

## Adding 'T' to BRICS: A NATO Ally in Transition

Written by Arslan Ayan

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ARSLAN AYAN, JUL 9 2019

*I wish they would take the necessary steps to let us in and we could take our place in BRICS (Hurriyet Daily News 2018).*

Ever since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan personally attended the 10<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit in Johannesburg in 2018, many scholars of political science from Turkey and a host of others from around the world have been caught up in a lively discussion about Turkey's ever-increasing aspirations to become a permanent member of the grouping. Much of the debate has centered around the material incentives for Turkey's desire to add a T to the BRICS grouping, such as various economic and military benefits, reducing dependence, and multilateral foreign policy options. For instance, Gokhan Bacik argues that because Turkey stands as a typical emerging regional power in its own capacity in the Middle East and this makes it –at least theoretically — eligible for membership: “When it was the BRIC, Turkey was not of the scale of its members. Compared with each of the original states, Turkey is not a same-level big power. However, South Africa's membership displayed that an African country with a lower degree of hard-power capacity was acceptable to the BRIC” (Bacik 2013, 766). Yaşar Yakış, a political scientist and a former Turkish foreign minister, similarly argues that Turkey would be a good candidate for the BRICS grouping's first trial expansion because it is “a great middle-size country, not very poor, not very rich, something in the middle” (Yakış, July 31, 2018). Jayshree Sengupta sees a possible Turkish membership as a mutually beneficial move. She argues that a membership will give Ankara access to infrastructural development loans from the AIIB and the NDB, while expanding the BRICS' influence due to Turkey's strategic location and unique identity and relationship with the West and the Muslim world (Sengupta, August 13, 2018). Moving the discussion even further, Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay classify Turkey as a “near-BRIC power,” which refers to Ankara's “increasingly assertive and independent style of foreign policy with aspirations to establish itself as a major regional actor.” (Öniş, Kutlay 2013, 1409).

This paper attempts to analyze Turkey's ever-increasing aspiration to become a member of the BRICS grouping by seeking answers to three major questions: 1) Why does a traditional NATO and Western ally with a decades-long agenda to become an EU member increasingly aspires come a full-fledged member of a grouping that arguably presents a challenge to the existing global order? What would be the pros of a possible Turkish membership in the BRICS grouping? Would BRICS members be willing to add T to BRICS?

The first potential benefit of a BRICS status for Turkey would be an increase in its position in the world system. We argue that Turkey would gladly bandwagon the BRICS club for similar reasons that of the other members: to punch beyond its weights on international and regional issues. The second potential benefit is economic. BRICS membership would help Turkey greatly in its desire to revisit its economic dependence on the West, the EU in particular. It would also contribute to Turkey's export trade greatly. And finally the third potential benefit is ontological. Ankara's desire for BRICS membership can partly be seen as an engagement in tactics of shame avoidance, “both retrospective – making up for past misdeeds — and prospective – avoiding future misdeeds” (Mitzen, Larson 2017, 8).

The following section elaborates on the BRICS consortium – what does the BRICS mean? – and on Ankara's ever-increasing aspiration to become a member. Utilizing mostly secondary sources, the third section then attempts to understand the puzzle of why a traditional Western ally increasingly desire to become a member of the most prominent non-Western grouping. What would be the pros and cons of a possible Turkish membership in the BRICS grouping?

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The final section seeks an answer to whether BRICS members would accept Turkey as an equal partner in the bloc.

### Turkey: Fit for Membership in the Club?

Despite periodical ups and downs due to domestic, regional and global developments, from the very beginning, Turkey's core material and ontological security interests have remained inextricably with the Western world for decades. For Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, and his narrow elitist circle, later known as the *Kemalists*, there existed only one and only true civilization; European civilization. Ankara initially joined the League of Nations in 1938, and then became a founding member of the UN in 1945. With the beginning of the Cold War, Turkey openly sided with "the free world and the Western Bloc" by becoming a member of NATO in 1952. Also, joining the EU has always been the most significant goal of the country since late 1950s. Ankara applied for a membership to the EU for the first time in 1959. And after almost 50 years, the EU finally agreed to start access negotiations with Turkey in December 2004. However, there is now an ever-increasing favoring of the BRICS grouping and a rise in anti-Western sentiment in Turkey's contemporary foreign policy. This has been more and more evident ever since Turkish President Erdogan personally attended the 10th BRICS summit in Johannesburg last year. We argue that there are three main reasons behind this: economic, political and ontological.

In the most simple terms possible, the BRICS is a heterogeneous club of states composed of five major emerging countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. These five countries share significant structural features and enjoy rapidly growing economies, significant military capabilities, substantial populations, and increasing political representation and participation in all global governance institutions (Thakur 2014, 1794-1795). Yet, the grouping is still far from being an EU-like coherent organization as it lacks the minimum legal and institutional features. Perhaps save for South Africa, BRICS grouping consists of some of the largest countries in terms of land area, population, economic and military capabilities and demographic scales. Turkey, in terms of GDP, share of global output, and military expenditure, is positioned ahead of South Africa with an undeniably large gap with the rest of the members of the club. If Turkey was a member, it would rank 5th in GDP analysis, in military spending and population and in its share of global economic output. It has a relatively large and growing population with over 80 million people, and its conventional army with 515,000 active troops and an additional 380,000 reserves, is the second largest standing military within NATO. Most scholars accept Turkey as an emerging regional (middle) power based on the country's advancement in economic development, and its arguably increasing soft power in global politics (Benhaïm, Öktem 2015). However, despite its relative economic and diplomatic success, in terms of material capabilities, Turkey has only managed to position itself "in the middle of the MIKTA grouping," largely behind South Korea, and Indonesia (Gök, Karadeniz 2018, 7). It is therefore only natural for Turkey to remain far below the BRICS members in terms of material capabilities.

The BRICS grouping is not an institutional organization. Therefore, there is no concrete roadmap for the economic and political conditions that need to be fulfilled for accession. The decision of accession is solely taken by the representatives of all the member countries of BRICS. It is therefore a difficult task to analyze whether Turkey fits into the BRICS standards. However, given the admittance of a middle power like South Africa, it is safe to argue that the club may open its doors to other Middle powers like Turkey, Mexico and Indonesia. The candidate must be an emerging, newly industrialised country with a growing economy and increasing political influence on regional and perhaps global affairs to a certain extent – but this is of course a very vague measure.

### Adding T to BRICS: What Would Be the Costs and Benefits?

*"Turkey is a European country, an Asian country, a Middle Eastern country, Balkan country, Caucasian country, neighbor to Africa, Black Sea country, Caspian Sea, all these"* (Grossman 2010).

This section attempts to answer the following questions: Why does a traditional NATO and Western ally with a decades-long agenda to become an EU member increasingly aspires to become a full-fledged member of a grouping that arguably presents a challenge to the existing global order? What would be the pros and cons of a potential Turkish membership in the BRICS grouping?

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The first potential benefit of the BRICS membership for Turkey would be an increase in its position in the world system. Unfortunately, such a prediction is doomed to suffer from a lack of an empirical evaluation. However, it would be safe to argue that Turkey would gladly bandwagon the BRICS club for similar reasons as of the other members: to punch beyond its weights on international and regional issues. It is no secret that South Africa rushed under the club's umbrella [...] "to entrench its claim to continental leadership. (Brütsch, Papay 2013, 304). Similarly, joining the BRICS has bolstered Brazil's soft power credentials significantly. Delhi is using the club to "exact the international respect it thought it deserved" (Brütsch, Papay, 303-304). And the grouping offers Russia an opportunity to "participate in an economic bloc in which it had a nominally equal status" (Johnson, Kösten 2016, 209).

Although, Turkey has historically been a close ally of the Western bloc, the US in particular, it has increasingly been marginalized and "pushed aside" by the West, the US and the EU in particular (Yakış 2018). And this process, perhaps unsurprisingly, goes hand in hand with Ankara's increasing alienation from the strictly Western-oriented policies it pursued during the Cold War and the 1990s. The period that started in 2002 with the incumbent AKP government's rise to power, which continues today, is often defined as an era in which *neo-Ottomanism* reached its peak in both sociocultural and foreign policy context. Ankara's neo-Ottomanist political ideology largely aims to set Turkey as a "benign regional power, especially in the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans" (Öniş, Kutlay 2013, 1411). As part of a search for an increased role in regional and global system, Ankara not only undertook many initiatives to become part of international institutions and increase Turkey's visibility in global platforms (Gök, Karadeniz, 6-7), but also engaged in a process of investment in countries from Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa, such as building mosques, education facilities, financing religious education, and providing humanitarian aid – especially in Somalia (Tol 2019). Turkey's neo-Ottomanism also paved the way for a new strategic thinking in the relations with the West "that is based more on cost-benefit calculations than on identity-related factors" (Oğuzlu 2008, 5). Turkey's negotiations with the European Union for a possible membership are at a certain deadlock, and disagreements between Ankara and the West, the US in particular, are becoming more and more visible on many critical issues. Turkish officials have gradually come to understand that Ankara's institutional relations with NATO and the EU "does not automatically suggest that Turkey is a part of the Western international community and that following a Western-oriented foreign policy always serves Turkey's interest" (Oğuzlu, 6). However, this realization does not necessarily mean a certain breakup with the West. Rather it makes Turkey a "soft-revisionist" state with an agenda to reform the existing international order into a more democratic and inclusive order. A potential BRICS membership therefore can easily be seen by the Turkish officials as a prestigious step for Turkey's efforts to consolidate its emerging regional power status. It is also "a short cut to satisfying" Ankara's increasing lust for a more autonomous foreign policy and less dependence on the West (Bacik, 769).

The second potential benefit of a BRICS membership for Turkey is economic. It is safe to argue that BRICS status would contribute to Turkey's export trade greatly. In 2000, Ankara's export trade with BRICS stood at just 3 % of the total export, and 11 % of the total import (Dinçer 2015, 3). Its export share rose to 8.4 % in 2013 while the import share reached 23 % in the same year (Dinçer, 3). Turkey's export share grew only around 5 % while import share grew around 12 % in thirteen years. When looked at the South African example, one sees a very different upward trend. Before its accession to BRIC, the country's export trade with the member countries were at only 6.2 % of the total export (Anuoluwapo et al., 2018, 31). However, when South Africa became a member in 2010, its export to the BRIC grew to 16.8 per cent and further rose to 29 per cent by the end of 2011" (Anuoluwapo et al., 31-32). It can hardly be argued now that Turkey's post-membership situation would be very different than that of South Africa.

A BRICS status would also help Turkey greatly in its desire to revisit its economic dependence on the West, the EU in particular. No BRICS countries are currently in Turkey's top 10 export countries list, which is heavily dominated by Germany, UK, USA, Italy and France. And China, perhaps unsurprisingly, is the only country to find a place in Ankara's top 10 import countries list. However, despite strong reactions from the EU and the US, Turkey increasingly attempt to create economic and foreign policy alternatives. For instance, to combine China's *Belt and Road Initiative* with Turkey's *Middle Corridor Project*, a "memorandum of understanding" was signed between Ankara and Beijing in 2016 (Turkish FM 2016). Ankara's goods and services trade with Beijing was around \$24 billion in 2017. Chinese investments in Turkey is currently around \$2 billion in total (Turkish FM 2016). Based on the post-membership South Africa example, it is safe to argue that a membership for Turkey would promote further developmental programmes, investments and infrastructure within the country, and strengthen Ankara's decades-

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long desire to act as a multilateral actor as both Middle Eastern country, a Western country, and finally a BRICS country.

A BRICS status would also offer Turkey a technology partnership, especially in term of military assistance. Ankara has already agreed to purchase S-400 surface-to-air missile defense systems from Russia. If deployed, the missile system will make Turkey the first NATO member to deploy the system on its soil (Ülgen 2019). If granted a membership, Chinese and Russian suppliers would increasingly support Ankara with new military technology and co-production ventures.

The third potential benefit of a BRICS membership for Turkey is ontological. Turkey has long been struggling with its geographical belonging. Is it a country that belongs to the West? Or the Middle East? Partly to reinvent its sense of self, Ankara applied for a membership of the European Union ( the then European Economic Community) back in 1959. After 50 years, the EU finally agreed to start access negotiations with Turkey in December 2004. However, decades-long efforts by a series of Turkish governments have eventually entailed a deep Western-fatigue, triggering a need for Turks to reconsider their "sense of self." The Ontological Security Theory (OST) in international relations predicts that when such an ontological insecurity emerges, "surprising foreign policy choices are made in order to avoid anxiety, shame or both" (Mitzen, Larson, 8). Even though it looks irrational for a traditional NATO, and Western ally to become member of the BRICS club, such a membership would entail Ankara's biographical continuity. Put differently, efforts by Ankara can partly be seen as an engagement in tactics of shame avoidance, "both retrospective making up for past misdeeds – and prospective – avoiding future misdeeds" (Mitzen, Larson, 8).

### **Would the Existing Members Be Willing to Add T to BRICS?**

In a 2005 Paper, Goldman Sachs argued that countries like Turkey and South Africa were too small for BRIC status (O'Neill 2005, 4). The paper also argued that among the eleven countries that are considered emerging markets with the potential to play significant roles in the global economy – Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey and Vietnam, – only Mexico and South Korea had the potential for membership. However, South Africa's accession in 2010 as the smallest member of the club tells us that the BRICS grouping may be open to middle-sized countries. Economic-demographic stature and hard-power capability may not be the main conditions for BRICS status, yet they remain important determining pillars.

There are already some positive signs from the BRICS members for a possible expansion. First of all, President Erdogan's attendance to the 10<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit was not "by accident," according to Pule Malefane, the South African Ambassador to Turkey (Sevinç 2017). Rather, Erdogan was invited by its members because "Turkey is viewed as a strategic partner and a leader in the region," as well as a reliable actor that works to strengthen South-to-South relations and Agenda 2063, a strategic vision of the African Union (Sevinç 2017). Indeed, Turkey is a leading trade partner, as its trade with South Africa forms around 40 percent of its total trade with rest of the sub-Saharan African states (Ndzendze 2018).

It is also known that China launched an initiative to create a BRICS+ circle in an attempt to enhance cooperation with other developing countries. In 2017, former Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, revealed China's desire to expand the core with five regional blocs, representing a total of 35 countries: "We will widen the circle of friends of the BRICS and turn it into the most influential platform for South-South cooperation in the world" (Lissovolik, Vinokurov 2019, 3-4).

There's now also a very positive trend in the relations between Ankara and Moscow. The two countries are increasingly becoming entwined in trade and defense. In 2018, the project of Turkey's first nuclear power plant was granted to Russia's Rosatom under a build-own-operate scheme. Also, an agreement that was signed between the Turkey Wealth Fund and the Russian Direct Investment Fund created a Russian-Turkish investment fund "with €900 million in joint reserve capital" (Frantzman 2019). Therefore, a BRICS status for Turkey can be viewed by Moscow as a positive move to detract Ankara from Western influence for good.

### **Concluding Remarks**

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This article briefly analyzed Turkey's ever-increasing aspiration to become a member of the BRICS grouping and analyzed the advantage and limitations of a possible Turkish membership in the BRICS grouping.

It was argued that the first potential benefit of the BRICS membership for Turkey would be an increase in its stature in the world system. Turkey would gladly bandwagon the BRICS club to punch beyond its weights on international and regional issues. A BRICS membership would also greatly help Turkey to revisit its economic dependence on the West generally and the EU specifically. It would contribute to Turkey's import and export trade greatly. Finally the third potential benefit is ontological. Ankara's desire for BRICS membership can partly be seen as an engagement in tactics of shame avoidance, "both retrospective – making up for past misdeeds — and prospective – avoiding future misdeeds" (Mitzen, Larson, 8).

Turkey admittedly remains far below the BRICS members in terms of material and economic capabilities. However, there is an ever-increasing favoring of the BRICS grouping and a rise in anti-Western sentiment in Turkey's contemporary foreign policy. This has been more and more evident ever since Turkish President Erdogan personally attended the 10th BRICS summit in Johannesburg last year. However, Ankara's increasing attention has not yet taken an official form and thus the potential of a BRICS membership is not serious at this point. Yet, there's now an undeniably positive trend in the relations between Ankara and BRICS capitals.

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**Arslan Ayan** is a PhD candidate, political correspondent based in Toronto, Canada. He holds a Master of Arts degree in IR from York University, with a thesis focusing on deep, mutually beneficial economic ties versus social, political animosity in Turkish-Israeli relations. His research interests lie in the area of state-centric security issues and power politics, with a special focus on conventional IR theory.