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## СОГЛАШЕНИЯ О СВОБОДНОЙ ТОРГОВЛЕ ТУРЕЦКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ: БАЛАНС МЕЖДУ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОЙ АВТОНОМИЕЙ И СТРУКТУРНЫМИ ОГРАНИЧЕНИЯМИ

### Аннотация

В условиях глобальной турбулентности и неопределенности внешняя политика Турции претерпевает значительные изменения, связанные с усилением взаимосвязи экономических факторов и параметров безопасности. Соглашения о свободной торговле выступают одним из ключевых инструментов укрепления стратегической автономии и диверсификации внешнеэкономических связей. В данной статье сквозь призму концепции торгового государства рассматривается роль подобного рода соглашений во внешней политике Турецкой Республики с учетом институциональных ограничений Таможенного союза ЕС и Турции и динамики геоэкономической конкуренции. Результаты исследования показывают, что Турция добилась высокого уровня либерализации торговли и расширения партнерских связей, однако эффективность соглашений о свободной торговле ограничена структурными дисбалансами национальной экономики, отсутствием устойчивой конвергенции политики и геополитической нестабильностью. В статье подчеркивается двойственная природа соглашений: невзирая на то, что они служат средством расширения экспорта и инструментом дипломатического маневрирования, они не обеспечивают долгосрочную структурную трансформацию. Авторами делается вывод о том, что заключенные Турцией соглашения о свободной торговле следует рассматривать не столько как классические инструменты региональной интеграции, сколько как элементы более широкой стратегии по укреплению автономии в условиях изменяющегося мирового порядка.

**Ключевые слова:** внешняя политика Турции, регионализм, зона свободной торговли, соглашение о свободной торговле, торговое государство.

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## **ТҮРКИЯ РЕСПУБЛИКАСЫНЫҢ ЕРКІН САУДА ТУРАЛЫ КЕЛІСІМДЕРІ: СТРАТЕГИЯЛЫҚ АВТОНОМИЯ МЕН ҚҰРЫЛЫМДЫҚ ШЕКТЕУЛЕР АРАСЫНДАҒЫ ТЕПЕ-ТЕНДІК**

*Аңдатпа*

Жаһандық турбуленттілік пен белгісіздік жағдайында Түркияның сыртқы саясаты экономикалық факторлар мен қауіпсіздік параметрлерінің өзара байланысының күшеюіне байланысты елеулі өзгерістерге ұшырауда. Еркін сауда туралы келісімдер стратегиялық автономияны нығайтудың және сыртқы экономикалық байланыстарды әртараптандырудың негізгі құралдарының бірі ретінде көрінеді. Мақалада сауда мемлекеті тұжырымдамасы тұрғысынан Түркия Республикасының сыртқы саясатындағы мұндай келісімдердің рөлі, Еуропалық Одақ пен Түркия арасындағы Кеден одағының институционалдық шектеулері және геэкономикалық бәсекенің динамикасы ескеріле отырып қарастырылады. Зерттеу нәтижелері Түркияның сауданы ырықтандырудың жоғары деңгейіне қол жеткізгенін және серіктестік байланыстарын кеңейткенін көрсетеді, алайда еркін сауда туралы келісімдердің тиімділігі ұлттық экономиканың құрылымдық теңгерімсіздіктерімен, саясаттың тұрақты конвергенциясының болмауымен және геосаяси тұрақсыздықпен шектеледі. Мақалада келісімдердің екіжақты сипаты атап өтіледі: олар экспортты кеңейту құралы әрі дипломатиялық маневр жасау тетігі ретінде қызмет еткеніне қарамастан, ұзақ мерзімді құрылымдық трансформацияны қамтамасыз етпейді. Авторлар Түркия жасаған еркін сауда туралы келісімдерді классикалық аймақтық интеграция құралдары ретінде емес, өзгеріп жатқан әлемдік тәртіп жағдайында автономияны нығайтуға бағытталған кеңірек стратегияның элементтері ретінде қарастыру қажет деген қорытынды жасайды. **Түйін сөздер:** Түркияның сыртқы саясаты, регионализм, еркін сауда аймағы, еркін сауда туралы келісім, сауда мемлекеті.

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## **TÜRKIYE'S FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS: BALANCING BETWEEN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS**

**Abstract**

In the context of global turbulence and uncertainty, Türkiye's foreign policy has been reshaped by the growing interconnection of economic and security factors. Free trade agreements (FTAs) have become a key instrument for strengthening strategic autonomy and diversifying external economic relations. This article examines the role of FTAs in Türkiye's foreign policy, taking into account the institutional constraints of the EU–Türkiye Customs Union and the dynamics of geo-economic competition. The methodological framework is presented by the concept of a trading state. The findings reveal that Türkiye has achieved a high level of trade liberalisation and expansion of partnerships, yet the effectiveness of FTAs is constrained by structural economic imbalances, lack of sustainable policy convergence and geopolitical instability. The discussion emphasizes the dual nature of FTAs: while they enhance export opportunities and diplomatic manoeuvring, they do not ensure long-term structural transformation. The article concludes that Türkiye's FTAs should be understood less as classical instruments of regional integration than as elements of a broader strategy to reinforce autonomy in a changing world order.

**Keywords:** Türkiye's foreign policy, regionalism, free trade area, free trade agreement, trading state

Contemporary Türkiye's foreign policy demonstrates a profound transformation in the context of global turbulence and uncertainty. Military and security concerns have become closely intertwined with economic factors, producing a complex policy framework. This transformation is marked by heightened flexibility and selectivity, both of which are embedded in the logic of strategic autonomy [1, p. 189].

Türkiye has evolved from an agrarian economy in the 1970s into a mixed economy characterised by a substantial share of industry and services. This transition was accompanied by progressive trade liberalisation and deeper integration into the global economy. The reforms introduced by Turgut Özal in the 1980s – reducing the role of the state sector, stimulating private entrepreneurship, liberalising tariffs and reforming the tax system – laid the foundations for a new foreign economic policy in which trade emerged as the central pillar of diplomacy. These dynamics are extensively examined in the historiography of the reforms and in analyses of Türkiye's foreign policy, often framed through the concept of a trading state [2]. The shift in priorities from a narrow “security agenda” toward an economic-commercial orientation in neighbourhood and regional relations is commonly associated with the “zero problems with neighbours” doctrine of the 2000s and the consolidation of economic diplomacy. Within this framework, free trade agreements (FTAs) served as practical instruments for market expansion, barrier reduction and the institutionalisation of interdependence [3].

At the same time, the institutional architecture of the EU–Türkiye Customs Union generated both incentives and constraints, prompting Ankara to pursue the development of a network of free trade areas with third countries. To mitigate structural asymmetries, Türkiye expanded its portfolio of FTAs, making such

agreements one of the key instruments of its foreign policy. This demonstrates Ankara's enduring commitment to a strategy of external trade diversification. Within the logic of a trading state, FTAs serve as institutional guarantees that Türkiye can construct its own network of interdependence.

The purpose of this article is to identify the distinctive features of Türkiye's deployment of FTAs as a foreign policy instrument. The central research question is: To what extent do FTAs strengthen Türkiye's foreign policy autonomy, and what structural and geopolitical factors constrain their effectiveness? Addressing this question enables an assessment of both the economic and the political consequences of Türkiye's trading state strategy.

Free trade areas represent one of the fundamental stages of economic integration. They provide for the conclusion agreements between states or supranational entities aimed at reducing or eliminating tariff restrictions and quotas on a defined list of goods and services [4]. Importantly, FTAs do not entail full unification of trade policy: each state retains sovereign authority to establish tariffs and rules of trade with third countries.

The scholarly debates on FTAs date back to the mid-20th century, when Jacob Viner, in his classic study *The Customs Union Issue* (1950), articulated the key dilemma between "trade creation" and "trade diversion" [5]. Since then, scholarly discussions have continued around the relative advantages of multilateralism and regionalism. Economists have generally favoured multilateral agreements, but free trade areas as a manifestation of regionalism have proven more pragmatic and politically feasible: they reduce tariffs within a narrow "club" of states while retaining the possibility of restrictions against outsiders [6].

Over the past decades, the scope of FTAs has expanded significantly. Modern agreements include not only tariff regulation but also non-tariff barriers, technical standards, investment rules, government procurement and intellectual property rights. As a result, FTAs have evolved into comprehensive regimes of economic governance, functioning as "sites of economic diplomacy" where "governments increasingly instrumentalize trade policy as a key lever in the pursuit of other policy aims" [7, p. 195].

It is important to distinguish free trade areas from customs unions. The classic model of John Kennan and Raymond Riezman (1990) demonstrates that a customs union requires coordination of external tariff policy: members agree on a common tariff vis-à-vis third countries, thereby internalising externalities of trade conditions [8]. This arrangement generates a coordination effect, often raising tariffs, as well as a complementary effect, which lowers them to stimulate intra-union trade. By contrast, FTAs do not require unified tariff policies: each state sets its own tariffs, resulting in lower external barriers than in customs unions but preserving positive "optimal internal tariffs." The absence of a coordination effect means that free trade areas represent a shallower stage of integration than customs unions, but one that is more flexible and politically resilient.

The assessment of the potential of FTAs in political science depends on the theoretical framework. Realism views them as an instrument of state strategy. According to researchers, such agreements can be used to strengthen national security, form alliances and enhance bargaining power [9]. Economic integration in this logic acts as a means of political influence, and not just commercial cooperation. Liberalism emphasizes the institutionalisation of interdependence. In this case, the arrangements create a “binding effect” increasing the costs of exit from cooperation and thereby reducing the likelihood of conflicts [10]. From this perspective, the formation of free trade areas is not only a trade project, but also a political one, contributing to the strengthening of trust between states [11]. In the context of Türkiye, these approaches are especially important: its FTAs simultaneously perform economic and strategic functions. It makes them a unique field for the analysis of the political economy of regionalism. Thus, free trade areas are characterised by flexibility and preservation of tariff sovereignty, the ability to combine economic integration with political goals and institutional expansion into the areas of non-tariff rules and standards.

This study focuses on a single case – Türkiye’s foreign policy. Relevance of the single case study is determined by its ontological, epistemological and methodological nature. First of all, a single case design implies “an intensive study of a single unit” [12, p. 342], enabling a detailed examination of foreign policy. The epistemological foundation of the research integrates elements from positivist and interpretivist traditions, allowing for a comprehensive interpretation of Türkiye’s external behaviour. Methodologically, this study applies the process tracing approach which “allows for an in-depth and context sensitive analysis” [13, p. 229]. Within the framework of case study theory, the Turkish case operates as both a heuristic and an analytical instrument, enabling the exploration of broader theoretical relationships between strategic autonomy and structural dependence.

The study is grounded in qualitative research traditions, including document and policy analysis, supported by secondary statistical evidence where appropriate. This approach provides a robust foundation for analytical generalisation — extending insights from a particular context to theoretically relevant cases. As Joseph Maxwell (2021) argues, qualitative inquiry offers valuable grounds for external generalisation when theoretical and contextual coherence is maintained [14]. Thus, the Turkish case functions as an analytical framework for understanding how a state negotiates between strategic autonomy and structural constraints. This methodological configuration allows the findings to be both contextually grounded and theoretically transferable to similar foreign policy environments.

## **Results**

Türkiye’s FTA policy has become an important instrument for strengthening its strategic autonomy and expanding its foreign policy influence. The country began signing these agreements in the 1990s, in parallel with the deepening of its

institutional interaction with the European Union. The establishment of the EU–Türkiye Customs Union in 1995 marked a critical turning point, generating both incentives and constraints for Ankara’s external trade strategy.

An important dimension of the transformation of Türkiye’s trade policy was the alignment of national legislation with the obligations stemming from the Customs Union with the EU. In practice, this meant adapting the regulatory framework to European standards, particularly in the fields of competition and innovation regulation, which resulted in the creation of the Competition Authority and the implementation of EU-comparable market oversight mechanisms. Another key condition of integration was the convergence of tariff regimes: Türkiye committed to harmonising its tariff system with the EU’s Common Commercial Policy by 2001, and by 2004 the level of tariffs in the non-agricultural sector had been reduced to 4.8 per cent, almost identical to the EU’s 4.1 per cent [15]. This outcome gave Türkiye one of the most liberalised tariff systems among countries of the Global South, thereby strengthening its position as a trading state. At the same time, Ankara introduced a comprehensive system of preferences, granting unilateral access to its markets for developing countries. This measure allowed Türkiye to reinforce its trade relations with the Global South and expand its network of economic cooperation beyond Europe.

However, the institutional constraints arising from the Customs Union also had negative consequences. Ankara was obliged to apply reduced tariff rates under the most-favoured-nation principle, which limited its ability to flexibly adapt trade policy to national interests [16]. Thus, on the one hand, participation in the Customs Union granted Turkish producers access to the European market. On the other hand, Ankara found itself in a situation of asymmetry: it was required to adapt its trade policy to EU rules without participating in Brussels’ negotiations with third countries [17].

**Structural economic constraints.** One of the key challenges in the implementation of FTA policy lies in internal structural imbalances. Türkiye continues to depend on energy imports, rendering its economy vulnerable to currency fluctuations and global energy price shocks [18]. This dependency limits flexibility in negotiations and reduces the sustainability of its export-driven growth model. In addition, persistent productivity gaps between different sectors of the economy, a high level of informal employment and significant income inequality complicate the modernisation of production capacity and reduce Türkiye’s ability to fully benefit from FTAs [19]. A particularly significant issue is technological backwardness: despite the active development of export-oriented industries, Türkiye remains weakly integrated into global value chains in high-technology segments [20]. As a result, the arrangements create opportunities for short-term market expansion but do not lead to long-term structural transformation of the economy.

**The problem of convergence.** Another challenge concerns the issue of convergence, which in its classical sense refers to the process of aligning the

economic, legal and political positions of actors [21]. For Türkiye, the success of free trade areas depends not only on tariff regulation but also on the political willingness of partners to maintain long-term cooperation. A lack of sufficient political trust leads to instability: the suspension of the agreement with Syria in 2011 and the termination of the agreement with Jordan in 2018 demonstrate that economic arrangements do not always withstand political crises [22]. Thus, for Türkiye, FTAs serve not only as instruments of trade policy but also as tools of diplomacy, requiring consistency across a broader spectrum of political issues.

**The necessity of continuous liberalisation.** Modern FTAs cover not only tariff-related but also non-tariff elements – technical standards, investment rules and regulations in the digital trade sphere. This obliges Türkiye to pursue a policy of continuous liberalisation in order to remain competitive in the global economy. The difficulty lies in the fact that the domestic socio-economic structure is not always prepared for accelerated liberalisation: pressure increases on the agricultural sector as well as on small and medium-sized enterprises that rely on state protection. From a political science perspective, liberalisation is not only an economic but also a social process. It entails the redistribution of benefits among different interest groups: large export-oriented capital benefits from free trade areas, while segments of domestic business and employment are placed at risk [23]. This asymmetry may generate social tensions and foster resistance within the country.

**Geopolitical challenges.** Alongside economic and institutional constraints, Türkiye also faces serious geopolitical challenges. Political and economic instability in North Africa and the Middle East has undermined the implementation of several agreements. Türkiye initiated the creation of the Levant Forum as a form of free trade area but this project effectively collapsed following political upheavals in Egypt and Syria [24, p. 744]. In this context, Ankara sought new directions for cooperation – with Lebanon, the UAE, Qatar and Sudan. However, such an adaptive strategy requires a constant search for new markets, thereby reducing the predictability of trade policy [25]. Moreover, Türkiye’s policy of expanding its network of free trade areas intersects with the interests of the EU, China, Russia and the Gulf states, introducing a competitive dimension. This compels Ankara to balance among different centres of power and to identify niches where agreements can simultaneously promote economic growth and strengthen diplomatic positions.

**Table. Structural Constraints in Türkiye’s FTA Policy**

<b>Category of Challenge</b>	<b>Nature of the Problem</b>	<b>Key Manifestations</b>	<b>Consequences for FTA Policy</b>
<b>Structural economic constraints</b>	internal structural imbalances weaken the sustainability of	- heavy dependence on energy imports → vulnerability to currency fluctuations and global energy price shocks;	- limits flexibility in trade negotiations; - short-term market expansion without

	the export-driven model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- productivity gaps across sectors</li> <li>- high informal employment and income inequality;</li> <li>- technological backwardness and limited participation in global value chains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>long-term transformation;</li> <li>- weak technological upgrading</li> </ul>
<b>Problem of convergence</b>	difficulty in achieving political, legal and economic alignment with trade partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of trust and institutional coherence;</li> <li>- suspension of FTA with Syria (2011); termination with Jordan (2018)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- instability of agreements during political crises;</li> <li>- weak resilience of regional trade frameworks</li> </ul>
<b>Necessity of continuous liberalisation</b>	ongoing adaptation to global trade standards challenges domestic socio-economic stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- inclusion of non-tariff elements: technical standards, investment, and digital trade;</li> <li>- pressure on agriculture, small and medium-sized enterprises;</li> <li>- redistribution of gains to export-oriented capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- rising social tensions and domestic resistance;</li> <li>- uneven distribution of liberalisation benefits.</li> </ul>
<b>Geopolitical challenges</b>	external political instability and competition among great and regional powers undermine policy predictability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- collapse of the Levant Forum after crises in Egypt and Syria;</li> <li>- competition with the EU, China, Russia, Gulf states</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- unstable regional partnerships;</li> <li>- reduced predictability of trade policy;</li> <li>- strategic balancing among centres of power</li> </ul>

In sum, the Turkish case illustrates how a middle power strategically deploys trade policy as a foreign policy instrument within asymmetric institutional constraints. Türkiye's strategy faces a wide range of challenges: structural economic dependence, limited policy convergence with partners, the domestic social costs of continuous liberalisation and a volatile geopolitical environment. Nevertheless, FTAs remain one of the most important instruments of Türkiye's external economic

and diplomatic strategy. Their effectiveness, however, depends directly on Ankara's capacity to address internal structural problems and to adapt to an evolving regional and global context.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this single case analysis demonstrate that Türkiye's FTA policy is of a dual nature. On the one hand, these frameworks enable Türkiye to strengthen its position as a trading state, expand export opportunities and diversify external economic ties. On the other hand, their effectiveness remains constrained by several factors.

First, the Turkish case confirms the conclusions of studies in the political economy of regionalism: FTAs can provide short-term benefits but do not resolve fundamental structural imbalances [6]. Dependence on energy imports and technological backwardness weaken competitiveness and reduce strategic autonomy [18; 20].

Second, unlike the EU or NAFTA, Türkiye's FTAs are often not supported by constant policy convergence. The durability of economic agreements is determined not only by institutional norms but also by the level of trust. Türkiye faces the limitation of political instability among its partners, which makes FTAs vulnerable to crises – the cases of Jordan and Syria clearly illustrate this trend.

Third, continuous liberalisation exacerbates internal social contradictions. It redistributes benefits in favour of export-oriented capital while simultaneously creating risks for agriculture and small businesses. This reflects the dilemma between the liberal benefits of interdependence and the social costs.

Fourth, the geopolitical environment intensifies vulnerabilities. Unlike other regional blocs, Türkiye's free trade areas exist in conditions of political conflicts and competition with the EU, China, Russia and the Gulf states [25; 26]. This reduces the predictability of Ankara's trade diplomacy but at the same time demonstrates its adaptability within the transformation of the world order.

The above allows to make several **conclusions**. FTAs have become one of the key instruments of Türkiye's foreign policy strategy, yet their contribution to the structural transformation of the economy remains limited. The effectiveness of these agreements depends not only on economic benefits but also on the level of policy convergence with partners. Domestic social costs of liberalisation may generate political resistance, which requires a balanced internal policy.

In this sense, the Turkish case functions as an analytical lens through which broader dynamics of middle-power economic diplomacy can be observed. Ankara employs free trade areas as a tool of diplomacy, balancing between the EU and alternative centres of power, in line with the model of a trading state. Thus, FTAs in the Turkish context should be viewed not merely as a classical tool of regional integration, but as an element of political and economic strategy aimed at strengthening strategic autonomy under conditions of a changing world order.

Given current trends, **several directions** in the evolution of Türkiye's strategy can be identified:

1. Expansion of a network of free trade areas in Africa and Asia. In the coming years, Ankara will likely focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, using them as new markets and platforms for enhancing political influence.

2. Selective integration. Türkiye may concentrate efforts on agreements with key partners (for example, South Korea, Qatar, Azerbaijan), considering free trade areas as instruments of strategic alliances.

3. Institutionalisation of agreements. To increase resilience, Ankara will need to embed political coordination mechanisms and dispute resolution instruments into FTAs, thereby enhancing trust and reducing the likelihood of revision.

4. Balancing among centres of power. Türkiye will continue to use free trade areas as a tool for manoeuvring between the EU, China, Russia and the Gulf states.

**Future research** may focus on three main trajectories. The first concerns **policy convergence and institutional dimension**. It is necessary to explore more deeply the relationship between economic and political factors shaping the sustainability of FTAs. How do the levels of political trust and institutional compatibility among partner states affect the durability of agreements? This calls for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of international relations and comparative politics.

The second trajectory concerns **geo-economic rivalry and FTAs**. Türkiye's strategy intersects with the interests of the EU, China, Russia and the Gulf states. A promising avenue of inquiry is the study of free trade areas as instruments of geo-economic competition in Eurasia. This would enable an assessment of how regional and global centres of power employ trade agreements to consolidate their spheres of influence.

The third trajectory involves **comparative analysis**. To identify the uniqueness and universality of the Turkish experience, it is important to compare it with the practices of other trading states such as South Korea, Mexico and Chile. Comparative studies will help clarify to what extent the Turkish model is a result of its particular regional context and to what extent it reflects broader patterns of the global political economy.

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