

Analysis

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Summary: The EU and Turkey need a new, more effective way of talking about strategy that is not beholden to the current problems in the accession process. The format for the strategic dialogue would be “27+1,” with all the EU member states participating. The agenda should not be EU-Turkey relations, as these issues should continue to be discussed in the context of the accession process. Rather, the 27+1 should talk about strategic issues of mutual concern. This dialogue would constitute of four meetings a year, at the summit and ministerial levels. It would be complemented by a regular interaction at the working level. In the midst of the debate of whether Turkey can be a model for the emerging democracies of the Southern Mediterranean, a Turkey-EU collaboration to facilitate the democratic transition of these countries appears increasingly indispensable. The establishment of a strong and effective foreign policy dialogue between Ankara and Brussels and the incorporation of Turkey as an influential partner in the European Neighborhood Policy will also provide the ultimate test for Turkey’s EU accession. It will determine whether there is the political resolve to jointly address issues of common concern.

How to Operationalize the Foreign Policy Dialogue Between Ankara and Brussels?

By Sinan Ülgen

Launched five years ago, EU membership negotiations with Turkey have stalled. This past year, only one chapter was opened for negotiations out of the 33 remaining. There is no end in sight to the structural problems handicapping Turkey’s accession prospects, but urgent foreign and security issues cannot wait. The EU and Turkey need a new, more effective way of talking about strategy that is not beholden to the current problems in the accession process. An effective foreign policy dialogue can complement the accession process and could even help to re-invigorate it by reminding all sides of the vast array of mutual interests that the 27 EU countries and Turkey share.

Why Start a Strategic Dialogue?

Currently, there is no forum for dialogue on strategic issues between the EU and Turkey. Before the Lisbon Treaty came into effect, Turkish ministers could discuss foreign policy issues during Troika meetings with the European Union’s High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, and the current and future presidencies. Previously, Turkish ministers also met their EU counterparts at the intergovernmental conference to open accession negotia-

tions every six months. But now that there are hardly any more chapters to open, there is little chance to meet.

This system is in any case being replaced with a new role for Catherine Ashton, Solana’s successor as high representative. While the new system and the new service are being set up, the EU has an opportunity to rethink how it engages with Turkey on foreign policy issues, and create a new channel for dialogue at the level of Ashton, and indeed other political levels.

Turkey is more than a strategic partner of the EU; for Turkey, the EU is more than a foreign country with which it has diplomatic relations. In the early part of the past decade, Turkey was positively inclined to follow EU preferences in foreign policy, even aligning itself with common foreign and security policy positions. In recent years, as the pace of accession negotiations has slowed, Turkey has moved into a more neutral position, assessing each case on its merits, and stepping out of line with the EU more often, most notably on Iran.

Turkey’s regional engagement is sometimes seen as a threat to the EU’s influence, but it could be a great opportunity if they work in tandem.

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Turkey's own success is having an impressive demonstration effect in the wider Middle East thanks to its status as a majority Muslim country with enhanced democratic standards, a pluralistic political system, and a vibrant economy. Deep engagement with such a country will itself further the EU's goals in creating a more democratic, economically open, and better governed wider Middle East. By embedding Turkish foreign policy in a deep engagement with EU structures and policies, Europeans could invigorate and enhance their own engagement in a region central to their interests.

The Strategic Dialogue in Practice

In each case, the format would be "27+1," with all the EU member states participating. The agenda should not be EU-Turkey relations, as these issues should continue to be discussed in the context of the accession process. Rather, the 27+1 should talk about strategic issues of mutual concern, particularly in the region surrounding Turkey and the current EU members. This dialogue would constitute of four meetings a year, at the summit and ministerial levels. It would be complemented by a regular interaction at the working level.¹

- **Annual Summit.** Once a year, European Council President Herman van Rompuy should chair a special summit on strategic issues in the wider neighborhood, with Turkey represented at the prime ministerial and/or presidential level.
- **Ministerial.** The Turkish foreign minister and the EU high representative need discussions that are regular but relatively informal. If the dialogue is not institutionalized, it risks being disrupted by the ups and downs of the accession process and Turkish politics. But if such a dialogue is formalized, it risks being blocked by all of

the factors that have blocked the accession process. The best solution is to make use of the informal "Gymnich" format. Turkey has been attending special sessions for candidate countries at the Gymnich since accession negotiations began five years ago. This participation should now be scaled up to a foreign policy dialogue between the Turkish foreign minister and his 27 counterparts, chaired by Ashton.

- **Working Level.** The European External Action Service (EEAS) will need to find a way to work with the political directors of the EU's foreign ministries, and Turkey could be involved in some of these new forms of cooperation. The Lisbon Treaty replaced the useful format of the 27 political directors' meeting prior to the Troika. Now this format could be used to prepare and underpin the political-level meetings of an annual summit and two ministerials a year.

Turkey recently proposed a regular dialogue with the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) ambassadors and informal policy planning talks. This suggestion makes sense, especially as the PSC has now gained a permanent chair, who could ensure that key regional issues are covered systematically, including areas where Turkey seeks greater involvement, such as the Balkans.

In addition, regular consultations with the Council working groups and Turkish experts should also be envisaged. In particular, Turkey could contribute its insight to the Council working groups on the Balkans and the working group on the Middle East.

The Strategic Dialogue and its Problems

As much a winning strategy as it may appear, the establishment of a strategic dialogue in foreign policy between Ankara and Brussels faces a series of obstacles. The first obstacle is one of perception. Turkish authorities viewed such offers as the first step towards the much maligned "privileged partnership," the objective championed by the Turkey-skeptics in Europe as the alternative to Turkey's EU membership. This was the perception that influenced Ankara's thinking in past years. But with the deadlock of the negotiations, Ankara warmed up to the idea of creating not an alternative but a complementary structure that would enable Turkey and the EU to cooperate in areas of common concern. Cooperation in home affairs and the

¹ For a more detailed account of the foreign policy dialogue refer to Sinan Ulgen and Heather Grabbe, "The Way forward for Turkey and the EU: A Strategic dialogue on foreign policy." Carnegie Europe, December 2010. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=42129>



progress towards visa facilitation and eventual liberalization would be the other pillar of this new structure of cooperation. Ankara also views the foreign policy cooperation as essentially benefiting Brussels. Turkish policymakers tend to belittle the EU as a foreign policy actor. They consider the EU as an ineffectual foreign policy player especially in the Middle East where Turkey's recent diplomatic activism has helped Ankara to acquire a more visible and influential role. The consensus view among Turkish diplomats is that the EU has very little to bring to the table. This view is also changing as the EU is starting, after the Lisbon Treaty, to acquire the tools and capacities to implement a more unified and effective foreign policy. The creation of the EEAS will certainly help Brussels to shed its negative image in foreign policy. The visibility that the High Representative Ashton acquired in critical issues of bearing to Turkey such as the Iranian nuclear problem was also helpful. Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu and Ashton have established a close working relationship on many of these issues.

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As a result, Ankara's approach to foreign policy cooperation with Brussels was transformed. Turkey took the lead in July 2010 by submitting a set of concrete proposals for "strengthening the Turkey-EU strategic dialogue." The proposals referred to the invitation of Turkish leaders to EU Council meetings, the participation of the Turkish foreign minister in select EU Foreign Affairs Council meetings and regular meetings between the chairman of the Political and Security Committee and the Turkish Permanent Representative in Brussels. The EU side eventually responded to these proposals in December 2010 and accepted only a few of Ankara's suggestions. Turkish policymakers considered the EU response to be too timid and restrained in scope to be acceptable. For instance Brussels had refused Turkish

participation in the Council working party on the Balkans as well as the participation of Turkish political representatives in EU Councils. Despite Ashton's willingness to set up such a framework, a number of EU member states had joined forces to scale down the level of ambition. Interestingly, some of these member states are pro-enlargement and pro-Turkey countries fearing that the gradual extension of the sphere of cooperation between Ankara and Brussels would lead Turkish policymakers to lose interest in the goal of membership.

Turkish policymakers also contend that the EU should demonstrate its goodwill by lifting the veto on the common foreign and security policy chapter of the negotiations. They argue that Brussels cannot continue to block this chapter where the parties are to discuss their foreign policy with a view to harmonize it while at the same time strive to establish a strategic dialogue on foreign policy with Turkey. A related problem is the lack of a security agreement between Ankara and Brussels due to the Cypriot veto. As a result, even if a regular dialogue is held, the EU representatives would be restricted in the type of information, analysis, and intelligence that they could share with their Turkish counterparts, greatly undermining the value of the dialogue for Turkey.

Finally, the *ad hoc* political and military alliance created by France to coordinate the international community's reaction to Libya is set to be a handicap for Turkey-EU rapprochement in foreign policy. The French decision to specifically exclude Turkey and NATO from this alliance has upset Turkish authorities. The view in Ankara is that despite its reassurance that it wants to improve the bilateral relationship beyond the EU membership issue, Paris views Ankara as a strategic rival. This is the explanation for excluding Turkey from this alliance and for rapidly forging ahead with military strikes at a time when the Libyan regime had specifically asked Turkey and Malta to intervene as mediators between the regime and its opponents.

Despite these outstanding problems, Ankara and Brussels continue to discuss the possibility of strengthening their foreign policy dialogue. This is the result of a realistic assessment concerning the fate of the accession negotiations. The evaluation is that unless the Cyprus question is settled or some of the Turkey-skeptic political leaders in the European capitals are replaced, the negotiations will



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not gather pace. Therefore, a new framework of cooperation underpinned by a foreign policy dialogue can be instrumental in safeguarding a degree of momentum in the Turkey-EU relationship and prevent the relationship from turning acrimonious.

In addition, the momentous events taking place in the Middle East and Africa have the potential to radically alter the political calculus related to the launch of a foreign policy dialogue between Turkey and the EU. In the midst of the debate of whether Turkey can be a model for the emerging democracies of the southern Mediterranean, a Turkey-EU collaboration to facilitate the democratic transition of these countries appears increasingly indispensable.

The Strategic Dialogue and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP)

The significance of the recent developments in the Arab world cannot be overemphasized. The wave of mass protests has finally paved the way for a transition to democracy in the region. This is, however, only a window of opportunity with no pre-determined outcomes. The onset of the “Arab spring” has led to a radical rethink of the way the international community and the EU should engage with the region. It is clear that old policies cannot be made to fit the new realities. The EU is revisiting its neighborhood policy and taking stock of the evolving situation in the Arab world so as to develop new tools and policies under the ENP. The European Commission and the EEAS have recently proposed a “Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity”² as an overhaul of the southern dimension of the ENP.

Turkey has also been very engaged in this region. Turkey’s growing involvement in the Middle East is one of the most salient features of its new foreign policy. The reasons for this heightened activism are manifold, led by the desire to transform Turkey into a regional power and an “order setter” in the Middle East. Accordingly, Ankara followed the protests in the Arab world very closely. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the first leader in the region to openly call for the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to

resign. His speech was televised in real time across the Arab world by Al-Jazeera. The Turkish president was the first Western head of state to meet with the head of the National Council in Egypt. In parallel, Turkey organized the largest civilian evacuation of its history by repatriating 18,000 of its citizens from Libya in a matter of days.

There is therefore a very strong case to be made for Turkey, as a visible and influential regional power to work in tandem with the EU for helping the democratic transition in the southern Mediterranean. The Turkey-EU collaboration in this sphere cannot, however, be limited to the foreign policy dialogue set out in the previous section. Helping Arab societies in their bid to succeed with their democratic transition requires a much more ambitious and comprehensive framework of collaboration between Ankara and Brussels. Ideally, the two sides should be able to harmonize their revitalized policies of engagement with the Arab world. The scope, import, and significance of this present day challenge merit the elaboration of a new governance structure for this endeavor.

The answer lies in reforming the governance of the ENP, or at least as it pertains to the Southern Neighborhood. Turkey should be allowed to join the ENP structures almost as a virtual member state. In return, Ankara can be asked to contribute to the ENP budget as it does, for instance, for FP7 programs, where it enjoys the same status as EU

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² European Commission and High Representative, “A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean.” COM (2011) 200 FINAL, March 8th 2011. Also see “A new neighbourhood policy for the EU” by Charles Grant, Center for European Reform, March 2011. http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/pb_grant_neighbourhood_11march11.pdf



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member states. The idea of allowing “partner” countries to contribute to the ENP is not new in itself. Already when the ENP was launched, Turkey and Russia had asked to be associated with this new policy as a “partner.” More recently, Switzerland asked to be associated with the “Eastern Partnership,” another dimension of the ENP. There is, as of yet, no room for “partner” countries in the current institutional design of the ENP.³

Opening the ENP to “partner” countries and, in particular to Turkey, would provide the following potential areas of collaboration to be explored and implemented:

- **Private sector development.** An economic reform agenda focusing on private sector development should accompany the democratic reform process in the Arab world. As diagnosed by World Bank experts in their 2008 study of the Arab economies,⁴ the main failure of the Arab states lies in their inability to nurture the development of a strong and independent private sector. The study had highlighted the prevalence of two obstacles — patronage networks and connected lending, which limits access to capital to regime-friendly enterprise owners. Turkey has a valuable and, to a large extent, transposable experience in private sector development. Turkish institutions are already active in exporting this know-how to Turkey’s neighbors. The Istanbul Stock Exchange is advising Syrian authorities on the overhaul of the stock exchange in Damascus. The Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB) is advising the Islamic Development Bank on the experience of free industrial zones in Islamic countries. The TOBB was also involved in the establishment and operation of the Jenin Industrial Zone in Palestine.
- **Regulatory reform.** Turkey is already well advanced in its process of regulatory reform. As a result, Turkey was able to establish a number of highly competent independent regulatory authorities. The Competition Board has, for instance, been commended by the OECD following its peer review as a model for other
- **emerging countries.** A twinning program can possibly be launched between Turkish regulatory authorities (competition, telecoms, energy, banking, securities, central bank) and its counterparts in the Arab world.
- **Education.** Turkey can be the focus of a student exchange program involving the southern ENP countries. The liberal visa regime of Ankara and the existing capacity for higher education services can be leveraged to launch an “Erasmus- like” system of student exchange with the Arab countries. Already almost 17,000 foreign students are attending Turkish universities.
- **Social policy.** The recent Turkish experience in overhauling the health system and the mass housing policy would be of significant relevance to Arab economies. Despite the high degree of informality affecting the jobs market, Turkey was able to implement a highly popular quasi-universal coverage in health. Similarly the success of the Mass Housing Administration (MHA), a government agency, in producing affordable housing projects based on the public private partnership is to be noted. The MHA was recently asked by the Chavez government to export its know-how and business model to Venezuela in return of a barter trade involving the export of oil to Turkey.
- **Political institutions.** Despite its well known and well publicized shortcomings, Turkey’s democratic experience and its political institutions remain of interest to Arab policymakers. In the wake of his visit to Egypt, where he met the representatives of almost all the different political parties ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to Wafd and including the youth reformers, Turkish President Abdullah Gul said that without exception his interlocutors asked to be invited to Turkey to learn more about the country’s political institutions and its political parties.
- **Civil-military relations.** Turkey is host to the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) training center in Ankara. The center is organizing courses for PfP countries on topics such as border security control, civil military cooperation, humanitarian relief operations, and combating organized crimes. The center can be entrusted with a mission to provide similar training to the military personnel of the Arab countries.

³The Union for the Mediterranean would actually be an exception with its multilateral format. However the UfM framework is not suited for the governance of an ambitious program of democratic and economic reforms.

⁴“From privilege to competition: unlocking private led growth in the Middle East and North Africa,” World Bank, 2008. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMENA/Resources/Privilege_complete_final.pdf

Foreign Policy Dialogue as the Ultimate Test of the Compatibility of Strategic Cultures

The establishment of a strong and effective foreign policy dialogue between Ankara and Brussels and the incorporation of Turkey as an influential partner in the European Neighborhood Policy will also provide the ultimate test for Turkey's EU accession. It will determine whether there is the political resolve to jointly address issues of common concern. Indeed if the two sides cannot combine their strengths to better tackle the dilemmas of democratic transition in their common neighborhood, at a time of acute need, how can one continue to champion the case for Turkish accession? These circumstances will lead Ankara and Brussels to drift apart. The goal of a shared vision and common future will be replaced by a sense of competition and rivalry. The end game will involve carving out individual spheres of influence in the ENP countries. Such an outcome would also severely handicap overall policy effectiveness. Instead of policy cooperation and capacity expansion, the international system would end up with policy duplication and competition.

If Ankara and Brussels can however elaborate the right structure to work together on foreign policy including neighborhood policy, this would not only improve the effectiveness of ENP but also alleviate the trust deficit between Ankara and Brussels. It would provide a definitive answer to the role that Turkey could potentially play as an EU member state. It would also help to assuage fears that Turkish accession would "dilute" the EU. On the contrary, a successful foreign policy collaboration between Ankara and Brussels would prove Turkish claims that the EU can become a more effective and influential global actor with Turkish accession.

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