



From partners to rivals? The future of EU-Turkey relations

by Luigi Scazzieri

23 June 2021

Relations between the EU and Turkey have become fractious. In 2018, the EU froze Turkish accession negotiations in response to the deterioration of Turkish democracy. Ankara's naval operations near Greek islands and Cyprus further increased tensions with Europe, as exemplified last summer by a collision between Turkish and Greek ships and a standoff between a Turkish and a French ship near Libya. Ankara's involvement in the Libyan and Syrian conflicts has also led many Europeans to see Turkey's policies in the Middle East as destabilising.

In his latest CER policy brief '[From partners to rivals? The future of EU-Turkey relations](#)', Luigi Scazzieri assesses the deterioration in the EU-Turkey relationship and the dynamics that are shaping relations, offering recommendations for how the EU should temper friction and try to maintain essential co-operation. Last year, EU leaders agreed on a 'carrot and stick' strategy, threatening sanctions if Turkey did not halt its actions against Cyprus and Greece, while also stating that they were ready to launch a 'positive agenda' centred on deepening trade.

In early 2021, Turkey signalled that it wanted better relations with the EU, pausing its naval operations near Greece and Cyprus and resuming diplomacy with Greece. But there is little chance of a genuine improvement in relations in the near term. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign and domestic policies will continue to cause friction with the EU. Erdoğan has not eased internal repression, while talks with Greece and negotiations over Cyprus are unlikely to make progress. At the same time an assertive, militarised foreign policy remains popular with many Turkish voters and tensions with Europe and the US could flare up again.

In the near-term EU-Turkey relations will almost inevitably continue to be characterised by a degree of tension. But Turkey remains an important partner for the EU in migration and in foreign policy. The Union has a fine line to tread: it must protect its interests while trying to reduce friction and preserving the possibility of a more amicable partnership in future. The EU's biggest incentive, the modernisation of its customs union with Turkey, could inject a more positive dynamic in the relationship and spur reforms in Turkey, especially if concluding negotiations was tied to a strengthening of human rights and democracy. But even if member-states agree to open talks, negotiations are likely to proceed very slowly.

Europe's focus will have to be on trying to prevent renewed tensions. The EU should encourage Greece and Turkey to negotiate on their differences, promote dialogue in Cyprus and try to reduce tensions between Turkey and other states in the Middle East. At the same time, the EU should try to shore up its partnership with Ankara in migration, by agreeing a new long-term funding package to support the millions of refugees in Turkey, and by co-operating in foreign policy, especially in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. Finally, Luigi considers the question of Turkey's EU accession negotiations. He argues that ending negotiations would not solve any of the existing issues but would risk pushing Turkey further away from the West.

Luigi Scazzieri, author of the policy brief said: "*Relations with Turkey will be one of the main issues facing EU leaders when they meet this week. Despite hopes of a better relationship after the dangerous tensions of last year, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign and domestic policies will continue to cause friction with the EU and prevent an improvement in relations. The Union will have to focus on preventing a resurgence of tensions in the eastern Mediterranean while trying to maintain essential co-operation with Turkey in migration and foreign policy.*"

Note for editors:

For further information on the new research and to request an interview with Luigi Scazzieri [@LScazzieri](#), please contact Rosie Giorgi in the CER press office on pressoffice@cer.eu or +44 (207) 233 1199.

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