

Turkey in Europe's Defence and Security Architecture: Win-Win Strategy or Strategic Risk?

The ebbs and flows of Europe-Turkey relations form a layered mosaic of competing forces, simultaneously encompassing engagement, cooperation, friction and antagonism. Though the assortment and predominance of elements may fluctuate across time, underlying dynamics recurrently point towards a potentially powerful, yet never fully cordial relationship. In an unstable and rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, important ‘pull’ factors seem to be drawing Europe and Turkey closer, with cooperation in defence and security increasing as both sides seek to enhance their military capabilities. However, this convergence does not necessarily imply a shared long-term strategic vision, nor significant alignment in broader geopolitical objectives. Careful diplomatic calibration and constructive engagement will therefore be indispensable in forging a win-win partnership that effectively mitigates the inherent risks entailed in the pragmatic alignment of strong yet not truly like-minded powers.

A flurry of diplomatic activity, bilateral agreements and defence deals is bringing Turkey closer into an emergent European defence architecture. From Baykar’s activities in Italy, including a partnership with Leonardo and the acquisition of Piaggio Aerospace, to the use of Hürjet aircrafts in Spanish military trainings, Turkish companies are rapidly expanding their footprint across Europe. Moreover, Turkey’s participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative points towards increasing structural integration. Diplomatic engagement has intensified, with high-level visits to and from Ankara, as well as renewed Turkish participation in foreign affairs discussions, like EU “Gymnich meetings” – following an absence of five years. Closer engagement is accompanied by warmer rhetoric, highlighting collaboration and trust: German foreign minister, Johann Wadepful, qualified Turkey as a “reliable and important NATO ally”, a natural defence partner: “Who else should we cooperate with, if not with our NATO partners?” [1]. British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, struck a similar chord, suggesting that the UK and Turkey “may sit at either end of Europe, but we’re strong partners, working more closely together now than ever before” [2]. The conclusion of the Eurofighter deal was hailed as a particularly significant milestone – “the biggest jet exports deal in a generation” [3]. The question is no longer whether Turkey has a role to play in European defence, but how this role is to be negotiated.

In a speech to the nation following the Eurofighter deal, President Erdogan spoke of deepening cooperation with Europe on a “win-win” basis [4]. Foreign minister, Hakan Fidan, similarly painted a picture of shared outlook, highlighting his country’s European identity: “As Europeans, we are all in the same boat. Ensuring the security of our own home is an existential necessity” [5]. Geopolitical circumstances offer strong arguments for a rapprochement. Following years of underinvestment, Europe has become acutely aware of its military shortcomings, laid bare by the war in Ukraine and the looming Russian threat, particularly in the context of an increasingly unreliable transatlantic alliance. Europe faces an urgent, existential even, need to rapidly scale-up its capabilities. Defence remains a priority in Turkey too, as it pursues “strategic autonomy”. Developments in the Middle East (Israel’s strikes against Iran, Syria, Lebanon) and military upgrades in neighbouring Greece and Cyprus give further impetus to military modernisation plans. Exclusion from the US F-35 programme arguably reduces Erdogan’s options, at least until Turkey’s domestic combat aircraft, the KAAN, becomes operable. Both sides are, therefore, compelled to explore new pathways of cooperation, in the knowledge that, by working together, sharing expertise, through common procurement and co-production, their pressing needs can be achieved speedily and at a lower cost.

Indeed, there is considerable scope for complementary engagement: Europe seeks production speed and affordability, which Turkey’s extensive industrial base can provide; Turkey seeks new

markets for its exports, and above all, cutting-edge technological insights and financial capital that Europe can offer [6]. Geographic proximity and alignment through NATO facilitate cooperation, providing a foundation of integration and inter-operability. Turkey's location close to Europe, the Middle East and the Black Sea is strategically important, and its military power is considerable – it has the second largest NATO army and a booming defence industry. Turkish technologies have been tested on the ground in Ukraine and beyond; and involvement in foreign conflicts (e.g., Syria) enhance military preparedness – which Europe lacks. For Turkey, collaboration with Europe can facilitate the modernisation of its armed forces; and participation in co-production programmes could provide valuable insights into advanced technologies to support long-term strategic autonomy. Given the need for constant upgrading to keep pace with technological innovation, Turkey could benefit from European financing programmes to sustain the growth of its military industry, especially as its economy remains in deep crisis [7]. The re-establishment of a European security architecture “cannot be done without Türkiye”, argues Fidan [8]; “there is no way around a good and deepened partnership with Turkey”, agrees German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz [9].

Yet, the nature of Europe-Turkey relations – frequently tense, occasionally even hostile – constitutes a principal obstacle to closer defence and security cooperation. In every step towards integration, voices of concern, hesitation and opposition emerge, pointing to the strategic risks of engaging with a not quite “like-minded” power. Europe and Turkey have fundamentally different visions of their respective role on the global stage, illustrated by their distinct interpretations of “autonomy” in foreign affairs: for Europe, this is understood within the context of a western alliance, comprising of partly overlapping structures like the EU and NATO; for Turkey, autonomy – rooted in experiences of past embargoes – implies independence from all blocks to enhance its position as a middle power, “a fully independent, effective, and influential actor” that is able to pursue “a genuine national foreign policy, independent of any external spheres of influence”, as Fidan put it in his “Century of Türkiye” speech [10]. Sticking points extend across multiple spheres, revealing the substantial depth of their differences: Europe criticises Turkey's democratic backsliding and reported human rights abuses; Erdogan considers this hypocritical, pointing at how western nations enabled Israel's war in Gaza and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. Europe remains wary of Erdogan's ties with Hamas, his growing rivalry with Israel, and his continued involvement in Syria. Crucially, Europeans fear that Turkey does not share the same threat perception vis-à-vis Russia, given Erdogan's ties to Putin and his balancing act in the Ukraine war. In turn, Turkey puts forward its own security concerns over deepening cooperation between Israel, Greece and Cyprus, perceived as “encirclement”. Long-standing disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean remain unresolved; and Turkey expresses frustration over its exclusion from EU initiatives, like SAFE, which it interprets as the result of “narrow national agendas of a few member states” – i.e., Greece and Cyprus [5].

Both Greece and Cyprus – contrary to most other European states – opposed Turkey's bid to join SAFE, pointing to pending territorial and maritime issues: “no third country, which occupies territories or threatens the security of member states, can under any circumstances participate in, or utilise, any European Union financial instruments in the field of defence and security” [11]. The deadlock over the occupation of northern Cyprus is a persistent thorn in Europe-Turkey relations; and Erdogan's revisionism in the Aegean Sea represents a security threat for Greece – and by extent the EU. The EU condemned the 2019 Turkey-Libya MoU for infringing the sovereign rights of third countries and violating international maritime law; and Turkey's unauthorized research and drilling activities in the region were similarly criticised for violating EEZ rights [12]. Under the Cypriot presidency of the Council of the EU, the Eastern Mediterranean is bound to come into greater focus as a strategic hub in European defence and security calculations. Moreover, recent energy agreements between the US, Greece and Ukraine add another important dimension to

regional dynamics – and will, therefore, likely play into the development of Europe-Turkey relations.

In navigating relations with Turkey, Europe is caught between conflicting considerations, as it seeks to address existential defence needs related to the Ukraine war on the one hand, yet hopes to avoid creating new vulnerabilities and dependencies – particularly bearing in mind Turkey’s “strategic autonomy” objectives, its overall transactional approach to international relations, its continued engagement with rivalling blocks, and its revisionist stance in the Eastern Mediterranean. An argument could be made that if Turkey became deeply embedded in Europe’s defence and security architecture, this would bring it deeper into a western alliance, potentially reducing friction points, in the same way that the formation of the European Union brought Germany and France closer, overcoming years of rivalry and conflict. Yet, closer relations and ensuing dependencies also carry significant risk, as German-Russian cooperation on energy clearly illustrated. Indeed, the risk is arguably multiplied in the case of defence, especially if this involves sharing sensitive data, advanced technologies and production expertise. Access to EU military technologies and funding could in the long-term embolden Turkey to pursue its independent foreign policy goals, potentially in opposition to European interests. In this sense, in collaborating with Turkey, Europe accepts the inherent strategic risk entailed in working with a potentially revisionist actor.

Structural cooperation in defence and security requires a level of trust that Europe and Turkey currently lack: the current rapprochement is driven by a circumstantial alignment of geopolitical interests, rather than ideological affinity or shared long-term goals. Consequently, Turkey’s integration into a new European defence architecture will likely be negotiated transactionally, with agreements concluded on an ad-hoc and issue-specific basis – as has often been the case in the past, for example, in dealing with migration. So far, Europe and Turkey seem to be talking past one another, pursuing distinct, scarcely intersecting agendas. In discussing Turkey’s potential admission into SAFE, Wadehul expressed support, provided Turkey addresses pending regional issues and accepts “the values of the EU [...] such as the rule of law, human rights, democracy, freedom of the press, parliamentary democracy” [13]. Greece was categorical in its opposition, insofar as Turkey maintained an active threat of war and continued to challenge the sovereignty of its islands [14]. For Greece, the “lifting of the casus belli is a necessary condition for the discussion to begin” [15]. Erdogan, for his part, made it abundantly clear that if Europe insists on operating through the “Copenhagen criteria”, Turkey has its own “Ankara criteria” [16]. Turkey hopes to tie cooperation in defence to broader political engagements, including VISA liberalisation for Turkish citizens, updated terms for the EU-Turkey Customs Union – and even re-negotiating membership to the EU [17].

Between geostrategic needs and ideological considerations, Europe has arguably prioritised the former, visibly toning down criticisms of Turkey’s human rights violations. Germany, notably, had initially opposed the sale of Eurofighters following Imamoglu’s arrest, but later reversed its position. Still, given the gap in respective expectations, Turkey’s involvement in a new European defence architecture will likely remain fragmented: functionally embedded in certain respects, peripheral or absent in others [6]. Engagement may increase in areas of low strategic risk, such as participation in foreign policy discussions or engagement in deconflicting processes to enhance trust-building between partners. Collaboration may grow in areas where interests generally coincide: in preserving safety of navigation in the Black Sea and preventing an expanded Russian influence in the region; in supporting the reconstruction of Syria and the peace process in the Middle East; in deploying a peacekeeping force to post-war Ukraine. Collaboration may grow under existing frameworks, like NATO which already has strict mechanisms for transparency and

for preventing the leakage of sensitive data to third actors. Joint arms procurement and co-production opportunities may be explored, particularly for low-level to mid-level technologies that carry modest strategic risks. Through sustained dialogue and diplomatic engagement, Europe and Turkey can find paths to bridge their fragmented relations and cooperate effectively in defence and security, even as their political, ideological and geostrategic identities remain distinct.

Throughout history, Europe and Turkey – in their evolving forms – have turned around each other’s orbit, their frontiers shifting fluidly on the map, their identities developing separately, but often dialectically. Though NATO membership marked a significant milestone in bringing Turkey into a western alliance, under Erdogan Turkey has visibly shifted towards an independent, autonomous and assertive foreign policy approach. Current geopolitical conditions may offer an opportunity for a Europe-Turkey rapprochement in defence and security; but for Europe this raises critical dilemmas, both in reconciling geostrategic needs with ideological commitments, and in balancing existential threats related to the war in Ukraine against long-term security considerations, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean. With an increasing number of European states ready to deepen collaboration, Turkey appears well-positioned to leverage circumstances and secure maximum strategic advantages. As a fragile partnership takes shape through pressure and compromise, defence and security developments in Europe and Turkey remain inevitably intertwined, oscillating between tension and alignment, bound by the adjacent space they occupy on the map.

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