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BULLETIN

Türkiye Seeks BRICS+ Membership

Aleksandra Maria Spancerska

Although Türkiye is a member state of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it is seeking to join BRICS+. In doing so, it wants to expand its influence in international forums. Joining this platform might not mean it must break relations with the West, but it would be diversifying its foreign partners, both politically and economically.

On 3 September, Ömer Çelik, spokesman for Türkiye's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), announced that the country had applied for membership in the recently expanded BRICS group (in EU documents it is commonly now referred to as "[BRICS+](#)"), which besides the original members includes Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. The countries of the group represent 46% of the world's population, 29% of its global GDP, 43% of its oil production, and 25% of its global exports. The format's next summit will take place on 22-24 October in Kazan and will be attended by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Türkiye's efforts to become a member of BRICS+ date back to 2018 when the country considered participating in the group, pointing to growing problems in accession negotiations with the EU despite NATO membership since 1952 and concluded trade agreements (Türkiye has been part of the EU customs union since 1995). However, in the current context—the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine with Chinese assistance in circumventing Western sanctions on Russia and Iranian military support—rapprochement with BRICS+ raises questions for Türkiye about a loss of Allied credibility.

Türkiye's Motivations. In his statements, Erdoğan stresses that, Turkish diplomacy is seizing every opportunity to make the country a regional and global power. In doing so, Turkish policymakers point to the mounting problems in the global governance system and the crisis of U.S. leadership in international forums, in part because of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, they also present a negative assessment of the "Western-centric" international order. Like China and [Russia](#), Türkiye is instrumental to the vision of

multipolarity in international relations. Türkiye's ruling elites are convinced that the country is united with the BRICS+ countries in seeking to build a more "inclusive and equitable" international order as a response to the shortcomings of the current system dominated by the U.S. and Europe. Erdoğan justifies this on the grounds of the need to support multilateralism and strengthen the voice of the "Global South" in international forums. He expresses this in the slogan "the world is bigger than the five", referring to the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

The intention to join BRICS+ is a political statement aimed at getting Western allies to recognise Türkiye's interests. Turkish policymakers are not breaking with traditional allies, but are seeking to expand their ability to act internationally, not wanting to rely solely on relations with the West. The regression in the rule of law and human rights that followed the failed coup attempt in Türkiye in 2016, and the country's transition from a parliamentary-cabinet system to a presidential system in 2018, which disrupted democratic checks and balances on the tripartite division of power, led to a deterioration in Turkish-EU relations. Accession negotiations that began in 2005 were frozen in 2018 by a decision of the European Council. Despite the mutual will to improve relations after [Erdoğan and the AKP renewed their mandate last year](#), there has also been no progress on modernising the customs union or visa liberalisation, which would allow Turkish citizens to travel visa-free to European countries. Lacking the expected gains in relations with the EU, Turkish policymakers are seeking alliances in disparate international formats.

In the calculation of the Turkish elites, rapprochement with BRICS+ is both part of creating foreign policy and expected to help alleviate domestic problems. The government camp, [despite making economic policy adjustments](#), continues to grapple with a protracted economic crisis (according to data from the state statistics agency TÜİK, Türkiye's annual inflation rate in August this year was 51.97%, down from 75% in May this year). This is prompting them to seek access to new markets and attract new foreign investment. The BRICS+ area has great potential in this regard: in 2023, Turkish trade with the bloc's countries (mainly China and Russia) accounted for about 60% of that recorded with the EU. In this way, Türkiye wants to stimulate growth and strengthen trade relations with emerging medium-sized economies.

Turkish Perspective on Relations with Selected BRICS+ Countries. Russia has responded positively to Türkiye's desire for accession to BRICS+, forming part of the positive dynamic in [Turkish-Russian relations](#). Türkiye, like the other countries in the format, has [not joined the Western sanctions imposed on Russia](#) over its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Russia and Türkiye continue to cooperate in the security field, due in part to Türkiye's acquisition of an [S-400](#) air and missile defence system. In addition, they have tactical alliances, as evident in the conflict in Syria and the South Caucasus. Unlike the EU and the U.S., neither Turkey nor Russia recognise [Hamas](#) as a terrorist organisation. In the economic area, however, Turkish-Russian trade has been declining recently. Due to U.S. threats to impose sanctions on Turkish financial institutions that cooperate with Russia, Turkish exports to that country fell to \$670 million in February this year, which was 33% less than in the same month last year when the value was \$1.1 billion. At the same time, Russian imports to Turkey fell 36.65% to \$1.3 billion from \$2 billion a year earlier.

Faced with a reduction in trade, Türkiye is keen to balance cooperation with China. In April this year, it replaced Russia as the main supplier of goods and services to the Turkish market. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, the value of Turkish imports from China rose to \$32.2 billion in 2021, while exports to China amounted to only \$3.7 billion, meaning that the trade balance favours China, and the trend is steady. Türkiye is part of China's Belt

and Road Initiative. In 2010, the countries established the High-Level Cooperation Council. In 2012, Türkiye was granted the status of "dialogue partner" in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), [established in 2001 on the initiative of Russia and China](#). During a visit to China in June this year, the head of Turkish diplomacy, Hakan Fidan, encouraged the Chinese to invest in Türkiye's high-tech sectors. The meeting yielded positive results—in July this year the Chinese electric vehicle manufacturer BYD Auto announced a \$1 billion investment to build a plant in Türkiye's Manisa province.

Conclusions and Outlook. Türkiye is interested in joining BRICS+ because of the need to diversify economic relations and the desire to intensify political relations with its member states, which at the same time fits Türkiye's policy of balancing its Alliance commitments with the development of relations with Western adversaries.

Although the benefits of BRICS+ membership will be less than those from potential EU accession, by joining the former, Türkiye could, for example, seek to obtain financing from the New BRICS+ Development Bank for infrastructure or renewable energy projects. Such sources of investment financing could be attractive to Türkiye, which is struggling with structural economic problems.

However, Türkiye's possible accession to BRICS+ is a challenge from a Western perspective. In the long term, the country could become significantly dependent on China, whose economy is about two-thirds of the GDP of the entire BRICS+, and on Russia, described as a threat to peace and security in Europe in NATO strategy documents. Türkiye's economic dependence on China and Russia would increase pressure from those countries on Turkish security policy. As a result, Turkish actions in NATO and vis-à-vis Ukraine's security could become an increasing problem for the Allies.

Türkiye's interest in joining the BRICS+ format should therefore prompt the EU and NATO to take action, signalling to Turkish policymakers the importance of maintaining and developing economic cooperation with Western institutions. It would be advisable in this case to work out a compromise on [Turkish-American cooperation in Syria](#) after the U.S. elections. To prevent the strengthening of the Eurasian vector in Turkish foreign policy, Poland could support the revival of discussions on reforming the customs union between Türkiye and the EU.