

80

November
2024

IKV BRIEF

TÜRKİYE AND THE EU IN THE FIELD OF SECURITY AND DEFENCE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF "STRATEGIC AUTONOMY": OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Hatice Zeynep Şen
IKV Junior Researcher

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

www.ikv.org.tr



Türkiye and the EU in the Field of Security and Defence within the Framework of “Strategic Autonomy”: Opportunities and Challenges

Hatice Zeynep Şen, IKV Junior Researcher

The Concept of Strategic Autonomy

Although there is no definitive agreement on its meaning or no clear definition of its scope, “strategic autonomy” generally refers to an actor’s ability to determine its own foreign policy and security strategies and act accordingly. Focus on foreign policy means that the actor prioritizes its interests and increases its manoeuvring capacity in this direction. The concept also includes a connotation such as the actor trying to become the absolute centre of power. However, this concept does not mean that an actor is trying to become a central authority, but rather that it has developed the institutional, political and material conditions necessary to act alone and in cooperation with alliances in pursuit of its own objectives.¹ It is neither complete “self-sufficiency” nor “isolation” or “rejection” of alliances. In a multipolar world, cooperation with third parties should not be overlooked while developing the ability to act in one’s own interests when necessary.

The concept has become popular in recent years with its inclusion in the official documents, where it has largely been associated with Europe. Although centred on Europe, strategic autonomy has begun to influence the foreign policy assessments of various actors amid growing competition among powers like the US, China, and Russia, as well as questioning the US’s position in the international arena. While strategic autonomy enables actors to respond more effectively to international power dynamics, its definition and implementation can vary significantly among different actors. Initially emerging in the EU with a focus on security, the concept has since expanded due to global and regional crises, encompassing a broader scope.

The EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy and the Development of Strategic Autonomy

Since its establishment, the EU has taken various initiatives to increase cooperation in the fields of security and defence as well as economic integration. Firstly, the Western European Union (WEU) was established in 1948 with the Brussels Agreement signed by Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France and the United Kingdom. Subsequently, in 1950, French Prime Minister René Pleven proposed the Pleven Plan to create a European Defence Community. However, this plan failed to materialize due to the French parliament’s disapproval of West Germany’s rearmament. During this period, the inclusion of West Germany and Italy in the WEU in 1955 marked a significant development.

¹ Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza and Volker Perthes (eds.), “European Strategic Autonomy Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests”, und Politik-SWP-Deutsches, S. W., 2019, p.5



Throughout the Cold War, EU security was largely shaped by NATO due to the escalating nuclear arms race. Although the concept of strategic autonomy remained on the agenda, the EU could only focus on this area post-Cold War. With the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, one of the Union's three pillars was designated as the "Common Foreign and Security Policy" (CFSP), which aimed to establish principles for Common Foreign Affairs and Defence. During this period, the military missions undertaken by the WEU were designated as Petersberg Missions, primarily framed as humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping operations. The St. Malo Declaration adopted by France and the UK in 1998 accelerated the development of the CFSP, adding a defence dimension and emphasizing the Union's capacity to respond autonomously to international crises.² The limits of this strategic quest of the EU were drawn at the NATO summit in 1999. The "Berlin Plus" arrangement, which allows the EU to use NATO structures, mechanisms and assets to fulfil ESDP missions, was signed. The aim here is to initiate a process that does not separate from NATO in the development of EU security and defence, in other words, to pave the way for EU security and defence within a framework that is "separable but not separate."³

While the dependency on the US in the field of security and defence continues to be debated, the EU's failure to effectively intervene in the Bosnian and Kosovo crises has further intensified the debates in this field. During the Gulf Operation, the division between the Atlanticist wing of the Union, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands, and Germany and France, who opposed the operation, became evident. As the differences between the EU and the US have grown, so has the EU's desire to develop its capacity to act as a strategic actor with its partners and on its own when necessary. In this direction, the "The European Security Strategy" adopted in 2003 was evaluated as the first step of the Union's will to abandon its role as a civilian peacekeeping force and to become an equal power with the US. This strategy aims to achieve a more secure Europe, determine the threats the EU faces, define its strategic goals and present the political implications for Europe. A policy compatible with the US was re-emphasised, and it was added that the transatlantic relationship was inevitable. "Our aim should be an effective and balanced partnership with the US. This is an additional reason for the EU to further develop its capabilities and increase its coherence."⁴ In 2004, the European Defence Agency was established to assist Member States and the Council in developing European defence capabilities in the field of crisis management and to sustain the ESDP.⁵

With the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon, a permanent High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy was established, and a decision was made to establish a foreign relations service. Petersberg's duties were expanded, and the Permanent Structural Cooperation Protocol (PESCO) was approved. After the steps taken with Lisbon, the Union could not respond effectively to the Libya-Syria crisis it faced in 2011, and the Libya

² Niklas Helwig & Ville Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27, Special Issue, 2022, 1-20.

³ Fatih Ceylan, "Stratejik Otonomilerin Kanaviçesi", Online Publication, 19.03.2024, <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2024/03/19/kanavice/> Access: 03.10.2024

⁴ Council of the European Union, "European Security Strategy a Secure Europe in a Better World", December 2003, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf> Access: 05.09.2024

⁵ For detailed information: <https://eda.europa.eu/our-history/our-history.html>



intervention was carried out with NATO capabilities. In 2014, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the tendency towards NATO in Eastern countries facing the Russian threat increased. France, which has argued that the EU should be a more autonomous structure since history, stated that the 2014 crisis revealed the need for an independent defence force for the EU. Indeed, issues such as terrorist attacks and migration crises experienced during this period also became a driving force for efforts in this field. The concept of strategic autonomy also gained importance again and was officially included as one of the strategic goals of the EU, first in the Council Decisions on the Common Security and Defence Policy⁶ in 2013 and then in the EU Global Strategy⁷ adopted in 2016. In this context, a call was made for the strategic autonomy of the EU and became one of the main objectives of the Union. Since this date, it is seen that the strategic autonomy of the EU has been emphasized in almost all the Council decisions.⁸

The Brexit referendum and the subsequent 2016 Global Strategy were followed by the EU Strategic Compass adopted in 2022 after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. The Strategic Compass aimed to provide the necessary political will to achieve the goals set in the Global Strategy. During this period, Trump's "America First" principle, which came to power in the US, signalled a decline in transatlantic relations long beforehand. The EU had to determine its priorities in such an environment and develop the momentum to act accordingly. Trump's demands from EU countries regarding military spending at the 2018 NATO summit, decisions taken without consulting NATO in the Syrian crisis, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan without informing allies in advance have shaken the EU's trust in the US. The need for autonomy in the field of defence and security has come to the fore again. French President Macron even made a statement in 2019 that "NATO is becoming brain-dead."⁹ During this period, not only the problems with the US but also China's increasing influence in the international arena has been another issue that has alerted the EU. This has particularly been evident in the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing supply chain crisis. New elements have been added to the concept of strategic autonomy and its scope has begun to expand.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU's ability to act strategically and autonomously has become more closely linked to questions of welfare, health and post-crisis economic recovery.¹⁰ As a result of the crises experienced during the COVID-19 period, the concept

⁶ European Council, "19/20 DECEMBER 2013 CONCLUSIONS", <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-217-2013-INIT/en/pdf> Access: 20.08.2024

⁷ European External Action Service, "EU Global Strategy", 14.11.2016, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en Access: 20.08.2024

⁸ European Parliament, "EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor", July 2022, Annex 2, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733589_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589_EN.pdf) Access: 20.08.2024

⁹ The Economist, "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead", 07.11.2019 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead> Access: 20.08.2024

¹⁰ Niklas Helwig & Ville Sinkkonen, "Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27, Special Issue, 2022, 1–20.



of strategic autonomy has also been paired with trade policies and its meaning has been expanded in this sense.

The Russia-Ukraine war has strictly created a new turning point. The EU has witnessed a war on its borders for the first time since the Second World War. Therefore, Eastern European countries concerned about Russian aggression have increased their tendency towards the NATO alliance. During this period, security concerns and disagreements have also emerged in countries within the EU. Indeed, Poland's security concerns and the support it expects are certainly not the same as those of Italy or Spain. Countries such as Finland and Sweden have also applied to join NATO, and the Alliance's weight has increased again. Another consequence of the war was that both energy dependence and strategic autonomy in security and defence returned to the top of the EU agenda.

The concept of strategic autonomy has gradually come to include geo-economic elements (such as supply chains and technological geopolitics), while the main starting point, the security domain, retains its importance. Transatlantic relations, which had been severely eroded during the Trump era, began to gain a positive atmosphere with Biden's coming to power. However, the AUKUS¹¹ crisis in 2021 was another breaking point. On 15 September 2021, the cooperation programme between the US, UK and Australia, known as AUKUS, was announced. With the agreement, a 50-billion-dollar conventional submarine contract that Australia had previously made with France was cancelled and an agreement was reached between the US, UK and Australia to share technology for constructing nuclear submarines. While European states, especially France, and the EU claimed they were not previously informed about this cooperation. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described the termination of the agreement as "a stab in the back for France", while Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire stated that Europeans should build their own defences, and that AUKUS showed that Europe could no longer trust the United States.¹²

The AUKUS, which is considered a major crisis, especially for France, has reinforced France's concerns about becoming an autonomous European power and becoming independent from the US. The Strategic Compass was also created in this period in response to the need for more autonomy. Written under four main headings, the Strategic Compass combined the themes of action, security, investment and partnership for the purposes set out in the EU Global Strategy and demonstrated the will in this field. In addition, this document again emphasized the "complementary" role of these efforts of the EU to NATO, not an "alternative."

¹¹ GMF, "The New AUKUS Alliance Is Yet Another Transatlantic Crisis for France", September 17, 2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/new-aukus-alliance-yet-another-transatlantic-crisis-france> Access: 20.08.2024

¹² Oğuz, Şafak ve Ferhan Oral. "AB'nin Stratejik Özerklik Çabaları, Stratejik Pusula ve Türkiye'ye Muhtemel Yansımaları". Bölgesel Araştırmalar Dergisi, c. 6, sy. 1, 2022, ss. 67-95.



Türkiye’s Quest for Strategic Autonomy and Its Place in the EU’s Defence and Security Compass

The post-Cold War era brought both challenges and opportunities to Turkish foreign and security policy. While Türkiye’s foreign policy evolved to become more diverse and multi-dimensional, security threats from neighbouring regions posed significant challenges, necessitating both defensive and offensive capabilities. Former Prime Minister and President Süleyman Demirel spoke of the emergence of a “Turkic world” stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China, while former Foreign Minister İsmail Cem articulated an ambitious vision for Türkiye in this new era, envisioning its reinvention as a multi-regional power.

Justice and Development Party (AKP), when it came to power in 2002, aimed to strengthen political, economic, and cultural connections with Türkiye’s neighbours across the Black Sea, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. During this period, while implementing many reforms on the path to membership as an EU candidate country, it also initiated high-level strategic councils with various states, established bilateral trade and investment relations with neighbours, and encouraged human mobility and visa-free travel, along with the “zero problems” policy it adopted with neighbouring countries.¹³ Despite fluctuations in the history of bilateral relations, the AKP administration initiated EU accession negotiations in 2005, making membership a tangible possibility. During this initial period, Turkish foreign policy was shaped under the guidance of academic Ahmet Davutoğlu, the chief advisor, around a proactive approach of “strategic depth.” This approach aimed to foster “zero problems with neighbours” and positioned Türkiye as an aspiring regional and global power, emphasizing its multifaceted identity that encompassed both Western and Islamic dimensions. A multidimensional foreign policy framework was adopted, extending Türkiye’s engagement with various regions such as the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Africa, and South America. This phase continued until the Arab Spring.

In the 2010s, however, Türkiye’s foreign policy underwent a significant shift, driven by both global crises and domestic political issues. Analysts argue that Türkiye’s pursuit of a more autonomous foreign policy stemmed from interconnected transformations at global, regional, and domestic levels. First, at the global level, the West’s retreat and the rise of new power centers played a key role. The 2008 financial crisis, followed by the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the subsequent U.S. withdrawal from its commitment to the liberal international order, alongside China’s rise, reshaped the global landscape. The spread of right-wing populism and authoritarianism within the liberal order further spurred Türkiye’s search for autonomy. Regionally, the Middle East and North Africa experienced seismic shifts following the 2011 uprisings, which devolved into prolonged conflicts, particularly the ongoing civil war in Syria. These developments not only affected Türkiye’s neighbours but also had broader repercussions, leading to

¹³ Amnon Aran and Mustafa Kutlay, IPC Policy Brief, “TURKEY’S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN AN ERA OF MULTIPOLARITY”, February 2024,

<https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20240311-10031956.pdf> Access: 16.08.2024



heightened terrorism and mass migration flows that impacted Europe. The growing influence of Russia in the region coincided with the decline of Western dominance, while the US reduced its involvement and both Russia and China challenged the EU's influence. Lastly, domestic crises fueled Türkiye's drive for autonomy. The failed 2016 coup attempt led to the declaration of a state of emergency and subsequently ushered in a more centralized governance model under the new presidential system. This period of intensified internal control further solidified Türkiye's autonomous stance in foreign policy.¹⁴ Since these periods, Türkiye has turned to its own strategic autonomy elements and increased its efforts in this direction. The quest here is described as encompassing three elements; first, "transactionalism" increasingly came to dominate Türkiye's interactions with its Western allies, as Turkish policymakers sought to reduce the country's security dependence on the United States and European powers. Second, "multiple alignments," "flexible alliances," and "issue-based" cooperation became a guiding feature of Turkish foreign policy behaviour. Third, the "quest for strategic autonomy" meant developing closer ties with the non-Western world, including Russia and China, as a way of adjusting to the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar international order¹⁵.

In the second decade of the AKP, the government under President Erdoğan's leadership sought to attain strategic autonomy, balancing the prevalence of the West for Türkiye with deeper relations with other regions. The quest for strategic autonomy, which is driven by a geopolitical shift to multipolarity, was intended to increase Türkiye's influence in the Middle East and the Black Sea.¹⁶ Türkiye, which implemented an open-door policy to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria during the Arab Spring, has become the country hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world as of 2024. Türkiye has also frequently stated that it has not received the enough support it expected from the Western world during this crisis. In the post-2013 period and especially after the irregular migration and asylum requests of Syrians to EU countries reached crisis level in 2015, both sides strategically initiated a Joint Action Plan, and a Joint Statement commonly referred to as the Türkiye-EU Deal in 2016 for cooperation.¹⁷ Such cooperation mechanisms are considered as one of the most important indicators of the "transactionalist" transformation in Türkiye-EU relations. Through engagement and cooperation in such critical areas, Türkiye aimed to make use of this momentum to accelerate the accession process, achieve progress in other areas such as visa liberalisation, updating the Customs Union and share the Syrian burden, while the EU

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Perspektif, Batı-Sonrası Dünyada Türk Dış Politikası ve "Türkiye Meselesi", FUAT KEYMAN, 13.02.2024, <https://www.perspektif.online/bati-sonrasi-dunyada-turk-dis-politikasi-ve-turkiye-meselesi/> Retrieved from: IPC Policy Brief, "TURKEY'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN AN ERA OF MULTIPOLARITY", February 2024, <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20240311-10031956.pdf>

¹⁶ Amnon Aran and Mustafa Kutlay, IPC Policy Brief, "TURKEY'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN AN ERA OF MULTIPOLARITY", February 2024, <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20240311-10031956.pdf>

¹⁷ A Readmission Agreement had already been signed between Türkiye and the EU in December 2013. Oğuz Kaan Özalp, "A FAILED NEGOTIATION?: A CLOSER LOOK ON THE EU-TURKEY DEAL OF 2016", 31.08.2021, Journal of International Relations and Political Science Studies (2), 5-20.



aimed to protect its external borders by controlling irregular migration. However, the expected outcome did not materialise, and relations started to move towards a more pragmatic ground. In addition, it may be argued that relations within the framework of transactionalism, which lack a normative and strategic orientation, weaken the progressive logic of Türkiye-EU relations. Türkiye has also conducted operations against groups it defines as terrorist organisations in Northern Syria to ensure its own security interests and protect its borders. The interests of Türkiye and the Western world have begun to diverge, especially regarding the Middle East. Türkiye, whose interests are increasingly conflicting with the West as well as other regional powers such as Russia, has begun to make strategic breakthroughs to reduce its external dependency in the field of defence. Defence industry investments started before but have gained momentum during this period. Turkish UAVs, which are still successful even in the Ukraine war, have become the largest part of its exports. Reducing its dependency on the West in this area has become one of Türkiye's main strategic goals.

Türkiye has become increasingly isolated in the region as a result of the Arab Spring process and the aggressive/assertive and interest-oriented policies it has pursued since then due to its internal and external security concerns. This situation has been reflected in both domestic and foreign policy, and the search for strategic autonomy has gradually increased. This has manifested itself both in the rapid change in the defence industry and in the "flexible" alliances it has attempted to establish with countries such as Russia, Iran and China. Türkiye also has recently begun to take steps towards establishing a balance mechanism and has tried to put strategic autonomy into practice in many areas. This practice is seen in a wide range of areas, from its alliance relations with the US, the EU, NATO, Russia and Iran, to its policies towards Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus, and its relations with Greece, Egypt and Israel. During this period, Türkiye's strategic search in foreign policy began to change due to reasons such as the economic and political problems it experienced at home, the Ukraine-Russia war that started in its nearby geography, and its increasing separation and isolation from its Western allies in the Eastern Mediterranean. Decision makers who direct Türkiye's foreign policy have begun to frequently use the expression "making Türkiye strong in the field and at the table".¹⁸

It is seen that Türkiye's recent cleavage from its traditional foreign policy and its search for autonomy that includes aggressive and hard power stems from both domestic threats and problems experienced in the international arena. This quest of Türkiye has also been subject to criticism that it is experiencing a "shift of axis" by moving further away from the West. As a result, the government has launched a new diplomatic process since 2021 to repair relations with its Western allies and Middle Eastern neighbours, including Israel (until the 2023 Israel-Hamas war broke out). As of 2021 steps were taken to repair damaged relations as the second phase. At the current stage, new initiatives have been taken to re-interpret strategic autonomy to put relations with the Western world back on

¹⁸ Fuat Keyman, "Türkiye-Batı İlişkileri: Stratejik Otonomi Bitiyor mu?", 05.11.2021, <https://www.perspektif.online/turkiye-bati-iliskileri-stratejik-otonomi-bitiyor-mu/> 16.08.2024



track¹⁹ (purchasing F16V aircraft from the US, seeking a return to the F35 project, tending to procure Eurofighter combat aircraft from Europe, and participating in the European Sky Shield project).

Since 2016, relations based on transactionalism have distanced both parties. It has been assessed that the EU sees Türkiye as a “buffer zone” that ensures European security with the Readmission Agreement and the 2016 Deal. EU officials have tended to see Türkiye not as a partner of European security, but as a “buffer” or a “wall” against security threats to Europe. Türkiye has also distanced itself from Europe with its increasingly aggressive foreign policy and centralized approach and has turned to flexible alliances based on interests with other countries. The fact that Türkiye, an important NATO ally, does not have a sufficient place in the EU’s strategic compass is also an important indicator of the state of relations. While the EU determined five countries (the US, UK, Canada, Norway and Japan) with which it aims to develop a strategic partnership in its Strategic Compass, it did not include Türkiye, a NATO member with whom it has been negotiating for years, among these countries²⁰.

In addition, Türkiye is also evaluated from the perspective of the unilateral claims of the Greek Cypriot Administration of Cyprus and Greece within the framework of mutual problems in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. The EU is criticised for lacking a deep understanding of Türkiye’s interests and perspective on this issue. However, if the EU were to adopt a more balanced approach, it could increase its role in the region as an honest broker and security provider.²¹ The Strategic Compass, which views Türkiye as an ‘opponent’ in the region rather than a ‘partner’, places both NATO-EU and Türkiye-EU cooperation in a position of further regression and deadlock. Positioning Türkiye in this way at such a critical time is seen as gainless to both parties and hampers dialogue channels. Indeed, the Turkish Foreign Ministry has stated that it considers the document neither ‘strategic’ nor a ‘compass’. Had the Compass been designed in a more objective and balanced manner, it could have served as a catalyst to deepen both Türkiye-EU and NATO-EU cooperation in the field of security at such a critical juncture.²² The drilling crises in the Eastern Mediterranean and the efforts of Greece and Cyprus to isolate Türkiye from the region have also found a place in the EU’s strategic agenda. When talking about various sea areas of interest to the EU, the definition of an area called the “Euro-Mediterranean Region” shows the point where Türkiye is positioned when viewed from Brussels.²³ Due to the tensions between Türkiye, Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern

¹⁹ Fatih Ceylan, “Stratejik Otonomilerin Kanaviçesi”, Online Publication, Access: 19.03.2024, <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2024/03/19/kanavice/> Access: 16.08.2024

²⁰ EDAM, Fatih Ceylan, Tacan İldem, 04.2022 AB STRATEJİK PUSULASI, TÜRKİYE’NİN KONUMU VE BAZI GÖZLEMLER, <https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220401-ABNATO.pdf> Access: 16.08.2024

²¹ İKV, İKV BRIEF “The EU Strategic Compass and Türkiye: A Missed Opportunity in Defence Cooperation”, 72, November 2022, https://www.ikv.org.tr/images/files/EU_Strategic_Compass_TR_2022_brief.pdf Access: 05.11.2024

²² Ibid.

²³ EDAM, Fatih Ceylan, Tacan İldem, 04.2022, AB STRATEJİK PUSULASI, TÜRKİYE’NİN KONUMU VE BAZI GÖZLEMLER, <https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220401-ABNATO.pdf> Access: 16.08.2024



Mediterranean, the EU decided to limit dialogue with Ankara on July 15, 2019. In 2022, while the importance and potential of the strategic partnership with Türkiye was acknowledged in the Parliament’s annual report on the implementation of the CSDP, it was noted that Türkiye’s “destabilizing role” in many areas, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, was a cause for concern.²⁴

Recently, EU decisions have given the impression that the progress of relations is tied to the Cyprus issue. The decisions regarding Türkiye adopted at the EU Special Summit held in Brussels on 17-18 April 2024 were evaluated by the Turkish Foreign Ministry as “another example of the EU’s lack of strategic vision on Türkiye and the global developments.”²⁵ IKV, on the other hand, criticised the Summit conclusions on the grounds that the European Council did not take a constructive step towards revitalising Türkiye-EU relations.²⁶ The decisions taken as a result of discussions based on the report prepared by Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative for Security and Foreign Policy at the end of 2023, included the statement “The European Union has a strategic interest in developing a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and a relationship based on cooperation and mutual benefit with Türkiye.” Despite the occasional emphasis on cooperation with Türkiye, there is a growing perception that the EU is now positioning Türkiye as a “competitor” rather than a “partner.” Indeed, this idea is also evident in public perception. According to a 2023 report prepared by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), it is seen that Western countries do not know whether to define Türkiye as an “ally” or a “rival”.²⁷ In the report prepared with data from nine EU member states (EU-9) as well as the US, UK, China, Russia, India and Türkiye, it is noteworthy that 41% of the nine EU member states do not know how to define Türkiye. This may be due to the change in Türkiye’s foreign policy orientation and its gradual emergence as a middle power. However, in the same survey, Türkiye sees the EU as a necessary partner with which it should cooperate strategically, with a rate of 53%. While EU countries see Türkiye as an “ally” with a rate of 8%, Türkiye sees the EU as an “ally” with a rate of 20%.²⁸

On the other hand, despite geopolitical differences and increasing political divisions in recent years, the EU continues to maintain its importance as a centre of attraction in Turkish public opinion. A public opinion survey conducted by the IKV in 2023 shows that

²⁴ European Parliament, “2019-2024 Implementation of the common security and defence policy - annual report 2022”, 18.01.2023 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0010_EN.pdf Access: 16.08.2024

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regarding the Conclusions of the Extraordinary European Council of 17-18 April 2024/Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18.04.2024 https://www.ab.gov.tr/53779_en.html Access: 16.08.2024

²⁶ IKV’s Comment on Related Decisions: <https://x.com/ikv1965/status/1780823612146037196> Access: 07.11.2024

²⁷ European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), “UNITED WEST, DIVIDED FROM THE REST: GLOBAL PUBLIC OPINION ONE YEAR INTO RUSSIA’S WAR ON UKRAINE”, February, 2023 <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/United-West-divided-from-the-rest-Leonard-Garton-Ash-Krastev.pdf> Access: 16.08.2024

²⁸ Ibid.



65.9% of the Turkish public supports the EU process.²⁹ The percentage of those who say that they would vote yes if there was a referendum on EU membership in Türkiye tomorrow is 64.6%.³⁰ Türkiye still has a positive view of the EU and wants to develop mutual cooperation.

Opportunities and Challenges for Collaboration

Although relations between Türkiye and the EU have practically come to a standstill, taking new steps in the relations is considered as a “challenging but possible process” for both sides. New endeavours are essential for the EU, which has set fresh goals following the 2024 Parliamentary elections, continues to be tested by the Russia-Ukraine war at its borders, and faces uncertainties in its transatlantic relations. Despite strategic “new” initiatives in its foreign policy, such as exploring BRICS membership, Türkiye remains a candidate country and has not given up on its goal of EU membership. Türkiye, in turn, needs to take new actions on this path and clearly recognise and affirm the value of a long-term partnership with the EU.³¹

For the EU, it is strategically necessary to invite Türkiye back to the dialogue, particularly given the Union’s focus on Cyprus and Eastern Mediterranean issues in recent decisions. Resolving these issues is impossible without Türkiye, which has the longest coastline in the Mediterranean and whose rights under international law are often contested. Cooperation in the security domain is of strategic importance to both the EU and Türkiye; however, this potential has not been fully realized due to the deterioration of relations. One of the primary challenges lies in the fluctuating dynamics between the EU and Türkiye, as well as uncertainties regarding the roadmap for future collaboration. A significant factor contributing to these uncertainties is the blocking of Türkiye’s progress on the EU platform by certain Member States and the constant obstacle presented by the unresolved Cyprus dispute, which hampers the Union’s ability to develop a unified, balanced strategic perspective on these issues. As a result, establishing deeper cooperation aligned with common security interests becomes increasingly difficult.

Türkiye’s current contributions to the European security structure, both within the NATO framework and due to its geopolitical position in the region, are quite important. NATO also stands out as one of the most powerful platforms that can provide cooperation between Türkiye and the EU in the fields of foreign policy and security. Since most of the EU member states are NATO members, cooperation with Türkiye is considered a strategic necessity in terms of European security. However, Türkiye, which is a NATO member but not a member of the EU, cannot find a place for itself in decision-making mechanisms

²⁹ İKV&TİM, “AVRUPA BİRLİĞİ DESTEĞİ VE AVRUPA ALGISI” ARAŞTIRMASI, Eylül 2023, https://www.ikv.org.tr/images/files/Avrupa_Birligi_Destegi_ve_Avrupa_Algisi_2023.pdf Access: 07.11.2024

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Sinan Ülgen, Sophia Besch, and İlke Toygür, “Strategic Autonomy as a Dynamic of Convergence in Türkiye-EU Relations”, Carnegie Europe, 22.10.2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/strategic-autonomy-as-a-dynamic-of-convergence-in-turkiye-eu-relations?lang=en> Access: 29.10.2024



while cooperating in this area, which means a new form of asymmetrical relationship that Türkiye cannot accept from a strategic perspective. The 2003 Berlin Plus Agreements constituted one of the cornerstones of cooperation between NATO and the EU and allowed non-EU NATO members to participate in EU-led peace missions. Within this framework, Türkiye has carried out significant cooperation with the EU and contributed to nine EU peace missions as part of the cooperation with the EU in the fields of security and defence. (Concordia and Proxima missions in Macedonia, EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina, EU Police Mission in Bosnia (EUPM), EU Legal Order Mission in Kosovo (EULEX)). However, this cooperation has come to a serious halt with the accession of Cyprus to the EU in 2004. This situation has also limited Türkiye's participation in EU peacekeeping missions within the scope of the Berlin Plus mechanisms and has restricted the potential of security cooperation between the two parties.³² Türkiye's veto of Cyprus' NATO membership and inclusion in the EU-NATO partnership framework has been a significant source of tension in Türkiye-EU security cooperation. Similarly, Cyprus has also prevented Türkiye's participation in the European Security and Defence Agency and intelligence sharing between Türkiye and the EU.³³ Türkiye's formal request to join PESCO was rejected, partly due to Austria's objection. Cyprus, France and Greece objected to the use of EU funds to finance Turkish-made Bayraktar drones and even much-needed ammunition for Ukraine. Türkiye has so far been largely excluded from EU defence industry efforts.³⁴ These mutual vetoes have seriously limited security and defence cooperation and potentially undermined joint efforts that would be in the interests of both parties. In particular, the fact that Türkiye's contributions within the NATO framework and its efforts to be included in the EU's defence mechanisms have encountered such political obstacles has led to a weakening of security cooperation in Türkiye-EU relations. These blockade policies implemented by some anti-Türkiye countries in the EU have limited cooperation on security and peace missions that could benefit both parties.

Despite all these difficulties, there are many areas where cooperation is seen as mutually beneficial and profitable. Collaboration in areas such as counterterrorism, prevention of irregular migration, and food and energy security are strategic issues emphasised in many EU documents. EU institutions frequently draw attention to the potential advantages of cooperation with Türkiye in these areas, but it is stated that due to the deterioration in relations in recent years, they now consider Türkiye more like a "regional rival" than a "partner." This competition is not seen as advantageous in terms of strategic goals for either actor, which has such a large area of cooperation, such a large volume of trade, and which is part of the Western alliance. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought Türkiye's strategic role in terms of European security back to the agenda. Türkiye, which has the longest coastline on the Black Sea, has increased its importance within the NATO alliance,

³² Talha Köse, "AB-Türkiye Güvenlik İş Birliği İmkan ve Kısıtları", Mart 2022, <https://kriterdergi.com/dosya-savunma-ve-guvenlik/ab-turkiye-guvenlik-is-birligi-imkan-ve-kisitlari>
Access: 07.11.2024

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sinan Ülgen, Sophia Besch, and İlke Toygür, "Strategic Autonomy as a Dynamic of Convergence in Türkiye-EU Relations", Carnegie Europe, 22.10.2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/strategic-autonomy-as-a-dynamic-of-convergence-in-turkiye-eu-relations?lang=en> Access: 29.10.2024



and countries such as Poland, Romania, and the Baltics have begun to see Türkiye as a central actor in terms of European security. These countries emphasize Türkiye's key position in NATO and tend to deepen cooperation. However, Türkiye's efforts to increase its strategic autonomy also raise some concerns among EU member states. These concerns are that Türkiye's development of a more independent foreign policy and security strategy could weaken its commitment to NATO.³⁵ Here, the importance of developing and maintaining strong cooperation with the "partners" expressed in the concept of strategic autonomy comes to the fore. The EU has been trying to increase its mobility in this area with its recent progress. Indeed, the "European Defence Industrial Strategy" (EDIS)³⁶, which is a first in the field of defence, and the new "European Defence Industry Program" (EDIP)³⁷ are also indicators of this. Ursula von der Leyen, who started her second term as Commission President in the renewed EU administration, promised to establish a "true European Defence Union" and create a "Single Market for Defence" in the 2024-2029 political guidelines she presented at the beginning of her new term.³⁸ Considering the breakthroughs made by Türkiye in the field of defence in recent years, it is evaluated that cooperation in this area will be beneficial for both parties. The understanding that "EU partnerships should be utilized" to increase readiness and resilience in the "European Defence Industrial Strategy" offers a perspective that can be developed at this point. Indeed, according to an analysis conducted after the 2024 Munich Security Conference (MSC), it is assessed that if this Union is made concrete, it will be an important supporter of a stronger European pillar within NATO. According to this 2024 MSC analysis report, the ten priority items required for the establishment of a concrete EU Defence Union are listed in four areas: strategy, institutions, partnerships and financing.³⁹ In the area of partnerships, it is assessed that the EU's new leadership team should materialize and deepen cooperation with key partners, starting with Ukraine, the United Kingdom and NATO. After Russia invaded Ukraine, informal NATO and EU cooperation reached remarkable levels. Still, it is stated that the constant tensions between Greece and Cyprus on the one hand, and Türkiye on the other, continue to hinder formal cooperation. It is noted here that "the inability to share confidential information and conduct joint exercises prevents synergies".⁴⁰ At this point, cooperation should be deepened rather than competitiveness in transatlantic relations, and the way should be paved for multilateral and systematic partnerships. The report also assesses that upgrading the EU's security and defence partnership and reconstructing a respective high-level dialogue with Türkiye could create the necessary goodwill to develop these

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ For detailed information: "EDIS Our common defence industrial strategy" https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edis-our-common-defence-industrial-strategy_en

³⁷ For detailed information: "EDIP The Future of Defence", https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edip-future-defence_en Access: 17.08.2024

³⁸ European Commission, "EUROPE'S CHOICE POLITICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE NEXT EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2024-2029", 18.07.2024 https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf Access: 17.08.2024

³⁹ Nicole Koenig, "From Soft Talk to Hard Power: Ten To-Dos for the European Defence Union," Munich: Munich Security Conference, Munich Security Analysis 3, September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.47342/YSBO6544>. Access: 03.10.2024

⁴⁰ Ibid.



partnerships.⁴¹ Massive shortages of military personnel, depleting supplies of weapons and ammunition, a fragmented defence industry, and financial difficulties restrain Europe's ability to re-arm. Thus, Türkiye may prove to be a useful long-term partner for the EU due to its strong military and booming defence sector.⁴² Türkiye has a strong military industry with the potential to contribute to European defence cooperation. Türkiye's contribution to the European Defence Industrial Strategy means contributing to both the EU security architecture and its defence industry. Steps to improve the partnership between Türkiye and the EU in this area will also pave the way for enhanced cooperation in NATO.

A constructive re-thinking of cooperation with Türkiye is made possible on the geopolitical front by the Russia-Ukraine war, which has a significant impact on Europe, and the increasingly expedient structural transitions that former European Central Bank president Mario Draghi highlighted in his 2024 report⁴³ on the EU economy. Despite the current challenges, the geopolitical and geoeconomic interdependence between the two sides has the potential to foster mutually beneficial cooperation pathways. Within the framework of its strategic autonomy objectives, the EU needs to recognise Türkiye as a strategic partner rather than a geopolitical rival. Similarly, Türkiye should adopt a vision of a long-term partnership with the EU.⁴⁴ This cooperation offers a driving force in the quest for revitalising Türkiye-EU relations, opportunities to work together towards achieving strategic autonomy goals and position the two actors as reliable partners in a complex global and regional environment.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to analyse the current challenges and opportunities of Türkiye and the EU within the framework of current developments and the concept of strategic autonomy. As a result of the crises experienced by the EU in recent years, it is seen that there are still vulnerabilities in the field of security and defence domain of the Union. Therefore, both focusing on developing a common voice as the basis of policy and seeking strategic autonomy are considered necessary for the EU. The fact that even the transatlantic alliance, which has been a steady basis of EU foreign and security policy for years, has deteriorated and led to a crisis of confidence has revealed that the EU should intensify its efforts in this field. Breakthroughs such as the European Defence Industrial

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sinan Ülgen, Sophia Besch, and İlke Toygür, "Strategic Autonomy as a Dynamic of Convergence in Türkiye-EU Relations", Carnegie Europe, 22.10.2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/strategic-autonomy-as-a-dynamic-of-convergence-in-turkiye-eu-relations?lang=en> Access: 29.10.2024

⁴³ Mario Draghi, "The Future of European Competitiveness: A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe," European Commission, 09.10.2024, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en Access: 29.10.2024, Retrieved from: Sinan Ülgen, Sophia Besch, and İlke Toygür, "Strategic Autonomy as a Dynamic of Convergence in Türkiye-EU Relations", Carnegie Europe, 22.10.2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/strategic-autonomy-as-a-dynamic-of-convergence-in-turkiye-eu-relations?lang=en>

⁴⁴ Ibid.



Strategy and the new European Defence Investment Program reveal the EU's desire towards a "real defence Union". Türkiye, on the other hand, has adopted an assertive foreign policy due to internal and external challenges, increasing centralization and international crises in recent years, and its efforts for strategic autonomy in critical areas have risen. At this point, it has gradually distanced itself from the West up to a degree since it is still linked to Western structures on an institutional basis. However, the increasing economic problems in Türkiye, the setback in democracy and human rights, and the criticisms that come with it are largely associated with Türkiye's drifting away from the Western alliance. In addition, it is still a matter of debate whether Türkiye's search for alternative alliances will bring as much benefit as the EU, which has been a partner with Türkiye in multiple areas for many years and has the largest trade volume.⁴⁵ In this sense, in a world where regional interests need to be protected and international peace is gradually eroding, it is deemed beneficial for Türkiye to reinterpret its search for strategic autonomy and take steps towards cooperation with the EU. If the political obstacles between Türkiye and the EU are lifted and dialogue processes are initiated, many areas of mutual partnership will be of interest to both sides. Multiple areas such as controlling irregular migration, combating terrorism, ensuring food and energy security, the transit role in the supply chain, breakthroughs in the defence industry and the long-standing commercial partnership prepare the ground for this cooperation. Although challenges and complexities remain in the cooperation of the two partners, crises in the global system, as seen in recent years, can suddenly expand and narrow the scope of strategic concepts. However, when we look at the geostrategic location of Türkiye and the EU and their historical relations, further engagement between the two partners seem quite compatible with the respective priorities in the search for strategic autonomy.

⁴⁵ Amnon Aran and Mustafa Kutlay, IPC Policy Brief, "TURKEY'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN AN ERA OF MULTIPOLARITY", February 2024,
<https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20240311-10031956.pdf>

