

Building European Strategic Autonomy Vs. Turkish Strategic Depth Macron's Diplomatic Gamble

In association with:

CATS Centre for Applied
Turkey Studies
NETWORK

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► Key Takeaways

- Emmanuel Macron's push in Brussels for European strategic autonomy directly clashes with Recep Tayyip Erdogan's long-term expansion strategy in several key areas.
- Both leaders have emphasized and publicized their enmity in order to use each other as a foil to advance their narratives on a domestic level.
- The upcoming French Presidency of the European Union (EU) will be a hazardous time, which could reignite tensions despite Turkey's major role in the EU reaching strategic autonomy.

Introduction¹

When and where will the next escalation take place? This question seems to plague the relationship between Turkey, the European Union (EU), and its member states, such as France. While the list of contentious topics between Brussels and Ankara has expanded since the aborted *coup* attempt in Ankara in 2016, the lack of trust between the two sides dates back as early as France and Germany's refusal to go forward with Turkey's accession to the EU in 2007. While technical negotiations to Turkey's accession are still underway, disputes in the Mediterranean and competing regional strategies have largely antagonized both parties, culminating with the European council adopting sanctions against Turkish officials in February 2020 and even discussing additional measures until ties improved in the spring of 2021.

Repeated diplomatic incidents, such as this year's "Sofagate" and the frequent verbal clashes between Presidents Erdogan and Macron² have shown that this increasingly strained relationship has even affected relations between leaders.

On a deeper level, these incidents highlight the existence of fundamentally diverging political strategies, interests, and agendas. The failure of the European component of the "Zero problems in the neighborhood" doctrine – which has shaped Turkey's foreign policy since the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) arrival to power in 2002³ – pushed the Turkish president to adopt a more confrontational stance towards his European partners. This largely serves Erdogan's domestic narrative. In Brussels, French President Macron has been pushing for European strategic autonomy by arguing that the EU has to become an independent power that can distance itself from the global geostrategic opposition between the US and China. Repeated Turkish breaches of Greek and Cypriot territorial sovereignty have shown the validity of Macron's arguments and strengthened his position in Brussels. Hence, while Turkey and France's regional strategies were designed separately, their inevitable opposition *de facto* serves the domestic ambitions and agendas of both leaders.

De Facto Conflicting Strategies

Ahmet Davutoglu has theorized Turkey's rise as a global and regional power that challenges the post-Cold War world order in his 2001 opus *Strategic Depth*.⁴ Being located at the center of the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans, he argues, Turkey has the geographic and cultural prerequisites to extend its area of influence to these three regions. At the same time,

¹ The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the Federal Foreign Office. CATS is the curator of CATSNetwork, an international network of think tanks and research institutions working on Turkey. This publication was produced as part of the project "The Search for Franco-German Consensus on the Eastern Mediterranean: The Paris/Ankara Row and its Consequences for the EU" which is a project of CATS Network

2. E. Ganley, "France Reacts to Boycott Calls; Erdogan Ups Macron Insults", *AP News*, October 25, 2020.

3. A. Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

4. From 2002 to 2016, Ahmet Davutoglu was a top aide to Prime Minister Erdogan before being promoted to Minister for Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister of Turkey.

the EU has been developing its very own influence strategy in the Mediterranean and the former Soviet republics since 2004 with its European Neighborhood Policy, while also progressively integrating the Western Balkans into the Union.

The Struggle for Regional Hegemony

Turkey's expansionist policies in the Eastern Mediterranean, a major component of its *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) strategy,⁵ have become increasingly hostile after its ambitions to position itself as a regional gas hub⁶ hit a wall in the beginning of the 2010s. The quasi-breaking of diplomatic relations with Israel (2011) and Egypt (2013), Turkey's pursuit of its own interests in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, and the subsequent rise of tensions with Russia, Cyprus, Greece, and France have isolated Ankara in the region.⁷ In the meantime, East Med countries stepped up regional integration through the creation of the East Med Gas Forum (EMGF), which aims to optimize the exploitation of the gas fields discovered in the early 2010s and facilitate cooperation on infrastructures. The East Med pipeline project, for instance, would connect Israeli and Cypriot gas fields to the

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European market. More importantly, the EMGF's *raison d'être* is not just gas exploitation, as the list of its members displays the new regional game of alliances.⁸ Meanwhile, the EU's Mediterranean countries, led by France's Emmanuel Macron, have relaunched economic and political cooperation initiatives in the region. Not only have they revived the Union for the Mediterranean, they have also created, under French initiative, the brand new Med 7 format (an alliance of the EU's seven Mediterranean countries). On top of this, the Commission also put forward a 'New agenda for the Mediterranean', that was

later endorsed by the European Council.⁹ New partnership priorities with countries in the Southern neighborhood that are currently under negotiation also demonstrate that the EU wants to extend its presence in the region, to the detriment of Ankara's projects.

Global Geostrategic Competition

Beyond Europe and Turkey's immediate neighborhood, a report published by the European Commission in March 2021 found that Turkey only aligned on 11% of decisions

5. See A. Denizeau, "Mavi Vatan, la « Patrie bleue » Origines, influence et limites d'une doctrine ambitieuse pour la Turquie", *Études de l'Ifri*, Ifri, April 2021, available at : www.ifri.org.

6. N. A. Güney, "Turkey as an Energy Hub for Europe" in: R. Bardazzi et al. (eds.), *European Energy and Climate Security*, Springer, 2015.

7. For more on France and Turkey's competition in the EastMed, see (from the same series): J. Jabbour, "France Vs. Turkey in the EastMed: A Geopolitical Rivalry between a 'Keeper' of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, May 6, 2021, available at: www.ifri.org.

8. The EMGF gathers Egypt, Greece, France, Cyprus, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, with the EU, the US and the UAE as observing members.

9. European Council, "Council Conclusions on a Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – A New Agenda for the Mediterranean", April 19, 2021.

taken under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including its defense component, CSDP.¹⁰ This non-alignment is by itself a problem for a candidate country like Turkey. However, the major issue is not just one of principles, as Turkish foreign policy in Africa and its close defense relations with Russia are a cause of concern for Europeans. For the past two decades, starting from the Horn of Africa, Ankara has been quietly expanding its influence across the African continent by using various tools such as humanitarian aid, development programs, and religious cooperation.¹¹ Ankara's recent move to strengthen ties with Sahel countries¹² – considered by French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian to be “Europe's southern border”¹³ – has irritated Paris, which accused Turkey of playing “on post-colonial resentment” to foster anti-French sentiment in the region.

While French, European and Turkish interests in Africa could very well align under the current *status quo*,¹⁴ the development of the defense component of European strategic autonomy as envisaged in Paris is highly incompatible with it. Keeping in mind Macron's tough stance on NATO's future and the recent debacles of the AUKUS deal and Afghanistan, the French president hopes to build on the current momentum to put together an ambitious Strategic Compass. The new EU ‘white book’ on foreign policy, security and defense is to be adopted in March 2022, under the French Presidency of the EU.

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From it buying Russian S-400 missiles to its repeated violations of Greek and Cypriot sovereignty, Ankara's actions were disruptive to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and highlighted the need for a more independent EU defense. Although Turkey, just like the United States (US), has attempted to join every recent European capacity-development initiative in the field of defense (be it Permanent Structured Cooperation [PESCO] or the European Defense Fund), France is warning its EU partners of the dangers of integrating into their defense ecosystem a country that does not recognize the borders of another EU member state. Moreover, as Europe's largest post-Brexit defense industry, France seeks to consolidate and expand on the existing EU's Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) as was done bilaterally with Germany and Spain over the past years, to enhance European strategic autonomy. France's military involvement in the East Med in the past two years should be seen through this lens and has already partly paid off, as Greece invested more than €5 billion in French military equipment since last January.

10. European Commission, “State of Play of EU-Turkey Political, Economic and Trade Relations”, March 22, 2021.

11. G. Angey, “La recomposition de la politique étrangère turque en Afrique subsaharienne. Entre diplomatie publique et acteurs privés”, *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, March 2014, available at: www.ifri.org.

12. H. Armstrong, “Turkey in the Sahel”, *Commentary*, Crisis Group, July 2021.

13. J.-Y. Le Drian, “Entretien sur la situation au Tchad suite au décès du président tchadien et les tensions entre l'Ukraine et la Russie”, France 2, April 2021. Full transcript (in French) available at: www.vie-publique.fr.

14. I. N. Grigoriadis and G. C. Kostaras, “Turkey's African Adventure: Taking Stock of a New Chapter in EU-Turkey Relations”, ELLAMEP, September 2021.

The Macron Method: Lead by Example and Embrace Competition

The *Rafale* and frigate sales to Greece also show that the French president has been trying to use every available opportunity to advance the vision he outlined at the beginning of his term, in his 2017 Athens and Sorbonne speeches. Not only does he not hesitate to reply to Erdogan's rhetorical and military provocations, he also frames them as aggressions on European sovereignty to push an agenda that goes well beyond its relations with Turkey. Moreover, Macron has developed a strategy of building *ad hoc* coalitions across the 27 Member States to rally support for his own initiatives.

Migration

Macron's uncompromising and publicized stance on Ankara's repeated violations of the 2016 EU-Turkey statement is an attempt to push for a reform of the EU's migration and asylum policy. The current system leaves the task of registering asylum and visa requests to countries of first entry (*i.e.*, Italy, Greece, Spain, and Malta). Hence, these Member

States have called for a reform since the beginning of the "refugee crisis" in 2015. However, Member States reluctant to host any additional migrants refuse to even discuss the proposition made by the Commission for a new Pact on Migration and Asylum in September 2020, as it would include a mandatory resettlement scheme for migrants reaching European shores. In light of its upcoming presidency of the EU Council, advancing negotiations on the Pact and reforming the Schengen borders code is high on the Élysée's priority list. The French have been putting much effort into building a coalition

of like-minded countries, around the Mediterranean in particular, to achieve their interests. In this sense, while Turkish breaches of the EU-Turkey statement are highly problematic, they have also provided the French with an opportunity to promote their views on the need for reforms and bridge divides that are inherent to the EU.

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Power Europe

The French presidency has pushed the concept of 'Power Europe' as one of the three terms that form the motto for its upcoming presidency of the EU ("Recovery, power, belonging"). It aims to assert EU values in the world and to affirm its status as an independent and capable actor. Beyond its defense component, it also seeks to make Europe more visible and reactive, specifically in the event of a diplomatic crisis. Despite the relatively low effectiveness of sanctions, the EU is trying to speak "the language of power" by developing horizontal sanction regimes that counter cyber-attacks and human rights violations. In February 2020, for instance, it sanctioned the Vice-President and the Vice-Director of the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO), following several months of illegal drillings

by Turkish ships in European waters. The possibility of sanctions was again on the table in December 2020,¹⁵ following a new escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean. The French president is no stranger to pushing for the use of sanctions¹⁶ or threatening Turkey with additional measures. This highly publicized punitive tool has the benefit of designating the rival other in a way that is intelligible for domestic audiences, thereby serving Macron's domestic and European political interests.

The same logic is at play when President Macron enters 'tit-for-tat' rhetorical battles with his Turkish counterpart on historical, religious, and human rights matters. As a vocal defender of a tough stance on *laïcité*, he found in Erdogan the perfect foil to assert that Turkish entryism allegedly promoted 'separatist' values in parts of the French Muslim community and needed to be countered. In Brussels, where France can rely on Dutch support, counterterrorism is also at the top of French priorities. On the Turkish side, Macron's statements and attitude vis-a-vis the Muslim community gave fuel to Erdogan's posture as a defender of 'oppressed' Muslims across Europe. Both leaders also regularly criticize each other's positions on human rights and the Rule of Law. They accuse each other of displaying authoritarian practices, particularly in the digital sphere. The latter is

a very important topic to France, which recently set up *Viginum*, a service tasked with protecting the country against foreign digital interference. In fact, Paris portrays the Turkish presidency's heavy use of bots on social media as a direct threat to the integrity of France's democratic processes, especially with the presidential and legislative elections looming close. In Brussels, France also relies on other Member States such as Lithuania and Latvia,¹⁷ to put hybrid threats high on the EU's agenda.

Macron's public shaming of Turkish actions are mainly intended as a wake-up call to his European counterparts

The two presidents' rhetorical battles are thus not directed at each other. Macron and Erdogan actually speak to their domestic audiences, pushing their own narratives and advancing their own national agendas. Moreover, specifically on migration and hybrid threats, Macron's public shaming of Turkish actions are mainly intended as a wake-up call to his European counterparts.

What Next? Turkey as an Indispensable Partner to European Strategic Autonomy

While announcing his "Initiative for Europe", and again in Lisbon in 2018, Emmanuel Macron revived an old French view on the future of Europe: the idea of concentric circles with different levels of integration, with Turkey being a key member of the third of these

15. European Council, "Conclusions on External Relations – Eastern Mediterranean", December 11, 2020.

16. France also advocated for the creation of a dedicated sanctions regime against Lebanese leaders.

17. Joint statement by the Presidents of France and Lithuania and the Prime Minister of Latvia on the Protection of Democracies, September 28, 2020. Available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

circles. It is clear that the current administration in Paris will not support the integration of Turkey inside the EU. However, Macron's vision and the EU and Turkey's common challenges leave much room for a special relationship between the two neighbors.

Economic Sovereignty

The reduction of geo-economic dependencies on the US and China is one of the pillars of the EU's vision for strategic autonomy. Following the EU's shortage of critical products such as masks and reagents during the Covid-19 pandemic, the reduction of the size of supply chains and the need for more diverse import sources emerged as a clear priority in Brussels.¹⁸ This in turn reinforced the French arguments. In this context, it only seems logical for the EU and Turkey to move forward in their economic integration. With a vibrant health industry and as an established major industrial partner,¹⁹ Ankara has a lot to benefit from the EU's will to relocate most of its imports. For years, it has demanded a modernization of the Customs Union, which, alongside three free trade agreements, governs the EU-Turkey trade relations. Although an impact assessment by the Commission on such a modernization clearly outlined the economic benefits for the EU in expanding the scope of this preferential trade relationship, political tensions have been impeding any progress in that direction since 2017.

However, the expansion of the Customs union could also serve as an important tool for the advancement of another EU priority, *i.e.*, the decarbonization of its economy, especially considering Ankara's recent decision to ratify the Paris Agreement. The "European Green Deal" plans to increase imports in gas and hydrogen and could very well benefit from Turkey's already-existing infrastructure in the East Med to reduce the EU's strategic dependency on Russia, which is still the main source of EU gas imports despite the complex current political relations. As a major opponent of the development of the North Stream 2 pipeline

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between Russia and Germany and as a member of the East Med Gas Forum, Paris could play a major role in supporting Turkish integration to the regional gas market.

Security

Following years of benign neglect *vis-a-vis* the Islamic State in Syria, terror attacks in Ankara and Istanbul between 2015 and 2017 forced Turkey to align with the US-led war

18. J. Borrell, "Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters », *HR/VP Blog*, December 3, 2020, available at: www.eeas.europa.eu.

19. In 2020, « some 41% of all Turkish exports in goods go to the EU while imports from the EU represent almost a third of all Turkish imports. The EU is also by far the biggest source of foreign direct investment in Turkey ». European Commission, "State of Play of EU-Turkey Political, Economic and Trade Relations", *op. cit.*

on the terrorist group. Furthermore, the French and Turkish Ministries of Interior signed a bilateral agreement on the extradition of French terrorists.

European and Turkish views on security are, admittedly, less compatible when it comes to migration management. However, Europe's refusal to host more Syrian refugees does not leave much room for anything else than cooperation. The Commission has already expanded its support to Turkey under the Facility for Refugees until 2023 with an additional €3 billion. The fall of the Afghan government in August 2021 has only increased concerns in Ankara about potential flows of refugees transiting through Turkey on their journey to Europe. While reaching another agreement, similar to the 2016 one, seems unrealistic, the establishment of a comprehensive and sustainable strategy to jointly address migration flows looks inevitable.

Diplomacy

In *A Fairer World is Possible*, the book he released right before the United Nations General Assembly in early September this year, Recep Tayyip Erdogan advocates for a deep and comprehensive reform of the UN governance system, including the Security Council and the P5. While Macron has not come out publicly in support of a change in the P5 system, the possibility of sharing the French permanent seat at the Security Council – either with Germany or with the EU, has been on the table for years. France has also been a major supporter of the UN Secretary General's plans for reforming the 76-year-old institution.

On this issue, as on several others, the renewed Turkish political engagement could actually prove useful to Franco-European efforts. In the framework of the current Joint

The EU and Turkey's common challenges leave much room for a special relationship between the two neighbors

Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) negotiations, the deep trade relations that Ankara maintains with Tehran could contribute to an easing of each side's stances, as in Libya where Turkey holds some of the cards that may allow for the smooth organization of the elections planned this winter. Moreover, Europeans are uncertain about the future of their diplomatic relations with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Conversely, Ankara has left its embassy open and has been trying to work with the Taliban

since mid-August, thereby positioning itself as an intermediary that could allow for the safe distribution of humanitarian aid. Cooperation on such sensitive topics is far from evident now and requires rebuilding trust in the Ankara-Brussels relationship. However, it is undeniable that both partners would greatly benefit from a clear division of labor, especially in the wider perspective of global US disengagement.

Practical geostrategic cooperation could also take place in Europe's Eastern neighborhood. The 2020 conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh showed the EU and its Member States' disengagement from the Caucasus, where they refrained from any military or political action. The Caucasus, once a French diplomatic

priority due to France's close ties with Georgia and Armenia, is being neglected by the EU at the expense of more pressing concerns, like protecting the integrity of EU external borders in Lithuania and Poland. In the Balkans, competition has raged for most of the 2000s, especially from Brussels' perspective. The EU might well be deeply divided on the issue of the full integration of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia, and Albania into the Union, with France and other Member States trying to slow it down. However, it stands united in countering the increasing Russian and Chinese involvement in the region, specifically in the field of infrastructures. Turkey's cultural and economic influence should thus be considered a minor issue as both the EU and Turkey's interests seem to be in line in this case: Ankara has not stopped supporting the EU integration of the Western Balkans, which would favor trade relations and reduce Russian presence in the region.²⁰

Surviving the French Presidency

The upcoming French presidency of the EU is a major test for Euro-Turkish relations, as Turkey is an easy target for the French president, who will be running for his reelection at the same time. In this context, he could easily be tempted to present Erdogan's Turkey as a bugbear in advocating for the EU's strategic autonomy. For his part, the Turkish president is increasingly confronted with a united domestic opposition already on a battle footing for the 2023 general elections. Tensions between France and Turkey might very well have calmed down in the past months. However, no structural issue has been addressed, especially not in Cyprus. Should the rhetorical battle between the two presidents continue, things could escalate once again very easily, despite it being detrimental to the long-term interests of both parties.

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How to quote this publication:

Antoine Michon, "European Strategic Autonomy Vs. Turkish Strategic Depth: Macron's Diplomatic Gamble", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, October 22, 2021.

ISBN: 979-10-373-0429-2

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20. A. Aydıntaşbaş, "From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans", *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), May 2019.



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