

## EU-Turkey Relations: Between Cooperation and Conflict

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### Summary

Almost two decades after the EU and Turkey started accession negotiations, the future of their relations is uncertain. In these twenty years, Turkey's political system gradually but steadily turned autocratic. The EU's normative leverage over Turkey is minimal, while Turkey today has a higher potential for disruption compared to the past. Disagreements in foreign and security policy dossiers are not uncommon. Still, Brussels and Turkey appear willing to cooperate. Moreover, they need one another. Ankara's space for maneuver is restrained by economic and technological challenges, and the EU needs a stable Turkey at a time of geopolitical turmoil in its immediate neighborhood. The parties should prioritise managing their disagreements by agreeing on a set of rules for engagement. This could increase the likelihood of practical cooperation in economy and trade, migration, and defence.

### The Issue

Officially a candidate country despite the deadlock in the accession process, Turkey is often referred to in EU documents as “a key partner”, “a country of strategic relevance”, and “an important ally”. Yet Ankara is also seen as a challenge, at times even a threat to regional stability and the interests of the member states. Meanwhile, Ankara claims to approach EU membership as a strategic priority, albeit unwilling to back up its words with actions. The AKP leadership accuses the EU of strategic blindness and asks the Union to approach Turkey's candidacy in a “fair” and “inclusive” manner, particularly as Russia's war against Ukraine has intensified discussions over Eastward enlargement.

Notwithstanding these seemingly different perceptions, both parties are aware of the importance of cooperation. Within the EU, calls for mutually beneficial frameworks as alternatives to accession are increasingly common. According to Hakan Fidan, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, the EU should stop “viewing Türkiye as a competitor in different areas and a transactional partner in

the wake of challenges that it cannot cope with by itself.” He further notes that “a robust and self-sustaining Turkish economy with access to global opportunities” will help Turkey “reduce tensions, de-escalate conflicts, help counter-terrorism efforts, and thus serve regional stability”.

***“the most vital issue ... is agreeing on engagement rules to manage conflict”***

Given the foreign and security policy disagreements between the parties and competing frameworks underlying their relations, conflicts will be an intrinsic component of bilateral relations in the foreseeable future. But this is hardly something new: the harmonious period between the signing of the Customs Union Agreement in 1995 and the late 2000s was arguably exceptional. Today, the most vital issue in EU-Turkey relations is agreeing

on engagement rules to manage conflict so that issue-based cooperation can continue effectively.

## Analysis

In the early 2000s, some within the EU saw the idea of granting Turkey candidate status as a means to improve relations. For example, candidate status might “solve the Cyprus issue and reduce tensions in the Aegean”. This belief turned out to be utterly false. Turkey is far from becoming an EU member and the Cyprus conflict remains unsolved—in fact, after the failed Crans-Montana talks in 2017, Turkey has shifted to support a two-state solution. The EU is now a party to the dispute and has to cope with its ramifications in the Eastern Mediterranean. And the Cyprus conflict has not been the only obstacle to Turkey’s accession.

Whispers about an alternative framework were already circulating at the start of Turkey’s EU membership journey. Since then, these voices have only become louder. The EU, already burdened by enlargement fatigue, lacks sufficient capacity to absorb a country like Turkey, with a vast population. Assumed political and cultural incompatibilities between Turkey and the EU also play a role. After almost two decades, European public opinion is understandably more skeptical about Turkey’s EU prospects, given Ankara’s perseverance at autocratization and its confrontational and ambitious foreign policy, often perceived as anti-Western and revisionist.

### *...two parallel ad hoc frameworks have emerged.*

#### *Contradictory Logics: Accession, Transactionalism, and Confrontation*

As the two actors drifted apart, the accession framework lost its function as an anchor for their relations. Instead, two parallel ad hoc frameworks have emerged. Especially since the March 2016 Statement on migration cooperation, transactionalism has become a common practice in EU’s approach to Turkey. In recent years, the EU also added confrontation to its toolkit. For example, following Turkey’s 2019 incursion into northern Syria, some Member States suspended arms exports to Turkey. The EU also implemented targeted restrictive measures.

These two frameworks are not always compatible with the normative logic underlying the accession framework, in which the EU holds the upper hand and the EU expects the candidate country to abide by the *acquis* as a whole. Transactionalism is an interest-driven, pragmatic approach. It works best when relations in different policy areas are compartmentalized. Confrontation aims at deterrence where a normative logic fails to generate a desired behavior. It is only likely to function when the confronted actor thinks that the costs of punitive measures offset the assumed benefits of its actions.

### *...the accession framework has arguably become a drawback to managing cooperation and confrontation*

Yet, given that the EU’s normative leverage over Turkey is minimal, that collaboration with Turkey is inevitable, and that alignment in foreign and security policy dossiers remains low, the accession framework has arguably become a drawback to managing cooperation and confrontation in EU-Turkey relations.

#### *EU-Turkey Relations: Continuity or Rupture?*

The geopolitical realities of the 2000s are no longer present. This period was shaped by the Post-Cold War assumptions that economic liberalisation will eventually lead to political liberalisation, and that cooperation rather than conflict shapes international relations. Moreover, the US is no longer as vocal a supporter of Turkey’s deeper integration into the EU as it was during the 1990s and 2000s.

### *...looking at EU-Turkey relations over a longer time horizon... reveals more continuities than ruptures.*

Yet, looking at EU-Turkey relations over a longer time horizon, beyond the fifteen years between the signing of the Customs Union Agreement in 1995 and the late 2000s, reveals more continuities than

ruptures. This is rather striking. First, “deploying economic means to (geo)political ends” was the defining element of relations in the preceding three decades after Turkey had signed an association agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1963. Second, escalations were also present during these years, including the Turkish intervention in Cyprus in 1974 following a coup sponsored by Greece; disagreements with Greece in the Aegean over the continental shelf; and former Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit’s unilateral freezing of the Association Agreement in 1978. Third, the relationship exhibited significant divergences in opinion even during the Cold War. For Europeans, Turkey was important enough that it should remain within the European security structure, but not mature enough to be granted full access to it in political and economic terms. For Turkey’s ruling elites before the AKP, economic and political integration with the European community was seen to be essential to secure the country’s place in the Western ecosystem of states. The dynamics of the Cold War helped anchor the relationship despite these different perceptions.

## Implications

Today, perceptions continue to differ. But many of the shared interests engendered by the Cold War are absent. The current geopolitical context consistently fails to provide a stable foundation for relations. This is due to the AKP leadership’s lack of a clear strategic sense of Turkey’s place in the world beyond the rhetoric of an independent foreign policy. It is also a result of the absence of a long-term vision within the EU for Turkey’s place in a changing European security order.

The Union and its Member States do not always see eye to eye with Ankara on critical foreign and security dossiers, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean, as evidenced by Turkey’s limited alignment with EU policies. Lacking normative leverage on Turkey, the EU cannot force Ankara to reform. At the same time, Turkey has a higher potential for disruption today than it had in the past—not only rhetorically but also via actual policies concerning the Turkish diaspora, migration, and within NATO. Nevertheless, Ankara’s aspirations for an independent foreign policy are restrained by economic and technological challenges.

All of this suggests that there is enough maneuver-

ing space for cooperation beyond disagreements and confrontation, especially in areas of migration, defence, and trade and economy—particularly regarding the green transition. Even though it is unclear whether institutionalising a full-fledged alternative framework is possible in the foreseeable future, given that disagreements and divergences in perceptions are not easily resolvable, the parties should work on managing their disagreements, at the very least, by agreeing on a set of rules for engagement. Meanwhile, the EU should continue supporting Turkey’s shrinking democratic spaces.

## Further Reading

- » Alper Coşkun and Sinan Ülgen, “A Reflection on Turkey’s Centennial”, Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2023), Brussels, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/11/07/reflection-on-t-rkiye-s-centennial-pub-90934>.
- » Ilke Toygür, et al., “Turkey’s foreign policy and its consequences for the EU”, Directorate General for External Policies Policy Department, European Parliament, (2022), Brussels, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/653662/EXPO\\_IDA\(2022\)653662\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/653662/EXPO_IDA(2022)653662_EN.pdf)
- » Sinem Adar, “Is (Strategic) Partnership Under the Shadow of Strategic Autonomy Possible”, Briefing Series Article 1, TUSIAD Global Politics Forum/Berlin Bosphorus Initiative, (2022), Istanbul, [https://www.institut-bosphore.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IB\\_BBI\\_Briefing-Series\\_SinemAdar\\_v6.pdf](https://www.institut-bosphore.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IB_BBI_Briefing-Series_SinemAdar_v6.pdf)



## Takeaways

- A combination of cooperation and confrontation will mark EU-Turkey relations in the foreseeable future, given geopolitical imperatives and diverging positions on foreign and security policy issues.
- This likely dynamic reflects both continuity and rupture in relations, especially if one takes a broader time horizon that goes earlier than the post-Cold War era.
- The EU cannot force Turkey to reform because it lacks the normative leverage. Nonetheless, it can continue supporting Turkey's shrinking democratic spaces.
- As the parties look for ways to effectively cooperate, albeit lacking an institutionalised framework, they should prioritise agreeing on a set of rules for engagement. This agreement would help them manage their disagreements.

## Sammanfattning och slutsatser

- » En kombination av samarbete och konfrontation kommer att prägla relationerna mellan EU och Turkiet under överskådlig framtid, med tanke på geopolitiska förutsättningar och olikartade ståndpunkter i utrikes- och säkerhetspolitiska frågor.
- » Denna dynamik återspeglar både kontinuitet och brott i förbindelserna, särskilt om man ser till en bredare tidshorisont som går längre tillbaka än tiden efter kalla kriget.
- » EU kan inte tvinga Turkiet till reformer eftersom man saknar det normativa inflytandet. Men EU kan ändå fortsätta att stödja Turkiets krympande demokratiska utrymme.
- » Eftersom parterna letar efter sätt att samarbeta effektivt trots avsaknaden av ett institutionaliserat ramverk, bör de prioritera att komma överens om en uppsättning regler för förhållandet. Denna överenskommelse skulle hjälpa dem att hantera meningsskiljaktigheter.

## About the SUITS policy brief

This policy brief aims contribute to a broad and well-researched understanding of Turkey and Turkish affairs through presenting a variety of voices on current issues and the foundational moments that impact today. The aim is to provide policy makers and others the tools to make informed decisions.

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