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***THE WORLD AND TURKEY
IN THE INTERREGNUM***

**A LONG-TERM OUTLOOK AT
THE EU-TURKEY RELATIONS:**

**IS (STRATEGIC) PARTNERSHIP
UNDER THE SHADOW OF
STRATEGIC AUTONOMY
POSSIBLE?**



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A LONG-TERM OUTLOOK AT THE EU-TURKEY RELATIONS: IS (STRATEGIC) PARTNERSHIP UNDER THE SHADOW OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY POSSIBLE?

Russia's war against Ukraine has fundamentally changed the parameters of the European security order toward a prolonged [confrontation](#) with Russia. As a watershed event, the Russian invasion has arguably provided the missing sense of urgency to finally put into practice the long-standing intellectual discussion about the EU's strategic autonomy. At the same time, however, it also accentuated the hard-pressing challenges waiting for the Union – immediately salient in areas of energy and defense and security. On the one hand, the transition to renewable energy is now more pressing. Yet, it has arguably also become costlier due to the short-term imperative to find [non-Russian sources of fossil fuels](#).

A similar paradox exists in the realm of defense and security. The war highlighted Europe's continued dependence on the US for security provision despite the aspiration to build strategic capabilities in defense and security. An unintended consequence of the invasion is certainly the revitalization of transatlantic relations. NATO, which was only two years ago announced "brain-dead" by the French President Emmanuel Macron, is back on its feet. Yet, Europeans are anxious, given the uncertainties concerning the 2024 US elections. Not relying on the US and US-led NATO is not an option in the short term but might add to the vulnerabilities of the EU in the mid-to-long term. It is likely that attempts at enhancing the

[EU-NATO cooperation](#), and with that, the [European pillar of NATO](#) will accelerate in the post February 24 world.

As a candidate country for EU accession, despite the stalled negotiations, and as a long-standing and lately more engaged member of NATO with increasing dependency on Russia over the years, Turkey will certainly not be immune to the changing security environment in Europe. After years of tension and frictions, the war has led to a conjunctural rapprochement between Turkey and its Western allies. Yet, underneath the surface relations remain strained as evident in the Turkish blockade of Sweden and Finland's NATO accession. The real test for the EU-Turkey relations is whether or not the two parties will be able to build a sustainable relationship under the shadows of their simultaneous aspirations for strategic autonomy.

Turkey: A Partner or A Challenge?

The existing evidence suggests that the future of EU-Turkey relations is ambiguous. Take, for instance, the EU's [Strategic Compass](#) adopted by the Member States at the Foreign Affairs Council in late March. The document perceives Turkey primarily as an actor contributing to the "instability" surrounding the EU due to "provocations and unilateral actions against EU Member States

and violations of sovereign rights in breach of international law” in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey is mentioned for the second time in the part on “tailored bilateral relations” with an acknowledgment of its contributions to the EU’s “CSDP (Common Security and Defense Policy) missions and operations.” As long as Turkey sustains de-escalation and addresses “EU concerns” (in the Eastern Mediterranean), the document further notes, the EU is committed to “developing a mutually beneficial partnership.” Important to note also that Turkey is not listed among the five countries (the US, UK, Canada, Norway, and Japan) that the EU aims to develop a strategic partnership with.

The message is clear. The EU signals to Turkey that it stands aloof despite the intense diplomacy between the two in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The tendency within the Union is to isolate foreign and security cooperation with Turkey to NATO. Unsurprisingly, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized the Strategic Compass on the grounds that the EU failed to act strategically [by falling under the influence of “the two members [Cyprus and Greece] who have maximalist maritime boundary claims at the expense and persistent denial of the rights of Türkiye and the Turkish Cypriots”] and to become a “part of the problem rather than the solution in the Eastern Mediterranean.”

A Tale of Shortsightedness: From Membership to an Ambiguous Partnership

The Eastern Mediterranean is only the most recent symptom of a problematic relationship. Turkey first applied in 1987 to join the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the EU, with which it had signed an Association Agreement in 1963. It was not until 2005; however, that the two parties did initiate accession negotiations. Since then, the whole process has demonstrated the lack of strategic vision on both sides. While the cognitive gap between the two grew, mutual trust steadily eroded.

In the early 2000s, some within the EU saw granting Turkey the “candidate status” as a means to [“facilitate the reunification of Cyprus and appease tension in the Aegean.”](#) However, there was also strong objection on the grounds that [“full membership for Turkey would overtax the EU’s capacities”](#) and Turkey should instead be offered a [“privileged partnership”](#). The debate over Turkey’s accession was one of the main issues underlying the objections to the European constitution referendums both in the Netherlands and France.

Still, other conjunctural elements at the time spoke in favor of the accession process. The perception that Turkey as a member of the EU would be a prime example of the compatibility of Islam and democracy (interchangeably used with the West) was not uncommon. The prospect of Turkey joining the EU was also supported by [Bill Clinton](#), [George W. Bush](#) (and later by Barack Obama). In the aftermath of the Turkish parliamentary elections in 2007, for instance, [Nicholas Burns](#) - the then US undersecretary of State – applauded Turkey as “the most impressive democracy in the Muslim world.” Adding to the enthusiasm of those who supported Turkey’s EU membership was also the optimism at the time about the worldwide spread of democracy via economic liberalization.

The zeal did not last long, and by the late 2000s, the talk of accession negotiations had almost wholly lost its momentum. Turkey’s refusal to give Greek Cypriot vessels access to its air and seaports under a customs union agreement with the EU and the electoral victory of right-wingers tipped the balance within the Union in favor of voices against Turkey’s accession. Later, the Eurozone crisis, the quarrels among the Member States about migration, and the pandemic have further deepened Brussels’ enlargement fatigue. Concurrently, the increasing deterioration of the rule of law and a confrontational foreign policy in Turkey as well as the stalemate in the solution of the Cyprus conflict and the tension with Greece over the Aegean Islands altogether, have helped put relations on hold.

An International Order in Crisis

The predicament that the EU-Turkey relations currently find themselves in, however, did not take shape in a vacuum. There is a larger international context to the endlessly disappointing saga of Turkey's integration into the EU via membership (or otherwise). From September 11, 2001 to February 24, 2022, the context was the appalling story of increasingly salient geopolitical competition. Over the years, mounting uncertainty, security anxieties, and political turmoil have overriden peace and stability.

During the last two decades, the US' claim to global leadership has weakened, whereby China has risen to the level of an increasingly assertive economic and strategic rival. Russia is also more willing to use military power and weaponize information, human bodies, geography, and energy resources in its contest with the so-called West. Even so, the EU has been, to a large extent, strategically absent – despite all the talk on strategic autonomy and sovereignty – about this new reality, because of its internal divisions, institutional hurdles, and self-indulgence.

Amidst the seeming shift in the center of gravity of world power away from the so-called West, [middle powers](#) emerged as influential actors in international politics. These actors are willing and, more importantly, also capable of pursuing an active foreign policy in line with their interests and priorities. They are well integrated into the global economy and finance and are eager to diversify their trading partners in a world where the developing and emerging economies will increasingly make up a larger share of the global GDP. Militarily, they do not shy away from [direct engagement in conflicts](#) and even gained [influence](#) at the expense of Western states and multilateral organizations such as the UN. Geopolitically, they tend to [hedge](#) between the so-called West and the so-called East.

Besides this multilayered and multi-actor geopolitical competition, there is also a second di-

mension to the changing international dynamics. The last two decades have simultaneously proven wrong the belief that democracy will triumph worldwide thanks to economic globalization and increasing multilateralism. Even the most economically advanced democracies today struggle with their own demons. The rise of [white Christian nationalism](#) in the US and Europe and the accompanying conspiratorial thinking with its irrepressible fears that the white race would be replaced due to immigration from Muslim countries threaten to filter through the mainstream. Victor Orbán's landslide victory in the recent Hungarian elections and the popularity of anti-immigration parties in places like France and the Netherlands are, to say the very least, worrisome.

Outside the US and Europe as well, the future of democracy is bleak. [Failed states](#) and [authoritarian consolidation](#) pervade the Middle East and North Africa, almost ten years after the popular uprisings against repressive regimes. The world's largest democracy, India, is in a "[precipitous decline](#)" under the rule of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Coup d'états were more common in 2021 than in any of the previous ten years and countries experiencing democratic decline outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin since the trend had started in 2006, says the Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2022](#) report.

Turkey's aspirations for an autonomous foreign policy: Between domestic factors and post-Cold War calculations

Turkey is a prime example of increasing authoritarian practices. Since the late 2000s, the country has steadily moved away from the rule of law and effective separation of powers. The failed coup attempt in 2016 and two years later, the transition into the presidential system put the last two nails in the coffin of Turkey's democratic aspirations. Given its almost seven decades of experience with competitive multi-party elections and its integration into the Western institutional architecture (via the Association Agreement with

the EU and its membership in both the Council of Europe and NATO), the demise of Turkish democracy is arguably one of the most disappointing examples of a global trend. When treated as a singular and isolated incidence, the temptation to treat Turkey's journey from the implementation of EU reforms in the early 2000s to an authoritarian rule under a nationalist-Islamist ruling alliance two decades later as proof of its inadequacy and even unwillingness for political convergence with the EU is certainly not negligible.

The temptation is even stronger given that the increasingly reckless moves in foreign policy overlap with the death agony of an already imperfect Turkish democracy. The re-alignment of political elites after the failed coup attempt in 2016 [together with](#) the cumulative growth in Turkish defence industry over the last four decades played a crucial role in this shift. Since 2016, Turkish foreign policy-making has been driven primarily by the readiness to [“pull \[the country\] up by its bootstraps,”](#) referring to the determination to pursue Turkey's interests independently from its Western allies – if necessary with hard power. Especially after the purchase of the Russian air-defense missile system S400s in 2017, Turkey's reliability within NATO was increasingly called into question. Most recently, Ankara's publicly and confrontatively expressed threats to stall the process of Sweden and Finland joining NATO add insult to the injury.

Yet, frictions with Western allies, deployment of hard power, and concerns among Western allies and experts about Turkey's place within NATO date back earlier than the post-2016 period. Moreover, Turkey's aspirations to enhance its inter-regional involvement and to become a center of attraction in and for its neighborhood also precede the rise of the AKP into power.

In fact, the roots of Turkey's aspirations for an autonomous foreign policy can arguably be traced back to the transition [into the post-Cold War era](#). No longer a flank state within the European security architecture, Turkey found itself with the

collapse of the Soviet Union in the midst of [instability](#) stretching from the Balkans to the Middle East, from the Mediterranean to the Caucasus. The end of the Cold War also accentuated the Turkish decision-makers' anxieties about Turkey's strategic importance to the West. Not only Turkey's threat perceptions in its own neighborhood changed significantly, but also doubt was cast within decision-making circles over the [reliability of Turkey's NATO allies](#).

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the Turkish decision-makers increasingly approached deepening historical, cultural, and religious connections with Turkey's neighborhood as an advantage in foreign policy. The AKP built upon this existing post Cold-War aspiration to make Turkey a regional power as a means to control uncertainties in an unstable neighborhood. The AKP's eagerness to present itself as the poster child of Islam's compatibility with democracy against the backdrop of the post 9/11 international environment and its bid for the EU membership to a certain extent fortified this aspiration. The party's growing electoral popularity together with Turkey's impressive economic growth rates that were primarily a result of its faithful application of the economic reform program prepared by the Minister of Economic Affairs of the previous government, Kemal Derviş. Later the financial flows in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, further boosted the AKP leadership's confidence beyond its actual capacity. Such overconfidence, combined with an identity-based perception of the world, led Ankara to speak out of turn in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Turkey positioned itself as the “democracy promoter” in the region by openly supporting the Muslim Brotherhood (and Hamas) at the risk of not only drifting apart from its Western allies, but also with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

An unintended yet arguably inevitable consequence of such out-of-proportion audacity has been hapless drifting amidst an increased geopolitical competition between the West, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other. Under

the survival struggles of a nationalist-Islamist ruling alliance, Turkey's post-Cold War (and pre-AKP) aspiration to become a regional power has, thus, lost strategic direction and is reduced to a rhetorical cry-out for strategic autonomy on par with the US and the EU at the expense of increasing dependency on Russia.

Indeed, at this current critical juncture when the European security order has become one of prolonged confrontation with Russia, Ankara's blockage of Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO risks confirming perceptions that Turkey does not share the geopolitical priorities of the Transatlantic Alliance. Even though Turkey might have legitimate security concerns and that bargaining to protect national interests is intrinsic to international relations and diplomacy, Ankara's publicly confrontational attitude alludes to the dangerous possibility that it is far from comprehending that the public display of NATO unity has gained a new meaning with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the post-February 24 world that is less ambiguously divided between the so-called West and Russia, such perceptions lead to even more heightened suspicions about Ankara's strategic direction.

The EU's aspirations for Strategic Autonomy and Turkey's (non-)Place in it

Whereas Turkey lacks a strategic vision beyond the continuation of the particularistic interests of its political leadership, the EU, for its part, lacks well-defined material and normative interests to realize its ambitions for strategic autonomy. One early example of this was granting membership to Cyprus before the [reunification](#) of the island. Not only the conflict became a European problem as a result, but Cyprus' membership also further added to the complexities of an already tricky process of accession negotiations with Turkey. Even today, at the center of the Eastern Mediterranean dispute over maritime boundaries and energy resources is the conflict in and with Cyprus. It is also a major [stumbling block to the NATO-EU cooperation](#) due to Turkey's blocking of Cyprus' participation in NATO's Partnership for

Peace Program.

At a more general level, the EU's lack of strategic vision in the very case of Turkey can also be observed in the tension between the anxiety over [losing](#) Turkey to Russia and/or China, on the one hand, and the seeming reluctance to engage with Turkey more strategically beyond disagreements and divergences, on the other. This tension results in a temporal discord. On the one hand, moments of crisis such as that in 2015 when millions escaping a brutal war in Syria hit the shores of Europe or, more recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, necessitate tactical engagement with Turkey in the short-term despite all the misgivings about the country's broken democracy record and assertive foreign policy.

At the same time, there is a great deal of unclarity about the EU's overall material and normative mid-to-long term interest(s) vis-a-vis Turkey beyond those of its Member States in specific files. What are, for instance, the Union's threat perception(s) vis-à-vis Turkey beyond the Eastern Mediterranean? Why does the shared ambition for an autonomous foreign and security policy bring the EU and Turkey to a stand-off rather than bringing them closer? How much do their interests vis-à-vis China, Africa, or Ukraine, for that matter, overlap or differ?

Ambiguity around these questions renders the EU's aspirations to become a strategic actor questionable. Moreover, the discrepancy between its short-term tactical engagements and the absence of mid-to-long term strategic clarity vis-à-vis Turkey damages the Union's foundational commitment to values and norms.

EU-Turkey Cooperation in Realm of Foreign Policy and Security

If correct, the immediate outcome of such depiction of the EU-Turkey relations is the perception that both the EU and Turkey are sleepwalking without a compass. When their paths cross, they cooperate out of necessity. When it is possible

to separate, they are eager to go onto their own ways. Two decades after its complicated journey for the EU membership began, Turkey today continues – partially due to its own doing, partially due to the shortsightedness of the Union – to [“remain on the uncertain periphery of the Western community.”](#) The absence of a consistent strategic outlook on both sides makes a sober discussion about how to cooperate towards building a peaceful future in a shared neighborhood difficult as mutual accusations often contaminate the conversation.

The EU’s political class is aware that a functioning relationship with Turkey is not a choice but an inevitability. This is due to the expansive economic and societal linkages between Turkey and the EU, the geographical proximity, the volatile security situation in the EU’s Southern Neighborhood, and more recently, the war in Ukraine. The same accounts for Ankara, despite sporadic confrontational outbursts and actions. Put everything aside, the EU is by far Turkey’s largest trading partner. Yet, it is uncertain whether the two parties have the political will to push the relationship beyond a transactional framework.

Assuming that building a sustainable relationship is in the interests of both the EU and Turkey, three issues require attention. Firstly, both parties should invest more in re-establishing mutual trust in order to start imagining a path for compromise and cooperation. This starts with accepting the fact that the other party has agency. Turkey needs to acknowledge that having the cake and not eating it will eventually make it rot. Despite all its inconsistencies, the EU is a system of values and norms. A sincere rapprochement with the Union requires that Turkey repairs its broken democracy record.

This applies to Turkey’s relations with NATO as well. In a multipolar world, many countries outside of the so-called West seem to prefer to hedge their bets. The war in Ukraine has so far demonstrated that [shying away from an open confrontation with Russia](#) is indeed the norm

among the so-called Rest. Ankara’s statements and actions have so far alluded to a somewhat similar strategic ambiguity. Yet, there is a catch here. Given that TR is a NATO member and a candidate country to the EU (despite stalled negotiations), Ankara will not be able to continue without a clear strategic direction especially given that the war is now likely to be prolonged.

On the other hand, the EU has to acknowledge the possibility that even under a different Turkish government that respects the rule of law and separation of powers, the two parties might still have diverging interests when it comes to foreign policy and security. The question is how to accommodate each other’s interests within a rules-based framework.

Secondly, the EU should actively work on sustaining internal unity in relations with Turkey. However, this is easier in theory than in practice given the various – and not necessarily overlapping – interests and threat perceptions of the member states. The last couple of years have clearly shown the [divergences](#) among member states in areas such as the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria, and Libya. The new reality on the ground in the wake of Russia’s war against Ukraine requires a significant rethinking of these divergences and a search for effective avenues of cooperation in areas where there is overlap with Turkish interests. It is imperative that the EU not let bilateral tensions determine policy-making at the EU level.

Last, but not least, given the urgency of energy and security imperatives in the wake of the Russian invasion, a solution to the Cyprus conflict, or at the very least enhancement of confidence-building mechanisms, is more pressing now. Soberly and patiently dealing with the elephant in the room – given the lack of political will to do so on both sides – would certainly facilitate energy cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. It would also contribute to enhancing cooperation between the EU and NATO when the fundamentals of the European security order are dislocated.