

# At the End of the Day, Where Will Turkey Stand?

by Soli Özel

## ABSTRACT

The crisis in Turkey's relations with the US and the EU cannot be understood without reference to the redistribution of power at the global level. In an age when the US under the Trump presidency abdicates some of its responsibilities as the predominant power of the Western alliance and the custodian of the liberal system, regional powers seek more room for manoeuvre in their vicinity. The EU is also trying to adjust to a smaller US presence in Europe. The crisis in Turkey–EU relations in this context reflects both the lack of enthusiasm in Berlin, Paris and elsewhere to engage Turkey and Ankara's steps in shedding Turkey's Western-ness in terms of its political and ideological identity.

*Turkey's foreign policy | Turkey's military policy | NATO | USA | European Union*

**keywords**

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### Introduction: A “global political awakening”

Our era is a transitional one. The order that was set in the part of the global divide led by the United States at the end of World War II became the global order at the end of the Cold War. That order is now unravelling. However, the contours of the order that will replace it are, as yet, unclear. The hegemonic power of the West is in decline – witness the separate but historically connected transformations of the roles of the US and the European Union in world politics. The imperial power of the United States, whose transatlantic commitment is gradually receding in favour of a deeper commitment to Asia, is challenged by a resurgent China as well as by what the late former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski called the “global political awakening”<sup>1</sup> of the ex-colonial countries in world politics.

The institutional setup of the post-World War II order is challenged by these two rising forces and, curiously enough, by the current President of the United States, Donald Trump. The post-national, liberal and “imperial” project of European integration<sup>2</sup> is in a profound crisis as some member states openly challenge the values and principles of the EU.<sup>3</sup> In many of the Union’s other member states, insurgent populist movements that have little patience for the liberal model challenge the established parties and gain ground among disenchanted segments of the population.

The legatee of an old empire, the United Kingdom is going through the convulsions of an identity crisis that reflects unease on the part of its most inward-looking elites, who resent and lament the loss of long-gone imperial glories. This post-imperial

<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Toward a Global Realignment”, in *The American Interest*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (July/August 2016), p. 1-3, <https://wp.me/p4ja0Z-zdK>.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Ivan Krastev, “The Metamorphosis of Central Europe”, in *Project Syndicate*, 21 January 2019 <http://prosyn.org/5nGgbTc>.

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traumatic syndrome, as it were, moved such elites to use ruse and deception to cause Britain to take a decision to disengage from Continental Europe. They took advantage of the resentments of the mainly older segment of the population that is full of insecurities about the future. They managed to convince or dupe enough of the voters to walk with them towards what transpires to be a profoundly misguided decision – that is, “Brexit”. That choice, whether or not it will be reversed, tears the British public apart and endangers the unity of the kingdom itself, as many citizens in Scotland and Northern Ireland feel that their concerns about leaving the EU are being utterly neglected.<sup>4</sup>

One must keep this context in mind in evaluating the current relationship of another imperial legatee, Turkey, with its allies and in discussing the country’s role in transatlantic security in the future. It is misguided to blame Turkey for not being a *bona fide* ally, as many American pundits and authors have so frequently done recently, at a time when the US President discusses leaving the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) with his aides. It is also wrong to assign blame to Ankara alone for the deterioration of relations between Turkey and its allies on both sides of the Atlantic. US foreign policy and a strong unilateralist streak in decision-making and implementation have strained Washington’s relations with all its allies before – most notably, during the ill-thought-out and ill-fated Iraq War (2003–11).

It is undeniable that Turkey’s democratic credentials have recently deteriorated dramatically. Yet, under the Trump Administration this is no longer an issue that might generate trouble between the two allies, given the nonchalance displayed by the administration concerning “values and principles” that were presumed to highlight the distinctiveness of the West. Similarly, and on a different scale, the EU’s past performance has significantly reduced its moral authority not only with the Turkish Government but also, more importantly, with the Turkish public – including the most pro-European segments of the population. Therefore, the current estrangement may yet prove to be detrimental to the strategic and security interests of both parties in this relationship, unless new ways and patterns of engagement are found.

The relative weakening of the “West”, the deterioration of the value of the “end of history” moment heralded at the end of the Cold War, the rise of populism and the accompanying bigotry that has crept into the political discourse of democratic countries have created a void for Turkey in terms of its political referents.<sup>5</sup> Turkey’s own authoritarian trajectory is well documented. It has been punctuated by what amounts to regime change, as the country’s system was transformed into a

<sup>4</sup> Pankaj Mishra, “The Malign Incompetence of the British Ruling Class”, in *The New York Times*, 17 January 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2RWEZsY>; Fintan O’Toole, “It Was Never About Europe. Brexit Is Britain’s Reckoning With Itself”, in *The Guardian*, 18 January 2019, <https://gu.com/p/afhg2>.

<sup>5</sup> Kemal Kirişci and İlke Toygür, “Turkey’s New Presidential System and a Changing West: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkey-West Relations”, in *Brookings Turkey Project Policy Papers*, No. 15 (January 2019), <https://brook.gs/2RoRQ7K>.

presidential one after a highly controversial referendum marred by irregularities. These developments are primarily a function of Turkey's own domestic dynamics. The construction of a regime dominated by a single party, and then by an overly centralised presidency, now places Turkey squarely in the camp of "illiberal democracies" or "competitive authoritarianisms" although the electorate (and consequently the government) still takes elections very seriously. In that sense, that part of Turkey's Western identity which relates to its political, ideological and value orientation diverges from the stated principles of the West. That the same values and principles are under attack in the bosom of the Western world as well is not much consolation.

With the political estrangement from an idealised Western identity in place, there now remains the question of what will happen to Turkey's *strategic* Western-ness. Recent developments in Turkish foreign policy – most tellingly, the rapprochement and collaboration with Russia and Iran in Syria, the probable purchase of S-400 air-defence missiles from Russia and the ongoing disagreements and frequent contestations with Washington on matters relating to Syria, not to mention the anti-Western rhetoric emanating from the authorities in Ankara – raise questions about Turkey's commitment to the Western Alliance. On the other hand, the US' seeming disregard for Turkey's concerns in Syria and the sense of abandonment by allies during the botched coup of July 2016, in striking contrast with Russian solidarity and help, have caused the Turks to question the reliability of their NATO partners.

With developments in the Middle East that date back to the Iraq War and were exacerbated by the civil war in Syria, the latent conflicts of interest between Turkey and its allies, most notably the US, have surfaced in full force. Turkey's aspirations to become a regional power – and, in fact a hegemonic one in the "post-Ottoman space" – found an accommodating environment in the wake of US failures, and particularly in the immediate aftermath of the Arab revolts. Coinciding with the incontestable hegemonic consolidation of power by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkish electoral politics in the elections of 2011 (when it received 50 per cent of the vote), the Arab revolts inspired Turkey's rulers to pursue a strategic as well as an ideological goal of resurrecting the *Pax Ottomanica* of a bygone imperial era.

Ankara's new rulers believed that, at a time of Western decline and in an international environment propitious for the rise of middle powers, Turkey deserved to be accepted as an important regional actor. This fed the desire to become a hegemonic force in the Middle East, assuming the role of the unifier of a Sunni regional order hitherto divided and exploited by Western powers, as manifested in the Franco-British reorganisation of the Middle East that was codified after World War I. The always pertinent question of Turkey's Western-ness was, therefore, brought forcefully back onto the agenda. In the event, such ambitions were thwarted by the Saudi-supported and -financed military-led counterrevolution in Egypt, which terminated the Muslim Brotherhood's chaotic experience in power, and by the failure of Turkey's grand design to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and

install a Muslim Brotherhood-led government in his place.

### 1. The past was not another country

Relations between Turkey and its Western allies have always been complicated. Recently, however, they have been mostly defined or described in terms of a succession of crises. Turkey's long-standing bid for EU membership is all but terminated, even if officially the parties prefer to keep it on life support. Beyond a cynical (although some might say realistic) transactionalism that serves both sides' momentary interests – best symbolised by the 2016 deal that ended the massive inflows of refugees into Europe through Turkey – relations between the EU, or its principal member states, and Turkey can at best be described as cool. In point of fact, they are actually marked by resentment and mistrust. These sentiments have been exacerbated by what many Turks consider a less than adequate response or display of solidarity on the part of EU member states when Turkey underwent the trauma of a botched coup – during which, it should be remembered, the country's National Assembly was bombarded by its own air force. In return, western European member states resent the abusive language that members of the Turkish Government, most notably President Erdoğan, uses against them in moments of crises.<sup>6</sup> There was also the perception abroad that the government did not simply use the coup to clear the ranks of the civil, security and judicial bureaucracy (but not the political level) of treasonous elements but also exploited it as a potent justification to launch a witch-hunt against perceived adversaries. For all intents and purposes, respect for fundamental rights was suspended and disregarded. Freedom of expression and the media were severely restricted. The sorry state of judicial independence on top of all these developments unquestionably informed liberal Europeans' negative assessments of Turkey.

The reasons for the mutual estrangement therefore, are numerous, and there is blame aplenty on both sides for the failure of the accession process. What is certain is that given the profound crisis in the EU, the rise of nativist populism that increasingly takes centrist politics hostage and the growing anti-Turkey sentiment that prevails among most member-state populations, Brussels or member capitals are now set firmly against Turkish membership. Turkey's own political problems; the burgeoning authoritarianism of its politics; and Ankara's desire to be free of any constraints as it pursues its ambitious, and arguably unattainable, domestic- and foreign-policy objectives distance it from the ideal format of a candidate country. Furthermore, over the past 16 years Turkey has been governed by a political elite whose formative ideology and political-strategic preferences do not prioritise a deeper Westernisation for the country. In fact, ideologically their

<sup>6</sup> Lizzie Dearden, "Angela Merkel tells Turkey to stop calling German authorities Nazis in row over pro-Erdogan rallies", in *The Independent*, 9 March 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/angela-merkel-turkey-germany-erdogan-rally-cancellations-stopped-being-called-nazi-referendum-a7620501.html>.

formation was predicated on a religiously defined animosity between Turkey and the West.

A careful observer of EU–Turkey ties, Josef Janning of the European Council on Foreign Relations, notes,

In its quest for regional hegemony in the Middle East, Turkey will feel unduly constrained in its domestic and foreign policies by the accession framework. Likewise, the EU will feel the need to strengthen the integrity of the Union as the primary instrument in the defense of their interests in an increasingly power-centric world. [...] In several ways, both Europeans and Turks appear to be locked into the accession paradigm, each for its own set of good reasons, although actors on both sides realize that this type of rationale is losing its defining strength.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, Janning argues that the prospect of membership for Turkey is all but dead. Yet the relations between the two parties should not be confined to the membership trajectory, as there are plenty of issues and common interests that should bring them together for fruitful negotiations. Indeed, the challenge for both the EU and Turkey will be to find ways of defining common security interests and devising frameworks within which modes of cooperation can be pursued.

In the US, the debate about Turkey is frequently acrimonious and many pundits question whether or not the country, although a NATO member, is still an ally. Even if one momentarily disregarded the reports that President Trump entertained the idea of withdrawing from NATO and the disdain with which he treats allies, this kind of commentary on Turkey reeked of intolerance of “insubordination” in the face of American policies or interests. In a typical example of such an approach, Steven A. Cook argued that

the basic assumption that should guide Washington in its approach to Ankara is that while Turkey remains formally a NATO ally, it is not a partner of the United States. The two countries are linked to each other by the Cold War, but with few common interests three decades after that conflict came to an end, the bilateral relationship is marked by ambivalence and mistrust.<sup>8</sup>

At best, for Cook and those who share similar views Turkey is a “frenemy”: neither a friend nor a foe.

<sup>7</sup> Josef Janning, “Transactional by Default: EU-Turkey Relations in Search of a New Rationale”, in *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2018), p. 58, <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/908/transactional-by-default-eu-turkey-relations-in-search-of-a-new-rationale>.

<sup>8</sup> Steven A. Cook, “Neither Friend nor Foe. The Future of U.S.-Turkey Relations”, in *Council Special Reports*, No. 82 (November 2018), p. 2, <https://on.cfr.org/2OHmraq>.

## 2. Turkey and the “West”: Rupture, muddling through or convergence

Turkey has been a member of NATO since 1952 and was one of the two countries, along with Greece, for which the Truman Doctrine that officially launched the Cold War was declared. Turkey thus became an integral part of the Western security system. After the end of the Cold War, particularly following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the 1991 war against Iraq over Kuwait, Turkey’s place in the Western security system would acquire new dimensions. In addition to its geopolitical position, the country’s domestic order became a globally valued asset.

A secular democracy despite its shortcomings, integrating with the global economy as a predominantly Muslim society, a member of NATO and in pursuit of EU membership, Turkey cut a very attractive profile in a world where violent Islamist extremism was rapidly being identified as *the* major security threat of the new era – a fact that the 9/11 attacks against the United States confirmed. But at the end of the Cold War this was not a certainty, and Turkey feared abandonment by its allies now that the main security threat that had kept them together no longer existed.

In fact, the European members of NATO were not as forthcoming as one would expect from allies during the Gulf War crisis of 1990–1. Therefore, in the wake of the Gulf War, Turkey made a conscious choice to beef up its indigenous military capabilities and reduce its reliance on the arms and goodwill of its allies. As such, Turkey and its European partners in NATO began to diverge in terms of strategic choices and security practices.

For Washington, Ankara moved from being a flank member to a frontline member as it sat at a critical crossroads to the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus – all zones of instability and insecurity. In contrast, the Europeans tended to view Turkey’s close proximity to all these regions not as an advantage but as a potential liability. This strategic blindness partially accounts for the EU’s denial of candidate stature to Turkey at its Luxembourg Summit of 1997, which was corrected two years later in no small part due to Washington’s intense lobbying.<sup>9</sup>

In the first half of the 1990s, Turkey sought to put its geographical location to lucrative use as a transit country for connecting oil and natural gas from the newly independent Central Asian republics to world markets. During that time, relations between Turkey and Russia were tense as the two old rivals competed with one another for influence in the post-Soviet space – and each aided the aspirations to independence of the other country’s minorities. Ankara eventually received Washington’s endorsement for the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline project

<sup>9</sup> Nathalie Tocci, *Turkey’s European Future. Behind the Scenes of America’s Influence on EU-Turkey Relations*, New York/London, New York University Press, 2011.

that finally materialised in 2005. Interestingly, Turkey's NATO membership was played up in this case to gain advantage in an economic competition. In 1998, Foreign Minister İsmail Cem argued that Turkey's "edge" as a transit country lay in its NATO membership, the security assurances of which would naturally cover the BTC pipeline despite the obvious advantages of a rival route through Iran.<sup>10</sup>

Turkey's Western – and, particularly, European – vocation received a boost in 2002 when the Union decided to extend a date to the country for accession negotiations at its Copenhagen Summit that year. This summit took place on the eve of the Bush Administration's Iraq War and after a major electoral victory by the AKP, a party stemming from Turkey's genealogically anti-Western Islamist movement. The AKP claimed to have shed its Islamist past; pursued economic, political and administrative reforms; and sought EU membership in its first years in power with admirable determination and discipline.

Those years were also a period of extraordinary success for Turkey as an economic phenomenon; a strategic actor; and, politically, a valuable example of democratic transformation. Turkish foreign policy – based on the doctrine of "strategic depth", with its guiding principle of "zero problems with neighbours" – drew a great deal of attention around the world. Turkey's mediation efforts in Middle Eastern conflicts were greatly valued, just as its foreign-policy positions were almost completely harmonised with those of the EU. Its rising profile and global popularity were awarded by its election to the United Nations Security Council as one of the European non-permanent members.

Dramatic change in the accession process came in the wake of the 2005 referenda in the Netherlands and France, in which the Turkish EU bid played a role in orienting public opinion against an ill-fated EU constitutional treaty. This tendency was exacerbated by the arrival in power in Germany of Angela Merkel, who was an outspoken opponent of Turkey's accession to the Union. Thus, Turkey's quest for membership and the EU's will to continue acting strategically effectively came to an end. Nonetheless, Turkey continued to prosper economically while the US and the EU were hit by the financial crisis of 2008. Domestically, the AKP's struggle to bring down the staunchly secularist forces in the military, judiciary and bureaucracy (the country's so-called "deep state") received support from the EU, whose Commission became less than rigorous in identifying the gradual but steady weakening of Turkey's genuine democratisation efforts.

When the Arab revolts broke out, Turkey was regarded as a potential "model" for the transformation of Arab countries. The political turbulence of that period, the ascent to power of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in various countries with which the AKP had historically close relations and the changing strategic configuration in the Middle East and North Africa region as Syria descended into a horrendous civil

<sup>10</sup> Serhat Güvenç and Soli Özel, "NATO and Turkey in the Post-Cold War World: Between Abandonment and Entrapment", in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2012), p. 533-553.



war encouraged Ankara to pursue a policy of regional hegemony. The European Union's influence over Ankara's political path was so impaired that Turkey's minister of EU Affairs at the time could throw the Commission's Progress Report for 2012 in the waste basket on live TV.

This new situation in the Middle East, as authoritarian regimes crumbled, further articulated Turkey's tendency to act more autonomously from the US; this trend had first become evident in the post-Cold War period but had remained subdued. Tarık Oğuzlu calls the foreign-policy orientation that grew out of this condition "Turkey-centric Westernism". For him, "the changes in the nature of the international political order since the end of the Cold War, and more recently since the 11 September 2001 attacks, appear to have enabled such mid-sized powers as Turkey to play more influential and independent roles in their own regions".<sup>11</sup> The relative decline in the power of the US, the passing of the unipolar moment and the gradual shaping of a more multipolar international system provided the conditions for Turkey to pursue its national interests – at times in defiance of its major ally, the United States – although the importance of Washington in Ankara's calculus remained steady.

In time, Turkish President Erdoğan responded to the rapidly changing strategic environment with a simple slogan: "The world is greater than five". He thus questioned the legitimacy of the global multilateral arrangements that had been dominated by the UN Security Council and its five permanent members – the US, China, Russia, France and the UK. He was challenging the institutional arrangements that had formalised the distribution of global power as things stood at the end of World War II. Not only was he rejecting the West's dominant position in that world order, even though Turkey was a member of the transatlantic security system, but he was also demanding that emerging powers such as Turkey be acknowledged as rightful participants in the premier league of power games.

Erdoğan's defiant rhetoric was vehemently anti-Western as well, even if for the most part the intensity of his attacks was mainly due to domestic considerations. On several occasions, he asked Vladimir Putin of Russia to admit Turkey into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, expressing a willingness to drop the quest for EU membership. Such posturing brought forth the perennial question about Turkey's strategic orientation. The deterioration in the country's relations with its Western partners continued apace, and received a nearly fatal blow when official and unofficial Turkey alike found the European posture and reaction to the attempted coup of 15 July 2016 wanting. The Europeans still fared better than the US though, as the general public blamed Washington for actively supporting the coup – both because of historical precedent and because, the assumed mastermind of the uprising, Fethullah Gülen, resided in the United States.

<sup>11</sup> Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkey and the West: The Rise of Turkey-centric Westernism", in *International Journal*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Autumn 2011), p. 993, <http://hdl.handle.net/11693/21805>.

The aftermath of the coup only made things worse. The emergency rule, which suspended most democratic and legal rights; the persecution of tens of thousands of people; and the attack on academia and the media reinforced the view in Europe that the coup was being used as a pretext to further Turkey's descent into authoritarianism. Ankara complained that its Western partners were not sensitive to the existential security concerns that Turkey faced. In turn, the government was totally oblivious to the way in which domestic developments under emergency rule were seen and judged in western European countries, particularly by their publics.

As suggested earlier, Turkey's quest for EU membership is currently all but buried because of measures associated with emergency rule and its incarceration of journalists and civil-society activists. Relations with the US are in crisis mode, and many analysts judge them to be at breaking point. Beyond the refrain over the presence of Gülen in the United States and the fact that US authorities do not respond too favourably to demands for his extradition, there are serious, security-related disagreements and quarrels between the two allies.

CENTCOM, the US command responsible for the Middle East area, supports and arms the Syria-based Democratic Union Party/People's Protection Units (PYD/YPG), which are the Syrian extensions of Turkey's nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Because the YPG were the fighting force on the ground on which CENTCOM relied, the US does not recognise the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organisation (unlike the PKK). Other problems continue to beset the bilateral relationship between Ankara and Washington. A US jury at the trial of a Turkish state-bank employee found the defendant guilty of breaching US sanctions on Iran, and sentenced him, albeit lightly, to serve time in a low security prison. American citizens and Turkish employees of American diplomatic representations languish in jail. Until October 2018, the incarceration of an American pastor, Andrew Brunson – who was charged with conspiring against the Turkish Government and accused, in defiance of basic logic, of being a member of both the Gülenist network and the PKK – poisoned relations further. President Trump's angry tweets and his announcements of economic sanctions against Turkey, as well as US sanctions against two government ministers when Brunson was not released as promised in July 2018, sent the Turkish currency into a free fall. The release of Brunson helped patch things up as did numerous phone conversations between the two Presidents but core problematic issues remained unsolved.

In addition to conflicts of interest on the ground in Syria, Turkey signed an agreement with Russia to buy two batteries of Russian S-400 air-defence missiles in the wake of the coup attempt. Turkey's search for a defensive missile system goes back to the Gulf War of 1991, when the country's security establishment recognised the seriousness of its vulnerability. For a long time, Turkey negotiated a missile deal with China, much to the consternation of NATO. In the event, however, the deal fell through because the Chinese were not interested in technology transfer.

Turkey revived the search for a defensive missile system after the coup. The reason for the rush, Sitki Egeli argues, was

[f]irst and foremost [...] the deep trauma left by the botched coup, and the consequent shift in Ankara's threat perceptions. The survival of Turkey's regime and its top leader was now at stake, and Turkey could not count on traditional allies anymore. [...] The turn of events during the coup had shown that the main danger to Turkey's rulers came from the air, and exposed the need to immediately resurrect effective air defenses over critical targets [...]. Conveniently enough, Russia, [which] had helped the Turkish government during the botched coup, was gracious enough to offer the world's most capable long-range air defense system. From this perspective, if the purchase of S-400s risked straining relations with NATO and the U.S., then that was a price [the] Turkish leadership was ready to pay.<sup>12</sup>

As was to be expected, the S-400 deal rang alarm bells in Western capitals and NATO headquarters. The *Economist* notes that

Turkey is a partner in the F-35 programme and is due to take delivery of 116 of the stealth fighter jets that will be the mainstay of NATO's combat air capability for the next 30 years. Turkey will be in a unique position to hone the S-400 against the F-35, knowledge that Russia may well take advantage of.<sup>13</sup>

That the risk of a severe backlash against Turkey were the S-400 sale to go through is prohibitively high was recently made clear by the remarks of top US defence officials. Ellen Lord – Undersecretary of Defense Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics – told Reuters that Turkey's plans to buy the S-400 system were "extremely problematical".<sup>14</sup>

As Egeli points out, Turkey's security problems and its vulnerability to possible missile attacks are all too real:

Turkey's geographic environment abounds in airborne threats. These threats involve the classical elements of air power in the form of fixed- and rotary-winged aircraft, as well as the more problematic ballistic and cruise missiles. [...] This is an environment under a serious air and missile threat; the complexity of this threat is likely to increase due to recent setbacks in efforts to contain the proliferation of chemical and nuclear weapons in the region. Aircraft, especially ballistic missiles, are ideal delivery platforms for such weapons of mass destruction.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Sitki Egeli, "Making Sense of Turkey's Air and Missile Defense Merry-go-round", in *All Azimuth*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2019), p. 82, <https://dx.doi.org/10.20991/allazimuth.470640>.

<sup>13</sup> "Turkey and NATO Are Growing Apart", in *The Economist*, 3 February 2018, <https://www.economist.com/taxonomy/term/29/0?page=45>.

<sup>14</sup> "Pentagon Report on Turkey's F-35 Program Delivered to Congress", in *Reuters*, 15 November 2018, <https://reut.rs/2zccKfj>.

<sup>15</sup> Sitki Egeli, "Making Sense of Turkey's Air and Missile Defense Merry-go-round", cit., p. 70.

In the heat of the discussion over the S-400s, the fact that Turkey signed an agreement on 8 November 2017 with fellow NATO members France and Italy to develop its national air- and missile-defence systems should not be overlooked. It is also a fact that Turkey participated “in nine out of thirty EU-led operations [and] has so far been the biggest contributor to European operations after France, Germany, and Britain”.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the newly launched Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a mechanism that will strengthen defence cooperation between EU countries and partners, “could provide a novel way to foster mutual trust between the EU and Turkey and possibly contribute to breaking the vicious cycle of blockage with NATO”.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, as Turkey’s relations with the US improved and the Trump Administration came round to luring the country over to its side, Congressional eagerness to punish Turkey’s purchase of the S-400s with the cancellation of its F-35 partnership abated. In fact, on 19 December 2018, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) notified Congress about potential foreign military sales of Patriot missiles to Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Turkey’s experience with Patriots is not new at all, as the Obama administration had notified Congress of possible sales of Patriots to Turkey already in 2009.<sup>19</sup> This time Washington kept offset options open – meaning that some technology transfer will take place, a high priority for Ankara. Congress did not object to the DCSA’s plans within the required 15-day window, and therefore the deal could now proceed if certain difficulties, first and foremost the S-400 procurement, are resolved.

Despite this opening from the US side, Ankara’s determination to go ahead with that purchase appears unwavering as of this writing. Can Kasapoğlu and Sinan Ülgen argued in a recent paper that although the S-400 is a more advanced, mobile missile-defence system, if the price of acquiring that system is being excluded from the F-35 programme then it is too high a price to pay. Given the importance of the F-35s for Turkey’s strategy, Ankara would be well advised to find a way to abandon the S-400 deal.<sup>20</sup>

These crises, recriminations and conflicts harm Western cohesion. They also call into question Turkey’s strategic identity. From the dying decades of the Ottoman Empire through to the founding of the Turkish Republic, the country took a

<sup>16</sup> Senem Aydın-Düzgit, “PESCO and Third Countries: Breaking the Deadlock in European Security”, in *IPC Policy Briefs*, January 2018, p. 4, <http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/?p=7281>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), “Turkey – Patriot Missile System and Related Support and Equipment”, in *DSCA News Releases*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.dsca.mil/node/1180>.

<sup>19</sup> DSCA, “Turkey – Patriot Advanced Capability-3 Guided Missiles”, in *DSCA News Releases*, 9 September 2009, <https://www.dsca.mil/node/298>.

<sup>20</sup> Can Kasapoğlu and Sinan Ülgen, “Strategic Weapon Systems in the Turkey-Russia-US Triangle”, in *Edam Foreign Policy & Security*, No. 2019/2 (January 2019), <http://edam.org.tr/en/strategic-weapons-systems-in-the-turkey-russia-us-triangle>.

Westernising direction. Its socio-political and strategic identities were meant to be Western. As the old elites give way to the new, more nativist ones, Turkey's quest for socio-political Westernisation is waning but its Western strategic identity has not, until recently, been fundamentally questioned despite recurrent crises. With recent developments and as Russia masterfully drives a wedge between Turkey and its Western partners, and therefore comes close to breaking the NATO alliance, this might change. There is a strong tendency among Turkish elites to retain sufficient autonomy to do as they please and even to act as a "lone wolf".

As such, the AKP Government, which at the beginning of its time in power pursued EU membership and took great care to maintain correct relations with the West, articulates a position that became familiar after the demise of the Soviet Union but was later dropped in favour of EU membership. This position, Eurasianism, was at times latent and at times active in Turkish foreign-policy thinking in the post-Cold War period. This "Eurasianist" approach, which moves beyond Oğuzlu's "Turkey-centric Westernism", intends to break with the West. It first emerged in the early 1990s as the Cold War ended and the post-Soviet space was opened up for strategic competition. It remained dormant for a long time while Turkey was pursuing membership of the European Union and then seeking to become the "order setter" of the Middle East. As both these projects failed for different reasons, the ruling AKP adopted aspects of the Eurasianist approach.

As Toni Alaranta suggests,

there are many variants of Eurasian thinking in Turkey, three common characteristics can nonetheless be identified: one is the conviction that the end of the Cold War bipolar system crucially changed Turkey's position in world politics. Second, the assertion that the "Anglo-Saxon civilization" is in deep crisis; and finally the claim that Turkey's traditional Western-orientation has become dysfunctional and that "Eurasia" offers a meaningful strategic alternative.<sup>21</sup>

This aspiration is unrealistic. Turkey does not truly have a viable Eurasianist option, but in trying to pursue it Ankara may inadvertently turn itself into a sidekick of Moscow and discover that in this unequal relationship it cannot adequately protect even its core national interests. Therefore, it is high time for Turkey to reassess its options and recalibrate its orientation. Unlike in the immediate post-Cold War period, with the "return of geopolitics" the Western strategic identity no longer imposes high democratic standards. So, Turkey and the EU as well as the US can work their differences out, establish better communications and converge on a realistic approach to their security and strategic interests with scant regard for the values and principles that are presumed to differentiate the countries of the West from others.

<sup>21</sup> Toni Alaranta, "A 'Eurasian Turn' in Turkish Foreign Policy? Not Likely", in *The Turkey Analyst*, 31 January 2018, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/594>.

As a recent report prepared for the EU's FEUTURE project concluded,

Turkey's gambit with Russia is unlikely to go any further. That Ankara's resources are insufficient for its hegemonic aspirations or its desire to be an autonomous actor have been laid bare in the course of the past six years. Turkey will need its alliance links in order to be able to pursue its security interests properly.<sup>22</sup>

At a time of slacking US commitment to Europe, such a situation should open new pathways for more interaction and cooperation between the EU and Turkey.

As for the US, in the debate between those who favoured continuing the alliance with the Kurds in Syria and those who thought it unwise to alienate Turkey, the latter evidently gained the upper hand. In fact, during a telephone conversation between himself and Turkish President Erdoğan, President Trump announced that he would withdraw US forces from northeastern Syria. Taken aback, Erdoğan, who had only recently announced that Turkey would intervene within a few days, urged caution and asked the US President not to rush. As Washington gears up to contain Iran's influence and military presence in the Middle East, and particularly in Syria, cooperation with Turkey will be essential. Yet, contrary to Turkey's expectations, the US Administration does not seem inclined to totally abandon the Kurdish forces that fought alongside American soldiers to eradicate ISIS, despite Ankara's assurances that the Turkish military could do the task.

Somehow, the two partners will have to find a way to detoxify their currently poisonous relations. The United States has had to show more sensitivity to Turkey's concerns, and in return Ankara will have to dampen the rampant anti-Americanism in its public discourse. If relations can be recalibrated after this new turn of events, and a new *modus vivendi* can finally be reached, Turkey will have to put some distance between itself and Russia. The head-spinning developments of the last few months, particularly over Syria, do present a moment of decision and impose a choice on Turkey. They also demonstrate that, however important its geography and however mighty its military, the country does not have the capacity to determine the course of events in Syria or elsewhere by itself.

The reality is that, at the end of the day, Turkey will have to remain within the Western security system – albeit seeking a high degree of autonomy, particularly in conducting relations with Russia and Iran, as it has no better or more convenient alternative for now and the foreseeable future. However, the proviso should be added that the S-400 deal may yet have the capacity to derail relations irreversibly.

*Updated 19 February 2018*

<sup>22</sup> Soli Özel, Pol Morillas and Jakob Lindgaard, "Evolution of the EU's and Turkey's Security Interests, Threat Perceptions and Discourse", in *FEUTURE Online Papers*, No. 3 (April 2017), p. 24, [https://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/pdf/D4.2\\_final.pdf](https://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/pdf/D4.2_final.pdf).

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