



Turkey's Labyrinthine Relationship with the West Seeking a Way Forward

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- From a Western government standpoint, Turkey is today a full autocracy, where the basic constitutional architecture and legal practice doesn't match the country's commitments under the Council of Europe or the North Atlantic Treaty.
- The years 2018 and 2019 marked the end of the Justice and Development Party's monopoly on Turkish politics and a serious dent in the President's personal prestige.
- Misguided economic policies and drastic governance choices have induced a substantial disconnect of Turkey's economy from its Western anchor.
- Turkey's upcoming military build-up will substantially change its force projection capacity in its near-abroad.
- Turkey's search for genuine independence is multifaceted (economic, military, diplomatic), but it also entails major constraints.
- From a Western standpoint, Turkey's choice of equidistance from the largest world powers has resulted in a bipolar foreign policy, the consistency of which largely escapes Western leaders and analysts.
- Relations between Turkey and the West, especially the European Union, still hold an immense potential in multiple fields, from economy to education, from culture to security. Geography will not change; it simply renders a mutual understanding necessary. But a return to normalcy may take a long time.

Introduction

It has been common, in the past few years and especially the past few weeks, to say that Turkey's relationship with the West, in particular with Europe, had become increasingly protracted. This may now be an understatement and 'labyrinthine' may be a better description.

Ankara's choices on governance, economic policy, military operations abroad, missile defence, or most recently maritime boundaries have puzzled many of the country's traditional partners. Even more than substance, it's the methods and the words used by the leadership that have left most Western political leaders befuddled. Conversely, in reaction to Ankara's latest initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean, EU member states and the European Union itself have strongly opposed Turkey's course of action.

Inevitably, trying to understand Turkey's current policies is highly risky for a foreign observer. But, international relations being as much about perceptions as they are about substance, it is important to distinguish one from the other, especially in a situation where a Western ally turns aggressively against its partners.

This article is not academic in nature, but is rather an attempt to shed some light, from a Western standpoint, on where stakeholders collectively stand and where they might go from here.

1. The domestic scene

1.1. Autocracy by choice

The political alliance between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen movement was instrumental in winning the November 2002 legislative elections and was later used to penetrate the State's structures. With the collapse of this pact in December 2013 following accusations of corruption, Turkey's governance took a sharp turn toward autocracy. It was the starting point of a gradual repression against its members.

It deepened in the aftermath of the failed coup of July 15-16, 2016, attributed by the leadership to the Gülen movement. Post-coup measures resulted in some 60,000 imprisonments and about 150,000 evictions from public jobs. Arrests and trials continue unabated to this date.

The march toward an autocratic regime was institutionalized with the April 2017 constitutional referendum (which created a [super-executive presidential regime](#), eliminated the position of Prime Minister, reduced the role of Parliament, and transferred powers to the Presidency) and culminated with the June 2018 presidential and legislative elections.

Institutional changes were accompanied by the harassment of political opponents, most particularly deputies and mayors from the Kurdish-origin Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The emblematic figure of Selahattin Demirtaş, HDP's co-chair, even had to run as candidate for the 2018 presidential elections from his cell in the Edirne prison. HDP mayors have been dismissed and replaced by government-appointed administrators. After their election in 2019, the two most prominent mayors from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Ekrem İmamoğlu in Istanbul and Mansur Yavaş in Ankara, were subjected to various administrative measures meant to limit their influence.

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Turkey's free media have simultaneously been reduced to a tiny portion of the print and audio-visual landscape, with prominent journalists forced into resigning and companies being taken over by AKP-friendly figures. In parallel, the government invested massively on social media communication and trolling, propagating doctored narratives and underlining events in Western countries felt to be illustrating the decline of the selected countries (e.g. police brutality in the United States, France, or Germany).

A systematic chase of free thinkers and civil society organizations intensified after the June 2013 Gezi protests in Istanbul, with simple protesters or dissenters labelled “terrorists” at the highest level of the State. The case of philanthropist Osman Kavala, detained since October 2017 under spurious accusations, is emblematic of the sharp degradation of rule of law in Turkey: on several occasions, Kavala was declared guilty by the Head of State before any indictment was released. When the said indictment was later produced in court, it mirrored exactly the presidential narrative.

A judiciary under state control is a prominent feature of any autocracy, and Turkey is no exception. The Kavala case is again very telling: when acquitted on February 18, 2019, Kavala was immediately re-incarcerated under a different (and undocumented) reason, while the three judges responsible for the acquittal of the 16 indicted citizens were put under enquiry. When condemned in the European Court of Human Rights for the Gezi trial, and especially for the abusive detention of Osman Kavala, Turkey chose to ignore the ruling (it continues to this date) and gave prominence to a controversial September 3-5, 2020 visit by the President of the European Court of Human Rights.

Overall, from a Western government standpoint, Turkey is today a full autocracy, where the basic constitutional architecture and legal practice doesn't match the country's commitments in the Council of Europe or the North Atlantic Alliance.

1.2. Two recent sea changes on the political scene

In February 2018, a coalition between the hitherto ruling AKP and the nationalist party MHP was established, in order to keep a majority in Parliament. It also introduced a first sea change in Turkish politics. Under MHP's influence, and despite the towering figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, policies became harsher on issues such as relations with the Kurds of Turkey or with Western countries, maritime boundaries or the handling of refugees.

On March 31, 2019, a second major sea change occurred with the loss of nine large municipalities by the AKP. Especially significant were the loss of both Ankara, the political capital, and Istanbul, the economic capital and the political cradle of President Erdoğan. The reactions from the leadership aggravated the situation: while Istanbul was lost by a tiny margin of around 13,000 votes on 8.5 million valid votes, the re-run imposed by the leadership on June 23, 2019 ended in debacle, with Ekrem İmamoğlu, previously a little-known district mayor, winning by a stunning 800,000 votes.

The political reality is simple: 2018 and 2019 marked the end of the Justice and Development Party's monopoly on Turkish politics and a **serious dent** in the President's personal prestige.

In addition, credible alternative politicians have emerged in the opposition CHP, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, and from among the AKP dissenters, in particular Ali Babacan, the only former AKP politician with world-level economic credentials. Conversely, Turkey's leadership has no potential heir-apparent, and the inner circles are rife with battles for influence.

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Domestically, the new presidential system does not seem to have convinced the Turkish public of its merits.

From an outsider's standpoint, the evolution of Turkey's political scene, the sharp degradation of the rule of law architecture, and the hostile narrative against the country's allies have all contributed to the current economic crisis, because they severely damaged the trust in the country's future potential. In that sense, there is now a divorce between the leadership's domestic political requirements and the country's international standing. This new situation may seem beneficial from a purely domestic standpoint but it may end up being largely incompatible with Turkey's core diplomatic, defence and economic interests.

1.3. An economic dead-end

Turkey has long been a structural deficit country, with no major natural resources, a deep dependence on energy imports, low savings per capita and a heavy reliance on export industries. Recently, a debt-driven growth pattern found its limits, especially as a number of domestic businesses are indebted in hard currencies and individuals are keeping their savings in foreign currencies rather than in Turkish Lira.

The exchange rate policy imposed by the Turkish President under the mistaken belief that low interest rates will result in low inflation has seriously aggravated the economic situation and impacted negatively the Turkish Lira in 2018 and 2020. Various expedients have been used to counter the currency's depreciation, without success. It is striking that since the beginning of 2020 some \$ 65 billion in hard currency reserves have been used to no avail in order to buttress the Lira. A discussion, -let alone an agreement- with the International Monetary Fund has been ruled out at the highest level, a decision which has further aggravated the economic prospects. Along the way, the Central Bank's reputation has been seriously degraded by the changes in its leadership which affected its independence, while the credibility of the Minister of Economy and Finance is as low as it ever was. The [view from Turkey's business circles](#) is grim.

Economically speaking, Turkey is therefore paying a high price for its autocratic system of government: the absence of internal debate, decisions imposed from the top down, credible actors being dismissed or resigning, no discussion with the IMF or the World Bank, are all imposing a toll on economic actors and ordinary citizens.

Yet, Turkey relies on foreign markets (especially the European Union) for exports and imports, and for short-term finance as well as Foreign Direct Investment, and last but not least technology. No alternative has yet emerged, except for energy imports (initially dominated by Russia and Iran; recently diversified with imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG); lately hopeful with modest gas [production prospects in the Black Sea](#), duly promoted by Turkey's Minister of Economy and Finance).

An important signal may have gone little noticed: in October and November 2019, the German car maker Volkswagen froze a € 1.3 billion investment in Manisa, due to uncertainties in Turkey's policies (military operations in Syria and rule of law were mentioned) and cancelled it altogether in 2020 due to the COVID-induced economic recession in Europe. This was a rare instance where a world-league economic operator mentioned political issues as the main driver of a negative decision.

“In short, misguided economic policies and drastic political choices have induced a substantial disconnect of Turkey's economy from its Western anchor.”

Similarly, although from a different perspective, Turkey's choice to purchase Russian-made S400 missile systems and to prepare their deployment together with Russian military specialists triggered the country's exclusion from the U.S. F35 stealth aircraft program, hence depriving its aerospace industry from a massive injection of funds and technology.

In short, misguided economic policies and drastic political choices have induced a substantial disconnect of Turkey's economy from its Western anchor.

1.4. A substantial military build-up

Well before the current evolutions, a substantial military build-up was planned and implemented: a new generation of frigates, six submarines with German propulsion systems, a helicopter carrier/assault ship with Spanish design, armed drones (both small and high-altitude-long-endurance) with British technology for some, short-range missile systems, a joint research project on missile defence with a French-Italian consortium, all will contribute to make the Turkish armed forces a stronger regional actor.

The deployment of new weapons has started in northern Cyprus, Syria, and Libya (short-range armed drones), but will accelerate in 2021 and the following years. Turkey's upcoming military build-up will substantially change [Turkey's force projection capacity](#) in its near-abroad, essentially in the eastern half of the Mediterranean Sea and in the Levant.

Under normal circumstances, this new development would be perceived as a strategic asset for NATO in a turbulent region. But, despite official narratives to the contrary, Turkey's standing within the Alliance has been substantially affected for several reasons in the past two years:

- a) Turkey has now integrated Russian systems and personnel at the heart of its air force, seriously hampering NATO's missile defence architecture (2019);
- b) it has undertaken operations in Syria with negative effects on the Western coalition's fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (2016-2019);
- c) it has opted for a military deployment in Libya in favour of a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government (2019-2020);
- d) it has conducted a para-military assault on its land border with Greece (2020);
- e) it is implementing a disruptive set of policies in the Eastern Mediterranean under a nationalist doctrine called Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*), including a unilateral redefinition of maritime borders and its enforcement through military means.

These developments are framed in a carefully constructed "conquest" narrative and an extensive use of social media and audio-visual material. Taken together, military operations in Syria, Libya, and Iraq, the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine, the return of the Hagia Sophia basilica museum to a mosque status, and the war-like narratives have largely redefined Turkey as a problematic ally of the West. At least, this is now the perception in most Western countries and even *realpolitik* reasoning does little to appease current concerns. Similarly, the constant communication efforts of the Turkish armed forces to present themselves as permanent and reliable NATO partners is regularly contradicted by facts on the ground.

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1.5. Political choices and electoral misfortunes have deeply transformed Turkey

“In 2023, a crucial year for Turkey and its leadership, two events already constitute major drivers of the current policies, not only transforming the domestic scene, but also challenging outside partners.”

Overall, the domestic political, economic and military landscape of Turkey has witnessed major changes since the first electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in November 2002. Whatever democratic features the country possessed have now evolved toward a fully autocratic regime, where most policy decisions are crafted and implemented from the presidential palace with no checks and balances, and where parallel structures and administrative decisions have become important tools in domestic politics.

In 2023, a crucial year for Turkey and its leadership, two events already constitute major drivers of the current policies, not only transforming the domestic scene, but also challenging outside partners. In June, presidential elections will take place, elections which the incumbent president cannot afford to lose. In October, the Republic's centennial celebrations will take place. This event is central to the president's ambitions to equal and surpass (including by erasing part of his legacy) the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

2. The international scene

2.1. The choice of equidistance

Some of Turkey's scholars have attempted to reconstruct Turkey's recent foreign policy evolution within a logical framework. The country's current foreign policy would be an adjustment to the post-Cold War world. Therefore, belonging to an anti-Soviet (1952-1991) and anti-Russia (1991 onwards) collective defence mechanism would not make much sense anymore. According to this theory, Turkey would be legitimate in looking for an equidistant position between the world's largest powers: United States, European Union, Russia and China. Some add the perception that Western civilization is on decline and morally bankrupt, that the U.S. is too far away to be a partner, and that the European Union doesn't have much to offer (to an autocracy). According to this concept, Turkey should therefore aim to become (again) a power in the middle of great powers.

This positioning entailed a distancing from the European Union: as soon as the short-term benefit of the EU accession process (i.e. depriving the army of any military role) was pocketed, the accession process was brushed aside (in practice, though not in words) because it carried too many democratic requirements and ran against the super-executive presidential system in the making and the concept of equidistance. Progress toward EU norms would have aligned Turkey too closely to Western governance standards and hampered a close relationship with Russia.

Similarly, but with more damaging legal and strategic consequences, the equidistance policy meant procuring missile defence systems from Russia (for political, not technical reasons) in the midst of a NATO-anchored military infrastructure, which includes bases in Incirlik, Kürecik, and Konya, and a land forces command in Izmir.

At a lower level, a recent example is very telling: Turkish naval forces are involved in a NATO operation called “Sea Guardian,” which was meant to prevent arms deliveries to all parties in the Libyan conflict, according to the conclusions of the January 2020 Berlin conference. On the other hand, they simultaneously protected civilian vessels delivering Turkish armaments to the Tripoli government and, in June 2020, blocked inspection procedures by Greek, Italian and French navies operating under the same NATO operation.

Such a policy is perceived in Western Europe as an *a la carte* NATO participation depending on the interests of the moment, although there is no sign of disengagement of Turkish forces from NATO operations in most geographical areas.

An accessory instrument to this policy is the formidable development of Turkey's official social media machinery, which includes a mix of nationalist narratives ("conquest", "battles", "war", "enemies", "glory") and selective or doctored news conveying only the bright side of things. In this respect, news about the Russian-led assault on a Turkish battalion in Saraqeb, Syria, on February 27, 2020, or the 12 August 2020 sea incident between a Greek and a Turkish frigate were carefully doctored.

2.2. The drive towards a multifaceted independence

Turkey's search for genuine independence is multifaceted (it concerns the military industry, the automotive industry, as well as military operations and of course foreign policy), but it also entails major constraints.

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On the military side, despite genuine progress and high ambitions, technological and political constraints remain high for both existing equipment and those under development. For example, the existing fleet of F16 and F4 aircraft, helicopters, surveillance aircraft, and different types of missiles all involve US-made components, therefore subject to limitations or potential sanctions.

This is even more valid for some of the critical new equipment currently under development. For example, the exclusion of Turkey from the F35 stealth aircraft program will deprive Turkey from using its navy version (F35B), therefore making the future aircraft platform/assault ship (TCG Anadolu) a much less efficient force projection asset.

In addition, the concept of independence entails new alliances, such as the military agreement with Russia and Iran about Syria, the so-called Astana process, which are not exempt from inconsistencies such as diverging political objectives. The fate of the Assad regime and its control over the Syrian territory is an obvious case of sharp divergences with both Moscow and Tehran. Similarly, the complicated alliance with Russia in Syria co-exists with an outright opposition in Libya, where Turkey sides with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), while Russia supports the Tobruk-based Libyan House of Representatives.

2.3. A bipolar foreign policy as a result

On the foreign policy side, seen from a Western standpoint, Turkey's choice of equidistance from the largest world powers has resulted in a bipolar foreign policy, the consistency of which largely escapes Western leaders and analysts.

Again, NATO is the prime example. The above-mentioned developments have already induced a serious breach of confidence between Turkey and its NATO allies and [raised the issue of paralysis](#) of some of the Alliance's policies. Together with the reinforced military means in the next few years, and in the absence of exclusion or sanctions procedures, these policy decisions and the aggressive accompanying narratives mean that NATO is in effect taken hostage of Turkish politics and is suffering structural consequences.

More precisely, in the mid-2020s context, such a substantial reinforcement of Turkey's force projection capacities cannot anymore be perceived as a strategic addition to NATO.

With Turkey's dual relationship with NATO and Russia now in place, the Western perception is moving toward extreme caution, if not diffidence. From a strategic standpoint, the combined effects of Turkey's and Russia's enhanced involvement in the Mediterranean basin create a host of [new power struggles](#).

Concerning NATO's concerns with Russia, Turkey has clearly facilitated the accomplishment of Moscow's strategic objectives in the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean, a confusing achievement of sort:

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- a) Russian S400 missile systems and associated personnel are now deployed in Turkey.
- b) By obtaining the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern-eastern Syria, Turkey has facilitated a takeover of their bases by Russia, at a time when Russia established a permanent air base at Khmeimim, near Lattakia.
- c) By deploying forces and assets in support of Libya's Government of National Accord, Turkey has prompted a Russian military build-up in the central and eastern parts of the country.

This is not to say that Turkey's relationship with Russia is an easy one. Looking at the energy sector, for example, Turkey had become overly dependent on Russia for gas imports, gas transit through the Turkish Stream pipeline and nuclear energy production through the Akkuyu power plant currently under construction near Mersin). Such a degree of dependence prompted Turkey to diversify its sources of supplies, in particular through the LNG market in 2019.

Concerning the EU-Turkey relationship, it has long been described as being in tatters. It is quite clear that very few avenues remain open to restore, or even maintain, the relationship at a decent level of intensity. The main reasons are fairly obvious: Ankara's choices in terms of governance are at the very opposite of EU norms and standards, Turkey's official narratives with EU countries are mostly offensive, while some actions amount to sheer hostility, e.g. the assault on the land border with Greece in February 2020.

In trying to understand the rationale and benefits of Ankara's attitude with Western countries, one observation inevitably comes to mind: hostility with the West is seen as politically useful on the domestic scene, even if drastic policy reversals become necessary when a particular action ends in failure or risks to trigger negative consequences.

This was the case with the above-mentioned paramilitary assault on Greece, where the approximately 5,000-6,000 migrants bussed to the border had to be repatriated and relocated in various holding centres across Turkey. This was also the case with US cleric Andrew Brunson, who was released after two years in jail. In both instances, Turkish policymakers vastly underestimated the reactions to their initiatives: in the first case, there was a massive show of EU solidarity with Greece, because the migrants wave was not spontaneous, but instead a planned operation of the Turkish Interior Ministry, with 1,000 special police, armoured personnel carriers, and a number of special equipment; in the second case, Turkey completely misread the religious component of the White House's political reaction to the sentencing -on spurious charges- of Pastor Brunson.

2.4. The specific case of maritime boundaries

The litigation on maritime boundaries and rights to access underwater resources between Turkey on one side, and Greece and Cyprus on the other (albeit being distinct cases), is a long-standing one, and actually predates the political tenure of the AKP since November

2002. The issue has taken a new dimension in the past few months for mainly two distinct reasons:

- a) Natural gas discoveries by Egypt, Israel and Cyprus, and the formation in January 2020 of the EastMed Gas Forum between Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority in view of the eventual construction of a gas pipeline, therefore bypassing Turkey, which under current delimitations has limited access to the Eastern Mediterranean seabed.
- b) A delicate political situation for the Turkish leadership and a dire economic and monetary crisis, which warranted a tactics toward rallying the Islamist-nationalist alliance to defend national interests.

Looking at recent developments from a pure energy standpoint doesn't help much in understanding Turkey's policy course. Assuming Turkey was legally allowed to drill in an area broadly located between Crete and Cyprus and found natural gas, the needed search and development effort would probably take ten years and amount to some € 10 billion. The resulting gas output would reach Turkey's shore at a cost largely superior to current and forecasted LNG import prices. In addition, the COVID-19-induced recession in Europe makes it unlikely that this gas would easily find an export market. Behind the economic gamble, there is a political motive: trying to break decades of stalemate on an issue dear to all Turkish politicians, i.e. Turkey's fair access to Eastern Mediterranean waters.

This is where Ankara's choice of a disruptive foreign policy comes into play. First, an agreement on maritime boundaries is struck with Libya in November 2019 as a *quid-pro-quo* for a defence cooperation agreement at a critical time for the Tripoli government. This agreement amounts to a unilateral initiative by Turkey with a beleaguered government which, incidentally, doesn't control Libya's easternmost shore where the new delimitation lands. This outlandish legal construction later triggered a Greek-Egyptian agreement of a similar nature, intersecting the previous one and therefore making a settlement even more difficult to reach.

“Searching for a way out of the maritime crisis may continue to prove extremely difficult for months to come.”

One interesting element is that Cyprus, Greece and Turkey all officially call for discussion without pre-conditions and proclaim their desire to reach a settlement. The Turkish claim on substance, i.e. being given a larger access to the Mediterranean Sea proportionate to its landmass, is viewed as legitimate by a number of experts of maritime issues in Europe and internationally. But, today, a mere exploratory meeting between Greek and Turkish diplomats is rendered impossible by Ankara's misreading of three crucial principles of the European Union: internal solidarity; good neighbourly relations; peaceful resolution of disputes.

Similarly, NATO's attempt to devise a military “deconfliction” mechanism seems to have failed, due to opposed preconditions between the parties. This being said, avoiding a repetition of incidents between the respective navies remains paramount.

Overall, the current crisis regarding maritime boundaries and gas drilling rights is the perfect example of the inefficiency of a disruptive foreign policy. Whatever the legitimacy of its claims, Turkey has opted for the one policy –disruption, unilateral moves, military threats– that cannot work, if only because Ankara totally miscalculated the European Union's reaction.

Searching for a way out of the maritime crisis may continue to prove extremely difficult for months to come.

3. Searching for a way forward between Turkey and the West

For all the narratives around the morally-bankrupt Western civilization, the “impositions” from Europe, and the New Turkey, there are some basic facts that cannot be eternally ignored by Turkey’s politicians from all sides:

- a) Turkey’s economy will continue for a long time to be anchored in the West for its exports and imports, technology needs (including military), and finance (short-term, portfolio and FDI). All diversification efforts have largely failed.
- b) Ankara’s choices of governance have forever derailed the prospect of an EU accession, and there is a need for defining a different form of relations. Even charting such a new course would require a political understanding on key norms and standards.
- c) Although currently not very visible, the most negative factor for Turkey lies in the “self-inflicted sanctions”, i.e. the negative perception of Turkey by investors and rating agencies, and hence the ensuing negative decisions. No amount of conspiracy theory will change that.
- d) Turkey’s political and economic standing would be hampered for the long-term, if it failed to resolve the current contradictions of its NATO policy.
- e) The net balance of Turkey’s military operations in northern Syria and western Libya so far has been to the benefit of Russia, not Turkey. In addition, the “export” of Syrian jihadists to Libya has created a new and dangerous situation for Europe, the Maghreb and the Sahel.

Relations between Turkey and the West, especially the European Union, hold an immense potential in multiple fields, from economy to education, from culture to security. Geography will not change; it simply renders a mutual understanding necessary.

Yet, finding a way out of the current crisis may look highly uncertain, if only because the fierce narratives from Ankara constitute the best way to block any dialogue. For the medium-term, the path forward will remain difficult, especially as long as disruption remains the core policy in Ankara.

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