

The Role of Free Trade Zones in Dealing With New Global Challenges —Western Anatolia Free Zone as A Contemporary Model



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Dr. Faruk Güler, born in 1950, earned his BSc, MSc, and PhD in Chemistry from METU by 1980 and began his career as a researcher and lecturer in Türkiye, the UK, and Canada. He transitioned to industry as R&D Section Manager at KORDSA, later leading key international operations for Branta Mulia in Indonesia and Thailand. Returning to Türkiye, he became General Manager of CBS Paint and then served as General Coordinator, CEO, and Board Member at Abalıoglu Holding. Since 2013, he has been CEO and Deputy Chairman of ESBAŞ and, since 2021, of BASBAŞ, contributing extensively to Türkiye's free zone development and industrial growth.

'The bad habits of the past will be abandoned, and everything will be restored according to the just laws of nature. Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world.' — Emperor Meiji (1868)

Global Shifts and the Strategic Roles of Türkiye and Japan

In recent years, global supply chains have undergone profound disruptions—shaped by geopolitical tensions, trade wars, and the shifting dynamics of global production. In this evolving landscape, nations with strategic geographic positions have become increasingly pivotal.

Under the current challenging conditions, Türkiye and Japan are two countries that stand out due to their economic strength and strategic positions, and whose cooperation would make a significant contribution to the global economy.

Complementary Strengths of Two Major Economies

Japan's economic strength is built on advanced manufacturing, technological innovation, and a highly skilled workforce. Japan's economy also benefits from world-class infrastructure, stable institutions, and globally competitive multinational corporations. Japan is

a major economic power due to its productivity, export capacity, and ability to innovate in high-value sectors.

For Türkiye, positioned at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, this moment represents an exceptional opportunity. With its strategic location, modern infrastructure, and growing diplomatic capacity, Türkiye stands ready to play a greater role in the emerging global economic order.

A Deep and Enduring Türkiye–Japan Partnership

Türkiye and Japan have a long-standing and friendly economic relationship built on mutual trust, complementary strengths, and strategic cooperation. Japanese companies have been active investors in Türkiye for decades, particularly in infrastructure, automotive, energy, finance, and manufacturing, while Türkiye offers Japan a large domestic market, a skilled workforce, and access to regional markets across Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Major projects—such as bridges, tunnels, and energy investments—have symbolized this partnership, alongside growing collaboration in technology, disaster management, and sustainability. Trade and investment ties are further supported by ongoing dialogue on a potential Economic Partnership Agreement, reflecting both countries' interest in deepening business and economic cooperation.

The Evolving Strategic Importance of Free Zones

Among the tools at Türkiye's disposal, free zones have proven to be particularly powerful instruments. Originally designed to encourage trade through reduced taxation and streamlined procedures, free zones have evolved far beyond their initial purpose. Today, they serve as dynamic ecosystems—centers of international commerce, industrial innovation, and geopolitical influence. Historically, free zones were established to attract investment, boost exports, and simplify trade. Yet as global competition has intensified, their role has expanded. In today's world, they are not merely economic enablers but strategic assets—capable of shaping trade routes, supporting national resilience, and strengthening regional stability.

Türkiye's Free Zones: Growth and National Impact

Türkiye's journey with free zones began in the 1980s when our nation first embraced an export-oriented growth model. Since then, 19 free zones have been established in Türkiye. Exports from the 19 free zones increased by 4 percent in 2025 compared to the previous year, reaching USD 12.5 billion, and accounted for 5 percent of Türkiye's total exports.

BASBAŞ: A Model for the Next Generation of Industrial Zones

A shining example of this vision is the Western Anatolia Free Zone—BASBAŞ, located in Bergama, İzmir. Covering 2.5 million square meters, BASBAŞ is strategically positioned near major transportation corridors, including Aliğa Port, the İzmir–Istanbul Motorway, and the 1915 Çanakkale Bridge. This location makes it a natural gateway connecting Europe, the Middle East, and beyond. What makes BASBAŞ truly significant is its focus on high-tech, sustainable, and value-added production—in fields such as automotive, renewable energy, and advanced machinery. BASBAŞ reflects a broader transformation in Türkiye's industrial strategy—from low-cost assembly models to innovation-driven production. It

embodies our ambition to build a more resilient, sustainable, and technologically advanced economy.

Western Anatolia Free Zone: Early Achievements and Ambitious Outlook

The Western Anatolia Free Zone, established in 2024 in the northern part of İzmir and offering logistical advantages to investors due to its location, recorded approximately USD 12.5 million in exports last year. After the completion of infrastructure works in July 2024, the zone became operational and has since emerged as an attractive hub for domestic and foreign companies seeking access to the European market. With new companies expected to increase their investments in the zone to benefit from significant tax incentives, exports in 2026 are projected to reach three times the level recorded last year.

Free Zones as Engines of National Strategy and Global Engagement

As the global economy becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to use free zones as instruments of strategic engagement will be essential. They are not merely zones of trade—they are platforms of cooperation, symbols of modern industry, and engines of national progress. Türkiye's new generation of free zones, led by projects such as BASBAŞ, represents a bold step toward that future. By combining geography with innovation, and industry with diplomacy, Türkiye is poised to strengthen its role as a key economic and geopolitical player in the new global order. 

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