



# “Containgement”: An EU Strategy towards Erdogan’s Turkey

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## Summary

- Turkish President Erdogan was prompted to fill the power vacuum in the Eastern Mediterranean by deploying hard-power means and tactics for achieving short-term strategic gains.
- Turkey has adopted a "power-based", assertive and revisionist foreign policy that embraces the “geography of the Ottoman empire”.
- The geopolitical awakening of the EU after the pandemic crisis calls for the advancement of a strategy that would manage to deal with Turkey's assertive and revisionist behavior.
- By combining ambition and pragmatism France and Germany should and can be the essential drivers of the EU in devising a comprehensive strategy of "containgement" vis-a-vis Erdogan's Turkey.
- The EU's "containgement" strategy (containment and engagement) should manage to embrace the right mix of sticks and carrots and the right balance of benefits and obligations for Turkey.
- A reset of the EU-Turkey relationship is now needed more than ever.
- The EU should embark upon building a new EU-Turkey understanding consisting of two pillars: trade/economy with a view to modernizing the EU-Turkey Customs Union; and migration with a view to re-packaging the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.
- The EU is still in search of a better definition of the "sticks and carrots" policy vis-a-vis Erdogan's Turkey.
- Greece should be an active contributor to the advancement of the EU "containgement strategy" by co-shaping Turkey's new relationship with the European Union.

## 1. Turkey's destabilizing role in the Eastern Mediterranean

*"Especially after the 2016 failed military coup and the 2018 Presidential elections, President Erdogan has adopted an assertive foreign policy featuring military interventions and challenges to the legal order in the Eastern Mediterranean."*

The Eastern Mediterranean does not resemble the adjacent Middle East, namely a region with the lowest relative degree of regional integration in the contemporary world. Yet it is indeed a region where the long-standing trends of disintegration, confrontation and potential armed conflict remain a constant feature of an unstable and turbulent security environment. The most recent addition to the region's instability is undoubtedly the assertive, provocative and illegal behavior of the Turkish government. Illegal, among others, by taking unilateral steps for conducting seismic research in a non-delimited continental shelf and exclusive economic zone claimed by both Turkey and Greece. Especially after the 2016 failed military coup and the 2018 Presidential elections, President Erdogan has adopted an assertive foreign policy featuring military interventions and challenges to the legal order in the Eastern Mediterranean. The range of the bilateral Greek-Turkish conflict has thus been broadened. To the old conflictual issues over the Aegean and over Cyprus, new conflicts have been added in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region –in Libya and to a certain extent in Syria.

### 1.1. Filling the power-vacuum in the region

The beginning of the US departure from the region predates Trump, going back to the "Asia pivot" under the Obama administration. The US retreated from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and subsequently reduced its military presence in the Mediterranean. Moreover, there was a delegation of US responsibility for the Western Mediterranean and parts of sub-Saharan Africa to the EU and for the Eastern Mediterranean to regional partners and allies.

Apparently, the retreat of the US strategic attention from the Eastern Mediterranean was viewed by President Erdogan as a window of opportunity, prompting him to fill the power vacuum by deploying hard-power means and tactics for achieving short-term strategic gains. It is worth noting that the US withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean has also consolidated NATO's endemic weakness in remaining a passive observer of Turkey's aggressive behavior towards Greece. Indeed, despite a series of divides between Turkey and its allies (notably Turkey's relationship with Russia, coupled by the purchase of the Russian-made S-400 anti-aircraft system) the Atlantic Alliance remains fragmented over a strategically important Turkey. That even though Turkey has kept distancing itself from the US and NATO, as well as from the EU, the latter not constituting a "strategic priority" for Turkey.

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Turkey's assertive and provocative behavior was facilitated by Russia's interest in regaining some of its past influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Smart use of Russia's rather limited – at least in comparison to the US – capabilities has allowed it to become a key player in Syria, where it also succeeded in projecting the image of a big power willing to invest considerable resources to support an ally. Russia has also used Syria as a "get out of jail card", a bargaining chip that would allow it to negotiate with the West from a position of relative strength and exchange an agreement on Syria with a compromise solution on the Ukrainian crisis. Along the way, Putin took advantage of rather poor policy choices by the US and the Europeans to increase its own influence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean in general, although it underestimated the complexity of the Syrian conflict and overestimated its own ability to facilitate a negotiated solution. Russia was also prepared to prevent a Cyprus settlement that would diminish its influence on the island (it needn't worry, as the central players in that conflict were once again unable to reach an agreement) while also keeping an eye on hydrocarbon developments in the Eastern Mediterranean.

## 1.2. Adopting hard-power and provocative policies

There are plenty of examples indicating Turkey's harsh reactions to Cyprus's delimitation agreements on Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) with Egypt (2003), Lebanon (2007) and Israel (2010) as well as to the plans for the construction of the EastMed natural gas pipeline. Turkey has claimed that these security arrangements regarding the exploration, monetization and transfer of Cypriot natural gas aimed to isolate Turkey from energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, while considering himself the leader of a global power and a "central state" in the international system, Erdogan could not put up with the emergence of the Republic of Cyprus (which Turkey does not recognize) as a key-player in the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdogan's strong counter-offensive to his rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean included:

- i. Turkey's decision to purchase its own drilling vessels and the beginning of its own explorations (in 2017 and 2018) in a legally delineated area, part of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Cyprus, in some cases following a license issued by the internationally unrecognized "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC).
- ii. Turkey's direct involvement in the Libyan civil war and the November 2019 signing of a military and maritime zone delimitation agreement between the government of Turkey and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). This outlandish agreement sparked harsh reactions in Athens, as it infringed upon maritime zones adjacent to the Greek islands of Crete, Kassos, Karpathos, Rhodes and Megisti, purposely violating the principle of international law that the islands are taken into account when delineating an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).
- iii. Turkey's promotion of short-sighted policies on the Greek-Turkish borders on the river Evros in northern Greece in late February-early March 2020 through the "instrumentalization" of migrants and refugees with the aim to blackmail the EU and secure additional economic aid as well as other concessions, e.g. visa liberalization for Turkish citizens.
- iv. Turkey's deployment of a research vessel, escorted by several warships, in a non-delineated area that Greece considers as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This unilateral decision by Turkey to conduct research activities in a non-delineated zone was illegal under the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS). It followed the agreement concluded between Greece and Egypt in the beginning of August 2020, agreement in full accordance with the provisions of the UNCLOS. The delineation of maritime zones between Greece and Egypt has infuriated Ankara, as it had successfully rammed both the illegal and geographically surreal MoU between Turkey and Libya, and, most importantly, Turkey's maximalist narrative of "Mavi Vatan" ("Blue Homeland").<sup>1</sup>

In addition to these illegal and provocative actions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkish senior officials introduced an inflammatory rhetoric against Greece and certain EU members along with the fiercely nationalist narrative of "Mavi Vatan". It is thus evident that Turkey

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<sup>1</sup> The later refers to an area upon which Turkey claims it has sovereign rights although this includes parts of the continental shelf of Cyprus as well as a series of big Greek islands, such as Rhodes, Karpathos, Kassos, and the Eastern part of Crete.

has abandoned the "security-based" foreign policy it followed since the mid-2000s (which was limited to certain ambitions of Turkey vis-à-vis its periphery) having moved further down the path of a "power-based" assertive foreign policy that exhibits the same pattern of aggressive behavior in Cyprus, the Aegean as well as Syria, Libya and Iraq. This assertive strategy is also revisionist and [embraces the "geography of the Ottoman empire"](#).

By mid-2020, it was made evident that Turkey has become a revisionist outlier attempting to limit if not undermine multilateral regional institutional arrangements that would not conform with Turkey's assertions. More importantly what became clear to the US, the EU as well as most of Turkey's neighbors, was that Turkey's illegal and assertive behavior in the region, if left unchecked, would carry certain negative repercussions for the coherence of the Atlantic Alliance as well as for the stability of the EU's Southern neighborhood.

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## 2. A European "containgement" strategy

### 2.1. The pandemic crisis and Europe's geopolitical awakening

The EU is challenged in terms of its regional influence and appears to lack a coherent and comprehensive vision towards its Southern neighbourhood. Based on the Global Security Strategy adopted in 2016, the EU aims to invest in the advancement of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and in supporting cooperative regional orders worldwide, especially in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa. It has also been actively seeking to strengthen its defence capabilities through a series of initiatives such as PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation), CARD (Coordinated Annual Review on Defence) and the European Defence Fund.<sup>2</sup>

An efficient use of the EU's still considerable normative power and of other foreign policy tools at its disposal would have a significant impact on Mediterranean stability and security. Fortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has awakened the EU from an economic and political sleep. Thanks to a leading role played by the French-German partnership, a groundbreaking budget agreement was adopted by the European Council on July 21, 2020. The agreement on the recovery package has arguably given the most important boost to EU integration since the launch of the euro. Thus, the EU emerges from the pandemic stronger and more unified. More importantly, the EU seems to understand that for defending its sovereignty and for promoting its interests independently from the United States it should further advance its "strategic autonomy".

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A [geopolitical awakening of the EU](#) has indeed taken place. Now a stronger EU is called upon to fill the power vacuum in the Eastern Mediterranean by advancing a strategy that would manage to deal with what appears to be a most serious source of instability in the region, namely Turkey's assertive and revisionist behavior. Ahead of the forthcoming EU Council on 24-25 September 2020 and amid an escalating crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell referred to the assertive come-back of the "old empires", i.e. Russia, China and Turkey vis-a-vis their immediate neighborhood and globally. Especially with regard to EU relations with Turkey, Borrell acknowledged that ["they have reached a critical junction" and "they are at a watershed moment in history"](#).

<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of Turkey in the PESCO mechanism was presented as a novel way to foster mutual trust between the EU and Turkey and possibly contribute to breaking the vicious cycle of blockage with NATO. S. Aydin-Duzgit, "PESCO and third countries: Breaking the deadlock in European security", Istanbul Policy Center and Sabanci University, January 2018. Retrieved [http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Pesco\\_and\\_Third\\_Countries\\_AD%C3%BCzgit.pdf](http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Pesco_and_Third_Countries_AD%C3%BCzgit.pdf)

## 2.2. "United we stand and fly?": A comprehensive EU strategy needs Germany and France to join forces

A reset of the EU-Turkey relationship is now needed more than ever. It must not be forgotten however that an effective strategy the EU may devise for dealing with Turkey should not only address the immediate challenge of Turkey's assertive behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean but also the future of EU relations with Turkey along with the pressing migration/refugee challenge.

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Germany and France should use the momentum they created through their agreement on the Recovery package and act together to give the EU [a stronger geopolitical voice](#). The absence of their cooperation has proved to have a rather negative impact on the EU's ability to move forward. Acting together France and Germany can combine ambition and pragmatism and may thus "put some flesh on the bones" of the EU's geopolitical awakening and foreign and security policy.

More importantly, France and Germany should and can be the essential drivers of the EU in devising a comprehensive strategy vis-à-vis Erdogan's Turkey. This strategy should aim at deterring Turkey's assertiveness while preserving the hope inherent in an engagement policy towards Turkey. This strategy of "containgement", combining containment with engagement, should manage to put forward the right mix of sticks and carrots and the right balance of benefits and obligations for Turkey.

## 2.3. Differing yet complementary approaches

For President Macron, Turkey's provocative and assertive behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean along with the migration/refugee crisis have given prominence to the relevance of European borders. For France, the European Union, while lacking the protecting American umbrella, should start speaking ["the language of power, without losing sight of the grammar of cooperation"](#). France has of course some additional reasons to promote initiatives aiming to contain Erdogan's aggressiveness. Indeed, Ankara's support for the Fayed al-Sarraj government in Tripoli runs counter to France's interest in containing migrants and refugees, and complicates its effort to fight extremists in the adjacent Sahel area. Moreover, should Libya become a client state of Turkey, the French Total's relationship with the Tripoli government would be put at risk. France is determined to [remain a power in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean](#) as well as to exercise power to bring order and stability in the region (Pax Mediterranea) without leaving Turkey's behavior unchecked so as to shape the region in its favor.

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France has thus not hesitated to support Greece either through mobilizing its naval fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean or through tightening ties with Greece and the Cyprus Republic. Moreover France had a leading role in the recent summit of the MED7 Europe's Mediterranean countries in Corsica for leading certain South European states (Spain, Italy and Malta) favoring a more cautious "policy of distancing" towards Turkey to agree on [strongly criticizing Turkey's provocative and illegal behavior](#) against two EU member states. At the same time, France is pushing for targeted sanctions against Turkey and replacing the current accession negotiations scheme with another EU-Turkey partnership that would include the economy, energy, migration, and culture. Yet for this new relationship to develop, Turkey's current provocative behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean must cease.

Chancellor Merkel is instead more interested in following a policy of "strategic patience" vis-à-vis Turkey and not let Turkey move further away from the EU or become a "lonely wolf".

Germany is thus in favor of Turkey's engagement with the EU arguing that although Turkey's accession process is de facto frozen, the EU has no good reason to suspend Turkey's membership prospects formally. Moreover, the start of negotiations for the modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union should be seen as a leverage to achieve changes to Turkish behavior with regard to its human rights record and good neighborly relations.

The meeting of President Macron with Chancellor Merkel on 20 August 2020 at the Fort de Breganson clearly demonstrated the possibility of convergence. The two leading European states accepted that although they have employed different (military vs. diplomatic) means in dealing with Turkey and the current crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, their policies should be viewed as complementary as they "have a shared agenda for the region" and they are determined ["to work together for ensuring stability" while "favouring de-escalation"](#).

#### 2.4. Devising an attractive package: Updating the Customs Union and the Statement on migration

*"The two leading European states accepted that although they have employed different (military vs. diplomatic) means in dealing with Turkey and the current crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, their policies should be viewed as complementary."*

For the EU strategy of "containgement" of Turkey to succeed, Germany and France should work together ahead of the coming EU Summit of 24-25 September 2020. The aim would be to devise an attractive package that could affect Erdogan's strategic calculus, leading him to pursue a constructive behavior towards the EU. Specifically, the EU approach should represent a balanced position which protects its interests while remaining open to dialogue and cooperation. This dual-track approach suggests that the EU and its Member States have to be united and firm on issues where their interests are at stake but also on the need to get Turkey to engage constructively.

By reaffirming its full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus, in its last meeting of 28 August 2020, the EU Council of Foreign Affairs decided that, if Turkey persisted in its policy of escalating tensions, the EU would take scalable actions and would make use of all options on the table, pointing to economic sanctions. EU sanctions against Turkey, especially well elaborated and targeted sectoral sanctions, if agreed and implemented, would definitely send a clear and meaningful message to Turkey that it should change course with regard to its assertive, provocative and illegal behavior.<sup>3</sup> However, for effectively dealing with Turkey, a policy of sanctions should be complemented with initiatives that need to be seen in Ankara as substantial and credible.

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In the post-pandemic era it is most likely that pressure will increase upon both Turkey and the EU member states. The EU should thus make use of and build upon Erdogan's current and future needs. Turkey aspires to status and recognition for being a regional power, a "central state", with a role in European and regional politics. The question of status cannot be eschewed. Moreover, Erdogan believes in transactional politics, and opts for deals with leaders on a personal basis.

The launch of negotiations between EU and Turkey for the modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union will be an essential part of the EU's policy of engaging Turkey. This arrangement should seek not only to effectively address the issue of modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union, but also to develop a holistic and effective migration policy in the post-Covid era. The EU should thus embark upon building a new EU-Turkey understanding consisting of two pillars: trade/economy, with a view to updating/ modernizing the EU-Turkey Customs Union; and migration, with a view to re-packaging the 2016 EU-Turkey

<sup>3</sup> For some analysts EU sanctions on Turkey would primarily hurt Turkey's economy yet they would also hurt European businesses. They might also prove counterproductive by making Turkish public opinion more nationalistic and anti-Western; by leading Ankara to complicate NATO's defense planning; and/or by prompting retaliation.

Statement.

#### *2.4.1. Modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union*

The Customs Union is an important instrument and the only leverage at the EU's disposal for concluding an agreement with Turkey. The EU should not necessarily put the discussions outside the context of the EU accession negotiations, but deal with it as an agreement that needs to be negotiated with a very important partner. Negotiations can indeed lead to an agreement that would balance the European and Turkish interests. Yet for EU-Turkey negotiations on CU modernization to begin, Greek and Cypriot concerns about Turkey's aggressive and illegal behavior in the Aegean and in Cyprus's and Greece's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) need to be taken into account.

It should also be considered that the modernization of the Customs Union has been already frozen since June 2018, namely well before the beginning of Turkey's drillings in the EEZ of Cyprus. That was due to its human rights record and the fact that Turkey is not implementing the current Customs Union towards Cyprus. By implication, there might be certain member-states not fully agreeing to negotiations for a modernized Customs Union to begin even if the environment in the Eastern Mediterranean becomes more favorable.

#### *2.4.2. Update of the EU-Turkey Statement on migration*

Modernization of the Customs Union needs to be linked with an updated EU-Turkey Statement with regard to migration. Updated arrangements on migration between EU and Turkey (through a repackaging of the existing EU-Turkey Statement) remain at the top of the policy list the EU is called upon to adopt.

Indeed, the importance of Turkey has been highlighted by the EU Commission VP Margaritis Schinas when he described relations of the EU with Third countries of origin and especially key-transit states (the external dimension) as being the first floor of the forthcoming New Pact on Migration and Asylum or the basis of a "three-story building". The second pillar, in his metaphor, is the robust common management of the EU's external border, and the third is the solidarity element, implying that for the third and the second floor to be solid, the first one (most notably a new deal with Turkey) needs to be solid too.

An updated EU-Turkey Statement should rectify certain provisions of the EU-Turkey Statement on migration regarding Greece. These most notably include: the readmission to Turkey of migrants crossing to the EU through the land borders; the possibility of transfers from the Greek islands to the mainland (without losing the right for readmission to Turkey); and the inclusion of explicit provisions in the Statement that returns can take place via regular and charter flights from airports on the mainland as long as the initial registration has taken place on the islands.

It goes without saying that the EU should guarantee adequate, if not generous, financial support for Turkey, which is hosting the largest population of refugees in the world, and provide funding of the same magnitude as that in the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement. (It should be noted that the Commission proposed and the European Parliament agreed in its July 2020 Plenary to top up the humanitarian aid to refugees in Turkey by 485 million euros). This support to Turkey may take place through the Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-27), perhaps linked with a suspension clause in case Turkey decides to "instrumentalize" again migrants and refugees.

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Turkey on its part is interested in a "restart" in its relations with the EU through an agreement that would not only promote revitalization of the existing EU-Turkey Statement but also include other forms of cooperation, such as the modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union or the issue of visa liberalization. Indeed, we should keep in mind that the EU-Turkey Statement is not only about migration. In this regard, Turkey is expected to seek the recommitment of the EU to issues other than migration and trade and the economy, e.g. visa liberalization, accession negotiations & chapters, Syria, and so on. Moreover, Turkey views Germany as the EU member state that can lead the way to the revitalization of the EU-Turkey relationship during its EU Council Presidency.

## 2.5. Better define what a strategy of "sticks and carrots" is about

By referring to a "sticks and carrots" approach as the strategy the EU follows towards Turkey, the President of the European Council Charles Michel seems to also share (along with other top officials in the EU, such as HRVP Josep Borrell) the rationale of the "containgement" strategy. Yet the EU is still in search of identifying the particular tools it should use for improving relations with Turkey while making clear to Turkey that the EU should be respected.

This was made apparent in the vague proposal introduced by the President of the European Council during his visit to Athens on 14 September 2020. The proposal concerns the organization of an international conference that would involve the "key parties" in the Eastern Mediterranean and NATO in order for the thorny issue of maritime boundaries in the region but also other issues, such as energy, security and migration, to be discussed. The proposal includes a number of difficult issues which should have been addressed and clarified before its introduction, such as the agenda of the conference and/or the status of the participants.

The adoption by the EU of a strategy of "containgement" of Turkey is undoubtedly in Greece's interest. In fact a similar strategy of "conditional engagement" was adopted [by Greece vis-a-vis Turkey in the late 1990s](#)<sup>4</sup> with the aim of bringing Turkey into the European integration orbit while giving equal attention to deterrence and hedging against the possibility that a strong Turkey might challenge Greek interests.

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Greece is still interested in having Turkey anchored in the broader European and transatlantic framework. Yet this partnership should be rules-based and function in accordance with international law and agreements. Greece should be an active contributor to the advancement of the EU "containgement strategy" by co-shaping Turkey's new relationship with the EU. To this end, Greece could introduce the "positive aspects" of a Greek-Turkish bilateral agenda by choosing to highlight the prospects for bilateral cooperation on issues of common interests, such as Covid-19, organized crime, climate change, and terrorism.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis and assessment of Greece's strategy in the late 1990s, Panayotis Tsakonas, *The Incomplete Breakthrough in Greek-Turkish Relations. Grasping Greece's Socialization Strategy* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010) <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230517868>

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