

New Perspectives on Mediterranean Geopolitics

Turkey in the Mediterranean: Influence on European Policies

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Whatever one might think about Europe's recent policies in the Mediterranean, paradoxically, they have seldom truly taken Turkey into account, despite its being part of that vast geographical and geopolitical grouping. Republican Turkey has likewise rarely shown a strong commitment to the Mediterranean, undertaking only a few major initiatives in the region, except in cases of conflict.

This dual lack of interest is a key factor in determining how Turkey has, or has not, influenced Europe's Mediterranean policies. Given that, to date, Turkey's influence has been quite limited on the whole, one must ask whether there are ways to overcome this situation and how it can be done.

The Contrasting Evolution of Turkish Perceptions of the Mediterranean

First, it is necessary to grasp Turkey's relationship with the Mediterranean, which can only be done by looking to its long history. The Ottoman Empire was built progressively, following a logic of concentric circles. It was dismantled according to a symmetrically inverse logic, losing its territorial conquests one after the other. At the centre of this immense empire, whose power peaked in the 16th century, the Medi-

terranean had long been conceived of and experienced as a place of expansion and conquest. As the great historian Fernand Braudel recalls in his book *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, the Mediterranean region was profoundly influenced at the time by the presence of the Ottoman Empire, which controlled more than 50% of the area of the coastal territories. However, the regions that had once made the Ottoman Empire powerful were also the source of its setbacks. Thus, at different times, the Mediterranean region is perceived in the Turkish collective political imagination as a vector of glory and success or, on the contrary, one of defeats and dark hours.

In 1923, Kemalist Turkey adopted a sort of geopolitical indifference towards the Mediterranean. As he repeatedly stated, Mustafa Kemal's main goal was to westernize his country, which, at the time, meant Europeanizing it. Consequently, his approach towards foreign policy initiatives was, above all, continental and, thus, overland. This factor was even more important due to the strong distrust towards the Arab worlds, which Kemalist orthodoxy accused of having betrayed the Sublime Porte and of having been the puppet of imperialist plans in revolting against it. Despite a clear willingness to resume more fluid relations with the Arab worlds and reinsert the country within the Mediterranean area beginning in the 1960s, tensions with Greece and the successive Cypriot crises rendered that willingness largely ineffective. In the end, it was not until the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power in 2002, and, more specifically, Ahmet Davutoğlu's² political affirmation that

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² Ahmet Davutoğlu was, successively, a lecturer on international relations, diplomatic adviser to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Foreign Affairs Minister, and Prime Minister, before falling into disgrace in 2016. His theories on foreign policy are most notably laid out in his most well-known work, *Strategic Depth: The International Position of Turkey*, published in 2001 [original title: *Stratejik Derinlik*. Istanbul: Küre Yay, 2001].

the Mediterranean fully regained its place in the considerations and plans of Turkish diplomacy.

In Davutoğlu's view, Turkey ultimately had to re-establish itself as a central power on the international chessboard, capitalizing on the strategic depth of its historical and geographical dimensions. Under this logic, the Mediterranean should be approached as a place of opportunities conducive to the implementation of multiple initiatives by Ankara. A very clearly articulated vision of the Mediterranean thus took shape, aimed at defending and promoting Turkish national interests. Indeed, in 2003-2004, Turkey began to show real activism in the eastern and southern Mediterranean towards many Arab states, most spectacularly in its rapprochement with Syria.

The Arab uprisings of 2010-2011 posed a challenge to the Turkish political authorities, who, like many other powers, knew a moment of hesitation and doubt. Should they perpetuate narrow forms of cooperation with the established regimes or, on the contrary, support the growing number of protest movements? They chose the latter option and, in so doing, affirmed a political choice. Ankara would aim to establish a strategic focus with the forces claiming to represent political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Given the changes that would soon take place in the Arab uprisings, this choice would prove to be a grave mistake and would lead to Turkey's relative isolation.

The last factor of any framework for analysing Turkish policies in the Mediterranean is the fact that they are implemented in an environment that is partially perceived as a threat. The ruling circles of Turkey's political authorities and diplomacy regard Cyprus, the Aegean Sea and unsettled disputes with Greece, and relations with Israel as threatening, conflictive elements that must not be underestimated.

In this brief sketch of Turkish perceptions of the Mediterranean region and the initiatives that Ankara can pursue there, the strictly European dimension is largely absent. A sort of decoupling of Turkey's European plans and its policy towards the countries around the Mediterranean, especially on its southern and eastern shores, thus persists. Nevertheless, Turkish leaders are cognizant that the more the country can assert itself in the Mediterranean, the more it will be able to underscore its importance to the European Union (EU). Additionally, many countries bordering the Mediterranean may attach great importance to

Turkey, as it is itself in a process of dialogue and negotiation with the EU and is thus tactically useful to ensuring that their own interests prevail.

A Critical Review of Europe's Initiatives in the Mediterranean

The first contemporary Mediterranean partnership was launched in 1995 under the name "Euro-Mediterranean Partnership." More commonly referred to as the Barcelona Process, it brought together the 15 countries of the EU and 12 countries from the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, including eight Arab states. The partnership was organized around three areas of activity: policy and security; economy and finance; and social and cultural aspects. The process's keen intuition lay in its understanding of the inseparable nature of these three areas and of the impossibility of building balanced partnerships between the two shores of the Mediterranean should any of the constituent elements be missing.

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The limitations, however, soon became clear, not least because of the inability to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also due to the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), in 2004, which changed the framework for EU countries' relations with their neighbours. The aim was to create, through bilateral agreements, a periphery of states ruled by "good governance," itself a concept conceived of by Europeans. The plan to pursue forms of multilateral cooperation based on shared objectives was thus progressively relegated to the back burner. Once partners, the countries of the European periphery became neighbours. The shift was not only semantic: the ENP, which has gradually replaced the Barcelona Process, was trimmed to the dyad of security and trade liberalization, far removed from the

Arab countries' concerns, as trade opening alone is obviously not a development strategy in itself.

The Barcelona Process was thus swiftly rendered ineffective. It was in this context that the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was created in 2008, at the initiative of France, with a view to giving new political impetus to cooperation between Mediterranean countries. But Nicolas Sarkozy's proposal concealed an ulterior motive, which all even remotely informed observers quickly deciphered. Sarkozy, then still just a candidate in the French presidential election, had repeatedly expressed a strong opposition to the prospect of Turkey's integration into the EU. The idea was thus to propose to Ankara a status that would allow it to enhance the value of its assets within the UfM as a sort of alternative to EU accession. However, the political manoeuvre was fairly crude and did not fool anyone, at least not the Turkish authorities.

Based on a union of projects with variable geometry, the UfM failed to produce the expected boost. Three negative factors were at play: the continued non-resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which blocked the implementation of efficient projects; the financial and economic crisis that rocked the EU, resulting in its stagnation; and the political instability due to the popular uprisings in several Arab countries beginning in 2011, which, *de facto*, thwarted the UfM's ambitions.

Thus, the Mediterranean policies promoted by the EU failed to spark a true Mediterranean partnership. The EU's inability to project itself as a strategic player and the problems the countries on the southern and eastern shores faced to ultimately take the path of resolute and equitable development clouded this prospect. This is compounded by the fact that, whilst the Arab states on the southern shore still have to meet European requirements, they do not, in turn, benefit from significant advances on the issues that are vital to them, in particular, the challenge of migratory issues. This asymmetry generates a sharp bitterness towards the EU, sinking the Mediterranean projects, which often fail to take concrete form.

In this situation, one might fear that the two shores of the Mediterranean would become increasingly less able to formulate a common vision and projects, and that the partner states would thus weigh the benefits and costs, which would, in future, favour other partners, such as the United States, Russia, India or China. That would mean that political, economic and se-

curity issues would not be handled by the regional actors most directly concerned. The challenge is for the states involved in this partnership to be able to build their strategic autonomy over time and be in a position to meet common challenges without suffering humiliation at the hands of foreign powers.

These challenges will remain unchanged as long as the partners are not in a position to reactivate the initial three-pronged Barcelona approach. The partnership's originality lay in a philosophy of action that sought to promote a holistic approach, integrating economic, environmental, political, social and security-related parameters. Unfortunately, this strategic vision is missing in the present stage, and the two shores seem to be growing farther apart rather than closer together.

Incorporating European Policies into the Mediterranean through Concrete Initiatives

It is in this context that the unique place that Turkey could occupy in Europe's policies in the Mediterranean must be considered. This means opening new paths so that the relationship between the EU and Turkey can be part of a new positive horizon that gives meaning to specific initiatives. These considerations are not intended as a roadmap, but rather, much more modestly, a non-exhaustive set of avenues that should be pursued, developed or continued to give form to a will and a project.

European leaders advocate the creation of a reinforced, if not strategic, partnership with Turkey other than accession to the EU. This method has the merit of being clear and preventing fruitless and hypocritical convolutions, although the proposal regularly elicits negative reactions in Turkey. Nevertheless, whilst integrating Ankara into the prospect of a strategic partnership has some strengths, it will ultimately depend on the EU's ability to project itself as a strategic player with real influence. That is why, given the uncertainty of achieving that, Turkish-European relations should be nurtured with other issues, lest they be stripped of all substance. In other words, how could this project be adapted at the Mediterranean level, which would undoubtedly be a stabilizing factor for the region?

From this perspective, energy issues should be a major area of cooperation. The European Union does

not possess gas and oil and it imports them heavily from Mediterranean states; Turkey, due to its geographical location, is a major energy hub. These structural factors should easily convince the parties to seek synergies and move forward more clearly on joint projects. That would moreover entail opening the “energy” chapter of the accession talks and, in so doing, would demonstrate a tangible willingness to look to the future through the creation of potential Mediterranean partnerships that would be beneficial to all parties.³ Turkey’s integration in this prospect would make sense and would probably amplify a real dynamic to Mediterranean projects on energy issues. From this vantage point, Cyprus takes on considerable importance: strong tensions exist between Turkey and the Greek part of the island over gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean. These difficulties can be explained by the failure to resolve the Cypriot question, with regard to which the EU has proved powerless as a judge and party since the accession of only the Greek Cypriot part in 2004. In view of the challenges, and despite the difficulties, a European initiative of good offices would nevertheless be opportune, to diffuse the growing tensions and help unblock the situation. Not only would it allow the EU to once again become a player in the eastern Mediterranean sub-region, it would also meet Europe’s objective need to diversify its energy supply sources. Such initiatives would not only recreate a climate of trust conducive to recasting Euro-Turkish relations, they would also be mutually beneficial for the implementation of European projects in the Mediterranean. In addition to the aspects strictly related to gas and oil exploitation and transportation, for the EU, it would also be a chance to develop the strong potential for complementarity that exists with Turkey and to show that no one is obliged to accept the humiliating terms of the United States and its oil companies. Another element of continuity to promote and deepen is management of the follow-up to the 16 March 2016 agreement, aimed at limiting and controlling the flow of migrants through Turkey. This agreement has been an undeniable quantitative success and has

nearly completely stopped arrivals to the Greek coasts. Although many human rights organizations have denounced it for its cynicism, it has indisputably yielded tangible results and dramatically reduced migratory pressure on the European Union. Of course, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had ulterior political motives with regard to how he managed the agreement, but the same holds true for the Europeans, and, from this point of view, there is little place for moral judgments of Turkey here. Additionally, Turkey is committed to reforming its migratory policy: “Four objectives, in particular, have been set: participation in the control of the EU’s external borders, adoption of the same visa policy as the EU, conclusion of an agreement with the EU for the readmission of migrants from Turkish soil, and lifting of the geographical limitation of the 1951 Geneva Convention.”⁴ Of course, the implementation of these elements depends on the political will that will condition the future of Turkey-EU relations.

Turkey plays a pivotal role in the cooperation between law enforcement services in the fight against terrorist organizations, with their many-sided variations and mutations

In this regard, one complementary factor is the liberalization of the visa system for short-term stays by Turkish nationals. Particularly symbolic, the implementation of this scheme was conditional on compliance with 72 criteria according to a roadmap adopted on 16 December 2013. The European Commission considers that seven of these criteria have yet to be met, the most sensitive being the review of Turkish antiterrorism legislation, which many observers consider insufficiently precise and protective of fundamental rights. Whilst these requirements may seem

³ The rules of the negotiation process between the EU and candidate states involve the opening of each of 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, then their closure at the end of the negotiation period. This method is intended to enable the incorporation of Community law into the national law of each candidate country. However, the state of the EU’s negotiations with Turkey is quite deteriorated. For instance, no new chapters have been opened since June 2016. Even more worrying is the European Parliament’s vote, on 13 March 2019, in favour of suspending accession talks with Turkey.

⁴ TOLAY, Juliette. “The EU and Turkey’s asylum policies in light of the Syrian crisis.” *Policy Brief*, No. 10. Istanbul Policy Center, 2014.

legitimate, it is not very effective to lay them down in an overly threatening way to a country that has been the victim of multiple terrorist operations in recent years. It would probably be more effective to strike a compromise on this point in the exchanges with the Turkish authorities, in order ultimately to overcome the blockages. Although the definition of terrorism is, at best, vague in Turkey and can give rise to very broad interpretations, the emotional burden of this scourge in a country that has repeatedly been the victim of it must not be underestimated. Finally, it is a matter of not giving in to the fantasies of certain European political forces who believe that eliminating visas would automatically lead to a wave of immigration of Turkish origin, a scenario that no serious study supports.

More generally, the fight against terrorism is an example of necessary and effective cooperation between the EU and Turkey. Turkey plays a pivotal role in the cooperation between law enforcement services in the fight against terrorist organizations, with their many-sided variations and mutations. This common struggle exists and, to date, has proven its effectiveness; it should be perpetuated and reinforced. In addition to intelligence services in the narrowest sense, cooperation between the counter-terrorism hubs of the respective ministries of justice should probably be strengthened.

Finally, beyond the institutional or official spheres, imaginative solutions should be sought to create the conditions to improve communication between the two societies, which are gradually drifting apart. These actions should thus seek to promote a “multiplier effect,” either through the association of research centres or think tanks engaged in the analysis of Turkish politics and society in the EU and in Mediterranean countries. This also means a more proactive communication policy, underscoring the value of Turkish achievements in the EU or European ones in Turkey and, in particular, in the Mediterranean region. From this point of view, it would be useful to consider more specifically initiatives targeted at young people, who are penalized in Turkey by the blocking of university and academic exchanges due to the dismissal or suspension of many academics.

Conclusion

The need to rebuild the relationship with Turkey can probably only be met by recasting the European Union and the Mediterranean partnerships themselves. A new page must be written, and it seems more necessary than ever to rethink Turkey in the light of a revitalized and, therefore, more efficient European project.

In this regard, an increasingly unstable and worrying international situation is both the worst and best of things. On one hand, it can encourage the temptation to go it alone, a nostalgic return to the games of the 19th-century Concert of Europe or the old Cold War, which has no future. On the other hand, it is a call for imagination and an invitation to recreate or rethink old solidarities to help them meet the requirements of today’s globalized relations. Reshaping the EU’s Mediterranean policies to respect the diversity of peoples is one way to enable a new and thoughtful consideration of Turkey, without falling prey to condescension or contempt. Let us hope that the current leaders will be able to speak with each other and bring finesse or intuition to relations that teeter between formalism and anathemas on one side and excesses born of a feeling of being underestimated or misunderstood on the other.

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It is impossible for the EU and Turkey not to have a common destiny. Therefore, more than ever before, it is necessary to dispel the distrust that hinders fluid relations with this country and, whether out of ignorance or weakness, prevents them from acquiring the density they need. Endowing them with a Mediterranean dimension would surely be a positive step.