

# TURKEY: Neither WEST nor EAST?

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## Abstract

*Following domestic political dynamics, disunity and redirected priorities of the EU and decreasing in its NATO geostrategic role, Turkey turned to new policy norm where narrowed national interests gained absolute dominance in foreign relations. The ensuing quest for flexible alliances with Western rivals has generated more transactional and compartmentalized relationships with Western powers as Turkey considers its traditional ties with them as unequal and at times unfavorable to its interests. From historic low points in relations with US and EU, more often benefits Russia as a more powerful partner in 'marriage of convenience' with Turkey. Turkey in regions as Middle East, Balkan, Caucasus, Central Asia and some part of Africa, aims for a larger role and persistently builds its capacity to influence events. The ambitious leadership and the transformation of the cooperative and economically based Turkish policy to one more exclusive and security-oriented, confronted Turkey with a myriad of actors of various scales including global heavyweights.*

## Keywords

*Turkey, nationalism, strategic repositioning, transactional, regional power, militarization, Western powers, Russia.*

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## Introduction

The key geostrategic location between three continents positioned Turkey as a critical NATO member during the Cold War. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, changes in the security environment, fundamental shifts in the domestic political scene, and the rise of Islamist political leadership have brought discord into the relations with former close partners. In this millennium, Turkey started to seek a more independent and active role, mainly in its neighborhood, often flirting with its Ottoman legacy.

It was particularly unnerved by NATO's passivity on its southern flank in the initial phase of the Syrian war and subsequent Western powers (mainly the US) reliance on Kurdish combatants (PKK's Syrian franchise) in its fight against the rising ISIS. Turkey has a bitter forty-year history of bloody conflicts with PKK. Therefore, the prevention of terrorist activities is the goal of the utmost importance in the Turkish national security strategy. The visible lack of support in crisis after the downing of the Russian military plane in November 2015 as well as during and after the failed coup attempt in July 2016 have only strengthened the pervasive and enduring sense of anxiety and suspicion of the Turkish authorities and a considerable part of the general public towards the Western security block.

Moreover, regional and neighborhood situations have become exceptionally turbulent where Turkey confronts upheavals and changes that further complicating its strategic choices. It deteriorated relations with the most powerful Arab states because it supported the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) which is considered a terrorist organization by Egypt, KSA, and the UAE, an tried to forge discreet cooperation with Western adversaries such as Russia or Iran as they gained control over the end game in the Syrian civil war. Having experienced shifted perceptions of threats and ever-growing security risks in the southern and eastern flank, Turkey has become more assertive, ready to deploy the military outside its borders.

Several domestic factors have also contributed to the militarization of foreign policy. Since the executive presidency system took effect in 2018, military actions abroad and the embrace of a more nationalist discourse have had

strong public support, sustaining the popularity of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Furthermore, the coalition with the ultranationalist party is critical for his grip on the power.

The research in this article focuses on the complex web of parties and events that are changing Turkey's internal dynamics, economic, foreign, and military policy priorities. It endeavors to present the outlook of Turkey's positioning towards the West and the East. However, the complexity of problems between the parties and the speed at which they are changing makes it difficult to offer straightforward predictions or recommendations.

## **Domestic Politics**

In 2018, Turkey witnessed fundamental shifts in governance when the nearly century-old parliamentary system was altered. With changes of constitution, president turned into the head of the executive branch, responsible for the conduct of foreign policy as well. The prime minister's office was abolished and the president was allowed to retain leadership of the dominant political party. Thus, Erdogan longevity<sup>2</sup> was reinforced with a powerful executive presidency which has eliminated most checks and balances, stimulating formation of an authoritarian system. As the introduction of the presidential system was originally the idea of the leadership of ultranationalist party (Karaveli, 2018), they have become elections partners setting Turkey on nationalistic trajectory, ever since<sup>3</sup>. As a result, traditional division in Turkish identity-based politics, between secularism and nationalism introduced by Kemal Pasha Atatürk and political Islam which has been thriving on political scene during AKP rule has been sidelined with unique merger of nationalist and Islamist visions. It was best manifested on March 2018, when President Erdogan saluted attendees at a rally in Mersin with both the ultranationalist

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2 As the head of the Justice and Development party AKP (an acronym for Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) he has been leading Turkey since 2003.

3 The Nationalist Movement Party MHP (an acronym for Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) has been a crucial AKP ally since 2015, when they blocked the attempts of different opposition parties to form a coalition government that would have removed the AKP from power.

“Bozkurt” gesture and the four-fingered with thumb bent “Rabia” gesture, aligning himself with the Muslim Brotherhood (RAND, 2020).

Eventually, the nationalistic and autocratic ruling style started to backfire both domestically and internationally. The trend of political polarization of the country along the ethnic and social lines deepened. An irreconcilable division was created between Erdogan’s supporters and his opponents. AKP and MHP dominate in the provinces of the conservative, nationalist Anatolian heartland, while the secular opposition is reinforcing its base in big cities and European Istanbul as well as along the Aegean coast. The support for Kurdish biggest party<sup>4</sup> has increased in the Kurdish southeast while the ruling AKP has lost significant support of moderate and pious Kurds. The polarization was best seen in local elections in 2019 when a broad political opposition, including the Kurds, for the first time united on the anti-Erdogan platform (Rodriguez, 2020). In a bitterly contested pre-election campaign the opposition gained important victories in most big cities, including the capital Ankara. Even more important was the victory in Istanbul, the largest city, where the rallied opposition won twice after AKP on dubious pretense contested the first round. Although the results did not directly influence the central government, it was a symbolic indication of the falling appeal with the urban elite. Moreover, it was widely seen as a rebuke for the apparent authoritarianism and a protracted economic crisis.

The longstanding rifts inside the ruling party pushed some of its prominent members to try their political luck, further straining Erdogan’s position even within his supporter base. The executive presidency was supposed to encourage a two-party system. Instead, it facilitated the formation of new parties, most remarkably two splinter groups of AKP targeting the same populace that brought Erdogan to power. Established by previously prominent politicians, they could strengthen the opposition ranks with the potential to erode the AKP base. Many of its voters do not acquiesce with the state of democracy, a departure from free-market, generally poor

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4 Peoples’ Democratic Party HDP (an acronym for Halkların Demokratik Partisi) – rising pro-Kurdish party which embraces progressive organizations and leftist and whose leader is facing life sentence. Selahattin Demirtaş has been in jail for almost five years.

management of the economy, and an inconsistent and flawed foreign policy. The country is now divided into two almost equal-sized camps. One camp supports Erdogan while the other opposes him. Even a small fraction of the votes shifting from AKP to the opposition could become a game-changer (Çevik, 2020).

Moreover, despite ideological convergence, a delicate fissure between AKP and MHP where one has an Islamic view of Turkey's identity and goals, while the other is ultra-nationalist, makes them often direct competitors in interior provinces, where the MHP, rather than the broad spectrum of opposition parties, represents an alternative for dissatisfied AKP voters. In these circumstances, the common strategy unfolded in playing on the Kurdish card and division of the opposition (Tol, 2020). MHP is championing a non-flexible view on the Kurdish problem, severely constraining room for maneuver on this issue, as a security-driven approach squeezed out options for a peaceful and political settlement which tentatively started in 2013 – only to be abruptly stopped less than two years later. AKP confronted with perpetual failure to develop a comprehensive Kurdish policy at home and in the region, recognized the opportunity to use Turkish and Syrian Kurds as the 'enemy' to win the crucial electoral battles as well as the ongoing battle for the hearts and minds of Turkey's national-religious conservatives, including quite some pious Kurds (van Veen and Yuksel, 2018). It resulted in a series of military operations outside its borders and domestic repression on HDP<sup>5</sup>, and both are usually condemned from the Western countries. Even if conflict with the Kurds has been draining Turkey's resources for decades and continues to curb its strategic potential, there is little prospect that Turkey will revive defunct peace talks with the PKK in the foreseeable future. Without that, Russia and Iran will ominously portray over realization (? The over-realization?) of Turkish national interests.

The internal disputes between Erdogan and the generally intransigent MHP leadership and how Erdogan will choose to satisfy the MHP's political aspirations will drive Turkey's foreign policy. Turkish tentative

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<sup>5</sup> MHP even requested to completely ban HDP for alleged ties to the outlawed PKK (Reuters, 2021).

disengagement from the West could be seen through the lens of the growing MHP influence in anti-Western moves in Turkish foreign policy. Its future ties can depend on whether the MHP leadership prefers to use its political leverage to achieve domestic or foreign-policy objectives (Ulgen, 2018). Meanwhile, closer ties with Russia are also far from a foregone conclusion, given the right-wing nationalists' distaste for such an alliance. The prospect of a protracted economic crisis, where Russia also faces economic problems and can be of little help, narrows the options for Turkish leaders, in warming up with the West and precarious embrace of China.

## **Economic Background**

In the Erdogan era, the Turkish population generally improved their economic status and many people escaped from poverty. Economic achievements and strong industrial growth in the AKP's early years boosted the quality of life but also planted the seeds of the frequent and painful cycles of recurring economic crunches and financial slumps. The Turkish model proved highly dependent on foreign credits and speculative investments, vulnerable to a steep decline in foreign direct investment with overall weakness toward even minor macroeconomic or political events, like former POTUS tweet (Financial Times, 2019). In times when signs of crisis showed up and economic growth stalled, government repeatedly opted for increase of its spending, and pushed harder for cheap credit that boosts consumption (pressuring Central bank to cut its interest rate below inflation rate<sup>6</sup>, with bond purchasing or effectively quantitative easing and reserve management policies), largely advancing its structural weaknesses. The set of measures directed against foreign investors and more interventionism of state in Turkish stock exchange and bond markets in the inevitable case of credit downturn regularly lead to escalation of lira conversions into US dollars. Lira depreciation, widened current account deficit, increase in external debt stock (majority of it is belonging to the private sector in crony construction

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<sup>6</sup> In economic circles Erdogan is often recognized as pragmatic autocrat who doesn't understand economy where his unconventional economic thinking – that higher interest rates are causing inflation – only serves populist goals (Bloomberg, 2021).

companies), growing unemployment are all indicators of vulnerability and limited means to face sudden economic shocks with significant repercussions on Turkey's political stability and economic climate. Feeble response and equivocal stimulus measures to coronavirus challenge only signaled that Turkish government lacked significant monetary and fiscal space given its poor handling of economy for sustained period.

After alarming situation in the second half of 2020, Erdogan reluctantly consented to reforms, replacing Central bank governor with addition of widely unpopular finance minister and his son-in-law after discovery of foreign reserves drain of \$128 billion and suspicion of huge profiteering in their sales (Al Monitor, 2021a). Reforms were promising and recognized from the international community, but as problems are structural, painful and politically detrimental, so once again Erdogan interfered, trying his luck with unorthodox economic policies and loyalists on crucial economic position. The circle was closed again with plunge of lira and flight of foreign investors (CNBC, 2021). Erdogan nationalistic calls to Turks to help stabilize lira by selling their foreign exchange assets and buy lira-based financial instruments were doomed to fail and failing to inspire confidence among its population and economic actors, has placed Turkey anew in the company with the most vulnerable countries in the world.

Overall, Turkey continues to face a contradiction between its economic and political interests where AKP officials have tendency to attack the EU and the US rhetorically to rally nationalist base. Despite its rhetorical allure, the anti-Western stance has not translated into a sustainable and prosperous economic model for Turkey. In the absence of coherent domestic policy, Western engagement and favorable global economic reshuffling resuscitated Turkey more than once. The cost of complete alienation from the West would be prohibitive for the Turkish economy that is structurally dependent on a free-market economy and deeply-rooted integration with Western institutions (Colakoğlu, 2019). Indeed, the legacy of past generations of Turkish leaders, who consciously chose to advance Turkey's economic integration with the West may yet prove the strongest factor keeping the country anchored to the West despite a darkening political outlook.

## Military Transformation

Erdogan wants Turkey as an independent geopolitical player who seeks to be the dominant regional force, projecting power over neighboring countries and across seas. Overestimating its power and capacity, he seeks to compete alongside heavyweights, at least in the wider Middle East. In this endeavor, Turkey faces some limitations. In terms of its economic capacity, Turkey can't match some of rich regional rivals, while when it comes to generating new weapons Turkey had been for long time on the losing side in defense technologies with plenty to recoup.

However, new strategic concept and proactive approach outside its borders<sup>7</sup>, thrusting the military into rapid transformation (side by side with post-coup purge), with the goal to improve military capacity and its foreign operational capabilities. Frustrated with repeated NATO's lack of support, Turkey quickly started to advance its defense technological and industrial base which now can produce various conventional weapon systems (Insight Turkey, 2020a).

Four pivots have shaped the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) immense change: the naval transformation toward a blue-water navy and the Mavi Vatan<sup>8</sup> concept, the army's expeditionary warfare concepts and doctrinal order of battle, the growing experience of the Turkish special forces and intelligence in proxy warfare and a rising forward-basing posture in Turkey's sphere of strategic interests (Insight Turkey, 2020b). The expeditionary posture has been gradually gained with forward deployments across region. Results can be seen in establishment of more military bases abroad<sup>9</sup> where Qatar and Somalia bases came in addition to the controversial Bashliq base in northern Iraq to demonstrate the importance of the wider Middle

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7 Except for some of NATO and UN engagements, Turkey's military and security involvement was concentrated predominantly in anti-terrorism activities in fight against PKK.

8 Blue Homeland

9 Since 1974 Turkey maintains military presence in unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.



East region for Turkey security posture. The string of generally successful military operations in Northern Syria and subsequent activities in Libya and Azerbaijan demonstrated progress in military prowess with most notable advance in drone warfare capabilities. Even if Turkey has developed well-trained and frequently used proxy warfare capabilities as a tool of power projection<sup>10</sup>, experts are of the opinion that for now they have delivered modest achievements (Yanarocak and Spyer 2021). Turkish special force presence in neighboring Iraq and Syria explains primary security concern, the PKK and its offshoots. The country also faces other hybrid risks on its territory, including the Salafi extremist terrorist networks of ISIS<sup>11</sup> and al-Qaeda. Thus, the Turkish military has to ensure a high level of readiness to tackle national security threats across a broad spectrum. Finally, Turkish military expeditions have consumed huge resources and placing an additional burden on the crisis-ridden economy could become urgent political question, losing its previous stand of wide support.

As Turkey will continue to depend on foreign military cooperation, it is in urge for a well-calculated national capacity analysis to maintain its military posture. Despite some success when it comes to high-end and technology-driven arms, Turkey still needs NATO capabilities and collaboration from exactly the same Western countries that Turkey often verbally attacks. Even drone industry which assets deployment on various battlefields has produced the most of the stir in international media depends on Western export licenses and its support and they cannot be taken for granted (CBC, 2020). However, West is not facing comfortable options as any lack of support can easily backfire. It will create opening for Russia or China to once again encroach on hungry Turkish weapon market.

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10 TAF has developed proxy forces in cooperation with private military contracting company SADAT and the Syrian National Army.

11 There is strong evidence that ISIS has built large and active network inside Turkey (Al Monitor, 2021b)

## Foreign Policy

Turkey bolsters its own vision of changing global order. While the US as the dominant Western power views a Great power competition as flashpoint in its strategic priorities, Turkey recognizes, mostly in the rise of China but also in Russian revisionism, signs of the US decline. Therefore, Turkey should not be only tied to the West but a more independent actor who will advance its strategic interests even when those are in contrast with its traditional allies or proclaimed core values. These can partly explain closing with Russia but also Turkey's reaction of China treatment of Turkic Uighur population (Al Monitor, 2021c). When faced with blatant oppression of its kin minority, Turkey compromised on its Islamic prestige in favor of narrow self-interest.

Increasingly faced with clearly opposing interests with the West, Turkey considers that it cannot be constrained by firm alliances. Alliances should be pragmatic and in accordance with Turkish interests. However, transactional and more autonomous approach, limited by inferior economic and military capacities is putting Turkey under pressure of bigger powers, namely the US and Russia. Hence, even if skillfully leveraging its strategic location, Turkey regularly operates with narrowing room for maneuver. Troublesome repositioning and strategic constraints were best exposed in Syria where principal strategic objective of prevention of Kurdish statelet on its border has brought Turkey on brink of military clash with the US and Russia, respectively. The potential rekindling of Ukraine crisis could be another test for foreign policy course.

Until 2010, Turkey advanced its role through trade and soft power tools and had very positive relations with almost all regional powers including Israel, Iran and the Arab States. Additionally, the ruling AKP also succeeded to advance relations with global powers and all other neighbors – including always antagonistic Greece, Armenia, and Syria. The groundwork for that approach where Turkey successfully played to the interests and issues of key regional players with its mix of trade/investment and politico-religious moderation/modernization had been laid by Ahmet Davutoglu and his widely known 'zero problems with neighbors' narrative (van Veen and Yuksel, 2018). However, everything started to change with Arab Spring in

2011 when Turkey dropped both Davutoğlu's and earlier Atatürk's 'peace at home, peace in the world' slogans, discovering that its policies failed to advance national interests. It led to a weakening of bilateral ties and to an erosion of Turkey's regional influence (Kuo, 2016). Turkey devised that it could better benefit from invoking and deploying both coercive diplomacy and military force as elements of its engagements with others. Consequently, from guarantor of stability and raw model for other countries, Turkey became party in all conflicts in the region, time and again with Russia.

Management of Syria and the Kurds are the principal political issues for Turkish foreign policy. These two critical issues have direct consequences to relationships with the US and Russia, and both have effects on regional positions and its reciprocity with domestic developments. With regard to wider region of the Middle East, Turkey considers that array of the US allied governments and US military engagement in Iraq and Syria are in contrast to its national interests. Turkey recognizes US support for the Gulf Arab States as the root cause of regional instability. Most of these states deteriorated relations with Turkey as they find Turkish proximity to the Muslim Brotherhood troubling. Moreover, rapprochement between KSA, the UAE and Egypt with Israel under the former US administration pushed Turkey toward interest-based cooperation with Iran as both countries see such alliance as an existential threat. While Khashoggi case clearly exposed the intensity of the struggle for regional supremacy between KSA and Turkey, physical proximity, alignment in Syria under the Astana agreement, common challenges created by KSA (e.g. Qatar blockade), energy dependence and financial crisis all played in favor of closer relations between Iran and Turkey.

Recent decade witnessed how neighboring support in hard days promoted mutual trust in Turkish Iranian relations. Turkey helped Iran to break the sanctions through equivocal financial and trade relations, while Iran (with Russia) was first to support Turkey after failed coup. Most of the others showed restraint, raising Turkish suspicion of direct or indirect complicity. In times when the balances in the region are in the flux, relations between Turkey and Iran are discovering some newfound areas of cooperation. After short plunge in the beginning of Syria crisis, clear rule of common interests prevailed. Their ability to compartmentalize their bilateral relations

has allowed for continued broad cooperation even as they engage in proxy war in Syria and competition in Iraq. Even if Turkey is uneasy about some of Iran's activities in its neighborhood, when it places Iran in the broader regional context and look at the allied countries opposing it, Turkey considers them as more dangerous. However, given their different political regimes, conflicting geopolitical ambitions and impact of great powers in the region there is a limit to how close they can become. The shifting regional power equations are forcing Turkey and Iran to frequently revise their positions, which may not always be compatible. That is especially in case when Iranian too aggressive stance leads to serious aggravation of regional stability. Besides, siding with Iran bears domestic costs as neither Sunni Islamist support base nor nationalists are pleased with that.

Concurrently, Turkish relations with Arabs have gravely deteriorated, generating serious and often unnecessary chasms (Aoudé, 2020). In the wake of Arab Spring the Sunni Middle East has cleaved into two competing axes, setting the Turkish-Qatari couple against KSA and the UAE axis aided by Egypt after 2013 coup deposition of MB government. To counterbalance KSA and the remarkably insistent UAE<sup>12</sup>, Turkey has created some form of unequal strategic alliance with Qatar, where Turkey dominates militarily while Qatar provides finance (Cafiero, 2016). Across the region, from Libya, Sudan or the Horn of Africa these opposing blocs at present contest each other's influence. In the West, the Islamist based Turkish-Qatari axis is often seen adversely as allegedly, they pursue not only legitimate forms of cooperation but also joint ventures in illicit finance, support for Islamist insurgents abroad, promotion of extremist ideologies, and harboring terrorists associated with Hamas and al-Qaeda (Erdemir, and Koduvayur, 2019). Finally, some analysts believe that Turkish dealings with Iran and Qatar and meddling in the Arab regime's affairs (including championing of

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<sup>12</sup> Turkish and Emirati leaders have benefited politically from the confrontation, using it to bolster their domestic and international positions. For the UAE, countering Turkey has opened the door to new alliances with Western actors, including European countries such as France and Greece, and has enhanced its position in Washington. For Ankara, its depiction of the UAE as intent on undermining Erdogan has provided fuel for the official narrative that outside forces are trying to sabotage a rising Turkey – a key theme in Turkish leaders' explanations of foreign policy objectives to voters (Aydıntaşbaş, 2021a).

Palestinian cause) have greatly contributed to pushing of the most of these regimes toward Israel (Al Monitor, 2021d).

Turkey has learned that opposition to Israel comes at a price. Good relationships between Israel, Greece, the Greek part of Cyprus, and Egypt made it possible for Turkey's adversaries in the Eastern Mediterranean to benefit from hydrocarbon fields with US blessings. The critical motivation behind Turkey's intervention in Libya is maritime positioning. Out of fear of being cut off from key maritime routes should Greece unilaterally extend its territorial waters and establish new maritime jurisdiction zones, Erdogan has responded by taking a more assertive line nearly pushing two NATO countries toward the naval clash (International Crisis Group, 2020). Under some pressure from the West, this time mostly from the EU, Turkey reduced the tensions, withdrew its ships from the contested area, and even initiated some sort of normalization of its relations with Greece. Likewise, the realization of limited capabilities, Mediterranean quandaries, and collapse of Islamist policy have forced the geopolitically isolated Turkey to improve its relations with KSA and Egypt. However, as Turkish problems with all three countries are not only political but rather structural, it leaves little room for the realization of a pragmatic solution. It is yet to see if Turkey is trying to use the normalization of these relations in a subversive way, namely to undo the network of cooperation that has emerged between Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Egypt, and other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries. By restoring individual relationships with some of them, Turkey hopes to weaken its cohesion and participate in the regional security architectures more effectively, i.e. as an agenda-setter (Al Monitor, 2021e).

### **Neither WEST...**

It is obvious that new political realities have set Turkey's relations with the West in a permanent crisis mode. How the subsequent moves will evolve remains elusive. This highly relevant and intriguing subject brought about a number of analyses which have proposed various scenarios for the future. In the wake of the failed coup when the relations reached the bottom, Amanda Sloat recognized three possible policy responses for the US and Europe:

abandonment, transactionalism, and engagement (Sloat, 2020). They will be reviewed in short and refreshed with some up-to-date arguments.

1) Proponents of abandonment recommend a complete breakdown of ties, disputing Turkey's current membership in NATO and its aspiring membership in the EU. Regarding the US, they have a score of open issues with Turkey. Sheltering of Fethullah Gülen, a self-exiled leader of a Sufi Islamic movement that Turkish authorities contend is a terrorist organization that masterminded a failed July 2016 military coup d'état; the purchase of the S-400; the impending multi-billion fine on Turkish government-owned bank accused of orchestrating a large money-laundering scheme designed to circumvent sanctions against Iran are only a few of them. Turkish regional policies in almost every case are at odds with the US, with a peak in their irreconcilable positioning toward the Kurds – the most important question in Turkey's national security and that will certainly continue to complicate advancement of US regional initiatives. Steven A. Cook writes, "While Turkey remains formally a NATO ally, it is not a partner of the United States", and "Unlike in previous eras, Washington and Ankara no longer share overarching threats or interests that bind them together" (Cook, 2018). In some more recent commentaries (Forbes, 2020), the sentiment was similar only it was addressed to the incoming US administration.

With NATO, the case is corresponding. The recent history with NATO was saturated with controversies<sup>13</sup>, culminating in 2019 when NATO condemned Operation peace Spring and Turkey initially refused to back the NATO defense plan for the Baltics and Poland (Lipka, 2019) in a bid to extract political support for its campaign. The situation only calmed down because of Turkey's quandaries with Russia. Turkey has reacted to geopolitical realities and assertiveness and duality of Russian strategy by trying to balance relations with its longtime allies and newfound partner. Turkey has not given up on the West but appears to hope that its balancing efforts will elicit favorable policy changes. Turkey is not turning eastward, as is often

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13 NATO – Turkey crisis is not without precedence. Even before relations have been tense like in the Cuban crisis, Cyprus in 1974, or Kurdish problems in the 1990s but this time problems are structural and raise the question of why Turkey is in NATO (Gilsinan, 2019).

speculated, neither towards the Islamic world nor towards Russia – It has turned inward (Lindgaard and Pieper, 2020). Rather than joining a regional organization as an alternative to NATO, it is more likely that Turkey will continue its quest for strategic autonomy where NATO is seen as an additional safeguard mechanism. For NATO it means that more often it may have to come to terms with a Turkey that is less of an ally and more a self-interested occasional partner with its own agenda.

2) That leads us to the second approach, transactionalism, where the West accepts that Turkey may not be a reliable ally but still recognizing its strategical usefulness. Instead of standing firm on honoring its values, pragmatic and practical dealings should be advanced. With a myriad of ostensibly irreconcilable issues but in order to keep Turkey in its camp, a logical choice for the West is its version of compartmentalization. It suggests Machiavellian policy as the only way to counter Russian (Chinese or Iranian?) negative influence.

Therefore, the US reaction to the S-400 was only in a military domain, Turkey was removed from the F-35 program but faced no sanctions in trade. Regarding the sanctions on Iran, had Turkey not joined them, it would have faced sanctions in trade. The bargaining on north Syria is within its own confines as well. Yet, it seems that growing crisis between them is becoming chronic, which very much pleases Russia. Cases of S-400 and F-35 can be portentous for some of the next potential arm deals, where the US refusal to provide sophisticated military technologies to Turkey forms a vicious cycle – the greater the crisis between the US and Turkey – the closer the relations between Turkey and Russia – which in turn means more crises with the US. Overall, Russia and the US dealings are critical for Turkey. Interactions with one involve the other as invisible third party that conditions, constrains or even shapes their nature and quality.

In relations between Turkey and the EU reciprocity pattern is even more evident. Behind them are tumultuous years where relations rather than having a basis in any shared values, became purely transactional covering only a few areas of mutual interest such as the refugee deal, counterterrorism cooperation or the most recently, de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Narrowing cooperation is dismissing pretense of accession talks as Turkey is rarely treated as a candidate member, simultaneously diminishing Turkey aspirations to become

a full EU member. Without structured collaboration, alienation will only grow further. Under these circumstances, relationship between the two parties can be anything but honest not much different than, for example, the EU-Saudi Arabia or the EU-China relationship (AI Monitor, 2021f).

The weakness of the EU position is frequently revealed in its inability to deal with Erdogan. While leading an EU candidate-member state for two decades, he has gained critical insight regarding European politics. Erdogan, more pragmatic than most of the EU leaders (who needlessly made him aware that they need him more than he needs the EU), learned how to deal and engage with them. Playing on European disunity he found out that humiliating them proved to be an effective instrument (WELT, 2021). The inferiority complex has been best exposed in the aftermath of the scandal with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (Politico, 2021). But even before, he found liberty to liken Chancellor Merkel and German officials to “Nazis” (Politico, 2017) and challenge Macron’s mental health (Euronews, 2020), without consequence, simply playing on their rivalry. As a shrewd politician, he uses the leverage of Turkic diaspora to maintain active relations with Germany, while France turns out to be a natural antagonist inside the EU. The slew of controversies put them regularly on different sides, culminating in the last summer Mediterranean incident when an escalating war of words threatened to transmit in real life. Turkey and France have been locked in various conflicts as Libyan, East Mediterranean and sometimes spreading all the way to Sub-Saharan region.

With more crises, Turkish posture and methods are becoming increasingly evident; revealing that as the gap between Turkey’s ambitions and capabilities is growing, as is the gap between its rhetoric and the realities on the ground. Nicholas Danforth best describes Erdogan’s *modus operandi* as “push, pocket any concessions or pause to negotiate if the pushback is too strong, and repeat as needed”. It’s a perfect strategy if you prioritize short-term concessions and discount the longer-term damage to bilateral relationships (AI Monitor, 2021g). In the EU, there is a growing awareness that Erdogan usually cannot follow his threats and warnings, exposing them as blackmail or bluffing, designed for bargaining purposes and domestic gains. Principally, Turkish foreign policy has fallen into the trap of short-termism and become increasingly unpredictable (AI Monitor, 2020). In



these circumstances, the EU gives priority to stability over democracy. An unstable autocratic structure presents a great danger for Europe so it seems that the new US administration will be the party that insists on human rights, exchanging roles with the EU in the good cop, bad cop game. Thus, grand bargains are tough to achieve but, eventually, Turkey and the EU will have to strike up a working partnership, whereby they cooperate on some issues and compete on others (Aydıntaşbaş, 2021b).

Possible venues for Western cooperation with Turkey can be found in places where their interests converge. For example, in Central Asia, as an almost unique place where Western and Turkish interests are mostly aligned, the West should seek to encourage Turkish success and positive trends. However, despite a historical affinity and kinship with Turkic peoples in Central Asia, Turkey's aspirations to become a more influential force will likely remain elusive as Turkey neither has military heft, economic capacities nor strategic vision to compete with Russian or Chinese engagement in the region. In the Balkans, although to some extent comparable pattern, the environment is much more complicated. Chances for collaboration can open in Ukraine where Turkey could play the role in facilitating dialogue to defuse the conflict (AI Monitor, 2021h). That is especially significant after Turkey with unprecedented controversy over its commitment to the 1936 Montreux Convention<sup>14</sup> portended a favorable posture toward the West. The list can be concluded with Afghanistan, where Turkey is trying to become an unavoidable party in the solution (The Diplomat, 2021), which should be acceptable for weary Western powers engaged in the protracted war.

3) Thus, even if the number of pessimists regard the engagement as the least likely scenario of three proposed policy responses, proponents of that option didn't completely lose their voice. Stressing a high degree in overall integration between Europe and Turkey and assuming that Turkey is still

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<sup>14</sup> The convention gives Turkey full control of the straits while imposing strict limitations for the military ships of non-littoral states, effectively restricting the access of US and NATO naval forces to the Black Sea. Besides Turkey plan to build an artificial waterway – Canal Istanbul – as an alternative to the Bosphorus, raising questions as to whether Ankara is still committed to its balancing act. Turkey's posture in the Ukraine-Russia tensions can put to a serious test the main geopolitical parameters that it has thus far observed in the Black Sea.

mostly in line with Western interests, the analysis ultimately concludes that they require a more nuanced and supple style of relationship management, introducing a broader range of shared interests (Sloat, 2018). Keeping away Turkey from Russia is a strong impetus for this approach (Tocci, 2020).

After identifying trends in relations with Turkey, RAND Corporation in its research for the US government has systematically classified Turkish respective positioning in four broad categories: Difficult ally, Resurgent democracy, Strategic balancer, Eurasian power. Any of them, except the second one, will lead Turkish foreign and defense policies that are contrary, in varying degrees, to the interests of the US and other NATO allies warranting a considered reassessment of US and European strategy toward Turkey and preparations for disruptive developments in all aspects of relations (RAND, 2020).

The critical question is what direction the new US administration will take as in the Trump era personal relationships at leader levels squeezed out the policies preferred by the broader US administration, leaving Erdogan to largely acts with impunity. Unlike before, the first steps indicate that actions that will shape the US-Turkey relations under Joe Biden will tend to involve strategic decisions rather than mere changes of tone putting more pressure on Turkey<sup>15</sup>. Besides, expectation goes for a firmer position on Turkey's reluctance in choosing sides whereas choosing a side is exactly what the West should demand of an ally. *Former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, W. Robert Pearson* in his commentary (Pearson, 2021), stated that "Turkey seems to seek the advantages while avoiding paying the price", then asking "for how long Turkey can run with the hare and hunt with the hounds?". The new US administration will likely not seek an early break with Turkey, but a firmer line is all but certain. In the meantime, according to one analysis (Hoffman, 2021), the US should try to keep the relationship broadly frozen until something changes – either the economic crisis becomes so dire that Ankara is forced to make concessions, the next election brings political change, or Russia and Turkey fall out over one of the many issues that separate them.

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15 The recognition of the 1915 mass killings of Armenian as genocide is an act that may upset an already tenuous relationship with Turkey but it is a risk president Biden appears willing to take to further human rights (The New York Times, 2021).

## Nor EAST...

Turkey sees Western actions too erratic and against its interests, while relations with Russia essentially adhere to stone-cold pragmatism and embrace cynical situational approaches (The Moscow Times, 2019) that ultimately serve to satisfy both countries. Be it in Syria, Libya or the Caucasus, the NATO and the EU have abdicated much of their responsibilities and shied away from risk, presenting a fertile ground for Russian rise on their behalf.

After tentative siding with Iran in Syria, Russia recognized a historical chance to drag Turkey in its orbit. The Astana framework, where Russia, Iran, and Turkey despite distinct visions have tried to reach compromise on development in the Syrian war, reinforced Russia's upper hand in the dealings. Deepening energy and economic ties, close personal ties between presidents, bilateral diplomatic and military coordination in Syria, and Turkey's purchase of the S-400 system, represent tangible manifestations of close relations where Russia holds the upper hand. Turkey is energy dependent on Russia, runs large trade deficits and the S-400 missile defense system only solidified the existing asymmetry in Turkish-Russian relations in the long run. Moreover, Russia is building the first nuclear plant in Turkey<sup>16</sup> and has clear information dominance space with widely accepted Sputnik Turkish-language edition (RAND, 2018). With the rising number of Russian leverages, Turkey currently facilitates Russian positioning in the region by enabling Russia to thrive through its main foreign policy tools: energy, military, and arms sale.

Wary eyes of Western politicians are observing their rapprochement as Turkey and Russia through the series of conflicts have gained exclusive positions to arbitrate in strategic parts of the world vital for Western interests and where neither of them has a genuine interest to achieve lasting peace. All conflicts have followed the same pattern. Despite their support for the opposing sides, they have tried to avoid direct clashes using proxies on the field and continuing with troubled status quo and ad hoc agreements.

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16 Russian Rosatom State Corporation holds a 99.2 percent stake in the project (Al Jazeera, 2021)

Even when directly confronted, sometimes with grave fatalities, they were ready for concessions. Most recently, in the fall of 2020, Turkey and Russia partnered in Nagorno Karabakh, where they followed the pattern of Syria and Libya they ultimately achieved to shut out Western powers (Isachenko, 2020).

Although Russia is aware of the limits of their cooperation, it consistently presses Turkey (most frequently in Syria), which seeks to hedge its position, reinforcing its ties with the West. A possible point of friction could be some sort of escalation in Ukraine, where Turkey is more aligned with the West. Despite his dealings with Putin, Erdogan has repeatedly rejected Crimea's annexation and forged active relations and military cooperation with Ukraine.

More frequent and frustrating altercations can push them toward an undesirable deterioration. Additionally, Erdogan's erratic or miscalculated behavior should never be ruled out. As their relations are greatly influenced by overall Russian leverage on Turkey it is difficult to predict what their next move will be.

## **Conclusion**

Some improvement in relations with Eastern countries, with the simultaneous weakening of the ties with the West, doesn't imply a complete change. It seems now that Turkey, in its pursuit of a more independent role, equally values all big powers. In the foreseeable future, the West (the US, NATO, or the EU) should expect Turkey will most likely strive for a more assertive policy that repeatedly proves contrary to Western interests. It will remain an unpredictable ally and willingly pursue cooperation with its foes (Russia, China, or Iran) whenever it suits its shifting national interests.

The downturn in relations with the West and the US, in particular, runs deeper than any one of the current issues indicate. It is the consequence of Turkish changing view of the global balance of power as it believes that the relative influence of the West is waning in relation to its Eastern counterparts. The Middle East region and Turkish neighborhoods are not

exceptions. As distancing coincided with the consolidation of authoritarian power in Turkey, it only confirmed that the relations with the West will be more transactional. They will be based on the areas of mutual interest rather than on any shared value. The West cannot change it; it can only hope to manage the issues as they arise. Therefore, it is very important that Western politicians understand how Turkey makes its policy. Despite considerable friction, it is not willing to completely shift to the East but it is just that its current leadership rejects the established rules of the game. More Russian weapons or preference for financial arrangements with China instead of with the EU countries can be significant indicators of the future direction. One way or another, the US cannot count on Turkey's support in the main objective of their current national security policy, namely, countering Russia or China. The Turkish-Russian concord is purely pragmatic and stems from their alienation from the West. Therefore, the future course of their cooperation will be determined by their respective relationships with the West. Russia will continue to balance those interests and strive to keep Turkey in its camp. By doing so it will deepen the rift with NATO and retain its strong influence on Turkey.

The ruling party, despite controversies, economic quandaries and internal political losses still holds firmly domestic position but Turkey will remain deeply divided country where domestic political, security and economic situations will likely remain volatile for some time. If nothing changes, the alliance with the MHP will continue to create difficulties for Erdogan in foreign policy, making Turkey more belligerent and intransigent for the West. Without new foundations more headaches are ahead, however, with all its setbacks, the West facilitated Turkey's political and economic rise, and for now it seems that no one else can or want to match it.

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