

# A Dysfunctional Marriage\*

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**Abstract:** *A combination of increased authoritarianism and military aggression against allies has rendered Turkish accession to the European Union a pipe dream. As Europe attempts to configure an alternative to Turkish membership via the prospect of a “privileged partnership,” Turkey instead turns eastward to cultivate new alliances. If no alternative to EU-membership can be found and agreed to by both parties, the EU and West as a whole must begin thinking about how it will deal with an adversarial Turkey and emergent Eastern Bloc.*

**Key Words:** Turkey, European Union, International Affairs, NATO, Accession

The Republic of Turkey suffers at once from both excess of pride and vacillation. We should expect no less from the heir of the Ottoman Empire. Like that empire, Turkey straddles the junction of four different regions. But at reduced square mileage, influence and impact, Turkey must ask who it truly is. Is the Republic of Turkey European or Middle Eastern? Is it a friend to the West or a foe? With outsized ambition and contentious geography, Turkey wrestles to grasp and define its identity – as do the states surrounding it. Concern regarding its intent and actions are justified. Turkey may be a far cry from the empire it claims lineage to, but its potential is massive, and it remains to be seen if it’s an ally to the West or an enemy.

Ties with Turkey were deepened through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization back in 1952. NATO added Turkey to its ranks in a pragmatic ploy to hedge the USSR but there was reason to believe the newly minted republic was truly westernizing. The Kemalism that emerged from the Turkish War of Independence (1919 – 1923) rapidly democratized and modernized Turkey. This was cause for optimism. Tensions with Greece and Cyprus had already been long standing but here stood an anomaly: a secular-Muslim democracy that was strategically cooperating with NATO.

Undoubtedly, Turkey’s firmest connection to the West today lies in its relationship with the European Union. The swift admittance that defined Turkey’s entry to NATO has not been replicated in its EU accession. Turkey’s actions as a so-called NATO member have been anti-European, ranging from streaks of authoritarianism to outright violence against allies, so refusal to admit Turkey is not at all surprising. What is surprising is the EU response to stalled accession talks and souring relations. Everything revolves around talk of a “privileged partnership.” This special status is meant to replace Turkish membership in the EU and comes equipped with many

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bells and whistles. A closer look, however, reveals it to be a lazy strategy. One that is likely to exacerbate bad Turkish behavior, culminating in closer ties with adversarial states in the east.

We know, first and foremost, that almost every European elite wants to maintain good relations with Turkey very, very badly. This may come as a surprise to outside observers. Relations between the European Union and Turkey have not been easy and have even degraded to a juvenile insults. One such example is Erdogan's comments back in 2017. When a minister was stopped from entering the Turkish Consulate, he referred to Dutch officials there as "Nazi Remnants."<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister Boris Johnson, unprovoked, wrote a rude and sexually explicit poem about Erdogan and a goat.<sup>3</sup> When Turkey and the EU are not verbally slinging mud at each other they seem to be caught up in very serious geopolitical situations that threaten to spiral out of control. But neither side is naïve. Both realize that it would be foolish to irrevocably sour relations or to cross the line that cannot be uncrossed.

Asli Aydintasbas, in her research, found that EU member states disproportionately polled in support of Turkish accession. Twenty members declared support with only four opposing. Opposition to Turkish membership in the European Union is a comically open secret so a particular nuance must be teased apart here. Europe, in the end, wants to maintain positive relations with Turkey without granting it membership to the EU. Turkey wants accession or to extract as much as it can from Europe while also cultivating alternative alliances. Part of all this entails playing an elaborate game in which both sides pretend the accession process is progressing or will progress once certain parameters are met. When either side fails to get its way, they can default to citing EU chapters and rules to moralize or pressure the other into give them what they want. Aydintasbas perfectly captures the fact that Turkish-EU relations are dysfunctional, but like a married couple that argues every day, they are comfortable in that dysfunction. Even as populism rages, Europe nor Turkey wants to sever from the other. The EU's economic clout along with Turkey's geography and military strength makes this "marriage" a necessity.<sup>4</sup>

But this does not change the fact that EU-Turkish relations are becoming increasingly toxic. By and large, EU grievances are real and legitimate. Of thirty-five accession chapters, fourteen of them are blocked over violations of human rights and lapses in the rule of law. Erdogan has continued to expand his authoritarian base of power, powering up the executive

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<sup>2</sup> "Turkey's Erdogan Calls Dutch Authorities 'Nazi Remnants,'" BBC News (BBC, March 11, 2017), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39242707>.

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Elgot, "Boris Johnson Wins 'Most Offensive Erdoğan Poem' Competition," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, May 19, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/19/boris-johnson-wins-most-offensive-erdogan-poem-competition>.

<sup>4</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, "The Discreet Charm of Hypocrisy: An EU-Turkey Power Audit," *European Council On Foreign Relations*, March 1, 2018, pp. 1-48.

branch at the expense of the legislature and judiciary.<sup>5</sup> Turks, meanwhile, seem to be at the mercy of this big-man rule. Those that do protest or criticize Erdogan's regime are subject to punishments ranging from suppression to torture.<sup>6</sup> The one-time anomaly – a Muslim-majority, secular democracy – is in a major backslide whose transgressions mirror those of other adversarial states like China, Russia and Iran.

A turning point in EU-Turkey relations was the coup attempt of 2016. It can be argued that Turkey's authoritarian streak began well before the 2016 coup attempt. But what cannot be doubted is that the attempt placed a sudden and massive strain on Turkish democracy and set fire to whatever authoritarian elements were preexisting. Turkey's experience of the coup was traumatizing. Insult was added to injury when Turkey's allies and the West as a whole were either silent or lukewarm in their condemnation of it. Already suspicious, this only convinced Turkey of Western hypocrisy and designs on it. Swift comparisons were made between the solidarity that the EU showed with Ukraine when Russia annexed Crimea, and the flippancy shown to Turkey in 2016.

By the West's own values, democratization should be gradual, legal and free of violence. If we posit that the West was largely silent because it opposes anti-Gülenism, crackdowns on the press, and Erdogan's centralization of power among other things, this still does not excuse not coming down hard on an attempt at changing Turkish politics with violence. All of this takes place in a context of Turkish aggression and violations of international law, but if the West wants to convince Turkey that it can enjoy the fruits of liberal IR order, it must be consistent across the board, even as Turkey is not where it wants it to be. Every time the West behaves hypocritically, Turkey grows more extreme in its stance towards it. It is now popular, for example, to declare the United States was behind the coup attempt.<sup>7</sup> It doesn't matter that this isn't true, Western action and inaction is creating greater anti-western sentiment in Turkey.

This is not to say that the concerning and authoritarian elements in Turkey should be excused. The EU is not playing kick-the-can when it expresses that Turkey is not democratic enough to be granted EU membership. Whether Turkey was democratic enough somewhere in the last 30 years of trying to gain accession is a different question, however, and this frustration partly colors Turkey's current disposition. Regardless, the reversal of Turkish democracy is a key sticking point and disqualifier for EU-membership. But with Turkish suspicions of the west

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<sup>5</sup> Dominique Soguel, "Turkey's Constitutional Referendum Explained," *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, January 21, 2017), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-referendum-constitutional-reform-a7539286.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Zaman, Amberin. "Torture on the Rise in Erdogan's Turkey." *Al Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East*. Accessed April 21, 2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/07/torture-turkey-rise-erdogan-republic-fear.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Turks Can Agree on One Thing: U.S. Was Behind Failed Coup," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, August 2, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/world/europe/turkey-coup-erdogan-fethullah-gulen-united-states.html>.

running sky high along with a contentious history of partially succeeding and failing to gain EU-membership, it is very unlikely that Turkey will be in a hurry to heed EU preaching on democracy.

Another major concern and disqualifier is Turkey's track record of aggression towards allies. Turkey infamously refuses to recognize the Republic of Cyprus and the Kurds and is the only state that recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The latter was born of a violent coup and invasion that left many dead, many displaced and Cyprus divided. Although the rest of the world refuses to acknowledge the de facto Turkish state that is there, the pain that led to it and the geopolitical situation created by its existence is a real thing. Turkish fighter jets have been known to fight with Greek ones, a particularly disturbing fact, given that the two are NATO allies. One such incident even caused the death of a Greek pilot.<sup>8</sup> Even more concerning was a dangerous situation that erupted between France and Turkey. Suspected of smuggling arms into Libya, French ships intercepted and got into a standoff with Turkey that could have very easily escalated and lead to a firefight between them.<sup>9</sup> Lastly is Turkey's purchase of the S-500 missile system from Russia which is taken by some scholars as indicator that is contemplating a departure from NATO defense systems and NATO itself.<sup>10</sup>

Turkey's behavior in the arena of arms and defense is far more concerning than its domestic politics and may indicate that a realpolitik approach will be needed to curtail and correct Turkish behavior. It is clear that international law, IGOs and lofty morals are not enough to contain it. To some extent, the EU knows this and is beginning to think about how relations would look outside of the EU-Turkey lens.

We must ask what Turkey's recourse will be if relations with the EU utterly collapse. One such answer may be found in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The SCO looks like the European Union inverted. Its member states are China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan. States like Belarus, Iran, Sri Lanka, Nepal and others have shown curiosity if not interest in possibly joining. The SCO's mission alludes to regional cooperation in the battle against terrorism and economic coordination, but it also has a track record of defending human rights violations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> TRTWorld, "Greek Fighter Pilot Killed in Crash," Greek fighter pilot killed in crash (TRT World, April 13, 2018), <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/greek-fighter-pilot-killed-in-crash-16678>.

<sup>9</sup> TRTWorld, "Greek Fighter Pilot Killed in Crash."

<sup>10</sup> John Irish and Robin Emmott, "France-Turkey Tensions Mount after NATO Naval Incident," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, July 7, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-france-turkey-analysis/france-turkey-tensions-mount-after-nato-naval-incident-idUSKBN2481K5>.

<sup>11</sup> "Is the SCO Emerging as Eastern Counterweight to NATO?," RealClearDefense, accessed March 22, 2021, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2015/08/31/is\\_the\\_sco\\_emerging\\_as\\_eastern\\_counterweight\\_to\\_nato\\_108426.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2015/08/31/is_the_sco_emerging_as_eastern_counterweight_to_nato_108426.html).

Who is to say whether or not the formation of such an eastern bloc could spell the beginning of a threat to the EU? Turkey began with a disposition of cultivating relations with all the regions whose borders it interacts with. The policies of Strategic Depth and “Zero Problems With Neighbors” once caused it to look like a liberal, international power in the making. As time progresses however, Turkey displays more of a willingness to balance against the west when it cannot get what it wants. By purchasing a missile system that is incompatible with NATO software, Turkey has indicated that in a worst-case scenario, it will defect to the eastern powers viewed as enemies. The prospect of this naturally terrifies the European Union, but it still refuses to admit Turkey into the EU.

If the EU strategy here is to continue dangling Turkey in a state of semi-membership, the EU may end up being unpleasantly surprised down the line. Turkey occupies critical geography and has a military that has proven capable in many different contexts. The EU is also acutely aware of Turkey’s latent economic potential. This is not a state that can be bullied, played with or led on forever. Turkey has real options, and they are growing by the day. One popular alternative to EU accession is the idea of a privileged partnership. According to Altay:

While earlier proposals did not elaborate upon the idea, statements and publications following the initiation of the talks in 2005 emerged to offer a clearer picture of what a Privileged Partnership could actually look like. Overall, European advocates of the idea concur on three overlapping objectives to be pursued through special institutional mechanisms between the EU and Turkey: (i) The partnership should ensure Ankara’s contribution to European security and political stability by closely anchoring Turkey to Europe; (ii) In conjunction with the first objective, the partnership should also maximize the benefits from Turkey’s stronger association with Europe by enabling mutually beneficial co-operation in multiple realms such as trade, investment, energy, and security; (iii) Finally and most importantly, the partnership should minimize the costs of associating Turkey with the EU, which would become overwhelming in case of a full membership.<sup>12</sup>

Peeking through the haze of technical jargon it would seem that all that’s meant by a privileged partnership is granting Turkey EU-like benefits in exchange for EU-like behavior without actually admitting Turkey to the EU. It is almost typical of Europe to generate an alternative that is nearly identical to what is already being done and to what is currently causing so much tension. Turkey will not tolerate a situation in which it contributes to Europe in an EU-like fashion without accession. That the EU believes it would still be able to impose EU-rules

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<sup>12</sup> Serdar Altay, “Toward a ‘Privileged Partnership’: The EU, Turkey and the Upgrade of the Customs Union,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 3 (2018): pp. 179-198.

onto Turkey and extract desired behaviors from it in the case of accession-talk collapse is outrageously arrogant and tone deaf. Privileged Partnership is tautology.

Arguments that the customs union should be upgraded hold more water by acknowledging economic self-interest and trying to create a situation of mutual benefit. But if the EU expects Turkey to play the role of geographical bulwark and EU foreign policy expat, it is naïve. If the EU believes it can dissolve accession talks and have almost nothing change as a result, it is foolish. There must be a paradigm shift.

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