



## **Policy Brief**

April 5, 2024

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# **Prospects for EU-Türkiye Foreign Policy Cooperation at a Time of Geopolitical Turbulence**

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## Foreword

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**Over more than six decades, the relationship between Türkiye and the EU has undergone a profound transformation. Just 20 years ago, Türkiye had real aspirations to join the EU. Today, that prospect is a distant memory, and political relations between the two parties are at an all-time low.**

Despite the prevailing challenges and areas of divergent interests, Türkiye-EU relations continue to exert a significant influence on domestic and foreign policies across much of Europe, particularly with regard to trade, border management, and migration. While the United States may view ties with Türkiye as discretionary at times, for both Türkiye and the EU, engagement remains unavoidable.

Furthermore, against a backdrop of geopolitical turmoil and regional instability, the imperative for robust dialogue and collaboration between the EU and Türkiye has never been more pressing. With Türkiye's accession process stalled and geopolitical tensions on the rise, the need to reinvigorate and strengthen diplomatic ties has become increasingly evident. From the enduring conflicts in Syria and Iraq to the evolving dynamics surrounding Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, the prevailing geopolitical context necessitates a coordinated approach between the two parties.

This political report examines the potential for collaboration between Türkiye and the EU, defining the essential preconditions for such cooperation and elucidating its mutual benefits. It also assesses the obstacles that stand in the way of such cooperation and proposes a framework for foreign policy dialogue between Türkiye and the EU, incorporating the views of Türkiye, the EU, and the United States.

## Restoring EU-Türkiye Dialogue and Cooperation: A Win for Both Sides

*Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, Regional Director, Türkiye, German Marshall Fund of the United States*

It has been 61 years since Türkiye signed an association agreement with the European Economic Community, 29 years since the establishment of the EU-Türkiye Customs Union, and 19 years since Türkiye's accession negotiations commenced. However, Türkiye's accession process is effectively on hold and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. There have been no noteworthy advancements in areas such as customs union modernization and visa liberalization, with cooperation on migration management serving as one of the few bright spots.

Meanwhile, the geopolitical landscape surrounding Türkiye is in turmoil, with the repercussions felt deeply also in Europe. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has reshaped European geopolitics to the extent that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz labeled it a *Zeitenwende*, a historical turning point. The conflict in Gaza, now primarily a humanitarian crisis, heightens the risk of a new wave of international terrorism and the potential for regional escalation. While a war between Iran and Israel may not be imminent, it remains a possibility, posing numerous risks for both Türkiye and the EU—including irregular migration, disrupted trade and connectivity, and an increase in terrorism threats.

Simultaneously, instability persists in Syria and Iraq, with uncertainties looming over the potential withdrawal of US ground forces. Türkiye faces significant security concerns in both countries and would need to allocate additional resources to manage the aftermath of a US withdrawal, particularly as Iran, Russia, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) also operate in the region.

Should the Russia-Ukraine conflict conclude on Moscow's terms, which is no longer an improbable scenario, containing a triumphant Russia will pose a considerable challenge for both the EU and Türkiye. This challenge would be further compounded in the event of a US pivot to Asia, although such a move is not imminent and lacks a set timetable.

Given this context, it would seem logical for the EU and Türkiye to foster robust foreign policy and security dialogue and cooperation. However, the reality paints a different picture. Türkiye's alignment with the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) positions is on the decline, high-level dialogues between the EU and Türkiye have been suspended, and various EU member states have imposed restrictions on defense sales to Türkiye.

EU accession candidates are expected to harmonize their foreign policies with that of the EU. This harmonization is measured through the alignment ratio of the candidate country with the CSDP. [Türkiye's alignment rate](#) has decreased dramatically from 97% in 2007 to 7% in 2022. Türkiye has also declined to participate in EU sanctions against Russia.

Meanwhile, reacting to the escalation of tension between Türkiye and EU members Greece and Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean, the [Council of the European Union](#) decided to cancel meetings of the EU-Türkiye Association Council and "high-level dialogues" on issues such as security, energy, economy, and transport, and to suspend negotiations with Türkiye on a comprehensive air transport agreement. Moreover, in October 2019, EU governments agreed to [limit arms sales to Türkiye](#) in reaction to Turkish military incursions into northern Syria.

As a result of these dynamics, the EU-Türkiye relationship has witnessed a shift towards competition, eclipsing the previously dominant mode of cooperation. This competition takes place not necessarily between the EU and Türkiye, but between individual members or groups of members of the EU and Türkiye.

Moreover, this competition draws Türkiye closer to the Russian Federation. The relationship between the two countries takes the form of [competitive cooperation](#). This type of cooperation is not stable, however, and depends largely on the two parties' respective relationships with the West. During periods when both feel Western pressure or feel isolated, they gravitate towards each other. Yet, when either or both find themselves in favor with the West, their relationship falters, giving way to competition rather than collaboration. This pattern suggests that if Türkiye were to have a more constructive foreign policy and security relationship with the EU and the United States, it would not feel the need to have close relations with Russia.

However, restoring the foreign policy dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Türkiye will be easier said than done. First and foremost, there is a lack of trust between Türkiye and its European allies. [GMF's Transatlantic Trends 2023 Survey](#) showed that Turkish respondents were the least likely to find other allies reliable, and Türkiye was seen as the least reliable ally by respondents from all other countries included in the survey. On the other hand, as demonstrated by the [Turkish Perceptions of the EU 2022 Survey](#) conducted by GMF, a plurality of Turks want to see the EU as Türkiye's main partner in international relations.

The Cyprus question will remain a challenge as the Republic of Cyprus, which Türkiye does not recognize, appears committed to blocking cooperation between Brussels and Ankara. A new round of talks about the island could ease this challenge, but as of now, the prospect remains remote. Turkish Cypriots have grown skeptical of the sincerity of their Greek counterparts in pursuing a negotiated settlement, particularly after the abrupt withdrawal of the latter from the Crans-Montana talks in 2017. However, the appointment of a new [personal envoy of the UN Secretary General on Cyprus](#) could lead at least to exploratory talks.

Given these challenges, foreign policy dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Türkiye should be restored incrementally and expectations should remain limited in the beginning. The EU should return to the practice of inviting the Turkish Foreign Minister to the informal meetings of EU foreign ministers, also known as Gymnich Meetings. Türkiye could, for its part, see the European Political Community meetings as an opportunity for dialogue with EU member states and attend these meetings more regularly. These are the low-hanging fruits. In order to establish a structured foreign policy dialogue between Brussels and Ankara, and subsequently lift restrictions on defense cooperation with Turkey, the European Council must rescind its decision of November 2019 based on the current détente between Greece and Türkiye. Türkiye, on the other hand, should increasingly align its foreign policies with those of the EU. It was able to do so in the past, and there is no reason why it cannot do so today.

The EU and Türkiye should not let what they cannot achieve deter them from pursuing what is possible and mutually beneficial.

## **To Speak or Not To Speak: Dialogue Between Türkiye and the EU Is Necessary, Even if It May Be Turbulent and Distasteful**

*Dr. Paul T. Levin, Director, Institute for Turkish Studies, Stockholm University*

Türkiye-EU relations are at a nadir. The country's EU accession process, while [nominally still in place](#), has been at a standstill for a decade. In 2023, only 10% of [Turkish foreign-policy positions aligned with those of the EU](#), and confrontations between Türkiye and EU member states such as Cyprus, Greece, and France have become commonplace. This state of affairs has prompted calls to reduce tension, including one from EU High Commissioner for External Relations Josep Borrell in a [joint communication](#) from last November.

"In light of Türkiye's assertive foreign and regional policy," Borrell wrote, "it remains essential to sustain diplomatic work with a view of reaching a deeper understanding of respective interests, defuse possible tensions and identify mutually benefitting areas of cooperation." He proposed inviting the Turkish foreign minister to the regular Gymnich Meetings of EU counterparts and to "conduct the EU-Türkiye dialogues on foreign policy and regional issues regularly" and in a more structured fashion.

There may now be a brief window for such talks. The lifting of the Turkish veto of Sweden's NATO bid has unblocked the sale of F-16 fighters and modernization kits from the United States, and started an attempt to resolve the impasse over Türkiye's purchase of Russian S400 missiles. On top of that, Greek-Turkish dialogue has at least temporarily calmed the Aegean waters. What, then, would be the pros and cons of a regular high-level dialogue on foreign and security policy?

There are areas in which increased communication could be mutually beneficial. Ankara often complains that it is expected to implement EU sanctions against Russia even though it was not consulted in their formulation. Had such consultation occurred, it is conceivable that Türkiye would have joined the sanctions regime. EU leaders may also find it beneficial to hear a Turkish perspective on topics such as security in the Black Sea or Eastern Mediterranean energy exploration. Regarding the former, the EU lacks a clear policy, but Türkiye, as a littoral state with special responsibilities to control the Turkish straits, has a major interest. Regarding the latter, Ankara, with some justification, feels excluded from recent developments.

Many in the EU will feel uncomfortable with any proposal to engage Türkiye. Some will undoubtedly see it as an effort by the bloc's leaders to cozy up to autocratic Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who keeps civil society representatives and opposition politicians behind bars, and reward him for bad behavior. Initiating a dialogue without conditions would certainly not be politically popular in Europe. (In fact, given how unpopular it would be, Erdoğan, who faces no elections for five years and [might to be considering his legacy](#), could do much to facilitate dialogue by [releasing political prisoners such as Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş](#) in a gesture of goodwill.)

The EU, however, has little leverage to propel reform in Türkiye today, so conditioning dialogue on democratic reforms is a sure way to prevent it. The assumption that the bloc can pressure neighbors to democratize by offering conditional cooperation may have been correct in a post-Cold War era in which Western powers confidently expanded a "liberal democratic order". Today, however, is a different era. Autocracy is expanding worldwide, and democracy is under threat from within in many key Western states, primarily by [right-wing populist](#) and nationalist parties. The West may wish to promote democracy abroad but defending it at home needs to be the priority, at least for the moment.

Profoundly shifting geopolitics also have consequences for the EU's dealings with Türkiye. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine revealed to many Europeans President Vladimir Putin's rejection of the principle of territorial integrity under international law and the potential [military threat that Moscow poses](#) to EU member states. Russia is already pursuing a [hybrid war](#) against European democracy and stability by systematically exploiting social divisions through its [support of radical actors on the far right](#) and far [left](#), and by engaging in election interference, cyber operations, and influence operations.

In light of this clear and present danger, can the EU afford to be selective about its partners? Suggesting that Brussels may have to engage with non-democracies not just for national security reasons but also to defend democracy is paradoxical. However, were the EU, and even the United States, to limit international engagement to liberal democracies, they would [risk pushing other countries into the arms of Russia and China, the primary champions of autocracy. Beijing, in particular, would gain significantly from such a development, especially as the world now has more autocracies than liberal democracies](#). Türkiye, a "swing state", performs a balancing act between the West and Russia, but this may not continue indefinitely. If Ankara is forced to choose a camp, the EU would clearly benefit from a choice in the Western alliance's favor, especially if the United States, under a second Donald Trump presidency, turns isolationist. Türkiye will remain an important neighbor and its growing military might and ambitions to [project power far beyond its shores](#) suggest that an EU policy of rejection and confrontation is ill advised. Maintaining the possibility of Türkiye's EU accession—conditional upon reform—in case of a dramatic change in the country's leadership would be wise. Sober realpolitik speaks in favor of dialogue with Ankara, at least on foreign and security policy.

To be sure, there are clear limits on how far engagement with Türkiye can and should go. The country will

as always push its own perspective on counterterrorism, but the EU should not allow itself to be pressured into embracing Türkiye's securitized and repressive approach to the Kurdish question writ large despite Ankara's legitimate security concerns. The unresolved Cyprus issue and an underlying divergence in values and threat perceptions will plague dialogue. Türkiye under Erdoğan is ultimately a revisionist (or "[system-transforming](#)") power that rejects the current US-led world order. Recurrent disagreements will remain a feature of its relations with the EU, and the discord may even worsen. High-level dialogue with Ankara will, therefore, not provide a path to consistently better ties. But it could be a way of preventing a rupture.

## **A Transatlantic Perspective on EU-Türkiye Foreign Policy Cooperation**

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The logic and prospects for enhanced EU-Türkiye foreign-policy cooperation will be shaped by decision-makers in Ankara and Europe. As other authors of this report have noted, the conditions for progress on this front are better than they have been for many years, even if the EU accession process itself is at an impasse. The United States is a stakeholder in this question. From a transatlantic perspective, closer EU-Turkish alignment—or at least more effective consultation—on foreign and security policy will not resolve the many differences in outlook and policy, but it will help allies, not least the US, to capture the benefits of Türkiye's geopolitical potential. It will also allow Türkiye a more predictable relationship with security partners at a time of growing risk.

Recent years have seen a notable reversal in the European and American approaches to relations with Ankara. As relations with Türkiye became increasingly strained, most notably after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's crackdown following a failed coup attempt in 2016, it was common for European officials and observers to come to Washington with a long list of concerns about Türkiye's domestic and international policy. Many of these were shared in Washington, but American interlocutors were often inclined to set these aside in the face of Türkiye's geopolitical position and the importance of the "strategic relationship". More recently, the American side has been more critical of Ankara across the board, while many Europeans have pointed to the EU's unavoidable need to have a functioning relationship with Türkiye. Much of this has been driven by the "inter-mestic" character of EU-Türkiye relations. For much of Europe, relations with Ankara have a bearing on domestic as well as foreign policy, above all in relation to investment, borders, and migration. For the United States, ties with Türkiye may sometimes seem optional. For Türkiye and the EU, a relationship—functional or not—is inescapable.

In some respects, the Western approach to Türkiye's neighborhood is increasingly reminiscent of its approach in the Cold War years. The war in Ukraine and the deepening confrontation between Moscow and the West is driving a broad realignment of strategic priorities in Europe. The same is true from an American perspective, although this concern exists alongside growing anxiety about the People's Republic of China (PRC) and flashpoints for conflict in the Indo-Pacific. The war in Ukraine and active hostilities in and over the Black Sea confront Türkiye and its NATO allies with ongoing risks of brinkmanship and escalation. During the Cold War, the strategic relationship with Ankara was seen as critical to security on NATO's southern flank. But Türkiye's role was never actually tested as open conflict was confined to peripheral areas (here, Türkiye did indeed play its part, not least in Korea, and much later in NATO operations in the

Balkans and Afghanistan). The point is that, tested or not, Ankara has long been a part of the Euro-Atlantic security system, under various strategic conditions.

As with EU-Türkiye relations, US bilateral relations with Ankara have entered a more pragmatic phase. Sharp differences of view persist regarding democracy, human rights, media freedom, and definitions of terrorism. There are also marked differences on regional policy, from Russia and Iran sanctions to Gaza, from US support to the People's Defense Units (YPG) in Syria and Turkish policy in the eastern Mediterranean to Türkiye's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system. That said, the foreign and security policy equation is in flux. Ankara's approval of Sweden's NATO membership and Washington's green light for Türkiye's F-16 purchase have changed the atmosphere. So, too, has the tentative détente between Greece and Türkiye in the Aegean and the suggestion that Türkiye might be able to rejoin the F-35 program if the S-400 issue is resolved. Against this backdrop, it will be in the US interest to support the development of a more effective and regular dialogue on foreign and security policy between Ankara and Brussels, including Turkish participation in the Gymnich meetings of EU foreign ministers. This would be a useful, parallel format to the much broader "US-Türkiye strategic mechanism" launched in 2022.

This US interest is likely to hold regardless of the outcome of the 2024 US elections, although with some significant nuances. A second Biden Administration is likely to pursue a continued pragmatic approach to Türkiye in which closer Turkish-EU alignment will be seen as a positive development in terms of allied cohesion. A Trump administration is unlikely to oppose this evolution but is likely to be agnostic at best when it comes to Europe's foreign policy ambitions, with or without Türkiye. In this regard, the European response to a possible decline in America's commitment to European security may be significant for Türkiye-EU cooperation. If the US disengages from Europe, either by design, or by necessity in light of demands in Asia, the EU finally may be driven to pursue "strategic autonomy", with all that this would imply in terms of investment and activism. Under these conditions, the EU will likely focus first and foremost on foreign policy demands in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods, where Türkiye can be a critical if sometimes challenging partner. The nexus of a tougher transatlantic burden-sharing climate and the EU's own geopolitical exposure will make closer foreign policy cooperation with Ankara difficult to avoid.

Finally, the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza and broader dynamics concerning the rise of the PRC and the future of the international order have spurred an active debate about the "global south" and the West. Even as Türkiye's foreign policy has taken on a more explicitly non-aligned character, Ankara's economic and security interests remain tied in large measure to those of Western partners. For the EU, Türkiye offers an increasingly useful window into thinking and policies in the global south. And at a time of growing risk in multiple regions, Ankara should see value in closer foreign-policy ties to the EU as a complement to NATO security guarantees—or even as a hedge against turmoil in transatlantic relations. Türkiye's EU accession, long supported by the United States, may be off the table. But at base, the American interest has always been more about Türkiye-EU convergence than membership per se. Closer coordination between Brussels and Ankara on foreign policy would be a step in this direction.

## Conclusion

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The recent shift in attitudes towards Ankara, observed in both Europe and America, reflects a growing preference for pragmatism over idealism. Despite persistent differences on values, both sides acknowledge Türkiye's geopolitical significance. However, the current state of EU-Türkiye relations is marked by challenges including regional tensions and a lack of trust. Historical agreements and aspirations for EU membership persist, but recent developments have led to increased competition rather than cooperation, especially amid regional conflicts.

Nevertheless, among these challenges lies an opportunity for dialogue and cooperation, particularly in light of shifting strategic priorities in Europe and global challenges such as China's rise. While EU accession for Türkiye might not be feasible currently, closer foreign policy dialogue would be in the interest of both Brussels and Ankara.

Incremental steps such as the EU's restoration of high-level dialogue with Türkiye, and increasing Turkish alignment with common EU foreign policy positions are seen as tangible pathways towards rebuilding trust and fostering collaboration. Despite formidable obstacles, prioritizing common interests and pursuing achievable goals is essential for both sides.

A pragmatic approach is deemed necessary, acknowledging divergent interests and values while recognizing the potential benefits of sustained dialogue. A nuanced approach grounded in *realpolitik* calls for sustained dialogue between the EU and Türkiye, even though it may not resolve all complexities. Engagement between the EU and Türkiye on foreign and security policy issues can contribute to increasing stability in the common neighborhood and preventing a rupture in Türkiye-EU relations.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of GMF.

*This policy paper is part of a series of events and analyses organized by the GMF-Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB) Fellowship on Türkiye, Europe, and Global Issues. The fellowship was launched in 2017.*