Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean
Geopolitical Europe’s pathway to strategic autonomy?

Zachary Paikin and Caroline Rose

Abstract

The EU currently faces a volatile and shifting environment in the Eastern Mediterranean (East Med) centred on a difficult relationship with Turkey. This coincides with a moment of profound change in world order.

French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have both pledged to build a more ‘geopolitical’ EU, but disunity among member states and competition between European-level institutions have plagued these efforts. As a rules-based interstate union, the EU retains a strong interest in preserving the rules-based character of the wider international order. Brussels will enjoy little credibility in its efforts to affect the global order, however, without first evidencing decisive impact on a regional level.

With EU-Russia relations at a standstill, the EU’s relationship with Turkey and the East Med region now represents the more natural area for Brussels to solidify its geopolitical bona fides. To bolster its credibility as an effective and independent guarantor of regional order at a time when the United States is re-examining its international priorities, the EU must also take care to ensure that its ties with Turkey do not descend to the level of hostility currently being witnessed in EU-Russia relations.

This will prove a difficult task. The EU is not necessarily seen as an honest broker in the region, owing to the persistence of powerful Greek and Cypriot bilateral interests and Europe’s need to keep Turkey onside in the migration complex. But against the backdrop of growing competition over energy resources and proliferating conflicts in the wider neighbourhood, there remains space for EU institutions and member states to take actions that enhance their capacity for strategic action, anchor Turkey in Europe, and foster a more inclusive and level-headed climate for regional security.
1. Introduction

In recent years, ties between Ankara and the Brussels have sunk to the level of third-country status, even if Turkey officially retains the status of candidate country. Accession talks – several chapters of which already faced constraints associated with EU conditionality on the issue of Cyprus – have been “effectively frozen” in the wake of the country’s post-coup purge and democratic backsliding since 2016. As such, the EU’s approach to relations with Turkey now teeters between extremes: signalling the potential for interests-based cooperation but also threatening more serious restrictive measures.

This downward spiral has occurred against the backdrop of a more assertive Turkish foreign policy along several vectors. The Eastern Mediterranean has been the site not only of new disputes with EU members Greece and Cyprus over questions of energy and sovereignty, but also a staging ground for an intervention in Libya and the further projection of Turkish power into Africa. Moreover, interventions in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrate Ankara’s push to participate in the balance of power and connectivity game in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and perhaps even further afield in Eurasia. At the same time, Turkey remains a force in the Black Sea region, where in recent months its strategic partnership with Ukraine has taken centre stage as the situation in the Donbass region has escalated.

The EU’s ability to advance its normative and values agenda within Turkey itself has also encountered several roadblocks. This is often attributed to Turkey’s increasing drift toward authoritarianism under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, but also has its roots in the growing bureaucratic inertia that has established itself within Turkish partisan politics and its new presidential system. As such, both the EU’s status as an effective normative power and its efforts to establish itself as a geopolitical force capable of exerting decisive influence in its own neighbourhood remain challenged. The resulting uncertain effects of any EU pressure directed at Turkey suggests that a more patient European approach may be required – one that finds ways to compartmentalise interests-based cooperation and values-based criticism.

Yet, these developments are occurring at a moment when geopolitical trends on a wider scale are placing added pressure on the EU to assume responsibility for managing security affairs in its own region. Both the US decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, combined with President Biden’s recent call for a more “stable and predictable” relationship with Russia, signal a shift in American priorities focused more intently on China. In this new world, Washington is unlikely to continue viewing the Eastern Mediterranean as lying within its primary area of interest, even if its special relationship with Israel and its NATO-related ties to Turkey ensure that it will not extricate itself from the region entirely.

Relations between the EU and Russia have also deteriorated since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2013-14. Unlike Turkey however, Russia has pretensions to global great power status. The security relationship between Brussels and Moscow thus remains – to a significant extent – subject to the dynamics of the Russo-American rivalry. Although in principle Russia values a sovereign Europe independent from the US and benefits from a strong European neighbour that serves as a motor of its own economic modernisation, the consolidation of a liberal Europe
that excludes Russia has left Moscow unwilling to recognise the EU as a leading and legitimate power. With US-Russia ties likely to remain adversarial for the foreseeable future, Turkey and the East Med region have emerged as more fertile ground for the EU’s development as a strategically autonomous and geopolitically conscious actor this decade.

Nonetheless, while the European level of governance remains a useful vector for member states to assert their collective clout on issues ranging such as human rights promotion, sanctions and trade negotiations, the development of a truly common strategic outlook and foreign policy remains in an embryonic stage. Unlike the single market, where institutional depth has followed the economic logic of deepening integration, the EU’s foreign and security policy (FSP) institutions were forged before the advent of a common European strategic culture.

Different member states continue to perceive Turkey in different ways. France, which retains strong economic and political interests in North Africa, has situated itself on the opposite side of Libya’s civil war and strongly backed Greece and Cyprus in their disputes with Turkey. Germany, by contrast, has adopted a more conciliatory approach based on mediation, in part due to its strong economic ties with Turkey. Italy’s Mediterraneo allargato strategy has seen Rome pivot between a mutually beneficial relationship with Ankara and an oscillating partnership with Paris, while the Baltics value Turkey’s ability to check Russian power in the Black Sea region.

While remaining an indispensable stepping point toward greater autonomy on a wider geographic scale beyond the 2020s, forging the building blocks of a coherent and strategically minded EU position in the East Med will therefore prove challenging.

2. Turkey’s strategic posture at the dawn of the 2020s

As Ankara’s prospects for EU membership have declined and the East Med has become the site of competition over resources, Turkey has undergone an authoritarian turn even as tensions have mounted between it and neighbouring EU member states. This confluence of trends has encouraged Turkey to pursue a more independent foreign policy and largely limit its relationship with Brussels to migration issues, trade and investment.

In this changing context, Turkey has sought incrementally to reduce its dependence on outside powers in the sectors of defence and energy; amplify its political Islamist ideology to bolster popularity among the Middle East’s Sunni population and pose itself as a regional leader; build up its armed forces’ operational capacity; and challenge existing legal interpretations of maritime and territorial sovereignty in the East Med.

Ankara’s ‘Mavi Vatan’ (Blue Homeland) maritime doctrine, which aims to establish Turkish naval pre-eminence in the Mediterranean and re-assert control over Aegean islands miles from its coast, reflects this mindset. Moreover, despite economic constraints, Turkey has significantly built up its defence sector, emerging from being the third-largest global arms importer in the 1990s to the fourteenth-largest arms exporter. Turkey has reduced arms imports by over 59%
since 2011 and has ramped up production of major arms and military equipment, such as corvettes, frigates, submarines, torpedoes, missiles and sensory equipment. Since the December 31, 1995 Customs Union agreement, Turkey has positioned itself as a key EU trade partner, with the EU becoming Turkey’s largest import and export partner and top investment source. But despite the continuation of close economic interdependence, various sources of tension have pushed the EU-Turkey relationship to a nadir. Following the breakdown of Turkish EU accession talks, Ankara’s ties with Brussels have evolved beyond this precedent, characterised now by a form of competitive cooperation featuring distrust, miscommunication and divergent geopolitical aims. This has expressed itself along several fronts in the East Med and surrounding region.

2.1 Energy and the East Med

Overlapping claims to Mediterranean legal maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) threaten to transform economic competition into military rivalry. Findings of natural gas deposits in the 2010s have created an energy boom that have exacerbated the region’s existing rivalries and paved the way for new alliance systems, with severe implications for the EU-Turkey relationship.

Map of Eastern Mediterranean gas and claimed maritime boundaries

Source: The Economist, 22 August 2020
The 2010 discovery of hydrocarbon gas in Israel’s Leviathan field by Noble Energy, followed by a 2011 discovery in Cyprus’ Aphrodite field, laid the foundation for a triangular energy relationship between Israel, Cyprus and Greece – the Cypriot government’s guarantor. The relationship expanded in 2015 after the discovery of hydrocarbon gas in Egypt’s Zohr field, leading to an initiative led by the Italian company ENI to create a regional energy hub that would depend upon Cypriot, Egyptian and Israeli gas deposits and Egyptian liquefaction facilities for a cost effective route of liquified natural gas (LNG) to Europe. The EU embraced this project as a convenient alternative to Russian gas, aiming to clip some of Moscow’s political and economic leverage over Europe and NATO.

In response, Turkey has amplified its quest for a legal model based on states’ continental shelves, rejecting its counterparts’ embrace of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea which enables national territories to have continental shelves of up to 200 miles and island waters up to 14 miles – many located close to Turkey’s Mediterranean coast. Despite possessing one of the largest coasts in the region, Turkey is constrained by tight maritime boundaries in the Aegean Sea where Greek sovereignty extends to mere miles from the Turkish coast. Compounding these physical constraints, Turkey also experiences domestic financial pressure to enact a more assertive policy against EU governments.

A combination of rising energy costs at home and dependence on natural gas supplies from Russia, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, Iran and Algeria have encouraged Turkey to identify additional energy alternatives. Given Turkey’s tense relationships with Russia and Iran, as well as the low threshold for conflict in the Caucasus and Africa with high risks for energy supply disruption, Ankara has sought out more secure sources for energy supplies. After Turkish hydrocarbon exploration in Turkish waters in the Gulf of Saros and the Aegean Sea proved futile, Ankara turned to Cyprus – where it has served as the guarantor of the northern side of the partitioned island, the Turkish Northern Republic of Cyprus (TRNC) – as a proven source of gas supply. Turkey accepted the increased risk of upsetting Cyprus and the EU by pursuing exploration to the southeast and west of the island in exchange for the possibility of securing an alternative gas supply that would allow it to gain leverage over Russia, competitors in the Middle East, and its EU Mediterranean counterparts.

By 2018, energy competition in the East Med had become militarised. As the triangular relationship between Israel, Cyprus and Greece evolved into the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), regional governments increased defence cooperation to secure resources against threats. The EMGF has grown to incorporate Egypt, Jordan, Italy, France, observer partners like the US, and informal partners that rival Turkey in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Ankara perceived that while the EMGF was an energy forum on paper, it signified a more formidable political and military alliance against it. Adding to these sensitivities has been France’s robust support of Greece. In addition to a series of escalatory naval incidents between Turkey and France during the summer of 2020, the French government has called on its
European counterparts to create a ‘Pax Mediterranea’ to protect European energy interests. France has used its participation within the EU’s Operation IRINI to stave off Turkish drilling activities near Cyprus and protect the activities of its energy giant, Total, dispatching its nuclear-powered Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier to patrol the waters near Cypriot gas fields.

Brexit has removed one of the EU member states most favourable to Turkey’s accession prospects, enhancing France’s relative clout within the EU. Paris perceives a threat from Ankara’s increasingly assertive foreign policy to its own value chain in North Africa. If French President Emmanuel Macron’s vision of a more sovereign Europe vis-à-vis the US necessitates starkly backing Greek and Cypriot claims, then this could limit the potential for a cohesive posture at the level of the 27 that is favourably disposed to cooperation with Ankara.

In response to its growing sense of isolation, Ankara has employed a strategy of contestation with its EMGF and EU counterparts. In February 2018, Turkey dispatched naval ships to intercept and blockade an ENI Saipem 1200 drillship from reaching the southeast Cyprus coast, compelling condemnations from Cyprus, Greece and Italy claiming that Turkey violated international law and risked escalation. Later that year, Turkey dispatched its first drillship, Fatih – an ode to the Ottoman ruler Fatih Sultan Mehmed, the conqueror of Constantinople – to the Mediterranean to initiate deep-sea drilling operations. Turkey began escorting its exploration and drill ships with naval forces and engaging in a more aggressive form of gunboat diplomacy and, on June 20, 2019, Ankara sent its second drillship, Yavuz, to Cyprus’s Karpas Peninsula.

As Turkey increased its naval and drilling activity in the region, it also sought to impose a new psychological reality, invoking an ideological call to return the Eastern Mediterranean to Turkey’s sphere of maritime and mercantile influence. On November 27, 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan arranged a secret memorandum of understanding with Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) to contest Greek, Cypriot and Egyptian claims to certain portions of their Eastern Mediterranean EEZs and obstructed Greece’s access to the continental shelves of the islands Rhodes and Kastelorizo. This prompted EMGF members to double down on security cooperation, paving the way for a series of bilateral and plurilateral defence initiatives and joint trainings that sought to ward off Turkish encroachments upon European territory and natural energy assets.

The divergent European and Turkish visions for regional security have now grown to encompass additional dimensions due to persistent rivalries and conflicts in the Middle East. The emergence of the EMGF and its transformation from an energy forum to a loose security framework to counter Turkey now overlaps with the GCC-Qatar rivalry, the Libyan conflict, the Syrian civil war and the broader Sunni-Shia sectarian split in the region. As the Middle Eastern and Turkish-European conflicts become further entangled, Brussels will find navigating, let alone resolving, its troubled relationship with Ankara even more challenging.
2.2 A geostrategic crossroads

Turkey’s geographic location – juxtaposed between Asia and Europe – provides it with further levers to influence EU policy. Its relative stability and place on the map have made it a key destination for migrant communities that have escaped civil conflicts and instability in Syria, Iraq and other areas of the Middle East.

Like the EU, the government in Ankara wishes to stave off another major migrant influx on the level of 2015 – the largest into the European Union ever recorded in a single year. However, Turkey and Europe diverge on what constitutes proportionate burden-sharing. Both agreed to a March 2016 landmark agreement that limited the number of asylum seeker arrivals in the EU and bound Turkey to limiting migratory routes into the Balkans. In exchange, Turkey was offered 6 billion euros for refugee aid, the promise to revive frozen accession talks, and reduced visa restrictions for Turkish citizens seeking to travel to the EU.

While both parties perceived the 2016 migrant deal as relatively fair at the time, Turkey has shown increasing dissatisfaction with its terms as time has gone on. Migrants have continued to reach Turkey, surpassing 2.5 million in 2015 to reach 4 million Syrian refugees by 2020, requiring the investment of billions of dollars into sheltering them without widespread international support. The EU has only released its designated refugee aid to Turkey incrementally. By early 2020, only 3.2 billion euros had been paid out despite the deal stipulating that all 6 billion would be delivered by the end of 2018, even as the Turkish government claimed that it had already spent $40 billion (approx. 33 billion euros) on refugees.

While certain EU members, such as Spain and Italy, arranged separate, bilateral immigration agreements with Ankara, the Turkish government grew to perceive the 2016 deal as a move from the EU to pass off migration management instead of playing a more active role. Significantly, the subsequent failure to revive Turkish EU accession talks in any genuine fashion further convinced Turkey that the deal’s terms must be reconfigured.

Amid naval escalation in the Mediterranean, a war of words with France, and tensions with NATO partners over Turkey’s purchase of the Russian S-400 defence system, Erdogan announced on February 28, 2020 that Turkey would abandon the 2016 deal altogether on the premise that the EU has failed to keep up its end of the bargain for greater financial assistance. Turkish border patrol agents ‘opened the doors’ to more than 35,000 migrants on the border with Greece and Bulgaria to enter the EU, aiming to pressure Brussels and its primary EU rival, Athens, into offering more than the 6 billion euros originally pledged in 2016. The resultant crisis, while temporarily resolved, revealed the kind of rapid economic and political pressure Turkey can apply on the EU – particularly its southern and Balkan European members – to push for favourable outcomes.
2.3 Beyond the East Med

Turkey’s mixed relationship with Russia has also garnered increasing coverage in recent years – a dimension of Ankara’s foreign policy that shines further light on the geographic context of Turkish power.

In the context of Donald Trump’s election and the rise of populist political movements within Europe and beyond, some have opted to characterise Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin both as authoritarian “strongmen”, united in opposition to Western policies and the “liberal international order”. While largely on opposing sides of the Syrian civil war, Moscow and Ankara have proven able to compartmentalise their differences and reach mutual understandings based on a fair appraisal of each other’s interests, such as in the March 2020 Idlib ceasefire. A similar dynamic played out in the agreement to end last year’s Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with Turkey and Russia carving out a new regional compact of sorts despite Moscow’s formal alliance with Yerevan and Ankara’s support for Baku.

However, this interpretation presents a one-dimensional understanding of the Russo-Turkish relationship. Russia and Turkey are historic rivals, fighting notable wars against each other in the 18th and 19th centuries and ending up on opposite sides of World War I and the Cold War. In contrast with Russo-Chinese cooperation in Central Asia which has been facilitated by both powers’ core interests being situated in other geographic theatres – Eastern Europe and East Asia, respectively – Turkey, for Russia, represents a borderland rather than a periphery. In other words, although Ankara and Moscow may have forged a tactical partnership given the issues plaguing their respective relations with Washington and Brussels, geography dictates that Russian and Turkish interests will clash so long as each country remains intent on being an independent power.

Turkey’s desire for independent power projection ensures that the emerging wider European landscape will feature multipolarity, complexity and overlapping entanglements, rather than a uniform binary standoff between democratic and authoritarian states. One need look no further than the Libyan conflict, which has pitted a France- and Russia-backed General Haftar against the government in Tripoli, supported by Italy and Turkey, as an example. While Ankara may acknowledge the costs of confronting Moscow head-on, it has not only found itself on the opposing side of a myriad of conflicts but also boasts a decade-old strategic partnership with Ukraine that was recently on display during the Russian military buildup near Donbass. As Turkish foreign policy grows increasingly assertive, the potential for friction with Russia becomes more likely.

The settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in the autumn of 2020 also presents Turkey with the prospect of playing a larger role in matters of Eurasian connectivity by way of a land corridor between Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave, allowing Turkey to access the rest of the supercontinent by way of the Caspian Sea. Turkish efforts to project influence along this vector have adopted a decidedly uneven pattern, playing up common cultural ties with the Turkic Central Asian republics while simultaneously courting China, despite the human rights abuses that Beijing continues to inflict on its Turkic Uyghur population. Whether this power-maximising
strategy will collapse on its contradictions remains to be seen, but thus far it has not impeded Central Asian governments from pursuing a similar approach, cultivating pragmatic relations with China to fuel their economic development, irrespective of the fate of the Uyghurs.

Ankara has therefore become a player in the South Caucasian and Central Asian theatres, where Moscow and Beijing have nominally pledged to harmonise their visions of Eurasian integration – the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). When combined with Russia's declared “pivot to the east” and its interventions in both Ukraine and Syria, this is helping to weave political and security dynamics in Europe’s Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods into a complex Eurasian tapestry, the precise shape of which is yet to be determined.

Any EU attempt to forge a long-term, strategically minded Turkey policy, although centred on strengthening Europe’s hand in the Eastern Mediterranean, must also incorporate an understanding of Turkey’s nuanced place in the fledgling pan-Eurasian system. Turkey’s Middle Eastern entanglements, occurring as European and Middle Eastern security dynamics are intertwining while West and East Asia are weaved into an ‘Indo-Pacific’ economic and conceptual whole, provide a clear illustration of the central place that Turkey occupies in this system.

3. The EU in a changing world

The overlapping nature of the EU-Turkey relationship and the wider fragmentation of the EU’s eastern and southern neighbourhoods illustrates how nothing less than Europe’s future security is at stake. These developments are also unfolding against the backdrop of a shifting global order and continued challenges in the practice of EU FSP.

3.1 A shifting global context

Key events of the last decade – most notably the vote for Brexit, Donald Trump’s election and Russia’s intervention in Ukraine – have driven much of the momentum behind the EU’s push for strategic autonomy. A growing bipartisan consensus in Washington identifying China as the primary challenger to US primacy has also emerged in recent years, underscoring Washington’s pivot to Asia and away from Europe. A high-profile spat in Anchorage, Alaska, between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese diplomat Yang Jiechi underlines the extent to which Washington’s tough line toward Beijing is likely to continue under the Biden administration, despite efforts to cooperate on issues such as climate change. As such, the election of Joe Biden marks only a partial reprieve from the “isolation” that the EU experienced during the Trump years.

Washington’s focus on confronting China is not entirely shared by its transatlantic allies. Although Beijing was labelled a “systemic rival” by the European Commission in 2019, outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel has openly vowed to avoid the advent of a world of rigid blocs. The EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), agreed during the Trump-
Biden transition period, may ultimately survive the recent round of reciprocal sanctions between Brussels and Beijing and a vote by MEPs to ‘freeze’ the deal’s ratification process.

EU-Russia relations also find themselves at an impasse. HRVP Josep Borrell’s widely criticised February 2021 trip to Moscow, in which the EU was subjected to whataboutism and derided as an unreliable partner, was a definitive demonstration that Moscow now cares little about normative European pronouncements. Since the onset of the Ukraine crisis just seven years ago, the ratio of Russian trade with Europe compared with its trade with China has gone from 5:1 to just 2:1. Alexander Lukashenko’s response to protests in Belarus in 2020 have also effectively ended any possibility of that country serving as a bridge between East and West, further solidifying the dividing line between Russia and the EU.

This partial strategic divergence in the transatlantic relationship and major obstacles to the expansion of the European normative and regulatory order in the Eastern Neighbourhood mark the end of the liberal international order as it was understood in the 1990s and 2000s. The alternative is not necessarily an anarchic world; indeed, a new mix of economic, political and multilateral liberalism could be reached in a post-hegemonic world. For example, China’s rise may hollow out some of the more explicitly liberal norms found in international institutions without necessarily challenging the economic openness of the overall international order. Nonetheless, these changes raise questions about how the EU should exercise its normative and geopolitical ambitions, and what sort of equilibrium should be found between these dual aims.

### 3.2 The EU in the East Med

The impasse in EU-Russia relations leaves Turkey and the East Med as the more likely candidates for solidifying the EU’s neighbourhood presence as a geopolitical actor. At the same time, recent developments such as CAI and the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership underscore the important place that China holds in the global economy. If one understands the term systemic rival as implying that Brussels and Beijing are effectively in competition over the regulatory norms and standards of the Eurasian supercontinent, then it is essential that member states and EU bodies do not waste an opportunity to anchor Turkey in Europe.

Member states may already have begun to internalise this new geopolitical landscape, with the March 25 European Council statement devoting more than two pages to the Eastern Mediterranean and only two sentences to Russia, despite the high-profile nature of the fallout from Borrell’s trip to Moscow. Accordingly, the Council’s statement covered the whole gamut of issues pertaining to EU-Turkey relations, including the customs union, energy, refugees, values, Libya, Syria, the South Caucasus, Cyprus, talks between Greece and Turkey, and regional security. That said, the document also warns Ankara to continue to engage “constructively” with the EU and its member states, cautioning that the proposed agenda for cooperation is “reversible”. Whether this caution points to an effort to accommodate those preferring a harder line, or rather a renewed European resolve rooted in newfound unity, remains to be seen.
One of the most significant obstacles to a united European FSP in the region in recent years has been divisions between France and Italy, with Rome hedging between Turkey and the EMGF bloc and Paris adopting a more unambiguously anti-Turkish line. However, the French and Italian positions have more recently converged. Turkey’s 2020 intervention in the Libyan civil war has encouraged Italy to adopt a more even-handed approach toward the belligerents, while Macron has begun to pair tough rhetoric with offers of dialogue with Ankara. This newfound unity was on display during the ‘Pax Mediterranea’ summit that Macron convened in Ajaccio in September 2020.

In the context of relations with Russia, Macron has vocally broken with the transatlantic consensus by proposing a reset, drawing the ire of many European partners. In the Mediterranean, however, France has allowed its relationship with Italy to develop “greater parity”, which has opened up space for a more robust European position to emerge. When paired with Germany’s willingness to mediate disputes between Athens and Ankara, the EU now possesses several (potentially) complementary tools to pursue a comprehensive regional strategy.

Yet the question remains how to transfer these assets and successes from the national to the European level, with ‘sofagate’ having highlighted the need for solutions to be found among EU institutions and not just among member states. A substantive, strategically coherent EU posture will invariably need to include engagement with Ankara as one of its core pillars. The Baltic states consider defending their sovereignty and pushing back against Russia to be their overriding foreign policy priority. Turkey – which boasts the second-largest military in NATO – is an inherent partner in this endeavour, giving several EU members a strong reason not to alienate Ankara. Yet it remains difficult to imagine how a strengthened EU FSP could adequately compensate Greece and Cyprus if the cost would be a less stringent pursuit of their national interests.

Moreover, Germany’s mediating role may prove complementary in a tactical sense but may ultimately falter if not paired with a fundamental buttressing of Europe’s collective strategy toward Turkey. A similar dynamic has already played out in Berlin’s ‘special relationship’ with Moscow, which collapsed under the weight of continued divisions over the norms that should inform the pan-European political and security system.

4. Recommendations

A more durable European approach toward Turkey that enhances the EU’s relative regional influence is required. Its aims must go beyond finding the right balance between engagement and a firm hand – now characteristic of the EU’s approach toward Russia, which finds itself decisively outside of the European normative orbit. Rather, it must be rooted in an appreciation of the complex role that Turkey plays in the European neighbourhood. With hopes for EU-Russia cooperation in the Middle East now effectively dashed, the EU finds itself largely on its own in the East Med. Brussels cannot afford to continue being distracted by the perceived slights of ‘sofagate’ or Borrell’s humiliation at the hands of his Russian counterpart.
Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean: Geopolitical Europe’s Pathway to Strategic Autonomy?

Despite the nadir in EU-Turkey ties, Turkey remains institutionally anchored in Europe, not only as an EU candidate country and NATO member but also as part of a Customs Union that renders it part of the EU’s economic value chain. Unlike Russia, whose strategic relationship with the EU is increasingly defined in purely adversarial terms, Turkey is both a partner and a challenge for Brussels rather than a full-blown rival. For Brussels to protect and advance its interests and strengthen its capacities as a geopolitical and autonomous player, it is crucial that the long-term picture of EU-Turkey relations – which remains uncertain – not come to resemble an EU-Russia relationship already defined by an unambiguous dynamic of rivalry.

In early 2021, President Erdogan launched a charm offensive toward the US and EU. Some attributed this attempted rapprochement to the change in administration in the US, with Erdogan aiming to preempt a potential depersonalisation and bureaucratisation of the Turkish-American relationship under Joe Biden. Alternatively, heightened tensions in the East Med and the threat of robust EU sanctions (contemplated prior to the March European Council) could be seen as prompting Ankara to consider a course correction. With French and Italian strategies converging in the Mediterranean and the entry into the White House of a new president more favourable to liberal internationalism, it is tempting to view this tactical turn in Turkish foreign policy as resulting from external pressure.

Yet beyond the tactical, it remains an open question whether Turkish foreign policy will moderate more substantially after Erdogan leaves office or whether Ankara will retain its overarching goal of buttressing the foundations of its independent power. If the former proves true, then Brussels may have greater leeway to adopt a more assertive approach toward Ankara, especially given the economic interdependence between the EU and Turkey. At the same time, the above analysis demonstrates that Turkey can apply several levers of pressure as well as relying on alternative foreign policy vectors.

Europeans need to build on the recent de-escalation of tensions and recognise the opportune timing for a rapprochement with Ankara, upon which a more substantive and strategically conscious strategy can be built. Turkey has identified limited gas resources in the Tuna-1 zone of the Black Sea. The discovery, while not entirely satisfying Turkish aims of energy independence or providing immediate relief to the Turkish economy, has allowed Ankara to scale down part of its pressure campaign against EU members in the East Med. Moreover, this development has coincided with increased uncertainty concerning the long-term commercial validity of new gas projects in the region owing to gas oversupply, low prices, and flattening European demand.

Against this backdrop, Turkey began to adjust its foreign policy posture in the first months of 2021, engaging once again with some of its top rivals including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Turkey also pursued exploratory peace talks on Cyprus with the United Nations in March 2021 which, while not successful, nonetheless reflect a potentially more conciliatory tone from Ankara. The Greek and Turkish foreign ministers subsequently met on May 31, 2021 and discussed the possibility of achieving “gradual normalization of the situation” in the East Med.
over time, laying the groundwork for a meeting between Erdogan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the June 2021 NATO summit.

However, for there to be successful rapprochement with Ankara, the European Council should seek to incentivise greater consensus on foreign policy towards Turkey between member states that have advocated for a more punitive posture toward Ankara and those which favour a more diplomatic approach. In the short term, deliberations amongst the 27 should encourage Mediterranean member states to explore potential opportunities for the EMGF to engage Turkey, at first incorporating it into the forum as an observer with the aim of eventual, but conditional, membership. This would represent a substantive compromise that could satisfy the desire of those members in favour of stronger engagement with Ankara without forcing their Mediterranean counterparts to concede on their core interests.

Beyond the East Med, Turkey’s growing Eurasian footprint has encountered some roadblocks, notably the recent failure in March 2021 of the Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad train to launch. However, this does not negate the likely long-term trend toward state-driven economic integration on a Eurasian scale. On an interconnected supercontinent, a revamped EU-Turkey Customs Union would strengthen the EU’s hand on matters of connectivity, regulation and norms. Turkey’s cultural influence in Turkic Central Eurasia, an important corridor of Eurasian integration, suggests that a partnership with Ankara has the potential to advance European interests and preferences much further afield than just Turkey itself. An EU strategy that incorporates a more wide-ranging understanding of Turkish foreign policy has a better chance of succeeding in the Eastern Mediterranean itself, where more core European interests are at stake.

It has been suggested that one of the main upshots for the EU of modernising its Customs Union with Turkey would be to improve governance and advance political reforms within Turkey. However, political developments in Turkey since the attempted coup of 2016 suggest that Brussels should be cautious about the prospects for achieving meaningful change in the short term. Tying economic cooperation to political reform in Turkey bears significant potential to backfire and represents little in the way of substantive change from the norm-centric approach that dominated Turkey’s accession process.

An effort by the European Council to delink cooperation on areas of shared interest from disputes over norms and values would represent a more level-headed approach. This could create the space necessary to foster a more inclusive regional condominium in the East Med over the medium term. A precedent for such an approach can be found in the multifaceted and recently launched EU-India Connectivity Partnership, which affirms the “shared values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights” that underpin the Strategic Partnership between Brussels and New Delhi despite India’s backsliding to the rating of ‘partly free’ in 2021, according to Freedom House.

Finally, the Commission and EEAS should appoint a team to develop a new strategic paradigm for relations with Turkey that weighs three factors against one another: (a) the damage inflicted by Turkey to rules-based order in the Eastern Mediterranean and MENA region, (b) the cost to rules-based order on a Eurasian scale that the EU would incur by alienating Turkey, whether
through Ankara’s tactical cooperation with Moscow or the failure to anchor Turkey in Europe in an era of Eurasian integration and rising Chinese influence, and (c) the cost to intra-EU rules-based order resulting from a possible failure to reassure EU members Greece and Cyprus.

The conclusions drawn from this consultation and reflection process could be pursued and later adopted as part of the EU’s Strategic Compass in March 2022, providing a tangible illustration of the Compass’s efforts to tie neighbourhood, regional and global challenges into a dynamic conceptual whole. Moreover, this new paradigm could serve as a guide for deliberations within the European Parliament, given its tendency to privilege normative concerns over strategic considerations. A European Parliament resolution on Turkey adopted in May 2021 mentions democracy 33 times and Cyprus 17 times, contrasting with HRVP Borrell’s report to the European Council in March of the same year, which makes 32 references to Cyprus and only three to democracy. Developing common terms of reference may help European institutions to speak more regularly with a single voice and buttress the foundations of EU FSP.

A matrix of a similar variety could also be employed to readjust the EU’s moribund relationship with Russia over the long term, once political conditions allow. In this sense, the East Med represents a key laboratory in which the EU can probe how to enhance its ability to become a geopolitical actor locally and a more strategically minded player along several vectors on a supercontinent-wide scale.