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► **GERMANY – TURKEY
– FRANCE STRATEGIC
RELATIONSHIP**

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Diplomatic Correspondent of Die Zeit

InBrief Series

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Three years ago, President Erdogan accused chancellor Merkel of applying “Nazi methods”. In 2019, Erdogan called on French president Emmanuel Macron to have his “brain dead checked”. When assessing the consequences of this reckless rhetoric, Merkel’s policy towards Turkey does not seem to be affected by the memory of this assault. In contrast however, Emmanuel Macron is still deeply offended, according to sources close to the Élysée, and Turkish French relations remain frozen since. Why the difference?

The German perspective of Turkey in Europe can be better described against the backdrop of France’s attitudes. Despite their close relationship, Berlin and Paris have adopted opposite positions on Turkey and thus mark the diversity of viewpoints in the European Union. This is particularly true after Brexit when Turkey lost a major EU player and potential ally who would share some views on continental Europe with Ankara and always highlighted Turkey’s strategic importance. Today three main considerations dominate the German and French policies towards Turkey: Strategic outlook, economic interests, and the domestic impact.

Strategic outlook

Since the start of the Turkish-Greek crisis and Erdogan’s aggressive rhetoric to assert Turkey’s interests in the Eastern Mediterranean Germany and France came up with two diverging answers to the problem. Emmanuel Macron called for sanctions against Turkey and sent Rafale fighter jets and a frigate to the Mediterranean theatre. Angela Merkel called on both parties to restrain from further escalation and on several occasions sent her foreign minister to defuse the crisis. In talks behind closed doors officials from Paris and Berlin clashed over their differing approaches. Some observers thought they were compatible in a peculiar way if one sees them as bad cop good cop tactics. Others argue the German mediation could have worked also without the backup of the French frigate. Since the beginning of this year Turkey and Greece are involved in direct talks.

Despite strained relations in the past years and the pivot of German troops from Turkey to Jordan in 2017, the German government sees Turkey as an important partner in the region. Notwith-

standing protests from opposition parties and other EU members, Berlin continues to deliver arms to Turkey for strategic reasons. With Ankara Berlin shares the view that Nato remains the most important pillar of security in Europe. In both capitals there is only cautious or little sympathy for the concept of “European sovereignty” championed by French president Macron, even if Merkel sometimes pursues projects which draw American resistance such as the Nordstream2 pipeline. The huge difference between Turkey and Germany though is the way how to defend national interests: While Erdogan has fought or stoked wars in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Nagorno Karabakh and threatened Greece with an invasion, Merkel has sought diplomatic and multilateral ways of resolving conflict, such as the Libya conference in Berlin in January 2020.

Angela Merkel sees Turkey in a bigger strategic context in Europe and beyond. She thinks that Ankara should be actively engaged by the EU to prevent it from sliding into closer liaisons dangereuses with Russia. German efforts to maintain workable relations with Turkey and to attach South Eastern European countries to the EU must be seen as an attempt to contain Russian and Chinese influence. Last but not least, Merkel was the primary architect of the refugee deal between the EU and Turkey in 2016, an agreement which needs to be updated today. Berlin looks for an extension of the damaged deal.

Economic interests

Germany’s trade with Turkey amounted to 36 billion USD in 2019 before the pandemic started compared to French trade with Turkey of 14.6 billion USD. Currently, there are 7000 German companies active in Turkey whereas 450 French enterprises are represented in the country. German business giants such as Siemens, Bosch

or Daimler run factories and assembly lines in Turkey, backed up by the German state insurer Hermes supporting secure investment in Turkey.

Of course, German business interests are seriously considered when the German government determines its Turkey policy. However, German hesitation to apply sanctions because of these interests should not be taken for granted by Ankara. Trade and investment are not the sole concerns of German foreign policy anymore. Turkey realized this in 2017 when the German government threatened to stop the Hermes insurer’s support for German business activity in Turkey. This was a diplomatically wrapped threat of a full-fledged economic embargo. In 2014, the German government convinced the EU, specifically hesitant Italy and Spain, to impose economic sanctions on Russia because of the invasion in Ukraine. Germany bore most of the damage as it was Russia’s second biggest trading partner. Contrary to the perception of many commentators in the US and the UK, economic interest is no longer the one and only driver of German foreign policy today.

Domestic impact

Roughly 3 million citizens of Turkish descent live in Germany, half of whom still have a Turkish passport. These numbers are always on the government’s mind when shaping its Turkey policy. Notably, there is a deep divide in Germany’s Turkish diaspora. The Turkish president enjoys high popularity among those who voted for him in the last presidential elections. However, the overwhelming majority of Turkish origin politicians and journalists in Germany are strong critics of Erdogan. Many of them call for the toughest possible measures against his government and often reject the strategic considerations regarding Turkey in the foreign and defense ministries.

When Angela Merkel conceives her Turkey policy this deep divide among the citizens of Turkish decent in Germany is always on her mind. She has tried to avoid unnecessary frictions with Ankara which could eventually result in uncontainable tensions in Germany. And here is another obvious difference to Emmanuel Macron whose concern in France are rather his citizens of Arab and African origin than those of Turkish descent.

As a final point, the diverging approaches of Merkel and Macron cannot be fully understood without emotions as part of the domestic impact. Emmanuel Macron is an intellectual, sensitive, empathetic president who quotes poets and philosophers. He does not forget insults very easily. When Merkel, a doctor of natural sciences, hears Erdogan talking, she recalls her rich experience with eccentric men in power, shrugs and moves on.

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