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# Türkiye and Europe's Joint Southern Venture

*Ankara and Brussels bring complementary assets to the table in their relations with the Global South*

*By Kristina Kausch and Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı*

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## Introduction

Europe and Türkiye have little in common these days, some might argue. Relations are at a historic low, the EU accession process is effectively suspended, and sustained cooperation is largely reduced to migration management. To say the relationship is in dire need of new impulses would be an understatement.

But the world around them is changing rapidly, and with it, new opportunities arise. Geopolitical events have shifted the EU–Türkiye relationship away from the EU accession agenda toward security cooperation in their immediate shared neighborhood. Yet both sides face compelling reasons to jointly seize opportunities with the so-called Global South in and beyond their shared neighborhood.

Much ink has been spilled over how power is diffusing from a unipolar, Western-led system toward a multipolar one in which middle powers play greater roles. As emerging powers assert significant agency, the Global South ceases to be seen primarily as a stage for great-power rivalry. In this environment, Türkiye and the EU have a window of opportunity to increase their global relevance by cooperating pragmatically in pursuit of tangible shared interests in and with countries of the South.

Global geo-economic trends also invite such a move. Economic nationalism is on the rise, and the United States is moving away from liberal free-trade orthodoxy toward strategic industrial policy, using subsidies to secure critical sectors and reduce dependence on competitors. In a less unipolar world, leading economies of the Global South are emerging as [significant voices in international politics](#) and key players in economic competitiveness. With growth rates more than double those of developed economies, these countries are expected to [lead global economic growth](#) in the upcoming decades. No longer accepting Western positions by default or letting themselves be squeezed between great-power blocs, these countries pursue their own interest and [will play an important role in shaping the future](#).

Within this landscape, Türkiye tends toward multi-alignment diplomacy. Paradoxically, this strengthens, rather than weakens, the rationale for Europe (used in this article as shorthand for the EU and its member states) to cooperate with Türkiye. Ankara's diversified foreign policy can provide access and influence in regions where the EU's presence is limited or contested. Structured cooperation in the Global South would allow the EU to leverage these complementary networks and capabilities, expanding its reach in a competitive geopolitical environment. By combining the EU's economic and regulatory power with Türkiye's diplomatic agility and regional access, the two sides can forge a pragmatic partnership across the Global South to enhance influence, support stability, and advance shared strategic interests.

That said, significant opportunities for cooperation also face considerable constraints. A climate of deep mutual distrust is compounded by active disputes between Türkiye and some EU member states—notably Greece and Cyprus—whose veto power often curtails broader EU–Türkiye engagement. Moreover, Türkiye's views often diverge from those of the EU mainstream (for example regarding the reform of global governance institutions). These dynamics require a pragmatic approach, centered on narrowly defined areas where cooperation can deliver tangible benefits for both sides. Even so, advancing in these domains of low-hanging fruit will not be straightforward.

The rise of the distinctive Global South identity, as well as changing perceptions of Southern emerging powers in Europe and Türkiye, provide a backdrop for understanding the present window of opportunity.

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## The Diplomatic Upgrading of the Global South

The term “Global South”, though controversial, has come to embody the new southern-hemisphere sense of empowerment. It has been broadly criticized for lumping together vastly diverse countries, suggesting a unified strategic aspiration, perpetuating postcolonial global hierarchies, and for its potential instrumentalization by actors such as China. Despite these criticisms, many in the southern hemisphere have embraced the concept as a political identifier for shared experiences of colonialism and marginalization, and as a vehicle for joint empowerment and South-South cooperation.

The strategic appeal of the Global South (in the North) has been boosted by a number of structural factors. Despite the ascent of Asian “tiger states” and the increasing joint agency of emerging markets displayed in formations such as BRICS, until recently, most southern-hemisphere emerging powers (with some exceptions) were not typically seen by the European policy mainstream as indispensable political and security players. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, Europe has been grappling with the crumbling of long-standing assumptions about the international order. The struggle to defend the European continent from invasion became symbolic of the larger struggle for a dependable, rules-based international order grounded in cooperation and peaceful coexistence. European policy communities long failed to see the central relevance of the non-Western world to that order’s survival. They often saw Africa and Latin America in particular through a development lens and considered them marginal to European and US interests.

While the Global South’s profile rose, cracks appeared in the international political consensus. The rapid succession of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine followed by the war in Gaza underscored the fundamentally different readings of world events in the Global North and South that had already begun to be felt during the 2009–2012 sovereign debt crisis and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Western policy communities were caught off guard when the 2022 Russian invasion was not interpreted similarly by Southern UN members. Conversely, Western stances toward Gaza and the contrast with the pressure to align on Ukraine shocked the non-Western world, unveiling an integrity gap and laying bare fundamental differences in interpreting global events.

Türkiye, by contrast, diverged from the mainstream Western positions on both issues. While it did condemn Hamas’s attacks on Israeli civilians, Erdoğan also [rejected](#) the notion of Hamas as a terrorist organization and Turkish discourse quickly converged with that predominant in the Global South, calling Israel’s operations genocidal. While Ankara did support Ukraine in various ways, it maintained its political dialogue with Russia and joined Western sanctions against the latter in a minimalistic way. For Europeans, the clash over Ukraine/Gaza was a reckoning, as they realized they needed the support of the South in multilateral institutions and international diplomacy if the rules-based international order was to survive. It also revealed that Western neglect had given others a head start in Southern partnerships, as evidenced by China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Russia’s expansion in Africa. Since then, European politicians have doubled down on wooing emerging powers.

In just a few years, the understanding that middle powers in the Global South will be crucial economic, political, and security players in the emerging order became mainstream. Competition among great powers to bring countries such as India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Indonesia, Brazil, or South Africa into alignment has become fierce. At the same time, the tangible contribution of Southern economies to core transatlantic interests—international peace and security, free trade and prosperity, climate security—has sunk in more forcefully in the wake of Trump’s global tariff policy. The weakening transatlantic relationship in the second Trump term has led some EU leaders to stress partnerships with the Global South as an opportunity to de-risk from China and Russia, as well as from US markets and diplomacy. The purported leadership withdrawal of the United States in key areas of global governance (such as climate, global health, humanitarian aid) also opens new opportunities for Europe and Global South partners to step in.

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Türkiye's foreign policy today already reflects a multipolar world order mindset, of which diversification and de-risking are natural consequences. In this vein, Ankara has been [diversifying its trade relations](#), including away from the United States (for example, trading in local currency rather than the US dollar). Türkiye's international positioning is unique: Geographically spanning Europe and Asia, culturally linked to the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Levant, the Middle East, and Central Asia, it is a NATO ally and EU aspirant, yet simultaneously pursues membership in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Ankara's self-assigned intermediary role is rooted in geography and a narrative of historical and cultural solidarity with non-Western states. President Erdoğan's oft-cited phrase "The world is greater than five" encapsulates Ankara's critique of the current international order, particularly the UN Security Council's structure, and serves as a rallying cry to reform global governance mechanisms dominated by Western powers.

At a global geopolitical crossroads, Europe and Türkiye have both understood the centrality of the Global South to international order and prosperity. They can jointly advance their shared interest in strengthening relations with key regions in the southern hemisphere.

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## Opportunities for Engagement

The EU and Türkiye bring complementary assets to the table in their relations with the Global South. The EU has institutional power but is often perceived as defending the status quo. Türkiye is diplomatically agile but lacks formal institutional leverage in core global governance bodies. The EU brings to the table finance, legal standards, and multilateral clout; Türkiye brings execution speed, market familiarity, operational presence, and a different kind of credibility in the Global South. Despite its imperial Ottoman past, Türkiye plays on [postcolonial resentment](#) and portrays itself as having a hybrid identity that is simultaneously Western and non-Western. This duality at times facilitates, and at other times limits, Ankara's international access and trustworthiness, as displayed by its (so far) unsuccessful BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization membership bids. Ankara's international credibility is also limited by its assertive approach to regional security in its neighborhood.

Despite the two sides' complementary assets, the scope of EU-Türkiye cooperation is hampered by political factors. Europe and Türkiye often find themselves in opposing camps in matters of global affairs, security, and governance. Mutual distrust—particularly between some EU member states and Türkiye—further constrains cooperation and even structured dialogue. Importantly, Turkish democratic backsliding and the perceived European selective application of international law regarding Israel/Gaza are widening the rift between the two in terms of values and objectives. That said, after several toxic years between the EU and Türkiye, the relationship has recently gained positive momentum with a renewed emphasis on strategic cooperation. This is an opportunity that should be seized. The areas of connectivity/value chains, clean energy, and post-conflict stabilization appear particularly well-suited.

### Connectivity

The EU and Türkiye share a unique geopolitical position that makes cooperation on connectivity strategically valuable. The collaborative development of trade, transport, and digital and energy corridors facilitates the redesign of global supply chains—which, in light of the above-noted structural shifts, is a top-tier priority in both Brussels and Ankara. The EU's deepening of its Global Gateway initiative (expanding from Africa toward Latin America and Central Asia) and Türkiye's intention to become a key country in the Middle Corridor offer ample opportunities for synergies. Diversified East-West routes that bypass Russian territory reduce Moscow's transit rent and coercive capacity. Importantly, a corridor from Europe to Central Asia through Türkiye would reduce Chinese dominance in Central Asia.

The joint development of the Middle Corridor, which provides an eastbound alternative to northern routes through Russia, is a shared opportunity to create a faster, resilient Asia-Europe logistics spine that routes via the South Caucasus and Türkiye. By jointly investing in rail, road, and digital infrastructure, aligning standards, customs, and financing, Europe and Türkiye can strengthen trade resilience, diversify supply chains, and reduce dependency on single routes. [The EU must](#) ensure that the corridor develops on European rather than solely Chinese terms, as failing to do so would allow China, Russia, and others to fill the void and undermine the EU's supply chains in the future.

Türkiye's role as a transit hub for Caspian and potentially eastern Mediterranean energy could complement EU goals for energy diversification and sustainability and help reduce dependency on Russia. A potential linking up to the planned India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor ([IMEC](#)), if and when political and security conditions in the Middle East allow, could maximize synergies and reduce stakeholders' geopolitical and financial risk. While the Iraq Development Road Project, set to connect the Gulf of Basra to Europe via Iraq and Türkiye, is in its early



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stages, it could present opportunities in terms of diversifying routes and mitigating risk.

Central Asia, where Türkiye enjoys long-standing political, commercial, cultural, and linguistic ties, is a region of particular potential for EU-Turkish cooperation on connectivity. The first [EU-Central Asia summit](#), held in Samarkand in April 2025, created opportunities to mobilize [investments under the EU's Global Gateway strategy](#) in digital connectivity, transport, critical raw materials, water, energy, and climate, underlining the opportunities for the EU in this region. Digital corridors such as the Black Sea electricity and fiber project or the Trans-Caspian Digital Silk Way can become critical complementary links, especially if Türkiye is included. The recent [Armenia-Azerbaijan agreement](#) on a prospective new connectivity route, if implemented, could facilitate Armenia's integration into the Middle Corridor, reducing its reliance on Russia and Iran for security and connectivity. Türkiye has leveraged trade, infrastructure projects, and the [Organization of Turkic States](#) to deepen strategic, economic, and political engagement with Central Asian republics. Given the EU's financing capacity and regulatory expertise, and Türkiye's regional networks, contracting capabilities, and cultural affinity, cooperation in infrastructure, renewable energy, and connectivity projects offers a practical, mutually beneficial avenue for advancing shared interests in Central Asia.

For the EU, deeper cooperation with Türkiye on corridors would contribute to its strategic autonomy and de-risking agendas by reinforcing the bloc's presence in strategic geographies, most notably Central Asia (and potentially Sub-Saharan Africa). For Türkiye, alignment with EU connectivity initiatives would boost its credibility as a global logistics and energy hub, attracting investment and raising its political profile with other parts of the world. Europe, Türkiye, and Asian partners would all benefit from enhanced connections in facilitating trade, green energy flows, and digital linkages that underpin future growth.

## Clean Energy

Cooperation on green energy is complementary to joint connectivity initiatives: while corridors provide the physical and digital backbone linking Europe to Asia and Africa, green energy offers the sustainable flows of power and resources that will define future competitiveness, creating a mutually reinforcing framework to anchor EU/Turkish ties with the Global South.

Both Türkiye and Europe face the triple energy challenge of rising demand, decarbonization, and diversification. Türkiye has considerable potential in renewables (solar, wind, geothermal) and stands out for its strategic position as a transit country for green hydrogen and electricity interconnections. As a party to the EU Customs Union, Türkiye will be among the countries most heavily impacted by the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). In response, Türkiye has ratified the Paris Climate Agreement and adopted a Green Deal Action Plan with the goal of net-zero emissions by 2053. Türkiye has a [stated goal](#) of increasing the share of domestic and renewable energy in electricity production. [Renewable generation](#) has roughly doubled to tripled over the past decade, reaching 42% of total output in 2022 and continuing to rise. In 2024, Türkiye ranked 11th in the world in terms of installed renewable energy capacity.

Anchored in its industrial and supply-chain policies oriented toward the EU, Türkiye could evolve into a pivotal hub for green tech and clean energy in the region, benefitting not only Türkiye's own green transition but also offering access points into the Global South's energy markets. The EU, through its Green Deal and Global Gateway frameworks, has financial instruments and regulatory and technological expertise that can be leveraged in joint projects. Collaboration on renewable generation, grid modernization, hydrogen corridors, and energy efficiency can reduce carbon footprints while creating a more integrated and resilient regional energy market.

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Together, the two partners could extend green-energy-related cooperation offers to partners in the Global South by co-financing renewables projects, facilitating Turkish contractors' access to EU project funding, sharing (and providing support in adopting) regulatory standards, and supporting green-tech capacity-building. Presenting joint initiatives in areas such as solar farms, hydrogen supply chains, and off-grid renewable systems could strengthen their collective presence in regions where energy demand is set to grow fastest (such as Southeast/South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa).

At the geostrategic level, building EU-compatible green value chains in Türkiye (and other neighboring countries) creates scale and proximity that can compete with Inflation-Reduction-Act-subsidized US production while keeping transatlantic standards aligned. Joint investment can de-risk clean tech dependence (for example, on solar/wind components and batteries) by nearshoring manufacturing in Türkiye and co-developing critical minerals partnerships in Africa with EU finance and standards. Offering bankable, rules-based green projects to partners in the Global South undercuts China's monopolistic green energy narrative and lets the EU-Türkiye team write an alternative playbook on green hydrogen certification, grid codes, and sustainability.

## Post-Conflict Stabilization

Another area where the EU and Türkiye can cooperate more closely is post-conflict stabilization anchored in geographies where both already have influence. With the United States stepping back from large-scale post-conflict stabilization, the EU and Türkiye can (partially) fill a void, combining their complementary strengths.

[Türkiye](#) is a longstanding contributor of peacekeepers to the United Nations, currently contributing to [seven UN Peacekeeping operations](#). It was the largest third-country contributor to some [EU-led crisis-management operations](#) (such as ALTHEA, EUPM or PROXIMA). Building on these experiences, Türkiye and the EU could expand their cooperation in this field.

The EU can contribute scale, long-term financing, and institutional expertise, while Türkiye can bring speed, risk tolerance, and visible delivery capacity resulting in synergy. Turkish companies, especially in [construction](#), have the agility and experience to operate in volatile environments, delivering airports, ports, hospitals, and roads where other firms hesitate. Their ability to mobilize quickly and to adapt to difficult contexts has made them valuable stabilizers in Somalia, Libya, and northern Syria. However, this same agility can raise concerns about Turkish companies forgoing ethical standards to comply with the local authorities.

Several theaters offer themselves for closer cooperation, provided political differences between Türkiye and EU member states can be smoothed over. In Somalia, the EU has invested heavily in governance and public services, while Türkiye has rebuilt the airport, port, and hospitals and trained security forces. Libya represents another opportunity, particularly in technical sectors such as energy and transport, where Turkish companies are active and EU regulatory expertise could promote transparency. There is also potential in Syria, where Türkiye enjoys political, cultural, and geographic advantages. Türkiye and Turkish companies have already begun to play an important role in Syria's reconstruction in cooperation with others. A group of Turkish companies has joined an international consortium to [expand the Damascus International Airport](#). Türkiye also started [pumping Azerbaijani gas to Syria](#) and is planning to increase its supply of electricity to the war-torn country.

Cooperation in post-conflict stabilization could also provide the opportunity for the EU and Türkiye to improve their respective reputations in the Global South as they seize opportunities to position themselves as providers of security and stability while demonstrating genuine commitment to local recovery. Joint initiatives would offer powerful public diplomacy opportunities, allowing both to counter Chinese and Russian narratives of Western exploitation.

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## Conclusion

In a geopolitically volatile world, the fraught relationship between the EU and Türkiye must explore new territory beyond its stalled accession framework. As Europe and Türkiye re-emerge from their recent toxic moment, a window opens for a pragmatic pivot toward more selective cooperation driven by mutual interests in the Global South. Combining the EU's institutional and financial power with Türkiye's diplomatic agility and regional access could deliver for both the triple aim of economic diversification, strategic de-risking, and revitalizing bilateral relations.

Through a pragmatic focus on tangible goals, concentrating on synergic areas such as connectivity, green energy, or post-conflict stabilization, Türkiye and the EU can bypass entrenched political hurdles to pursue mutual benefits in a changed geopolitical environment.

To be sure, this approach will face significant constraints deriving from a deep-seated climate of mutual distrust and often divergent geopolitical outlooks. These challenges necessitate a carefully curated agenda centered on well-defined projects where collaborative gains clearly outweigh political friction.

Successfully implementing such a partnership could yield transformative impacts on three levels. First, it offers a pathway to rebuilding trust and creating positive momentum bilaterally, slowly shifting the narrative from perennial conflict to constructive engagement.

For their positioning in the Global South, a joint EU-Türkiye approach would present a compelling opportunity to boost the soft power of both and offer attractive cooperation models that complement offers from China, Russia, or even the United States. This model would combine the EU's standards-based investment frameworks such as the Global Gateway with Türkiye's rapid, on-the-ground project execution and the distinct advantages of a NATO ally with a diverse portfolio of international partnerships.

Finally, the strategic geopolitical impact could be profound. A synergistic partnership would enhance the strategic autonomy of both Brussels and Ankara, creating more resilient supply chain corridors such as the Middle Corridor that help de-risk dependencies on Russia and offer complementary pathways to China's Belt and Road Initiative. By jointly projecting stability and providing sustainable development options, the EU and Türkiye can move beyond their transactional relationship to become pivotal actors shaping a multipolar world.



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## Afterword

*by Magdalena Kirchner, Director, Center for Europe in the World, Stiftung Mercator*

At a time of profound geopolitical transformation, the relationship between Europe and Türkiye stands at a crossroads. While political tensions and structural challenges persist, this report offers a case for renewed engagement, anchored not in past grievances, but in a joint assessment of the new international order and the opportunities that arise from it. Coordination may be of particular benefit for future engagement with countries of the “Global South”.

In Europe’s global partnership network, constructive relations with Türkiye are key and the potential for mutual learning is vast on the political and societal level. Fostering dialogue among diverse actors, especially in times of uncertainty, is essential to building trust, identifying common ground, and shaping pragmatic paths forward. This publication exemplifies that spirit: It brings together rigorous analysis, strategic foresight, and a clear-eyed view of both constraints and possibilities.

The authors, Kristina Kausch and Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, have reframed the EU–Türkiye relationship not as a stalled process, but as a potential partnership—one that leverages complementary strengths to engage with a rapidly evolving global landscape. From connectivity and green energy to post-conflict stabilization, the report outlines concrete areas in which cooperation is not only possible but urgently needed.

We are grateful to the authors and to all stakeholders who enriched this dialogue with their insights and perspectives—particularly those from the “Global South”. Their engagement reflects a growing recognition that Europe and Türkiye, despite their differences, share a vested interest in shaping a more inclusive and resilient international order.

This report is an invitation—to policymakers, academics, and civil society—to think beyond binaries and explore new avenues of collaboration. I hope it inspires further debate, deeper understanding, and above all, action.