

TRANSACTIONAL BY DEFAULT: EU-TURKEY RELATIONS IN SEARCH OF A NEW RATIONALE

Relations between the European Union and Turkey have not only changed in tone and style but in substance. Turkey is thinking bigger about its own role as a regional great power and seeks recognition and respect of its status aspiration and related political moves. For Ankara, this is more important than the accession process, though the membership option remains relevant for Turkey as it has transactional value in dealing with EU capitals or third actors. For Europe, relations with Turkey remain relevant because of the conflicts and risks in Europe's neighborhood that Turkey could influence. Both sides are gradually adjusting to a transactional relationship in which each side primarily pursues its own interests.

Josef Janning*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Spring 2018

* Dr. Josef Janning is a Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and the head of its Berlin Office.

In the past few years, relations between the European Union (EU) and Turkey have been anything but “normal,” and in light of the recent dramatic changes, the relationship has become even more aberrant. In the eyes of the European and Turkish political classes, these changes affect both domestic and international politics; over time this will transform the role of the respective partner in the foreign policy strategy of Ankara, Brussels, and Berlin. In its quest for regional hegemony in the Middle East, Turkey will feel unduly constrained in its domestic and foreign policies by the accession framework. Likewise, the EU will feel the need to strengthen the integrity of the Union as the primary instrument in the defense of their interests in an increasingly power-centric world. Both sides will continue to have a strategic interest in the bilateral relationship and seek to influence each other’s decision making and behavior. In this context, the refugee deal will not remain at the center of the relationship; in its current form it will be a transitory arrangement, valuable as long as it serves the short-term needs of both sides.

In the ever-changing landscape of international affairs, this piece seeks to identify and understand the shaping factors and drivers of Turkish and European foreign policy, and to draw conclusions on the sustainability of the refugee deal, as well as the future of the bilateral relationship.

The Erosion of a Paradigm: Turkey and Europe beyond Accession

In several ways, both Europeans and Turks appear to be locked into the accession paradigm, each for its own set of good reasons, although actors on both sides realize that this type of rationale is losing its defining strength.

The decade-old accession promise still serves an important function in Turkish politics: a European liability to Turkey that is often exploited to elicit political and financial support. Although Turkey is critical of many EU policy issues, Ankara continues to valorize its candidacy status as a manifestation of Turkey’s special place and role in international affairs. Access to EU markets and investment capital is crucial for the Turkish economy as alternative sources are not in sight in the shorter term. Neither Russia, China, nor the Middle Eastern states could easily replace the EU. All of the above, however, are in flux. Currently, Ankara has strategically prioritized its status as a sovereign actor over a palpable accession plan. That being said, Ankara remains focused on its regional power aspirations in all of its neighborhood, which renders its EU candidacy secondary. As a pivotal actor in an unstable and sensitive region, Turkey is demanding parity in its relationship with Europe—be it Brussels, Berlin or Paris. To underline its claim and demonstrate its range of options, Ankara explicitly

alters its relations with leading global powers, strengthening or weakening ties with the US, Russia, and China. For Turkey's leadership, the accession process may have some material benefits; however, its concept and structure which could be sufficient for small states such as in the Western Balkans, is inadequate for Turkey.

“Currently, Ankara has strategically prioritized its status as a sovereign actor over a palpable accession plan.”

In terms of power politics, Turkey's national sovereignty clearly has to claim priority over any pooling or sharing of sovereign powers as is the basis of EU policy. As a significant power actor, Turkey will take an instrumental approach to agreements and organizations, reserving the right to step out of any agreement or institution when compliance or membership collides with national interests. Principally, this would also apply to NATO, although NATO itself respects national sovereignty more than the EU or the UN. Thus, membership of the EU in its current form, has never been less attractive to Turkish leaders than today. On the geographic and political margins of the center, a leadership role in the EU is hard to build and to sustain—that is the Brexit message to Turkey.

Nevertheless, accession continues to be pursued in formal terms; firstly because the promise of it could be used as a bargaining chip, and secondly because the EU might regress to a looser intergovernmental framework built around a common market over time, which would be rather attractive to a sovereigntist Turkey. In this context, Turkish leaders refuse to settle for anything less than membership as a general means to extract concessions from the EU. The same zero-sum approach can be seen on the renegotiation of the EU-Turkey Customs Union. From the Turkish point of view, the marginalization of Turkey in EU trade negotiations must end as Turkey is significantly affected by outcomes yet not represented at the table—the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations have duly illustrated that concern. On the other hand, strengthening the Customs Union in areas such as public procurement could give the EU sway over Turkish domestic policy, which will not be received well by Turkey. As a result, Turkey's genuine interest in deepening the Customs Union will remain limited.

As for domestic politics, Turkey views the Copenhagen criteria and accession monitoring processes as being misused by the EU to constrain and direct government policy and to weaken leadership at a time of regional insecurity and conflict. From a sovereigntist perspective, such interference must be rejected, particularly

because it runs counter to the transformation of the Turkish political system based on a strong Presidency with a clear popular mandate, a set of norms and values specific to the Turkish nation, and a national government in full control of domestic affairs. Following the failed coup of June 2016, such perceptions have deepened, and a sense of incompatibility between EU accession criteria and Turkish interests has grown.

On the part of the EU, the accession process with Turkey remains a symbol of consistency of the bloc's enlargement policy. Integration is conceived as a continent-wide project uniting democracies and market economies under the roof of a legal community. Integral to that claim is the openness for enlargement, though not as a negotiation among equals but as a careful evaluation of candidates based on the criteria defined by the EU alone. Holding on to the accession process despite the changes in Turkey thus represents the ongoing determination of institutions and member states to order the EU's neighborhood through the magnetism of membership. Because it applies to other candidates such as the Western Balkans, its application in the Turkish case needs to continue. More specifically, EU member states insist on the continuation of the accession process with Turkey as a way to influence Turkish domestic and foreign policy. The EU believes keeping Turkey close through the membership option should help to provide stability and mitigate risks in an otherwise conflict-ridden neighborhood.

Despite the continuation of accession negotiations, the goals and interests of the EU have changed substantially as can be seen by leaders such as Angela Merkel and Jacques Chirac distancing themselves from the accession process in 2005. Their views on Turkish membership reflect a deeper doubt about the strength of pull factors in the integration process at large. While unavoidable, Eastern enlargement has changed the polity and politics of the EU beyond expectation. The new diversity of political strategies and heterogeneity of socioeconomic conditions have led to the emergence of new cleavages and conflicts among member states. For instance, the recently admitted East Central European members do not fit into previous patterns of consensus and cooperation, so further significant additions to the Union such as Ukraine or Turkey would create even bigger integrational challenges. This argument could also be made for the Western Balkans; although the demographic and economic influence of the region looks marginal, the Greek sovereign debt crisis has demonstrated how much the economic problems of a small state can disrupt the stability of an entire system.

In its present form, the European Union cannot accommodate additional member states with special interests and status demands. In the future, new members

would need to fully fit within the mainstream consensus and participate without national caveats, or else their membership would further increase the centrifugal trend from which the integration process is already suffering. Even a Turkey that fulfills all Copenhagen criteria but demands special status in the EU due to its demography, geography, and economy would not strengthen but politically weaken the EU. Seeking to steer or change the integration process from the political margins will cause friction and hamper progress, and could eventually undermine the support for EU membership at home—this is the lesson of Britain’s 45-year membership. At the height of its commitment to the Copenhagen criteria over a decade ago, Turkey’s leaders and public would not have seen their country as an “ordinary” member of the EU nor would they have seen Ankara’s role as acting within the informal integrationist core of member states. The same factors which make up Turkey’s significance to Europe—demography, geography, economy—also stand in the way of Turkey becoming an ordinary member state of the European Union.

“Eastern enlargement has changed the polity and politics of the European Union beyond expectation.”

Given the events of the past decades, the considerations above have remained of academic value. Turkey has moved away from the Copenhagen criteria politically, institutionally, and economically. This shift has not just been a consequence of the attempted coup of 2016 but began years before. At the same time, Turkey’s leadership sought to change its relationship with the EU from that of an applicant to that of an equal. For the EU, this transformation coincided with a broader crisis of the bloc’s enlargement and neighborhood policies. Steering politics in the neighborhood through economic and fiscal incentives and managing access to EU programs via Brussels institutions did not achieve the outcomes and the stability EU governments were hoping for. This underperformance can be seen in the Eastern Partnership process and applies most notably to the cases of Ukraine and Moldova. Moreover, it can be examined in the slow and volatile transformation of Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia; also, in a wider sense, it extends to the ineffective “more-for-more” approach to North Africa following the Arab Spring. In all of these cases, the magnetism of the EU managed through accession and partnership programs did not result in the desired level of political stability, nor did it lead to a thorough transformation towards democracy and the rule of law. Instead of struggling with the democratic and economic integration of a highly successful Turkey, the EU must deal with an incompatible yet assertive Turkey standing tall in a neighborhood that is neither shaped nor lead by Brussels.

Towards a Transactional Relationship

In the realm of international affairs, transaction-based relations are neither new nor unusual. The pursuit of self-interest fits well within the Hobbesian notion of anarchy between states seeking “power after power” in the struggle for survival. Transactional relationships are interest-based: Interaction neither presupposes common values nor does it incentivize community-building. That means transactional relations will always require power to secure outcomes and power differentials between actors will further or diminish their chances to succeed.

Political actors must find mutual interests, define common values and norms, and engage in regional community-building to balance regional power disparities. If cooperation on these fronts fails, actors must at least agree to a shared set of rules for political interaction. This is where the European-Turkish relationship stems from and what has been forgotten over the past few years. It is important to remember this context because if the parties involved begin to search for alternatives to the “power after power” approach to classic interstate action, the option to reinstate the relationship to a community-building mode remains, and its incentives remain purely transactional. For the time being, both sides are pursuing their own self-interest in the relationship; each side seeks to secure outcomes for itself. The shift towards a transactional approach also sidelines the role of EU institutions in favor of that of member states.

The refugee deal between Turkey and the EU is an almost perfect illustration of the current condition of relations. It is a deal which meets short and medium-term interests of both sides, but one that does not address long-term policies to resolve the refugee crisis. The main actors on the EU side were the Dutch EU-Presidency and the German government, aided by the European Commission. Their principal interest was to limit and control the movement of refugees from Turkey into the EU via Greece. Keeping in mind that domestic developments in Turkey would impact any internal decision making, the EU believed that the financial support provisions would help to de-link the deal from the current state of the accession process. On the Turkish side, the government’s interest was to secure support in handling the millions of refugees already inside Turkey’s borders. At the same time, the deal was used as a tool to build an eye-to-eye exchange with European leaders, particularly with the German Chancellor, independent of the state of accession talks. Illustrative of this is the fact that Ankara insisted on including visa liberalization in the deal, which until then was only pursued in the context of accession. For both, the returns or admissions formula was a necessary part of the agreement but of secondary significance. Since Spring 2016, there have been admissions between both Turkey and the EU, though none have been implemented according to the exact wording of the

agreement. Importantly, the primary interests of both sides were met, and this secured the continuation of the deal through a period of increased tensions, electoral campaigns, and political moves in areas that were formerly of mutual interest.

“The same factors which make up Turkey’s significance to the EU—demography, geography, economy—also stand in the way of Turkey becoming an ordinary member state.”

The question is: How and where can a transactional relationship serve the self-interests of both the EU and Turkey? While some obvious answers come to mind such as the war in Syria due to its externalities affecting both Turkey and Europe, the future remains unclear. To date, neither side seems to have a definitive approach to the relationship as a transactional one, and the hierarchy of interests is not easily discernable. Based on stated policy preferences, core economic and political interests, exposure to risk, and commitment to stability, the aspects sketched out below could serve as entry points into an understanding the purpose and goals of a transactional European-Turkish relationship. Turkey’s primary interest is to minimize risks in the neighborhood. To achieve this, Ankara needs to convince Moscow and Washington to recognize its involvement across the southern border in Syria as legitimate and simultaneously advocate for regime change in Syria. Furthermore, Turkey seeks to prevent Kurdish independence in whatever shape or form, and will therefore also act to undercut a territorial consolidation of Kurdish rule. In the regional context, Turkey wants to consolidate its position in the strategic triangle of the Middle East, formed by Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. This goal will require the full flexibility of Turkish foreign policy and keeping all options open—from special relations with Iran to rapprochement with Israel—for increased credibility among Arab countries, or for an alliance with Saudi Arabia.

Securing its position vis-à-vis the other regional powers, Turkey will have to secure and expand an economically competitive position, one aspect of which will be its market access to the EU and European investments; not to mention, receptiveness to China’s One Belt One Road Initiative and Turkey’s bridging potential in energy transport to Europe. All of these are assets which will increase the recognition and respect of Turkey in the eyes of major external actors such as the US, Russia, China, and select European countries. Turkey will seek to attract, develop, and exploit any and all assets in the pursuit of its strategic interests. Likewise, Ankara will try to use great power rivalries and interests to its favor, and in effect engage in a seesaw policy, which also implies taking an instrumental view of its multilateral engagements, be it in NATO or with the EU.

The primary goal of European actors is controlling the externalities of a conflict in a deeply unstable region. Europeans will seek to prevent escalation and a further disintegration of statehood in the Middle East, even if they cannot do so directly. Instead, the European interest will focus on stabilizing pivotal actors and taming the strategic rivalry in the triangle of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey by working with and supporting all three of them in different ways. Ideally, the conflict dynamics within the triangle would be controlled, proxy wars avoided, and over time the power struggle would be transformed into a regional power balance. Turkey would be an essential part of the equilibrium Europe wants to see emerge. Since the ongoing conflicts could hardly be ended by European action alone, Europe can focus on improving the resilience of other actors and strengthening their refugee absorption capacity. Built on the model of the EU-Turkey deal, other arrangements with Lebanon and Jordan could follow.

“Turkey wants to consolidate its position in the strategic triangle of the Middle East, formed by Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey.”

Like Turkey, European foreign policy would seek to influence the actions of great powers such as the US, Russia, or China in the region. Contrary to Turkish policy, Europe’s *realpolitik* would be limited by its normative dispositions. While these may not play out as much externally as they will internally, they will shape European domestic debates about engaging with weak democracies or authoritarian regimes for the sake of political stability.

Meanwhile, the gap between the EU’s internal and external policies will widen. The global shift towards power politics and transactional relationships among the major players in economics, trade, security, and conflict management, along with a general instrumentalization of international institutions by big powers will leave Europe alone in the pursuit of a rules-based order. The Trump administration may not be interested in the destruction of an order previous governments have established but as John Ikenberry concluded, turning away from a rules and process based approach to international relations is enough to put them into question. Without the effort of other major players, Europeans will not be able to sustain the multilateral milieu. To hedge against a spillover to the EU itself, they will feel forced to make a clear distinction between the type of interaction inside the EU among member states and the mode of interaction in the outside world. Turkey, with the accession process dormant, will find itself in the outside world. That will make it easier for both Turkish and European policymakers to apply a transactional rationale to their relationship.

Additionally, the momentum and orientation of the accession track will become much weaker. On transactional terms, the status of a candidate country and a member of the Customs Union will be preserved at best, but not deepened.

55 years after signing the Association Agreement between the European Economic Community and the Turkish Republic, the window of Turkey's integration into the European Union has closed. The prospect of membership has been a formative goal in Turkey's development, a prospect which has receded before it could be realized. Too much has changed internally and externally; both Europeans and Turks now pursue differing interests more important to them than clinging to the accession agenda. By no means does this mean less interaction between Brussels, Paris, or Berlin and Ankara. The enlightened self-interests of both sides will bring them together time and again, as they face similar dangers in an insecure world.