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Quo vadis Türkiye?
The future of Ankara relations with the West

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Introduction

The foreign policy orientation of Türkiye has always been an attractive topic for both international and domestic audience. In the Western public, particularly, Türkiye's different policy actions (e.g. 1974 intervention in Cyprus, the rejection of March 1 resolution regarding Iraq war) incite the debates on whether Türkiye is a reliable ally or not¹. However, all these debates are mostly ideological and lack of empirical support both inside Türkiye and in the West. With the changing international order after the Cold War and especially with the AK Party government in 2000s, the intensity of the debates on the change of Türkiye's western-centered foreign policy has increased and a lot of time has passed with mutual accusations.

The most important legacy Türkiye inherited from Ottoman Empire is its geography at the intersection of three different continents. Such a location makes Türkiye susceptible and sometimes vulnerable to the impacts of various social, cultural and political developments. However, the legacy of Ottoman Empire is not limited to these unchangeable realities but also several behavioral continuities especially in the spectrum of foreign policy has been a part of this legacy. Geographical factors, which are key determinants of state foreign policies in international relations, are not only pivotal but also variables capable of yielding divergent outcomes when interpreted in varying contexts. Türkiye's narrative is one of both transformations, as its foundational principles are periodically reinterpreted, and continuity, as certain enduring constants assert themselves through these reinterpretations.

Furthermore, what the "West" represents as an analytical concept in this paper is twofold. First, it is a geographical area encompassing the Europe and the North America. Hence, the nation - states and their societies within this geography are parts of the West. Secondly, it represents an ideational/institutional project of a world order based on principles determined by American and European actors. Throughout the paper, therefore, statements regarding "Türkiye and West relations" indicate bilateral or multilateral relations between Türkiye and states in West and also relations between Türkiye and institutional structures of the Western world including the EU, NATO, Council of Europe etc.

In the remainder of this study, a historical account of the complex and ambivalent relationship between Türkiye and the West, from the nineteenth century to the republican era, will be presented. The purpose of this historical narrative is to demonstrate that the challenges faced today are neither new nor unprecedented, and that the key difference compared to previous crises lies in the nature, symmetry, and intensity of the relationship. The study will then examine the current state of Türkiye-West relations, highlighting critical points of contention. Finally, the paper will discuss the implications of these issues for Türkiye's future political trajectory and assess whether Türkiye can find a place in alternative platforms, such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, by fully distancing itself from the West.

¹ Cook, Steven A., and Michael J. Koplow. "Turkey Is No Longer a Reliable Ally." *Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2016. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-is-no-longer-a-reliable-ally-1470869047>.

Historical Background of Türkiye-West Relations

While one aspect of the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Europe/West is always a self and other relationship, on the other hand, it is the relationship of two actors who have intertwined, influenced and transformed each other. Yurdusev, for example, argues that Ottoman Empire played an important role for the emergence of modern European state-system both as an antagonistic power and an ally². Similarly, modern Türkiye as we know it today owes a lot to Europe and the reciprocal relations since the beginning of 19th century. On the one hand, the Ottomans preferred to complement the weaknesses that emerged as a result of their mutual struggles with the superior aspects of their enemies; on the other hand, they saw European actors as important allies, especially against Russia, the new threat coming from the north.

The Republican era, on the other hand, carried Türkiye-West relations to a different dimension. While the Republic considered the West, and Europe in particular, as an ideal that it should be a part of, it tried to bring the relations to an identity similarity based on the idea that this was the only way to ensure its political existence and security. However, in the early years of the republic, this identification effort did not prevent Türkiye from trying to preserve its political autonomy. During this period, Türkiye, on the one hand, became a member of western-centered institutions such as the League of Nations (and even this was by invitation), but at the same time, it maintained a delicate balance in its relations with the Soviets, carefully avoiding entanglement in regional and global conflicts. This careful policy continued during the second world war. Above all, Türkiye preferred a cautious, balanced and autonomous stance in its foreign policy in order to ensure its internal security and order and to prioritize the establishment of revolutions³.

The Cold War period marked the most important break in the orientation of Türkiye's foreign policy in the republican era. In the post-1945 period, Türkiye, which began to feel the Soviet threat much more acutely, made a very clear choice in favor of the West, first with Marshall Aid and then with NATO membership. This period reflects the most intertwined period with the West in Turkish history. While Türkiye became a founding member of the Council of Europe in 1950, the Turkish army started to coordinate its structuring, modernization and equipment procurement processes with the West as a NATO army. Of course, this period also brought about the emergence of a new actor as the most important figure in Turkish-Western relations. While Türkiye-West relations had been Türkiye/Ottoman-Europe relations for many centuries, the US emerged as the main actor of the West in the 1950s. From then on, Türkiye-West relations acquired a dual character, with Türkiye trying to balance its relations with European actors on the one hand and the United States on the other.

Although the westernization project of the Republic constitutes the main backbone of both its foreign and domestic policy, it would be misleading to claim that the century-long process has passed in absolute harmony between the parties in this sense. Relations have been strained at various periods, especially since the mid-sixties, and then they have been tried to be repaired. Starting from the mid-60s until the 80s, the Cyprus issue posed problems especially between the US and Türkiye and even led to the 1974 Cyprus Intervention and the imposition of an

² Yurdusev, Nuri. 2003. *International Relations and the Philosophy of History: A Civilizational Approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.

³ Oran, Baskın. 2008. *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*. 13th ed. İletişim. p.253

embargo between the allies. Like many foreign policy issues, the factors affecting Western-Turkish relations, which have experienced crises from time to time since then, cannot be read independently of the changes in the global, regional and domestic policies of the actors. Therefore, the process of divergences and harmonization leading up to today should be read through these three perspectives.

Already mentioned above that the issue of where Turkish foreign policy will stand among the different power centers of the world has been ongoing since the 19th century. However, the emergence of the East-West distinction as two rival blocs, apart from individual actors, is a situation forced by the Cold War. Prior to the Cold War, when Turks thought of the West and Western allies, they thought of European states, especially Britain, but now this role was taken over by the United States, which had become the most powerful state in the world across the Atlantic. Türkiye's choice in this period was, in fact, quite clear. Based on the idea that the westernization goal of the Republic was to act together with Europe and the United States both in terms of identity, economy and politics, Türkiye joined two major Western-based organizations such as the Council of Europe and NATO, and its biggest foreign policy and security issue after World War II was to deal with the threat of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's ideological stance towards the West, which threatened not only Türkiye but also the whole of Europe, starting from Eastern Europe and extending to Central Europe, and the threat of communist expansion in different parts of the globe, which rang alarm bells for the capitalist western bloc, ensured that Türkiye and the West's interests overlapped. The question of whether Türkiye's transition to a liberal market economy brought it closer to the West, or if, conversely, an inevitable security rapprochement with the West led to the adoption of a capitalist development model from the 1950s onwards, remains a subject of debate. However, it is clear that Türkiye formally aligned itself with the Western bloc in the late 1940s, coinciding with the final stages of single-party rule. This alignment was further solidified through the policies adopted by the Democrat Party, which succeeded the Republican People's Party (CHP) in the 1950s

As much in the rest of the world, the Cold War was a period of limited choices, few opportunities and great threats in Turkish foreign policy. Caught between two nuclear superpowers, most of the actors had to choose one of the two sides, which narrowed the diversity of their foreign policies. This period brought relative stability to Turkish foreign policy, especially until the mid-1960s. The Turkish army was rapidly restructured as a NATO army. There were no major crises in relations with the West during these years. In fact, Türkiye was subjected to serious criticism during this period for its close stance to French position in the Algerian liberation war⁴. During this period, Türkiye also wanted to improve its relations with the European Economic Community and applied for association⁵. However, the Cyprus problem that erupted in the mid-1960s caused one of the most serious questionings of Turkish-US relations. When the crisis brought Türkiye's possible intervention in the island to the agenda, a letter from US President Johnson to Turkish Prime Minister İnönü and its publicization increased the reaction against the US in Türkiye⁶. The Cyprus issue would later become one of the biggest ruptures in Turkish-Western relations. When Türkiye intervened on the island in

⁴ Ersoy, 2012

⁵ Ankara Agreements Signed between parties in 1963, See <https://www.dipublico.org/110833/eu-turkey-association-agreement-the-ankara-agreement-1963/>

⁶ Erhan, Çağrı . 2008. *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*. Edited by Baskın Oran. 13th ed. İletişim. p.686

1974, it faced an embargo from its allies and once again questioned its relations with the West. With the impact of this crisis, Türkiye's dependence on the West and the United States, especially in terms of military hardware and ammunition, has become one of the most questioned issues in Türkiye. The fact that the foundations of many of the domestic defense industry companies, which are on the agenda today with very serious projects, were laid at this time is one of the first steps towards reducing this dependence. After the 1980 coup d'état, relations between Türkiye and the West, despite the contradictions, somehow gained a relatively positive momentum until the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Although relations with the European Community were strained due to the coup's undermining of the democratic process, the military government's declaration that it would work in harmony with the Western bloc and NATO in particular, its green light for Greece's return to NATO's military wing, and its tough approach to communist movements put relations back on track. With the January 12 decisions, Türkiye announced that it was abandoning its import-substitution economic policy and would become a full-fledged part of the global capitalist economic model, and Turgut Özal's victory in the 1983 elections led to a rapid improvement in relations between Türkiye and the US. In this process, Türkiye not only applied for full membership to the EU but also acted together with the US and the coalition in the first Gulf War.

Despite all the crises, the dual structure of the international system in the period from the Second World War to this date has not led to serious debates about the place of Turkish foreign policy in the Western bloc. Apart from the Cyprus issue, the number of issues on which Türkiye disagreed with its allies during this period was extremely limited. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to a new opening process in Turkish foreign policy. In addition to the disappearance of the threat of the Soviet Union, the attempt to establish an exciting relationship with many newly established Turkic states in the post-Soviet regions, the preference to give more importance to regional politics, and the idea that new opportunities opened up for Türkiye in a wide geography from the Balkans to the Middle East and Central Asia brought a new activism to Turkish foreign policy. However, it is important to underline that this process of opening up is not incompatible with Türkiye's traditional pro-Western Turkish foreign policy. While Türkiye appeared in these new geographies as a NATO member, aspiring EU member, secular and democratic country, as well as a Muslim country, the West had no complaints about the role Türkiye could play in the reintegration of these geographies into the global economic and political system. Although Türkiye's fight against terrorism in the 1990s drew criticism from Europe, the rapid reform processes between 1999 and 2005 brought Türkiye to the point of starting full membership negotiations with the EU⁷.

The rapid liberal economic reforms initiated by the Justice and Development Party after it came to power in 2002 and the legal democratic arrangements within the framework of the EU harmonization process strengthened this relationship in the European context. However, in 2003, the second most important break in Turkish-US relations after 1974 occurred. The Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in order to remove the Saddam Hussein regime and its request to use Turkish territory to open a front from the North came to the agenda of the Turkish Grand National Assembly after very tight negotiations between the two countries. However, the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye's rejection of the said resolution on March 1, 2003 brought anti-

⁷ See https://www.ab.gov.tr/65_en.html

Türkiye sentiment in the United States to its peak⁸. It was during this period that Türkiye was no longer considered a reliable ally and the ruling Justice and Development Party's ties to the Islamist tradition were brought back to the agenda. In Türkiye, the increasing number of terrorist incidents and military casualties were linked to the US and anti-Americanism began to rise sharply⁹. This process of positive relations with the EU and negative relations with the US was reversed in late 2007, and while the Erdoğan-Bush meeting on November 5, 2007 was aimed at repairing Turkish-US relations¹⁰, the anti-Türkiye campaigns of Sarkozy and partly Merkel in Europe, combined with the stagnation of reform processes in Türkiye, led to a period of decline in EU-Türkiye relations that continues to this day¹¹.

As can be inferred from the historical context above Türkiye's relationship with the West has always been characterized by dual aspects. One is Türkiye-Europe relations which is more historical and multifaceted and the other one is Türkiye-US relations which is comparatively new and mostly security oriented. Therefore, evaluating the relations between the West and Türkiye requires attention to this duality.

Recent Developments in the relations

In the second decade of the AK Party government several international and domestic factors contributed the discussion on the sincerity of the alliance relations. Türkiye intensified the diversification of its foreign relations into various geographies in that period. For some this is a result of Türkiye's growing economic power and market necessities. The Middle East, South East Asia, Africa and Central Asia are critical regions for Turkish entrepreneurs and traders. However, for others, these attempts not only a result of economic necessities but also Turkish government under Erdoğan have been looking for an alternative to the traditional Western alliance and Western international order.

This period is also coincided with the rise of systemic change debates in international politics. China and Russia have increased their influence in international politics, especially after the 2008 economic crisis, and have begun to challenge the US-centered world at some points. These countries, which sometimes constitute a center of attraction for countries outside the Western alliance, have been at the center of both geo-economic and geopolitical calculations. In this context, Türkiye's relations with these countries have been interpreted as a widening distance from the traditional Western alliance. However, the primary argument of this study is that the reasons for the weakening of Türkiye-West relations should be sought in intra-alliance relations. Relations with other international actors are more often the result, not the cause, of intra-alliance crises.

⁸ Kesgin, Baris, and Juliet Kaarbo. "When and How Parliaments Influence Foreign Policy: The Case of Turkey's Iraq Decision." *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 1 (2010): 19–36.

⁹ Grigoriadis, Ioannis N. "Friends No More? The Rise of Anti-American Nationalism in Turkey." *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (2010): 51–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20622982>.

¹⁰ See <https://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2007/11/05/haber,3F42A4BD7DEA4B51AE9E5CBD6AC9C9CA.html>

¹¹ See <https://www.france24.com/en/20110225-france-sarkozy-gul-turkey-eu-hopes> ; Yenel, Selim. "Turkey's Disengagement from the European Union." *German Marshall Fund*. February 2, 2023. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-disengagement-european-union>.

Intra-Alliance Crisis

Syria

On March 1, 2003, the Turkish parliament's rejection of the Iraqi parliamentary resolution marked a significant rupture in Turkish-American relations, one that would not be easily forgotten. Nevertheless, both parties managed to restore ties, and Türkiye entered the Obama era with a renewed sense of optimism¹². The messages delivered by President Obama, particularly his outreach to the Muslim world and his promises regarding the Middle East, had a notably positive impact on both Turkish policymakers and public opinion¹³. However, this positive momentum proved to be short-lived. The Arab uprisings, which began at the end of 2010 and affected a broad region, gradually began to strain the relationship between the two nations once again. Initially, both Türkiye and the United States viewed the uprisings as a legitimate demand for democracy, offering their support. However, the first significant rift emerged during the Libya crisis, when Türkiye opposed NATO's intervention¹⁴. This intervention, which was carried out at the urging of France, further eroded coordination between Türkiye and NATO.

However, the major divergence occurred in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising. Initially, both countries supported the opposition, but as ISIS and the PKK gained strength during the insurgency, their priorities in Syria diverged. For the US, local actors who could cooperate with the international coalition in the fight against ISIS became a priority. In contrast, Türkiye argued that the coalition could continue its fight against ISIS without reducing its support for the opposition in Syria. Türkiye found it unacceptable that the US shifted its focus entirely to combating ISIS, particularly after 2013, and diminished its support for the opposition. Moreover, Türkiye criticized the US for providing substantial ammunition support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a structure where the YPG, the Syrian extension of the PKK, constitutes the primary faction.

Türkiye vehemently opposed the US's relationship with the Syrian branch of the PKK, which is considered the primary threat to Türkiye and is designated a terrorist organization by both the US and the EU¹⁵. Türkiye argued that the ammunition support, especially, contributed to an increase in attacks against Turkish targets. On the other hand, the US maintained that its partnership with the YPG was strictly limited to the fight against ISIS and that the ammunition support was not intended to target Türkiye.

This tension, which began in 2013, fundamentally altered Türkiye's Syria policy. The increasing terrorist attacks and the influx of refugees prompted Türkiye to adopt a more pragmatic approach to Syria. The focus shifted from the priority of toppling the Syrian regime to objectives such as halting the conflict, reducing refugee flows, and removing the YPG from Türkiye's border¹⁶. In line with this new policy direction, Türkiye initiated three distinct military interventions in Syria. These interventions drew significant criticism, particularly from Western public opinion, with claims that they weakened the SDF's ability to fight ISIS. However, the fact that Türkiye itself was engaged in combatting ISIS during these

¹² See <https://www.cnnturk.com/video/dunya/erdogan-obamadan-umutlu-162354>

¹³ See <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning>

¹⁴ See <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/turkey-opposes-any-nato-operation-in-libya-idUSTRE72D49D/>

¹⁵ Kanat, Kılıç, and Kadir Üstün. "U.S-Turkey Realignment on Syria." *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 4 88-97.

¹⁶ Ataman, Muhittin , and Çağatay Özdemir. "Turkey's Syria Policy: Constant Objectives Shifting Priorities." *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi* 5, no. 2 13-36.

interventions, and felt that it could not gain its allies' support for this effort, contributed to a growing lack of mutual understanding between Türkiye and the West.

Türkiye's second major step in Syria raised significant concerns regarding its relations with the West. The Türkiye-Russia crisis, which erupted after Türkiye shot down a Russian plane that violated its airspace while coming from Syria, escalated with mutual sanctions. However, this crisis was followed by a series of diplomatic talks between the two countries, which eventually paved the way for cooperation on Syria¹⁷. Particularly, Assad's advances against the opposition in Syria, supported by Iran and Russia, and the massing of opposition forces along Türkiye's border, raised fears of a large influx of migrants into Türkiye. In response, Türkiye, together with Russia and Iran, helped establish a status quo in Syria by 2019, which remained in place until the opposition eventually overthrew Assad in 2024. This process of bilateral negotiations, which began in Syria and resulted in relatively improved Turkish-Russian relations, reinforced the perception in the West that Türkiye was increasingly aligning itself with Russia while distancing itself from the West.

S-400 Missile System Procurement and Disengagement from the F-35 Project

For an extended period, Türkiye has been pursuing the acquisition of a robust air defense system to counter missile threats from neighboring countries. A key aspect of this pursuit has been Türkiye's emphasis on technology transfer as part of the procurement deal. By 2013, significant progress had been made in negotiations with China on this matter. However, Türkiye's air defense system negotiations with China were eventually stalled, primarily due to opposition from NATO allies, particularly the United States¹⁸. During this time, Türkiye also raised the possibility of purchasing Patriot missiles from its NATO allies and engaging in joint production, but these efforts were not finalized either. In 2016, the discussions surrounding the purchase of Russian-made S-400 missiles, which gained momentum as part of Türkiye's efforts to rebuild relations with Russia after the downing of the Russian plane, further exacerbated tensions between Türkiye and its Western allies. The decision to proceed with the S-400 deal marked a significant turning point, driving a deeper wedge between Türkiye and its NATO partners¹⁹.

Türkiye's completion of the S-400 procurement process with Russia, including the announcement of the purchase of two S-400 missile systems, coupled with the US's response through CAATSA sanctions, significantly heightened tensions in bilateral relations. During this period, Trump's written and verbal threats, which had a profound impact on the Turkish economy, further exacerbated the mistrust between the Turkish government and the US. Although Türkiye maintained that the S-400 system did not conflict with its NATO membership, the US declared that Türkiye was excluded from the F-35 project as part of the CAATSA sanctions²⁰. Türkiye's exclusion from the F-35 program, a cornerstone of its air force's next-generation plans, along with the transfer of these 5th-generation aircraft to countries such as Israel and Greece, with which Türkiye has had ongoing regional tensions,

¹⁷ Köstem, Seçkin. 2020. "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34 (6): 795–817.

¹⁸ Ethan Meick, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report, China's Potential Air Defense System Sale to Turkey and Implications for the United States, 2013

¹⁹ See <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/turkeys-purchase-of-russian-missile-defense-system-will-be-paradigm-shifting-for-its-relations-with-the-us/>

²⁰ See <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231/>

fueled the perception that the security-based alliance between the two countries was effectively coming to an end.

Western Criticism of Türkiye's Domestic Politics and the July 15 Coup Attempt

One of the reasons for the recent deterioration in relations between the West and Türkiye stems from allegations that Türkiye has regressed in terms of democracy and human rights due to the slowdown in EU membership negotiations. In this context, issues such as the rule of law, as well as the freedom of the press and expression, have come under increased scrutiny. Notable criticisms include Türkiye's handling of the 2013 Gezi protests, the escalation of conflicts with the PKK terrorist organization after 2015, and the legal actions taken against politicians from opposition parties. Additionally, the 2017 referendum, which introduced changes to the governmental system, faced criticism for undermining the separation of powers within Türkiye's political system²¹. These issues have led to growing concerns in the West about the state of democracy and political freedoms in Türkiye.

Among the various criticisms directed at Türkiye, the issue of press freedom stands out as the most prominent and contentious. Particularly concerning is the noticeable decline of dissenting voices in mainstream media, the swift and frequent changes in the ownership of media outlets, which have increasingly shifted away from opposition, and the legal actions taken against journalists. These factors have compounded the criticism surrounding the state of press freedom in the country. Criticism from the West, especially the European Union, is largely based on Türkiye's status as an EU candidate country and the significant deterioration in both freedom of the press and freedom of expression within the country—issues that are foundational to the EU's principles. In response, Türkiye vehemently denies the allegations, arguing that the accusations are unfounded. The government contends that journalists who face trial and imprisonment are not being persecuted for their journalistic activities but for their involvement in actions outside the realm of professional reporting, thus framing the situation in a different light²².

Another area of significant concern is women's rights, particularly following Turkey's controversial withdrawal from the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention in 2021. The Istanbul Convention, a landmark agreement aimed at preventing violence against women and eliminating gender-based discrimination, had been adopted by member states of the Council of Europe to ensure the protection of women's rights. Türkiye's decision to withdraw from this convention, a move that coincided with a disturbing rise in femicides and other forms of violence against women in the country, has drawn harsh criticism from the European Union. Joseph Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, was among those who voiced strong disapproval, urging Türkiye to reconsider its decision and reinstate its commitment to the convention²³. This withdrawal, particularly for anti-Türkiye political parties and groups within the EU, has come to symbolize a broader reluctance to uphold international human rights standards, further straining Turkey's relations with the European Union.

²¹ Kemal Kirişçi and İlke Toygür, Turkey's New Presidential System and a Changing West: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkey-West Relations, Brookings Turkey Project Policy Paper, 2019

²² <https://www.dha.com.tr/politika/bakan-tunc-gazetecilik-faaliyeti-ile-kimse-gozaltina-alinmaz-2573890>

²³ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/turkey-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-turkey%E2%80%99s-withdrawal-istanbul_en

The overarching criticism, which encapsulates the various issues discussed above, points to what many perceive as Türkiye's democratic backsliding²⁴. From the erosion of women's rights and the curtailment of opposition parties' freedom of expression to the suppression of press freedom and the deterioration of the right to a fair trial, these developments have been viewed as a significant deviation from both the EU standards that Türkiye aspires to meet and the democratic norms that were established during Türkiye's own reform process. The democratic regression outlined by the West has resonated deeply within European political circles and public opinion, leading to heightened scrutiny of Türkiye's trajectory and its commitment to the core values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the path of EU membership.

For Türkiye, one of the most disappointing issues in its relations with allies during this period was the July 15 coup attempt and its aftermath²⁵. There is still a strong perception in Türkiye that the FETO terrorist organization that carried out the July 15 coup was backed by the United States and that American support for the coup was evident due to the failure to extradite the organization's leader and prominent members both before and after the coup. It is also important to note that criticism regarding the transparency of the post-coup process and its adherence to the principles of law is often viewed with skepticism by the Turkish government. The Turkish authorities perceive such criticisms as lacking genuine intent and as being influenced by external political motivations²⁶.

Tension in the Eastern Mediterranean

One of the major disputes between Türkiye and the West is the determination of the continental shelves in the Eastern Mediterranean and the sharing of energy resources in the region. Especially the strained relations with Greek Cypriot and Greece have brought the EU and Türkiye into confrontation since these two countries are EU members. When the United States aligned itself with Greece and the Greek Cypriot positions on this issue, Turkey responded with coercive diplomacy, deploying exploration vessels to the contested areas and declaring its intention to safeguard the security of these vessels. In addition, Türkiye supported the UN-recognized Tripoli government in the civil war in Libya, and in return for the military and intelligence support it provided to the government there, Türkiye signed an agreement between the two countries defining the borders of the continental shelf and the exclusive economic zone²⁷.

The Western countries, which have characterized Türkiye's actions in the region as revisionist and aggressive, further exacerbated the situation by attempting to deter the Turkish government from its decisions through both explicit and implicit sanctions²⁸. This approach intensified the conflict, as Türkiye framed the issue as one of national sovereignty under the "Blue Homeland"

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34774624>

²⁵ Dedeoğlu, Beril. "Turkey and the West after the Failed Coup: Possible Scenarios." *Insight Turkey* 18, no. 3 (2016): 31-42. ; Lesser, Ian. "Turkey and the West after the Failed Coup: Beyond Suspicion?" *Insight Turkey* 18, no. 3 (2016): 45-53.

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-40617546>

²⁷ See <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/12/06/disisleri-bakanligi-turkiye-libya-sinirini-gosteren-yeni-anlasmanin-haritasini-paylasti>

²⁸ See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/11/11/turkey-s-illegal-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-adopts-framework-for-sanctions/>

doctrine. By asserting that it would not tolerate any infringement on the maritime borders defined by this doctrine, Türkiye added another layer of complexity to the dispute.

It remains challenging to provide a definitive answer regarding the future trajectory of Türkiye-West relations, given both the historical context and the prominent recent issues at play. However, it is important to recognize that both extreme negative and overly optimistic scenarios carry a significant margin of error. It is reasonable to assert that while relations between Türkiye and the West in the new era are unlikely to collapse, they will not resemble the dynamics of fifty years ago. Within this framework, several critical factors will shape the evolution of Turkish-Western relations, including: the status of the post-Trump Atlantic Alliance, the impact of the Russian threat and Chinese competition on both sides, perspectives on regional security challenges, and the degree of mutual economic interdependence.

The Post-Trump Atlantic Alliance as an Opportunity for Türkiye-Europe Relations: Cracking NATO, Rising Far Right

Throughout the 2010s, numerous analyses discussed Türkiye's apparent drift away from the West and NATO. A central argument in these discussions was that Türkiye's policies and the values promoted by its government were increasingly at odds with those of the West. In these arguments, the West was often depicted as a unified bloc, characterized by ideals such as democracy, human rights, cosmopolitanism, and a rule-based foreign policy. However, it seems that the dynamics within the West, particularly in the aftermath of Donald Trump's presidency, have shifted significantly. During his first term, the Trump administration made it clear that the security of Europe—a primary motivation behind NATO, the umbrella organization of the Western bloc—would no longer be a top priority for the United States²⁹. This development has somewhat alleviated the criticism directed at Türkiye, as it highlights the diminished commitment of the United States, the central force of the Western alliance, to this vital issue. At the same time, however, this shift has introduced both opportunities and challenges for European members of NATO and for Türkiye.

It seems obvious that the new US relationship with Russia will challenge the EU, which sees Putin's Russia as an existential threat, and Türkiye, which has been a rival to Russia in many areas from Libya to Syria, from the Caucasus to Ukraine, even though relations have been positive recently. If the US and NATO's deterrence efforts weaken—even momentarily—and Russia's gains over Ukraine become permanent, it will increase the likelihood of new threats both for the EU member states of Eastern Europe and for Türkiye, which lost its relative supremacy in the Black Sea after the 2014 Crimean invasion. In this case, Türkiye's relations with the European leg of the Western bloc will become much more important.

Two significant obstacles to further progress in Türkiye-Europe relations are the bilateral relations between Türkiye and France, as well as between Türkiye and Germany. While the history of Turkish-German relations is long and predominantly positive, it has recently experienced a notable deterioration. Unlike the period in the late 1990s and early 2000s, current German-Turkish relations are marked by mutual accusations and are only cooperative when absolutely necessary. Germany has criticized Türkiye's governmental influence over its

²⁹ See <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>

diaspora, while Türkiye has accused Germany of tolerating PKK elements both within its borders and in Türkiye. These tensions have contributed to the deterioration of relations. Moreover, the inability of the governments to improve relations with Türkiye, which had to respond to the rising anti-Türkiye rhetoric from both the far right and the far left in German politics, has led to growing problems. Where Turkish-German relations have been relatively good is in the context of the migration deal signed between Türkiye and the EU and championed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Even though this agreement is considered insulting in Türkiye and is seen by Europeans as a reason for Türkiye's bluffs, it still seems to be working.

Relations between Türkiye and France have always been troubled since the Sarkozy era. Issues such as Sarkozy's opposition to Türkiye's EU membership, France's intervention in Libya despite Türkiye's objection and then supporting different sides in Libya under Macron, France's signing a defense cooperation agreement with Greece against Türkiye even though it is not mentioned, France's support for the YPG in Syria and rivalry in West Africa have kept bilateral relations tense for nearly 20 years. Nevertheless, France has always been an important country for Türkiye as one of the European countries with the highest number of direct investments in Türkiye. France is the most vocal proponent of the EU's new strategy of “strategic autonomy”, which largely excludes Türkiye.

Can Autonomous Strategies Overlap?

The concept of strategic autonomy, which the European Union has been striving to develop under France's leadership, encompasses self-sufficiency and self-determination in strategic domains such as defense and foreign policy³⁰. Recently, Türkiye has increasingly emphasized this concept as well. Within the EU context, strategic autonomy is primarily understood as a move toward European security that is less dependent on the United States, largely influenced by the first Trump administration. For Türkiye, it signifies an effort to overcome its asymmetric position in relations with both the US and the EU³¹. However, the question arises: do these two distinct visions of strategic autonomy foster a partnership, or do they exacerbate existing divisions? In this context, the perspectives of France and Germany on Türkiye, as well as Türkiye's own aspirations in its relations with Europe, are crucial. The fact that countries such as Spain, Italy, and the UK adopt a more favorable stance toward Türkiye, while countries like Germany, France, and Austria remain more distant, underscores the difficulty of achieving unified EU-Türkiye coordination.

While there remain voices in Europe that oppose the strategic dimension of relations with Türkiye, the growing pro-Türkiye sentiment that has emerged since the 2025 Munich Security Conference is also significant³². With NATO's second-largest military and extensive experience in asymmetric power struggles with Russia across various theaters, it is reasonable to anticipate that Türkiye's role in European security will continue to grow. However, what is particularly important is how this relationship will be structured in a context with less US involvement and reduced reliance on NATO. The historical asymmetry in European-Turkish relations has

³⁰ Varma, Tara. 2024. “European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe.” *The Washington Quarterly* 47 (1): 65–83.

³¹ Duran, Burhaneddin. “Uluslararası Sistemin Krizi Ve Türkiye’Nin Stratejik Otonomi Arayışı.” *Kriter* 8, no. 88 (2024).

³² See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-partner-of-strategic-importance-candidate-for-eu-membership-foreign-policy-chief/3459837>

consistently been a source of concern for Türkiye. The country seeks to move beyond the perception of being the party that is uncertain about NATO's protection, the one kept waiting at the door regarding EU membership, and the party that is always making demands but seldom receiving positive responses. As such, Türkiye seems determined to be regarded as an equal partner in any emerging European security framework, if there is to be one.

It is still unclear whether Türkiye's expectation of a more symmetrical rather than asymmetrical relationship includes the issue of EU membership. This is because, in addition to the EU's reservations on this issue, Türkiye's willingness to do so is questionable. Although Erdogan has occasionally mentioned EU membership as a strategic goal for 2024³³, there have been no reciprocal steps to revitalize the membership process and it is unlikely to happen in the near future. Therefore, it seems inevitable to expect the new relationship to be less normative and more strategic. The first pillar of this strategic step will undoubtedly be a renewed and updated Customs Union agreement. The EU is still one of Türkiye's largest trading partners. It is of utmost importance for the Turkish economy to take steps to ensure the continuation of this trade with European countries, with which Türkiye has the largest trade with the exception of energy.

Bilateral and minilateral partnerships are likely to become one of the most significant formats in Türkiye-Europe relations in the new era. Türkiye's increasingly positive relations with Mediterranean countries, such as Spain and Italy, which have strengthened in recent years, could serve as pioneers of this new approach within the context of Mediterranean security. An example of this growing collaboration is the acquisition of the Italian company Piaggio by Baykar, a Turkish defense industry firm, which is viewed as a significant step forward³⁴. Moreover, Italy and Türkiye may develop substantial cooperation in various Italian initiatives, such as the Mattei Plan³⁵ and Enlarged Mediterranean³⁶ projects. Similarly, the strong relations fostered between Türkiye and Spain, particularly since the launch of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, are likely to be extended into strategic areas. This could lead to the two countries partnering in Mediterranean security and defense industry projects, with a particular focus on naval forces. Despite the UK's departure from the EU, Türkiye's relationship with the UK remains important, as the UK continues to offer a nuclear deterrent that could complement European security. This partnership may play a pivotal role in balancing interests in the Middle East and countering Russian influence.

Russian Revisionism and Rising China: Will Türkiye Turn East?

One of the most significant developments on Türkiye's agenda in 2024 was its reported application to join BRICS. BRICS, a platform composed of major countries outside the Western alliance—namely Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—primarily seeks to challenge dollar dependency and counter Western-centric paradigms in the global economy. While BRICS lacks an official secretariat or formal organizational structure, its meetings and

³³ See https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/dis_basinda_turkiye/detay/erdogan-full-membership-in-the-eu-is-our-strategic-goal

³⁴ See: Giannotta Valeria, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/opinion/opinion-new-era-for-piaggio-aerospace-under-baykar/3442091>

³⁵ See <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/mattei-plan-africa-turning-point-italys-development-cooperation-policy>

³⁶ Coticchia, Fabrizio, and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso. 2024. "Still on the Same Path? Italian Foreign and Defence Policy in the Enlarged Mediterranean." *Mediterranean Politics*, January, 1–10.

declarations have always carried considerable weight in international discussions. The key themes of BRICS include advocating for de-dollarization, emphasizing the principle of non-interference in internal affairs under the framework of the United Nations, and opposing the imposition of rules that align solely with the interests of Western powers.

Erdogan's earlier remarks that Türkiye could also join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), coupled with the BRICS issue, led to an increase in comments that Türkiye had decided to part ways with the West and would definitely join the blocs led by Russia and China in the East. Claims that Türkiye is moving away from democratic values have also reinforced these comments. However, the question remains: is it truly realistic for Türkiye to sever its ties with the West and join so called Eastern blocs?

For Türkiye's policymakers, Turkish foreign policy's interest in non-Western regions and organizations should be seen as a diversification of foreign policy in response to Türkiye's growing needs, rather than a defection from the West³⁷. Moreover, Türkiye's engagement with non-Western countries and organizations is not an isolated case. As Blinken, the Secretary of State in the Biden administration, recently stated in Foreign Affairs magazine, while the US competes with China on a number of issues, it will not hold back from cooperating on issues that are beneficial to the American society. Turkish decision-makers argue that this logic parallels Türkiye's own approach to its foreign policy. In fact, as Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated in an interview with the state news agency on 19 September 2024, if relations between Türkiye and the EU had gone differently, and if the EU had responded to Türkiye's economic needs, especially infrastructure financing, Türkiye might not have sought platforms such as BRICS³⁸.

While Türkiye defends its foreign policy diversification, it must be acknowledged that international alliances are not only about strategic interests but also about identity and ideological alignment. In this context, the claim of Türkiye moving away from democratic institutions and aligning with authoritarian blocs requires careful consideration. It is important to recognize that not all BRICS members are authoritarian, yet the group does include countries with different political systems, some of which are more autocratic. The question of Türkiye potentially shifting away from Western democratic values and aligning more closely with Russia and China should thus be examined through the lens of both strategic calculations and ideological compatibility. However, it is equally important to highlight that there are significant structural barriers to Türkiye fully breaking with the West or entirely pivoting toward the Russian-Chinese axis. Türkiye's deep-rooted ties with NATO, its economic interdependence with Europe, and its societal ties with Europe are all formidable obstacles to a complete realignment.

The first significant structural barrier to Türkiye's complete shift away from the West is its deep economic integration with Western countries, particularly Europe³⁹. The European Union remains Türkiye's largest trading partner, and European investors continue to be the dominant source of direct investment in the Turkish economy. This close economic relationship is further

³⁷ See <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-hakan-fidan-in-anadolu-ajansi-editor-masasi-na-verdigi-mulakat-19-9-2024.tr.mfa>

³⁸ See <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-hakan-fidan-in-anadolu-ajansi-editor-masasi-na-verdigi-mulakat-19-9-2024.tr.mfa>

³⁹ See https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/turkiye_en

exemplified by Türkiye's reliance on export and import activities, which makes the use of reserve currencies like the dollar and the euro crucial for its economic stability. Additionally, the tourism sector, a key foreign exchange source for Türkiye, also underscores the importance of its ties to Europe, as European nationals constitute one of the largest groups of tourists visiting Türkiye, second only to Russian visitors.

Second, Türkiye's military and security infrastructure are deeply integrated with NATO and the broader Western security framework, which presents another substantial barrier to any move away from the West in this domain. As a member of NATO, Türkiye participates in joint defense initiatives, exercises, and intelligence sharing, and its military capabilities are aligned with those of Western powers. This level of integration makes it particularly challenging for Türkiye to abandon or substantially alter its defense ties with the West.

Third, Türkiye's sociological integration with Europe is far deeper than its connections with China or Russia. The largest Turkish diaspora resides in Europe and North America, where Turks have gradually integrated into the social, political, and economic fabric of these societies. Over time, this integration has not only influenced Turkish society but has also helped shape the political dynamics within Türkiye. The bonds between Türkiye and Europe are reinforced through both the experiences of the Turkish diaspora abroad and the influence of European political norms. Additionally, the Western values and practices Türkiye adopted during its modernization process have become deeply embedded in its social and political structures, making any significant shift away from these norms difficult and complex. This sociological integration thus represents a further constraint on Türkiye's potential pivot away from the West.

The history of Turkey-West relations has been characterized by a series of fluctuations. The current debates are not the first instances of crises within this context. While the origins of the crisis and mutual suspicions lie in intra-alliance dynamics, the heightened intensity of the crisis can be attributed to its convergence with systemic disruptions in international politics. Unlike the current crises, during the Cold War, which did not coincide with such a significant systemic disruption, questions regarding Turkey's future direction were less acute. Therefore, it is unlikely that Turkey's potential participation in BRICS or its observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would signify an unequivocal break from the West. On the contrary, it is highly probable that considerable opportunities for cooperation, particularly with the European segment of the Western bloc, will arise. If the Ukraine-Russia war were to end in the manner suggested by Trump, Russia could strengthen its position in regions where its interests' conflict with Turkey, especially in the Black Sea, and reallocate resources previously committed to Ukraine toward other regions such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Africa. This scenario, which would likely exacerbate European anxieties, could foster a convergence of threat perceptions between the parties. Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to expect Turkey to sever its ties with Russia and other non-Western actors in the short term.

Turkish-American relations are likely to remain tense, particularly in the Middle East, due to ongoing issues such as Palestine, Iran, and Syria. The current state of relations between Israel and Turkey, coupled with the potential normalization between the Gulf states and Israel, could further isolate Turkey in the region. It is clear that the primary factor contributing to this isolation is U.S. regional policy. Despite these challenges, the likelihood of Turkey's future being severed from the West is not as high as often suggested. This is because Turkey has been integrated into the Western bloc for over 70 years, with deep institutional, normative, economic,

and military ties, making any rupture costly. In the short term, it is unlikely that an alternative to this level of integration and interdependence can be found elsewhere.

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