia tensions reflects its historical relationship with both countries. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran distanced itself from the US and pursued closer ties with Russia. While diplomatic normalization between Iran and the US has yet to be achieved, Iran-Russia relations remained relatively positive during the Soviet Union era, though they stagnated in the 1990s due to Russia's internal issues. The 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement (Boudreaux, 1995) illustrates the negative impact of US actions on Iran-Russia relations. Under Putin's leadership, Iran-Russia relations saw significant acceleration, but Russia did not veto UN sanctions in 2010 and suspended the sale of the S-300 missile defence system to Iran (Gutterman, 2010). Therefore, the shadow of

the US has not been missing in Iran-Russia relations.

The Syrian War represented a turning point in Tehran-Moscow relations, as the two countries worked together to prevent the fall of the Assad regime. In the years that followed, their cooperation deepened significantly. Iran's isolation from the international system, particularly during the Trump administration, played a significant role in bringing it closer to Russia and China. Additionally, tensions between the US and Russia heightened, and the Iran-Russia alliance emerged as a major force in the anti-US front. As a result, Tehran and Moscow have forged a strategic partnership, with shared interests in maintaining the Syrian government, countering US influence in the region and preserving their own regional interests.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has introduced a new dimension to Russia-Iran relations. Despite Iran's claims of neutrality in the face of Russian aggression, its actions and rhetoric have proven otherwise. High-ranking officials, including religious leader Ali Khamenei, have cited "NATO expansionism" (Nada, 2022) as the root cause of the conflict and failed to condemn Russia's occupation, instead presenting justifications for the invasion. The alignment of these justifications with official Russian discourse is also noteworthy.

During the UN General Assembly vote, Iran opted to align with Russia, as evidenced by its voting record throughout the Ukraine crisis. While the United Nations Security Council, convened after the invasion commenced in February, issued a resolution on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March calling for Russia's immediate withdrawal from Ukraine, Iran chose to abstain from the vote (Iran International, 2022). In a subsequent vote held in April to remove Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, Iran voted against the motion (United Nations, 2022). On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October, a vote was held at the UN General Assembly to condemn Russia's decision to annex eastern Ukraine, but Iran did not participate in this vote (Zelenskyy, 2022).

The prolonged and unexpected resistance of Ukraine, coupled with the support from the West, led to a prolonged war that Russia had not anticipated. Consequently, Russia found itself unable to continue the conflict with its own resources and had to seek assistance from other countries, including Iran. One of the most significant areas of cooperation between Iran and Russia is military cooperation, which has attracted a

considerable amount of attention. Initially, the Iranian government provided drones to Russia and subsequently expressed its intention to supply ballistic missiles to Russia as well. This aid has generated substantial controversy among the international community critical of Russia, prompting countries like the US, England, and Germany to issue warnings to Iran and threaten sanctions. The transfer of Iranian drones to Russia has particularly been a contentious issue and has drawn scrutiny from various parties.

Iran's stance of support for Russia reveals the implementation of two different types of balancing policies. The first of which involves utilizing Russia as a balancing actor against the US, which becomes especially significant when considering the mounting pressures exerted by the latter through the imposition of economic sanctions. In such a context, the obligation to seek closer ties with Russia is reinforced, thereby enabling Iran to navigate its foreign policy objectives in a manner that aligns with its strategic interests. The Iranian government's support for Russia also promotes a more symmetrical relationship between Iran and Russia. By supporting Russia during the Ukraine war, Iran has been able to increase its leverage and pursue a more equitable relationship with Russia.

### **Policies towards US-Chinese competition**

When examining the stances of Türkiye, Iran, and Germany regarding the US-China rivalry, it becomes apparent that Türkiye is the most neutral among the three. While Ankara's conflicts with the US and the EU push it towards a balanced position that will not harm its relationship with China, the Tehran administration, which is facing severe sanctions from the West, has been strengthening its ties with Beijing. Meanwhile, Berlin, which seeks to preserve its economic relations with both countries, has been striving for a balanced approach in the Washington-Beijing rivalry from the outset, but its ability to maintain this equilibrium has been challenged by the escalating global power struggle, causing it to lean more towards the US recently.

Germany, as a prominent trading state, is facing a serious predicament due to the escalating tensions between its key ally, the United States, and its largest trading partner, China. Berlin seeks to safeguard its economic interests and steer clear of potential damages that may arise from strained relations with China, similar to its approach with Russia. However, the US' pressure on Germany to align with its stance on China is gradually forcing Berlin to take a more active role in the conflict (Buchhorn

and Palan, 2022). The failure of the "stay-away-from-tension" policy that was implemented with Russia, following its attack on Ukraine, has emboldened those advocating for a more robust policy towards China, both within Germany and the EU circles. These factions propose that the West, including Germany and the EU, should work in tandem with the US to devise a more efficacious policy against the emerging threat from countries such as Russia and China (Dienstbier, 2022). Annalena Baerbock, who is a member of the Green Party and holds the position of foreign minister in the federal government in Berlin, strongly advocates for this policy. In November 2022, ahead of Chancellor Scholz's visit to China, Baerbock exerted pressure on Germany's soft China policy (Krüger, 2022).

According to the figures in Table 2, China has been emerged as a crucial economic partner for Germany. Consequently, proponents of a careful policy towards China argue that economic interests should not be jeopardized (Die Zeit, 2022; Mader and Nabben, 2023). Additionally, China's dominant position as the leading producer of rare earth elements has created a significant dependence on its supply by Western countries including Germany (Der Spiegel, 2022a; Reisch, 2022).

Despite the significant increase in China's share of Germany's imports, the United States remains a crucial economic partner for Germany in terms of exports and investments. In 2020, German companies received over three times more foreign direct investment from the United States than from China, and the total value of direct investment from the United States was approximately 14 times higher than that from China. These statistics underscore the enduring importance of the United States to Germany's economic well-being, even as China continues to grow in economic significance.

The German government faces a delicate balancing act in managing its economic relationships with these two superpowers. While Germany has increasingly turned to China as a major trading partner in recent years, its longstanding ties with the United States compel it to tread carefully so as not to jeopardize these relationships. In the event of a competition between the United States and China, Germany is more likely to side with the United States, given the significant economic ties that bind the two countries. However, Berlin's foreign policy is designed to avoid having to make such a stark choice, as it seeks to maintain strong economic relationships with both nations (Berkofsky, 2022).



The Huawei controversy has highlighted the challenges facing Germany in balancing its economic ties with China against its national security interests and geopolitical considerations. After the US ban and sanctions against the company on the grounds of spying, Berlin resisted pressure from Washington for a long time and did not decide to exclude Huawei from the construction of 5G communication networks in Germany. However, in the political atmosphere created by Russia's attack on Ukraine, German politicians feel obliged to act more in harmony with the US on "threats to the Western world" and they tended to exclude Huawei from the German 5G network (Soares *et al*, 2022).

Germany's vulnerability to pressure from the US on its policy towards China is due to differences among coalition partners in how it should be formulated (Der Spiegel, 2022b). This resulted in Berlin gradually abandoning the balance policy in the Sino-US competition and approaching Washington's line. However, it should not be forgotten that taking a position with the US in the global power struggle carries some risks for Germany. Washington's economic pressures on European countries and its tendency towards a protectionist policy mostly target Germany (Becker *et al*, 2022; Wettach, 2022). In addition, the possibility of repeating the problems experienced in the US view of NATO and security partnerships with European countries during Donald Trump's presidency increases Germany's hesitation (Küstner, 2018; Gebauer, 2019).

China's rise has also had important reflections on Türkiye-China relations. Relations between the two countries, which were established in 1971 and had limited development opportunities until the 21st century, have entered a rapid development process since the beginning of the century. In this process, one of the important motivations for Ankara's desire to improve its relations with Beijing was that China, which has rapidly turned into a global power, offering new economic opportunities to emerging powers, such as Türkiye, that will provide more autonomy in their foreign policies. The rapidly developing economic relations between the two countries since the beginning of the century are a concrete example of this situation.

Türkiye, a rising regional power, has followed a policy aimed at improving its relations with China and increasing its areas of cooperation. Important steps have been taken in this direction since the beginning of the 2010s. Raising the relations between the two countries to the level of strategic cooperation in 2010 and Türkiye's inclusion in the

Belt and Road Initiative in 2015, which is of great importance in terms of China's global economic and political influence, are some of these steps. During this period, Türkiye considered China as an actor with which it could cooperate in the military field. China's participation in the Anatolian Eagle military exercise in 2010 was an important step in this direction. It is also important that Beijing had the opportunity to conduct a military exercise with a NATO member country for the first time (Temiz, 2017: 162). Although it was cancelled in 2015, a Chinese company won a tender for Türkiye's air defence system in 2013, which is an example of Beijing's increasing value for Türkiye as an actor to balance the West (Reuters, 2015). In line with the recent development of Ankara-Beijing relations, it is possible to say that Türkiye, which has experienced major problems in its relations with the West, especially with the US, considers the rise of China and the change it caused in the international system as an opportunity rather than a threat.

The rise of China as a global power and its attempts to establish spheres of influence have become significant concerns for the United States since the early 2010s. This development has led to intense competition between the two countries on a global scale. Although Türkiye's distance from the Asia-Pacific region, where this rivalry is most intense, eliminates Türkiye's obligation to be actively involved in the conflict and crises between the US and China, Ankara is active in the struggle areas of these two great powers that have great effects on a global scale.

One of the areas where the US-China rivalry is the most intense and has the greatest repercussions on a global scale is the economic rivalry between the two great powers. Türkiye, on the other hand, follows a policy that prioritizes its own economic interests in this competition. This is seen in the Belt and Road Initiative, one of the most important agenda items of the Washington-Beijing rivalry in recent years. Since the US views this initiative as an attempt by China to expand its military presence and diplomatic influence through economic means (Medeiros, 2019: 99), it is attempting to limit its scope with initiatives such as the "Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment" and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (Biçer, 2022; Haffner, 2022). Türkiye, on the other hand, joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015, which the US considers a major threat to its economic interests. Another important example showing that Ankara is pursuing a balanced and self-interested policy in this

competition is the intensified trade war between the US and China in 2018. Türkiye considered this crisis between Washington and Beijing an opportunity to improve its economic relations with the United States (Reuters, 2019). These two examples show that Ankara tends to follow a balanced policy that prioritizes its national interests without being polarized in the US-China rivalry.

Understanding Iran's position on the US-China rivalry requires acknowledging the US's role in Iran-China relations. The US actively impeded friendly ties between the two countries from the 1990s to the 2010s with some success. China complied with US pressure and agreed not to supply anti-ship missiles to Iran in 1997 (WSJ, 1997). China also pledged to reduce nuclear technology support to Iran (Smith, 1997). China's support for sanctioning Iran in the 2010 Security Council vote, under US pressure (United Nations, 2010), was a significant blow to Iran's economy and related sectors.

China has sought to adopt a balanced policy towards Iran, even during periods of intense pressure from the US. Despite the constraints imposed by Iran-related agreements with the US, the Chinese administration continued to support Iran on pertinent issues. China also opposed George W. Bush's characterisation of Iran as part of an "axis of evil" (Garver, 2006: 283-284). Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to Tehran, just months after Bush's statement, was a clear indication of China's support for Iran. In a joint statement, the leaders emphasised the importance of President Khatami's proposed formula of "dialogue among civilisations." The statement also upheld this point/fact that regional countries would ensure the security of the Gulf and expressed opposition to foreign intervention in the region under the pretext of human rights (FMPRC, 2002).

It can be said that China has been able to take more independent steps in Iran in the last 10 years, when it started to rival the US, especially in the global power struggle stage; thus, Iran has developed closer relations with China to balance the US. In 2018, Iran's economy suffered greatly after US President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and the reimposition of heavy sanctions on Iran. Due to the increasing oil demand in China, Iran has turned its focus towards exporting oil to China.

The 25-year strategic cooperation agreement, the foundations of which were laid with Xi Jinping's visit to Tehran in 2016 (Fassihi and Myers, 2021) and signed between China and Iran in March 2021, led us to think that the relations between the two

countries have reached the level of strategic partnership. Accordingly, China would invest \$400 billion in Iran. In return, China has guaranteed oil purchases from Iran for 25 years. The objective of Iran in this context is to compensate for the decline in oil revenues by engaging in direct sales of oil to China and to press the US to take quick steps in the nuclear negotiations, which came to the agenda again after the Biden administration took office. Iran's has achieved partial success in this regard. Even after sanctions were imposed by the US administration, China did not give up buying Iranian oil (Lawler *et al*, 2023). Thanks to China, Iran was able to minimize the damage caused by US sanctions. Nevertheless, the return of the US to nuclear negotiations has yet to produce a tangible result.

On the other hand, the Iranian side did not make all its foreign policy investments in China. An example of Tehran trying to balance China is the Chabahar port's construction and development activities. This port is being developed by an Iranian-India partnership. The use of Iran's strategic Chabahar port by India, one of China's biggest rivals, is undesirable for China. In addition, this port is exempt from sanctions by the US (Basravi, 2020), which does not want to lose India.

## **Conclusion**

In the two decades under investigation, it becomes apparent that Türkiye has surpassed both Germany and Iran in expanding the scope of its foreign policy. Initially, among the trio, Türkiye faced the most constraints at the dawn of the new millennium. The financial crisis of 2001 compelled Ankara to seek external funding, thereby intensifying its dependence on the United States and the European Union for foreign policy direction. Conversely, Iran, under the leadership of reformist President Mohammad Khatami, endeavored to mend its ties with Western nations to diminish the geopolitical influence of Russia and China. During the premiership of Gerhard Schröder, Germany pursued a foreign policy that challenged its long-time ally, the United States, by working to create a Berlin-Paris-Moscow axis (Hacke, 2005).

The Justice and Development Party (AK Party), which was in power in Türkiye at the time, initially tried to strengthen ties with the EU with the help of encouraging signals from European nations, but in response to pressure from European capitals that did not act impartially on the Cyprus issue, it adopted a more independent stance and sought to

counterbalance the West. The growth of Ankara's connections with Middle Eastern nations at the end of the 2000s exposed Türkiye to accusations of "axis shift" and "neo-Ottomanism" as part of this quest for balance. Then, to counteract the mounting pressure from the West between 2013 and 2016, particularly in the wake of the failed coup, Ankara began to rapprochement with Moscow (increased energy cooperation, purchase of S-400s). Despite increased pressure from some anti-AK Party circles in the US and Europe as a result of this rapprochement, Türkiye was able to maintain its relations with the West at a certain level within the confines of the balance of power policy it adopted. Ankara's policy of balance was made possible by Russian and Chinese challenges to Western dominance.

With Angela Merkel becoming chancellor following the early elections in 2005, Germany, which had a more independent foreign policy stance than Türkiye at the beginning of the 2000s, has modified its stance. The ratio of defence spending to GDP stayed at a fairly low level with an average of 1.2 per cent during this time, even though Merkel, who served as prime minister for 16 years, was "following" US security policy once more. The unexpected foreign policy of Trump and Putin captured Germany's "free-riding" strategy, which sought to rely on the US in security problems and behave at ease with Russia and China in particular. Germany, which continues to build the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline project with this nation, despite Russia's invasion of Crimea, was harshly attacked by US President Trump for being "a captive of Russia." Despite these critiques, Russia's 24<sup>th</sup> of February invasion of Ukraine was the actual blow to Germany's foreign policy of balance. While this action by Putin rendered Berlin's strategy of balance unachievable, it brought Germany's approach to Russia more in line with Washington.

The normalization of relations with the West under Khatami came to a stop with the restriction of his foreign policy, and Tehran returned to its strong anti-American stance in the 2000s when we examine the evolution of Iran's balance strategy during the same period. Tehran departed from its balance strategy during this time due to the West's rising pressure on Iran as its nuclear programme became more intense. Iran, which was under heavy pressure from the UN, US, and EU due to its nuclear activities between 2010 and 2013, briefly resumed its balance of power policy following the 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) reached with the P5+1 after the negotiation process that had been started following Hasan Rouhani's election as

president. But the Tehran government was no longer able to uphold its balance of power policy in light of the US President-elect Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and his resumption of a policy of harsh sanctions against Iran. Iran turned its back on the West once more and opted to become more proximate to Russia and China after finding the efforts of the EU nations insufficient in regard to maintaining the nuclear accord and the policy of the Biden administration, which took office in the US following Trump.

The article concludes that, in contrast to Türkiye, Iran and Germany maintain more stable arms relationships with their major power allies. Consequently, they are less assertive than Türkiye in seizing opportunities arising from changes and tensions in the international system to enhance their strategic autonomy. Considering the future directions of the foreign policies of the US, China, and Russia—the key players in the global power competition—these countries will undoubtedly be able to influence Tehran, Berlin, and Ankara through the rationality of their approaches towards these nations.

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