

Can Europe's search for security become a window of opportunity for Türkiye?

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The war launched by the United States and Israel against Iran is shaking not only the Middle East but also the transatlantic alliance. As disagreements between Washington and European capitals deepen, the European Union is also trying to increase its responsibility for the security of the continent within an order in which it will not be dependent on the United States. However, in doing so, it also creates a contradiction: looking at its current thinking and course of action, it raises the question of whether the EU, while seeking to strengthen its security, will do so by excluding a key NATO ally such as Türkiye.

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As the US–Europe divergence reaches a new threshold

The war launched by the United States together with Israel against Iran has carried the divergence between, on the one hand the United States, and on the other hand the other allies in NATO and EU partners, to a new and dangerous stage. Of course, disagreements between the United States and its European allies are not new. After Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014, it was decided within the Alliance that allies would allocate 2 percent of their GDP to defence spending and reach this target by 2024. In fact, the discourse, insistently emphasized by Trump, that allies should "put more skin in the game" in defending the European continent is also not new. We should recall that this has been voiced at the highest level on various occasions as a priority by all US administrations over recent decades. It would not be wrong to acknowledge that during his first presidential term, Trump's strong pressure on allies, with his distinctive style and rhetoric, had an accelerating effect in ensuring that allies moved toward this target within the given timeframe. On the other hand, we should not forget that with the Obama Administration, the United States, in line with its threat perception, shifted its focus to the Asia-Pacific region with China at its center. This, in turn, made European countries feel more strongly the need to increase their responsibilities for the defence of the continent. At the NATO Summit held in The Hague last year, in the months following Trump's assumption of his second presidential term, it is a fact that the decision to raise the share of defence spending to 5 percent of GDP was taken also in a way that would help appease Trump.

The tendency of the United States, during Trump's presidency, to take unilateral decisions on matters concerning allies increasingly clashes with Europe's approach based on multilateralism and consultation. This situation brings with it a serious test in terms of the necessary unity, cohesion, and solidarity among allies within NATO. The view increasingly voiced among European countries is that the security of the continent cannot continue to be so dependent on the fluctuating strategic priorities of the United States.

New instruments in European defence: the rise of SAFE

With President Trump's return to the White House, debates around Europe's "strategic autonomy" have gained a new urgency. Although European countries have increased their defence spending in recent years, dependence on the United States remains evident, especially in critical areas such as intelligence, strategic transport, missile defence, and nuclear deterrence. It would not be wrong to foresee that this situation will continue for a long time as a fundamental characteristic of the transatlantic security architecture. Under these conditions, it is natural to give priority to efforts to strengthen the European identity within NATO. This is also to Türkiye's advantage, given that it is part of NATO. On the other hand, another concrete reflection of this search that has been progressing for some time is the European Union's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) mechanism. The EU's SAFE arrangement, which aims to serve efforts to rapidly increase Europe's defence capacity, is essentially a continuation of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiatives.

Although SAFE is still in the implementation phase, it aims to bring together the EU's currently fragmented defence instruments under a single and integrated system (by linking capability development, industrial resilience, and long-term strategic objectives). By integrating the EDF, PESCO, and the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), SAFE is expected to provide a framework for aligning Europe's industrial capacity with its strategic objectives. In this way, it aims both to strengthen Europe's defence capabilities and to support the broader security ecosystem's ability to act independently. SAFE should be seen not only as a financing tool, but also as a framework that aims to increase coordination within the European defence industry and strengthen joint production capacity. In other words, it has the potential to become one of the most concrete instruments of Europe's long-standing claim to "strategic autonomy."

Strategic inclusiveness or political obstructionism?

However, at exactly this point a critical question arises: will Europe manage this process with an inclusive approach, or will it narrow the framework in a way that obstructs countries that are capable of contributing to this process and have the will to do so, driven by a reflex tied to the purely political priorities and narrow, dogmatic policy choices of certain member states?

The participation of a NATO ally like Türkiye, which has critical importance for European security, in these mechanisms is unfortunately still subject to serious limitations. A recent decision adopted by the European Parliament, which ties the participation of third countries to criteria such as "rule of law, democratic standards, and alignment with EU foreign policy," has in practice created an exclusionary framework vis-à-vis Türkiye. While the effort to protect the values on which the EU is built is commendable, in the current global environment where security and defence are at the forefront, one would have expected it to develop more realistic and creative avenues of cooperation with third countries, especially those that are NATO members. In addition, the obstructive attitudes of Greece and Cyprus (the Greek Cypriot Administration) at the governmental level further complicate the matter. Such an exclusionary stance clearly reveals the contradiction between Europe's security needs and its political preferences.

The search for a more flexible framework for the veto rule

Decision-making processes within the European Union also constitute an important dimension of this debate. The unanimity rule seriously limits the Union's ability to act, particularly in the fields of foreign, security, and defence policy.

In this context, the views recently expressed by German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepful are noteworthy. Wadepful emphasises that the European Union should move from unanimity to a system based on qualified majority in foreign policy and security matters. This approach, which acknowledges that the current veto mechanism prevents Europe from responding quickly and effectively to crises, remains to be seen whether it will turn into a growing trend within the EU. However, one thing is certain: with its current structure and decision-making methods, the EU, which cannot go beyond the lowest common denominator, has little chance of substantiating its claim to be a geopolitical actor.

A stalled process in Türkiye–EU relations

Relations between Türkiye and the European Union have long been in a state of structural deadlock. Accession negotiations have been effectively suspended, and political dialogue has been confined to limited areas. The fact that senior EU officials no longer mention Türkiye among candidate countries aptly reflects the current situation.

The EU's attempt to create a positive agenda in its relations with Türkiye (such as updating the Customs Union and making progress in visa facilitation for Turkish citizens entering the Schengen area) has been tied to the condition of resolving the Cyprus issue, particularly to satisfy the Greek Cypriot Administration and Greece, thereby eliminating the chance of progress from the outset. On the other hand, the backsliding in recent years in Türkiye in the areas of democratisation and the rule of law is put forward as the main justification for the EU's distant stance toward Türkiye. However, it should also be noted that this situation serves as a convenient political "pretext" for those who are already inclined to keep their distance from Türkiye's EU membership perspective.

In recent years, an increasingly transactional approach has come to dominate relations between Ankara and Brussels. Cooperation in areas such as migration and energy often rests on short-term balances of interest rather than on a strategic partnership. This, in turn, leads to a weakening of a long-term perspective in the relationship.

Can this become a window of opportunity for Türkiye?

The deepening divergence between the United States and Europe may open a new window of opportunity for Türkiye. Europe's need to increase its defence capacity raises the importance of countries like Türkiye, which possess strong military capabilities and defence industrial capacity.

In this context, Türkiye adopting a more proactive approach to resolving at least some of its existing problems with the European Union could expand opportunities for cooperation in the field of defence. Even if no concrete progress is achieved in the short term regarding accession negotiations and full membership, rapprochement and cooperation in defence could, in the medium and long term, pave the way for a positive evolution of this process as

well. It should not be forgotten that Türkiye's defence industry has become a dynamic source of capability development. Its UAVs, naval platforms, and missile systems have reshaped battlefields from Ukraine to Africa, elevating Türkiye to the position of a significant security provider. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that Türkiye, at the initial stage, advancing defence industrial cooperation with EU member states such as Italy, Spain, Romania, and Poland would be important both for easier access to EU initiatives and projects and, more broadly, for fostering a more positive atmosphere in Türkiye–EU relations in the medium to long term. Undoubtedly, starting with defence cooperation and steadily climbing the steps would be a sound course of action.

In this context, the most critical factor for Türkiye is the steps it will take in the fields of democratisation and the rule of law. This should be seen not only as a normative choice from an economic and societal perspective, but also as a strategic necessity. The discourse once used vis-à-vis the EU—“if necessary, we will turn the Copenhagen criteria into Ankara criteria and continue on our path”—reflected the will to respond to the legitimate expectations of Turkish citizens in the areas of democratisation, individual freedoms, and the rule of law, and demonstrated that such steps would not be taken merely to satisfy the EU. In fact, steps taken in this field would weaken the strongest argument in the hands of actors within Europe who maintain a distance from Türkiye due to the democracy deficit. Of course, these steps alone will not be sufficient to resolve all problems. However, there is no doubt that they would strengthen the hand of those who support Türkiye's participation in EU initiatives related to European security and defence.

Conclusion: Exclusion or strategic inclusiveness?

At a time when the US–Europe divergence is deepening, the outcome of efforts to reshape Europe's security architecture will be determined by the choice between strategic inclusiveness and shortsighted political obstructionism. How robust and sustainable a European security structure that excludes Türkiye would remain as a serious question mark. Relations between Türkiye and the European Union will either remain trapped in the current vicious cycle of transactional, limited cooperation, or be redefined on a more rational basis. Therefore, it will be important for Türkiye to read this new period correctly, prioritise domestic reforms, and demonstrate that it is as predictable an actor as possible in the formulation and implementation of its foreign and security policies.