

Türkiye as a Cusp State: Conceptualization and Implementation

Meliha Benli Altunışık
Middle East Technical University

Abstract

This article revisits the concept of the “Cusp State” with a specific focus on Türkiye, aiming to deepen both its theoretical and empirical relevance. It begins by re-examining the definitional foundations of the concept, which refers to states situated at the intersection of regional and global dynamics, exhibiting hybrid characteristics and adaptive foreign policy behaviors. The article argues that the Cusp State framework offers a valuable lens for analyzing Türkiye’s foreign policy, particularly due to its blend of ideational and material factors and its geostrategic positioning. The analysis explores how Türkiye navigates its cuspness by employing region-building strategies, enhancing connectivity, and repositioning itself within global hierarchies. The article also investigates the limitations and contradictions inherent in these strategies, including domestic-international linkages, geopolitical constraints, and normative tensions. In doing so, it demonstrates that Türkiye’s trajectory exemplifies the dynamic nature of cuspness—not merely as a structural condition but as a set of evolving practices shaped by agency and context. Ultimately, the article contributes to the literature by refining the Cusp State concept and offering empirical insights into Türkiye’s foreign policy conduct in a rapidly shifting international environment.

Keywords: Türkiye’s Foreign Policy, Cusp State, Regionalism, Balancing, Connectivity

1. Introduction

One of the key challenges in the study of foreign policy lies in conceptualizing the type of actor a state constitutes within the international system. This is also salient in analyses of Türkiye’s foreign policy. Türkiye has often been described as a middle power, even as early as the 1930s, despite lacking significant military and economic capabilities at the time, largely due to its strategic geopolitical position and historical legacy. More recently, its expanding military and economic power also accorded it a middle power status. However, as the literature on middle powers emphasized, the concept, while offering a useful general framework, remains analytically imprecise due to its broad and often ambiguous scope. Consequently, there is growing need for more differentiated and nuanced typologies in middle power category that can more adequately capture the complexities of Türkiye’s international role.

The literature on middle powers has increasingly sought to introduce distinctions within this broad category, most notably through the differentiation between traditional and rising/emerging middle powers (Jordaan, 2006). In this framework countries such as Türkiye are typically placed in the latter group, characterized by a pursuit of strategic autonomy, regional

leadership and diplomatic assertiveness (Öniş & Kutlay, 2016). Another strand in the literature focuses on status-seeking middle powers, that is states that actively strive to enhance their international influence and prestige. These actors often “punch above their weight” through proactive diplomacy, engagement in multilateral forums, and leadership on specific issue areas (Cooper, 1997). Türkiye has also been identified as a status-seeking middle power within this conceptualization (Dal, 2019). While such classifications offer useful tools for distinguishing among a diverse set of states, their focus on external behavior alone presents certain limitations. Specifically, they tend to overlook systemic factors and constraints, such as geopolitical positioning (Teo, 2021), and fail to account for deeper drivers of foreign policy behavior, particularly historical legacies and domestic political dynamics, which often shape middle power strategies in ways not fully apparent from their external behavior alone.

I have argued elsewhere that looking from this perspective Türkiye’s middlepowerness has been modified by its three general characteristics: its historical legacy; geopolitical position; and its political and ideational ambiguity (Altunışık, 2023). Overall, Türkiye is thus a “modified middle power” which rests on its cuspness (Altunışık, 2014; Altunışık, 2023). This article first aims to revisit the conceptualization of Türkiye as a Cusp State and then focus on the behavioral aspect, as it is argued that the concept of Cusp State “encompasses a wide range of politics and phenomenon with evident policy relevance and testable empirical implications” (Chan, 2014, p.169). Specifically, the article explores the characteristics of Türkiye as a Cusp State, the interplay of its ideational and material dimensions, its strategies as regards regionalism, connectivity, and the international system especially at times of transition, and the challenges these strategies face. Thus, building on my previous work on the topic, this study adopts a process-tracing methodology, complemented by temporal comparison, to identify the mechanisms that activate cuspness and to analyze how actors in Türkiye narrate and respond to it. These dynamics are examined historically through three hypothesized modes of cusp state behavior: regionalism, connectivity, and balancing.

Conceptual Discussion

In International Relations (IR), the definition of a Cusp State relates to the discussion of regions (Herzog & Robins, 2014). States are first and foremost identified with regions, even when they are considered to be constructed. Cusp States have ambiguous positions as to their regions, with respect to their identity and activism. They are simultaneously part of several regions and do not fit neatly into any at the same time. Thus, a Cusp State refers to a country situated at a pivotal or transitional point between regional classifications or roles in the global system. As a result, these states occupy a position of ambiguity, often straddling traditional boundaries of power and influence. As such the concept of Cusp States offers a nuanced lens through which to examine states that sit on the cusp of multiple regions, identities and systems. However, unlike negative framings, such as “torn states” (Huntington, 1996, p.138-139), which highlight fragmentation and dysfunction, the Cusp State concept emphasizes agency, complexity and potential. The concept of Cusp States overlaps but is analytically distinct from the concept of liminality. While liminality refers to an ontological ambiguity, Cusp State is positioned at a boundary between two or more regional orders and power systems as well as identities. As such Cusp States are at the edge of multiple trajectories.

Thus, the Cusp State is a neutral term, as although cuspness introduces some significant

structural elements it is also up to the political actors what to do about cuspness and what kind of strategies to develop. Cuspness constitutes both a material and ideational structure, grounded in geographic location, historical legacies and ideational formations. In this sense cuspness is given not chosen. And yet, cuspness is also an outcome produced through interactions. In this sense cuspness is also relational. Thus, cuspness can intensify or decrease as a result of shifts in the international system, regional wars, failed hedging and overextension, or domestic regime change. In sum, cuspness should not be understood as a fixed structural attribute or only an outcome of state behavior. Rather, it denotes a dynamic condition produced through the interaction of structural in-betweenness and evolving regional and global pressures and domestic context. This dynamic relationality avoids structural determinism as well as total voluntarism.

Furthermore, cuspness is not an exceptional state. While Türkiye is often highlighted as a quintessential cusp state, it is important to avoid the trap of exceptionalism. Many other states share similar characteristics. For example, Russia straddles Europe and Asia, Israel sits at the crossroads of the Middle East and the West, South Africa bridges sub-Saharan Africa and the Global South, and Brazil bridges South America and the Global South, etc. (for different cases see chapters in Herzog & Philips, 2014). Recognizing these parallels ensures that the Cusp State concept is not reduced to a singular case but rather understood as a broader phenomenon.

The notion of the Cusp State serves as a conceptual bridge between material and ideational dimensions, as well as between structural constraints and the exercise of agency. As such, it can be unpacked into two interrelated dimensions:

Ideational and Material Dimensions

Cuspness encompasses both the ideational and the material. On the ideational side, it pertains to how a state perceives itself and how it is perceived by others. Cusp States frequently adopt a self-image as intermediaries and bridges, emphasizing their distinctive roles and in-between positions, even as they may be viewed as outsiders by their neighbors. This identity emerges relationally, shaped within the dynamic Self/Other framework (Rumelili, 2007).

Materially, cuspness is grounded in tangible factors such as geographical location, economic capacity, and military strength, all of which influence a state's relations and engagement with its surrounding regions. In Türkiye's case, its geographic position at the crossroads of continents is as crucial to its cuspness, as are its historical legacies and cultural narratives. Unlike the concept of liminality (Rumelili, 2003), which implies a transitional or in-between status ideationally, cuspness highlights a more enduring duality, marked by both structural positioning and active agency. Since the establishment of the Republic, successive political elites, from Atatürk to diverse figures such as Turgut Özal, Bülent Ecevit, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, İsmail Cem and Ahmet Davutoğlu have emphasized Türkiye's multi-regional identity and active engagement across regions, consistently highlighting its role as a country on the cusp of multiple geopolitical spheres (Altunışık, 2014, p.28-36).

Structure and Agency in navigating cuspness

While cuspness is inherently linked to structural factors, such as institutions, geographic locations, and identity formations, it does not render state behavior fully determined. Cusp

States retain agency in how they navigate and manage their position through their actions and strategies. Türkiye, for example, which straddles multiple regions, exercises strategic agency in defining its role across multiple regional and global spheres. Through diplomatic initiatives, alliances, and foreign policy choices, it actively shapes its positioning rather than passively inheriting it.

However, this agency is not boundless and it operates within structural constraints. The very features that enable cuspness also limit the range of feasible choices. A case in point is Türkiye's foreign policy during the 2010s under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which sought to foreground Türkiye's Middle Eastern identity and activism. While this shift reflected a strategic exercise of agency, it faced serious limitations. Türkiye's deep-rooted and multi-faceted ties to Europe, its historical legacies, limited acceptance in the Middle East, and perceptions from both regional and international actors constrained this shift, illustrating that Cusp States must operate within the structural possibilities and limitations imposed by their position. These structural realities curtailed the extent to which Türkiye could redefine its identity and role, illustrating the double-edged nature of cuspness—where strategic maneuvering is both enabled and circumscribed by a state's embedded position in regional and global orders.

Implementation: The Behavioral Discussion

Türkiye's evolution as a modified middle power brings to light several critical questions. How have Turkish political elites navigated the country's characteristics as a Cusp State? What strategies have they developed to address these dynamics over time? Since the establishment of the republic, Türkiye's Foreign Policy (TFP) has reflected diverse responses to its material and ideational context, with debates often centering on the most effective way to address these challenges. These responses have been shaped by the international environment, which has provided both opportunities and challenges, as well as domestic political actors' worldviews. This paper will focus on three major strategies: The first strategy is regionalism, which is a strategy that seeks to leverage as well as tone down its in-betweenness by acting as a catalyst for regional initiatives, region-building and regional multilateralism. The second strategy is connectivity, which aims to leverage Türkiye's in-between position as regards to different geographies by connecting them. The third strategy is international balancing and hedging, which is a strategy that focuses on preserving in-betweenness by avoiding binary alignments, when possible, especially during times of global transitions. This strategy emphasizes enhancing security, increasing strategic autonomy, and maintaining long-term relevance in global politics.

Cuspness and Regionalism

Cusp States are deeply linked to regionalism, often belonging to multiple regions without being fully embraced by any one of them. Türkiye exemplifies this ambiguity. It is geographically and historically part of the Middle East, Europe, the Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean, Central Asia, South Caucasus, and the Black Sea, but its inclusion and acceptance in these regions is uneven and fluctuates over time. Furthermore, a defining characteristic of Cusp States is the tension between self-perception and external recognition. Türkiye views itself as a central player in multiple regions and as a mediator in international disputes (Ministry of Foreign



Affairs website, 2025a and 2025b), but this self-image is not always reflected in how others perceive its role and belonging.

A critical illustration of this mismatch is Türkiye's longstanding bid for European Union membership which has been met with skepticism, reflecting its incomplete acceptance as a European state. Türkiye has applied to be part of the European integration process as early as 1959, finally becoming a candidate country to the EU in December 1999. While formal accession negotiations began in 2004, Türkiye's European identity has continued to be questioned. Notably, during his 2007 presidential campaign, then-French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy declared that "Türkiye is not European," revealing the deep skepticism surrounding Türkiye's belonging in Europe (Hürriyet, 2007). Similar dynamics shape Türkiye's position in the Middle East. Despite cultural and historical linkages, many regional states perceive the Middle East primarily through an Arab-centric lens, limiting Türkiye's acceptance as a fully integrated actor (Jung, 2005). Türkiye's imperial legacy along with its integration into the bipolar order during the Cold War, continues to shape and constrain its relations with neighboring states. These historical and structural legacies contribute to a persistent disjunction between Türkiye's self-perception and how it is recognized by others. For Cusp States like Türkiye, this gap becomes a driving force behind foreign policy behavior.

To bridge this divide and gain broader regional acceptance, Cusp States often pursue proactive and at times assertive foreign policy strategies. In Türkiye's case, this has translated into a sustained effort to cultivate recognition and legitimacy across multiple regions. Its foreign policy has long reflected this ambition, seeking to reconcile its self-ascribed role as a regional connector with the sometimes ambivalent or conflicting perceptions held by external actors. Its efforts to engage with the European Union, assert leadership within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and build influence in Central Asia, exemplify its strategic pursuit of regional relevance and its efforts to actively engage in regional initiatives to gain recognition and legitimacy.

To overcome their regional ambiguity, Cusp States like Türkiye are keen to establish or join regional organizations that can affirm their belonging. Indeed, regional multilateralism has long been a defining feature of TFP since the early Republican era. Even in the 1920s, while mainly focusing on state formation and nation building, Türkiye actively sought participation in European initiatives, like the Briand-Kellogg Pact and various disarmament conferences, to underscore its European identity and assert its place in continental politics. In the 1930s, Türkiye played a pivotal role in the creation of the Balkan Entente (1934) and the Sadabad Pact (1937). The Balkan Entente, which united pro-status-quo states in response to the perceived threat from Fascist Italy, not only reaffirmed Türkiye's enduring Balkan identity rooted in its Ottoman past, but also made Türkiye an active player in the region and helped to ease tensions with Greece. Similarly, the Sadabad Pact aimed to foster cooperation among Middle Eastern states, positioning Türkiye as a stabilizing force and a bridge between diverse regional systems (Akdevelioglu & Kürkçüoglu, 2011, p.220-222).

During the Cold War, Türkiye's involvement in regional organizations was limited, not only because it was firmly embedded in the Western bloc through its NATO membership, but also because Cold War rivalries dominated the political dynamic in the surrounding regions. Nevertheless, when opportunities arose, Türkiye did engage in regional initiatives. For example, despite reservations stemming from its secular identity, Türkiye chose to join the Organization of Islamic Conference (later Organization of Islamic Cooperation, OIC) in

1969, viewing it as a strategic opportunity to participate in a Middle Eastern initiative that sought to counterbalance Arab nationalism, which had limited Türkiye's actorness in the region. Similarly in 1985, Türkiye, alongside Iran and Pakistan, became a founding member of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which continues to exist today with the expanded membership into Central Asia, placing Türkiye together with a competitor, Iran, in a new geography. Still, throughout the Cold War, the defining influence on Türkiye's foreign policy was its alignment with one of the major blocs in the bipolar international system. The structure of the international system, therefore, significantly shaped Türkiye's approach to regional multilateralism. It was ultimately the end of the Cold War that created new possibilities for regional engagement and the (re)construction of regional identities.

Türkiye's efforts at region-building gained momentum after the end of the Cold War. One notable initiative from the 1990s was the establishment of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in 1992. Proposed by Türkiye, BSEC emerged in response to the shifting geostrategic and economic role and significance of the Black Sea basin in the wake of the end of bipolarity. It was envisioned as a framework for fostering regional cooperation and transforming the Black Sea into a zone of stability and collaboration. Notably, BSEC also includes countries that are not littoral to the Black Sea, such as Greece and Azerbaijan, highlighting Türkiye's attempt to construct a broader regional identity with itself at the center, an opportunity made possible by the geopolitical reconfigurations following the Cold War. Similarly, in 1998, on Türkiye's initiative, the BLACKSEAFOR—a multinational, on-call naval peace task force—was established to promote maritime security and regional stability in the Black Sea (Aydin, 2024).

Continuing its post-Cold War regional activism, Türkiye launched several initiatives across different geographies to position itself as a central actor in emerging regional architectures. Türkiye also took the lead in founding the Developing-8 (D-8) in 1996, a platform aimed at sectoral cooperation among a diverse group of Muslim-majority countries including Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, and Nigeria. Similarly, TURKSOY, established in 1993, brought together the so-called Turkic states of Central Asia and the Caucasus in a cultural and linguistic framework, reflecting Ankara's ambition to cultivate a shared regional identity rooted in common heritage as a way to be part of this emerging region.

In the Middle East, despite the limitations stemming from the post-Gulf War context that had led to the United States (US) and the Arab world's attempts to establish a new regional order, Türkiye continued to play a role in regional cooperation. Ankara actively participated in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) track, one of the Madrid Peace Process' multilateral tracks. Türkiye also sought to promote regional cooperation through the establishment of multilateral platforms, most notably the Iraq Neighborhood Forum Initiative. Initially proposed in 1998 and later revived in response to escalating tensions between the US and Iraq in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion, the initiative was centered around Iraq and aimed to institutionalize dialogue among Iraq's neighbors. Its primary objective was to foster a cooperative framework to address regional security concerns and prevent further destabilization in Iraq through diplomatic engagement with Iraq's neighbors. Those efforts largely failed and in 2003 the US invaded Iraq and overthrew the regime. In 2008 Ankara reactivated the Forum in an enlarged form, most notably now including Egypt, to help consolidate the new Iraqi regime and manage relations with several regional powers



with interests in Iraq. This time, the effort gained traction, with multiple meetings taking place (Altunışık, 2023).

In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, Türkiye sought to integrate itself into the region following the emergence of newly independent states after the Soviet Union's collapse. Türkiye emphasized historical and cultural ties with these countries, solidifying relationships through institutions such as the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States (TÜRKPA), the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY), and the Summits of the Heads of Turkic Speaking States (now known as the Organization of Turkic States, OTS). To enhance cooperation in religious matters, the Eurasian Islamic Council was established in 1994, headquartered in Ankara, serving as a consultative mechanism. During the 1990s, Türkiye's approach focused on leveraging cultural proximity -primarily religious and ethnic connections- and employing soft power to engage with the region (Köstem, 2017). Efforts to increase connectivity also included infrastructure development, such as road and railroad networks, as well as pipelines (Altunışık, 2024).

In recent years, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has become a key platform for Türkiye's political, economic and cultural engagement in the region. The OTS currently includes five full members. At the OTS' November 2021 meeting, members adopted the Turkish World View-2004 document, underscoring Türkiye's central role in shaping the Organization's vision. The organization has since emerged as a vital institution for Türkiye to emphasize cultural proximity and deepen its ties with the region (Kahveci & Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2023). Yet, the dynamics in the region limited Türkiye's regionalism both in the 1990s and 2000s. While it was the "return of Russia" and regional conflicts then in the 1990s, today competing great powers and the difficulties of carefully balancing its relations with them impose limitations on Türkiye's regional roles. For both periods, domestic limitations also accentuated the challenges Türkiye faced.

Promoting regional initiatives has been a way for Türkiye to be active in the South Caucasus. Especially since the early 2000s, Türkiye has sought to expand its influence through a combination of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, each reflecting its evolving geopolitical strategy. Türkiye has proposed regional frameworks like the Stability Pact for the Caucasus in January 2000, the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform in August 2008 and the 3+3 initiative in December 2020 to foster stability and shape region's political dynamics as well as assert itself as part of that region.

In the early years of the AKP rule, specifically in the Middle East, Türkiye adopted a strategy of regionalism to enhance its role in regional politics. This approach emphasized economic cooperation as a key driver of regionalism. In the early 2000s, Türkiye signed free trade agreements with Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Morocco, and Tunisia, and implemented reciprocal visa waivers to establish a free trade and travel zone with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. On 31 July 2010, Türkiye, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon signed the Close Neighbors Economic and Trade Association Council (CNETAC). This initiative aimed to create a Middle Eastern regional free trade agreement, known as the "Middle Eastern Shamgen Area", promoting the free movement of capital, goods and people (Albarracín, 2011). However, this ambitious regional integration project was disrupted by the Arab Uprisings and a subsequent shift in Türkiye's policy toward the region, halting much of the progress made during this period.

In sum, the case of Türkiye illustrates how Cusp States navigate regional ambiguity

by leveraging multilateralism and diplomatic activism. Their foreign policy is shaped as much by a desire for recognition as by strategic calculation, making them both complex and consequential actors in regional affairs. Since the turn of the millennium, Türkiye has sought to increase its regional footprint by taking bilateral steps, with varying degrees of success; proposing and promoting regional initiatives. Thus, Türkiye has sought to redefine, reshape and blur the boundaries of its diverse regional sphere through regionalism initiatives and by becoming a member of regional groupings. In line with its position as a Cusp State, Türkiye has cultivated a significant regional role through active participation—and occasional leadership—in regional organizations, leveraging this involvement to reconcile competing interests and perform varied identity roles. Türkiye's regionalism strategy overall demonstrated the opportunities and limitations of Türkiye as a Cusp State. The limitations do not necessarily originate from Türkiye's cuspness but rather from the policies of great powers and regional actors as well as Türkiye's own choices based on the preferences of its political leaders.

Cuspness and Connectivity

A related foreign policy strategy that Türkiye has been promoting especially since the 1990s has been to present its position at the intersection of multiple regions as central player to major connectivity projects. In fact, since the end of the Cold War Türkiye has been playing a pivotal role in several regional and intercontinental connectivity projects across railways, roads, and pipelines, linking Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Its geographical location as well as its cultural, economic and political links with multiple regions allow Türkiye to use its cuspness in promoting its role as an intersection or a hub for such projects. For example, projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, the Middle Corridor Initiative, and several rail and road networks have been proposed and developed by Türkiye, in cooperation with other actors.

Energy collaboration has been a critical component of this strategy. The concept of Türkiye as an energy bridge gained prominence following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Turkic states. Türkiye began to envision itself as a strategic conduit linking the energy-rich Caspian region with energy-consuming markets in Europe. Thus positioned between major producers and consumers of fossil fuels, Türkiye leveraged its geographic location as a key bargaining tool in regional energy politics. Over time, metaphors such as "transit energy country" and "energy hub" emerged to describe its evolving role in the global energy landscape. This role emerged strongly in linking the Caspian region to Europe with the BTC (completed 2005), the South Caucasus pipeline (completed 2006), and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) (completed 2018) (Erşen, E. & Çelikpala, M. 2019). Türkiye played a pivotal role in proposing gas and oil pipeline networks as regards to the Middle East as well, including linking Iraqi energy resources to Europe via Türkiye and connecting Egyptian resources to European markets through Jordan, Syria and Türkiye (Euro-Arab Mashreq Gas Pipeline). However, these failed to materialize due to changing geopolitics in the Middle East and Türkiye's increasingly problematic relations.

The connectivity projects also expanded to other areas, such as roads and railways. In the context of the Middle East, infrastructure development further supported this vision, with

plans for rail links connecting Syria and Iran via Türkiye, and Türkiye to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) and Baghdad, and finally, a south-north corridor from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to Türkiye and Europe. Additionally, road and motorway networks were planned to be modernized to enhance connectivity between Türkiye, Syria and the KRI. Other major projects included integrating electricity grids between the Mashreq economies and Türkiye and constructing advanced telecommunication infrastructure, such as the JADI project, an underground fiber optic network linking Jeddah, Amman, Damascus and Istanbul, or the Regional Cable Network (RCN), connecting the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Türkiye (Albarracín, 2011). Like energy projects, most of such connectivity projects in the Middle East failed due to changing relations with the region. Currently, Türkiye is actively supporting Iraq's Development Road Project (DRP), envisaged as a 1,200-km rail and highway corridor linking Grand Faw port in Basra to the Turkish border, and through Türkiye, to Europe. In April 2024 a quadrilateral memorandum of understanding among Iraq, Türkiye, Qatar and the UAE was signed, which has made DRP as a strategic project for Türkiye to bolster its transit hub aspirations (Göçer & Altunışık, 2025). As to Central Asia and the Caucasus, several projects have been proposed, including the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) Railway (completed in 2017), the Trans-Caspian Rail Link (Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Azerbaijan) and The International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Türkiye thus aims to utilize its cuspness to position itself into these connectivity projects. Connectivity strategies are both an expression of its cuspness and a tool to manage it. Rather than merely presenting itself as a bridge, Türkiye has actively used these connectivity projects to bolster its autonomy and its regional and global influence. However, there are significant limitations. Competing regional or global powers sometimes view Türkiye's involvement with caution, creating potential bottlenecks and exclusions. As such, Türkiye's ability to navigate between different regional frameworks is shaped by its cuspness, enabling it to pursue multiple, at times competing, connectivity projects, such as participating selectively in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while also promoting its own Middle Corridor as an alternative. This flexibility is a strategic asset, but it also necessitates constant recalibration and renegotiation of Türkiye's role as global and regional dynamics evolve. While offering opportunities for influence, this positioning demands Türkiye continuously manage complex and often contradictory expectations from both internal and external actors (Üngör, 2024).

Cuspness and Global Transitions

Cuspness is not static but evolves in response to shifts in the international system. Periods of global transformation, such as the end of the Cold War or the emergence of multipolarity, can deepen cuspness by reshaping the roles and opportunities available to Cusp States. Conversely, during the periods of systemic stability, the ability of Cusp States to leverage their in-between positions may be constrained. Türkiye's shifting role in NATO and its fluctuating alliances in the Middle East illustrate how systemic changes influence cuspness over time. In particular, Türkiye's in-betweenness becomes more pronounced and more challenging during periods of global transition and uncertainty, necessitating innovative strategies to expand influence while simultaneously avoiding the risks of marginalization.

During periods of international order transition, Cusp States often play a critical and

dynamic role due to their intermediate position between major powers and their capacity to influence the trajectory of systemic change. Analyzing Türkiye's strategies as a Cusp State in the transforming international systems offers valuable insights for theories of power transition, as the behavior of such states may signal shifts in power structures, such as the decline of unipolarity or the rise of multipolarity. Furthermore, the choices Cusp States make, whether toward alignment, neutrality, or balancing, can significantly affect patterns of international conflict and cooperation. Thus, understanding the behavior of Cusp States may have significance beyond themselves.

Cusp States typically pursue a range of strategies during international transitions. Their behavior during such times is shaped by the need to maximize security, maintain autonomy, and capitalize on opportunities while minimizing risks. Balancing between different powers is one of these strategies which has also been a typical strategy for Türkiye. Unless they are not directly threatened, Cusp States opt to balance competing global powers or blocs. A related strategy is the quest to achieve autonomy, which is a strategy of expanding influence during the time of transition. Throughout its history, Türkiye has consistently navigated a delicate balancing act between different global powers, shaped by its strategic location, political dynamics, and the changing global order. The root of this strategy goes back to the 19th century, when the international (mainly European) system was transforming and the Ottoman Empire tried to survive by balancing one great power against the other without overtly committing itself to one. The multipolar system allowed it to play this role. For example, during the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Ottomans allied with Britain and France to counter Russian expansion, despite their weakened position. This delicate diplomatic balancing act helped delay the empire's collapse (Brown, 1984).

In the early years of the republic, Türkiye continued this tradition. Despite a general Western orientation, in the 1920s it pursued a cautious balancing act between the Western powers and the Soviet Union, navigating the newly formed and unstable international order (Balta & Özdal, 2023). In the 1930s, as the global system began to shift from multipolarity to bipolarity, Türkiye adopted its strategy once again, this time balancing between the European great powers (Barlas & Yılmaz, 2022). During World War II, Türkiye maintained a policy of neutrality despite pressures from the United Kingdom, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Türkiye managed to maintain its neutrality for the majority of the conflict. This neutrality enabled Türkiye to avoid direct involvement in the war while skillfully engaging in diplomatic negotiations with all sides (Deringil, 2004).

The post-World War II era marked a critical turning point. Faced with a tangible threat from the Soviet Union, Türkiye opted for alignment by joining NATO, securing military and economic support. Yet, even during the Cold War, Türkiye did not fully abandon its balancing approach. During the détente of the 1960s and 1970s, as the strict bipolar system evolved, Türkiye took advantage of opportunities to diversify its policies. While remaining a NATO member, Türkiye strengthened diplomatic and economic ties with the Soviet Union and deepened its involvement with the Middle East by delinking it with its NATO membership. This evolving foreign policy strategy reflected Türkiye's efforts to maintain a flexible and independent stance while engaging with both superpowers and its regional neighbors. All these moves culminated in a broader strategy of "relative autonomy" (Oran, 2011, p.393-410).

In the current international era, marked by intense US-China competition and rivalry



and uncertainty over the structure of the future global order, Türkiye has once again been prompted to employ a strategy of balancing and strategic hedging. As a result, Türkiye seeks to maintain relations with both declining and rising powers, avoiding overcommitment to any single bloc. This has manifested in Türkiye's efforts to assert "strategic autonomy" (Aydın Düzgit, Kutlay & Keyman, 2025) while remaining within NATO. For instance, Türkiye has cultivated close ties with Russia, particularly in the realms of energy (such as the Turkish Stream pipeline) and defense (such as the purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems), straining relations with the US and other NATO allies (Köstem, 2022). Meanwhile, its relationship with China has evolved, largely driven by economic considerations. Türkiye has become an active participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China is now one of its largest trading partners (Eliküçük Yıldırım, 2020).

Thus, while NATO membership remains a core part of Türkiye's foreign policy, it has increasingly sought to establish itself as an independent actor in international relations, using its relationship with China and Russia to gain leverage in regional and global affairs. However, these relationships have limitations and they are not without tensions. As to Russia, conflicting geopolitical interests in the Middle East and North Africa as well as in the South Caucasus together with economic and energy vulnerabilities have at times led to crisis (Köstem, 2022). As to China, one of the key points of tension is the issue of the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang. Türkiye's expressions of concern over the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang have led to public backlash but have been moderated diplomatically to preserve broader economic ties (Eliküçük Yıldırım, 2020). Similarly, there are limitations on economic and connectivity cooperation (Ergenç & Göçer, 2025). Finally, for both China and Russia, the fact that Türkiye is ultimately a NATO member puts a general limitation to their relationship. Thus, Türkiye's relations with major powers embody the careful balancing and strategic flexibility that define cusp behavior.

Türkiye's intermediary role has also positioned it as a potential facilitator in global conflicts. Since the 1990s, Türkiye has increasingly positioned itself as a mediator in regional and international conflicts, leveraging its cuspiness during periods of global transition. In the post-Cold War era, Türkiye began deepening its diplomatic engagements, particularly in the Balkans, where it played a constructive role in post-conflict reconciliation among Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia. As global power dynamics shifted in the 2000s, Türkiye expanded its mediation efforts into the Middle East, hosting indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria in 2008 and engaging with both Hamas and Fatah in an attempt to reconcile Palestinian factions. Its proactive diplomacy extended to Africa as well, particularly in Somalia, where Türkiye combined humanitarian and development aid with mediation between warring factions. In Asia, Türkiye launched the Istanbul Process in 2011 to facilitate dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan, underscoring its role in fostering regional cooperation. Most recently, during the Russia–Ukraine war, Türkiye brokered the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative alongside the United Nations, ensuring vital grain exports from Ukraine amid a global food crisis. This mediating capacity further reinforces Türkiye's relevance amid systemic flux.

Another strategy characteristic of cusp state behavior is the active advocacy for a multiplex world order (Acharya, Estevadeordal & Goodman, 2023) as a calculated means to expand influence and autonomy in an increasingly fragmented global landscape. Cusp States, positioned between major geopolitical regions and often possessing hybrid identities, tend

to resist rigid alignments if they are not faced with direct threats. Instead, they benefit from and seek to cultivate a more fluid, multiplex environment where power is distributed across several centers. This structure allows them to navigate between great powers, expand their diplomatic room for maneuver, and extract strategic benefits by engaging with competing blocs. Türkiye's repeated calls for reforms in global institutions such as the UN Security Council (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025c), the IMF, and the World Bank—while framed in the language of justice and inclusivity—also serve a more pragmatic objective: to dilute the dominance of established powers and carve out a larger role for itself and similarly situated states. In practice, this vision of a world order frequently involves hedging strategies, where Türkiye engages simultaneously with competing power blocs: maintaining NATO membership while deepening ties with Russia and China, or participating in Western-led economic systems while vocally supporting alternative structures like BRICS. Moreover, Türkiye's alignment with other medium powers in forums like MIKTA or the D-8 is more about leveraging collective weight to challenge the decision-making monopoly of great powers. In this sense, advocacy for a multiplex world becomes less a vision for global equity and more a tactical maneuver within a competitive international system, one that allows Cusp States to punch above their weight by exploiting geopolitical fluidity.

Despite their potential, Cusp States like Türkiye also face significant challenges. Their in-between position often exposes them to competing pressures from different regions and powers, sometimes leaving them vulnerable to alienation or conflict. For instance, Türkiye's simultaneous engagement with Europe, the Middle East, and Russia has sometimes resulted in conflicting policy demands and strained relationships. Behaviorally, Cusp States must balance their self-perception as bridge-builders with the practical challenges of achieving acceptance and influence across multiple regions. There is always the risk of overreach or miscalculation. In some cases, Cusp States may overestimate their ability to maneuver between powers and face backlash or isolation. They may take actions that provoke major powers or misread the trajectory of the transition. Overall, there are limitations to balancing and transactionalism.

Thus, the strategies of Cusp States like Türkiye are important for global stability, especially in times of transition. They may play a stabilizing role by mediating and engaging with multiple sides, and Cusp States can help dampen great power conflicts. Yet, if Cusp States overreach or align too strongly with one side, they can exacerbate tensions or draw major powers into localized conflicts. In any case, their choices often influence the legitimacy and shape of the emerging international order.

Conclusion

This article builds on my earlier work on Türkiye as a Cusp State (Altunışık 2014; Altunışık, 2023) with the aim of deepening and sharpening the conceptual rigor of the concept. It does so by clarifying the relational dimension of cuspness, conceptualizing it simultaneously as a structural condition and as a set of practices shaped by agency and context. The article further develops the practice dimension of Cusp States by identifying and demonstrating different strategies, and also by linking these strategies more systematically to global and regional dynamics as well as to domestic political processes. In this way, the concept is refined to better capture and explain the international behavior of one such Cusp State, Türkiye, along with identifying the opportunities and constraints that shape its foreign policy.



The concept of Cusp States offers a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of states that exist on the margins of multiple regions and systems. By emphasizing structure and agency, ideational and material dimensions, and the dynamic relationship with regions and the international system, the Cusp State concept provides a more balanced and constructive lens than traditional frameworks like "torn states." It also differentiates from the concept of liminal states which focus on the identity of in-betweenness and the construction of discourses as a constitutive practice. The concept of the Cusp State, by contrast, refers both to a structural condition and to a set of evolving practices shaped by agency and context. It is closely related to the literature on middle powers, since many Cusp States can be characterized also as middle powers (Robins, 2014, p.2-3). Framing Cusp States in this way refines the discussion on middle powers in International Relations and allows for the identification of a distinct sub-category. The concepts such as hub, bridge, however, are metaphors, generally used by policy-makers for reconstructing foreign policy roles (Yanık, 2009).

Cusp States must navigate significant challenges, balancing their unique opportunities with the demands of their multifaceted roles. In doing so, they highlight the evolving and dynamic nature of international relations in a changing world. The concept of Cusp States is, therefore, highly linked with global politics. As is explained, systemic transitions, albeit challenging, provide Cusp States like Türkiye opportunities to strategize. However, this does not mean that Cusp States prefer instability or that cuspness completely disappears in periods of stability. Cusp states also enjoy advantages of stability, such as security, economic advantages, predictability and legitimacy. However, they may also be constrained, especially in a tight bipolar or tight unipolar system. Türkiye was constrained during the height of the Cold War, or during the US domination right after the end of the Cold War. In the latter period, although Türkiye also enjoyed the benefits of its partnership with the US in different regions, it felt constrained in post-Gulf War Iraq.

Cuspness is a structural condition that enables certain strategies but does not prescribe them. It opens a range of options, such as balancing, bridging, hedging, or regionalism, but which path is taken also depends on domestic factors, such as leadership, ideology and institutional capacity. Thus, the concept of Cusp States is also deeply intertwined with domestic politics, as a state's international positioning often serves as a reflection, and sometimes a driver, of internal political agendas, identity struggles, and regime legitimacy. For Cusp States like Türkiye, the ambiguity of their global role—neither fully part of the West nor wholly aligned with the Global South—often mirrors internal tensions over national identity, ideology, and the direction of state-building. Leaders in Cusp States frequently instrumentalize foreign policy to reinforce domestic legitimacy, portraying assertive or “independent” international stances as evidence of national strength, sovereignty, and resurgence.

In Türkiye's case, for instance, especially in recent years, the pursuit of a multipolar world and an active mediatory role have become central to the ruling elite's narrative of a “New Türkiye” that no longer submits to “Western tutelage.” Foreign policy is thus tightly woven into domestic discourses about the reassertion of civilizational heritage, nationalism, Islamism, and neo-Ottoman nostalgia. By projecting Türkiye as a pivotal actor capable of balancing East and West, the government appeals to a sense of exceptionalism that resonates with key segments of the domestic population, while deflecting criticism about democratic backsliding, economic instability, or international isolation.

Moreover, Cusp State behavior can also exacerbate domestic polarization. Competing

elites and constituencies may have divergent visions of where the country belongs globally—whether as part of the liberal West, a leader of the Islamic world, or a regional power in its own right. These visions are not merely symbolic; they influence policy choices, alliance preferences, and institutional reforms. In Türkiye, debates over EU membership, relations with NATO, and policies in the Middle East, or partnerships with Russia or China, are not just policy issues but struggles over the identity and the politics of the republic.

Thus, Cusp States like Türkiye experience several pressures. These states often face identity tensions, cultural ambiguities, or strategic vulnerabilities. However, their cuspiness, particularly their position at the intersection of cultures and their pivotal geopolitical role also grants them significant advantages. This includes the ability to leverage cultural diversity, adapt to global trends, and strategically balance competing foreign powers while capitalizing on their versatility (Chan, 2014).

Cuspness is understood primarily as a structural condition rooted in geography, historical ties, and systemic positioning. It introduces important constraints and opportunities, but it does not fully determine how domestic politics and foreign policy interact. In fact, recognizing cusp status as a structural condition highlights a crucial tension: while the position may be fixed, the strategies and discourses that states adopt to navigate it are highly variable and politically constructed. This means different domestic actors can interpret and respond to cuspness in radically different ways, leading to divergent foreign policy paths even within the same structural constraints. This means the interaction between domestic politics and foreign policy is not mechanical. Instead, domestic political dynamics—ideological competition, regime type, leadership style, identity politics—mediate how Cusp States interpret and operationalize their structural position.

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