

How Far Can Turkey Challenge NATO and the EU in 2020?

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In their dealings with Turkey in 2020, NATO and the European Union will sit across a more assertive interlocutor than ever before, but one they can hardly ignore.

NATO leaders will have to cope with the actual deployment of Russian S-400 missiles, the possible acquisition of Russian fighter aircraft, the continuing Turkish military operations in northern Syria, and an incipient military deployment in Libya.

EU leaders will deal with ongoing issues, such as Syrian refugees in Turkey, the expulsion of jihadists of EU origin, and drilling operations around Cyprus, as well as new topics like the agreement with Libya on maritime boundaries, the implications for EU businesses resulting from eventual US sanctions, and the consequences of Brexit for Turkey's relations with the UK and the EU.

The number and seriousness of these issues, as well as the potential for more adverse developments in Turkey's policies, justify a firm, resolute, and yet cooperative policy from NATO and the European Union.

TURKEY'S DOMESTIC SCENE: NATIONALISM ON THE RISE

Turkey today is more nationalist and more inclined to assert its political and military power than in recent years. This is in part a reflection of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's style and personae, but it is also the result of other factors such as past economic growth and history's heritage.

The Erdoğan Factor

Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power since November 2002. Erdoğan himself was prime minister from March 2003 until August 2014 and president of the republic thereafter. One of the main achievements during that period was a notable increase in prosperity, resulting in the creation of a new middle class; a massive development of transportation, irrigation, and social infrastructure; and a military buildup. This is illustrated in a [list of 824 projects](#) launched and/or completed in the 2010–2019 period.



The presidency's operating mode is one mixing bold initiatives producing visible results in the public space with the **steady elimination** of freedom of expression and a tight control of the media and the judiciary, as illustrated in contentious events like **the 2019 municipal elections** and the **Gezi trial**.

These achievements are now at risk amid misguided economic policies and a drastic dismantling of rule of law within a new constitutional framework (one-man-rule system), creating a growing strain for the leadership.

In a political setup where all decisions converge toward the head of state, where the parliament has been stripped of many of its powers, and where **dissent and freedom of expression are often criminalized**, misguided economic policies undermine political leadership even more.

Economic Difficulties

Turkey faces severe **economic difficulties**: the corporate debt overhang (mostly denominated in foreign currency) is not showing any real improvement, while the dismantlement of rule of law and freedoms is alarming domestic and foreign investors. The growth model pursued by the Turkish authorities during a decade of uninterrupted progress was based on a **domestic lending boom**. The steady growth era of the AKP's first decade is now over due to the misguided policy decisions mentioned earlier. Yet, Turkish authorities have often blamed the unfavorable economic situation on **foreign forces** in order to alleviate their responsibility.

Given the prevailing choices, the current policy mix can hardly produce any substantial alleviation of the **economic difficulties**. Predominant in the current mix is the interest rates policy, which is based on the belief that low interest rates lead to low inflation. This policy is forced down the economic system, including by erasing

the **Central Bank's independence** and substituting its competent team by a team subservient to the president's beliefs.

As a result, Turkey's international financiers and its domestic business circles have become more careful and are closely watching not only developments in the economy, but also the rule of law, ethics, and foreign military operations. Decisions such as the postponement (due to the Syria incursion) of a €1.3 billion investment by **Volkswagen** and the sale of the **European Bank for Reconstruction and Development** (EBRD)'s stake in the Istanbul Stock Exchange (due to the appointment of a former public bank executive condemned in the United States, Hakan Attila, as the Istanbul stock exchange's CEO) represent highly symbolic cases in point.

In parallel, the Turkish leadership shows a persistent propensity, irrespective of the economic crisis, to undertake grandiose projects such as **Canal Istanbul**, a proposed canal connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, a so-called **crazy project** that raises **staggering challenges** (regarding land prices, hydrology, environmental protection, international law, and military transit) that are **hardly discussed** in the public domain. **These challenges** may turn a grand scheme into an impending catastrophe.

Growing Nationalism

Both Erdoğan's political and economic decisions have been framed in a fierce nationalist narrative. However, the nationalist sentiment in Turkey is deeply rooted in the years leading to proclamation of the republic in 1923, especially in the transition between the never-ratified Sèvres Treaty of 1920 (which would have divided out Ottoman Turkey between Armenia, France, Greece, and Great Britain, with large "zones of influence" for France, Italy and Great Britain) and

the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 (which essentially mapped most of today's Turkey). A nationalist reading of history has been nurtured since the early years of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's rule, including through teachings in schools (such as the national security class taught in public high schools from 1926 to 2012) and countless formal ceremonies. [Nationalism is part of the country's history](#) and it has morphed into a predominant thought under Erdoğan.

The president's exceptionally long dominance on Turkey's political stage has now come under [serious challenges](#). The losses incurred in the March 31, 2019, municipal elections and the June 23, 2019, repeat election in Istanbul meant that [nine of the ten major urban centers will be led by mayors attached to opposition parties](#). It also means losing the financial bounty accruing to the ruling AKP through kickbacks on public tenders. Moreover, it has illustrated that a different type of leadership—Ekrem İmamoğlu, the new mayor of Greater Istanbul, has strong religious credentials and made a point to promote tolerance between opposing strands of opinions—could be attractive even in places where the AKP felt hitherto unchallenged.

Some analysts took the view that the 2019 municipal elections [ended the era of the AKP's political hegemony](#), even though they failed to set a clear path for Turkish politics.

According to recent opinion polling, around [33 percent](#) of the Turkish electorate would vote for the AKP, a high number by EU records but a far cry from its heyday in [general elections](#) during the previous decade, where the AKP garnered 46.6 percent in 2007, 49.9 percent in 2011, and 41.0 percent in 2015. In addition, the question arises of how many deputies the two new parties being created by former prime minister Ahmet

Davutoğlu and former vice-prime minister Ali Babacan will attract from the AKP or other groups of deputies.

Having to fend off such a political decline and simultaneously keep the vital alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) alive, the leadership has chosen to ramp up the nationalist narrative as a way to solidify its electoral base around the figure of a strong president in tough times. In turn, as a collateral benefit, this rallying cry around nationalist themes allows the president to enjoy [support for his military incursion in Syria](#) from both AKP dissenters and several opposition politicians (except the Kurdish-rooted Peoples' Democratic Party) who can hardly run the risk of being labelled "traitors."

In addition, as exemplified in the U.S. State Department's [Turkey 2018 Human Rights Report](#), an extensive definition of "terrorism" continues to be used even after the state of emergency was lifted. The report underscores that "new laws and decrees codified some provisions from the state of emergency; subsequent anti-terror legislation continued its restrictions on fundamental freedoms and compromised judicial independence and rule of law." These provisions facilitate the control of the society through political trials, the dismissal of elected mayors and their replacement by appointed officials, the submission of the media, and a close alignment of the judiciary. The doctored narratives disseminated by the leadership pursue the same objective.

To outside observers, the leadership's policies and narratives seem to be the way to achieve political sustainability in the context of a waning popularity. In a situation where the alliance between the president's party (AKP) and the nationalist party (MHP) is [increasingly dependent on the MHP's influence](#), foreign policy has inevitably become less Western-oriented, more EU- and



U.S.-hostile, and certainly more Turkey-centered. And precisely because national feelings are strongly rooted in Turkey, the center-left Republican People's Party and the conservative Good Party also espouse these changes, at least on issues such as sending back Syrian refugees or intervening militarily in Syria.

TURKEY ACTING STRONGLY ON A FAST-CHANGING INTERNATIONAL SCENE

Using Military Force and Pushing Maritime Boundaries

At a time when Erdoğan is faced with serious political and economic challenges at home, Turkey has taken numerous foreign policy initiatives, using both military force and an assertive legal posture.

First, Turkey has deployed military force in instances like incursions in northeastern Syria, recent deployment of armed drones in Northern Cyprus, reinforcement of an existing base in Qatar, and preparations for a [military deployment in Libya](#). In the latter example, on January 3, 2020, the parliament voted on a motion that gives the head of state total discretion on the level of deployment and on rules of engagement, in itself a symbol of the one-man-rule system in place. The [Turkish deployment in Libya](#) is a complex operation, given the current level of force projection capabilities. The eastern-based Libyan [parliament](#) predictably rejected the deployment. Meanwhile, the recent Moscow and Berlin meetings on Libya didn't bring about any progress toward a ceasefire, despite Turkey's intense diplomatic activities.

Second, Turkey has developed an assertive legal posture, shown through an agreement with Libya on maritime boundaries aimed at redefining Turkey's rights to the

detriment of Greece and Cyprus. The leadership also presents this move as an instrument to hamper the construction of a gas pipeline from the Egyptian and Israeli gas fields toward Greece. [As Bloomberg reports](#), a director general in the Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry was quoted on December 6, 2019, as saying that "this agreement also amounts to a political message that Turkey can't be sidelined in the Eastern Mediterranean and nothing can be really achieved in the region without Turkey's participation." Research and drilling off Cyprus by Turkish vessels in contentious areas is conducted under [military protection](#) of the Turkish Navy and armed drones deployed in Northern Cyprus.

Several of these initiatives raise long-standing thorny legal issues linked to the Law of the Sea, which Turkey never signed. But they also create a new reality by associating a complete redefinition of maritime boundaries (the Turkey-Libya treaty crafted in the absence of any international consultations), a military buildup (which increases the risk of maritime incidents), and an implicit request to the EU to stop backing its member states (here essentially Cyprus) and instead turn to a [negotiated settlement of maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean](#).

With its treaty with Libya, [Turkey has therefore challenged boundaries established by Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus](#), on which Eastern Mediterranean gas exploration and pipeline projects depended until now. Notably, an agreement on the [East Med gas pipeline](#) was signed on January 2, 2020, between Cyprus, Greece and Israel, with Italy's support.

Increasing Military Capabilities

Beyond the immediate horizon, military observers note that the Turkish navy will deploy (in 2020 or 2021) its first light aircraft carrier, [TCG Anadolu](#), a vessel able

to project, attack, and/or transport helicopters, landing crafts, and troops anywhere in the Mediterranean. It will also continue the development of new short-range missiles, the reinforcement of its naval forces, and the production of a range of drones, including armed ones. In the latter case, for some experts, Turkey's military posture in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East is being changed radically: it is, according to Chris Cole, the director of Drone Wars UK, "becoming a major player in drone usage, which is, like the US, prepared to engage in targeted killing outside its own borders."

In addition, the first of six new generation submarines (Type 214) was launched on December 22, 2019. Saying the vessels will be launched at the rate of one each year, Erdoğan added: "With the policies our country follows, we seek establishment of rights, which have been delayed. The works we carry out in the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Libya are in this context."

Coming from an important NATO member, Turkey's new methodology—substituting international cooperation with unilateral moves and confrontational statements—inevitably constitutes considerable challenges for Greece, Cyprus, Israel, the EU, the United States, and NATO as a whole.

On the military side, the reorganization of Turkey's missile defense with the deployment of S-400 missiles from Russia (together with the accompanying technical personnel) and the possible purchase of Sukhoi aircraft constitute a radically new situation for NATO's missile defense architecture. It may ultimately result in curtailing (if not upending in some cases) Turkey's full participation in NATO's military activities. The threats uttered about expelling U.S. forces from the Incirlik and/or Kureçik air bases are bound to create more fundamental tensions because, according to U.S.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper, they come together with "growing military ties to Russia [that] raise questions about the country's commitment to the Western alliance."

Despite Ankara's repeated assertion that they are not directed against NATO and that Turkey will remain a faithful partner of the Atlantic alliance, it is beyond doubt that these moves will substantially alter NATO's military organization and illustrate a risk apparent since August 2016, when this author previously questioned, "Will Russia's long game of undermining the EU's cohesion, the U.S. status as the major superpower, or the role of NATO find fertile ground in post-coup Turkey? One hypothesis is that Russia may go for a long-term game-changing move and lure Turkey away from the West as part of a broader geopolitical reconfiguration."

Resettling Syrian Refugees

The Turkish government intends to resettle up to 1 million Syrian refugees in the areas it controls in northeastern Syria. As presented, the plan raises multiple questions. What is its legality in the absence of a UN-agreed peace agreement and the accompanying security guarantees? How about Syria's sovereignty? How about the respect of humanitarian law? How about respecting existing land and property rights? Will Syrian refugees be convinced to trust Bashar al-Assad's regime for their security? What are the risks of demographic and ethnic engineering? Who will be implementing and monitoring the plan and what will be the role if the UN Refugee Agency must work in areas under the exclusive control of Turkish forces or their proxies?

Although the Turkish authorities are trying to impose this resettlement plan in the international agenda, the plan has so far received little support given its many ambiguities. Yet, it is perceived as politically necessary



by the leadership due to three reasons: there is a genuine “refugee fatigue” amid the population, there is the perception that refugees were the main cause for the AKP losses in the 2019 municipal election, and the opposition and AKP dissenters cannot afford to oppose the plan. The Turkish initiative is accompanied by a strong **presidential narrative** and recurrent threats to send back Syrian refugees to Europe. If the military incursion in Syria is called an “invasion” and if more money doesn’t come from the EU, Erdogan threatened that Turkey “will open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees your [Europe’s] way.”

However, the main focus of the refugee challenge is the Idlib province in northwestern Syria, where Russia and the Assad regime have increased their onslaught on jihadists groups, triggering a new exodus toward camps located along the border with the Turkish province of Hatay. International cross-border assistance to Syrian refugees was vetoed at the UN on December 20, 2019, by Russia—an ally of Turkey in Syria—and China, making the situation far worse for Ankara. On December 23, 2019, Erdoğan spoke of letting new Syrian refugees leave Turkey onward to Greece, once again using a **threatening language** instead of a cooperative one: “If the violence towards the people of Idlib does not stop, this number will increase even more. In that case, Turkey will not carry such a migrant burden on its own. . . . The negative effects of this pressure on us will be an issue felt by all European countries, especially Greece.” More than the actual threat, it is the permanent use of acrimony with the EU that defines Turkey’s current posture.

Positioning Turkey Midway Between East and West

As the previous section outlines, the return to a “power in the middle” posture is partly rooted in Turkish history, but it is also the child of the economic

progress and steady political leadership during the first decade of AKP power. Both factors allowed Ankara to launch multiple new projects: military industry and equipment, transportation infrastructure, energy production and pipelines, and expanded diplomatic networks, effectively putting Turkey in a different place on the international stage.

The leadership’s populist narrative and unexpected initiatives is at odds with Turkey’s previous foreign policy choices, looks inconsistent from a NATO and European standpoint, and is filled with blatant contradictions. But in today’s Turkey, it probably sounds acceptable to a substantial segment of the domestic audience.

While they still rest on a narrative of Turkey being at equal distance from the West and the East, Ankara’s recent foreign policy decisions represent a major departure from the North Atlantic alliance spirit and commitments and a major achievement for Moscow. The “equal distance” doctrine often depicted by Ankara’s leadership is not reconcilable with the defensive nature of its membership in NATO, so much so that Turkey now finds itself in a double bind: claiming to be a full part of the North Atlantic alliance while procuring a missile system from Russia.

Overall, Turkey foreign policy since mid-2016 has been in part driven by a closer dialogue with Russia and a large degree of strategic patience from the Kremlin. As a result, it can be considered that **Moscow has played Ankara off against the West.**

BUILDING A SOLID NATO AND EU POSTURE

In devising its policy regarding Turkey, the European Union will have to consider the considerable uncertainty of Turkey’s political prospects in the medium term. The

room for maneuver for both the opposition alliance and the dissenters from the AKP is unclear at this stage. The president is likely to put up a huge fight to preserve his political dominance. In addition, for the sake of doing so, he might engage in risky legal, diplomatic, and military activities in the Eastern Mediterranean or in Libya and, with more difficulty, in Syria.

In this context, NATO and the EU have a similar political imperative, which is to continue defending their policies and interests irrespective of the Turkish leadership's current assertive moves. In so doing, it is necessary to distinguish between the overall nationalist trend and the rapprochement with Russia—which is real and unlikely to dissolve in the post-Erdoğan era—and Erdoğan's own style and posture—which is a matter of political survival at home, a field in which NATO, the EU, and the United States do not have much influence.

NATO's Priority

NATO should focus on maintaining the integrity of its missile defense system and on protecting the potential negative influence of Russia via Turkey. Despite the soothing narrative of NATO's public statements, it is beyond doubt that Turkey is witnessing a serious crisis of confidence with the organization and that assertions to the effect that S-400 missile systems will be “self-standing” have no credibility. More generally, the trust put by NATO in Turkish forces (for example, naval forces in the Black Sea or the Eastern Mediterranean) has been eroded by recent decisions on missile purchases from Russia and by assertive statements from Ankara about the Eastern Mediterranean.

The core issue is undoubtedly NATO's potential reaction to the effective deployment in the spring of 2020 of Russian S-400 missile systems. The [Center for American Progress](#) recommends several measures for

curtailing Turkey's participation in sensitive operations in Eastern Europe.

Furthermore, a decision will have to be made about upending the operation of the Kureçik advanced radar and relocating it in another NATO member country. Collateral decisions will be needed on a continued Spanish Patriot missile battery deployment in Turkey, a continued deployment of NATO aircraft with airborne warning and control systems at the Konya air base, and the use by NATO members' air forces of the Incirlik air base.

Although the public narrative from NATO officials is generally positive, it is beyond doubt that Turkey's recent moves have raised momentous challenges for the North Atlantic alliance and, temporarily or permanently, given Russia a boost in its policy of challenging NATO.

Dealing with a Tougher Stance in European Political Circles

Although British, French, and German leaders may express their views in different styles, the EU's political mood has become increasingly critical of Turkey and especially of its president. The substantive reason is the perception that Turkey is pivoting away from the values it once said it was sharing with the European Union and the transatlantic alliance. This trend will now be reinforced by Ankara's much more assertive posture, itself closely correlated with tensions on the domestic political scene.

In national parliaments and the [European Parliament](#) alike, as well as in the executive branches of government and the [European Council](#), statements and resolutions concerning Turkey have noticeably changed in recent months, in particular with respect to drilling off Cyprus, the proposed resettlement of Syrian refugees in areas



controlled by Turkey in Syria, and the threats to send Syrian refugees to the EU.

As a result, EU statements could lead to more negative decisions: further cuts in EU financial support to Turkey, [sanctions linked to gas drilling operations](#), or the postponement of the [modernization of the existing EU-Turkey Trade Union](#). This path requires careful consideration at two levels.

First, the EU should consider the likely reaction of the Turkish leadership. Given the prevailing narrative in Ankara, it is likely that implementing the “sanctions framework” adopted by the EU Council on November 11, 2019, would primarily serve Erdoğan’s fierce narrative against the EU.

Second, negative measures should not be perceived as letting down the liberal segment of the Turkish society. In other cases, the European Parliament’s call for the suspension of the EU-Turkey Customs Union makes little sense because it would hurt both sides and therefore amount to self-inflicted wounds.

Regarding Turkey’s frozen EU accession process, it is remarkable to note that Ankara’s leadership continues to claim that it has fulfilled all the EU requirements and that accession remains a strategic priority, while at the same time dismantling rule of law and organizing a one-man-rule system, both trends utterly incompatible with the accession process. The political reality is that the current freeze allows Ankara to escape the EU’s political conditionality and governance standards and replace them as much as possible by bilateral relations with EU governments. These tactics will keep working as long as both the EU and Turkey find it convenient not to formally call off the accession process.

Five EU Priorities

The European Union should focus on five priorities: counterterrorism, Syrian refugees, boundaries and energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean, keeping economic ties alive, and supporting the liberal segment of the society.

Counterterrorism: EU governments’ priorities will likely to go to counterterrorism, a field already covered by active cooperation schemes between a number of European governments and Turkey. The day-to-day running of counterterrorism cooperation requires considerable confidence between the services concerned and there are already remarkably successful operations. Dialogue at political levels should underline the commonality of interest between Turkey and EU countries.

Syrian refugees: The future of Syrian refugees has been the subject of a permanent dialogue between the EU, EU governments, and Turkey for more than four years. The [EU €6.0 billion facility for Syrian refugees in Turkey](#) has achieved remarkable results, to the satisfaction of the Turkish agencies involved. It is only at top political levels that Ankara has consistently denigrated the EU facility for obvious domestic purposes.

Notwithstanding politically motivated narratives emanating from Ankara, there is a need to continue supporting Syrian refugees in ways acceptable to both Turkey and the EU in the respect of international humanitarian law. The position sometimes expressed by some European political parties that Turkey should shoulder the burden alone does not make good sense. Therefore, measures similar to those included in the existing EU facility—such as funding measures in favor of the social needs and income-generating activities of refugees (including the needs of host communities)—

should be extended and their budget implications should be considered urgently. Particular attention should be given to cross-border assistance to Syrians internally displaced persons on the border of the Idlib province with the Turkish province of Hatay.

This is different than lending support to Ankara's plan for the resettlement of Syrian refugees in northeastern Syria, which will not be supported by the EU under the current circumstances as it is unilaterally conceived to serve Turkey's sole interests and flawed with a long list of impossibilities (see above). The plan should be reworked as part, at a later stage, of a UN-agreed peace agreement on the Syrian transition.

Germany's [Chancellor Angela Merkel](#)'s visit to Turkey on January 24, 2020, illustrated how consistently Erdoğan is challenging the EU €6.0 billion plan and simultaneously cultivating Europe's (especially Germany's) fear of a new wave of refugees.

Boundaries and energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean: By virtue of Ankara's recent foreign policy initiatives (see above), the already complex conundrum of maritime boundaries, gas exploration permits, and possible construction of an underwater gas pipeline between the Israeli gas fields (Leviathan) and Greece has become an immensely more difficult issue to handle.

The [agreement between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece](#), signed on January 2, 2020, is perceived in Ankara as an adverse move. If effectively built, this gas pipeline could reduce the EU's dependence on Russian gas and run counter to [Russia's energy politics](#) in the region.

There is no other avenue than dialogue and ultimately negotiations, which are bound to be a long, protracted process. Meanwhile, the use of military force by Ankara

to impose its own interpretation of the applicable rules cannot be tolerated, lest making the Eastern Mediterranean an area where rogue behavior will prevail over a mutually acceptable multilateral solution.

The EU should therefore exert efforts to bring these issues to the UN table and, meanwhile, take all necessary measures to prevent Turkey from imposing its unilateral views.

Keeping economic ties alive: The EU-Turkey Customs Union is beneficial to both sides and is in need of modernization. The [overhaul](#) proposed by the European Commission would aim to extend the coverage of this trade regime to service industries, agriculture, and public procurement; modernize its governance framework with a new dispute settlement mechanism; and help foster greater convergence between Turkish and EU trade policy. But, due to the degradation of rule of law, it has been blocked on political grounds in the EU. This has three implications: calls for a suspension of the customs union should be withdrawn; technical negotiations for the custom union's modernization should go forward; but in order to lift the political objections in the European Parliament and in national parliament, positive moves are needed concerning a return to rule of law in Turkey.

Supporting the liberal segment of the society: In the current political context, there is a distinct risk for the EU to become, in the eyes of the Turkish public, the scapegoat of many of the country's woes. There is little doubt that the combination of a more nationalist mood and carefully doctored narratives emanating from the authorities has created a less favorable opinion of the EU in the country. Yet, those segments of society that are fighting for a reinstatement of the rule of law, freedom of expression, and liberties know that the European Union is a value-based political entity and that it will



not abandon these fundamentals when confronting an assertive one-man-rule political entity.

This is why the EU should energetically continue its support to an independent civil society and a free press, while condemning current political trials and calling for their end. In so doing, EU institutions should work closely with the Council of Europe and its human rights commissioner and closely follow developments in the European Court of Human Rights.

Choosing the Right EU Methodology

The current European methodology is a risk in itself. For a host of reasons not linked to relations with Turkey, the EU has altered its modus operandi. The application of the Lisbon Treaty during its first ten years has led to a predominance of the European Council of Heads of State and Government in foreign policy matters, therefore bringing domestic politics closer to foreign relations matters. There is also a distinct German-French propensity to make Berlin and Paris the predominant sources of foreign policy choices. In London, there is by definition a preference for quadripartite discussions with Turkey because this framework is more favorable to its post-Brexit status, as it keeps Britain engaged together with the two largest EU member states on an important foreign policy matter.

Using a restricted format instead of the full EU machinery (a tempting methodology given the EU's internal divisions) diminishes the European Union's efficiency when confronting Ankara's positions. This was and still is apparent with Turkey doing away with EU rule of law standards (since 2014); negotiating an EU financial facility for refugees (2015–2016) and playing one member country against the EU

institutions, threatening the EU with a new wave of refugees (2019) against a small set of member countries; or acting bilaterally on maritime boundaries and drilling operations (2019), again targeting mainly two member countries. This format gives the opportunity to Ankara to “divide and conquer” in the belief that rule-based considerations may be less important in bilateral discussions as opposed as EU-level discussions.

Mostly out of its own volition, the EU is therefore curtailing its political weight when dealing with Turkey. This state of affairs may reflect the current state of intra-EU politics, but it should be corrected by integrating European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell in the next round of quadripartite discussions with Turkey scheduled for February. The recent Berlin summit on Libya is a good example of a better connection of an EU member government's initiative with the EU institutional setup.

CONCLUSION

Turkey's international posture has radically changed over the last few years. It is a function of a) Erdoğan's international ambitions and political decline, b) a rising nationalist sentiment among a large segment of the population, c) Donald Trump's unexpected support, and d) Vladimir Putin's strategic maneuvering. This “New Turkey” challenges the Eastern Mediterranean maritime boundaries and drilling rights and is prone to project military force abroad while substantially reinforcing its army's equipment. While every country is free to choose its own destiny, seen from Brussels, Turkey's posture of challenging both NATO and the EU runs counter to its membership of the transatlantic alliance.

In the final analysis, from an EU standpoint, Turkey today has a triple identity: a strategic partner for Europe, especially in the economic and trade fields; Europe's adversarial interlocutor in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East; and a negative player within NATO.

The challenge for EU leaders in 2020 is to combine pushing back Turkey's actions when they run counter to EU core interests with cooperation when there is ground for joint action. In trying to do so, they should not expect an easy ride.

Relations with Turkey may become one of the litmus tests for the EU's foreign policy in 2020. In the words of [Borrell](#), "We see the rebirth of geostrategic competition.

. . . The EU has the option of becoming a player, a true geostrategic actor, or being mostly the playground. . . . We need to speak more the language of power, not to conquer but to contribute to a more peaceful, prosperous and just world."

NOTES

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