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# Historic missed opportunities and prospects for renewal: Turkey-EU relations in a post-Western order

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## ABSTRACT

Turkish-European Union (EU) relations in the broader context of the transatlantic alliance have been one of the defining features of Turkish foreign policy in the post-war era. The article identifies elements of the cyclical nature of the relationship and missed opportunities, notably in the 1970s and the early 2000s, which have been costly both to Turkey and the EU. Domestic politics and crises both in Turkey and the EU have played an important role in shaping the long-term dynamics of this complex and mutually important relationship. The emerging post-Western order has contributed to the decline and recent stalemate in Turkey-EU relations. The article probes into the possibilities of a revival in Turkey-EU relations and consider whether the Russian war against Ukraine will create a new opportunity for a revival of the relationship as part of a new wave of enlargement, which was not on the agenda previously.

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## Introduction

Turkish-European Union (EU) relations have been one of the defining elements of Turkish foreign policy in the post-war period, especially since the early 1960s. These relations should be seen in the broader context of Turkey's commitment towards and membership in the Western alliance since 1945.<sup>1</sup> The United States (US) has also been a critical actor for Turkey throughout the post-war period. Therefore, Turkey-EU relations<sup>2</sup> need to be considered in the broader context of the Turkey-EU-US triangle. The central contention of this article is that the history of Turkey-EU relations is characterized by a series of missed opportunities, which represent failures both on the part of the Turkish and the EU elites. These series of missed opportunities have, in turn, been detrimental for both sides and prevented the achievement of a stronger and mutually beneficial partnership. Moreover, in the current era of major global shifts and the emergence of

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powerful non-Western global actors, such as Russia and China, the long-standing Turkey-EU relationship finds itself confronted with a serious existential challenge.

Arguably the best periods in Turkey's post-war period development trajectory, in terms of both economic and democratic development, were the periods when relations with the EU were extremely positive (i.e. the 1960s and the early 2000s). Domestic politics, both in Turkey and Europe, have been a major limiting factor in shaping and restraining the process of 'deep integration', meaning Turkey's smooth and steady progress toward EU membership over time. In the EU, the principal concerns have been closely associated with three major themes: size and absorption capacity (Turkey is a large country and generates fears of its possible impact on the EU's governance structure), level of development (Turkey is below the EU average, raising concerns about the burden on EU budget and potential for large-scale migration) and identity (especially conservative center-right and more strikingly far-right parties in Europe question Turkey's European identity, which in turn creates a significant religious-nationalist backlash in Turkey). In the early 2000s, the shift toward center-right Christian democratic parties in Europe weakened the pro-Turkey coalition in the EU. The dominant bloc led by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy saw Turkey not as a 'natural insider' (based on their perceptions of European identity) but as an 'important outsider' (a key partner in terms of common economic and security interests, but not a potential full member). More recently, the rise of right-wing populism both in Turkey and in key European countries has led to a vicious circle whereby 'populists' in both contexts have benefited from each other's existence but have clearly undermined Turkey's long-term membership prospects.

The current Turkey-EU relationship has become a transactional and interest-driven relationship devoid of any of its original normative content. Cooperation has continued in key areas such as the economy, energy, and migration control. However, the key aspect of the relationship, the transformative effect of the EU on Turkish domestic politics, has effectively withered away in recent years. From the perspective of the present study, one central question is whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine will be the beginning of a new chapter in the relationship, creating an important avenue for the reactivation of Turkey-EU relations in the new era. The answer to this question depends on two interrelated factors: (a) domestic political developments in Turkey and (b) the approach adopted by key EU elites. As long as the current authoritarian presidential regime continues in Turkey, it is highly unlikely that the relationship will progress beyond a minimalist, transactional approach. In that sense, Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2023 are likely to prove a crucial turning point. Even if the opposition wins and political change is

instigated to reverse the authoritarian interlude in Turkey, a full-scale reactivation of Turkey-EU relations will also depend on the nature and strength of the signals projected by key EU actors. The possibility of a new enlargement wave in Europe, following the Russian war against Ukraine, involving Ukraine and Moldova in the first wave and extended to Georgia and Western Balkans at a late stage could prove to be a decisive turning point, particularly if Turkey is also included as a potential member with firm and credible signals. Otherwise, the outcome will likely be another round of humiliation and disappointment, with the relationship not going much beyond a modified version of ‘transactionalism’.

### **Turkey-EU relations: historical trajectories and missed opportunities**

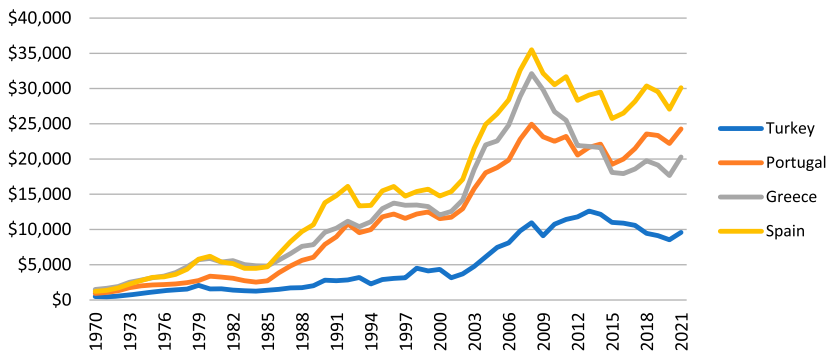
The 1960s constituted a critical phase of Turkey’s relations with the EU. Following the Ankara agreement of 1963 (parallel to the Athens Agreement of 1962 with Greece), Turkey became an early Associate Member of the European Economic Community (the EEC, originally a club of six founded by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which turned into the European Community in 1967 and the EU in 1993). Indeed, the logic of the Ankara and Athens agreements was very similar. The two neighbors followed very similar paths until 1974, and their fortunes differed markedly thereafter. From the perspective of the EEC and the Western Alliance, both countries were important NATO members, balancing the Soviet Union in southern Europe. In terms of their development levels, both were semi-industrialized countries, and inevitably their full integration into the EEC was conceived as a long-term, stage-by-stage process. Membership in the EEC, which at that time was essentially a customs union, would require a significant transition period. The Ankara Agreement envisaged a preliminary period from 1963 to 1974 and a transitional period from 1974 to 1995. With the additional protocol in 1974, the markets of the European Community (EC) were opened to Turkey (except in agriculture and textiles), whereas the Turkish economy continued to be protected against products from EC member states. It was envisaged that Turkey would be able to dismantle its tariffs over time as the economy matured and industry would be able to compete with its European counterparts on equal terms.

The 1970s represented an important turning point in Turkey’s relations with the EC. The comparative axis in this period is the Southern European trio of Greece, Spain, and Portugal. In early 1974, Turkey was the only country among this group of four that enjoyed a democratic regime. However, the fortunes of Turkey and the other Southern European states diverged sharply after 1974. The Cyprus crisis and Turkish intervention in Cyprus were also defining moments in the relationship, with significant

longer-term consequences. Authoritarian regimes collapsed in all three Southern European cases, and as part of the EC's wave of Mediterranean enlargement, all three countries lined up and became members of the EC during the 1980s (Greece, 1981; Spain and Portugal, 1986). All three benefited from the 'virtuous cycle' of the membership process (democratic consolidation, expansion of trade and foreign direct investment, and access to redistributive funds). Consequently, they have been able to grow rapidly and raise their per capita incomes to very high levels. Among the trio, Spain was perhaps the major winner, establishing itself as a first-tier European country by the end of the 1990s. In contrast, Turkey increasingly moved into a period of economic and political instability in the second half of the 1970s and subsequently to a period of military rule between 1980–1983, drifting further away from Europe in the process. The gap in per capita incomes between Turkey and the Mediterranean trio has expanded considerably over the years, as seen in [Figure 1](#).

Arguably, one of the biggest missed opportunities in Turkey-EU relations involved the failure on Turkey's part to apply for full EC membership at the same time as Greece in 1974. One could visualize an alternative scenario whereby Turkey, under the assumptions that it would apply for full membership in 1974 and maintain economic and political stability on the domestic front, enabling it to avoid a military coup in 1980, could have become part of the early Mediterranean enlargement of the EU, capitalizing on the virtuous cycle, from which the three Mediterranean countries have benefited in a dramatic fashion.<sup>3</sup>

The failure to apply for EC membership in 1974 (which admittedly may not have brought about the same response from Europe as in the case of Greece) is once again rooted in Turkish domestic politics. The 1970s was a period of import-substituting industrialization (ISI) and protectionism. There was a strong consensus at the time within the bureaucratic and



**Figure 1.** GDP per Capita Income of Turkey, Portugal, Greece and Spain, (Current USD). Source: The World Bank.

business elites that Turkey should approach EC membership at its own pace and not expose its domestic industry to risky competition from abroad. The analogy was to ‘jumping on the train whenever we are ready’ (seeing the relationship essentially in bilateral rather than multi-dimensional terms). In retrospect, this proved to be a mistake. Once Greece was an ‘insider’ in the Community, it became an important veto player for Turkey during the 1981–1999 period, including having a veto over financial assistance as part of the Customs Union Agreement and tying Turkey’s candidacy in 1999 to the membership of the Republic of Cyprus as the sole representative of the island. Indeed, the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to EU membership in 2004 has produced additional obstacles on the path of Turkey’s relationships with the EU.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the economic realm, however, there is no doubt that Cyprus was a key factor that contributed to the deterioration of relations with the EC and the Western alliance from the second half of the 1970s onwards. The disputes and conflicts over Cyprus have severely undermined relations with the EU and have continued to poison Turkey-EU relations over the course of the past few decades. The dispute surrounding the Cyprus conflict raises a controversial point regarding a major missed opportunity of the 1970s. Whilst recognizing that Turkey had serious concerns about the treatment of the Turkish Cypriot minority on the island, one is inevitably tempted to raise the question of whether the problem could have been resolved through diplomatic initiatives through multilateral channels at the time as opposed to unilateral military intervention. This is a legitimate question to pose given that the partition of the island in the form of two independent republics failed to generate international support for the official Turkish position (the idea of a confederation based on the co-existence of essentially two independent republics on the island), even in countries like Azerbaijan with strong diplomatic and political ties to Turkey.

### **The revitalization of Turkey-EC/EU relations in the post-1987 era**

Domestic politics was once again at the forefront of Turkey-EC relations in the early 1980s. The military interlude of 1980–1983 led to a major disruption in Turkey-EU relations. Relations, however, started to improve following the transition to democratic politics. Turgut Özal played a proactive role by applying for Turkey’s full membership in 1987. The outcome of the application was not successful, but it helped to reactivate the Customs Union Agreement, which was originally envisaged by the Ankara Agreement of 1963. Indeed, the Customs Union became effective by the end of 1995, but with no promise of full membership.

The early 1990s was largely a period of disappointment in Turkey's relations with the EU. The EU appeared to be much more receptive to the candidacy and eventual membership of several post-communist Eastern European countries such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. There was considerable enthusiasm in Europe for Polish membership. Poland, like Turkey, was a large country with a significant agricultural sector, but it did not seem to pose significant identity threats as Turkey's membership did. Indeed, Poland's candidacy was treated as a natural step in terms of a 'return to Europe,' from which it was artificially torn apart by Soviet repression. During this period, driven partly by the humiliations of the membership process, Turkey started to look increasingly to the East in the emerging post-Cold War context. Relations with Russia and other post-Soviet states, especially in Central Asia, became an important feature of Turkey's foreign policy during this period, and reflected the deep sense of disillusionment of being left behind in the membership process.

This sense of disappointment continued with the EU Council's 1997 Luxembourg Summit, where Turkey was identified as an important partner and offered a special status (privileged partnership), but this offer fell considerably short of full membership. This sense of pessimism was reversed, however, with the critical decision of the Helsinki Summit of December 1999. The Helsinki Summit was crucial in providing strong signals of full membership to Turkey. It also helped to produce a momentum of economic and political reforms in Turkey, notably after the 2001 crisis. The early 2000s, especially the phase from 2002–2007, is often identified as the 'Golden Age of Europeanization' in Turkey. Arguably, without the membership promise, the reform process (even more strikingly in the political realm) would not have displayed the same momentum and intensity.<sup>5</sup>

An interesting question concerns the context in which the Helsinki decision emerged. We can argue that the political context of Europe in the late 1990s produced a favorable environment for Turkish membership. The Social Democratic wave in key European countries (rule under the Social Democratic Party in Germany under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Tony Blair's New Labor in the United Kingdom, and Socialists under Michel Rocard in France) created an environment that was generally supportive of Turkish membership. Social democrats, with their multicultural vision, were comfortable with Turkish membership in identity terms. Their key concern was that reforms had to be undertaken in key economic and political spheres to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria.<sup>6</sup>

At the elite level, we can identify support for Turkish membership in the late 1990s and the early 2000s among European actors based on their vision of the future of Europe and how Turkey fits in and strengthens that vision. Social democrats envisioned Turkey as a part of a multicultural Europe based on the assumption that Turkey would comply with the economic and

political components of the Copenhagen criteria. Intergovernmentalists, including those in the United Kingdom, the new post-communist member states, and Nordic states like Sweden, conceived Turkey as an integral part of a more flexible pattern of integration. Pro-Mediterranean coalition countries, which favor a stronger role for the Mediterranean as a region within Europe, looked favorably upon Turkey's membership. For member states, such as the United Kingdom, who favored a greater role for the EU as a security actor, Turkey's inclusion would be a major asset, given its significant military capabilities and its presence within NATO. Finally, for EU institutions like the Commission, Turkey's membership, as part of a broader enlargement wave, seemed to be an appropriate path to increase their weight relative to the governments of member states.<sup>7</sup>

From a broader perspective, it is important to recognize that the highpoint in Turkey-EU relations, involving the Helsinki Decision and its aftermath, was reached at the peak of the unipolar moment in international relations. The Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War ended, and the Western alliance appeared to be at the peak of its power. The EU, supported by the US, reached the peak of its confidence which facilitated a combination of deep integration (with the implementation of the single currency experiment, the most ambitious project to date) and an extensive wave of enlargement oriented towards the Central and Eastern Europe. From that point onwards, however, the EU was confronted with a series of major economic, security, and identity crises, in turn which created significant political backlash in the domestic politics of member states, which, consequently reduced the incentives and resolve for further enlargement and inevitably had detrimental effects on the trajectory of Turkey-EU relations.<sup>8</sup>

### **Missed opportunities in the 2000s: the question of 'Fairness' in Turkey-EU relations**

The period of intense optimism between December 1999 (the Helsinki Decision) and September 2005 (the formal opening of accession negotiations with Turkey) generated a suitable environment for wide-ranging reforms both on the economic and democratization fronts, first in the context of the coalition government of 1999–2002 and then in the early years of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government. The early 2000s was also a period when trade with the EU significantly expanded, and Turkey, for the first time in its history, managed to attract a sizable amount of foreign direct investment, a large majority of which (70 percent) originated from the EU.

However, there was a loss of momentum during the second half of the 2000s. This early loss of momentum accelerated and was associated with a process of 'de-Europeanization' in the later stages of the AKP era in the



2010s. As widely documented, Turkey diverged significantly from EU norms both on the economic and political fronts during this period.<sup>9</sup> Part of the problem is the weakening of the reform effort in Turkey, both on the economic and democratization fronts. The EU membership process in the early 2000s provided a common objective for both the secular elites and the conservative counter-elites for different reasons (secular elites desiring EU membership as part of Turkey's search for Westernization and modernization, and the conservative counter-elites supporting EU membership as a means of consolidating their status and power in Turkish society and as a means of advancing religious freedoms) and helped to overcome, at least temporarily, polarization in Turkey. Indeed, the early AKP government, with a reformist and pro-EU orientation, was able to harness the support of different segments of Turkish society ranging from religious conservatives to Turkish nationalists, liberals and Kurdish nationalists, and social democrats. However, the breakdown of the negotiations and the failure to open the vast majority of the chapters due to lack of agreement on the Cyprus issue not only helped to create a nationalist backlash in Turkey but also led to an environment of re-polarization of Turkish politics and a serious loss of the reform effort, which inevitably pulled Turkey and the EU apart from each other over the course of the subsequent decade.

Yet, part of the blame for the progressive weakening of the relationship rests with the EU itself. Even the most progressive and pro-EU elements in Turkish politics (such as Kemal Derviş, the architect of Turkey's Strong Economy Program after the 2001 crisis) were critical of the terms of the accession negotiations document, which formed the basis of negotiations from September 2005 onwards. The idea of 'permanent safeguards' (involving continued restrictions on migration from Turkey and limits on access to redistributive funds), even if Turkey were to become a full member, generated intense criticism in Turkey's domestic circles. The possibility of Turkey being admitted as a full member, but in the form of a second division member, which would not enjoy the same benefits and entitlements as the rest, raised fundamental questions about 'fairness' in Turkey-EU relations.<sup>10</sup> The nature of the accession negotiation document clearly strengthened the position of Euroskeptics in Turkey. They argued quite convincingly that Turkey would not be admitted, even if all the conditions were met, on the grounds of culture and identity (based on the oft-heard claim that the EU is a Christian club). The argument that Turkey was not being treated fairly by the EU and differential standards were applied to Turkey compared to other late entrants was also effectively utilized by Prime Minister (later President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during the second decade of AKP rule as a basis for generating strong anti-Western and anti-EU sentiments, which helped to provide political support and generate populist dividends on the domestic front.

The failure of the EU to deal equitably with the Cyprus conflict, marked by the decision to admit the Republic of Cyprus as the sole representative of the island before the conflict itself was properly resolved, could be identified as another major mistake on the EU's part. During the early years of the AKP government, Turkey displayed a significant commitment to resolving the Cyprus dispute on an equitable basis by agreeing to the implementation of the Annan Plan proposed by the UN, which would reunify the island under a loose confederation. Following this reunification process, the whole island would be admitted to the EU, which would also open the path for Turkish accession. However, the Republic of Cyprus, or Southern Cyprus, was admitted to the EU prior to adoption of the Annan Plan, and thus had little incentive to comply with the UN-proposed plan. Inevitably, therefore, the referendum of 2004 on the Annan Plan failed to generate the desired outcome. Whilst Turkish Cypriots in the North strongly endorsed the Annan Plan; there was hardly any support for the Plan among the Greek Cypriots in the South. Indeed, the accession process lost its momentum over the Cyprus issue, and the failure to open key chapters for accession negotiations effectively strengthened the Euro-skeptical and anti-EU sentiments in Turkey. Moreover, in recent years with the downturn of the Turkish economy, the EU has been criticized by Turkish opposition leaders and the wider public because of the Refugee Agreement (The EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan) between the Turkish government and the EU, whereby Turkey has become a 'buffer state' for incoming migrants to Europe. Hence, a balanced analysis needs to attribute part of the responsibility to the EU in understanding the stalemate and, ultimately, the breakdown of the membership process in recent years, which also means that the EU must also share the blame for Turkey's dramatic authoritarian turn during the later years of the AKP era.

In terms of historic missed opportunities, one could make the following distinction between the critical phases, the 1970s and the early 2000s. Arguably, Turkey was primarily responsible for its failure to take advantage of the EC's Mediterranean enlargement wave. Developments in Turkey's domestic politics effectively constrained Turkey's relations with the EC and prevented it from taking advantage of its enlargement wave of the 1980s, from which countries like Spain, Portugal, and Greece immensely benefited. During the mid-2000s, however, the missed opportunity resulted from failing to find an equitable solution to the Cyprus dispute. Arguably, the key EU actors such as the EU Commission and key member states like Germany could have been more pro-active in pushing the Annan Plan, given the fact that Turkey had already been granted a candidate country status and significant reforms had been accomplished over an extremely short period of time, largely because of the incentives provided by the full-membership. This was ultimately a mistake on the part of the EU. It is quite likely that

key EU leaders, like Angela Merkel and Nicholas Sarkozy, on the right side of the political spectrum, who favored a return to the ‘privileged partnership’ idea, failed to anticipate the degree to which Turkey would turn away from Western norms over the course of the decade. They probably assumed that Turkey would continue its Western path, with significant integration in economic and security realms, but falling short of full membership. In 2007 or 2008, Merkel and Sarkozy could not anticipate the extent of the humiliation and backlash that the stalemate in the EU membership process would create on Turkey’s domestic front. They could also not foresee the magnitude of the geopolitical shifts taking place on a global scale, which also helped Turkey slide into a quite different direction. The outcome of this process has been costly to Turkey but also to the EU. The EU, as a global actor, would have been in a much stronger position to deal with the crises and geopolitical challenges of the past decade in the European periphery and the Middle East if Turkey had been incorporated as a full member.

### **The pendulum swings away from the EU and the western alliance in the emerging post-liberal order**

Turkish foreign policy (TFP) has experienced a profound transformation over the course of the twenty-year period that the AKP has been in power. Indeed, a strong contrast can be discerned between TFP in the early AKP era (2002–2011) and the later phases of the AKP (post-2011 era). The ‘logic of interdependence’ constituted the key driving force of TFP during the early AKP era, and Turkey was firmly anchored to Western democracies in terms of its identity and normative credentials in addition to its institutional commitments in the economic and security realms. However, during the second phase of the AKP, ‘the logic of strategic autonomy’ emerged as the overriding principle.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the first decade, where the emphasis was single-mindedly on the use of soft power and diplomacy, hard power and more coercive elements started to play an increasingly important role in TFP in the second phase. Turkey has been actively involved in military operations in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Azerbaijan in recent years. Unilateral foreign policy actions have also been more frequent during the later phase of the AKP.

How do we explain this dramatic shift in TFP during the last decade? A three-stage analysis may be proposed to explain this dramatic shift. At the global level, the relative decline of the West and the emergence of new centers of power such as China and BRICS (and re-emergence in the case of Russia) exercised a deep impact on countries like Turkey (Poland and Hungary in the European periphery are also striking examples), torn between their traditional alignments with the West and new, emerging

partnerships with the East in an increasingly post-Western or post-liberal international order. At the regional level, the failure of the Arab spring and, notably, the tragedy of the Syrian Civil War created new instabilities and security challenges, such as the intensification of the Kurdish conflict. At the domestic level, Turkey experienced a process of stage-by-stage democratic backsliding leading to the establishment of a competitive authoritarian, Russian-style presidential regime, institutionalized by the referendum of 2017 and the June elections of 2018. There is no doubt that these three different elements—global, regional, and domestic—should not be seen as totally distinct but as mutually interlocking phenomena.

Charismatic populist-nationalist-authoritarian leaders seem to be a central feature of the emerging post-liberal international order. Erdoğan, as the leader of the AKP, has been a dominant and influential figure in Turkish politics since the beginning of AKP rule. His role in the foreign policy process became progressively more dominant during the later phase of AKP rule, as the overall regime became increasingly more authoritarian and personalistic. In retrospect, five major principles seem to be at the heart of Erdoğan's foreign policy vision. These principles have played an important role in shaping TFP in recent years, as traditional institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs lost their importance and became marginal in the policy-making process. These principles are (i) Turkey is not a typical middle power but a truly global power considering its historical legacies as well as military capabilities; (ii) internal and external security concerns are a fundamental driving force of foreign policy; (iii) Turkey is a leading country in the Islamic World based on its Sunni-Muslim identity; (iv) Russia and China are key partners in a shifting global context, where Turkey positions itself as a leading country in the 'global South', pushing for a multi-polar global order and promoting the interests of the weak and underprivileged segments of the global order; and (v) relations with the West are to be constructed and maintained in transactional terms in the realms of mutual economic and security interests. Liberal or Western norms, however, no longer constitute a prime reference point for foreign policy, as was the case during the first decade of the AKP rule. These underlying principles, in turn, lead to a broad approach to foreign policy based on the concept of 'strategic autonomy'. The key idea is that Turkey is a sufficiently powerful country to be able to act independently and in line with its national interests on several key foreign policy issues whilst balancing its relations with Western and non-Western global powers in the process.

A central element of TFP during the second phase of AKP rule has been a growing affinity with the Russia-China axis.<sup>12</sup> Russia had already emerged as an important actor for Turkey after the collapse of communism. However, during the 1990s and the early 2000s, relations with Russia developed in a broader context where Turkey was firmly embedded in the West

in economic, security, and identity terms. This strategy started to change notably with the disappointments of the EU membership process, which reached a stalemate from 2005 onwards. Erdoğan effectively capitalized on the failures and humiliations of the stalled EU membership process and clearly signaled his intentions as early as 2011 by arguing that Turkey could become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an alternative to EU membership. The stage-by-stage decay in Turkish democracy during the post-2011 era pushed Turkey further away from the Western alliance and brought the country closer and closer to the style of authoritarian capitalism exemplified by the Russia–China axis.<sup>13</sup> In that respect, the failed military coup attempt on July 15, 2016, constituted another landmark event in Turkey’s changing relations with Western and non-Western global actors.<sup>14</sup> Erdoğan and the AKP leadership, having survived the coup attempt, were highly disappointed with the attitudes of the US and key European countries. This event, more than anything else, aggravated the already prevalent anti-Western sentiments in Turkey,<sup>15</sup> especially in the media outlets which are closer to the Erdoğan regime. In contrast, ties with Russia, which had undergone a temporary breakdown due to a crisis in November 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian plane along the Turkish-Syrian border, showed a great improvement. Unlike the Western leaders, Putin showed strong sympathy for Erdoğan after July 15, and the Turkish leadership also looked more closely to Russia regarding its future security.

In understanding TFP in recent years, one also needs to draw attention to the populist dividend in the domestic sphere. A highly nationalistic and ambitious foreign policy discourse based on the notion of ‘strategic autonomy’ has served as an effective tool for building and maintaining a broad-based electoral coalition at the domestic level and drawing attention away from economic problems and other forms of a governance crisis. Furthermore, foreign policy in this context has become an important tool for fragmenting and weakening the opposition, thereby attempting to strengthen and consolidate the nascent presidential regime in the process.

Turning back to the theme of Turkey’s growing affinity with the Russia–China axis, Russia has certainly been the dominant element. Turkey’s relationship with Russia has assumed a novel qualitative dimension in recent years. Part of this is due to the personal affinity between the two key leaders, Erdoğan and Putin. The domestic political trajectories and political economies of Russia and Turkey also exhibited considerable similarities as a Putin-style presidential regime and the authoritarian leadership style clearly served as a kind of role model for Erdoğan’s Turkey. This was in sharp contrast to the previous decades, where the relationship had developed in an environment in which Turkey was firmly embedded in the transatlantic alliance in normative and material terms.

In the later phase, a new critical security dimension was added to the Turkey-Russian relationship as Turkey increasingly leaned towards non-Western powers for its security concerns. Russia became an insider and immediate neighbor of Turkey in Syria and the Middle East. Both countries also took an active part in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Turkey's beyond-the-border military initiatives in Syria had to be through the consent of Russia, although the two countries appeared to be ironically on opposite sides of the conflict, with Russia supporting and Turkey firmly opposing the Assad regime. The purchase of S-400 missiles from Russia proved to be a critical turning point in this context, with widespread ramifications in terms of creating deep tensions and friction with the US and other NATO partners.

Even if not on the scale of Russia at this juncture, China is increasingly becoming an important actor for Turkey. The growing Turkey-China relationship reflects the importance of two key elements. The first element concerns the growing global reach of China in recent years under the presidency of Xi Jinping, with major initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and large-scale lending from the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). The second element concerns Turkey's increasing distancing away from the West and looking for alternative finance and diplomatic support to strengthen and consolidate the nascent presidential regime. The relationship with China also gathered significant momentum following the failed coup attempt of July 2016, with Turkey becoming increasingly involved in the BRI. Turkey's invitation to the annual BRICS Summit in Johannesburg in July 2018 as the representative of the Islamic Conference Organization constituted another important development in this rapidly evolving relationship.

Having set the stage for the new TFP, the key issue is whether Turkey will be able to maintain this balancing act between the West and the East based on the principle of strategic autonomy. The process of balancing the Great Powers has certainly become far more difficult following the election of Joe Biden as the new US president in November 2020. The geopolitical competition between the US and the EU, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other, appear to have intensified with Biden's presidency, and countries like Turkey, arguably, have less space to maneuver and face greater pressures to choose sides in this stiffer international environment. Certainly, Erdoğan felt more comfortable with a like-minded populist leader like Trump in conducting bilateral relations, even though significant tensions and conflicts also characterized the Turkey-US relationship during the Trump era. Turkey is already feeling the pressures of Biden's presidency and facing the difficulties of managing the economic and security relationships with the United States and the Western alliance, given that Turkey is heavily dependent on the West in economic and security terms.

The S-400 issue aptly highlights the difficulties and contradictions of the new style of TFP based on autonomous action and attempts to balance rival global powers. For Russia, the sale of S-400 missiles to Turkey made perfect sense. It was a source of revenue and was also part of a broader strategy to distract Turkey away from NATO and the Western alliance. For Turkey, however, the decision was clearly part of an inconsistent strategy where Turkey wanted to maintain its organic links to NATO whilst buying missiles of a rival power, which other NATO members saw as an existential threat. With growing pressures from the United States, Turkey has not been able, as of this writing, to activate the S-400 missiles. At the same time, it is confronted with sanctions from the United States and has been excluded from the lucrative F-35 program, in which Turkey played a significant part. These sanctions will not disappear unless Turkey radically changes its policy and commits itself fully to returning or not using the Russian missiles, a possibility that also does not appear to be on the cards at the moment. At a recent NATO Summit, Erdoğan clearly expressed that Turkey will not abandon the idea of using S-400 missiles. The danger of this incoherent policy is that it may lead Turkey to be isolated and weakened in an increasingly difficult and competitive international environment. To add a further dimension, Turkey's increasingly unilateral moves based on the principle of strategic autonomy, such as natural gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean, attempts to resolve the perennial Cyprus conflict, or sending a military force to Libya, not only generate criticism from Turkey's traditional Western partners, who increasingly perceive Turkey as a geopolitical rival, but also fail to receive the support of Russia. Despite the growing affinity between Russia and Turkey in recent years, the relationship also embodies significant conflict in many different areas ranging from Syria to Eastern Mediterranean to Libya. The recent rapprochement between Turkey and Ukraine, as a means of pleasing Biden and the United States, has indeed aggravated the tensions between Turkey and Russia. Certainly, the Turkey-Russia partnership looks significantly short of a 'strategic partnership' and will be even more difficult to maintain in an overt form after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is a relationship strongly driven by two key strong leaders (Erdoğan and Putin) and lacks the kind of institutional depth that Turkey has enjoyed with the West over the course of several decades. Russia will certainly fail to consider Turkey a 'strategic partner' if Turkey resumes its long-standing status as a NATO member. Although Russia and China have become more important in terms of financial assistance during Turkey's recent currency crisis, the West continues to be more important for Turkey in economic terms. Contradictory foreign policy moves are also costly in terms of discouraging direct investment, which comes predominantly from Western sources.



Given the obvious costs associated with the new style of TFP, as the S-400 issue clearly demonstrates, what would be an alternative and constructive path for Turkish foreign policy in the coming years? An alternative path would be to return to the basic principles of Turkish foreign policy, which had been followed throughout the Republican era except for the past decade. Ideally, Turkey, in the emerging international environment, should be firmly anchored in the coalition of democratic capitalist states. Hence, strong ties to the Western alliance, not only in institutional but also in normative terms, should be the primary anchor of foreign policy around which ties to other actors such as Russia and China could be organized. Whether Turkey will be able to achieve a re-transformation of its foreign policy in this direction is highly uncertain and depends critically on Turkey's domestic political trajectory. A process of re-democratization in Turkey, with the opposition harnessing sufficient support to win the next presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023, would constitute a crucial step in this direction. A process of political change and re-democratization in Turkey appears to be a precondition for a shift of foreign policy whereby Turkey would again play a benign regional and global middle power role as in the case of the early phase of the AKP era. It is through such a shift that Turkey can serve as a democratic role model for the Middle East and the Muslim world, and it is through such role model capabilities that Turkey can make a genuinely positive impact in its neighborhood as opposed to a strategy of active interventionism and involvement in the domestic political processes of key Arab countries. The key point is that the more Turkey is involved in the internal affairs of the Middle East and takes sides in sectarian conflicts, the more it is likely to undermine its influence and end up in a position of isolation.

### **Could the Russian invasion of Ukraine prove to be a turning point? A new wave of enlargement and its implications for Turkey**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has constituted a major point of rupture in the evolving post-Western international order, with dramatic implications for global actors such as the US, the EU, and China, not to mention Russia itself. It also constituted a major shock for the rest of the world and the global South, including Turkey, which was already confronted with the complex task of managing its relationship with Western and non-Western powers. Naturally, the Ukraine War will have significant repercussions on Turkey-EU relations and the future of the Turkey-EU-US triangle.

The ongoing War in Ukraine has several important immediate repercussions. The transatlantic alliance, which had experienced a certain degree of fragmentation due to Brexit and Trump, has been effectively reunified



against Russian aggression. There was an unexpectedly strong and unified response by Western democracies and their Asian allies (G7 plus). The magnitude of sanctions implemented during the current crisis has been much greater than the earlier phases of Russian expansionism in 2008 and 2014. Europeans clearly visualize this war as a European war, which constitutes an existential threat to their security and, for the first time, were willing to expand their military budgets by significant margins. In particular, the US and key European countries like Germany and France took active steps in supporting Ukraine in both military and economic terms. The importance of NATO as a collective defense organization was revitalized. From the Western perspective, Russia was clearly identified as a rogue state. Extensive sanctions were designed to isolate Russia from the rest of the world and punish Putin's regime, hoping that the regime would collapse under such pressures.

What was quite surprising, however, was that the rest of the world (effectively much of the global South) reacted quite differently to the War in Ukraine. They certainly did not see the war as their own and did not consider Russia a rogue state. While there was sympathy for the Ukrainians in terms of human losses and the destruction suffered, the dominant view was that Putin was justified in his actions, and the war was largely a reaction to NATO expansionism. The rest of the world's approach was also quite pragmatic in the sense that they tried to take advantage of the opportunities provided by Western sanctions to improve their trade, investment, and energy linkages with Russia. The formidable alliance between China and Russia has not only survived, but probably has been strengthened by the war, with the additional element that the already asymmetric relationship between China and Russia was further tilted in China's favor.

Turkey's position amid this major crisis of the emerging post-war order (or disorder) is also quite striking. TFP, as orchestrated by President Erdoğan and his close associates, has tried to play a delicate balancing role, utilizing the close associations that Turkey had developed both with Russia and Ukraine over the years. Turkey's proactive mediating role in the conflict has also been used effectively as a tool for regaining popularity in domestic politics, which is badly needed in the context of a deep and ongoing economic crisis. Turkey also wanted to reinforce its position in NATO and tried to project the image of a reliable partner in the conflict. The use of Turkish drones by Ukraine in the early stages of the war also worked in favor of Turkey in terms of strengthening its position and obtaining the goodwill of its Western partners. Turkey also played an important role in the grain corridor deal, capitalizing on its close relations with Ukraine and Russia during the summer of 2022. With the mediation of Turkey and the UN, Ukraine and Russia signed an agreement in Istanbul on the resumption of Ukraine's grain exports from Black Sea ports. This

was an important initiative in terms of helping to alleviate a global food crisis, which had developed in the aftermath of the war with serious negative implications for the Middle East and African countries. Because of the proactive role of Turkey in promoting the grain corridor agreement, President Erdoğan was able to bolster his popularity both in domestic and international circles.

At the same, however, Turkey's position during the conflict has been more in line with the position of the majority of the global South or the non-Western world. At the UN General Assembly, Turkey condemned Russian actions, both in initiating the war and its annexation of parts of Ukraine, but overall its condemnation of Russia has been rather muted. There was certainly no attempt to classify Russia as a rogue state and to target Putin directly as a person responsible for the invasion. There was also no intention of applying sanctions on Russia, which would have been suicidal in any case, given the degree of dependence on imports of Russian energy and agricultural commodities. Strong personal relations between Erdoğan and Putin have continued in an uninterrupted fashion during the war. Turkey adopted a neutral approach in line with the concept of 'strategic autonomy' and a balancing strategy, as discussed earlier. Certainly, from the Russian perspective, Turkey was conceived as one of the friendly countries in striking contrast with the vast majority of the Western world.

Whether Turkey can sustain this strategy as the war deepens is quite uncertain. Unlike countries like India or Brazil, which can undertake this balancing act in a more flexible fashion, Turkey is constrained by the fact that it is a member of NATO and is institutionally embedded in the Western alliance. In the short term, however, the balancing strategy and the emphasis on Turkey's mediating role appear to have worked. The ongoing crisis has also generated a greater space for the regime to take independent actions in the domestic sphere, given that the key Western actors are preoccupied with security considerations and are not willing to lose Turkey as a key security partner, even though Turkey is clearly seen as an outlier and deviant NATO member through its actions in recent years. Turkey's active opposition to the inclusion of Sweden and Finland (although an agreement was reached in NATO's Madrid Summit, leading to the removal of the Turkish veto) by claiming these countries, through their support of Kurdish insurgencies, formed a threat to Turkish security. This was a sign that Turkey was not on level terms with the key Western actors in terms of focusing on Russian aggression in Ukraine and the threats this posed for overall European security. A legitimate question to ask is whether Turkey will continue the path which had emerged in the late AKP era, involving a combination of a competitive authoritarian regime at home and a neutral foreign policy, where the West continues to be important only on transactional terms. Alternatively, are we likely to see a radical shift back to the earlier position of being an integral

part of the Western alliance, and will the Russian invasion of Ukraine generate some rather unexpected opportunities in this process?

### Concluding observations and scenarios for the future

Turkey-EU relations have been in the process of serious decline over the course of the past decade. Due to its multiple crises and populist backlashes, the EU has been in a defensive mood and has been concerned with its internal problems. Enlargement has certainly not been on the cards until the current security crisis involving the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The perception of Turkey within the core Western capitals is that of a country whose primary orientation is no longer towards the West. In Turkey, the political elites increasingly look at the EU and the West as 'the other', increasingly shifting their geopolitical priorities towards Russia, China, the Middle East, and the rest of the global South.

The most decisive interaction between the EU and Turkey in recent years has involved the EU-Turkey Refugee Agreement of 2016 (EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan), which involved financial assistance to Turkey in return for restricting the flow of Syrian refugees to Europe. Clearly, this was a transactional agreement whereby Turkey was conceived as a buffer state rather than a genuine and equal partner.<sup>16</sup> It was certainly a form of cooperation that was designed to shield Europe from the instabilities of the Syrian civil war. The Refugee Agreement, perhaps unintentionally, allowed President Erdoğan to capture the moral high ground (based on the argument that, unlike the EU, Turkey has more humanitarian, open-door policies towards the refugees, and Turkey is helping the EU to solve its domestic problems with very little benefits in return) and using this opportunity to bolster his popularity on the domestic front. However, the weak performance of the Turkish economy in recent years hurt Erdoğan's domestic popularity, and the open-door approach to refugees has increasingly become a political liability for Turkey's governing elites, especially in the light of the forthcoming elections. Moreover, recent reports on Turkey by the European Commission and the European Parliament, criticizing the nature of the political regime and human rights malpractices, had very limited impact in the absence of a credible membership signal and were effectively challenged on the grounds that they interfered in the sovereign state of Turkey's domestic politics. What is perhaps striking is the extent of anti-Western sentiment in Turkey, which is not only associated with religious conservative political elites but happens to be a common feature across the whole of the political spectrum.<sup>17</sup> The failure of the EU to make progress on some of the key Turkish demands, such as the revision and modernization of the Customs Union and visa liberalization, has not helped matters either.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these unfavorable trends, given the strong interdependence in the realms of economy, energy, and migration security, a significant ‘transactional relationship’ is likely to continue.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, this is clearly a minimalist agenda compared to the initial objective of Turkey’s full EU membership. A key implication of our analysis is that the EU is unlikely to play a significant role in Turkey’s possible democratic revival. The main impetus for this will have to originate from domestic sources. Possible political shifts, both in Turkey and the EU in the coming years, may contribute to a possible revival in the relationship in the medium term. The forthcoming elections in Turkey will likely be a crucial turning point in this context. If the opposition forces in Turkey are able to win and reverse the authoritarian tide, this will pave the way for significant improvement in Turkey-EU relations. It may be seen as a paradox that although the EU itself may contribute little to Turkey’s democratic revival, Turkey’s democratic revival is likely to lead to a strengthening of relations with the EU, which are likely to have positive repercussions in terms of Turkey’s democratic deepening as well as leading to favorable outcomes in the areas of environment protection, technological innovation and digitalization, and gender equality. However, political change in Turkey alone will not be able to shift the balance in the direction of the EU and the Western alliance. One of the opportunities created by the Ukraine war is the possibility of a new wave of enlargement. The inclusion of Turkey in this wave could have a crucial bearing in terms of strengthening Turkey-EU ties on a permanent basis and deepening the process of democratic consolidation in Turkey. On the other hand, the inclusion of Ukraine, Moldova, and possible Western Balkan countries and the exclusion of Turkey could be yet another historical missed opportunity leading to a new round of humiliation and disappointment and inevitably to the continuation of a largely minimalist transactional agenda.

## Notes

1. For a critical analysis of Turkey’s complex relationship with the West in the post-war period, see Kirişçi, *Turkey and the West*, which highlights the point that Turkey’s relationship with the Western Alliance and with the US in particular was never smooth and often had its tense moments. For a small sample of the vast literature on Turkey-EU relations from a historical perspective, see Müftüler-Baç, *Turkey’s Relations*; Eralp and Yurdusev, *Türkiye ve Avrupa*; Yeşilada, *EU-Turkey Relations*; Arıkan, *Turkey and the EU*; and Öniş, “Luxembourg,” “An Awkward Partnership,” and “Turkey’s Encounters”. For more recent developments in Turkey-EU relations, see Aydın Düzgüt and Tocci, *Turkey and the European Union*; Müftüler-Baç, “Turkey’s Ambivalent Relationship”; and Reiners and Turhan, *Unpacking the New Complexities*.

2. Prior to 1967, the EU was known as the European Economic Community (EEC), and from 1967–1992 it was called the European Community (EC).
3. For further elaboration on comparison between Turkey and the Mediterranean trio during the 1970s and possible missed opportunities, see Öniş, “An Awkward Partnership.”
4. The significance of the Cyprus conflict and the implications on Turkey-EU relations of integrating the Republic of Cyprus into the EU prior to resolving the conflict on the island are explored by Yeşilada and Sözen, “Negotiating a Resolution.”
5. Valuable analyses of the major initiatives associated with the ‘golden age’ period are provided by Müftüler-Baç, “Turkey’s Political Reforms,” and Özbudun, “Democratization Reforms.”
6. For a more detailed treatment of the underlying dynamics of the Helsinki Decision, see Öniş, “Luxembourg.”
7. For further elaboration on the emergence of a pro-Turkey coalition in the EU towards the end of the 1990s, see Öniş, “Turkey’s Encounters.”
8. On the series of crises that the EU experienced and the challenges that this has created both for the EU itself as well as for Turkey-EU relations, see Öniş and Kutlay, “Global Shifts,” and Colta and Isernia, *The EU through Multiple Crises*. Kaya, “Right-Wing Populism,” also provides a valuable account how the rise of Islamophobia and populist sentiments in Europe due to the economic crisis and the migration crisis produced a deep negative influence over the already difficult trajectory of Turkey-EU relations.
9. On the process of ‘de-Europeanization’ in the second half of the 2010s and how Turkey progressively diverged from the EU norms on both the economic and political fronts, see Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber, “Encounters with Europe,” and Yılmaz, “From Europeanization to De-Europeanization.”
10. For a good discussion of the ‘fairness’ issue in Turkey-EU relations, see Keyman and Aydın, “The Principle of Fairness.”
11. For detailed analysis of the dynamics of Turkish foreign policy in the emerging post-Western or post-liberal international order and the growing importance of ‘strategic autonomy’ as a key principle underlying TFP in recent years, see Kutlay and Öniş, “Turkish Foreign Policy,” and “Understanding Oscillations.”
12. On the growing importance of the China-Russia axis for Turkey, see Kutlay and Öniş, “Turkish Foreign Policy,” and, “Understanding Oscillations.” For a valuable assessment of the strong partnership that has emerged between Turkey and Russia over the course of the past decade, see Kubicek, “Structural Dynamics.” On the growing importance of Turkey-China relations in recent years, see Öniş and Yalikul, “Emerging Partnership.”
13. For a powerful treatment of how Turkey drifted stage by stage into a competitive authoritarian regime during the course of the 2010s, see Esen and Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism.”
14. *BBC News Türkçe*. “15 Temmuz darbe girişimi: Türkiye neden ABD’yi suçluyor, Amerikan yönetimi ne diyor?”, February 21, 2021. Accessed on July 11, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-55952909>.
15. *TRT Haber*. “15 Temmuz’da batı nasıl tepki verdi?”, July 12, 2018. Accessed on July 11, 2022, from <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/15-temmuzda-bati-nasil-tepki-verdi-374909.html>.
16. For a good discussion of Turkey as a ‘buffer state’, see Keyman, “Turkish Foreign Policy.”

17. Kaliber and Kaliber, “From De-Europeanization,” provide an incisive analysis of the process anti-Western populism has become a dominant feature of Turkish politics and Turkish foreign policy in recent years.
18. The point about ‘unfair treatment’ has also been made about the Customs Union (CU) with the EU. Whilst most analysts acknowledge that Turkey has benefited from the CU over time, they also contend that there is a significant need for reform to eliminate some of the biases against Turkey, especially given that the possibility of full EU membership has dropped from the agenda in recent years. Particularly relevant in this context are Dawar, Hartwell and Togan, “Reforming and Renegotiating,” and Yilmaz, “The EU-Turkey Customs Union”.
19. The concept of transactionalism, meaning a pure interest driven relationship devoid of normative content, has been well explored by Bashirov and Yilmaz, “The Rise of Transactionalism.”

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