# Turkey and Europe in a Changing Global Order

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We are living in an era of reordering. The global order is being challenged not only by Russia and China but also by the United States (US). Normative and geopolitical revisionism has become commonplace. The old European security order was conceived within a US-centric framework and designed in cooperation with Russia. After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, that order became directed against Moscow, yet still underwritten by Washington. Under President Donald Trump, however, Europeans are pursuing security against Russia but potentially without the US. At the global level, Europe finds it challenging to navigate power politics, in contrast to other actors, such as the US, Russia, China, or India.

Reordering is affecting Turkey's relationships with Europe and the rest of the CITRUS group, which comprises China, India, Turkey, Russia, and the US. Geopolitically, Turkey is moving closer to Europe—as opposed to the European Union (EU)—and to the US. It is also gradually and subtly distancing itself from Russia and rethinking the strategic rationale that lay behind its rapprochement with Moscow between 2016 and 2023. This realignment towards Europe echoes shifts in Turkey's foreign policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historically, global watershed moments like systemic wars or regional conflicts have redefined Turkey's relations with Europe and the West. The current transformative period for the global and European orders is having a similar impact.

With other members of the CITRUS group, however, there is continuity. Turkey's ties with China are not changing dramatically and remain focused on the economy, rather than on geopolitics. Still, Ankara is less sanguine than in the past about joining Beijing-led frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. As for India, Turkey sees its relationship partly through its alliance with Pakistan and less as a bilateral matter with strategic significance; the same goes for the way India sees its relations with Turkey.

## Historical legacies

Over the last two centuries, three watershed moments have shaped Turkey's relations with Europe and the West: the Crimean War of 1853–6; the Cold War and Turkey's 1952 accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO); and the end of the Cold War.[1] During the first two moments, geopolitics drew both sides closer together; this created some pressure for domestic political convergence as well, particularly as Turkey attempted to align its political order with that of European powers.[2] In the third instance, geopolitics and domestic politics temporarily widened the gap between the two sides, which later converged.

The question of Russia has long been central in Ottoman and Turkish elites' thinking on international affairs, their image of their country's place in the world, and the nature of Turkey's relations with the West. Closer alignment with the West as a whole or individual European powers formed the core of Turkey's counterbalancing strategy towards Russia. However, nuance is needed here. Despite the Ottomans' attempts in the nineteenth century to form alliances with various European powers to counter Russia's geopolitical ambitions, the Ottoman elites occasionally cooperated with Moscow to achieve their strategic goals when they perceived European policies as threatening their interests.[3] For instance, Turkey enjoyed Soviet support during its war of independence against European powers. Similarly, Turkey's staunch anti-Soviet position during the Cold War did not prevent the country from compartmentalising its relations and engaging in cooperation. In the 1960s, for example, Turkey worked with the Soviets to launch some of its heavy industries.

Still, the perception of Russia as a threat had a formative impact on Turkey's geopolitical identity. In the nineteenth century, this meant the Ottoman Empire was to be part of the European imperial order. Europe was a reference point for the Ottomans' modernisation efforts, influencing geopolitics and the military, political, economic, and legal domains. In the twentieth century, this perception meant Turkey became a member of NATO and a part of the

transatlantic community. In other words, Ankara's alignment with European powers against Russia was integral in making Turkey a part of Europe and, after 1945, of the West.

The emergence of a US-led West after the Second World War diversified Turkey's relations. While Europe influenced Turkey's political, economic, and institutional modernisation, it was NATO, and consequently the US, that had the most profound impact on Turkey's security culture. The Turkey-US relationship was—and still is—in essence a security partnership.

Thus, Turkey has long been partly or fully integrated into the geopolitical, political, cultural, and institutional West. There are key differences between these four concepts.[4] The geopolitical West is limited to a community built on foreign and security policy coordination. The political West alludes to the Western models that have guided Turkey's domestic transformation in terms of democratic development, regulatory harmonisation, the rule of law, and the like. In the nineteenth century, the Ottomans' European aspirations influenced their domestic political order, particularly the notions of citizenship, constitutionalism, and inclusive community.

The cultural West broadly denotes a process of societal and political secularisation and modernisation. The term acquired critical significance in the early Turkish Republic with the reforms championed by the country's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and his comrades. However, the conservative and Islamist segments of Turkish society and politics have had more antagonistic or reserved relations with the cultural West. The institutional West, finally, refers to the collection of Western organisations. Ankara places great importance on its membership of institutions such as NATO and the Council of Europe as well as arrangements like the EU-Turkey Customs Union.

**The post–Cold War era**

The end of the Cold War marked another watershed moment that redefined Turkey's position in the world and its relationships with the West and Russia.

First of all, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a Russia that was diminished in both power and revisionism. This lowered the threat perceptions in Turkey and the West. For Ankara, this shift implied a lesser need to counterbalance Russia through various alignment strategies with Western powers. Similarly, the West's need for Turkey as a frontier state or a Southern flank of NATO against the Russians was reduced. Initially, this situation created anxiety in Turkey about its future in the geopolitical and institutional West and its desired status in the political West. What is more, while many in the West celebrated the end of the Cold War as a triumph for liberal democracy over its rivals and a potential for global expansion, Turkish domestic politics faced democratic regression under military tutelage.

Therefore, not only were there growing questions about Turkey's place in the geopolitical West, but Turkey and the political West—represented mainly by Europe—were also decoupling from one another. This was the situation for the most of the first decade, especially its first half, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the same period, Turkey viewed Russia in a new light, and both sides began to explore more avenues for cooperation. Although the conflicts and crises in the Western Balkans and the Middle East increased Turkey's importance to the West and created more opportunities for collaboration, these crises were qualitatively different from and less significant than the earlier threat posed by the Soviets. That threat had brought the two sides closer together and made Turkey part of the geopolitical West.

Against this backdrop came the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, followed by the US-led global war on terror, which significantly affected international politics. Many viewed this turning point as a confirmation of American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis, which suggested that the global order would be redefined along cultural, religious, or civilisational lines, often based on conflicts between these elements.

In this context, the intersection of Turkey's cultural and geopolitical identities has gained importance for many in the West; arguably, the former has become even more pronounced

than the latter. To improve relations between Europe and the Muslim world and challenge the 'clash of civilizations' perspective, in 2002 Turkey hosted a joint forum of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the EU entitled 'Civilization and Harmony'. This initiative eventually evolved into the 2005 Alliance of Civilizations, co-chaired by Turkey and Spain. At a time when the divide between the Muslim world and the West was widening, the combination of Turkey's cultural identity as a Muslim-majority state and its geopolitical identity as a Western country and NATO member became a significant asset in Ankara's relations with the West.

In December 1999, the EU officially declared Turkey a candidate country at the European Council summit in Helsinki. Accession negotiations began in October 2005. To achieve these two milestones, from the late 1990s and throughout the first decade of the 2000s, Turkey had to introduce various reform packages to harmonise its legal, political, and economic systems with those of the EU and thus align itself with the political West. The EU was a motivation and a reference point for these reform packages.

**Turkey in the emergent global order**

The global order is again in flux. Great-power competition is redefining the international security environment, and war and territorial conquest are back. After the Cold War, economic logic reshaped globalisation and, by many accounts, superseded geopolitical logic. Now, the reverse is happening: geopolitical logic is recasting economic and political relations. Trump's return to the White House has undermined transatlantic unity and the concept of the geopolitical West. Europe's security now has to reckon with great-power rivalries, spheres of influence, Russian revisionism, and an uncertain US commitment to NATO.

Europe and Turkey have opposing views on this reordering. Many in Europe see great-power competition primarily through a negative lens. The prevailing belief is that this competition signals the rise of the 'rest', that non-Western centres of power are becoming more assertive

in global politics, and that these powers are challenging the so-called liberal international order, including democracy at home and abroad. This perspective sees the great-power contest as a challenge to the global order that Europeans have known, created, and benefited from.

In contrast, Turkey views global restructuring largely through a positive lens. The associated rivalries signify the existence of multiple centres of power, which provides more room for manoeuvre and more opportunities for hedging and balancing—especially at a time when Turkey-Western relations have become crisis-ridden and the two sides' threat perceptions and priorities have gradually diverged. Since 2015, the Middle East has played a central role in shaping Turkey's reading of world politics, as Ankara has seen trends and developments in the region as a microcosm of global restructuring.

Over the past decade, Ankara has witnessed the US—and the West more broadly—reducing its regional security commitments and showing less interest in any additional geopolitical or security role. By contrast, after its military intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia expanded its influence in regional security through various conflicts, including those in Syria and Libya. Meanwhile, China emerged as the region's largest trading partner and began adopting a more significant diplomatic presence, particularly in conflict mediation, as exemplified by its part in brokering a deal between Tehran and Riyadh in 2023 to restore diplomatic ties.[5] For the governing elites in Ankara, the West's changing position in the Middle East symbolises the region's evolving role in global politics: a multipolar Middle East reflecting a multipolar world.

This regional restructuring has given birth to the idea that the world might not be post-Western, but it is no longer as Western-centric as in the past. In the imagination of Turkey's elites, this view represents the normalisation of the West, which, having long served as a reference point for the country's political and economic transformation, is now losing its previously unrivalled position. From such an understanding of international affairs flow strategies of hedging or geopolitical balancing.

However, two recent developments partly challenge this assumption of regional multipolarity as emblematic of the global order. First, Israel's war on Gaza has illustrated that the US remains the most influential external actor in shaping the course of regional events, despite discussions of multipolarity in the region's relations with external powers. Second, Russia's regional stature has diminished with the fall of Syria's former dictator, Bashar al-Assad, and the weakening of Iran and its regional network, as illustrated during the twelve-day war between Iran and Israel. Likewise diminished is Moscow's ability to serve as a pole for countries seeking to engage in geopolitical balancing acts. Assad's downfall, coupled with the prospect of an end to Turkey's long-running conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has also enabled more convergence and cooperation between Turkey and the US.

**Turkey and Europe in a contested world**

Turkey and Europe are both confronted by a shift in the US position in international affairs. However, their responses differ. For the non-Western world, as well as Turkey, Trump in fact represents relative continuity with previous administrations. For Europeans, the change is more profound and more disruptive. This stark disparity in perceptions was shown clearly by a European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) poll conducted before Trump began his second term.[6] While Europeans, along with Western-allied states such as South Korea, held a bleak view of Trump's return to the White House, people outside the West tended to see his re-election either more positively or simply as normal.

Trump's worldview leaves no room for normative considerations or pretensions and shows little regard for international rules and law. While not as extreme, many European states have engaged in normative revisionism to shield Israel from having to face the consequences of its actions through international law and courts. For Trump, it is a give-and-take world that focuses on the here and now. This approach is rooted in the logic of spheres of influence and adaptable, issue-based partnerships. Trump also represents a decline of the geopolitical West. The clearest indication of this trend is his ambivalence, or even animosity, towards the European security order and Ukraine.

For Turkey, Trump's world is the world it has known for some time—and thus the new normal. Transactionalism is one of the most prominent features of Ankara's international relations, not only with Russia but also with Europe. Multi-alignment is already a dominant aspect of internationalism for many non-Western actors. Turkey has also been vocal about the West's double standards and active undermining of international law and courts, for example over Gaza, a trend that has weakened Europe's and the West's normative claims.

Despite these differences, this watershed moment in the European security order brings Europe and Turkey closer together. The reason, as in the past, is Russia and its revisionist policies. While a reduced Russia typically lowers Ankara's threat perception of Moscow, a revisionist Russia heightens it.

Indeed, Russia is the most immediate threat to European security. The Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East are not separate theatres in the confrontation between Russia and the West; rather, they form a single space. Turkey connects all these regions and links them with the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and beyond. In geopolitical disputes across these areas, Turkey and Russia have been on opposing sides, particularly in Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine.

A revisionist Russia will trigger a counterbalancing strategy from both Europe and Turkey. Ankara views Moscow's revisionism as a long-term security challenge. The structurally competitive nature of Turkey-Russia relations, coupled with Ankara's and Europe's shared concerns about Moscow's disruptive behaviour, should lay the groundwork for a more structured Europe-Turkey dialogue on foreign and security policy.

If the war in Ukraine remains frozen along current lines, a battle-tested, revisionist Russia, which has already placed its economy on a war footing, could reconstitute its power relatively quickly and challenge the security of Russia's so-called near abroad, including the Black Sea, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. This would pose a direct and immediate

threat to European security. If Russian revisionism continues, Ankara's threat perception and pursuit of a counterbalancing strategy towards Moscow will intensify.

In contrast to previous watershed moments, Europe is now a diminished power in global affairs and is overly dependent on the US for its security, while the West is losing its exceptionalism and becoming normalised. What is more, unlike in 1856 or 1952, the current governing elites in Ankara are less emotionally invested in being perceived as European or Western and are less ideologically attached to Europe. At best, geopolitically, Europe is an unfolding story for Ankara.

Against this historical backdrop, and at a time when Trump's commitment to European security is highly questionable, Europe cannot establish a post-US security order against Russia without including Turkey. Therefore, Trump's attitudes and the restructuring of the global order provide further impetus for Turkey and Europe to engage in a more structured dialogue on foreign and security policy. This dialogue should consider European security in a broad sense, bridging the gap between EU countries and other European NATO members like the United Kingdom (UK) and Norway. Moving forward, this dialogue should also aim to include non-EU and non-NATO states, such as Ukraine and Georgia.

Last but not least, Turkish and European policies on China are similar. Divisions within the EU prevent the formulation of a unified policy towards Beijing, and many European states do not see China as a direct or immediate threat to their interests. But both Turkey and Europe are likely to experience troubles with the Trump administration, so China is unlikely to drive a wedge between them anytime soon. Plus, Beijing's treatment of the Uyghur Muslims will probably limit the scope of Turkey-China relations for the foreseeable future.

**Divergences**

Despite their common geopolitical challenges, there are obstacles to the extent to which Turkey and Europe can cooperate.

First, there is a trust deficit, which is reflected in the language of both sides. In September 2020, in an address to the European Parliament, then EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell mentioned Turkey along with Russia and China as states trying to revive old empires that challenged European security.[7] By putting Turkey, an EU candidate country, in the same category as Russia and China, which are clear adversaries of the West (particularly the former), Borrell illustrated the depth of the crisis in EU-Turkey relations.

Similarly, speaking on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, 'I trust Russia just as much as I trust the West', while complaining that Turkey had been waiting on the EU's doorstep for the past fifty years.[8] This statement can be best interpreted as reflecting a lack of trust on both sides. Meanwhile, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, seeing the EU's rejection of Turkey as primarily about identity, has argued that the union has become a 'supranational civilization but not supra-civilizational'.[9]

There are also differences in how Turkey and Europe approach great powers, particularly Russia. For Europe, Russia presents a more immediate and pressing challenge. When Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Turkey was among the first countries to provide military equipment to Kyiv, including armed drones, and built and delivered two corvette ships for the Ukrainian navy.[10] However, Ankara was also an early advocate of a diplomatic solution to the conflict and attempted to broker one, albeit without success. This policy has strong popular support in Turkey, where 57 per cent of the public believes that a deal between Russia and Ukraine is the most likely outcome to the war.[11] In contrast, aside from countries such as Poland, European states were initially hesitant to supply heavy weapons to Ukraine but eventually embraced the idea of European security against Russia and became more critical of any potential deal with Moscow.

Meanwhile, Turkey strives to maintain a working relationship with Russia despite the two countries' rivalries in the South Caucasus, the Middle East, North Africa, and other regions. Sympathetic to Moscow's concerns about Western involvement, Ankara objects to the

presence of non-littoral NATO states in the Black Sea maritime domain. Ankara adheres strictly to the Montreux Convention, which regulates passage through the Turkish Straits, and thus rejects growing calls from various Western circles to reinterpret the convention to allow a greater NATO and Western presence in the Black Sea.

Turkey's policy towards Russia is influenced considerably by geographic proximity. This, in turn, motivates Ankara to pursue simultaneous strategies of both counterbalancing and cooperation with Moscow. In future, Ankara is likely to emphasise the former without entirely disregarding the latter.

It is not clear whether Turkey and Europe will collaborate or compete in their shared neighbourhood. Over the last decade, both sides have regarded each other more as rivals than as partners, largely because of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. With the reduction of these tensions and the current imperative for cooperation in Syria, the two sides must explore ways to enhance collaboration in their shared neighbourhood. This is particularly vital for an orderly political transition in Syria.

Furthermore, despite expectations of closer collaboration between Turkey and Europe, Ankara, as an ambitious middle power, will stick to its strategy of multi-alignments and maintain its significant interest in various international configurations. For example, Turkey initially showed an interest in the BRICS grouping, which originally comprised Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, as a platform that could help crystallise the global South's vision of multilateralism. Yet, Ankara's earlier interest in the group focused more on the future than on the present: Turkey views the BRICS in terms of its potential transformation into a significant economic platform rather than its current state. Indeed, more recently, Ankara seems to have lost its appetite for the BRICS. Currently, the grouping represents more of a powerful narrative of discontent with the existing global order than a credible political project to create an alternative.

This flirtation with other formats also partly reflects Turkey's signalling of discontent with Europe and the West. Indeed, Fidan noted that if Turkey had become an EU member, it would not have shown such a strong interest in alternative platforms.[12]

Finally, in Western geopolitical thinking, India increasingly occupies a special place as a primary ally in Asia to counterbalance China. This is the case mainly for the US, but to some extent for Europe as well, even though Trump has upset relations by imposing tariffs of over 50 per cent on Indian imports. However, Turkey-India relations are driven largely by another factor: Pakistan. Ankara's close relations with Islamabad sour its ties with Delhi. India, likewise, sees Turkey largely through the lens of Pakistan, reducing the geopolitical and strategic dimensions of these relations.

**Recommendations**

Turkey and Europe should reflect together on what global power politics and spheres of influence mean for them and how they can cooperate in such a world.

To avoid being squeezed in a G2 world of the US and China—or a G3 world that also includes Russia—Europe must evolve into a geopolitical power and a pole that provides its own security as well as that of its neighbourhood. In such a world, Europe must address the challenges posed by Russia, the US, and China simultaneously to ensure its security. While the Russian threat is more geopolitical in nature, the US challenge is more encompassing, ranging from security to politics, the economy, and identity.

This situation calls for a new European security order. The starting point for this new order should be more structured cooperation between NATO's EU and non-EU European members, with Turkey, the UK, and Norway serving as central pillars of this framework.[13] As the ECFR poll shows, there is strong societal support in Turkey for such cooperation, with 17 per cent of Turkish respondents viewing the EU as an ally that shares the same interests and values, and 47 per cent considering the union a necessary partner for strategic collaboration.[14] In

contrast, only 9 per cent of those surveyed saw the EU as an adversary and 19 per cent as a rival.

Europe and Turkey should try to rebuild trust, and for this, the relationship needs new language. At the core of this new language should be ideas for how the EU, Turkey, the UK, and other European actors can cooperatively reconstitute Europe—in geopolitical, security, and economic terms, beyond the EU framework. Similarly, the EU should continue to invite Fidan to its so-called Gymnich meetings. These informal gatherings of EU foreign ministers should form the basis of a more structured foreign and security policy dialogue as well as high-level Turkey-EU summits. Such sustained interaction is crucial to rebuild trust.

Europe and Turkey should also establish new cooperation mechanisms in their shared neighbourhood while broadening the scope of this area.[15] Wars, conflicts, and state collapses shape the geopolitics of the region, whether in the east with Russia's war on Ukraine or in the south with Israel's war on Gaza and regional revisionism. On the former, structured foreign and security policy collaboration between the EU and non-EU members of NATO is essential to counter Russian revisionism in the Black Sea and strengthen European security. On the latter, to offset the US's unconditional backing for Israel, Europe, Turkey, and other regional states should work together in rejecting Israel's policy of depopulating Gaza and annexing the West Bank. They should instead adopt a principled stance of supporting the enforcement of international law and courts in this conflict.

Some neighbouring states are entering a fragile post-conflict phase. Syria and possibly Libya are notable examples. Turkey's considerable influence in these countries and their significance for European security require close cooperation between the two sides on post-conflict stabilisation efforts. There is an intimate connection between post-conflict stabilisation, domestic political order, and the geopolitical identities of these states.

Turkey and the EU, as well as the UK, should discuss cooperation in the broadest possible geographic terms, covering not only the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East but also the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Africa. Turkey plays significant

roles in these regions, which are also important for European security and have substantial Russian and Chinese presences. The manner in which Europe—or the West in general—positions itself in the regional politics of the non-Western world has major implications for how these regions engage with great-power rivalry.

Similarly, Turkey and Europe should explore ways to cooperate more closely on connectivity projects and endeavour to make their visions of transregional connectivity more complementary and collaborative, rather than competitive. These projects not only connect regions but also redesign global supply chains and aim to redefine regional order, with implications for the global order. At a time when the EU seeks to bring its supply chains closer to home and reduce its dependence on China, the bloc must play a more proactive role in connectivity projects. Ankara, too, is active on this front, given its strategic location connecting East and West. Plus, Turkey's place in Europe's redesign of its global supply chains will affect the extent to which the Turkish economy remains anchored in the European economy. This, in turn, will inform Turkey's future in geopolitical Europe.[16]

Russian revisionism, combined with the decline of the geopolitical West, is likely to make Turkey an integral part of a new geopolitical Europe. However, Ankara will not want its relations with Europe to be reduced to a one-dimensional security partnership, as has been the case with the US. This new period should lay the groundwork for redefining a more meaningful and functional framework for Turkey-Europe relations, which should include elements such as modernising the EU-Turkey Customs Union, integrating Turkey into European defence-industry mechanisms, and moving forward on visa liberalisation.

Finally, Europe should not drop its normative agenda. Unlike previous watershed moments, when there was closer interconnection between Turkey's geopolitical identity and its domestic politics, this new period does not seem to have domestic implications. But should Europeans abandon their norms and values, they would be going along with the 'might is right' worldview embraced by the current US, Russian, and Chinese leaders. To distinguish itself from other global powers, Europe still needs to marry geopolitics with a set of values and a normative narrative. Transactionalism has its weaknesses: it might be good at creating a

new form of relations between two sides in a speedy manner, but it is not good at sustaining these relations in the long term. Therefore, Turkey's inclusion in geopolitical Europe—even outside EU membership—should not be devoid of a normative framework.

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**Notes**

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