

# **TURKEY'S NEW PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM AND A CHANGING WEST: IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY AND TURKEY- WEST RELATIONS**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In July 2018, having triumphed in the presidential elections the previous month, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began to formally transform Turkey's long-standing parliamentary system into a heavily centralized presidential one. The new system entrenched his one-man authoritarian rule at home and is having profound implications for the making and substance of Turkish foreign policy as well as Turkey's relations with the West. This transition has taken place amid an international environment that is undergoing a significant transformation. Today, the West is far from a shining "city on the hill," attracting Turkey and other countries toward the liberal values it is meant to represent. Populism and nationalism are on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic. President Donald Trump's "America First" policies are eroding the world order characterized by multilateralism, free trade, and advocacy of liberal values. The European Union is weakened internally by the challenge of Brexit and by diminishing public support for a liberal Europe comfortable with diversity. Complicating this picture are emerging powers such as China, Iran, and Russia that are playing a much more assertive role on the global stage.

This paper argues that the confluence of a "new" Turkey and an evolving international order is likely to continue to strain Turkey's relations with its Western allies. Although many of the challenges that crowd the Turkish-Western agenda predate Ankara's formal introduction of its presidential system, these issues are likely to become more visible and harder to overcome. Yet, it is possible that the amount of authority and power the Turkish president has amassed for himself may also create new opportunities for transactional relationships. Furthermore, structural factors and geopolitical realities are likely to dampen Erdoğan's temptation to break away from the trans-Atlantic alliance. This in turn may create some room for pragmatism and the possibility to improve cooperation between Turkey and the West in addressing common challenges. Against this background, anchoring Turkey to the West within a values-based framework no longer looks realistic. So how should the West approach Turkey? Which is better: engagement not based on rules, or rules-based non-engagement?

This paper recommends that moving forward, Turkey's Western allies should bear in mind that:

- Geopolitical realities bind Turkey to the West. Trans-Atlantic allies should play the long game and try to find a functioning framework tied to credible conditionality. In the short term, the focus should be on realistic and pragmatic engagement with Turkey while insisting on rules-based cooperation.
- One common challenge to Turkey's relations with its historical allies stems from pervasive negative discourse against the West in Turkey, as well as against Islam and Turkey in the West. To revive mutual trust between the two, leaders and policymakers on both sides should make a concerted effort to refrain from employing negative rhetoric toward each other.
- For U.S.-Turkish relations, given Trump's disinterest in prioritizing the rule of law and basic rights and freedoms, it will be important that all branches of the government, business, and civil society keep these principles on their agenda.
- Urgently appointing a U.S. ambassador to Turkey and reconsidering U.S. tariff increases on Turkish aluminum and steel imports could be another confidence-building avenue to explore, especially given that the United States enjoys a persistent trade surplus over Turkey.
- Finding a pragmatic solution to the issue of Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missiles will be an important step forward. A resolution that stops short of an outright cancellation of the purchase but limits the operationalization of the missiles in a manner that does not jeopardize NATO member countries' immediate security should be considered.
- Once Turkey meets the relevant criteria, the EU should fulfill its pledge of visa-free travel for Turkish nationals, as part of a broader public diplomacy effort to reconstitute reciprocal trust.
- Areas of EU-Turkish cooperation, such as counterterrorism, transportation, migration, and energy, should be further deepened in the spirit of win-win cooperation.
- Efforts to modernize the EU-Turkey customs union should be boosted and framed in the spirit of "rules-based cooperation" that benefits both sides.
- Last but not least, there is urgent need to make progress on the Cyprus issue, starting with a concerted effort to resolve the irony that Turkey and Turkish Cypriots are currently being punished for having supported the reunification of the island.

## INTRODUCTION

In July 2018, having triumphed in presidential elections the previous month, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began to introduce administrative measures formally transitioning Turkey's long-standing parliamentary system into a heavily centralized presidential system. These measures have massively overhauled the Turkish state apparatus and are affecting both domestic governance and the making of foreign policy. The parliament's ability to legislate and hold the executive accountable have been curtailed. The military, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the treasury, whose origins can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire and were known as the "three H pillars" (*Harbiye*, *Hariciye*, and *Hazine*, respectively) of the Turkish state, have seen their influence and power shrink. Public space for independent civil society and the media has narrowed. The opposition is weak and divided. These developments, naturally, did not happen overnight and are the product of a long process. They have, however, become permanent features of the new system of governance that will continue to shape Turkish foreign policy in novel ways, while also complicating and adding challenges to the already difficult relations between Turkey and its Western allies.<sup>1</sup>

The transition to the "new" regime has been marked by two important parallel processes that are adversely affecting Turkey-West relations. First, Turkey's democracy has regressed dramatically in recent years. In 2018, Freedom House classified Turkey as "not free" in its "Freedom in the World" report, for the first time since the series began in 1999.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the shared values that are supposed to bind Turkey into the Western alliance have been weakening. Secondly, Turkey's traditional foreign policy statecraft, and particularly its Western orientation, has been eroding under pressure from Erdoğan, who entertains a greater and more assertive international role for Turkey at least partly shaped by an aspiration to be the leader of the Muslim world. This unsurprisingly leads to an ever longer list of problems in Turkey's relations with its allies, particularly the United States.<sup>3</sup>

These processes have been accompanied by an international environment that is dramatically transformed. Today, the West is far from a shining "city on the hill," attracting Turkey and other countries towards the liberal values it is meant to represent. Populism and nationalism are on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic. President Donald Trump is increasingly associated with illiberal leaders around the world. His "America First" policies are eroding the world order characterized by multilateralism, free trade, and advocacy of liberal values. The European Union (EU) is weakened internally not only by the challenge of Brexit, but also by diminishing public support for a liberal Europe comfortable with diversity. Instead, political parties are exploiting xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments to increase their electoral support. Complicating this picture are emerging powers such as China, Iran, and Russia that are playing a much more assertive role on the global stage. These developments are also profoundly affecting Turkish foreign policy.

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1 The authors recognize that the "West" has different connotations for different readers. For the purposes of this paper, "West" and "Western" refer to the United States, the European Union and its member states, particularly the leading powers of Western Europe, and other NATO allies of Turkey.

2 "Freedom in the World 2018: Turkey Country Report," (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2018), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/turkey>.

3 For a survey of Turkey's problems with the United States and the EU, see Amanda Sloat, "The West's Turkey Conundrum," (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, February 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-west-turkey-conundrum/>; and Eduard Soler i Lecha, Funda Tekin, Melike Janine Sökmén, "It Takes Two to Tango: Political changes in Europe and their Impact on Turkey's EU bid," (Cologne, Germany: University of Cologne, April 2018), [http://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/user\\_upload/Online\\_Paper\\_No.\\_17\\_D2.2..pdf](http://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/user_upload/Online_Paper_No._17_D2.2..pdf).



The confluence of a “new” Turkey and an evolving international order is likely to continue to strain Turkey’s relations with its Western allies. Many of the challenges that crowd the agenda of these relations predate the formal introduction of the presidential system. However, they are likely to become more visible and harder to overcome. Yet, it is also possible that the amount of authority and power Erdoğan has amassed for himself may also create new opportunities for transactional relationships. Furthermore, structural factors and geopolitical realities are likely to dampen his temptation to break away from the trans-Atlantic alliance. This in turn may create some room for pragmatism and the possibility to improve cooperation between Turkey and the West in addressing common challenges.

This paper is divided into four main sections. It starts by tracing how Turkey moved from the earlier years of Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule, widely seen as a success story in the West, toward illiberalism and the presidential system now formally in place. The second section discusses the new system of governance in Turkey and its implications for foreign policy. The third section explains how external developments such as democratic regression and disunity in the West and the rise of new global powers influence Turkey’s relationship with its Western allies. The final section concludes that volatility and uncertainty are likely to continue to shape Turkey’s relations with its trans-Atlantic allies and recommends that policymakers seek to manage the current landscape with the long-term positive potential of the relationship in mind.

## THE NEW PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

When the AKP came to power in 2002, it quickly embarked on political reforms as it had promised and adopted a foreign policy committed to EU accession and “zero problems with neighbors.” Domestically, its advocacy of liberal democratic values alongside a conservative religious identity led the AKP to be called “Muslim democrats,” in clear reference to the Christian Democrat parties in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the AKP government banned capital punishment while expanding civil liberties such as freedom of association and expression. The Turkish parliament also introduced a series of cultural rights for minorities, most notably for the Kurds.<sup>5</sup>

However, this positive record in domestic politics did not last long. In hindsight it became evident how the show trials of *Ergenekon* and Sledgehammer (*Balyoz*), initiated in 2007 by members of the judiciary associated with the *Hizmet* movement,<sup>6</sup> then a close ally of the AKP, were used to strike at the heart of the opposition by alleging their involvement in coup preparations, unrelated to the actual coup attempt of 2016 (to be discussed later). The whole episode came to an end in 2013 with draconian sentences handed down that effectively destroyed many centers of secularist resistance to the AKP and its

4 Sultan Tepe, “Turkey’s AKP: A Model ‘Muslim-Democratic’ Party?” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no.3 (July 2015): 69-82, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/turkeys-akp-model-muslim-democratic-party>.

5 For a discussion of the details and the politics surrounding the adoption of these reforms, see Paul Kubicek, “The European Union and Grassroots Democratization in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 3 (2007): 61–77, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683840500235456>; and Fuat Keyman and Senem Aydın-Düzgit, “Europeanization, Democratization and Human Rights in Turkey,” in *Turkey and the European Union: Prospects for a Difficult Encounter*, eds. Esra LaGro and Erik Knud Jorgensen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

6 The movement known as “Hizmet” (translated from Turkish as “service”) is a transnational religious movement headed by Fethullah Gülen who resides in Pennsylvania in the United States. For background information on Gülen and his movement, see Asli Aydıntaşbaş, “The good, the bad and the Gülenists,” (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2016), [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the\\_good\\_the\\_bad\\_and\\_the\\_gulenists7131](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_good_the_bad_and_the_gulenists7131); and Dexter Filkins, “Turkey’s Thirty Year Coup,” *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/turkeys-thirty-year-coup>.

vision for an Islamist-leaning “new Turkey.”<sup>7</sup> During this period, signs of the illiberalism of the AKP government steadily emerged, culminating in the crackdown on the Gezi Park protests in May-June 2013. The protests were triggered by an urban development plan for an Istanbul park, but quickly spread across most of the country. The government’s brutal response is generally seen as a critical turning point in Erdoğan’s move toward authoritarianism.<sup>8</sup>

From then on, and especially after Erdoğan became Turkey’s first popularly elected president in 2014, Erdoğan and his allies increasingly espoused the notion that he represented the “will” of the electorate and the nation.<sup>9</sup> The president systematically eliminated critics within the AKP, purging many of the more liberal party founders. The July 2016 military coup attempt became yet another critical turning point in Turkey’s slide away from democratic rule.<sup>10</sup> Despite frustrations with Erdoğan’s increasingly authoritarian rule, all political parties and most Turkish civil society rejected the putsch as an assault on Turkey’s democracy.<sup>11</sup> However, this did not prevent Erdoğan from introducing emergency rule, enabling him to circumvent the parliament and rule by decree. Large numbers of academics, bureaucrats, doctors, journalists, judges, prosecutors, police officers, politicians, and others found themselves detained or out of work. The independent media was silenced. In Erdoğan’s own words, the coup attempt became a “gift from God,” with which he was able to crush any remaining opposition to his power.<sup>12</sup>

It is against this background that Erdoğan successfully held a referendum in April 2017 on constitutional amendments to transform Turkey’s parliamentary system into a presidential one.<sup>13</sup> These reforms eliminated the office of prime minister and enabled the president to serve as head of the ruling party, a significant break from the long tradition of the presidency being considered a symbolic unifying post above partisan politics. New powers were given to the president, including the right to issue decrees, propose the budget, appoint cabinet ministers and high-level bureaucrats without a confidence

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7 For a discussion of these trials see Semih Idiz, “Turkey’s Ergenekon Verdicts: Justice or Vengeance?” *Al-Monitor*, August 6, 2013, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/ergenekon-military-coup-verdicts-revenge.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/ergenekon-military-coup-verdicts-revenge.html); and Dexter Filkins, “Show Trials on the Bosphorus,” *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/show-trials-on-the-bosphorus>.

8 Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism*, (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016), 250.

9 Ergun Özbudun, “AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan’s Majoritarian Drift,” *South European Society and Politics* 19, no. 2 (2014): 155-67, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13608746.2014.920571>.

10 The government put the blame for the coup attempt on officers and civilians associated with the Gülen movement. It occurred against the background of a power struggle that began in 2011 when Erdoğan refused to include Gülenists on AKP lists for parliamentary elections and shut down Gülenist prep schools (used for fundraising and recruitment). Gülenist police and prosecutors responded by launching corruption investigations that implicated government ministers and Erdoğan’s family members. In turn, the government closed Gülenist newspapers and television stations, seized companies belonging to Gülen’s supporters, and purged hundreds of government officials. The alliance between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement thus came to an end. For a discussion of the coup attempt, see Mustafa Akyol, “Who Was behind the Coup Attempt in Turkey?” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/opinion/who-was-behind-the-coup-attempt-in-turkey.html>; and Christopher Kilford, “The Night that Shook a Nation: The 2016 Turkish Military Coup – What Happened and Why It Failed,” (Ottawa, Canada: Conference of Defence Associations Institute, May 2018): <https://cdainstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Vimy-Paper-37-Final-1.pdf>.

11 “Turkey’s political parties in solidarity after coup attempt,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 16, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-political-parties-in-solidarity-after-coup-attempt-101698>.

12 Patrick Kingsley, “Turkey Detains 6,000 over Coup Attempt as Erdoğan vows to ‘clean state of virus,’” *The Guardian*, July 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/17/us-turkey-coup-attempt-fethullah-gulen>.

13 For a discussion of the amendments see Alan Makovsky, “Erdoğan’s Proposal for an Empowered Presidency,” (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, March 2017), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/03/22/428908/erdogans-proposal-empowered-presidency/>.

vote from the parliament, and directly and indirectly appoint the Council of Judges and Prosecutors. Experts at the Venice Commission and elsewhere expressed concern about insufficient checks and balances, given excessive concentration of power in one office, limited parliamentary oversight, and a weakening of judicial independence.<sup>14</sup> The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) expressed its own concerns about the state of democracy in Turkey and decided to restart monitoring the country, a process it had relaxed in 2004 in response to reforms adopted by the new AKP government.<sup>15</sup> In June 2018, Erdoğan won the snap presidential election and quickly oversaw the installation of the new system.

## FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM

The new presidential system in Turkey has sealed a *de jure* one-man rule, and this has several implications in terms of the making and substance of Turkish foreign policy.

The first is that Turkish foreign policy will become even more personalized in the hands of Erdoğan as a result of the restructuring of the Turkish state apparatus that he instituted right after he was sworn into office as an executive president on July 9, 2018.<sup>16</sup> The most striking characteristic of this restructured state is that his ministers and those serving under them are handpicked for loyalty. Similar observations also apply to the military, traditionally an important player in Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan has replaced the military's decades-old promotion system with one that allows him direct control over appointments into the higher ranks. In a major break from institutionalized practice, he appointed Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar as minister of national defense.

Secondly, the new practice will also diminish the role of state institutions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with decades of experience in managing Turkey's external relations.<sup>17</sup> Their traditional advantage based on their expertise and experience as well as their role as a check on the executive will diminish. A serving diplomat noted that the Ministry had become "completely excluded" from foreign policymaking and was in a "state of paralysis."<sup>18</sup> Turkey's long-established foreign policy favoring realism, pragmatism, and "caution" over "daring" will further erode.<sup>19</sup> This will also lead to manipulation of foreign policy to serve domestic populist ends.

Thirdly, the shift of Turkish foreign policy away from the precepts of traditional Turkish foreign policy and its Western orientation has been evident for some time. Erdoğan's supporters and members of his entourage think that the West is in decline, the world has become much more multipolar, and Turkey should not hesitate to diversify its allies and collaborate with Russia, Iran, and China if needed. Relations with Western allies

14 "Opinion on the Amendments to the Constitution Adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 21 January 2017 and to be submitted to a National Referendum on 16 April 2017," (Strasbourg, France: Venice Commission and the Council of Europe, March 2017), [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=cdl-ad\(2017\)005-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=cdl-ad(2017)005-e).

15 Ingebjørg Godsken and Marianne Mikko, "The Functioning of Democratic Institutions in Turkey," (Strasbourg, France: Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, April 5, 2017), <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=23525&lang=en>.

16 "Executive and Administrative Section," *Official Gazette*, July 10, 2018, <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/main.aspx?home=http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2018/07/20180710.htm&main=http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2018/07/20180710.htm>.

17 Sedat Ergin, "Risking the Foreign Ministry," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 19, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/sedat-ergin/risking-the-foreign-ministry-134721>.

18 Conversation with an anonymous Turkish diplomat, November 6, 2018, Ankara.

19 Malik Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture: Republic at Sea* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

are not seen as set in stone. Although this does not necessarily mean there will be a sharp breakup, a much more transactional relationship is foreseen with the West rather than one that shares a common strategic vision. It is important to note that the departure from such a shared vision became especially visible after the Arab Spring erupted. Erdoğan and his entourage, especially then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, hailed the popular uprisings as an opportunity for a “grand restoration” of Islamic civilization<sup>20</sup> and envisioned Turkey becoming “the spokesperson of the Islamic world in the international system.”<sup>21</sup> This was then accompanied by an ambition to make Turkey a global actor determined to shape issues high on the international agenda, ranging from reforming the United Nations Security Council to ending injustices around the world, particularly those against the Palestinians and the Burmese Rohingya.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, this “new” understanding of Turkish foreign policy is one that has shown a greater willingness to employ military force.<sup>23</sup> This was most dramatically and daringly manifested when Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in November 2015, precipitating a major bilateral crisis. It was followed by two military interventions into northern Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 and Operation Olive Branch in January 2018, which ironically had the tacit approval of Moscow. Such use of force has also been accompanied by an interest in expanding Turkey’s military capabilities and force projection globally. This is reflected in the acquisition of military bases outside Turkey, such as in Qatar and Somalia. Ultimately, Erdoğan even advocated a military intervention against the Kurdish, U.S.-backed People’s Protection Units (YPG) in northeastern Syria.<sup>24</sup>

The final implication results from the regression of democracy in Turkey that has severely narrowed the public space for foreign policy debates and hence the possibility of course corrections to policy. The media has particularly taken the brunt of this development. Many long-standing columnists with expertise on foreign policy have either been sacked or silenced, mainly for questioning the wisdom of the government’s policies and demanding the reinvigoration of Turkey’s Western orientation in place of closer ties with Russia or Iran. Critiques of Turkey’s involvement in Syria were immediately met with accusations of being sympathizers of Bashar Assad’s regime. Similarly, a group of retired ambassadors who had at an early stage counseled Erdoğan not to become involved in Syria and not to deviate “from Turkey’s traditional, Western-orientated foreign policy” were ridiculed.<sup>25</sup>

20 Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Ahmet Davutoğlu’nun Diyarbakır Dicle Üniversitesi’nde Verdiği ‘Büyük Restorasyon: Kadim’den Küreselleşmeye Yeni Siyaset Anlayışımız’ Konulu Konferans,” (speech, March 15, 2013), [www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-ahmet-davutoglu\\_nun-diyarbakir-dicle-universitesinde-verdigi\\_-buyuk-restorasyon\\_-kadim\\_den-kuresellesmeye-yeni.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-ahmet-davutoglu_nun-diyarbakir-dicle-universitesinde-verdigi_-buyuk-restorasyon_-kadim_den-kuresellesmeye-yeni.tr.mfa). See also the interview with Davutoğlu in İbrahim Karagül, “Yüzyıllık parantezi kapatacağız,” *Yeni Şafak*, March 1, 2013, [www.yenisafak.com/yazidizileri/yuzyillik-parantezi-kapatacağız-494795](http://www.yenisafak.com/yazidizileri/yuzyillik-parantezi-kapataca%C4%9Fiz-494795).

21 Murat Yeşiltaş, “The Transformation of the Geopolitical Vision in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Turkish Studies* 14, no. 1 (2013): 678, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683849.2013.862927>. For a comprehensive analysis of Davutoğlu’s Islamist perspective after the Arab Spring, see Behlül Özkan, “Turkey, Davutoğlu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,” *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 119-40, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00396338.2014.941570>.

22 See Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “73. Birleşmiş Milletler Genel Kurulunda Yaptıkları Konuşma,” (speech to the 73rd U.N. General Assembly, New York, September 25, 2018), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/98783/73-birlesmis-milletler-genel-kurulunda-yaptiklari-konusma>.

23 For a discussion of key points of the “neo-realist” orientation of Turkey’s foreign policy see Murat Yeşiltaş, “Türkiye Merkezli Yeni Dış Politika,” *SETA*, May 12, 2018, <https://www.setav.org/turkiye-merkezli-yeni-dis-politika>.

24 Selcan Hacaoglu, “Erdoğan Threatens Action Against U.S.-Backed Kurds in Syria,” *Bloomberg*, November 27, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-27/erdogan-threatens-action-against-u-s-backed-kurds-in-syria>.

25 Damla Aras, “Turkey’s Ambassadors vs. Erdoğan,” *Middle East Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2011): 47-57, <https://www.meforum.org/2838/turkey-ambassadors-vs-erdogan>.



## THE DECLINE OF THE RULES-BASED WORLD ORDER AND ITS IMPACT ON TURKEY-WEST RELATIONS

A strategic alliance with the United States and Europe and membership in Western institutions were core characteristics of Turkey's foreign policy since the end of World War II. Independent of the many problems and crises that at times engulfed these relationships, Turkey's Western orientation remained in place. Today, even if Turkey continues to be a part of these institutions—and it may be too early to talk of a decisive axis shift—its Western orientation has been weakened significantly. This section argues that, in addition to the domestic developments particular to Turkey that have already been discussed, the current state of the West also plays a significant role in pushing Turkey to look for alternative foreign policy visions, partnerships, and ad hoc alliances.

The U.S.-led post-World War II order “of multilateral rules, institutions, open markets, democratic community and regional partnerships” is eroding.<sup>26</sup> Trump has removed the United States from the Paris climate agreement, the United Nations Human Rights Council, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran and has announced his intention to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) with Russia. More strikingly, he has adopted policies that risk a “looming global trade war” and undermine the very institutions that the United States put into place to sustain free trade.<sup>27</sup> He has attacked the pillars of European security and prosperity by defining NATO as “obsolete” and the European Union as a “foe.”<sup>28</sup> This has led to a fractured West and encouraged emerging countries to challenge the existing world order.

### *The United States and Turkey*

Turkish government officials celebrated the election of Donald Trump with some enthusiasm. They assumed that Trump's well-documented sympathy for strongmen leaders would ease his relationship with Erdoğan. Indeed, Trump did frequently shower Erdoğan with praise, and the affinity between the two leaders was conspicuously captured at the NATO summit in July 2018 when they fist-bumped and huddled together away from the other leaders.<sup>29</sup> However, this has not always been the case. Even if the two leaders are similar in their style of governance,<sup>30</sup> this does not necessarily mean that they always find themselves on the same page.

The positive mood from the NATO summit evaporated quickly due to Turkey's continued detention of the American pastor Andrew Brunson, who was charged in March 2018 with espionage and links to the Fethullah Gülen movement and the Kurdistan Worker's Party

26 G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 29.

27 “The looming global trade war,” *The Economist*, March 2018, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/03/08/the-looming-global-trade-war?fsrc=dg%7Ce>.

28 James Masters and Katie Hunt, “Trump rattles NATO with ‘obsolete’ blast,” *CNN*, January 17, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/16/politics/donald-trump-times-bild-interview-takeaways/index.html>; and “Trump calls European Union a ‘foe’ – ahead of Russia and China,” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/15/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-helsinki-russia-indictments>.

29 David Morgan, “Trump fist-bumped Turkish leader Erdogan, said he ‘does things the right way,’” *CBS News*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-fist-bumped-turkish-leader-erdogan-said-he-does-things-the-right-way>.

30 Amanda Sloat, “When strongmen fight: The US and Turkey need diplomats to resolve their leaders’ dispute,” *Brookings Institution*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/18/when-strongmen-fight-the-us-and-turkey-need-diplomats-to-resolve-their-conflict>; and İlke Toygür, “When strongmen personalise foreign and security policy: the US and Turkey,” *Elcano Royal Institute*, November 30, 2018, <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/when-strongmen-personalise-foreign-and-security-policy-the-us-and-turkey/>.

(PKK), both considered terrorist organizations by Ankara. Erdoğan had earlier suggested to Trump to swap one cleric for another as part of his persistent effort to have Gülen extradited from the United States, but the Trump administration refrained from making an exchange.<sup>31</sup> In August 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on two Turkish ministers, and Trump announced the doubling of tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminum imports. These measures sent the Turkish lira into a tailspin.<sup>32</sup> Brunson was finally released in October 2018 and in return sanctions were partly lifted.

However, U.S.-Turkish ties would be shaped not only by the relationship between the two leaders. When Erdoğan's security detail beat up protesters in Washington, DC in May 2017, Congress responded with vocal criticism, including a call from Senator John McCain to expel the Turkish ambassador.<sup>33</sup> The revelation that the former national security advisor to Trump, Michael Flynn, had been engaged inappropriately by a company acting on behalf of the Turkish government to lobby Congress to extradite Gülen and even to arrange for his removal to Turkey by extrajudicial means was also not well received on the Hill.<sup>34</sup> Turkey had found itself on the wrong side of the Congress when a Turkish banker was indicted and sentenced to a prison term for evading U.S. sanctions on Iran.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Turkey's decision to stick with the purchase of S-400 missile defense systems from Russia also risks a U.S. reaction, as Congress seeks to prevent the Turkish acquisition of F-35 joint strike fighter jets if Ankara goes ahead with S-400 deal.<sup>36</sup>

Since the announcement of a second round of sanctions on Iran in August 2018, the Trump administration has included Turkey among the list of countries temporarily exempted from secondary sanctions.<sup>37</sup> Sanctions on Iran are likely to continue to be a source of tension as Turkey wants to keep the JCPOA in place. Turkey is heavily dependent on energy imports in general, and Iran has been a long-standing and important supplier of natural gas. These differences cannot be accounted for solely by domestic developments in Turkey. Trump's disregard for the JCPOA, championed by the Obama administration, and his decision to pull out of Syria are developments that profoundly affect Turkish foreign policy.

Trump's disengagement from Syria has antecedents in the previous administration's attempts to limit U.S. interventions in the region. Once Obama failed to enforce his red line on the use of chemical weapons in Syria and withdrew from a policy that once

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31 Bill Chappell, "Turkey's Erdogan Suggests Swap: Jailed U.S. Pastor For Turkish Cleric," *NPR*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/29/554451339/turkeys-erdogan-suggests-swap-jailed-u-s-pastor-for-turkish-cleric>.

32 Aykan Erdemir, "Turkey's Perfect Storm," *Politico*, August 11, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-donald-trump-sanctions-turkey-perfect-storm>.

33 "Erdogan's bodyguards' in violent clash with protesters in Washington DC," *The Guardian*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/17/erdogans-bodyguards-in-violent-clash-with-protesters-in-washington-dc>; and "John McCain: Turkish ambassador should be 'thrown out' for violence," *The Guardian*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/18/john-mccain-turkey-protest-ambassador>.

34 Nicholas Schmidle, "What Michael Flynn Did for Turkey?" *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-mike-flynn-did-for-turkey>.

35 Benjamin Weiser and Carlotta Gall, "Banker From Turkey Is Convicted in U.S. Over Plot to Evade Iran Sanctions," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/03/world/europe/turkey-iran-sanctions-trial.html>.

36 Brendan W. McGarry and Pat Towell, "FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act: An Overview of H.R. 5515," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 7, 2018), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10942.pdf>.

37 "Turkey among 8 countries granted waiver on US oil sanctions against Iran," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 5, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-among-8-countries-granted-waiver-from-us-oil-sanctions-on-iran-138591>.

actively advocated the end of Assad's rule, Turkey was pretty much left on its own. Initially, this led Turkey to become more directly involved in efforts to bring about regime change by force by overlooking the involvement of unsavory radical extremist groups in order to gain the upper hand on the ground.<sup>38</sup> This continued until Russia, with Iranian involvement, intervened forcefully in support of the regime in Damascus and harshly sanctioned Turkey for downing one of its warplanes in November 2015.<sup>39</sup> From then on, Erdoğan found himself having to cooperate with Russia and Iran on negotiations to stabilize the conflict, called the "Astana process."

Ironically, the cooperation between Turkey and Russia deepened once the U.S. partnered with the YPG to defeat the Islamic State in Syria. The initial U.S. reluctance to recognize the strong connection between the YPG and the PKK—an organization that has been fighting the Turkish state since the early 1980s and which Turkey, the United States, and NATO consider a terrorist organization—manifested a lack of sensitivity toward a long-standing ally's national security concerns.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, Russia consented to Turkey conducting two cross-border operations into Syria to create buffer zones against both the Islamic State and the YPG. In September 2018, Russian cooperation was also critical in averting a major displacement crisis, with possible dire consequences for Turkey, when Putin supported Erdoğan's diplomatic efforts to institute a cease-fire between the Syrian regime and the opposition in parts of the Idlib province. This kind of cooperation will not necessarily amount to a strategic reorientation for Turkey as there is a clear recognition of their divergent long-term interests in Syria and that Russia historically has been a geopolitical rival for Turkey. Yet it is also a manifestation of how U.S. reluctance to engage in shaping the future of Syria in turn very much shaped Turkey's policies.

Finally, one last external factor shaping Turkish foreign policy is that traditional U.S. support for Turkey's EU membership has markedly diminished. Anchoring Turkey in the West through the EU had been one conspicuous aspect of U.S. strategy until recently.<sup>41</sup> Turkey was seen as a key actor for addressing, stabilizing, and resolving conflicts in its neighborhood resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was then followed by a more ambitious agenda to have Turkey also contribute to integrating countries in its neighborhood into the global economy and the world order. For Turkey to be able to achieve such a role, its own democracy and economy needed to be reformed, and EU membership was seen as the greatest way to achieve it. This strategic vision has eroded and appears to have fallen victim to the weakening U.S. commitment to upholding the broader liberal world order.

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38 For Turkey's involvement in the Syrian crisis, see William Harris, *Quicksilver War: Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Chapter 4.

39 Idil Bilgic-Alpaslan, Bojan Markovic, Peter Tabak, and Emir Zildzovic, "Economic implications of Russia's sanctions against Turkey," *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2015/economic-implications-of-russias-sanctions-against-turkey.html>.

40 Amanda Sloat, "In Syria, Trump faces a tough balancing act between Turks and Kurds," *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/06/in-syria-trump-faces-a-tough-balancing-act-between-turks-and-kurds/>.

41 For an exhaustive study of U.S. involvement and support for Turkey's EU vocation, see Armağan Emre Çakır, *The United States and Turkey's Path to Europe: Hands across the Table* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Nathalie Tocci, *Turkey's European Future: Behind the Scenes of America's Influence on EU-Turkey Relations*, (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

## ***The European Union and Turkey***

Turkey's relations with the European Union have also been affected by a series of existential challenges and multifaceted crises that the EU has been going through for the last decade. At the top of the list remains the issue of Brexit and the challenge of concluding a smooth transition to a 27-member EU without triggering economic and political instability. This issue has exhausted much of the energy of the European Union for more than two years and is far from being concluded. Furthermore, even if the global economic crisis and eurozone crisis have started to recede into the past—though all of the issues related to social cohesion and inequality remain unresolved—the 2015 influx of Syrian and other refugees has provoked an identity crisis that threatens the values and the very fabric of the EU. This is propelling an increasing number of illiberal populist political parties and leaders into government and parliaments, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>42</sup> This worrying picture extends to Western Europe with right-wing populist parties in government in Austria and Italy and becoming a significant presence in the parliaments of many other countries. With European Parliament elections in May 2019, these developments risk furthering the stress on European integration.

In addition, terrorist attacks in EU member states have intensified the search for advanced security arrangements. Increasing Russian assertiveness and irregular migration have come to be defined as existential perils. However, steps toward further foreign and security policy integration are hindered by increasing nationalism and political fragmentation. The absence of a common foreign policy undermines the EU's ability to play a meaningful role on the world stage and the advantage that the EU once enjoyed as a “normative power.” Even if growing differences between the United States and the EU have pushed the EU to seek “strategic autonomy,” as expressed in the Global Strategy adopted by the EU in 2016 before Trump's election,<sup>43</sup> the U.S. president's bullying has made Europe's foreign policy weakness more apparent. With Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria and Afghanistan, not only will the EU need to play a more assertive role in its wider neighborhood, collaboration with Turkey will remain vital even in the absence of an accession process.

Even if the rules-based link has weakened, Turkey and the European Union have quietly embarked on purely transactional cooperation. This has been most conspicuous in the area of migration, especially with the adoption of EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016. This cooperation is not without challenges,<sup>44</sup> but it has provided a pragmatic platform for burden-sharing with respect to managing the presence of more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey and dramatically reduced irregular migration into the EU via Turkey. Border management, intelligence-sharing on foreign fighters, and energy are also areas where there is ongoing pragmatic cooperation. This kind of transactionalism ironically is also a manifestation of how the EU's transformative power over Turkey eroded with the weakening of the accession process and diminished engagement on the part of the EU.

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42 Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); and William Drozdiak, *Fractured Continent: Europe's Crises and the Fate of the West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017).

43 “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy,” (Brussels: European External Action Service, June 2016), [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf).

44 Başak Kale, Angeliki Dimitriadi, Elena Sanchez-Montijano, and Elif Süm, “Asylum Policy and the Future of Turkey-EU Relations: Between Cooperation and Conflict,” (Cologne, Germany: University of Cologne, April 2018), [https://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/pdf/FEUTURE\\_Online\\_Paper\\_No\\_18\\_final.pdf](https://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/pdf/FEUTURE_Online_Paper_No_18_final.pdf); and Ilke Toygür and Bianca Benvenuti, “One Year On: An Assessment of the EU-Turkey Refugee Statement on Refugees”, (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, March 2017), <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/one-year-assessment-eu-turkey-statement-refugees>.



However, Turkey and the European Union do not only have accession negotiations as a common platform. Trade has come to constitute an important dimension of EU-Turkish relations since the customs union between the two sides came into force in December 1995. Since then, Turkey has had to align its legislation with EU regulations on the internal market and adopt the EU's common external customs tariffs. The EU is Turkey's largest trading partner by far, absorbing more than half of its exports while Turkey stands as the EU's fifth-largest trading partner just after Russia and ahead of Japan, Norway, and South Korea.<sup>45</sup> However, the customs union is in dire need of reform and an upgrade to catch up with the new generation of trade agreements. It needs to be expanded to cover agriculture, services, and public procurement. Both sides are keen to modernize it and many commentators see modernization as motivating reform in Turkey,<sup>46</sup> but no immediate progress is foreseen at the moment.<sup>47</sup> Visa liberalization, another very long-term desire of Turkey, is held up by seven benchmarks that Turkey has not yet met.<sup>48</sup> In any case, any substantive development is perceived as a gift to Erdoğan and is therefore withheld because of the democratic backsliding in Turkey.<sup>49</sup>

All in all, the current state of affairs in the European Union and its members' reticence toward further integration and enlargement also have an impact on Turkey's perception of the EU. In addition, there is deep-seated mutual mistrust and the temptation of both sides to portray the other in a bad light for political gain. One stark manifestation of this tendency was when Erdoğan accused Dutch and German authorities of behaving like Nazis when he and his ministers were denied permits for rallies with Turkish diaspora voters in the campaign for the constitutional change referendum in 2017. Furthermore, Erdoğan and the pro-government media adopted a narrative implying European involvement in the coup attempt of July 2016 and accusing European governments of protecting the perpetrators of the coup that fled to Europe.

Similar observations can also be made about the way politicians in Europe have portrayed Turkey and Turks as a threat to Europe. In 2002, former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing argued that Turkish membership in the EU would be the end of it, while basing his ideas very much on questions related to identity and culture.<sup>50</sup> In 2004, German Chancellor Angela Merkel offered a "privileged partnership" to Turkey

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45 "International trade in goods - a statistical picture," Eurostat, 2017, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International\\_trade\\_in\\_goods\\_-\\_a\\_statistical\\_picture](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_trade_in_goods_-_a_statistical_picture).

46 Sinan Ülgen, "Turkey's EU Anchor," (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, December 2017), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/12/13/trade-as-turkey-s-eu-anchor-pub-75002>; Çiğdem Nas, "Turkey-EU Customs Union: Its Modernization and Potential for Turkey-EU Relations," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2018): <https://www.insightturkey.com/commentary/turkey-eu-customs-union-its-modernization-and-potential-for-turkey-eu-relations>; and Nilgün Arisan Eralp, "The Unique Nature of Modernizing the Customs Union," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, September 28, 2018, <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/920/the-unique-nature-of-modernizing-the-customs-union>.

47 "European Council conclusions, 28 June 2018," European Council, June 28, 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/06/29/20180628-euco-conclusions-final/>.

48 These seven benchmarks out of 72 are: the fight against corruption, judicial cooperation in criminal matters, cooperation with Europol, data protection legislation, anti-terrorism legislation, EU-Turkey readmission agreement, and biometric passports. For more information, see "Turkey 2018 Report," (Strasbourg, France: European Commission, April 17, 2018), 48-49, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-turkey-report.pdf>.

49 In October 2018, at a number of meetings held under the Chatham House rule and attended by the authors of this report, former as well as serving EU politicians and officials expressed the fear that modernization of the customs union risked becoming a "gift" for Erdoğan.

50 "Pour ou contre l'adhésion de la Turquie à l'Union européenne," *Le Monde*, November 8, 2002, [https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2002/11/08/pour-ou-contre-l-adhesion-de-la-turquie-a-l-union-europeenne\\_297386\\_3214.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2002/11/08/pour-ou-contre-l-adhesion-de-la-turquie-a-l-union-europeenne_297386_3214.html).

instead of membership.<sup>51</sup> Years later, pro-Brexit campaigners instrumentalized the possibility of Turkish membership as a reason to quit the EU.<sup>52</sup> Even if the deterioration of the relationship is constantly blamed on Turkey's democratic backsliding,<sup>53</sup> rising nationalism and populism in Europe have an impact on the relationship as well. In addition, accession negotiations being open-ended and never providing a real carrot, created in Turkish society a huge amount of frustration and a perception of double standards. These developments gradually weakened the will to reform in Turkey and damaged the EU's transformative power.

### *The changing world*

With Turkey's Western liberal democratic allies troubled internally, the world has become more multipolar. China stands as an example of an economic miracle without democracy and is leading a shift of global power to Asia. Chinese influence within the EU and its immediate periphery has become increasingly visible, for example as Southeast European countries are becoming better connected thanks to Chinese infrastructure.<sup>54</sup> These investments increase China's soft power, while challenging Western dominance. Beijing is also much more willing to flex its military power, for instance, by building islands to support its territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Russia too poses a growing geopolitical challenge to the Western-led rules-based order. It has become deeply invested in Syria, limiting the influence of the United States and European actors in shaping the outcome there. Moscow has become much more aggressive in its near abroad, undermining the territorial integrity of several neighboring countries. Its annexation of Crimea, its encouragement of separatism in Ukraine, and its invasion of northern parts of Georgia have been examples of this tendency. In addition, its constant harassment of Baltic countries directly undermines the security of the West. Its quest for political influence in the United States and EU member countries in support of populist, xenophobic, and radical nationalist groups undermine liberal democracy.

These mounting challenges to the world order push Turkey to search for ad hoc alliances and alternative partnerships. Foremost, it enables Erdoğan to develop and mobilize support for a narrative that challenges the current order. At the July 2018 BRICS summit in Johannesburg,<sup>55</sup> Erdoğan stated that the "current global system satisfies no one other than a minority whose interests have been guaranteed."<sup>56</sup> Furthermore,

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51 Karl-Theodor Zu Guttenberg, "Preserving Europe: Offer Turkey a 'privileged partnership' instead," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/15/opinion/preserving-europe-offer-turkey-a-privileged-partnership-instead.html>.

52 Dan Sabbagh, "Michael Gove admits leave campaign wrong to fuel Turkey fears," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jul/16/michael-gove-admits-leave-was-wrong-to-fuel-immigration-fears>.

53 Galip Dalay, "Turkey-EU Relations: Dysfunctional Framework, Status Anxiety," (Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 2018), <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-eu-relations-dysfunctional-framework-status-anxiety>.

54 Philippe Le Corre, "China's Rise as a Goeconomic Influencer: Four European Case Studies," (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/15/china-s-rise-as-geoeconomic-influencer-four-european-case-studies-pub-77462>; and Philippe Le Corre, "China's Balkan investment pledges stoke EU concern," *Financial Times*, July 1, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/6c646a3e-7d29-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d>.

55 BRICS stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

56 The full text of the speech can be accessed at Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Current global system satisfies no one other than a minority whose interests have been guaranteed," (speech, Johannesburg, South Africa, July 27, 2018), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/95978/-current-global-system-satisfies-no-one-other-than-a-minority-whose-interests-have-been-guaranteed->.

he, in a number of speeches right before and after the presidential election in June 2018, argued that “today’s world is not like the U.S.-led unipolar one of the 1990s nor that of the 2000s characterized by globalization.”<sup>57</sup> Instead, he went on to describe a world where every nation stood on its own and advocated a policy that could best be described as “Make Turkey a Global Power.” The weakening of the West means that Turkey has been obliged to work with rising powers like Russia or Iran in Syria, or with China in the economic realm, for example. However, this will not necessarily mean strictly a drift from the West. It will lead to diversification of partnerships and ad hoc alliances depending on the issues.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The world order is in conspicuous decline, international institutions are weakening, historical alliances are at risk, and trans-Atlantic relations are becoming more transactional. While the United States under Trump’s leadership is increasingly unwilling to sustain the order it once tried to create, the EU is constantly busy with its own existential crises. Both Europe and the United States are troubled by democratic backsliding and nationalism, while rising powers like China and Russia chip away at the present world order. Meanwhile, with the new presidential system in Turkey, Erdoğan has instituted a system that he adamantly defines as a “democracy,” but which lacks core components such as rule of law, basic freedoms, and broader civil liberties. Against this background, anchoring Turkey to the West within a value-based framework no longer looks realistic. So how should the West approach Turkey? Which is better: engagement not based on rules, or rules-based non-engagement?

First of all, it is important to understand that geopolitical realities bind Turkey to the West. Trans-Atlantic allies should play the long game and try to find a functioning framework tied to credible conditionality. In the short term, the focus should be on realistic and pragmatic engagement with Turkey while insisting on rules-based cooperation. Erdoğan and his entourage deeply resent the West. Yet, so far, he has not broken away from a single Western institution and is unlikely to do so soon. This should be an advantage for Western policymakers who can insist that membership in these institutions requires respect for their shared values. Both NATO and the Council of Europe, in addition to the European Union, can be used as platforms for pressing Turkey to respect liberal values.

Secondly, one common challenge to Turkey’s relations with its historical allies stems from the pervasive negative discourse against the West in Turkey, as well as against Islam and Turkey in the West. A Turkish foreign policy outlook that “leaves Turkey looking unpredictable and untrustworthy in the eyes of its Western allies” aggravates this old mistrust.<sup>58</sup> To revive mutual trust between Turkey and the West, leaders and policymakers on both sides should make a concerted effort to refrain from employing negative discourse toward each other.

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57 The nearly full text of his speech (in Turkish) is available in the form of an election manifesto at: “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan seçim manifestosunu açıkladı: Ahdım olsun ki,” *Gazete Vatan*, May 6, 2018, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-secim-manifestosunu-acikliyor-1163950-gundem/>.

58 Remarks made by a former assistant secretary of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ünal Çeviköz, quoted in Semih İdiz, “Is Erdogan Giving Up on EU aspirations?” *Al-Monitor*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/turkey-erdogan-resurrects-desire-to-join-shanghai-group.html>.

### ***U.S.-Turkey relations***

First of all, for U.S.-Turkish relations, in light of Trump's disinterest in prioritizing the rule of law and basic rights and freedoms in Turkey, it will be important that all branches of government, business, and civil society keep these principles on the agenda. This would also help take U.S.-Turkish relations beyond the personalized *quid pro quo* arrangements between Erdoğan and Trump. One urgent and important step to achieve this would be to ensure the appointment of a U.S. ambassador in Ankara. The position has been vacant since the last serving ambassador left in October 2017. The presence of an ambassador is of paramount importance in terms of addressing the many challenges facing U.S.-Turkish relations and ensuring a realistic and pragmatic approach.

Second, when it comes to foreign and security policy, a rebalancing is required with the United States. Time will tell how the U.S. decision to pull out of Syria will play out, but the least that can be said is that the withdrawal may remove an important challenge to U.S.-Turkish relations and an issue that was amply exploited in Turkish domestic politics to fuel anti-Americanism. This may well enable closer cooperation between both sides in combatting remaining elements of the Islamic State, while also generating the necessary trust to explore common policies to ensure the rights of diverse communities, including of Kurds, living in areas being vacated by the United States.

Third, finding a pragmatic solution to the issue of the S-400s that stops short of an outright cancellation of the purchase but limits their operationalization in a manner that does not jeopardize NATO member countries' immediate security concerns might help. The announcement by the U.S. administration approving the sale of Patriot surface-to-air missiles to Turkey would be an important step in the right direction, if an agreement can be reached on Turkey's long-standing demands on pricing and technology transfer.

Fourth, reconsidering U.S. tariff increases on Turkish aluminum and steel imports could be another confidence-building avenue to explore, especially given that the United States enjoys a persistent trade surplus over Turkey. Any policies to improve the economic links between the countries would be mutually beneficial.

### ***EU-Turkey relations***

The EU dimension has more to offer but also faces greater challenges. Identifying a realistic and viable framework for EU-Turkish relations remains a challenge and a lively intellectual industry.<sup>59</sup> The long-standing traditional policy based on the EU accession carrot to induce convergence with EU values is currently not working. Yet, this does not mean that the EU has lost all leverage and has to accept democratic regression and rising authoritarianism in Turkey. Instead, the EU should continue to support democracy and rule of law by taking at least four solid policy steps.

The first is to improve public diplomacy. There should be positive engagement between EU institutions and member states and Turkish civil society. Such diplomacy will also need to address and discuss remedies to the mistakes made in treating Turkey's

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59 One such rich exercise is the project FEUTURE which has been receiving funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme. In this project, various papers have been published with three possible scenarios for the future of Turkey-EU relations: Convergence, cooperation and conflict. These papers can be accessed at "FEUTURE Online Paper Series," University of Cologne, <http://www.feuture.eu/>.



accession differently than other candidate countries.<sup>60</sup> The “othering” of Turkey dramatically eroded the credibility of the EU among the Turkish public and helped weaken the will to sustain reforms. At a time when populism, if not outright racism, in Europe is on the rise, overcoming the “othering” of Turkey on grounds of culture, size, and migration will indeed be a challenge. This is likely to become even more difficult if the political right makes significant inroads during European Parliament elections in May 2019. This is already reigniting calls for a “privileged partnership” with Turkey in place of EU membership.<sup>61</sup> Such an arrangement may seem like a sensible pragmatic policy, but it would be a betrayal of the vision of leaders such as Martti Ahtisaari, Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, Anna Lindt, Michel Rocard, Gerhard Schröder, and others to achieve a Europe comfortable with its diversity. As unrealistic as it may sound right now, it will be of paramount importance to revive the once impressively persuasive message that the EU is a community of shared values and Turkey has a place in it once these values are respected. This should be the driving force behind the long view and the reconstruction of the EU’s transformative power.<sup>62</sup>

Second, the pledge of visa-free travel to Europe, a step that many perceive as a long delayed sign of good will, should be fulfilled. It would clearly help defuse anti-Western sentiments in Turkish society and facilitate people-to-people contacts. It would also help further expand economic relations between both sides and help alleviate the problem of “othering.” If the credibility of the pledge is strong, this would also give the EU considerable leverage over ensuring that the Turkish government does implement the reforms needed to meet remaining criteria for visa liberalization to take place.<sup>63</sup>

Third, areas of cooperation, such as counter-terrorism, transport, migration and energy, should be further deepened in the spirit of win-win cooperation. Additionally, Turkey needs to be included in the growing discussions on European security and strengthening of Common Foreign and Security Policy. Currently, reforms to improve European security in the face of mounting internal and external threats are debated without much reference to Turkey.<sup>64</sup> However, the security of Europe and the security of Turkey are deeply linked, and it is difficult to see how European security can be addressed without Turkey.

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60 For a discussion of the EU’s declining commitment and missteps toward Turkey, see Laura Batalla, “Turkey and EU at a Crossroads: How to Fix a Wrecked Relationship,” *Heinrich Böll Foundation*, July 7, 2017, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2017/07/07/turkey-and-eu-crossroads-how-fix-wrecked-relationship>.

61 For recent discussion of the prospects of “privileged partnership” in place of membership, see Serdar Altay, “Toward a ‘Privileged Partnership’: The EU, Turkey and the Upgrade of the Customs Union,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 3 (2018): <https://www.insightturkey.com/article/toward-a-privileged-partnership-the-eu-turkey-and-the-upgrade-of-the-customs-union>.

62 For this message, see “Turkey in Europe: More Than a Promise? Report of the Independent Commission on Turkey,” September 2004, [https://www.independentcommissiononturkey.org/pdfs/2004\\_english.pdf](https://www.independentcommissiononturkey.org/pdfs/2004_english.pdf). The report was penned by nine former European politicians and prominent public figures led by Martti Ahtisaari, former Finnish president. They warned that the failure of the accession process “could result in a serious crisis of identity in Turkey, leading to political upheaval and instability at the Union’s doorstep.”

63 For more on the criteria, see “Roadmap towards a visa-free regime with Turkey,” (Brussels: European Commission), December 2013, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-is-new/news/news/docs/20131216-roadmap\\_towards\\_the\\_visa-free\\_regime\\_with\\_turkey\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-is-new/news/news/docs/20131216-roadmap_towards_the_visa-free_regime_with_turkey_en.pdf).

64 For example, former German Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel at the Munich Security Conference in 2018 and Minister Heiko Maas in June 2018 delivered critical speeches on these topics without one single reference to Turkey. See Sigmar Gabriel, “Speech by Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel at the Munich Security Conference,” (speech, Munich, Germany, February 17, 2018), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/rede-muenchner-sicherheitskonferenz/1602662> and Heiko Maas, “Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas: ‘Courage to Stand Up for Europe - #EuropeUnited,’” (speech, June 13, 2018), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-europeunited/2106528>.

Fourth, the Turkish economy is sliding into recession and has been labeled the “most vulnerable emerging market.”<sup>65</sup> Turkey does not have oil or gas to subsidize its economy; instead, for its economy to function, Turkey must trade and attract foreign direct investment. The EU is of paramount importance here. The Turkish economy performed impressively during the best years of EU-Turkish relations and the customs union was critical to this performance. As noted earlier, the customs union is in dire need of modernization, requiring its extension beyond industrial goods to include services, agricultural goods, and public procurement. However, this faces two obstacles, a European Council objection to start negotiations on grounds of Turkey’s democratic regression and the concern, as noted above, among European politicians that this would be a gift to Erdoğan. This is a very short-sighted approach. The focus should be on Turkey as a country and long-term economic interests on both sides.

Here, it is important to recall that the original customs union was instrumental in inducing Turkey to take its initial and shy steps toward reform that would eventually culminate in its recognition as a candidate country for EU membership. The EU today should adopt a similar engagement-oriented strategy to establish a link between modernizing the customs union and reviving reforms in Turkey. Modernization would require reforms in dispute resolution, state aid, procurement, and services regulation. Such measures would improve Turkey’s governance by requiring compliance with a regulatory framework that is supported by enforcement rules. In this way, the modernized customs union could constitute the basis of “rules-based cooperation” in the short term.

Last but not least, there is the issue of Cyprus. Possibly the most concrete evidence of what the EU’s engagement could achieve was the way in which the promise of accession played a central role in getting Turkey to support the United Nations’ Annan Plan to resolve the conflict in Cyprus by reunifying the island. As a result, in a referendum held in April 2004, Turkish Cypriots voted decisively in favor of the plan while Greek Cypriots with the virulent encouragement of their government voted against it. The Republic of Cyprus made it into the EU while Turkey and Turkish Cypriots were not only left out but also punished. Retrospectively, this development played an important role in the gradual loss of Turkish public support for EU membership. It is very difficult to see how progress can be achieved in Cyprus and in EU-Turkish relations without addressing this glaring injustice that may well be sitting at the very center of the processes that brought Turkey and Turkish-EU relations to their current state.

While all of these issues will remain on the table, ad hoc alliances and volatility are likely to continue to characterize Erdoğan’s foreign policy, and it would be unrealistic to expect any major improvements in Turkey’s democratic performance. Nevertheless, the focus of both the EU and the United States should be on drawing Turkey closer to shared policies and playing for the long term. The geopolitical reasons that motivated U.S. and Turkish decisionmakers at the end of World War II to engage with each other are still in place. Similarly, as much as they may be going through a particularly difficult period, both Turkey’s and the EU’s prosperity and security continue to depend on sustained engagement with each other. Therefore, it will be important for all sides to overcome their current differences and invest in a functioning, pragmatic relationship.

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65 Dana El Baltaji, “Most Vulnerable Emerging Market of Them All Is Still Turkey,” *Bloomberg*, November 7, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-07/guess-who-is-the-most-the-vulnerable-emerging-market-of-them-all>.

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