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# Turkey and the West: Keep the Flame Burning

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**Turkey, Europe, and Global Issues**

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## Introduction

### Galip Dalay and Kadri Tastan

With relations between Europe and the United States going through an unprecedented crisis, Turkey's long-standing place in the transatlantic alliance is increasingly being questioned and problematized. Turkish-Western relations have never been crisis-free but always prickly. As Ian Lesser puts it in this paper, there has never been a golden era for Turkey's relations with the United States or the West in general. Nonetheless, a majority view now holds that the current crisis between them is different.

Yet, however prevalent the use of the term "crisis" in this context, there is not a shared and straightforward answer to the question of how to define it. And further questions have to be answered as to what is at the root of the crisis. Is it Turkey's democratic regression? Is it the West's lack of concern or sympathy for Turkey's political and security challenges? Is it the decoupling of both sides' threat perceptions and geopolitical aspirations? Is it a function of current leaders?

What makes the crisis in relations deeper and different than the ones, say, over the "Johnson letter" incident in 1964 or over the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. What is different this time is also that these questions cannot be easily and satisfactorily answered.

As well as the plethora of unknowns in Turkish-Western relations, there are also new certainties. First, the deepening crisis is occurring at a time when the post-1945 international order, which was largely seen as the only game in town particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War, is either collapsing or increasingly on a shaky ground. There appears to be a close link between two phenomena. Second, though one should not downplay the role of the individual leaders, the crisis predates and will outlast the current ones, in particular President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Third, despite the periodic exasperated calls on both sides for breaking off ties, this is not a rational option.

Both sides have too much to lose from a complete breakdown of relations. Having said this, the current framework for their relationship is outdated and not helpful. The status quo no longer works. Turkey's place in the Western camp is questioned more than ever by all parties involved. However, pointing out what is not working is easier than saying what would work in its place. This is the challenge that any discussion on the future course of Turkish-Western relations faces. But, despite the difficulties involved, a debate on an alternative framework is sorely needed.

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Finally, Turkey's ties with Europe and the United States alike are strained, but not always for the same reasons. Since late Ottoman period, Europe served as a reference point, if not a model, for Turkey's modernization and the political and economic reorganization of the state. In more recent times, the European Union served as reference point for its domestic political transformation. In contrast, the United States has been a strong reference point for Turkey's foreign and security policy since the country joined NATO. Unlike its multifaceted ties with Europe, Turkey's relationship with the United States has largely remained unidimensional—essentially a security partnership.

This difference has largely informed the nature of the crises that Turkey has experienced with Europe and the United States. Whereas geopolitical divergence—be it on Syria, the Syrian Kurds, or Iraq—have mostly strained relations with the United States, domestic political factors and the Turkish diaspora have become the

main contentious topics with Europe. However, that does not mean that domestic politics do not play much of a role in Turkish-U.S. relations. The United States' tepid response to the coup attempt of 2016 and the arrest of the American pastor Andrew Brunson on tenuous and dubious charges caused a major storm in their relations. Likewise, as is becoming increasingly clear within the context of Eastern Mediterranean, geopolitical issues are set to put their imprint on Turkish-EU ties. Thus, separating foreign and domestic policy issues in Turkish-Western relations is increasingly futile.

This paper addresses these questions from the starting perspective that all sides need to keep the flame burning in relations between Turkey, the United States, and Europe. In the first section, Galip Dalay explains why both sides need a new framework for their relations. Next, Kadri Tastan explains the limits of Turkish-EU relations. In the third section, Ian Lesser address Turkish-U.S. relations. And finally, Valeria Talbot looks at how the Eastern Mediterranean is becoming an area of contention between the two sides.

## Turkey and the West Need a New Framework

### Galip Dalay

What is the source of the problems in relations between Turkey and the West? The answer to this question can take many forms.

From a personality-centric perspective, one can say that it is a matter of leadership, looking at the roles played by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Donald Trump, President Barack Obama, or even France's President Nicolas Sarkozy when he made opposition to Turkey's membership of the EU a central pillar of his politics at a time when the country was largely seen to be on a reformist path.

From a domestic political perspective, one can argue that it is the personalization of power, democratic backsliding, and rising level of authoritarianism in Turkish politics. This perspective would also regard the rise of nativism and identity politics in the West as a major source of friction in relations.

From a foreign-policy perspective, one can see the decoupling between the two sides' threat perceptions, security concerns, and geopolitical aspirations as the main source of tension. This has manifested itself in the Syrian crisis and in the Eastern Mediterranean. For example, the United States' policy toward the Syrian Kurds or its tepid reaction to the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey dramatically undermined relations. Likewise, Ankara's instrumentalization of the Turkish diaspora in its feud with the EU and its purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems have had similar impacts.

From a more systemic perspective, one can argue that there is nothing unique to the crisis in Turkish-Western relations. Rather it reflects a broader, multifaceted change at the international level. The future of these relations is questioned simultaneously as the international system that was established after the Second World War is also challenged

from within and without. The lack of an all-encompassing shared threat perceptions and geopolitical challenge, as was the case with the Soviet Union, is weakening the bonds and structures that were formed in the context of the Cold War.

The fact that the world is not as Western-centric as it used to be very much resonates in certain quarters in Turkey. However, many actors in the country tend to confuse this with the world entering a post-Western phase. The lesson that decision makers in Ankara derive from this reading is that Turkey can attain its interests and goals much more effectively if it engages with different centers of power. This does not mean giving up on the West—Turkey will keep its membership in all Western institutions, even though the meaning of these memberships are dramatically changing—but it does mean giving up on the idea of the indispensability and uniqueness of the West. Turkey increasingly tends to treat the West as a one center of power among others in the world.

At the same time, regional powers such as Turkey increasingly have more weight in shaping regional affairs, and they vie for more recognition and enhanced status in international affairs. This creates friction with their international partners. In recent years, the Middle East has been a textbook case of how the role of the regional powers has increased when it comes to dealing with a major regional crisis, as in Syria, Libya, or Yemen. From this perspective, the crisis in Turkish-Western relations should not be seen as a unique or isolated case, but as symptomatic of the changes in the broader structures of the international system.

Each of these explanatory frameworks offer valuable insights into the nature of Turkish-Western relations. However, none alone can account for the crisis in its entirety. Therefore, a holistic approach is needed.

In this context, it is not helpful to speak of the West as if it is a single unitary actor. In recent years, and particularly since Donald Trump was elected president in the United States, the transatlantic divide has been widening. Moreover, Turkey is experiencing different crises with both sides of the Atlantic. The weight of domestic politics and the diaspora is particularly felt in relations with Europe, whereas the role of geopolitics is much more pronounced in relations with the United States. This does not mean that geopolitics play no role in shaping Turkish-European relations. It clearly does, as evidenced by the growing row between Turkey and France over the Eastern Mediterranean. Likewise, as seen in the case of Turkey's detention under house arrest of Pastor Andrew Brunson between 2016 and 2018 and its ramifications, domestic politics can prove to be very consequential for Turkish-U.S. relations too. Similarly, given the deepening crisis between Turkey and France and the EU over Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, geopolitics puts its imprint on Turkish-European ties as well. The West as a broad term thus has limited utility when looking at the different crises that Turkey is experiencing with the United States, the EU, or individual European countries. However, when it comes to discussing the more structural foundations of the crisis, employing the relations with the West as the overarching framework make sense.

### Turkey's Status Anxiety

In their current and institutional forms, whether the EU accession framework or NATO membership, Turkish-Western relations are product of the Cold War and they are asymmetric and hierarchical in favor of the West. Turkey wants to redress this. Though this is a legitimate goal, the popular concept in Turkish foreign and security policy of strategic autonomy is nebulous and is not very meaningful. First, strategic autonomy is not very attainable, and there is a question as to whether it is desirable in a highly interdependent world. Second, this quest has not produced any of its intended outcomes. As operationalized, strategic autonomy effectively means making Turkey less dependent on the West rather than making it

an autonomous actor in international affairs. This concept is particularly in vogue in relation to the balancing act between the United States and Russia in Syria. However, Turkey has not become a more autonomous actor in that conflict. Instead, it traded its dependency on the United States for similar relations with Russia, over which it has even less leverage. Turkish-Russian relations in Syria are asymmetric in favor of Moscow.

Turkey's questioning of the framework of its relations with the West and quest for redressing its asymmetrical relations, and addressing its status anxiety vis-à-vis the West, is legitimate. However, the way it has tried to do this is self-defeating and is highly likely to deepen its vulnerabilities both vis-à-vis the West and Russia. This point in return begets the following question: what should be a new basis of Turkish-Western relations?

In this respect, at least when it comes to Turkey-EU relations, Brexit can become both a boon or a curse depending on how smoothly the EU and the United Kingdom form a new type of relationship. For long time, Turkey was not even open to discussing any other form of relationship with the EU other than membership. It regarded any alternative through the lenses of being relegated to second-tier status. This in turn deepened its status anxiety. The fact that the United Kingdom will now have to form a new kind of relationship with the EU will highly likely reduce Turkey's psychological resistance to discussing alternative forms for its own one. However, if the EU and the United Kingdom fail to come to an agreement in a relatively reasonable time frame and relations between them become more acrimonious, then the prospect for an alternative form of the relationship—or at least a discussion on it—between Turkey and the EU will further recede.

In any case, Turkey's relations with Europe and the United States are marked by a crisis of framework and status, in particular when it comes to Turkey's status anxiety. If these two dimensions are overlooked, their relations will remain crisis-ridden for the foreseeable future.

## The Limits of what Is Possible between Turkey and the EU

**Kadri Tastan**

Turkey's road to EU membership was officially opened in 2005, but this was also the year in which its hope of joining the EU one day was effectively dashed. On October 3, Turkey and the EU opened official negotiations on full membership, causing a jubilant mood in Ankara. Then, on November 22, Angela Merkel became the chancellor of Germany. Even before coming to office, Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union party had made it clear that they were opposed to Turkey's full membership in the EU, proposing instead the amorphous concept of a privileged partnership. Two years later, Nicolas Sarkozy, who was strongly opposed to Turkey's EU membership, became the president of France. Meanwhile, the Republic of Cyprus, which Turkey does not recognize, had joined the union in 2004. With the change of political leaders in major European countries, opposition to Turkey's membership became more vocal and prevalent. And, by blocking many chapters of the accession talks, these leaders essentially hollowed out the process.

Starting in 2007, the mood in Turkey toward the EU accession process also changed. From a utilitarian and pragmatic perspective, it served to increase the international legitimacy of the ruling Justice and Development (AK) Party, given its roots in political Islam, and to provide domestic security for it in relation to the military-dominated old establishment (that is, to avoid the party being shut down like its predecessors on many occasions, which it narrowly did in 2008). The party largely achieved both of its these goals by 2010. As the EU accession process had served its initial purposes and the government felt more secure, its appetite for related reforms began to fade away. Moreover, the deterioration of Turkish-EU relations coincided with a period of internal volatility. First, when the country's convergence with the EU and democratic reforms started to stagnate—in 2007-2010

with many politicized judicial cases and in 2011-2013 when the Arab Spring dominated the foreign policy agenda. Then, Turkey's domestic politics began a steep downward trajectory from the Gezi Park Protests of 2013.

*Despite the end of the credibility of the accession process, the two sides continued to play the game for their own reasons*

In principle, the EU has a powerful tool to shape institutions and political structures in other countries through accession conditionality. The two prerequisites for this to be effective is the genuine willingness of the EU to accept new members and of potential members to accept the body of EU law. The first condition only existed in 2004-2005 and among a limited number of EU countries and European leaders, while no concrete steps have been taken on the second in Turkey for a long time, regardless of official declarations. It is important to recall that the EU closing the door on Turkey's membership, around 2006-2007, happened when Ankara undertook significant reforms for converging with the EU.

### **A Hypocritical Game for Two**

Despite the end of the credibility of the accession process, the two sides continued to play the game for their own reasons. This worked for some years despite several crises. Especially with the democratic regression in the country, the EU found itself obliged to criticize Turkey and issue declarations reminding it of democratic principles from time to time. Yet the EU no longer offered it anything when inviting it to respect the rule of law. With weak and non-credible

conditionality, the internal changes induced by the EU have stopped. The will of the EU and the credibility of its incentives became insufficient to push Turkey to make reforms. In these last years, instead having any influence on Turkey's political course, EU officials sometimes struggled to secure meetings with senior Turkish officials. For example, during her visit to Ankara in 2018, the European Parliament's rapporteur for Turkey could not meet anyone from the government. The leverage and ability of the EU to exert a significant influence over the course of political events in Turkey has for a long time almost vanished.

A glimmer of hope for relations appeared in 2015 with the growing challenge of refugees fleeing from Syria. The unprecedented situation in the Aegean Sea prompted the EU member states, and primarily Germany, to agree to a controversial deal with Turkey in 2016. With this, the EU trampled upon any normative considerations and principles for the sake of preventing the further flow of refugees into Europe, while its vulnerabilities in this regard shifted the asymmetry in relations in favor of Turkey. With the refugee deal, the nature of the relationship moved from the accession framework to bilateral transactionalism.

The accession process became nonfunctional but continued to affect relations—by inflaming the political crisis between the two parties. Turkey never swallowed the EU closing the membership door and this became a matter of pride for it because in the meantime, it has become much more confident and assertive in foreign and regional politics.

***Transactionalism will remain the basis of the relationship until there is will and creativity to build a more institutionalized one.***

Turkey continues to discuss membership and relations with the EU through the mistreatment it suffered over 10 years ago when the door was closed on its membership prospects, which ignores the fact that the country's political situation in recent years has

removed its eligibility to join the EU. Meanwhile the EU continues to cite the political situation in Turkey as the main reason for blocking the accession process. Neither picture is complete and both, though partially accurate, are one-sided. The EU continues to use the accession process, which has lost all credibility, as a tool to make itself heard by Turkey or to have some leverage over it. But, on the other hand, it also accepted the end or the freezing of normative relations with the 2016 refugee agreement. As it stands, both sides have no faith in the accession process, but for a variety of reasons neither is willing to pull the plug on it. Instead of being an opportunity for convergence between Turkey and the EU, the accession framework has become a hurdle to any meaningful engagement or cooperation.

### **New Reality, New Challenges**

In the current state of affairs, the EU has limited tools and willingness to encourage Turkey to undertake economic or political reforms. In the best-case scenario, modernization of their customs union or a new trade and investment agreement could lead to the modernization of economic structures and transparency in Turkey.

Transactionalism will remain the basis of the relationship until there is will and creativity to build a more institutionalized one. This would require dialogue and creative models because the complicated interdependence between Turkey and the EU requires finding a unique model for relations. Absent normative relations based on the accession process or an institutional relationship, economic relations are highly likely to survive on the basis of mutual interests. However, while it is clear that the EU is unlikely to play any consequential role in influencing Turkey's domestic political trajectory. Their divergence in values could also make cooperation in many areas difficult.

More ominously, not only is the prospect of accession no longer plausible today, even a privileged relationship or partnership seems difficult to achieve due to the current state of relations. Ten or fifteen years ago, when some European leaders proposed this instead of



EU membership, Turkey's leaders rejected it outright. Nobody dares to say so today, the prospect of a privileged relationship is also becoming a dream for those who think it is essential for the common interests of both sides. This is dangerous not only for Turkey, but also for the EU.

Lacking a firm normative architecture and with its corresponding institutional structure future Turkish-EU cooperation could be based on three pillars: economic relations including trade and energy; foreign policy, security, and defense; and migration.

Without a credible accession process, Turkey will not feel bound to cooperate and align with the EU in matters of foreign policy, security, and defense. This happening already. Turkey's alignment with declarations of common foreign and security policy has dropped considerably since the deadlock in the negotiations. The fading prospects of membership are not only reason for this; there is a growing divergence between the EU and Turkey's threat perceptions and foreign and security policy goals. Therefore, creating a common ground on major is becoming a tall order. However, an increasingly institutionalized foreign and security policy dialogue is essential to prevent Turkey and the EU from further drifting apart.

In the economic and trade fields, the customs union constitutes an important institutional base and its modernization, or else a new broader trade and investment agreement, is necessary to ensure the development of these relations. In the energy sector, the interdependence between the EU and Turkey has increased in recent years. Turkey is an important transit country in the Southern Energy Corridor (with the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline) and also with Turkish stream. But the tension in the Mediterranean around territorial disputes will have negative consequences on cooperation in the field of energy.

In recent years, cooperation over the refugee situation has been a mirror image of Turkish-European relations. The migrant deal is a rare area of cooperation established since the deterioration of relations from 2013. It was negotiated in urgency and neces-

sity but on a basis of mistrust. It is not voluntary and good-faith cooperation. The instrumentalization of the migration issue shows that cooperation in this area will also be problematic. It is far from being constructive for now.

### **What Next?**

Characterized by mutual suspicion, Turkey's relations with the EU and many member states are strained. In the absence of shared expectations and stable relations, even transactional forms of cooperation do not work and transactional relationships clearly have their limits.

The non-credibility of the accession process does not facilitate developing better relations but makes it even more complex. In the EU, the renationalization of policy decisions, the weakening of the community approach, and the growth of populism have made the debate on enlargement much more toxic. The current image of Turkey in Europe is not helpful either. The coronavirus pandemic is likely to make the task much more difficult.

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The nature of Turkish-EU relations necessitates the development of an original model that would take elements from the models of cooperation of the EU with third countries. These vary according to economic, political, geographic, normative, and perhaps even (implicitly) cultural proximity and priorities. They apply to countries as diverse as Norway, Ukraine, Canada and South Korea. Institutional forms that Turkish-EU relations could take include the European Economic Area, the European Economic Area Plus, extended associate Membership, strategic partnerships, and privileged partnership. Since the United Kingdom and the EU will also have to find a model for their future relations, this will also offer the opportu-

nity to see what new form of relations the EU can have outside of accession with a third country.

It is obvious that a new framework that excludes the accession process will also mean the end of Turkey's membership prospects (at least, for a while). But this would not prevent the two sides from building another framework of relations. This new framework should have two clear features. First, the reward for this new form of the relationship, be it Custom Union modernization, visa-free travel for Turkish citizens to Europe or much closer coordination between Turkey and Europe on foreign and security policies, should be attainable for Turkey. Second, this framework should not be solely premised on pragmatic or transactional dimensions; it should still have strong value and normative dimensions. Therefore, Turkey attaining these rewards should be contingent upon its fulfilment of predetermined normative criteria. As stated above, acceptance of these normative criteria or standards will depend on economic or other benefits. The perspectives of the EU and Turkey remain divergent and their positions differ

in many areas. Clear and rational objectives are thus needed on both sides for negotiating a future relationship in a novel institutional framework.

In whatever new form, the Turkish-EU relationship should contain the following two features. The EU needs to demonstrate the credibility of its commitment to Turkey, meaning that it should be serious about delivering the stated rewards if Turkey meets the pre-set goals and standards. In this respect, this new form of the relations should be premised on credible conditionality with clearly set and attainable goals as well as a corresponding normative framework. Though a norm-free, transactional relationship might come across as more hassle-free and thus be tempting, their relationship is not a foreign policy issue for both sides, it is essentially a domestic political issue for them. Therefore, a pure transactional approach is unlikely to be sustainable and to deliver for long. Contemplating alternative forms of relationship should still include much effort and thinking into its normative component.

## Turkish-U.S. Relations in a Time of Shocks

Ian Lesser

The past year has seen the U.S.-Turkish relationship go from the forefront of international policy debates to a second or third--order concern. To a remarkable degree, the coronavirus pandemic has simply pushed aside foreign-policy questions of all kinds. To be sure, bilateral issues between Turkey and the United States continue to be addressed away from the political spotlight. This might actually bring some modest benefits for a relationship that has traditionally been dealt with by civilian and military professionals on both sides. But it is unlikely to resolve the many serious underlying disputes. For the moment, US-Turkish differences have been deferred but not resolved.

### Personality and Mistrust

Domestic developments on both sides continue to be important drivers of the relationship in terms of constraints and opportunities. On the Turkish side, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been successful in harnessing public opinion to a series of nationalist causes. The U.S. factor has been at the center of Turkey's policy vis-à-vis the Kurds in Syria, and more broadly in the context of Turkish mistrust of allies in general. Dismal Turkish public attitudes toward the United States are now widely shared across the political spectrum. Whatever the uncertainties regarding the durability of Erdoğan's position in the face of more concerted and diverse political opposition, his skill at playing the nationalist card appears undiminished. This is most evident in the operations in Syria and the increasingly contentious disputes in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. It may soon find other outlets. The deepening global economic crisis could be especially dangerous for emerging economies, including Turkey. As in past financial crises, there will be a strong political incentive to blame foreign actors and Western—above all U.S.—lobbies for the

country's misfortunes. None of this bodes well for the underlying climate of mutual mistrust in relations.

On the U.S. side, the scene is equally troubled. The relationship with Turkey has never had much public visibility or excited much interest outside foreign and security policy circles, and now the coronavirus crisis and the immense scale of the collapse facing the global economy will be overwhelming distractions for the political class). As in Europe, this could well mean less scrutiny of the state of democracy, media freedom, and the rule of law in Turkey. Certainly, Congress will have other concerns and may be less inclined to press for implementation of measures under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act and other sanctions. The Trump administration, at least at the level of the White House, has never been enthusiastic about pressing Turkey on these fronts.

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Even the vexing issue of Ankara's S-400 purchase has gone out of the news for the moment. But on this front, as well as its increasingly assertive policies in the Eastern Mediterranean (including Libya) the gap between Turkish and U.S. perspectives will remain wide. To the extent that U.S.-Russian relations continue to worsen, it is likely that Congress and key policymakers will return to the S-400 issue. If the missile system is made fully operational, this will almost certainly be a red line for Washington triggering the implementation of sanctions against Ankara. Turkey has so far managed to go right up to this point, although it is arguable whether the system is not already operational in a limited sense. If Russia is concerned about the potential for a military inci-

dent in or near Turkish airspace—and mounting frictions over in Libya heighten the risk—it might also choose to delay making the S-400s fully operational. Turkey's repeated offer to convene a bilateral working group aimed at the technical concerns of NATO allies is unlikely to satisfy U.S. critics. In short, the S-400 issue threatens to come back on the bilateral agenda with a vengeance in the near future. Turkey's argument that the purchase is a technical and commercial choice obscures the highly political nature of the procurement decision in the eyes of its Western partners, above all the United States. The issue is not Turkey's sovereignty, or the longstanding failure to agree on an alternative U.S. or European system for air defense. The issue is Russia and the degree to which the S-400 deal compromises NATO security interests.

***By almost any measure, the U.S. constituency for the bilateral relationship has been poised at the brink of collapse for some time.***

Much could turn on President Trump's election prospects. His apparently durable personal rapport with Erdoğan has likely been one of the factors standing in the way of an even more assertive and critical U.S. approach to Turkey. A Democratic administration would probably be a much tougher interlocutor for Ankara on domestic and foreign policy questions. For all his evident mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis, President Trump could yet benefit from the demonstrated tendency of the public to rally around their leaders in times of crisis. The outcome in the presidential election is far from certain. A Democratic administration would surely return U.S. foreign policy to a more predictable and traditional course. It could draw on a wealth of foreign-policy expertise, including many individuals knowledgeable about Turkey. This would make for a more informed policy, but not necessarily a more congenial one from a Turkish point of view. In Congress, the gloves would be off on the S-400 question as well as Cyprus and the

Eastern Mediterranean. Only a Turkish commitment to keep the S-400s in deep-freeze, perhaps in exchange for a deployment, if not sale of, U.S. Patriot missiles could give both sides enough political cover to take sanctions off the table. This would be a very expensive approach from Turkey's perspective. That said, whatever the result in November 2020, no administration is likely to have much time to devote to big new initiatives in the relationship.

### **A Waning Strategic Logic?**

It would take a great deal to restore bilateral confidence in the Turkish-U.S. relationship. The nationalistic and sovereignty-conscious climate on both sides has made it more difficult to overlook specific policy differences in the interest of broader strategic stakes. The debate in Turkey often assumes that the country is simply too important to be ignored by the United States and the EU. For Europe, this may be an uncomfortable truth. Turkey and Turkish policies are a factor across multiple critical issues facing the EU, not least on migration and security. By contrast, for the United States, Turkey is simply a very difficult ally adjacent to regions of variable interest. Despite many efforts at diversification, it sees the relationship almost solely through a security lens. And with the rise of China and steadily growing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, Turkey's strategic relevance may be declining. By almost any measure, the U.S. constituency for the bilateral relationship has been poised at the brink of collapse for some time. Negative perceptions of its Middle East policy, an apparently burgeoning relationship with Russia, and above all the S-400 purchase have left Turkey with few if any friends in Washington.

### **Icebergs in the Mediterranean**

The United States has many other sensitivities impeding a return to more normal conditions in the relationship with Turkey. The list includes differences over Iran, the fate of the Kurds, Ankara's policy toward jihadists and ex-jihadists in Idlib, and the general deterioration of media freedom and the rule of law in the country. These concerns are not new. Potentially more

serious risks for relations flow from the increasingly fraught situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Until the late 1990s, the tense relationship between Greece and Turkey over demarcation issues in the Aegean, disputes in Thrace, and alleged Greek support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were all standing threats to stability. Cyprus, too, was a leading flashpoint. Long before the S-400 dispute, there was an S-300 dispute involving the Cypriot purchase of a then state-of-the-art air defense system from Russia (the United States helped broker a solution in which the system, once purchased, was never actually deployed on Cyprus). In 1996, Greece and Turkey nearly went to war over the islet of Imia/Kardak. Protracted brinkmanship in the Eastern Mediterranean used to be a fixture of relations between Athens and Ankara, and a leading obstacle to U.S. diplomacy and NATO operations in the region. All of this had been left behind in the détente that has prevailed between the two countries since the late 1990s.

***Without careful management and attention to the risks of brinkmanship, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean could well prove a new flashpoint in U.S.-Turkish relations.***

Unfortunately, a mood of brinkmanship has returned to the Eastern Mediterranean, with threats over energy exploration in the waters offshore Cyprus and more frequent incidents in Aegean airspace. The fraying of the EU-Turkish refugee agreement and migration-related incidents on the land and sea borders this year have fueled concerns about potential conflict in the region. In the prevailing U.S. perception, as in Europe's, this dangerous situation has been fueled by the nationalist climate in Turkey—and elsewhere—and a more assertive Turkish posture, especially vis-à-vis Cyprus and broader maritime disputes in the region. Congress has a long tradition of engagement on these questions and has recently opted to overturn a longstanding prohibition on arms sales to

the Republic of Cyprus. At the same time, U.S.-Greek security relations have grown increasingly close—an unstated hedge against a deteriorating strategic relationship with Turkey. Without careful management and attention to the risks of brinkmanship, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean could well prove a new flashpoint in U.S.-Turkish relations.

### **Economic Exposure**

The United States' off and on threat and use of financial and trade sanctions against Turkey have taken a toll on the latter's economy. Under conditions of global economic collapse in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, this facet of the relationship takes on new and potentially much more serious meaning. Emerging economies, already under pressure, are likely to be particularly affected by an economic depression. Even in the absence of further U.S. economic pressure, Turkey's looming balance of payments crisis could compel it to seek relief from the International Monetary Fund. If it does, the United States' attitude toward this request could be critical in determining the fund's response. That said, if Washington and Ankara are looking for political trade-offs in the service of stabilizing the relationship, finance and trade could be key elements. A Democratic administration more inclined to be critical of Turkey over foreign and security policy might also be less inclined to use economic sticks against a NATO ally.

### **Alliance and Society as Anchors**

The Turkey debate in the United States is now far more critical and uncompromising than the one in Europe. Many European politicians and observers, some highly critical of Turkey, now find themselves in the strange position of arguing for tolerance in U.S. policy. For all the talk of the transactional approach emanating from Washington in recent years, key EU states are now the leading advocates for a practical quid pro quo posture in relations with Turkey. Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers and experts are no longer willing to give Ankara the traditional benefit of the strategic doubt. The consequences are visible, from the cancellation

of Turkey's participation in the F-35 program to the congressional resolution on the Armenian genocide.

Under these very troubled conditions, and beyond some political developments of purely tactical value, are there any positive openings ahead? Two very different prospects are worth noting. First, Turkey is likely to face a chaotic and crisis-prone security environment for some time. Its Western ties, however fraught, will be of critical importance for deterrence, reassurance, and crisis management. Partnership with the United States will retain its importance under these conditions. If NATO comes to play a more important political role, as many in Turkey favor, this could benefit Turkey as a key member with an enduring seat at the table. NATO could also be a more palatable vehicle for much security cooperation currently conducted with some friction on a bilateral basis with Washington. This could be an opportunity for both countries. Needless to say, some compromise resolution of the S-400 dispute would give this approach a tremendous boost. So too could strains in relations between Turkey and Russia as result of developments

in Syria or Libya. Here, there will be a delicate balance between estrangement that could serve Western interests and outright confrontation, which allies will surely wish to avoid.

Second, on a very different front, many in the United States (and in Europe) are now more focused on building ties with civil society inside Turkey. This is unlikely to revolutionize a relationship that has always been relatively formal and focused on "high" political and security concerns. But it could help to diversify a notoriously single-track partnership and provide a useful "fly wheel" for relations in difficult times when both countries will face multiple public-policy challenges. These could well encourage alternative geometries in the relationship; for example, involving cities and other less traditional players. Stabilizing and rebuilding the "strategic" relationship between Turkey and the United States will depend, above all, on the behavior of political leadership on both sides. Other actors have a role to play too, and the prevailing crisis conditions could inspire greater creativity on this score. It will not be easy, but it may be necessary.

## Turkey and the West in the Eastern Mediterranean

**Valeria Talbot**

Gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean were expected to foster regional cooperation and to be a driver for the solution of long-standing disputes and crises that affect regional stability. However, while gas discovery was the catalyst of cooperation for some countries, such as Israel, Egypt, Greece and Cyprus, gas explorations and exploitation off the island's coast have instead become a source of new tensions between Turkey, on one side, and the Republic of Cyprus and Greece, on the other. Furthermore, over the last years, tensions escalated and the crisis theatre widened to involve other players, such as the European Union and the United States. In this way, the "great game" of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean has become a further critical issue in Ankara's already tense relations with Brussels and Washington. How to transform the situation into a win-win one for all is the main challenge.

### A Catalyst for New Tensions

Since the first explorations at the beginning of 2000s and above all after the discovery of the Aphrodite field in 2011, which paved the way for further explorations of potentially huge reserves of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean basin, Turkey has claimed the rights of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (which it alone recognizes) to benefit from natural resources around the island and has opposed unilateral initiatives by the Republic of Cyprus (which it does not recognize) as well as the activities of international energy companies in disputed waters around the island.

Cyprus declared an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in 2004, which Turkey sees as infringing on its continental shelf. However, Turkey, which claims a 200-mile EEZ, has not signed the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea<sup>1</sup> nor agreed maritime demarcation deals with the other littoral countries, except for Northern Cyprus. Over the years Cyprus has signed agreements with Egypt, Lebanon, and Israel. Furthermore, in 2007 it created 13 licensing blocks off the island to take advantage of gas reserves and starting to issue invitations for tenders. The first license was granted to the U.S. company Noble Energy in 2008 for Block 12 (Aphrodite), although Turkey and Northern Cyprus steadily opposed this. Turkey argues that Cyprus has no right to award drilling concessions unless an agreement with Northern Cyprus on sharing revenues is reached and the two parties agree on a final settlement. As long as the island remains divided into two parts with different international legal status, this will continue to hurt prospects for any involvement of Turkey in regional energy cooperation, frustrating the country's ambitions to become a regional energy hub between hydrocarbon-rich areas and the European markets.

### A High-Stakes Game

Over the years, two issues made Turkey more assertive in defending the right of Northern Cyprus and itself to have a share in hydrocarbons exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. First, a greater number of foreign companies were granted exploration licenses and started to carry out activities in the sea around the island. Turkey did not hesitate to flex its muscles to hamper them, as for example in January 2018 when it sent military vessels to block the Italian energy company ENI's drill ship that was heading to Block 8 (Calypso), or when it warned the U.S. company

<sup>1</sup> Kadri Tastan and Tobias Kutschka, [The implication of Eastern Mediterranean Gas for Turkey](#), German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 2019.

ExxonMobil to stop its activities in the offshore Block 10 of the island. Second, energy cooperation increased among the other littoral states, showing Turkey's growing isolation in the region. Some of them signed bilateral agreements, while in January 2019 Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and Israel, along with Jordan, Italy and the Palestinian National Authority, established the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to coordinate their energy policies, create a regional gas market, cut infrastructure costs, and offer competitive prices.

Turkey's proactive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean not only produced further tensions with Cyprus and Greece, it also became a thorny issue with the EU and United States, both of which have significant energy and geopolitical interests at stake in this region. Nevertheless, condemnation of Turkey came only after Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced in May 2019 that a Turkish vessel would drill in the waters west of Cyprus. Brussels and Washington considered this extremely provocative and urged Turkey to stop operations that the EU considered illegal.

***Turkey's proactive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean not only produced further tensions with Cyprus and Greece, it also became a thorny issue with the EU and United States.***

In June 2019, the EU took a further step to support Cyprus, threatening to adopt "appropriate measures" against Turkey when it announced that a second vessel would drill off the northeast coast. The European Council decided to impose restrictive measures on Turkey for its "continued and illegal drilling activities."<sup>2</sup> These included the suspension of negotiations on the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement and all meetings of the Turkish-EU high-level dialogues. Furthermore, the EU decided to reduce the pre-accession assistance to the country for 2020, a cut of €145.8

million to the funds allocated to foster reforms in Turkey, and it invited the European Investment Bank to review its lending activities in Turkey. Its loans to Turkey amounted to €385.8 million in 2018 and nearly €29 billion since 2000.<sup>3</sup>

However, the EU measures appeared more symbolic than effective and it seems they were intended more to accommodate Cyprus's requests than to pressure Turkey. Indeed, the EU appears reluctant to strongly pressure Turkey, due to the country's key role in some crucial issues, such as the management of migrants and refugees flows. These punitive measures hardly discouraged Ankara from conducting exploration activities in waters off the island.

Frictions in the region further escalated after Turkey signed a maritime agreement with the Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), alongside a military and security deal. With this agreement, which defines maritime borders and EEZs with Libya, Turkey wanted to have a say on the question of the delimitation of waters in the Eastern Mediterranean and above all on the exploitation of its huge gas resources. Beyond Greece and Cyprus, it also intended to send a strong signal to the other members of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum that it is willing to play a central role in the regional "great game." Not only has the legitimacy of the agreement with Libya been questioned by the other littoral states, it also involves an area of the Mediterranean through which the EastMed pipeline is supposed to pass, making its realization more difficult. Since 2015, the EU has indicated the Eastern Mediterranean as a key priority for its energy diversification strategy and the EastMed pipeline as a high-value project to ensure security of supply<sup>4</sup> and reduce European countries' dependence on Russian gas. However, the construction of this ambitious 1,800 km pipeline—which is expected to transport between 10 and 16 billion cubic

2 Council of the EU, [Turkish drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: Council adopts conclusions](#), July 15, 2019.

3 European Investment Bank, [Turkey](#), accessed May 25, 2020.

4 Theodoros Tsakiris, Sinan Ulgen, and Ahmet K. Han, [Gas Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean: trigger or Obstacle for EU-Turkey Cooperation?](#), FEUTURE, May 2018.



meters per year from the Leviathan field off the coast of Israel to Greece and Italy through Cyprus and Crete by 2025—faces challenges in terms of feasibility, costs, and funding.

The United States also stepped in the Eastern Mediterranean gas dispute to support Cyprus and Greece, while sidelining Turkey. In December 2019, Congress approved the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019, which redefines U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the alliance between the United States, Greece, Israel, and Cyprus. The law authorizes new security assistance for Cyprus and Greece, lifts the arms embargo imposed on it in 1987, and the establishment of a United States-Eastern Mediterranean Energy Center to facilitate energy cooperation among the United States, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus. The law is clear evidence of the importance the United States places on its energy and strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. The protection of the U.S. oil companies' contracts goes hand in hand with the need to contain and reduce Russia's influence in the area and in particular on Cyprus. To this end, the United States conditioned arms supply to Nicosia on the denial of entry to its ports to Russian military vessels.

### **What Room for Cooperation?**

Against this backdrop, it is likely that recent developments will not defuse tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and that energy will remain a source of conflict in the foreseeable future. Certainly, not the only one, as in this region energy overlaps the geopolitical and security interests of regional and external actors. It

seems that the “great game” of gas has gradually transformed, at least for some players, into a greater game for geopolitical influence in the region.

***The protection of the U.S. oil companies' contracts goes hand in hand with the need to contain and reduce Russia's influence in the area and in particular on Cyprus.***

In this context, Turkey is a key player that could act as a stabilizer or as a spoiler. It has important assets to become the transit country for gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to the European market. For this, it can rely on its location close to gas fields and a domestic network of pipelines to transport their output to Europe. Gas transit via Turkey would be less expensive and challenging than the EastMed pipeline project. From this point of view, regional cooperation including Turkey could be a win-win solution, but this is not feasible as long as current divisions and tensions persist.

Although in recent years the EU and Turkey have disagreed on almost everything and the accession process for the country is in a stalemate, both sides should fully engage in restarting a dialogue to overcome their differences and defuse tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. In spite of the fact that the gap between them has deepened over the last years on many issues, they can build on their economic interests, since the EU is by far Turkey's largest trade partner and a major investor in the country, to enlarge the scope of their cooperation in the future.

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The fellowship on Turkey, Europe, and Global Issues was launched by The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) in June 2017, to emphasize the geopolitical and economic importance of the relationship between Turkey and transatlantic partners. The fellowship promotes high-level debate and provides recommendations focusing on developments in Turkey, EU–Turkey relations and Turkey-Transatlantic relations.

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