

EU-TURKEY STRATEGIC DIALOGUE: A CONCEPT IN NEED FOR ACTION

The tremendous political changes that have been taking place in the Middle East and North Africa have stressed the importance for the materialization of the EU-Turkey Strategic dialogue. Turkey needs the EU for its economic modernization. On the other hand, Turkey's political system seems attractive to many political forces in the Arab Spring countries and can be used as inspiration for their democratization process. The Strategic Dialogue, however, needs to become separated from Turkey's EU accession negotiations. This article puts forward several concrete suggestions to increase the cooperation between the two sides.

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Talk about a strategic dialogue between Turkey and the European Union is not new. But the historic transformation currently taking place in the Middle East and North Africa has made the prospect of a joint strategy more desirable and feasible. The need for a converged policy and strategy between the two parties has never been greater. Additionally, it should be very clear to both sides that neither of them can act alone in confronting the extraordinary challenges lying ahead.



This article elaborates on the strategic dialogue and presents specific recommendations on how to “fill” this concept with meaning and actions. Before doing so, an important premise needs to be made: the strategic dialogue is not intended as a replacement for the accession process. It is a paradox that Turkey’s accession negotiations are hampering cooperation in other areas with the EU. The accession process should be decoupled from the political dialogue, and for the latter, a reset is needed in order to improve cooperation as well as to promote common strategies in the foreign policy domain. Whatever one might think about the pros and cons of accession, denying that Turkey is a crucial player with an important strategic role would be very short-sighted.

For some time, there were fears in the West that Turkey may shift away from Europe and turn its back on NATO. However, a closer analysis of Turkey’s foreign policy in its immediate neighborhood and in the regions with which it was supposed to construct new axes does not justify those fears. There is no Ankara-Tehran axis; there is no Ankara-Damascus axis; there is no Ankara-Moscow axis. Ankara’s strongest axes are with Brussels and Washington. In almost all of the recent critical occasions, Ankara has gradually aligned itself with NATO. Turkey may take its time to consider any new case thoroughly –and this certainly slows down NATO’s decision-making mechanisms (which can lead to frictions)– but, more often than not Ankara in the end falls in line with the prevailing NATO view.

After all, Turkey has limited power resources that make the country’s alignment with its Western allies almost a necessity. The U.S. is the leading power in NATO and Turkey’s security guarantee. If Turkey wants to become a high tech country, its economic future lies in Europe. Therefore, even though the South and the East may have recently gained more importance compared to the past, Turkey’s strategic interests are best met in the West and the North.

Viewed from a European and American perspective, the logic of a joint action with Turkey has also gained more importance, since the Turkish “model” appears more

and more attractive in a neighborhood that is undergoing a profound transformation. Until a few years ago, democratization was an aspect affecting Turkey's relations with the West, but in the past years, democracy has increasingly become a subject in Turkey's relations with the non-Western world. Turkey's experiment and experience with democratization could be seen as an inspiration or even a roadmap for other Muslim societies which are radically changing. Turkey's experience from its own democratization process, if shaky, gives it greater legitimacy to tackle sensitive issues such as supporting secularism, civilian oversight of the military, constitutional reform and reform of the judiciary. Consequently, Turkey may play a crucial role in the democratization process of its neighborhood.

Some might argue that Turkey needs to further democratize in order to play this inspirational role. The country has indeed fallen dramatically short of Western and Turkish liberal expectations, particularly those created after an initial package of AKP-led reforms before 2004. Today, just to mention one area of serious concern, Turkey is ranked in the 148th place of the press freedom index – ten places below last year, and behind countries

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such as Russia, Ethiopia and Venezuela. This should not, however, stop other countries from following Turkey's path. Turkey's imperfect democratic credentials are still better than what most people of the MENA region enjoy in their daily lives – except perhaps in Israel. The EU should therefore make good use of Turkey's soft power and its long-established commercial, diplomatic, and cultural relationships throughout the region. Also, the EU could use Turkey when it needs to establish indirect channels of communication with groups and parties such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

The picture of synergies between Turkey and the EU is complete if we take into account that Turkey's increasing popularity is connected to its Western and European character. As Soner Çağaptay argues: “Ultimately Turkey came to realize that its strategic value to the Middle East is not rooted in the fact that it is a Muslim power –the region has many such states– but that it is a Muslim power with strong ties to the U.S., access to NATO technology and muscle, and the ability to sit at the table with the Europeans.”¹ So what are the steps that need to be taken in order to finally actualize this strategic dialogue?

¹ “Turkey's foreign policy pivot”, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 2012.

The first step is procedural and institutional: the EU should re-launch the tradition of inviting Prime Minister Erdoğan to the EU summits – which it used to do until 2006. In addition, a regular participation of the Turkish Foreign Minister in meetings of the EU Foreign Affairs Council should be envisaged. This has been done on a case-by-case basis, but what is needed for the strategic dialogue to work is an arrangement that is fixed, regular and independent of single events in daily politics.

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Today, there is a biannual meeting between the EU High Representative, the Turkish Foreign Minister, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy and the Turkish Minister for European Affairs, but in the current situation meeting only twice a year is almost meaningless. Additionally, the EU needs to find the appropriate institutional mechanism to engage in joint action and to institutionalize the foreign policy dialogue on the neighborhood at

all sectoral levels. This means dialogue between the relevant Turkish ministries and the Political and Security Committee, the External Action Service, between Ministry units and the Commission Directorate Generals. An additional channel of communication should open between the office of the Special Envoy of the EU for the Southern Mediterranean and the units in Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs that deal with this region.

All these dialogue channels would give Ankara the sense that it has “direct access” to the EU’s decision-making system while the EU would have the chance to include regional strategic assets into its foreign policy domain. For the time being, Turkey has the chance, as a candidate country, to join declarations concerning EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Turkey, however, is asked (usually on short notice) to align itself with foreign policy declarations as a *fait accompli*. Therefore, Turkish alignment with EU positions in the CFSP has steadily declined over the last few years. If discussions could be held beforehand and if Turkey could influence some of their outcomes, this would send Ankara the message that it is taken seriously as a foreign policy partner. The same applies for the EU-led missions, where Turkey is usually asked to contribute after the political and technical planning has already been completed. Structured dialogue at the sectoral level would also lead to better coordination in fields such as humanitarian aid, refugee assistance, and maybe even joint election observation missions.

The EU should also support Turkish initiatives in its neighborhood and express its clear wish to have Turkey as a leading partner at the negotiating table when it comes to conflict resolution or talks about sensitive regional issues. One such initiative is the creation of a Contact Group on Syria, the first steps of which have already been taken in Istanbul at the beginning of April 2012. Within this Contact Group a few core countries could try to fine-tune a strategy that will put an end to the Syrian crisis.

The last but equally important aspect of a true strategic dialogue would be functional cooperation on good governance. The European Parliament in a recent resolution suggests that the “participation of Turkish institutions and non-governmental organizations in ENP instruments would generate unique synergy effects, especially in areas such as institution building, socio-economic and civil society development.”² Turkey could bring additional expertise to the EU Twinning programmes, as well as to the EU democracy promotion instruments.

It would also be a good idea to involve Turkey in the discussions on the future functioning of the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy. Turkish political parties and civil society have a network of contacts in the Arab countries and significant experience with the local political actors. At a time when the EU tries to restore its credibility in a region where its policy of conditionality would be difficult to apply, using Turkish expertise and personnel would be an added value to EU programs.

² European Parliament Resolution, “2011 Progress Report on Turkey 2011/2889 (RSP)”, 29 March 2012.