

Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU An Everlasting Candidate Between Delusion and Realities

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The relationship between Turkey and the European Union has never been easy. It is now affected by the activism of Ankara's foreign policy, conducted in disregard of international law. Turkey remains, however, an important partner for the EU, as it is still officially a candidate for membership (since 1987) and in the Customs Union (since 1995). It impacts the EU, both in its internal (immigration, trade, other common policies) and external policies (through its gunboat diplomacy against two Member States (Greece and Cyprus) and countries eligible to the European Neighbourhood Policy). Moreover, the impact of the war in Ukraine will affect relations between Brussels and Ankara.

In the face of Turkish activism, the EU lacks the capacity to anticipate and react, a problem that concerns not only its relations with Turkey, but its overall neighbourhood and association relations with its periphery.

In the framework of the work on the neighbourhoods of the European Union (EU) carried out by the Institute for European Studies of the University of Saint-Louis¹ and following its Annual Conference², with the aim of contributing to a better account of the Union's relations with its periphery, the working group "Turkey"³ presents below its elements of analysis in the run-up to 2023, which will be marked both by the centenary of the Republic and by long-awaited elections.⁴

Although much of this work was done before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (24 February 2022), it has lost none

of its relevance. One might even think that a stronger EU attitude towards Turkey in 2018-2020 might have made the Kremlin think twice. Faced with Turkish bellicosity in the eastern Mediterranean, the weakness of European reactions may have convinced Moscow that it could act with impunity against a country that is a member of neither the EU nor NATO.

IS TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY REALLY NEW?

Turkish Foreign policy is undergoing frequent and brutal changes. Beyond its activism, observers question its ideological foundations: is it a diplomatic translation of the Muslim Brotherhood objectives, an updated version of an old nationalism dating back to the origins of the Republic; or the result of opportunism, if not reflecting the pragmatism of a government that uses it to remain in power?

Is it effective; managed according to Turkish national interests; contributing to the maintenance of peace in the Mediterranean and Western Asia? Will it continue after the elections scheduled for 2023? Would another policy be desirable, if not possible?

And what of the views of the *Muslim Brotherhood*, has Turkey adopted them? After keeping itself at a distance from the Arab world for decades, Erdoğan wanted to "exploit the Arab Spring" (Sabaileh), presenting himself as the "godfather" of political Islam. Initially well received in the West, in the hope of offering Muslim countries an example of moderate Islamism and perhaps a model, this policy has now had the opposite effects to those expected: instead of moderating political Islam, it has

radicalised Turkish politics, which has established highly suspicious relations with extremist movements.

A symptom of AKP's ideological bias is the deterioration of relations with Israel, which bears the personal mark of Erdoğan. Is he devoted to the Brothers or is it the opposite? In a Turkey surrounded by five countries of Christian culture and four Shia or Shia-governed countries, whether in a neo-Ottoman or pan-Sunni form, "*Sunnimonomania*" (Cengiz Aktar) is not conducive to good neighbourly relations.

Moreover, despite the illusions nurtured at the beginning of this century, particularly in Washington, about the possible virtues of a "*moderate Islamism*", in a country with more than 80 million inhabitants, adhesion to political Islam cannot make a positive contribution to the peace of the world. Europeans, who tend to underestimate the problem, still need to be aware of its true dimension.

Turkish policy also remains influenced by the narrow nationalism of the former Kemalist administration. In its post-Cold War form, the myth of a country besieged by enemies persists, surrounded by a hostile ring of islands and unfairly deprived of its EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) by UNCLOS (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea). Turkey still uses Turkish-speaking minorities (especially in Bulgaria, Syria and Iraq) to interfere in the affairs of its neighbours. It sees no contradiction in demanding an independent state for the Turkish Cypriots, while denying any autonomy to its 15 million Kurds. Having been unable to capture the Kurdish vote, Erdoğan exports to neighbouring countries a problem that he is unable to solve at home.

Turkish nationalism locks Ankara in solitary positions: the refusal to sign the UNCLOS Convention, to recognise the Armenian genocide and the legal government of Cyprus. By having a strong impact on neighbourly relations, this attitude is aimed directly at Europe, committed to respect the Treaties and the rule of law.

The emergence of gunboat diplomacy has downgraded Turkish diplomacy. When no one threatens Turkey at sea,

naval investment is of particular concern, in particular the aircraft carrier built with Spain and the submarines with Germany. However, these massive purchases did not raise any objections in NATO⁵ while they proved to be very threatening to Turkey's neighbours.

Alongside the classic army, which Erdoğan distrusts, the "*excessive elongation*" (Dufourcq) of Turkish expansionism is based on the network of the Muslim Brotherhood mentioned above, the manipulation of the jihadi militias and the use of new weapons, including drones, not to mention a suspicious interest in nuclear weapons. Turkey has shown the effectiveness of its drones in neighbourhood conflicts that make it dreadful to countries that do not have its military capabilities. This superiority will increase when Turkey is able to modernise its military instruments by itself. In the context of the evolution of Western Asia towards proliferation, attention must also be paid to the prospects of developing Turkish nuclear power, with a power plant under construction in Akkuyu, two planned (in Sinop and the Bulgarian border) and the possible diversion of enriched uranium for military purposes.

From the point of view of the Turkish general interest, the current policy leads to an *unprecedented "ideological bankruptcy and diplomatic isolation"* (Yurttagul). It has too many contradictions to be sustainable in the long term (Manservisi). Activism carries the risk of miscalculations that would lead to an armed conflict. Erdoğan has no clear vision, either of his country's interests or of the fragility of international balances. As he lacks knowledge of foreign policies and does not listen to his diplomats, he is able to take significant risks.

TURKEY, A VICTIM OF FOREIGN POWERS?

Should tolerance, if not complacency, end? Trump celebrated Erdoğan "*as a hell of a leader, a tough man*" (2019). As Joe Biden has different views, Turkey is lobbying intensively in Washington. For a significant part of the diplomatic establishment, as well as the military-industrial circles, Erdoğan's attitude is perceived as a "*temporary aberration*" (Ian Lesser). Opinion is divided between those

who push the US Presidency to demand clarifications and those who wonder what could be offered to Turkey in order to bring it back to the American side. With the war in Ukraine, the State Department hopes for a return to more cordial relations and has begun to pay the price: it ruled against the Eastmed gas pipeline and gave a favourable opinion on the sale of F16 aircraft.

A study by the Hudson Institute (Seth Cropsey & Eric Brown, *Energy: The West's Strategic Opportunity in the Eastern Mediterranean*) recommends that the US government build on the democracies of the Athens-Nicosia-Jerusalem axis, with a view to creating a new security architecture in the eastern Mediterranean basin. It advocates assisting the three countries in exploiting their underwater resources, facilitating Cyprus's accession to NATO and strengthening the 6th Fleet. It is therefore possible to find an alternative to the Anatolian quadrilateral.

In any case, it is up to the EU to understand the strategic needs of the United States (and not the reverse) and adapt to them in the common interest (Ian Lesser). According to Jacques Attali, the EU is currently making the same mistake as the British Prime Minister of 1938, by yielding to the pressures of a dictator, while we know today that *"appeasement never works"* (Saban Yüksel).

Nevertheless, Erdoğan will go as far as he can by affirming his *"will to displeasure"* by gestures as spectacular as possible, for he believes that *"Turkey has the political, economic and military power to tear out immoral maps and documents such as the Lausanne Treaty imposed on it."*

In aiming to reconcile Islamism and nationalism, neo-Ottomanism now appears as the regime's preferred option. In practice, Erdoğan seems also to be a pragmatist who would manage his foreign policy without excess of ideology and according to his needs. He needs enemies outside to find a derivative to the declining performance of the economy. Standing as a victim of foreign powers excuses the weaknesses of his internal management. This also allows him to silence the oppositions by accusing them of lack of patriotism when they criticize his management.

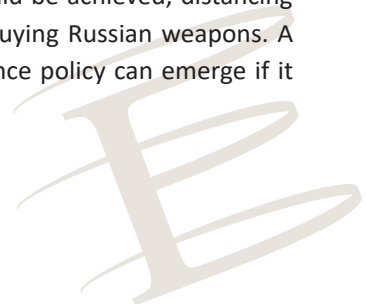
Erdoğan's tactic is also to take advantage of his partners' numerous weaknesses and mistakes. He uses the opportunities offered by their naivety and lack of foresight, in particular the US and the EU. His strategy aims to maximise his benefits by balancing between Russia and the United States, although less easily than during the Trump presidency.

On the contrary, if it is capable to free itself from its expansionist dreams, Turkey can legitimately develop an Eurasian identity and aspire to a 360° policy. Feasibility of such a policy is to be analysed in the long term, when Turkey will survive the delusions of Erdoğan and AKP policies.

Turkey should strongly be encouraged to heal its neighbourly relations rather than cultivate conflicts. Instead of being just a slogan, Davutoğlu's *zero problem* with neighbours should become its main objective. Moving from Theodore Roosevelt's *"big stick"* to the *"good neighbourhood"* of his nephew Franklin would free Turkey from several burdens. Respecting international law, withdrawing from Cyprus and the occupied territories in Syria and Iraq has a political price that may seem high, but which is neither disproportionate nor likely to weaken it. Countries far more powerful than Turkey, such as Russia in evacuating the Baltic States, or the US in returning the Panama Canal Zone, have freely achieved that.

If Turkey wants to renounce Western tropism inherited from *Tanzimat* and Atatürk, it could seek a form of equidistance that bridges between East and West (Jean Fournet) and by restoring good relations with the *"Big Five"* (permanent members of the Security Council) and the European Union. It could opt for a positive non-alignment, relying on the United States for its security, Russia for its energy imports, and the European Union for its trade.

To this end, the Turkish government would free itself from its colonial neo-Ottomanism. The desire to develop national independence would be achieved, distancing itself from NATO without buying Russian weapons. A new 360° foreign and defence policy can emerge if it



is devoid of the will for expansion or domination. As a way to harness its “*new centrality*” (Dufourcq), Turkey would develop a peaceful post-Erdoğan foreign policy, in accordance with international law.

WILL TURKEY REMAIN AN EVERLASTING CANDIDATE?

With more responsibilities than influence, the EU is behaving cautiously in the Eastern Mediterranean, although Turkey’s activism has several destabilising effects:

- challenging the EEZs in the Eastern Mediterranean, though all countries, except Turkey, agreed on demarcations in accordance with UNCLOS;
- interfering in countries eligible to the ENP (Syria, Libya, Palestine);
- opposing the reunification of Cyprus, in advocating a two-state solution, contradicting UN resolutions;
- blackmailing the EU, in refusing to re-admit many illegal migrants, despite being paid for that from the Community budget;
- constantly exerting pressure on the Turkish diaspora in Europe in order to fight AKP opponents (notably Kurds and Gülenists).

For the majority of Member States, maintaining good trade relations with Turkey has priority. In countries hosting important Turkish immigrant communities (Germany, Netherlands, France, Austria), the management of visas, residence rights and integration also plays an important role. For at least three countries, there are also political problems: with Cyprus (occupation of the north), with Greece (maritime border disputes) and with France (official Turkish support to Muslim Brotherhood activism in Europe and West Africa).

As Turkey is still an official EU candidate, the Copenhagen political criteria (internal and external) remain a formal prerequisite for progress in the negotiations opened in October 2005. They are also supposed to play a fundamental role in the management of bilateral relations, regardless of accession.

However, the EEAS reports do not explicitly state that it disqualifies Turkey as a candidate country. While they are quick to denounce the same violations in other countries, the High Representative’s statements concerning Turkey remain surprisingly cautious. This is not an isolated case: the NATO Secretary General is even less active. In practice, the EU is compromising to get what it wants in terms of controlling illegal migration, fighting crime or obtaining energy security.

EU vigilance is increasingly selective. The European Parliament has clearly called for a halt to the negotiations, but the European Council has taken an ambiguous stance. Are those who call for a vigorous policy towards Turkey unrealistic? Are those who want a “*constructive engagement*” naive?

Facing gunboat diplomacy against two Member States, the EU has to protect its maritime territory. Failing to take effective measures to bring the offender back to reason is eroding the philosophical basis of the EU’s “*soft power*”. The transactional compromises it accepts, for example by signing highly criticised migration agreements, are not improving its security.

In this context, the accession negotiations became “*a toxic item*” (Marc Pierini). But no one dares to sign the *death certificate*. Paradoxically, it requires unanimity, while a single Member State vetoing one of its 35 chapters can block it indefinitely. In the event of lasting breaches of the rule of law or peace, qualified majority voting should be sufficient to put an end to the negotiation.

Ankara has some reasons to complain about the opposition of several Member States. But above all, the Turkish government must blame itself. While acceptance of the *acquis* is the premise of any accession negotiations, Turkey shows a clear unwillingness to adopt Community standards, by “*bargaining instead of complying*”, particularly in the political field.



WHAT MEASURES SHOULD THE EU TAKE?

Should the negotiations be resumed if Turkey becomes democratic again, for example if the opposition wins the 2023 elections? This option will certainly have supporters, either to encourage democracy or more prosaically to improve the business climate.

The EU should not wait too long to learn the lessons of the past 17 years. It should question how Turkey could behave after accession. How to deal with a member state which would be the most populated country in the enlarged EU? Its unwillingness to comply with European values was already obvious before 2002. Turkey's Islamist experience is not a mere parenthesis. Is it possible to manage so many differences or is it better to keep Turkey out of the EU?

What should we do in the short term if we are convinced that the only policy Erdoğan can understand is firmness? To act means to go far enough in the way of sanctions. Part of the political class, both in Brussels and Washington, is not ready to understand this. In 2018-2020, as Ankara became increasingly belligerent, when it became necessary to move to concrete measures, the European Council did not react efficiently. Clearly, Germany has more to lose than other countries. Furthermore, the discussion confirmed the weight of arms dealers in their country's foreign policy: according to the SIPRI (*Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*) over the period 2015-2020, more than 40 % of arms sales to Turkey came from Italy and Spain, which explains their reluctance to stop them.

In line with the objective of solidarity between Member States enshrined in the Treaty, it would have been logical to stop the sale of arms to the aggressor, as did two far away countries: Canada when it found that Azerbaijan had used Turkish drones against Armenia with Canadian components, and the US with CAATSA sanctions. On the other hand, national embargo procedures in Europe have not been activated for commercial reasons.

While the Customs Union has contributed significantly to the modernisation of the Turkish economy, it has long been in favour of the EU: Europeans have access to the Turkish market at a reduced budgetary cost. The structural surplus from which the EU benefited for many years has now been reduced as a result of the economic slowdown in Turkey (which compressed imports) and the depreciation of the Turkish lira (which favoured its exports). In 2021, trade in goods was close to a balance: the EU imported EUR 78 billion and exported EUR 79 billion.

By moving some of their activities to Turkey to take advantage of the depreciation of the lira, it is unclear whether European multinationals have destroyed jobs in their home countries. On the substance of the problem, it would be useful to know how the "competitive devaluation" of the Turkish lira may negatively affect the European economy and whether action should be taken to compensate for its effects.

Like the US, does the EU need to enforce punitive tariffs? In 2018, this is what Washington did to secure Pastor Andrew Brunson's release. These measures are a language that the Turkish President understands, as an expert in hostage diplomacy and blackmail.

TURKEY AND THE UKRAINIAN CHALLENGE

From a geopolitical point of view, Erdoğan proved to be a good servant of the Kremlin in disturbing NATO's southern flank. For Russia, which fears nothing more than being surrounded by a well-armed coalition, this is a great advantage. This is less a good deal for Turkey, which is likely to be deprived of reliable allies and will miss the capacities of the Alliance.

Isolated by his sectarianism, Erdoğan also helps Russia through his Islamist-nationalist initiatives. Although in Libya, his support for the Muslim Brotherhood put him against the Russian mercenaries, it helped divide the Western powers. This could at least please Putin, who did not appreciate how NATO organised Gaddafi's fall.



The two presidents cultivate preferences for authoritarian management and imperial nostalgia. Both are interested in creating zones of influence beyond their national borders, which can lead them to compete. In Central Asia, rivalry is hidden, but real. If Turkey sees itself as a model, the former Russian big brother has another one to promote.

As a component of its swinging policy between Washington and Moscow, Turkey cultivates good relations with Ukraine. It has not recognized the annexation of the Crimea and went even further in selling drones to Kiev, knowing that it would certainly arouse the ire of the Kremlin, as well as please Washington.

However, the outbreak of an open war brutally puts Turkey in a difficult position. Despite its diversification efforts, its dependence on Russia remains very strong: about 50 % of its gas imports, the activation of the S-400 anti-missile shield and a nuclear power plant on the Mediterranean coast under construction by Rosatom. In supporting Assad's recovery efforts in northern Syria, Russia can weaken the jihadist shelter that Erdoğan supports in Idlib province, with the risk of triggering new migration pressures.

That is why Ankara has limited itself to a moral condemnation of the invasion, while refusing sanctions and the closure of its airspace to Russia. At the request of Ukraine, it did the minimum service in the Straits in implementing the Montreux Convention. Erdoğan, who is not precisely seen as a conciliator, offered his mediation. Is he likely to become a *"Monsieur bons offices"* courted by the two belligerents and the European Council?

The prolongation of the war will probably increase the vulnerability of the Turkish economy: the rouble depreciation, trade disruptions, and rising oil prices will have a negative impact on a country heavily dependent on its energy imports. Maintaining a pseudo-neutrality will not be easy. Because of its aggressive postures, Turkey is isolated. It may be constrained into hard choices, especially if it persists in its refusal to apply sanctions.

Will Erdoğan's bargaining offer put forward since Biden's election be accepted because of the war in Ukraine? Turkey will probably condition the implementation of sanctions. The State Department is once again questioning about compensations to be given to keep Turkey in. But CAATSA sanctions were activated by a bipartisan majority in Congress that does not intend to be intimidated. Is Turkey likely to bridge the gap through cosmetic human rights measures or by giving up the S-400 to improve its relations with the Hill?

Another issue is the possible revival of the EASTMED pipeline. Mediterranean gas exports are currently taking place through Egypt in the form of LNG. It would be less costly to send them through Anatolia, a solution that would benefit both Turkey and the EU. This route needs a pipeline, crossing Cyprus' EEZ, which needs its government's approval, unlikely as long as Erdoğan opposes the reunification of the island.

CONCLUSION

According to Marc Pierini, former EU Ambassador to Ankara, *"the European Council's allowing an autocratic Turkey to pursue adversarial steps on Europe's southeastern confines, is not a strategy. It is a mere expedient that will come back to haunt EU leaders."*

The EU is now paying a high price for its passivity (the cost of inaction), which stems from mistakes dating back to the early 2000s, when it left the talks on the reunification of Cyprus in the hands of those who oppose it and hypocritically launched an accession negotiation doomed to fail. Fifteen years later, this *"strategic carelessness"* reveals deep failures in Brussels policy and decision-making process that affects EU's credibility in setting up its future foreign policy in its periphery.

In the short term, the EU must draw lessons from the 2020 Council abstentions. It should empower itself and resist autocrats' blackmail, be it on migration (Turkey) or dealing with oil and gas sales (Russia). The lack of policy towards Turkey and other peripheral countries is also a dangerous vacuum that must be filled.

Effective measures are necessary to stop Erdoğan's belligerent drift. Several Member States bear responsibility in the arms race which is now intensifying in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in the navy. Rapid embargo procedure on sensitive arms' sales should be activated. To avoid blackmail, the EU should be ready to implement trade defence measures. If the suspension of the customs union (requested by Greece and Cyprus) is not considered appropriate, the EU should be able to decide on *ad hoc* measures, as the US Department of Commerce is currently doing, even with friendly countries.

In the medium term, the Brussels-Ankara relationship deserves more than a frozen accession negotiation and a standstill in the customs union. As geography matters, this relationship must now be the subject of a thorough analysis leading to a clear strategy to be agreed by the Council.

Two options should be analysed:

1) A repairing one would derive from a human rights improvement in Turkey. This would consist of resuming accession negotiations and deepening the customs union. Although these avenues are not completely closed and a new government resulting from the 2023 elections might ask to do so, this way is not likely to be successful:

- Accession negotiations require unanimity at every stage: hoping for a successful outcome against Ankara's continuous refusal to recognize the legal government of Cyprus and preventing the Cypriots from finding a solution by themselves, is an illusion, not to mention vetoes from other member states. Experience shows that such negotiations require a strong political commitment from both candidate country and member states, which has been constantly lacking and will not appear miraculously in 2023.
- To improve the customs union, strong political will is also needed. Turkey is not an easy partner. Progress involves measures that will not please Ankara, which is not determined to open up its

public procurement markets. And neither the abolition of visas, nor the introduction of free movement of persons, are on the agenda.

This option is therefore doomed to fail. Unwillingness to recognise it means extending the current deadlock. Blaming Turkey for moving away from the Copenhagen criteria without doing anything to end a negotiation which has never been a real one, is not contributing to EU's credibility, not only with Turkey but also in the whole European periphery. Beyond the Customs Union, since the approach recommended in 2016 has not yielded any results, an in-depth analysis of the possible developments of economic relations is to be carried out in the new context of energy dependency and the struggle against climate change.

2) An innovative option would be to draw the conclusions of two decades of standstill by exploring alternatives that take into account Turkey's modernisation and geopolitical positioning.

- Firstly, in making adequate pressures to prompt Turkey to improve its relations with its neighbourhood, which had constantly deteriorated during the Erdoğan period, as the slogan of "*zero problem with neighbours*" has become "*only problems with neighbours*". The few signs of lull observed in 2021 compared to 2020 could be a starting point for systematic improvements. As Turkey has no less than nine immediate neighbours, there is no shortage of opportunities, for instance to repatriate its armed forces within its borders, restore normal diplomatic relations, and develop cooperation.
- Secondly, in clarifying Turkey's alliances. Erdoğan's policy has multiplied conflicts, at the cost of isolation, both with allies (NATO countries, Israel), as well as with new partners (Russia, Iran) and even with the Arab countries (Gulf countries, Libya, Maghreb). If Ankara wants to achieve a 360° foreign policy, promote its Eurasian identity and regained centrality, it can do so peacefully and in accordance with international law.

As now illustrated by the war in Ukraine, the EU is a victim of its “strabism” (Dufourcq), in its assessment of its relations with neighbours. It lacks policies in line with the problems and opportunities of its periphery.

Since Brexit, the EU is now surrounded on three of its four cardinal points by countries with which relations need to be improved or restored over time, through efficient association regimes which are still partly lacking. Instead of a *ring of fire*, such revision could materialize the “*ring of friends*” proposed in the first version of the neighbourhood policy in 2003, in which Turkey would be a prominent participant.

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Endnotes

- 1 René Leray and Lino Francescon, associate researchers.
- 2 VOISINAGES Annual Conference, *Foreign Policy of Turkey: what European answer?*, Institute for European Studies of the University of Saint-Louis Brussels, 8 February 2022.
- 3 Members: Éric Dell’Aria, Jean-Marie Lhuissier, Pierre Mirel, Eva Saenz-Diez Jaccarini; rapporteur Jean-François Drevet.
- 4 All the cited quotes in this paper were made during the VOISINAGES Annual Conference.
- 5 NATO’s tendency is to encourage its members to raise military spending, without consideration to possible consequences on the regional power balance.





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