

Turkey's foreign policy and its consequences for the EU



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In-Depth Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present impasse in EU-Turkey relations is attributed by Europeans to Turkey's democratic backsliding and increasingly unilateral foreign policy. This, however, cannot be considered separately from the current state of institutional affairs and blurring of frameworks obstructing EU-Turkey cooperation in foreign and security policy. This study takes these elements into consideration while introducing different frameworks of Turkey-EU relations, namely Turkey as: (i) a candidate for accession; (ii) a key partner in economy and trade; as well as (iii) a strategic partner. The study then focuses on the overall dynamics of Turkish foreign policy-making, its relations with historical allies and approach to theatres of power in its neighbourhood. To understand better the consequences of Turkish policies for European security, the study assesses the country's key recent foreign policy principles, such as the 'strategic-depth doctrine' and the 'blue homeland doctrine' as well as the situation in three Mediterranean hotspots. A short evaluation of the presidential system's impact on foreign policy and the country's relations with the United States are also included. The analysis ends with an overlook to the future and policy recommendations for decision-makers in Europe.

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List of abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party
CAATSA	Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act
COP	Climate Change Conference
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
GNA	Government of National Accord
HR/VP	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
IS	Islamic State
JPC	Joint Parliamentary Committee
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USA	United States of America

Executive Summary

Europeans attribute the present impasse in European Union (EU)-Turkey relations largely to Turkey's democratic backsliding and its increasingly unilateral foreign policy stance. This, however, cannot be considered separately from the current state of institutional affairs. The In-Depth Analysis (IDA) focuses on overall dynamics of EU-Turkey relations and Turkish foreign policy alongside Turkey's relations with its historical allies and regional powers. It starts by summarising the frameworks through which EU-Turkey relations are shaped. Today, Turkey is perceived as a candidate for accession, a key partner in economy and trade, as well as a strategic partner. The IDA briefly introduces these frameworks before moving on to an historical assessment of Turkish foreign policy. The different perceptions and frameworks that constitute these approaches mix and blur the relationship, thereby making it difficult to cooperate effectively in foreign and security policy.

Turkish foreign policy is then contextualised with a special focus on Turkey's 'strategic-depth doctrine' and 'blue homeland doctrine' as well as the country's presidential system and the increasing personalisation of foreign policy. Additionally, the IDA prominently deals with Turkey's approach to multilateralism and 20th century multilateral institutions as well as its perception of alliances in the 21st century. Three case studies in which recent tensions have shaped EU-Turkey relations complete the analysis: the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Libya.

The IDA finds that there are various interchanging dynamics which have led to the current state of affairs. It concludes that the differences between EU institutions and their preferences among the array of existing frameworks when it comes to EU-Turkey relations make it very difficult to find a well-functioning way forward. Member States' national interests are also very much factored in, not only in the Council and the European Council, but also in their bilateral relations with Turkey. Since they hold competences when it comes to foreign and security policy-making, the dynamics of cooperation with Turkey become even more complicated. Looking at the road ahead, there are four important tasks:

1. **Re-balance the relationship of conflictual cooperation** and sustainably steer EU-Turkey relations back into calmer waters. This includes creating a solid core of cooperation driven by mutual interests as well as confidence-building measures for addressing the increasing lack of trust.
2. **Build a functional rules-based institutional framework for EU-Turkey relations.** The key is to have a rules-based relationship rather than ad-hoc negotiations when the needs arise. Currently, the accession framework does not necessarily serve this purpose.
3. **Engage with Turkey under the umbrella of multilateral organizations while keeping the cost of unilateralism high.** In terms of foreign policy this would require anchoring Turkey and EU-Turkey relations within multilateral institutions. Clearly the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is one option, but not the only one.
4. **Encourage Turkey to join the EU and other like-minded partners in promoting forward-looking global agendas.** It is important to find ways of integrating Turkey into EU agendas with a longer-term vision, the most important of these being green and digital transitions, together with public health, as recently demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last but not least, this study suggests that the EU should not wait and hope for elections in Turkey to provide a solution to existing problems. The issues related to overall framework(s) will nonetheless persist. The electoral environment risks tensing and politicizing the relationship. The EU should look for consensus among its own ranks to build a common path and should discuss the future of its relations with Turkey when the right time comes.

1 Introduction

Institutional ties between Turkey and the European Union (EU) go back to the 1963 Association Agreement that Turkey signed with the European Economic Community. Ever since, a *multifaceted* relationship has existed, spanning across areas such as economy, trade, counterterrorism and migration. The need for cooperation and collaboration on various dossiers of mutual interest is largely clear to both sides. Even if the relationship has demonstrated resilience to date, there are currently various conflictual challenges: the dynamics of Turkish domestic and foreign policy; political developments in the EU and its Member States and the lack of a united stance; as well as changes in the global context.

Since the 2016 failed coup attempt and Turkey's transition into a highly personalised presidential system¹, its historical role as a strong ally of the West has increasingly been brought into question. Recent foreign policy moves have left the country isolated within the region and alienated both from the EU and the United States (USA). The decline in Turkish democracy has worsened this clash of interests. Meanwhile, Turkey has been hosting the largest refugee population in the world², which has become the country's biggest source of leverage *vis-à-vis* the EU. It has facilitated drastic moves such as that in March 2020, when Turkish officials encouraged refugees to congregate on the Greek border.

Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have also been a key issue in putting EU Member States, most notably Greece, Cyprus and France, at odds with Turkey. Beyond that, Turkey's actions in Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Afghanistan have also given rise to repercussions for the EU. Overall, EU-Turkey relations are very delicately balanced in an uneasy state of '**conflictual cooperation**'. Among the different thematic dimensions of this relationship, foreign and security policy is an area where conflict has gradually risen despite persistent, albeit increasingly difficult, cooperation. Turkey's assertive foreign policy in the EU's immediate neighbourhood has led to rising tensions tipping this delicate balance more towards conflict. The magnitude of these tensions may be lower today than it was in 2020, but it is nevertheless hard to predict what may be ahead. Furthermore, any perceptions held by the proponents of adversarial policies have not fundamentally changed. Meanwhile, putting aside the normative framework, the EU has started to treat Turkey as a third country rather than candidate country for accession.

Today, the scope for cooperation in this relationship draws strongly from economy and trade³. The existence of a somewhat outdated Customs Union agreement provides an opportunity for mutually beneficial modernisation in terms of increasing gains. Yet, such a modernisation would require a substantial amount of political alignment. While some experts perceive this as the EU's opportunity for leverage⁴ on reforms in Turkey, others are more sceptical, recommending to explore different forms of economic cooperation such as free trade agreements⁵. Turkey's will to align with the EU's green transition provides another key area for mutual consideration.

Before moving into assessments for the EU's future strategy in its difficult relationship with Turkey, this study provides a general outlook of EU-Turkey relations, assessing Turkish foreign policy with a specific focus on tensions in the Mediterranean. Finally, it presents conclusions and policy recommendations.

¹ K. Kirisci & I. Toygur, [‘Turkey's new presidential system and a changing west: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish-West relations’](#), Report, Brookings Institution, 2019.

² For more information on Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey, see [UNHCR webpages](#).

³ B. Saatçioğlu & F. Tekin (eds), *Turkey and the European Union. Key Dynamics and Future Scenarios*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 2021.

⁴ B. Saatçioğlu et al., [The Future of EU-Turkey Relations: A Dynamic Association Framework amidst Conflictual Cooperation](#), FEUTURE Synthesis Paper, 2019.

⁵ G. Felbermayr & E. Yalcin, [The EU-Turkey Customs Union and trade relations: what options for the future? In-Depth Analysis](#), European Parliament DG EXPO, PE 653.640, 2021.

2 EU-Turkey relations: overall dynamics and framework(s)

EU-Turkey relations are more multifaceted than those with any other third country, displaying a high degree of complexity and interdependence. Turkey is a candidate for accession, key economic and trade partner as well as a strategic partner in the neighbourhood and beyond. In institutional terms this is reflected in the Association Agreement that was signed in 1963 which aimed at establishing a Customs Union (effective from 1996); a Negotiating Framework that also mobilises the Instrument of Pre-accession Assistance (IPA); and various forms of cooperation in policy areas of mutual interest. The EU-Turkey Statements of November 2015⁶ and March 2016⁷ are the most recent and prominent examples, defining cooperation in the area of irregular migration, while introducing other forms of working together such as high-level dialogues to explore the vast potential of EU-Turkey relations. Various Positive Agendas (2012, 2020)⁸ represent additional attempts to provide a frame for revitalising the relationship. Thus, EU-Turkey relations range from a rules-based integration perspective and association to purely interest-based transactional cooperation. This multifaceted structure must be taken into consideration to improve our understanding of how Turkey's foreign policy has an impact on the EU.

2.1 Turkey as a candidate for accession

An analysis of narratives used in EU-Turkey relations by both parties has highlighted that for Turkey the most important and consistent element has been a proclamation of EU membership as its official goal⁹. Moreover, the accession track represented the most prominent institutional frame for this relationship since the early 2000s. However, an institutional path which has always been bumpy is now effectively at an impasse. Accession negotiations started to stagnate almost immediately after the process started in October 2005. Out of 35 negotiation chapters, 16 have been opened so far, of which only one - Science and Research - has been provisionally closed, whilst many remain blocked for political reasons¹⁰. Furthermore, in June 2018 the Council noted that 'Turkey has been moving further away from the EU. Turkey's accession negotiations have therefore effectively come to a standstill and no further chapters can be considered for opening or closing'¹¹. There seem to be a number of drivers which have brought about this situation. For instance, in the EU experts have identified not just a general enlargement fatigue, but also a specific 'Turkey fatigue'¹². Furthermore, there are strong veto players to Turkish membership among Member States, namely Cyprus, France and Austria. Transition of power in national capitals have impacted Member States' positions towards EU-Turkey relations and hence consistency in the EU's approach. Most prominent examples are Germany and France. The red-green coalition government in Germany from 1998 to 2005 marks a period of German support to Turkey's prospect of EU accession – Turkey was granted EU candidate country status in 1999 – whereas the electoral victory of Angela Merkel in 2005 marked the beginning of an era of opposition to Turkey's accession in Germany. Complying with the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* Merkel did not try to end accession negotiations but she also promoted the idea of a privileged partnership

⁶ Council of the European Union, [EU-Turkey Statement](#), Press statement and Remarks, 870/15, 29 November 2015.

⁷ European Council, [EU-Turkey statement](#), Press Release 144/16, 18 March 2016.

⁸ European Commission, [Positive EU-Turkey agenda launched in Ankara](#), MEMO/12/359, 17 May 2012; European Council, [Special meeting of the European Council \(1 and 2 October 2020\) – Conclusions](#), EUCO 13/20, 2 October 2020.

⁹ H.-L. Hauge, et al., '[Narratives of a Contested Relationship: Unravelling the Debates in the EU and Turkey](#)', FEUTURE Online Paper, No 28, 2019.

¹⁰ For an overall overview on the state of negotiation please see: European Commission, European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations' [website](#); M. Schröder & F. Tekin, 'Institutional Triangle EU-Turkey-Germany: Change and Continuity', In: E. Turhan (ed.), *Relations between Turkey and Germany Reconsidered: New Dimensions, New Challenges*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 2019, pp. 29-58.

¹¹ Council of the European Union, [Enlargement and stabilisation and association process](#), General Affairs Council Conclusions, 10555/18, 26 June 2018.

¹² E. Soler i Lecha, et al., '[It takes two to tango: Political changes in Europe and their impact on Turkey's EU bid](#)', FEUTURE Online Paper, No 17, 2018.

for Turkey. Nicolas Sarkozy, who was elected French President in 2007, also openly opposed Turkey's accession. Given the political weight of France and Germany in the EU, government changes impacted the relations to a great extent. Since the United Kingdom left the EU on 31 January 2020, Turkey has very limited support within the Union when it comes to its membership bid. On the contrary, the ranks of Turkey-sceptics have swelled, mainly due to Turkey's democratic backsliding leading to a full breach of the Copenhagen political criteria, worsened by an assertive foreign policy witnessed in the Eastern Mediterranean with activities perceived as illegal by the EU.

An important element of EU candidacy is the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, with Turkey having been its largest recipient. In the years 2007-2013 the country received EUR 4.8 billion under the IPA I framework¹³. For the IPA II period 2014-2020 it was supposed to receive EUR 4.4 billion, which were reduced to EUR 3.5 billion in reaction to Turkey's distancing itself from the EU. These recent cuts in IPA funds due to democratic backsliding in Turkey have served to politicise the funds. Yet, IPA III and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) continue to be important sources of leverage for the EU, in addition to Turkey's participation in EU programmes as the key to people-to-people contact. This is even more important considering that the field of action for civil society organisations in Turkey is becoming increasingly restricted by new domestic laws¹⁴. It is important that the EU continues to try and provide breathing space for these activists. At the same time, related measures have to carefully weigh the risks and advantages. While involving Turkish authorities to a greater extent in granting procedures would reduce the level of suspicion vis-à-vis externally funded actors in Turkey, it would also decrease the level of control over the alignment of recipients with EU values. Funds would also need to target establishing new channels of dialogue as well as access to official institutions without putting civil society actors at risk¹⁵.

One important question is the utility of accession negotiations when it comes to alignment in foreign and security policy. Turkey's potential contribution to the EU's security structure was perceived as a reason for the country to become a candidate for accession. The Negotiating Framework includes two relevant chapters on external relations (Chapter 30) and on foreign, security and defence policy (Chapter 31)¹⁶, with the former covering common trade and commercial policy, in addition to humanitarian aid and development. When it comes to Turkey's alignment with Common Foreign Security Policy, the country's rate is very low, at around 14 % in 2021 according to the European Commission¹⁷. Turkey seeks involvement in EU defence initiatives – like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – and has become increasingly more interested in understanding the direction of European strategic autonomy. It is important to underline that the European security structure in the 21st century should involve not only actors from the EU but also third countries like the United Kingdom and Turkey. These areas open new potential avenues for collaboration whenever the overall situation becomes more positive.

2.2 Turkey as a key partner in economy and trade

The Commission's annual reports on Turkey refer to the country as a key partner in economic terms. According to 2020 data, for Turkey the EU is currently the largest trading partner (31.4 % of imports; 41.3 % of exports), while for the EU Turkey is its sixth largest trading partner¹⁸. Turkey also frequently claims to play an ever-increasing role in European supply chains. It can be noted that the relationship's least

¹³ For an overview of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, please see the [European Commission's webpage](#).

¹⁴ E.g. Law No. 7262, for more information on its impact on civil society please see Amnesty International, [Turkey: Terrorism Financing Law Has Immediate 'Chilling Effect' On Civil Society. Impact Of Law No. 7262 On Non-Profit Organizations](#), 2021.

¹⁵ For recommendations on IPA funding, see O. Zihnioglu, [Supporting Democracy, Human Rights, and Civil Liberties in Turkey: The Case for the EU](#), E-Paper, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2021.

¹⁶ European Commission, [Negotiations Status Turkey](#), 2019.

¹⁷ For more information, see European Commission, [Turkey Report 2021](#), Staff Working Document, SWD(2021) 290 final/2, 2021.

¹⁸ European Commission, [Countries and regions – Turkey](#), 7 July 2021.

conflictual aspect is its economic dimension, which displays clear mutual benefits stemming from cooperation. However, current breaches of rule of law in Turkey also endanger this area. The 1963 Association Agreement focused on establishing the Customs Union in order to provide the right framework for exploring those benefits¹⁹. In institutional terms, the EU decided on two occasions to postpone the Association Council's annual meetings: firstly in 2016 as a continuing state of emergency in Turkey disrupted its democratic system; and secondly in July 2019 by way of response to Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean drilling activities²⁰. Additionally, modernisation of the Customs Union²¹, which the Commission proposed in December 2016, was suspended for political reasons in June 2018²². Hence, one can state that convergence and full exploitation of mutual benefits from an economic perspective, with Turkey as a key EU partner, is being hampered by stagnation in the political framework. Even if the economy represents an opportunity, the relationship's overall instability prevents its full exploitation.

Today, there is new momentum around Turkey's well-calculated ambition to align itself with the European Green Deal²³. Consequently, the Turkish Parliament has finally ratified the Paris Climate Agreement on 6 October 2021. A national plan in line with the European Fit for 55 package²⁴ would certainly solidify this commitment. This is an area where further alignment would benefit not only both sides, but also the global fight against climate change.

2.3 Turkey as a strategic partner

The perception of Turkey as a strategic partner puts the country's geostrategic relevance in a key position for the European Union and also centres it on developments in their shared neighbourhood. This is closely linked with dimensions of migration, security, counterterrorism and energy.

Since 2015, Turkey has become a key component in the EU's approach to irregular migration from the region. EU-Turkey Statements from 2015 and 2016²⁵ clearly portray a broader strategy by linking migration to revitalisation of the accession negotiations, facilitation of visa liberalisation and modernisation of the Customs Union. Additionally, they introduce an institutional framework of High-Level Dialogue in the areas of energy, trade, counterterrorism and foreign policy. The Facility for Refugees has become one of the core elements in supporting Turkey, which is currently hosting over 3.6 million Syrian refugees²⁶. Thus, even if many see irregular migration management as one of the key areas of EU-Turkey cooperation, it has also blurred the relationship's framework and devalued conditionality over democracy, with the EU's democratic leverage becoming even less functional or effective.

In addition to irregular migration management, security has become key. Even under the direst circumstances where Turkey is perceived as undermining regional stability and security in the EU's neighbourhood (namely, the Eastern Mediterranean), EU foreign ministers have continued to recognise that 'the EU and Turkey have a strong interest in an improvement of their relations through a dialogue which is intended to create an environment of trust'²⁷. However, with divergent interests still shaping EU-

¹⁹ E. Erdil & I.S. Akçomak, 'Economic Drivers as Anchor of EU-Turkey Relations: Trade, Finance and Knowledge', In: B. Saatcioğlu and F. Tekin (eds.), *Turkey and the European Union*, 2021, pp. 121-144.

²⁰ Council of the European Union, [Turkish drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: Council adopts conclusions](#), Press Release, 557/19, 15 July 2019.

²¹ A. Sinem, et al., [Customs Union: Old Instrument, New Function in EU-Turkey Relations](#), Comment 2020/C 48, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), 2020.

²² Council of the EU, Enlargement and stabilisation and association process, 2018.

²³ For more information on the European Green Deal, see [European Commission webpages](#).

²⁴ European Parliament, [Fit for 55 Package under the European Green Deal, Legislative Train Schedule](#).

²⁵ Council of the EU, EU-Turkey Statement, 2015; European Council, EU-Turkey Statement, 2016.

²⁶ See [UNHCR webpages](#).

²⁷ Council of the European Union, [Statement of the EU Foreign Ministers on the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean](#), Press Release, 312/20, 15 May 2020.

Turkey relations, responding to tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, in 2019 the Council decided to suspend negotiations on the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement²⁸. The EU also listed two Turkish individuals within the existing framework of restrictive measures²⁹. A new approach of 'phased, proportionate and reversible' engagement was tabled in March 2021. Thereafter, in June 2021, the European Council welcomed a de-escalation of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, beyond exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey, there have so far been no concrete developments that would help resolve long-standing problems in the region.

At the same time, the frequency of High-Level Dialogues remains rather irregular. Between 2015 and 2019 only 11 such dialogues took place (four political, three economical, two on transport, one on energy and one on counterterrorism)³⁰. Within the framework of the 'positive political EU-Turkey agenda' (also called Positive Agenda) that was agreed upon in the European Council meeting of October 2020³¹, dialogues have been revived concerning climate, migration and security.

Considering these three interlinked frameworks of Turkey as a candidate for accession, a key partner in economy and trade and a strategic partner, it is important to highlight that the Council of the EU and the European Council focus more on interest-based formats that view Turkey more as a strategic or key partner. The European Parliament (EP), on the other hand, clearly perceives and treats Turkey within the accession framework³², while the Commission focuses rather on the technical aspects of each of the three dimensions. The Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations remains responsible for the enlargement policy, IPA programming and implementation. The European External Action Service (EEAS) has a special status. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) provides a link by being both the permanent chair of the Foreign Affairs Council and Vice President of the Commission. All these issues further increase the complexity of EU-Turkey relations, as those separate tracks not only structure EU-Turkey relations differently, but also generate competing dynamics between the various institutions in Brussels. Taking into consideration the recent 'Sofagate' incident, it is important that EU institutions put an additional effort into harmonizing their views³³.

²⁸ Council of the EU, Turkish drilling activities, 2019.

²⁹ Council of the European Union, [Turkey's illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: EU puts two persons on sanctions list](#), Press Release, 104/20, 27 February 2020.

³⁰ Republic of Turkey, [Turkey-EU High Level Dialogue Meetings](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019.

³¹ European Council, Special Meeting, 2020.

³² Agence Europe, [European Parliament Plenary Interview Turkey](#), Europe Daily Bulletin No. 12721, 19 May 2021.

³³ I. Toygür, [Can the Conference on the Future of Europe prevent another #SofaGate?](#), Elcano Royal Institute, 20 May 2021.

3. An assessment of Turkish foreign policy

Turkish foreign policy over the last two decades has shown evidence of both continuity and change. Firstly, we can observe the acceleration of some trends that have started to become apparent since the end of the 1980s. While the West has remained a priority it is no longer *the* priority, with Turkey consistently seeking to diversify its partnerships. This has gone hand in hand with expanding the number of actors involved in the implementation of Turkish foreign policy. It is no longer a restricted club of diplomats and security officials, but one in which private companies, charities and educational foundations have been invited to join. With the introduction of the presidential system, though, foreign policy-making has become personalised, ideological and very much designed for domestic political gain. At this point, some historical perspective is needed to facilitate understanding of these trends.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, its policies have consistently sought to elevate Turkey's stature and influence, not only regionally but also in global terms. Yet, amidst significant transformation in many aspects of Turkey's domestic politics and the international order, how Turkish policy-makers have pursued this goal has changed dramatically over the past two decades. As a result, while Ankara's desire for increased stature and influence did not originally bring about any direct conflict with its Western allies, this goal has over time become a dangerous driver of tensions with the EU and the USA.

In very broad terms, the evolution of Turkish foreign policy over the past twenty years or so could be seen as having progressed from a reasonably harmonious vision of Turkish power to a more antagonistic stance. The former, often associated with Ahmet Davutoğlu's strategic depth doctrine, relied on exerting diplomatic and economic influence in an increasingly peaceful and integrated region. Conversely, the latter has found expression in various formulations ranging from 'precious loneliness' to the 'blue homeland', prioritising transactionalism, independence and military assertiveness, often wedded to non-aligned or anti-imperialist rhetoric. This way of conducting foreign policy is very much associated with President Erdoğan himself and relates to a period of hyper-presidentialism together with personalistic and increasingly hierarchic decision-making. Looking forward, it is likely at least for the foreseeable future that a sense of geopolitical ambition will continue to be seen animating Turkish foreign policy, regardless of who holds power in Ankara. Yet, the evolution of Turkish domestic politics may affect the instruments and alliances in foreign policy as well as the tone, including a potential rebalancing of relations between the Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

3.1 Zero problems: tempering tensions in the 2000s

When it comes to Turkish foreign policy at the outset of the new century, Ahmet Davutoğlu's book *Strategic Depth* provided the source for the country's vision, better known through the awkwardly translated but not inaccurate slogan 'zero problems with neighbours'³⁴. In the early 2000s, Turkey was having problems with many of its neighbours, more precisely five out of nine bordering countries (including Cyprus). These problems had many overlapping causes³⁵.

- Greece and Cyprus: tensions resulted from nationalism and conflict that fuelled competing claims over territory and nautical control.
- Syria: issues were the result of spillover from Turkey's Kurdish conflict, overlaid with Cold War antagonism.

³⁴ I.N., Grigoriadis, [The Davutoğlu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy](#), Working Paper No 8/2010, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), 2010.

³⁵ W. Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy Since 1774*, Third Edition, Routledge, London, 2012.

- Iran: Turkey's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership combined with its secular orientation fuelled tensions.
- Armenia: a historic legacy of the genocide had been compounded by more recent fallout from the Nagorno-Karabakh war in the early 1990s.

Against such a backdrop, for all the theoretical flourish with which Davutoğlu presented his policy and all the problems it would eventually create, this approach had clear common-sense appeal. At a moment when the Turkish government was trying to expand its increasingly export-oriented economy, curtail the role of the Turkish military in domestic politics and ultimately join the EU, reducing tensions with neighbours took on additional importance. Breaking down animosities created new markets for Turkish products, helped minimise the militarisation of Turkish political discourse and made Turkey appear as a more appealing, less risky candidate for EU membership.

In the early to mid-2000s, Turkey's efforts to rebuild its regional relationships included outreach to countries having both good and bad relations with Turkey's Western allies. After Greek-Turkish tensions had spiked during the 1996 Imia/Kardak crisis, the AKP's early efforts to improve ties with Greece were not only profitable for both countries but also very well received in Washington and Western Europe³⁶. More crucially, at a time when the AKP was already facing off with the Turkish military over domestic issues, it took a considerable political risk in supporting the Annan Plan on Cyprus in order to overcome one of the central obstacles to EU accession.

In the Balkans, Turkey was eager to play on its historic ties, as well as its religious links with Muslims in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet, Turkey's economic clout also provided a more substantive engine for engagement, as smaller countries in the region welcomed a new source of trade and investment³⁷. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey initially used its influence with the Muslim community to support work by *inter alia* the Office of the High Representative and also proudly restored Mostar's famous Ottoman-era bridge.

More ambitiously, in the Caucasus Ankara attempted to implement the Zero Problems doctrine through rapprochement with Armenia. In 2009, Davutoğlu and his Armenian counterpart signed an accord that would have re-opened the closed border between their two countries³⁸. Yet, this apparent success quickly broke down in the face of resistance from Azerbaijan and its nationalist allies in Ankara. As a result, the accord was never ratified. Recent normalization efforts, however, are followed with some cautious optimism in Europe.

More problematically, in the Middle East pursuing a policy of Zero Problems with neighbours also required reaching out to some less than savoury actors. Ankara's efforts to improve ties with Syria reached the point where Erdoğan and his wife were taking holidays with Bashar and Asma Assad, thereby attracting some criticism. Moreover, amidst existing concerns over the AKP's Islamist orientation, seeing Erdoğan and Davutoğlu making frequent and enthusiastic visits to Tehran also created unease in some Western circles. Coupled with increased outreach to a number of other Muslim countries, this side of Davutoğlu's policy gave rise to accusations that Turkey was 'turning East' or abandoning the West in pursuit of some sort of Islamist or Neo-Ottoman ideology³⁹.

³⁶ For more information on the reception of these policies see G. Fuller, '[Turkey's Strategic Model: Myths and Realities](#)', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol 27 No 3, 2004, pp. 151-164; S. Larrabee, '[Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East](#)', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 86 No 4, 2007, pp. 103-114; Y. Bozdağlıoğlu, *Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish Identity: A Constructivist Approach*, Routledge, New York, 2003.

³⁷ E.E. Güzelçere, '[Turkey's Soft Power in the Balkans Reaching its Limits](#)', Policy Paper 75, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), July 2021.

³⁸ N. Wires, '[Turkey and Armenia Sign Landmark Agreement](#)', *France 24*, 10 October 2009.

³⁹ S. Çağaptay, '[Secularism and Foreign Policy in Turkey: New Elections, Troubling Trends](#)', Policy Focus 67, Washington Institute, 2007.

In retrospect, Davutoğlu's policies reflected a remarkable and ultimately misplaced confidence in Turkey's ability to strengthen its standing on all fronts simultaneously. His ambition seemed to reflect both an undue faith in Turkey's soft power and a prevailing sense of post-Cold War liberal optimism. At times, Davutoğlu appeared to envision Turkey as taking the lead in the Middle East. From this perspective, his efforts to improve trade ties, end visa restrictions and resolve regional disputes reflected a conviction that Turkey could indeed take the lead in spreading liberal order in a region that had been condemned to discord since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, in the early 2000s Davutoğlu was not alone in thinking that if Turkey strengthened its hand in the Middle East both economically and diplomatically, the country would become more attractive as a partner for the EU. Many others in Turkey and the West believed that Turkey could become more powerful and independent *vis-à-vis* Europe while at the same time becoming associated on more equal and respectful terms.

In the early 2000s, though, both the popularity and success of Turkey's policy could be attributed to the considerable assets at its disposal through regional relations. In the Balkans and the Middle East, many of Turkey's neighbours responded enthusiastically to Ankara's outreach. Turkey not only brought considerable economic opportunities to its neighbours but, because of its institutionalised defence and economic ties with the West, also seemed to offer countries such as Georgia, Syria, North Macedonia and Albania a model and pathway for moving closer to the USA and the EU.

During this period, the AKP's regional approach generally played well in the West, in part because it resonated with the era's driving ideological impulses. The desire for Turkey to serve as a bridge to the Islamic world was strongly felt, particularly in post-9/11 Washington, and Davutoğlu's 'neo-Ottoman' rhetoric carried, particularly in the Balkans, a distinctly post-national emphasis that reflected the EU's long-term ambitions. Overcoming historical animosities, national rivalries and sectarian conflict through trade and diplomacy fitted in very well with the end-of-history liberal internationalism that prevailed and flourished in the 2000s. If Turkey envisioned these trends coming together in a way that amplified its own wealth and prestige in the process, that did not necessarily seem unreasonable to officials in Washington and Berlin whose countries had played similar roles.

It should be noted that none of these trends necessarily began with the AKP but, for a number of reasons, they were able to capitalise on them more effectively than their predecessors⁴⁰. In the 1990s, for example, there was a wave of optimism that Turkey could draw on its historic and cultural ties to help integrate countries of post-Soviet Central Asia into the Western orbit. In reality, Turkey lacked the cultural ties, geographic proximity and economic heft to play the role then, but was better prepared to play it closer to home a decade later. When he visited Washington shortly after 9/11, Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit gave George Bush a replica of an Ottoman Quran and spoke about how Turkey could play an important role in reconciling Islam and democracy. He even discussed the importance of Turkey's historic and cultural ties to Afghanistan as a contributing factor to the NATO mission there. Yet it soon became clear that the AKP would be able to deploy this rhetoric far more convincingly than a firmly secular leader such as Ecevit. When Erdoğan launched the Alliance of Civilisations with his Spanish counterpart in 2005, for example, it received a degree of positive attention in the Western press that would have been hard to imagine with a less religious Turkish government that did not seem to represent the 'Islamic world' so authentically. That the AKP government proved so successful in wrapping its new foreign policy in the mantle of domestic democratisation also helped further the impression that Turkey's new regional activism would be complementary to its greater integration with the West.

Finally, Davutoğlu's own salesmanship played a crucial role in shaping the reception of Turkish foreign policy, which itself fed a positive dynamic that shaped the direction of the policy itself. Davutoğlu's writings from the 1990s certainly reflect his own deep desire to see Turkey and the Islamic world take on a greater

⁴⁰ See for example, I. Cem, *Turkey in the 21st Century: Speeches and Texts Presented at International Fora (1995-2000)*, Rustem, Lefkosa, 2001; C. Çandar, *Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist Moment – A Eurasianist Odyssey*, Transnational Press, London, 2021.

geopolitical role *vis-à-vis* the West. Yet, he also proved remarkably talented at presenting his own policies and Turkey's rise more broadly, in terms that proved very appealing in Western capitals. His own rhetoric helped sharpen the internationalist vision, provide a historic logic to Turkey's role and more broadly offered a sense of intellectual *gravitas* to Turkish policy-making. All of this contributed to the appeal of Turkish policy, which in turn fuelled the conviction in Ankara that pursuing a more expansive vision of Turkey's role in the world need not necessarily put Turkey in direct competition with the West. Perhaps more relevantly, the enthusiasm with which Davutoğlu himself was received in Western policy-making circles may itself have inspired greater optimism on Davutoğlu's part, that his own vision for Turkey need not put him or Turkey on a collision course with the USA or the EU.

3.2 Problems begin: the limits of soft power in a changing region

This virtuous cycle could not be sustained. Following the AKP's first decade in power, the limits of a foreign policy focused on improving relations on all fronts were beginning to show. Seen in context, Erdoğan's 'one minute' intervention at Davos in January 2009 stands as a telling transition point, marking the shift from Turkey's foreign policy ambitions in the 2000s to the new articulation of those ambitions that has gained force today.

In the previous two years, Ankara had taken the lead in brokering quiet diplomatic contacts between Syria and Israel as a prelude to securing a more dramatic diplomatic breakthrough between them⁴¹. That Turkey was initially able to play this role in itself represented the success of Ankara's diplomatic efforts over subsequent years. That such an ambitious peace-making effort seemed plausible also denoted the optimism that surrounded Turkey's regional role at the time. Regrettably, as with many peace-making efforts in the region sponsored by even more powerful states, this too was to prove futile. Specifically, it collapsed amidst the 2008-2009 Gaza War, a conflict between Israel and Hamas which left over a thousand mostly Palestinian civilians dead.

It was in the immediate aftermath of this that Erdoğan created a stir on stage at the Davos Forum where he and Israeli President Shimon Peres participated in a panel discussion devoted to Middle East peace process and Erdoğan walked off stage after he complained that he had been given far less time to speak than his Israeli counterpart⁴². In a context that again in itself showed the prestige Turkey had achieved on the world stage, Erdoğan seamlessly conflated his anger over Israel's actions with the injustice he perceived in himself not having been given enough time to respond. In walking off, he appeared to be conveying a message that the esteem Turkey had won through its efforts was insufficient. Rather than aspire for participation and respectability on these terms, Erdoğan was defiantly rejecting them and charting a more antagonistic course. Needless to say, he returned home to a hero's welcome.

Over the next few years, though, the contours of Turkish foreign policy and their implications for the West were further complicated by the Arab Spring. In this movement's early years, the AKP too adopted a more consistently Islamist foreign policy than before, but ironically this helped preserve, for at least a few more years, the impression that Turkey's foreign policy ambitions need not be in competition with the West. It is easy to forget that Ankara did not immediately embrace the Arab Spring everywhere. At first, the popular uprisings seemed to threaten the profitable relationships Turkey had developed with the authoritarian leaders of countries such as Libya and Syria, which are explained in the case-studies sections of this analysis.

Very quickly, though, developments rendered this approach unsustainable and instead seemed to open up a much more dramatic set of possibilities for Turkey. In particular, the Muslim Brotherhood's success in Egypt suddenly seemed to offer the AKP a prospect of Islamist governments coming to power

⁴¹ J. Heller & A. Macdonald, 'Israel and Syria reveal peace talks in Turkey', *Reuters*, 21 May 2008.

⁴² AP Archive, [Turkish PM Erdogan walks off stage in clash over Gaza](#), *Youtube*, 21 July 2015.

democratically across the Middle East. In the eyes of Davutoğlu and Erdoğan, Turkey could help usher in this transformation, thereby consolidating a degree of influence that had previously been beyond reach.

In pursuit of this vision, Erdoğan threw his support behind the Morsi government in Egypt and Ennabha in Tunisia. While there had previously been ideological differences between Erdoğan and the Egyptian Brotherhood – Morsi himself had written critically about Erdoğan for not being Islamist enough – the Brotherhood now welcomed Turkey's support. Erdoğan made a triumphant visit to Cairo in which he promised at least USD 2 billion in economic aid. Over the following year Turkey and Egypt prepared to conduct joint naval exercises. Following Gaddafi's fall, Turkey also became active in Tripoli, providing diplomatic and financial backing for Muslim Brotherhood-linked actors there. At this stage, Syria seemed to be the one country where Turkey's plans were not immediately falling into place, but even here many observers in Ankara and the West assumed it was just a matter of time before the Assad regime also fell. Initially, this too appeared to be a goal in which the interests of Ankara and its Western partners converged.

3.3 A drastic turn: Turkey takes on its neighbours and the West

It was only with the Arab Spring's collapse, coinciding as it did with Erdoğan's own definitive turn toward authoritarianism, that Turkey's course irreconcilably changed direction⁴³. By the end of 2013, serious strains had begun to emerge on various fronts. In Egypt, a coup brought down the Morsi government. While the EU and USA conspicuously failed to condemn the coup in resounding terms, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel all threw their support behind the new government. To Erdoğan, who believed Morsi's fate was exactly what his enemies had in store for him, this represented additional evidence of Western hypocrisy. Erdoğan saw parallels between the uprisings that had proceeded the 2013 coup in Egypt and the Gezi Park Protests that took place in Turkey that same summer, with the enthusiastic Western media coverage of Gezi consolidating his sense of embattled antagonism even further. It was at this moment that Erdoğan's advisor İbrahim Kalın used the term 'precious loneliness' to describe Turkey's position in the region⁴⁴. Kalın tweeted that while he did not believe Turkey had been 'left alone' in the Middle East, if this was the charge levelled against Turkish policy, 'I should say this is precious isolation'.

In Syria, 2013 was also the year when it became clear, following the Ghouta poison gas attacks, that the Obama administration was unlikely ever to use military force, as it had in Libya, to topple the Assad regime. This put Ankara, which was heavily invested in its support for the anti-Assad rebellion, in a difficult position, particularly as Assad was showing more staying power than they had originally assumed⁴⁵. Thus, as many Western governments became increasingly concerned by the growing radicalism of the anti-Assad rebels, Ankara doubled down in its support for some of the most radical among them. It was not that Erdoğan was drawn to groups such as al-Qaeda's offshoot al-Nusra by ideological sympathy. Rather he was less worried about their ideological orientation and, at a time when his priority was in toppling Assad, their violence and radicalism made them appear as the most likely to finish the job.

By the end of 2014, this dynamic had been considerably amplified by the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and the re-emergence of Turkey's perennial Kurdish conflict⁴⁶. At the same time, the international community was becoming deeply alarmed by the spread of IS, whilst Ankara, by contrast, had become anxious about the increasing strength of Kurdish forces linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in north-eastern Syria. The contrast in perspectives was crystallised when IS besieged the Kurdish town of Kobani on the Turkish border during October 2014. While Western opinion rallied around Kurdish forces resisting IS, Erdoğan appeared to welcome the town's fall. As Turkish forces closed the border and watched, Washington began airdropping supplies and striking IS forces. Over the next few years, this cooperation would evolve into full-

⁴³ H. Barkey, 'Turkey and the Arab Spring', Q&A, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 26 April 2011.

⁴⁴ Access the tweet via <https://twitter.com/ikalin1/status/362746057513385984>.

⁴⁵ M. Crowley, 'Did Obama get Erdogan wrong', *Politico*, 17 July 2016.

⁴⁶ A. Stein, *The US War Against ISIS: How America and its Allies Defeated the Caliphate*, Bloomsbury, New York, 2022.

fledged Western support for Syrian Kurdish forces in the fight against IS, a development that confirmed, in the minds of Erdoğan, the West's fundamental hostility to Turkey.

The final event that pushed Erdoğan to define his and his country's interests in such a directly antagonistic manner was the July 2016 coup attempt. As has been repeatedly observed, Erdoğan emerged from the night of 15-16 July convinced that Western powers had been behind an effort to topple him⁴⁷. Pro-Erdoğan media have frequently complained about the lack of support Western leaders showed in the aftermath – although the EU had immediately issued two statements (by the European Commission and on behalf of the Member States) condemning the attempted coup and stressing the need for a swift restoration of Turkey's constitutional order⁴⁸. Similarly, much has been made of the fact that Vladimir Putin called Erdoğan after the coup attempt before any of the NATO member countries did. While Erdoğan undoubtedly appreciated the call, he had never expressed any concern that Moscow was plotting to overthrow his government. In other words, when the failed coup occurred, Erdoğan's worldview was already sufficiently well-established that blame was almost certain to fall on the USA.

The fact that this failed coup came immediately after Ankara's rapprochement with Russia and immediately before the Turkish military launched its first cross-border operation in Syria makes it difficult to untangle fully what drove Erdoğan's increasingly close cooperation with Moscow. Specifically, Erdoğan's decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defence missiles, which subsequently became one of the main points of disagreement with the USA and NATO, is still poorly understood⁴⁹. Some analysts have suggested that it was either an effort to secure Russian support for Turkey's actions in Syria or the cost of Putin's forgiveness following Turkey's action in shooting down a Russian jet during November 2015. Others have argued that Erdoğan wanted the missiles to defend his palace in the event of another coup, or that he thought making the purchase would help secure Russian political support for his regime in these circumstances. Whatever the reason, Erdoğan probably did not anticipate that the purchase would generate as much pushback as it did. Nevertheless, his decision to follow through with it regardless soon emerged as a key demonstration of his new vision for a more independent foreign policy. The recent Russia-NATO crisis once again tests Turkey's self-claimed balancing policy between its Western allies and Russia⁵⁰.

In this decision more than others, the impact of the personalisation of foreign policy decision-making under Erdoğan's presidential system soon became clear. The very murkiness of this decision-making process itself, coupled with a real possibility that the decision could have been taken purely for the sake of Erdoğan's own personal security, reveal the extent of this personalisation. Moreover, failure to anticipate the fallout from such a decision in Turkey's bilateral relationships reflects the fact that it was made without full consultation with the Turkish foreign ministry. From the time that the purchase was announced until the time that Washington eventually imposed sanctions in December 2020, statements from the Turkish presidency consistently reflected unrealistic confidence about the prospect of avoiding sanctions altogether⁵¹. Perhaps some of this was simply intended as messaging of propaganda, but it was also likely

⁴⁷ K. Güler, [‘Towards Erdogan and the East: Conspiracies and public perception in post-coup Turkey’](#), presentation at the Contemporary Turkish Politics Workshop at Rice University's Baker Institute, 14 October 2016.

⁴⁸ European Commission, [Joint Statement on the situation in Turkey](#), Press Release, 16 July 2016; European Commission, [Statement by the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Council, and the EU High Representative on behalf of the EU Member States present at the ASEM Summit on the situation in Turkey](#), Press Release, 16 July 2016.

⁴⁹ S. Fraser, [‘AP Explains: Why NATO member Turkey wants Russian missiles’](#), *AP News*, 18 July 2019.

⁵⁰ M. Pierini, [‘The Russia-NATO Crisis Tests Turkey's Balancing Policy’](#), *Carnegie Europe*, 15 January 2022.

⁵¹ Reuters Staff, [‘Erdoğan says Trump can waive sanctions on Turkey for Russian defense purchase’](#), *Reuters*, 14 July 2019; E. Toksabay & T. Gumrukcu, [‘Erdoğan says U.S. sanctions would ‘disrespect’ Turkey’](#), *Reuters*, 11 December 2020.

to be the result of Erdoğan not having access to reliable reporting from an effective and well-functioning foreign ministry.

During this period, Erdoğan sought to conduct bilateral relations with Washington through direct personal communication with US President Donald Trump. While this proved effective up to a point – indeed more effective than many US analysts expected – it ultimately served to reinforce a number of false impressions and leave Ankara ill-prepared to confront the problems it was creating for itself⁵². Among the principal drawbacks of this personalised approach was Erdoğan's repeated belief in Trump's assurances that as President he had the ability to circumvent institutions on the US side so as to deliver results for Turkey. On legal issues, such as the Halkbank case and the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, Trump ultimately exaggerated his own capacity to bend the law to accommodate Erdoğan. Without reliable sources of information and communication channels with US institutions, Ankara was caught off guard by the role that Congress and the Pentagon ultimately played in imposing sanctions and removing Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet programme. Moreover, Erdoğan's faith in his personal relationship with Trump also left Turkey vulnerable when this relationship went sour, as in the case of imprisoned Pastor Andrew Brunson. In the summer of 2018, Trump felt betrayed when a deal he believed he had worked out with Erdoğan for Brunson's release fell through⁵³. He responded by threatening to 'obliterate' the Turkish economy, imposing tariffs and sanctions that contributed to the ongoing destabilisation of the Turkish Lira⁵⁴.

The foreign policy impact of the presidential system has become difficult to disentangle from a number of other trends, specifically Erdoğan's political alliance with the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party and his post-attempted coup fixation with confronting foreign and domestic threats to his regime. Moreover, implementation of the presidential system in theory, as specified by the current constitution, bears little relation to the version being practised by Erdoğan himself. Any future Turkish president would not wield the same power as Erdoğan, nor necessarily be beholden to the same fears or alliances. As such, the importance of system-related issues in Turkish foreign policy-making could decrease following the country's next transfer of power.

For now, though, the impact of the presidential system on Turkey's relations with Washington is clear. As US-Turkish ties deteriorated, political commentators in Ankara continued to articulate a rationale for Turkish policy in which Turkey was breaking with half a century of subservience to the West in order to pursue a more independent foreign agenda. According to this theory, Turkey's push for independence generated hostility from the West, which wanted to bring Turkey to heel. However, eventually Turkish policy would pay off when Western leaders realised that, on account of Turkey's strength and importance, they ultimately needed Turkish support. Furthermore, they would be forced to rebuild relations with Turkey on Ankara's terms. From this perspective, when Turkey sought improved relations with Russia, or threatened to use military force against US-backed Kurdish fighters in Syria, this represented the necessary proof of Turkish strength and resolve that would eventually lead the West to treat Turkey with more deference and respect.

This argument proved elegantly self-reinforcing, as it transformed the negative consequences of Turkish policy decisions into proof that they were actually working. Allegations of Western support for the 2016 coup attempt and Syrian Kurdish fighters give evidence of Ankara being convinced that the West was already conspiring against it. Consequently, the costs of Turkish policies generating hostilities appeared less important⁵⁵. When, for example, Washington imposed sanctions on Turkey to secure the release of

⁵² N. Danforth, '[An Even More Troubled Alliance: Turkish-American Problems in Contemporary Perspective](#)', *TurkeyScope*, Vol 1 No 6, 2017.

⁵³ A. Zaman, '[Understanding the Failed Deal With Turkey That Sparked Trump's Fury](#)', *The New York Times*, 7 August 2018.

⁵⁴ M. Badkar, '[Lira extends slide as Trump threatens to 'obliterate' Turkey's economy](#)', *Financial Times*, 7 October 2019.

⁵⁵ N. Danforth & N. Gingeras, '[Into the Abyss: Turkish Impressions of a U.S.-Turkish Break](#)', *Bipartisan Policy Center*, 17 August 2018.

imprisoned pastor Andrew Brunson, pro-government Turkish media depicted it as part of a longstanding war against the Turkish economy, not the response to a specific Turkish government action.

Closer to home, Ankara followed this same logic in response to its deteriorating relations with neighbours in the Middle East and Europe, ultimately leading to the adoption of what became known as the blue homeland doctrine⁵⁶. From 2013, Turkey's 'precious loneliness' had rapidly escalated. Ankara had not only fallen foul of Egypt and the Gulf States because of its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, but also further alienated Israel with its support for Hamas and Palestinian claims in East Jerusalem. Subsequent developments further exacerbated this, including collapse of the 2015-2017 Crans-Montana talks over the future of Cyprus. Intensified Cypriot efforts to exploit natural gas finds south-east of the island in conjunction with Israel and Egypt led to even more tensions. In the following years, this cooperation deepened into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which incorporated Greece within an increasingly close coalition of regional states.

Ankara's exclusion from this Forum, as well as its inability to find more diplomatic support following collapse of the Crans-Montana talks, was in itself a consequence of Turkey's policies towards Europe and its neighbours. Yet, as Ankara came to perceive itself as being surrounded by an axis of hostile powers in the region, it decided to double down on the approach which had helped consolidate this hostility⁵⁷. Accordingly, in an effort to 'break out of its encirclement', 'push back' against hostile confinement and demonstrate that Turkey could not be denied a 'seat at the table', Ankara adopted an ambitious plan for militarily and diplomatically thwarting its rivals' plans in the regions⁵⁸. Ankara pressured the Government of National Accord (GNA), the United Nations (UN)-recognised Libyan government based in Tripoli, into signing a Memorandum of Understanding that formally delimited respective Libyan and Turkish Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean. With this Turkey formally claimed a dramatically expanded EEZ directly contradicting longstanding Greek claims as well as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). By the summer of 2020, Turkey had begun exploring for gas in this newly claimed region, bringing it into direct conflict with Greece, Cyprus and the EU.

Turkish sabre-rattling with Greece in 2020 was also indicative of a new militarism in Turkish foreign policy, something that was explicitly celebrated in Ankara. Pro-government think tanks, journalists and even many in the opposition, were eager to point out that, whether fighting against the PKK in Syria and Iraq or deploying Turkish military assets to Libya, Ankara was now using 'hard power' to advance interests beyond the country's borders⁵⁹. A particularly dramatic demonstration of this came in the autumn of 2020 when Turkey provided drones and other forms of military support to the Azeri government in its war with Armenia⁶⁰. In clear contrast with Ankara's more cautious approach not only during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war but also with the 2009 effort at rapprochement, Erdoğan's government sought to play a crucial role in the conflict and at the same time advertise this as widely as possible.

During the course of 2021, Ankara seemed to recognise that it had become too embattled and regionally isolated. Moreover, there was a fear of more pushback from Washington following the election of President Joe Biden. While eagerly suggesting that Biden's election could lead to a 'reset' with Washington, Ankara quickly began touting plans for rapprochement with countries ranging from France and Greece to Egypt, Israel and the UAE⁶¹. Yet the results of this shift have been modest. Aided by a ceasefire and tenuous political process in Libya, Ankara and Cairo have lowered the temperature of their relationship. With the UAE and now perhaps Saudi Arabia, Ankara has gone further. In Ankara, Erdoğan recently welcomed Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, as well as the prospect of increased Emirati investment.

⁵⁶ D. Gardner, 'Turkey's foreign policy of "precious loneliness"', *Financial Times*, 16 November 2015.

⁵⁷ W. Armstrong, 'Analysis: Turkey's foreign policy takes hawkish turn over "Blue Homeland"', *BBC*, 6 July 2020.

⁵⁸ R. Gingeras, 'Blue homeland: the heated politics behind Turkey's new maritime strategy', *War on the rocks*, 2 June 2020.

⁵⁹ M. Ataman, 'Turkey in 2020: Regional power and global actor', *SETA*, 31 December 2019.

⁶⁰ S. Fraser, 'AP Explains: What lies behind Turkish support for Azerbaijan', *AP News*, 2 October 2020.

⁶¹ See e.g. S. Demirtaş, 'France's Macron sends letter to improve ties with Turkey', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 15 January 2021.

Turkey has also carried out several inconclusive talks with Greece, although this did not prevent the conclusion of a French-Greek defence agreement in the autumn of 2021.

Washington, in turn, has welcomed a reprieve from mounting tensions with Turkey but so far there has been no reset and, furthermore, none of the underlying problems have been solved. Efforts to find a mutually acceptable solution to the S-400 crisis have failed. Washington continues to insist that Turkey warehouses the system while Ankara continues to push for US acceptance of this purchase and drop sanctions. The Biden administration is looking for opportunities to cooperate with Ankara but so far few have been forthcoming.

It had originally been hoped in the spring of 2021 that Turkey could continue to run Kabul airport after the USA's withdrawal, but the Taliban's victory effectively scotched these plans⁶². Subsequently, because of Washington's need for an intermediary with the Taliban, Qatar proved better able to fill this role than Erdoğan's government. Meanwhile, many flashpoints remain, with a number of crises having been narrowly averted. For instance, in October 2021, Erdoğan threatened to expel the ambassadors of ten Western countries after they criticised the continued imprisonment of philanthropist Osman Kavala. Skilful diplomacy on both sides ensured that the ambassadors stayed, but the touch-and-go nature of Turkey's relations with the West were again made patently clear. Early in November 2021, Ankara threatened to launch another military operation against US-backed Kurdish forces in Syria, which would probably have triggered a sharp response from the Biden White House.

In the course of two decades, Turkey has progressed from pursuing a vision of national prestige that involved improving economic ties and soft power, to nationalism, irredentism and hard power. Whereas Turkey, as with many nations, has long been eager for a more prominent role in the world, the manner in which Ankara is now pursuing this goal brings together a dangerous mix of militarism, religion and nationalism. In part, this change reflects geopolitical changes that have made Turkey's neighbourhood more violent and chaotic. But it is also the result of a new political and ideological reconfiguration within Turkey that has brought together the most aggressive Islamists and traditional nationalists in opposition to the country's liberal and democratic elements. This alliance is based on a shared worldview which assumes hostility from Turkey's neighbours and Western allies while surmising that the West is in decline and it is time to diversify allies.

In summary, the direction in which Turkish foreign policy has developed has led to various problems with the EU and its Member States. The following section will focus on three Mediterranean hotspots that have created tension over the years.

⁶² M. Kofman, et al., ['After Withdrawal: How China, Turkey and Russia will respond to the Taliban'](#), Commentary, *War on the rocks*, 31 August 2021.

4. Three Mediterranean hotspots: East Med, Syria and Libya

The multifaceted nature of EU-Turkey relations has so far produced a scenario of 'conflictual cooperation', as mentioned earlier. This delicate equilibrium was shaken by increases in security and foreign policy conflicts during 2019 and 2020.

Particularly when we look at recent years, Turkey's foreign policy moves have become increasingly less predictable and rather ad-hoc depending on the context. Its understanding of strong relations has seemingly faded away, in favour of more 'liquid' alliances⁶³. Turkey's approach to the 21st century's multilateralism and its apparent inclination towards unstable alliances rather than solid partnerships could also persuade the EU and some of its Member States to adopt more transactional approaches. This new situation and the unpredictability of Turkish foreign policy make it more difficult, albeit not impossible, for the EU to come up with effective and innovative policy tools to regain trust and preserve collaboration in dossiers of mutual interest.

Strategies adopted in the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Libya reflect the assertive character of Turkish foreign policy and the extent to which it clashes with those of the EU and some of its Member States. Foreign and security policy in the shared neighbourhood is one of the realms where EU-Turkey relations have become increasingly adversarial. There is more than one driver explaining this evolution, but changes in Turkey's foreign policy decision-making and domestic politics⁶⁴ would appear to be key, as explained above in detail. Turkey's perception of global alliance structures and multilateralism is similarly important to consider.

In the three cases covered here (the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Libya), two alternative futures are still possible: one in which adversarial relations reach the point of no return; or one in which the current vicious circle of grievances and threats is broken, giving way to new opportunities for dialogue and cooperation. For each of the different cases, the following subsections will outline: (i) Turkey's position and the extent to which it has evolved; (ii) which instruments Turkey has deployed to achieve its foreign policy goals; and (iii) the level of impact on EU-Turkey relations.

4.1 Eastern Mediterranean

Even among the three cases analysed in this study, a hierarchy can be established. The situation in the Eastern Mediterranean is certainly the most crucial, in light of various overlapping developments⁶⁵. It should not be analysed as a single conflict, but rather as a matrix of intersecting conflicts. There are three main components: (i) the division of Cyprus and Turkey's support for the self-proclaimed 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus', including the presence of Turkish troops on the island; (ii) the disagreement on maritime waters, air space, continental shelf and economic exclusive zones in the Aegean and Mediterranean; and (iii) the proliferation of mechanisms for regional cooperation that exclude Turkey, thus connecting with broader patterns of amity and enmity in the wider Middle East region⁶⁶.

Firstly, with regard to **Cyprus**, Ankara's perception of the conflict is that Turkey and Turkish Cypriots have been unfairly treated by the EU. Turkish Cypriots having voted in favour of the Annan Plan in 2004, which

⁶³ E. Soler i Lecha, [Liquid alliances in the Middle East](#), CIDOB Notes Internacionales, 2017.

⁶⁴ I. Toygur, ['Whatever it takes: When Foreign Policy Becomes the Key for Staying in Power'](#), IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook, 2021.

⁶⁵ A. Adar & I. Toygur, [Turkey, the EU and the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis: Militarization of Foreign Policy and Power Rivalry](#), SWP Berlin, December 2020.

⁶⁶ The scope and nature of this study does not allow for an extensive account of the historical evolution of these conflicts. Ample bibliography exists on the three cases. See among others D. Keridis & D. Triantaphyllou, *Greek-Turkish Relations: The Security Dilemma in the Aegean*, Brassey's, Dulles, 2001; M. Aydin & K. Ifantis (eds.), *Turkish-Greek Relations: The Security Dilemma in the Aegean*, Routledge, London/New York, 2004; International Crisis Group, [Turkey-Greece: From Maritime Brinkmanship to Dialogue](#), International Crisis Group Report 263, 2021; T. Dokos, et al., [Greek-Turkish Relations and the Cyprus dispute: impact on Turkey-EU scenarios](#), FEUTURE Online Paper, Vol 27, 2018.

was also backed by the Turkish authorities, is frequently put forward as an argument to blame the EU for failing to deliver on its promises⁶⁷. This historical betrayal as well as limited progress in revamping negotiations has hardened Turkey's position, the latest attempts being the 2015-2017 talks ending in Crans-Montana and subsequent exploratory talks in 2021, both of which ended in failure.

The nationalist turn in Turkey's foreign policy explained above translated into military deployments and intensified unilateral actions in the field of energy, even though initial discoveries of hydrocarbon deposits happened more than a decade ago. Activities have also involved symbolic moves such as President Erdoğan's visit to Varosha as part of the celebrations marking the 37th anniversary of self-proclamation of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus', an entity that only Turkey recognises. This visit was condemned by the HR/VP Josep Borrell, who said that it has the ability to 'cause greater distrust and tension in the region and should be urgently reversed.'⁶⁸ Borrell not only referred to this visit, but also to Turkey's statements at the highest level arguing that in the absence of a solution, for which the Republic of Cyprus and indirectly the EU is blamed, a two-state solution would be the only alternative⁶⁹. Foreign policy experts on Turkey are divided in their opinions as to whether these statements are part of negotiation tactics or represent a substantive and real declaration of intent.

Arguably, aside from frustration and little hope of reunification of the island on the EU side, there are a number of factors that have contributed to a more aggressive and provocative tone in Turkish foreign policy: (i) the victory of a Turkish nationalist candidate in the October 2020 elections held in the north of the island; (ii) consensus around this issue between the Turkish government and most of the Kemalist and right-wing opposition; (iii) the predicament of nationalist generals and admirals among the Turkish armed forces which have become increasingly critical of the solidarity and effectiveness of the Western alliance in advancing the country's interests; and (iv) the first tentative signs of frozen conflicts melting, which have opened new spaces to challenge the *status quo*, such as in Nagorno Karabakh where Turkey is a relevant player whose priorities differ from those of the EU or some of its most vocal Member States.

Secondly, regarding **maritime disputes in the Aegean and Mediterranean**, Turkey's position is incompatible with that of Greece and Cyprus. There are various elements of dispute: the sovereignty of several islets and rocks; the extension of maritime waters (Turkey argues that it should be 6 nautical miles, while Greece argues that it should be extended to 12); and delimitation of the respective EEZs. Greece and Cyprus invoke the UNCLOS Convention, with an interpretation which is seen to be supported by the EU through the so-called 'Seville map'⁷⁰. Turkey, which has not signed the Convention, considers the status quo unfair and limiting. Hence, it decided to move from words to action by resuming the exploratory missions of its vessel *Oruç Reis* in disputed sovereign waters off the Greek Island of Kastellorizo in summer 2019. In broad terms, Turkey not only denies Greek and Cypriot claims, but also promotes a different, maximalist delimitation, popularly known as the 'blue homeland doctrine', as explained earlier.

Whereas these issues have always poisoned Greek-Turkish relations, in 2019 the situation escalated. Cyprus and Greece protested Turkey's unilateral actions and the European Council agreed to downgrade relations with Turkey still further. In October 2019, the Council agreed to establish a framework regime of restrictive measures, later prolonged until November 2022⁷¹, targeting 'natural and legal persons' responsible for or involved in illegal drilling for hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean⁷². Hence, the HR/VP and the

⁶⁷ V. Boland & D. Dombey, 'EU 'has broken its promises to North Cypriots', *Financial Times*, 10 September 2004.

⁶⁸ European External Action Service, [Varosha: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell](#), 201115_5, 15 November 2020.

⁶⁹ T. Gumrukcu, 'Turkey's Erdogan says two-state solution only option for Cyprus', *Reuters*, 10 February 2021.

⁷⁰ A map made public in 2006 and drawn by scholars from the University of Seville, following a request from the European Commission to delimit the maritime jurisdictions of the member states. See J.R. Mateos & J.L. Suárez de Vivero, 'Maritime Europe and EU enlargement: a geopolitical perspective', *Marine Policy*, Vol 30 No 2, 2006, pp. 167-172.

⁷¹ Council of the European Union, [Unauthorised drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean: council prolongs the sanctions regime by one year](#), Press Release, 845/21, 11 November 2021.

⁷² Council of the European Union, [Outcome of the Council Meeting](#), Press Release, 13066/19, 14 October 2019.

Commission were invited to present proposals to this effect, which resulted in a framework finally being adopted by the European Council in November 2019⁷³. Far from having the effect of softening Turkey's position, this instead prompted the announcement of a bilateral deal with the Libyan government on EEZ that totally ignored Greek claims. The European Council in December 2019 condemned this decision and once again reaffirmed its solidarity with Cyprus and Greece.

Nevertheless, by the end of 2020 signs of de-escalation did eventually become apparent, including a halt in the *Oruç Reis* explorations. This resulted from a number of factors: the threat of more sanctions (eventually not followed through); expectations created by Joe Biden's victory in the US elections; and the perception in Ankara's decision-making circles that Turkey was fighting on too many fronts at the same time. This was related not only to foreign policy, but also to a rapidly deteriorating economic situation. Signs of goodwill and more cooperative statements were heard again in Greek-Turkish bilateral relations⁷⁴. This included a decision to resume exploratory bilateral talks in January 2021⁷⁵, which coincided with Erdoğan's statements arguing that Turkey wanted to turn a new page in its relations with the EU⁷⁶. The fact that disastrous escalation was avoided this time should not be an invitation to complacency or passivity, as the underlying causes of events in 2019 have yet to be resolved.

Finally, one of the newest and most relevant Eastern Mediterranean developments is a **proliferation of regional cooperation initiatives** that have one element in common: the non-participation of Turkey. These initiatives include *inter alia*:

- the trilateral cooperation between Israel, Greece and Cyprus;
- talks involving Greece, Cyprus and Egypt, which have occasionally been open to the participation of France in a 3+1 format;
- the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (with the participation of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and Palestine considering UAE's candidacy, with EU and USA in observer roles);
- the Philia forum, gathering Egypt, France, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Cyprus and Greece;
- the new quartet that met in Paphos in April 2021 (the UAE, Israel, Cyprus and Greece).

Turkish officials have perceived the proliferation of these initiatives as an 'attempt to form an alliance built upon hostility towards Turkey', as expressed for instance by the foreign affairs minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, when commenting on the Philia forum⁷⁷.

As recently stated by scholars, the Eastern Mediterranean has become 'the eye of a gathering geopolitical storm.'⁷⁸ The involvement of an increasing number of extra-regional actors, growing connections between the rivalries in this area as well as alliances and counter-alliances in the Middle East together with some degree of political instrumentalisation seeking domestic political gains have all combined to make this Mediterranean storm potentially devastating.

This situation certainly implies that the EU will need to explore ways of avoiding further crises by creating opportunities for de-escalation. In that light, the EU must invest in strengthening the current *détente* in Greek-Turkish bilateral relations and, despite accumulated frustration, persevere in maintaining hope for

⁷³ Council of the European Union, [Council Decision \(CFSP\) 2019/1894 of 11 November 2019 concerning restrictive measures in view of Turkey's unauthorised drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean](#), L 291/47, Official Journal of the European Union, 2019.

⁷⁴ Hurriyet Daily News, ['Turkey, Greece cancel naval drills as gesture of goodwill'](#), 27 October 2020.

⁷⁵ Hellenic Republic, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs announcement on the resumption of Exploratory Talks Between Greece and Turkey](#), 22 September 2020.

⁷⁶ S. Van Dorpe, ['Erdoğan: Turkey wants to 'turn new page' in EU relations'](#), *Politico*, 10 January 2021.

⁷⁷ R. Soylu, ["An anti-Turkey alliance": Ankara slams Greece for hosting 'hostile' meeting with regional countries"](#), *Middle East Eye*, 12 February 2021.

⁷⁸ M. Tanchum (ed), [Eastern Mediterranean in uncharted waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities](#), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Turkey, 2020.

the reunification of Cyprus. This is certainly preferable to inertia, that will merely increase the chances of dangerous unilateral retaliation from Turkey, which in turn would require a vigorous response by the EU. The EU can also encourage contacts on different societal levels between the three parties, albeit these have diminished due to COVID-19 restrictions, as well as promote and finance inclusive regional cooperation fora. Moreover, for the EU it would be useful to understand better Turkey's threat perception, particularly when shared across large segments of Turkish society, not just by the government and security establishment. A key challenge for the EU in pursuing this strategy is to avoid it being misinterpreted as a sign of weakness in Ankara and a source of doubt about the Union's solidarity. Hence, this constructive policy should run in parallel to already existing measures that aim at emphasising the high cost of unilateralism.

4.2 Syria

Turkey has a 909 kilometres long border with Syria and is currently hosting 3.6 million Syrian refugees. Some of Turkey's largest southern cities such as Gaziantep and Urfa are geographically much closer to Aleppo and Damascus than they are to Ankara and Istanbul. These basic geographic and social factors already indicate why Syria is not seen in Turkey as just one conflict in its vicinity, but as a top foreign policy issue with major destabilising potential. Looking at the degree of convergence or incompatibility between the EU and Turkey when it comes to the Syrian war, close attention should be paid to: the weight of **history**; the different threat perceptions when it comes to **terrorist activities; refugees** – an issue which can potentially lead to cooperation or political tension; and Turkey's **military operations in Northern Syria**, largely unwelcomed by the EU.

A brief look at some key events from recent history helps in understanding the fluid nature of Syria-Turkey relations even before the war as well as the Kurdish issue's centrality in these relations. The two countries were on opposite sides during the Cold War, but its end created opportunities for rapprochement. Yet, support provided by the Syrian regime to the PKK put the countries on the verge of armed conflict as Turkey amassed troops at the border during October 1998 and threatened to enter Syrian territory⁷⁹. This threat was enough to bring about an agreement concerning opposition to the PKK in Adana.

The death of Hafez al Assad in 2000 and succession by his son, Bashar al Assad, opened a further window for de-escalation. The presence of then Turkish President, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, at Hafez's funeral was highly appreciated and hence successive Turkish governments were keen to profit from this opportunity⁸⁰. The possibility of not only consolidating peace but also developing cooperation at all levels was one the most visible outputs of the Zero Problems doctrine, as detailed in Section 3 of this study. By 2010 Turkey and Syria had lifted visa requirements for their nationals, which resulted in booming cross-border trade and short-term tourism⁸¹.

Yet Turkey's relations with Syria changed dramatically during the last decade. As explained above, the first reaction to democratic uprisings in several Syrian cities was to persuade al-Assad, until then regarded as a rather friendly leader, to opt for political dialogue rather than repression. Ahmet Davutoğlu himself travelled to Damascus to convey this message to the Syrian president⁸². It did not work. Accordingly, as repression mounted and the conflict escalated, Turkey changed its stance, calling for al-Assad to step

⁷⁹ Ö. Alantar, [‘The October 1998 Crisis: The Change of Heart of Turkish Foreign Policy towards Syria?’](#), *Cahiers d'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien*, Vol 31, 2001, pp. 141-162.

⁸⁰ M.B. Altunışık & Ö. Tür, [‘From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations’](#), *Security Dialogue*, Vol 37 No 2, 2006, pp. 229-248.

⁸¹ Ö. Tür, ‘The Political Economy of Turkish-Syrian Relations in the 2000s – The Rise and Fall of Trade, Investment and Integration’, In: Ö. Tür & R. Hinnebusch (eds.), *Turkey-Syria-Relations. Between Enmity and Amity*, Routledge, London, 2013, pp. 159-176.

⁸² K.Y. Oweis, [‘Assad: Syria won't stop fight against „terrorists“’](#), *Reuters*, 9 August 2011.

down⁸³. It applied economic sanctions and allowed the Free Syrian Army as well as the political opposition to operate from Turkish territory. During 2012 and 2013, tensions between both countries escalated, including attacks on Turkish soil, such as the car bomb explosions in Reyhanlı, for which Turkey blamed the Syrian regime⁸⁴. Ankara authorised cross-border military operations⁸⁵ and also requested NATO assistance, to which the Alliance responded by deploying Patriot missiles across southern Turkey early in 2013⁸⁶. During that period, Turkey's position *vis-à-vis* the conflict in Syria was not significantly different from those of its NATO allies.

This started to change in 2014 due to a different **threat perception**. For the EU and the West, Islamist militias, including those linked to al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State's emergence in Syria and Iraq were viewed as the number one threat. By contrast, Ankara prioritised the defeat of Al-Assad and was concerned about the strengthening of Kurdish militias. Displays of violence by IS against civilians, including foreigners and members of religious minorities, and vindication by IS of terrorist attacks in Europe, such as those in Paris in November 2015, led Turkey's allies to make decisions on the ground that were seen by Turkey as a threat to its own national security. The USA and various European countries were keen to strengthen the partnership with Kurdish militias (Syrian Democratic Forces-People's Protection Units) in the fight against IS, while Turkey perceived this partnership as a national security threat because of links with the PKK, even more so as the Peace Process with the Kurdish armed group ended abruptly in July 2015. Turkey's insecurity concerns grew even further because of Russian threats in retaliation for Turkey shooting down one of its jets that had entered Turkish airspace for a few seconds in 2015⁸⁷.

In this context, Turkey re-evaluated its position. Al-Assad's advance with the fall of Aleppo and Kurdish militias' military victories against IS, which threatened to consolidate a united territorial space connecting the three cantons traditionally populated by Syrian Kurds and included Arab-speaking areas, rang all the alarms in Ankara. This Turkish policy review implied mending ties with Russia and promoting alternative frameworks with Moscow and Tehran for resolving the Syrian conflict, such as the Astana Process, which excluded both the EU and the USA⁸⁸.

In this context, Ankara also tried to convey a message to its European partners that its cooperation was vital in handling the massive inflow of **refugees**, which intensified due to the fall of rebel strongholds in Northern Syria. With hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees reaching EU territory starting in Spring 2015, the issue of migration quickly came to dominate the EU-Turkish agenda. The EU requested Turkey's cooperation, a process which was concluded with the well-known March 2016 deal⁸⁹. Although Turkey received ample EU funds and recognition⁹⁰, Ankara still perceived EU and US policies regarding the Kurdish issue as undermining its national security.

This is how Turkey's involvement in Syria entered a new phase, that of **military incursions into Syrian territory** and the support of loyal Syrian militias to consolidate positions against the Syrian Democratic Forces-People's Protection Units. This strategy differed from that of the EU and, more importantly, key Member States such as France. In the past, Paris and Ankara shared a willingness to gather international support aimed at bringing down the Al-Assad regime, but since 2014 their strategies have openly grown

⁸³ J. Burch, [‘Turkey tells Syria’s Assad: Step down!’](#), *Reuters*, 22 November 2011.

⁸⁴ M. Weaver, [‘Turkey blames Syria over Reyhanli bombings’](#), *The Guardian*, 12 May 2013.

⁸⁵ Al Jazeera, [‘Turkey authorises future Syria raids’](#), 05 October 2012.

⁸⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, [NATO support to Turkey: Background and timeline](#), 19 February 2013.

⁸⁷ Reuters, [‘Russia approves detailed sanctions against Turkey over downed plane’](#), 1 December 2015.

⁸⁸ F. Balanche, [Will Astana Displace Geneva in the Syrian Peace Process?](#), Policy Analysis, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017.

⁸⁹ European Council, EU-Turkey Statement, 2016.

⁹⁰ See e.g. the European Commission, [EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis](#); European Commission, [The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#).

apart. The publication of a map detailing French military positions in Syria by Turkey's Anadolu news agency⁹¹.

In February 2020, coinciding with the deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in Idlib, anti-Syrian sentiment in Turkey continued to mount. Moreover, there was growing frustration not only with the EU, but even more so with Greece and France in the Eastern Mediterranean. Hence, Turkey decided to 'weaponise' migration. In February 2020 Erdoğan warned that millions of refugees could head to the EU if he was not presented with help to relocate some of them within parts of northern Syria controlled by his allies and which he described as 'safe zones'⁹². In fact, thousands were beginning to reach or head towards the land border with Greece. Interestingly, very few were going towards Bulgaria, confirming the political orchestration of the crisis.

European decision-makers responded with messages of solidarity with Greece. It was the first international crisis to be managed by Ursula von der Leyen, Charles Michel and later David Sassoli in their new positions as Presidents of the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament respectively. Greece responded forcefully, implementing harsh measures at the border and suspending asylum procedures. However, the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in March 2020 and the implementation of stricter border closures put an abrupt end to this migratory flow.

The perception gap between the EU and Turkey regarding security threats emanating from Syria has significantly widened since 2014. This issue remaining central for Turkey and relatively less important for the European Union does not create the best conditions to bridge the gap. Yet, there is some room for cooperation. Despite these different perceptions, high-level political dialogue with Turkey about Syria is needed, as the consequences of the conflict affect both the EU and Turkey. Even more importantly, when coping with the conflict's humanitarian consequences, the EU should continue supporting Turkey, not just the government and state institutions but also the whole of society. The EU should not, in any case, make this humanitarian support conditional on cooperation in other areas. Neither Turkish society nor Syrian refugees should bear the cost of political tensions.

4.3 Libya

Turkey has played a significant role in the Libyan conflict's evolution since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and even more so after the Libyan transition collapsed in 2014, which led to the outbreak of what has been called the 'second Libyan civil war'. Unlike the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria, Libya stands as an exclusive foreign and security policy matter with very few domestic implications for Turkey. The situation for some EU Member States is quite different. For instance, neighbouring countries such as Italy and Malta are directly exposed to the consequences of Libya's destabilisation, which they may regard as more than a foreign policy issue. The following paragraphs explore how some of these differences can be traced back to: (i) the **2011** operation to oust Gaddafi; (ii) Turkey's **political alliances** in Libya; (iii) the different threat perception regarding **terrorism and migration**; (iv) Turkey's critical role in the **Libyan war** and the extent to which it can assist **national reconciliation**; and (v) how this conflict interacts with other **scenarios of regional competition**.

It is also worthwhile to analyse Turkey's involvement in the Libyan conflict over the past decade and how it has evolved. The first aspect worth highlighting is Turkey's **reluctant involvement in the NATO operation** that executed UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973⁹³. Regarding Gaddafi's regime, Turkey unsuccessfully advocated for mediation and finding a political solution to the extent of offering

⁹¹ L. Mas, 'L'agence turque Anadolu publie une carte des positions militaires françaises en Syrie', *France 24*, 30 March 2018.

⁹² DW News, 'Erdoğan warns 'millions' of refugees heading to Europe', 2 March 2020.

⁹³ [2011 UN Security Council \(UNSC\) Resolution concerning Libya](#)

Gaddafi a guarantee of safe departure⁹⁴. Turkey was worried about the impact that a military confrontation could have for thousands of Turkish citizens working in Libya⁹⁵ and numerous Turkish investments there which, according to some sources, amounted to USD 20 billion (from pre-2011 deals)⁹⁶. Turkey also reacted negatively to not being invited to the international meeting convened by the then French President Sarkozy following a vote in the UN⁹⁷. Once the operation was launched, Ankara expressed its disagreement with the way it was being conducted, for instance by denouncing the French air attacks on Libyan ground forces⁹⁸.

Following the killing of Gaddafi, Turkey welcomed the **transition process** that was initiated immediately thereafter. Thus, in principle it could be said that this provided a new space for potential cooperation between Turkey, the EU and the most relevant EU Member States. However, the strategies pursued not only by Ankara but also by all other interested parties contributed to the fragmentation of Libya's political system, which led to the emergence of various informal partnerships with different local actors, all promoting their own interests in particular parts of the country. As in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt, Turkey tried to take advantage of its good relationship with political actors closer to the Muslim Brotherhood, as detailed earlier in Section 3. In the case of Libya, Turkey regarded establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood political branch in 2012, the Justice and Construction Party, as a political opportunity⁹⁹.

Any hopes that Libya could transition into a functional democracy faded away in 2014. This mainly resulted from internal fragmentation dynamics in Libya, an abundance of weapons and, to a certain extent, the increased regional competition in which Turkey was a relevant participant. Finally, the conflict in Libya, particularly after the collapse of the transition in 2014, also reflected the confrontation between two ideologically antagonistic constellations of local and regional actors. Following elections in June 2015, two centres of power emerged: Tripoli, which mainly received the support of Qatar and Turkey and where the Muslim Brotherhood was stronger; and Tobruk, with its most visible figure Khalifa Haftar backed by the UAE and Egypt, two countries that see the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist militant groups at large as domestic and regional enemies. These four countries were not the only regional players to take sides, but they were certainly the most influential. This involvement translated into financial and military support for parties to the conflict, which, as described in reports from the UN panel of experts, rendered the arms embargo imposed on Libya by the UNSC since 2011 'totally ineffective'¹⁰⁰. Furthermore, the UAE and Egypt also launched military operations on Libyan soil, ostensibly in the fight against terrorism. The involvement of all these regional powers turned Libya into a **regional proxy war**.

A number of key events raised alarms in Western Europe about the spread of Islamist extremism in North Africa: the presence of IS fighters in Libya; the kidnapping and beheading of a group of Christian Egyptian workers in 2015; terrorists threatening to conquer Rome; a group being able to take control of the city of Sirte; and an attempt to capture the southern Tunisian city of Ben Guerdane. Up to that point, Europe's concerns about Libya were mainly limited to migration and Italy's regret at having to manage the humanitarian crisis alone. As terrorism was becoming a key agenda item, Libya acquired much more importance on the list of EU priorities and that of many Member States. As had happened with Syria, this created a diverging **threat perception** between Turkey and the EU. However, a major difference here was a greater discord within the EU on how to act in Libya and whom to support. The two most influential EU

⁹⁴ E. Toksabay, 'Turkey says offered Gaddafi "guarantee" to quit Libya', *Reuters*, 10 June 2021.

⁹⁵ J. Head, 'Libya: Turkey's troubles with Nato and no-fly zone', *BBC News*, 25 March 2021.

⁹⁶ J. Harchaoui, 'The Pendulum: How Russia sways its way to more influence in Libya', *Commentary, War on the rocks*, 7 January 2021.

⁹⁷ M. Champion, 'Erdogan and the French', *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 April 2011.

⁹⁸ New Wires, 'Turkey reluctantly joins NATO operations against Libya', *France 24*, 24 March 2011.

⁹⁹ J. Harchaoui, 'Why Turkey Intervened in Libya, Foreign Policy Research Institute', Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ United Nations, 'Libya arms embargo "totally ineffective": UN expert panel', *UN News*, 2021.

countries, Italy and France, visibly disagreed amongst themselves. Thus, while policies *vis-à-vis* Libya put Turkey at odds with some Member States, mainly France, this did not imply a clash with the EU as a whole.

Turkey's involvement and the risk of collision with some EU Member States significantly increased during 2019. In April of that year Khalifa Haftar launched a military operation aimed at conquering Tripoli, only a few days after the UN had convened a Libyan National Conference. Turkey perceived that Haftar was not acting alone but was backed by Turkey's regional rivals and to a certain extent also by France¹⁰¹. Ankara then decided to reinforce its support for the GNA, the internationally recognised government against Haftar. However, this support came at a price. In November, Ankara signed a maritime memorandum with the GNA establishing a EEZ stretching from southwest Turkey to northeast Libya¹⁰². As explained earlier, this delimitation effectively ignored any Greek claims as well as the UNCLOS¹⁰³. In January 2020, Turkey's support was formalised as its Parliament approved the deployment of Turkish troops in Libya¹⁰⁴.

Both the maritime deal and Turkey's decision to increase its military presence in Libya infuriated Greece and France, thereby further linking the conflict in Libya with the matrix of conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean. This also led to dangerous incidents such as the one in July 2020, when a French frigate attempted to verify the contents of a Tanzanian-flagged cargo ship escorted by three Turkish naval vessels that threatened to retaliate. France then openly accused Turkey of bypassing the arms embargo in Libya and decided to suspend its participation in NATO's Mediterranean mission¹⁰⁵. Some weeks later, Macron developed his vision of what he called a 'Pax Mediterranea' at the Lugano forum, arguing that new forms of cooperation in the Mediterranean are the answer to any return of regional imperial powers, explicitly mentioning Turkey¹⁰⁶. In November 2020, another maritime incident, this time involving a German vessel deployed in the IRINI naval operation, demonstrated how Libya could further irritate relations between Turkey and the EU¹⁰⁷.

Changes in Libya contributed to the avoidance of further tensions between Turkey, the EU and some of its Member States. This was made possible through a combination of the success of the Berlin process' in facilitating the formation of a new unity government and the failure of Haftar's unilateral offensive towards Tripoli which effectively pushed some of his supporters – Egypt in particular – to explore other avenues for reconciliation.

When it comes to cooperation with Turkey in Libya, the EU should acknowledge that a lack of unity among its Member States has so far undermined the possibility of any meaningful dialogue on this very important issue. The Berlin process has opened an opportunity not only for peace in Libya, but also for greater cohesion among EU Member States. This could provide space for the HR/VP to take up a more relevant role in voicing a shared EU policy towards Libya, eventually backed by a group of highly influential Member States, which may facilitate dialogue with Turkey. This could take the form of regular contacts with Turkish authorities in Ankara and with its diplomatic services in Libya to jointly provide support to Libyan authorities in consolidating the political transition and avoiding a new collapse. The fragile peace in Libya also offers an opportunity to bring together more closely those countries that have significantly invested in the conflict. Finding common ground not just between Turkey and France, but also Egypt and the UAE could have positive effects beyond Libya. For all this to be realised, the EU will need to work with other

¹⁰¹ J. Irish, '[As ties fray, Turkey accuses France of bias over Libya](#)', *Reuters*, 1 July 2020.

¹⁰² Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), '[The Libya-Turkey Memorandum of Understanding: Local and Regional Repercussions](#)', 2020.

¹⁰³ Hellenic Republic, '[Response of the Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alexandros Yennimatas, to a journalist's question on reports of a signing of a memorandum of understanding by Turkey and Libya regarding maritime zones](#)', 28 November 2019.

¹⁰⁴ P. Beaumont, '[Turkish MPs pass bill to send troops to support Libyan government](#)', *The Guardian*, 2 January 2020.

¹⁰⁵ J. Marcus, '[Libya crisis: France suspends Nato mission role amid Turkey row](#)', *BBC News*, 2 July 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Élisée, '[Notre Méditerranée gronde. Écoutez le message du Président Emmanuel Macron au Forum Moyen-Orient Méditerranée de Lugano](#)', 29 August 2020.

¹⁰⁷ H. Von Der Burchard, '[Germany 'concerned' after Turkey orders halt to ship search off Libyan coast](#)', *Politico*, 23 November 2020.

relevant international partners, particularly the USA, in persuading Turkey and other regional powers to repatriate any foreign troops deployed in Libya.

5. Conclusions

The Turkish Republic's founding fathers embraced Westernization. When Turkey joined NATO in 1952, foreign and security policy became an integral part of this vision. Until the end of the 20th century, Turkey was largely aligned with Europe, even if not without problems. Turkey's eagerness to join the EU was one of the guarantees for this alignment. In the second decade of the 21st century, though, this relationship started to crack.

Today EU-Turkey relations are not only fragile, but also shaped by parallel and sometimes even contradictory tracks. The Association Agreement of 1963 and its additional protocols still constitute this relationship's foundational basis. This also served to establish the Customs Union in 1995. The Negotiating Framework still shapes Turkey's accession talks, though they are currently at a standstill. Meanwhile, EU-Turkey relations have been shaped by other ad-hoc frameworks, such as the EU-Turkey Statements or multiple Positive Agenda proposals. Based on various sets of conditionalities these include promises such as: High-Level Dialogue meetings; people-to-people contacts; visa liberalisation; and the long-awaited modernisation of the Customs Union.

This being said, Turkish foreign policy and the country's moves in regional theatres of power, as discussed in Section 4, have had repercussions for the EU and for EU-Turkey relations. **First of all**, the imminent threat of this relationship becoming adversarial in nature shifted attention to an agenda of collaboration and containment. More precisely, after a period in which the EU decided that accession negotiations were at a standstill, in October 2020 the European Council formulated an offer for collaboration on dossiers of mutual interest. This offer for a Positive Agenda, reiterated by the European Council in December 2020 and March 2021 as well as in the Joint Commission-HR/VP communication on the State of Play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations¹⁰⁸, is conditional on Turkey decreasing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and engaging in a constructive dialogue with Cyprus and Greece. Otherwise, the EU will continue¹⁰⁹ to apply restrictive measures. In the meantime, whilst financial support of EUR 3 billion to support refugees and host communities as a follow-up to the work carried out under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey has been mobilised for the period 2021-2023¹¹⁰, financial support in the framework of IPA funds and the European Investment Bank will continue to apply. These varying approaches bear different results, while mixing and blurring prospects for the future. Currently at hand is a rather transactional relationship, including promises that are not regulated by the legal framework of relations and a stalled accession process.

Secondly, the increasingly conflictual relationship has laid open differences between EU institutions when it comes to their preferred approach regarding the EU's policy towards Turkey. Increasing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean motivated the European Council to focus on a geostrategic approach conditioning the offer of a Positive Agenda on Turkey's foreign policy actions rather than trying to encourage developments in democracy and rule of law standards in the country. In fact, the European Council conclusions of December 2020 do not include any reference to the rule of law, while conclusions from following meetings in March and June 2021 limit themselves to highlighting that rule of law in Turkey

¹⁰⁸ European Council, Special meeting, 2020; European Council, [Statement of the Members of the European Council](#), SN18/21, 25 March 2021; European Commission, [Joint Communication To The European Council – State of play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations](#), Joint Text, JOIN(2021)8, 22 March 2021.

¹⁰⁹ The EU sanctions framework and the concrete implementation - on two persons - is already in place, see [here](#).

¹¹⁰ European Commission, [Implementing Decision of 21.12.2021 on the financing of individual measures to support migration and border management in Turkey](#), CO(2021)9854 final, 21 December 2021.

remains a concern¹¹¹. Foreign and security policy remains a Member State competence, which limits the impact of EU institutions other than the Council and the European Council.

Conversely, the EP has continued to underline that Turkey is still a candidate country for accession, even though membership is not imminent. Hence, the EP wants any future conversation to encompass the domestic situation in Turkey, including: democratic backsliding; rule of law violations; together with concerns related to basic rights and freedoms. Over the past five years the EP's tone has gradually hardened. In 2016, 'freezing' accession negotiations was recommended¹¹². In 2017, 2019 and again in 2021, the institution called for 'suspension'. Meanwhile, in a statement by the EP Standing Rapporteur on Turkey and the Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee in March 2021, the EP has solidified its request for keeping human rights and rule of law at the core of EU-Turkey relations. The latest EP report, voted on by the plenary in May 2021, asked for harmonisation of EU institutions' positions so as to develop a common approach towards Turkey¹¹³. Harmonizing institutional stances remains a crucially important issue for overall relations.

Thirdly, tensions in the different theatres of power have also increased bilateral strains between Turkey and individual Member States, mainly France, Cyprus and Greece. The EU has shown solidarity with Greece and Cyprus in clearly stating its readiness to impose restrictive measures on Turkey. The Joint Communication on the State of play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations highlights how relevant the Cyprus issue is for all dimensions of the EU-Turkey relationship¹¹⁴. Hence, either this matter is resolved, which seems very unlikely in the near future, or political will is created to find alternative ways forward.

All in all, **the differences between EU institutions** and their preferences among the **array of existing frameworks** when it comes to EU-Turkey relations make it very difficult to find a harmonized approach. Member States' national interests are also of key relevance, not only in the Council and the European Council, but also in their bilateral relations with Turkey. Following this line of thought, the study concludes that all EU divisions as well as approaches to EU-Turkey relations within multifaceted frameworks and changing conditionalities negatively affect the relationship. The former is a long-standing EU reality, but the latter could be worked on. Turkey uses these differences to its advantage, with a consequent gradual erosion of trust. Hence, expectations management becomes very difficult and the way forward obscured.

The current policy of offering a positive political agenda that is conditional upon Turkish foreign policy either appeases or simply overlooks Turkish domestic politics. Mindful that domestic politics form one of the key drivers of Turkish foreign policy, this situation will become even more complicated when Turkey approaches its next election period, officially scheduled for no later than June 2023.

Foreign policy cooperation: mission impossible?

This study concludes that if the EU would like to increase its foreign and security cooperation with Turkey, it has various paths to follow. Historically, cooperation under the umbrella of NATO could be rewarding, especially as Turkey and 21 EU Member States are already NATO members. However, bilateral problems between Turkey and certain Member States also hinder EU-NATO cooperation. Turkey defends its right to limit information exchange and blocks the participation of some Member States, predominantly Cyprus, in joint activities. The current state of affairs between Turkey and the USA also makes it difficult to maximise

¹¹¹ European Council, [European Council meeting \(10 and 11 December 2020\) – Conclusions](#), EUCO 22/20, 11 December 2020; European Council, [European Council meeting \(24 and 25 June 2021\) – Conclusions](#), EUCO 7/21, 25 June 2021; European Council, Statement of the Members, 2021.

¹¹² European Parliament, [Resolution of 24 November 2016 on EU-Turkey relations](#), P8_TA(2016)0450, 24 November 2016.

¹¹³ European Parliament, [Resolution of 19 May 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Turkey](#), P9_TA(2021)0243, 19 May 2021.

¹¹⁴ European Commission, Joint Communication, 2021.

the benefits of NATO. It is important to remember that Turkey's purchase of Russian S400 air missile defence systems has led to sanctions by the USA under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) since April 2021. One important area to watch is Turkey's relations with China. In a period in which Turkey looks for new allies and commitments in the region, Sino-Turkish relations gain relevance. China has left its mark in the Eastern Mediterranean through the Belt and Road Initiative and the EU needs to be aware of potential policy challenges in the future¹¹⁵.

When it comes to the United Nations, Turkey is still very vocal about the need to reform the Security Council. Turkey's demand for reform is strongly linked to its desire to challenge the 20th century security architecture dominated by a handful of countries. Erdoğan's vision of UN structures' reform targets the constitution of a checks-and-balances system between the UNSC and General Assembly in which membership of the UNSC is enlarged to 20 countries that are elected by the General Assembly. This should ensure a fairer cultural and geographic representation¹¹⁶. EU Member States also consider reform options for the UNSC. While Germany is promoting a concept of granting additional Member States (besides France) a permanent seat; Italy, Spain and Malta have joined an informal group called 'United for Consensus' that also includes Turkey. In reaction to the G4-Group (Germany, India, Brazil and Japan) proposal, this group seeks to open discussion on the UNSC composition. When it comes to challenging the UN on the ground, Turkey's interference in Libya has been at odds with the UN-led Berlin process, while in Cyprus Turkey's recent moves in Varosha are in defiance of existing UNSC resolutions. In any case, further cooperation opportunities under the UN or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) should be contemplated.

When the right time comes, the EU could also look for synergies under PESCO. Until now even if PESCO is, generally and conditionally, open to third country participation, it has not proven itself to be a framework for intensifying cooperation with Turkey. In May 2021 Turkey officially applied for a military mobility project, but motivation among Member States to grant Turkey access seems to be rather low.

2022 has started with several challenges that should be factored in any attempt to manage EU-Turkey relations differently and favour greater cooperation on foreign and security policy. Increased tension in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood (Ukraine and Belarus), timid openings to explore normalisation of relations between Armenia and Turkey and various processes of regional de-escalation in the Middle East and North Africa (the Baghdad process, Iran-Saudi talks and the fragile but welcome Libyan transition) create opportunities for convergence on topics that are considered vital to both the EU and Turkey. Turkey is also one of the countries that will be more affected by the outcomes of a successful or failed negotiation on the Iranian Nuclear Deal, a diplomatic endeavour in which the EU plays a major role. Reinforcing communication and consultations with Ankara could support the EU's negotiation efforts while reassuring Ankara that its interests are being considered by the EU. Finally, the NATO summit in Madrid (29-30 June 2022) will be a critical date in the foreign and security calendar for many EU member states as well as for Turkey. NATO is expected to adopt a new Strategic Concept, just months after the publication of the EU's Strategic Compass and the extraordinary defence summit under the leadership of the French EU Council Presidency.

Together with this foreign and security policy calendar, domestic political calendars should also be taken into consideration. On the one hand, France will go through presidential and legislative elections in April and June 2022. Should French political elites instrumentalise Turkey in the electoral campaign, this could

¹¹⁵ For detailed analysis see J. Bastian, [Expeditionary Capital in the Eastern Mediterranean: Why Turkey Matters to China and Vice Versa](#), Working Paper, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies, No. 4, October 2021.

¹¹⁶ R.T. Erdoğan, *A Fairer World is Possible: A Proposed Model for the United Nations Reform*, Turkuvaz Kitap, 2021; for brief summary see also TRT World, ['In new book, Erdogan says the UN needs to be reformed for global justice'](#), 6 September 2021.

be harmful in broader EU-Turkey relations, as was the case in 2007. Likewise, statements by Turkish officials, including the President, could play a role in domestic electoral campaigns, as happened during the 2017 Dutch and German elections, and would add new sources of irritation to the relationship. On the other hand, uncertainty on whether Turkey could go for snap elections will also mark the tone of relations. As elections in Turkey approach, the temptation to resort to victimisation and nationalist discourse could increase. It is only after these elections that a more stable basis for the relationship could be built, either with the current leadership or with an alternative one.

What might then be the continuities and changes under a different administration? Even if Turkey's key national interests will remain unchanged, the way of doing politics and tools used in the process are expected to differ. It is expected that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would regain its central role, increasing the agency of career diplomats in Turkey. Some of the personal ideological views of the incumbent President – like his approach towards the Muslim Brotherhood or his ambitions for regional leadership – could be re-evaluated. A new government could be more open to collaborate with its traditional Western partners, including the EU. However, overall change in global power dynamics, the changing nature of multilateralism in the 21st century and Turkey's ever-growing defence industry may lead to increasingly unilateral foreign policy in some theatres of power. Another area where development may take place is the one of Turkey-Russia relations. There is a kind of personal chemistry between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Vladimir Putin that would be hard to replace. Last but not least, a government change and an announced desire to revive democracy in Turkey could lead to an overall positive atmosphere between Turkey and the EU. Issues related to current framework(s) would remain on the table, but the wish to overcome them would be greater.

6. The way forward – outlook and recommendations

The EU and Turkey have the task of rebuilding trust in the relationship, which has eroded over the years, while finding ways to collaborate in dossiers of mutual interest. Frustration with an increasingly dysfunctional accession process has led to a loss of credible conditionality over time, while leaving the EU lacking tools to have any transformative impact on Turkey as a candidate state. The downward spiral in relations and the lack of a well-functioning institutional framework has in turn narrowed the scope of cooperation when it comes to foreign and security policy. Moreover, given the understanding of foreign policy-making in Turkey, which is rather ideological, politicised – mostly unpredictable – and personalised, foreign policy cooperation has become much harder. This study concludes that the overall state of affairs between Turkey and the EU has an overarching impact on foreign policy cooperation. It also underlines that the current backsliding in democracy, rule of law, as well as protection of basic rights and freedoms in the country hinders cooperation. This being said, it concludes that the need for cooperation and alignment is ever more important, also taking into account the overarching challenges both sides face. Several steps are recommended moving forward.

1. Re-balance the relationship of ‘conflictual cooperation’

The aim is to steer EU-Turkey relations sustainably back into calmer waters. This includes building a solid core of cooperation driven by mutual interests as well as confidence building measures for addressing the increasing lack of trust in the relationship. More precisely, the following steps are recommended:

- aim for a reduction of the level of politicisation on both sides. A pragmatic approach could be mending relations behind the scenes. This would assist in avoiding vetoes for political reasons and also circumvent diplomatic conflicts, both of which can fuel nationalism in Turkey. This does not mean the EU should give up on defending democracy, rule of law, basic rights and freedoms, but rather look for ways to have a real impact.
- focus on straightforward institutional tracks. Package deals such as the EU-Turkey Statement on refugees that combined the tracks of Turkey as an accession candidate, key trade partner and strategic partner are ultimately not helpful. Linking irregular migration management, revitalisation of accession negotiations, facilitation of visa liberalisation and modernisation of the Customs Union makes conditionality blurred and expectations management way too complicated.
- be prepared to acknowledge and use the potentially increased room for greater cooperation, if general and presidential elections in Turkey in 2023 bring major political change. This should not create in the EU or in its Member States the illusion that all foreign policy differences will disappear from one day to the other. Rather, de-personalisation of foreign policy-making, re-centralisation of foreign policy-making in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a stronger will to cooperate with the European Union may be witnessed.
- revitalise high level political dialogue on sensitive foreign and security policy matters that are seen as a priority by both. Even agreeing to disagree and being able to manage such disagreements would be a positive step compared to the current situation. Such dialogue formats are equally important on issues where priorities of Turkey and the EU diverge.
- actively use the European Parliament’s Joint Parliament Committee (JPC) for dialogue. The composition of the European Parliament’s delegation to the JPC and the meetings’ agendas should reflect the diversity of opinions as well as breadth of policy areas towards Turkey. It should be a platform for open and constructive dialogue. The last JPC meeting took place in December 2018 and since then the EP delegation kept on meeting without their Turkish counterparts. It is important to underline that, when the right time comes, both sides should meet in good faith.

Given the wide range of relevant issues, the platform should not be instrumentalized but rather used for much needed dialogue.

2. Build a functional rules-based institutional framework for EU-Turkey relations

The key is to have a rules-based relationship rather than ad-hoc negotiations when the needs arise. One of the authors recently suggested that the EU should start thinking about modernising the Association Agreement, considering it is already the foundational framework for EU-Turkey relations¹¹⁷. Many could think it may not be the best time to invest in a new framework. However, holding democratic conditionality over a non-functioning framework while at the same time having a stable relationship is not possible. Hence, the EU should start working on defining a mutually attractive offer with the hope of a more collaborative counterpart appearing on the Turkish side in the near future. A key factor for this option to be considered in Ankara is to explicitly indicate that it would not imply excluding Turkey's membership prospects. Once a well-functioning rules-based framework is identified, both parties could more confidently discuss (and agree upon) what should be the main framework of relations in the future. Hence, the following steps are recommended:

- openly state that it indeed needs a well-functioning rules-based framework and start discussing the fundamentals of it internally, *inter alia* via consultations with the Member States to define what they would prefer to be included.
- signal to Turkey, whenever the country is ready to cooperate with the EU while returning to democracy, rule of law and respect for basic rights and freedoms, that it is open to discussing the future of the institutional relationship on a more equal footing.
- consider including in the new framework innovative channels of communication and consultation when it comes to foreign policy cooperation, in addition to dispute settlement mechanisms.
- use the figure of EP Rapporteur and the yearly EP report wisely to recommend a way forward. It is important to underline that the EP report (adopted in the form of a resolution) is based on the European Commission's yearly country report and is rather political. This is the primary tool that the EP holds when it comes to defining its stance towards Turkey. It can be pioneer for setting the tone when it comes to building a rules-based framework in the upcoming years.
- use the budget scrutiny role of the European Parliament. The Foreign Affairs Committee in cooperation with the Budgets Committee through the annual and multiannual budget procedures and in particular the scrutiny of the IPA instrument, could play important roles in linking democratic conditionality to EU funds. This would clearly strengthen the overall role of the European Parliament in linking democracy to EU-Turkey relations.

3. Engage with Turkey under the umbrella of multilateral organisations while keeping the cost of unilateralism high

The EU should safeguard democracy, the rule of law, basic rights and freedoms. This is a prerequisite not only for EU-Turkey relations, but also for defining the EU's role in the world. Currently, the USA has been more vocal when it comes to Turkey's democratic backsliding and unilateral foreign policy. CAATSA sanctions, Turkey's removal from the F35 programme and the recent decision of President Joe Biden not to invite Turkey to the Summit for Democracy have all been clear and significant signs. This is an area where the EU and the USA should collaborate further and look for concrete angles that would encourage Turkey to contribute so as to remain active in multilateral institutions.

In terms of foreign policy this would also require anchoring Turkey and EU-Turkey relations within multilateral institutions. Clearly NATO is one of those institutions, but it is not the only option. This also

¹¹⁷ I. Toygür, '[A New Way Forward for EU-Turkey Relations](#)', *Carnegie Europe*, 26 January 2022.

applies to organisations to which both Turkey and EU Member States belong to, such as the OSCE, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Council of Europe. The UN Climate Change Conference (COP) is another example representing a concrete opportunity for green transition. The same applies to other UN agendas both parties share, such as the Sustainable Development Goals or the reinforcement of the World Health Organization.

The Cyprus conflict is the elephant in the room. Not only does it open the ground for unpredictable tensions in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, but it may also hamper any future action envisaged to reshape the framework of EU-Turkey relations. The EU expects Turkey to reaffirm its commitment to UN-led settlement talks on Cyprus, but the current Turkish administration sees no benefit in that. Consequently, the following steps are recommended:

- work on resolving existing tensions with Turkey before they are converted into active conflicts. Waiting is not the best policy here. Rather, time should be spent in engaging with Turkish administration and civil society. Taking their perceptions of threat seriously will contribute to resolving long-standing issues.
- support any attempts for regional de-escalation, creating incentives to consolidate emerging positive trends. Examples are the Greece-Turkey bilateral talks; the Berlin process in Libya; and the Baghdad conference in the Middle East.
- anticipate the possibility of having to downgrade its relations with the Turkish government still further if democracy continues to erode and be ready to upgrade them if the current trend is reversed. The EU should stand firm on its principles and be vocal when Turkey decides to leave the Istanbul Convention or not implement the judgements and decisions of European Court of Human Rights.
- enhance dialogues on foreign policy matters, which are always needed, particularly regarding the shared neighbourhoods. However, these dialogues should mostly be linked to the principle of multilateralism. 2022 will witness discussion on the EU Strategic Compass and NATO Strategic Concept. Turkey should be consulted in both processes. European security is not only about the EU but should also take into account third countries such as Turkey itself. This would help foster EU-NATO cooperation in a broader sense.

4. Encourage Turkey to join the EU and other like-minded partners in promoting forward-looking global agendas

Focusing on structural challenges which require urgent decisions, such as the green and digital transitions, could change the tone of the conversation between Brussels and Ankara. This could form one key element of the new functional rules-based institutional framework that is recommended as task 2 above. To this end, the following steps are recommended:

- seek collaboration with Turkey in the strategic planning of over-arching policies, such as environmental, energy digital and health policy. It is important to remember that broader European strategic sovereignty is not only about the EU but also third countries, such as Turkey. To this end further discussion on how Turkey's agenda could align with that of the EU is warranted. Turkey should be asked to identify dossiers where it would like to see more EU alignment with their positions – beyond the accession negotiations that are currently non-functioning. When the time comes to negotiate a new rules-based framework, all these areas should be skilfully included.
- make public dossiers of alignment and agreement between Turkey and the EU. Today, all the attention is given to disagreements. Shifting the focus to a fairer and balanced account would contribute to the spirit of collaboration and help in building trust, which at the moment is very much lacking.

- encourage different committees of the European Parliament to increase dialogue with their Turkish counterparts. This would give a platform to the European Parliament to have consultations on dossiers of mutual interest, while increasing its role in building a well-functioning framework for the future.
- promote a structured conversation between EU think tanks and research centres specialising on foreign and security policy and their Turkish counterparts. The goal would be for Turkish experts to contribute to European debates on risks, opportunities, alliances and capabilities; and for EU researchers to contribute to similar discussions in Turkey. A more general aim would be to create connections that are resilient to political tensions at the highest level.
- promote more systematic contacts between the diplomatic services of the EU, including the EEAS and those of the 27 Member States and Turkish diplomats. This could take the form of joint training, exchanges and systematic consultations in key countries where either Turkey, the EU or both, have major stakes as well as in preparation of major international summits such as the upcoming COP27 in Sharm el Sheikh or the G20 summit in Bali (Indonesia).

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