



31 OCTOBER 2020

# A CRISIS REVEALING A RELATIONAL MALAISE: WHICH EUROPEAN STATUS FOR TURKEY?

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The Greek-Turkish tensions around the exploitation of Eastern Mediterranean energy resources stem from maritime disputes that have given rise to a longstanding but until now unsuccessful dialogue. They repeat the pattern of other more recent Turkish-European confrontations, from Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh via Libya... It appears that these tensions reflect a deeper malaise, linked to the Turkey's claims of regional and international status, which can only be dealt with and assuaged if the Europeans redefine the nature of their relations with Ankara. There is no doubt that to do this they must find the

strength to be «constructive for both parties» which also means to use their historical experience as a source of inspiration for a way out of the crisis (§-1), and concurrently engaging in a solid partnership with their great south-eastern neighbor (§-2).

### **1. «Europe» as inspiration: for a peaceful settlement of energy conflicts**

The discovery of natural gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean has revived long standing maritime disputes between Greeks and Turks<sup>1</sup>, that

<sup>1</sup> Maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean are notably linked to the conditions for the delimitation of the continental shelf of the Aegean Sea after the attribution of the Dodecanese islands to Greece, as well as to the partition of Cyprus.

had almost degenerated into armed conflicts in 1987 and 1996<sup>2</sup>. The recent gas field developments and unilateral exploration activities have aggravated tensions already aroused by competing pipelines projects of Turkey («TANAP» for Caucasian gas, «TurkStream» for Russian gas) and Greece-Israel («Eastmed») - not to mention the utilization of liquefied natural gas terminals by Egypt and the controversies about the access to Libyan gas...

In order to contribute to the solution of such a complex problem, the European Union must primarily display maximum cohesion and not allow regional actors to exploit the difference of opinion among its member states.

Isn't it sure that Germany is all the more inclined to play the role of mediator in the current regional conflict as it is holding the rotating presidency of the EU Council - and also as it is concerned about the management of the large Turkish-speaking community present on its soil and the consolidation of the migration pact concluded in 2015? Isn't it sure that France could legitimately give its support to Greece by arguing that this country is a member of the EU, while at the same time finding an opportunity to sell fighter aircraft to Athens and another ground to counter Turkey's desire for regional power? Isn't it sure that a common European position admits by definition these conciliatory and confrontational viewpoints as complementary to itself? In fact Europeans have more or less ended up aligning themselves since October 2020, on the basis of a «carrot and stick»<sup>3</sup> policy vis-à-vis Turkey. It is their responsibility to maintain the achieved coherence without allowing themselves to be dragged into counterproductive war of word and polemical provocations.

Drawing on the history of their longstanding rivalries, Europeans can also suggest to regional actors to opt for a cooperative approach inspired by the one that led to the creation of the «European Coal and Steel Community» and the «European Atomic Energy Community» («Euratom») in the 1950s.

It is precisely because these were vital and strategic resources that they were put at that time under a common management, albeit to a lesser degree for Euratom. For the management of natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean this suggests two operational options to be adapted to regional sensitivities. Perhaps, once Turkey and Lebanon have been able to join «East Med Gas Forum» bringing together since 2019 Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Italy, it could be useful as discussion forum to move on towards such projects.

## 2. The European Union as partner: a new status for Turkey

Beyond the maritime disputes to be dealt with, the Europeans must also take the measure of the identity malaise revealed by the current crisis : this malaise is reflected in the regional rise in power of Turkey, which is also perceptible in Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Iraqi Kurdistan, the Sahel and Nagorno-Karabakh...

Fifteen years ago, Turkey was a reliable ally on the southern flank of NATO and a candidate country motivated with the prospects of EU membership. Today it seeks to combine the preservation of its Western alliances with an aspiration for autonomy and power. Even if the evolution of its role within NATO will have to be re-examined in this new framework that includes the results of the November 2020 US

<sup>2</sup> On these issues, see Jean Marcou, «Le casse-tête du grand jeu gazier et de la reconfiguration stratégique qui l'accompagne en Méditerranée orientale», Question d'Europe 571, Robert Schuman Foundation, September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Sanctions covering from banning European ports to Turkish ships on one side to the lifting visa restrictions for Turks traveling to the Schengen area on the reverse side.

election results, European interests require rapid redefinition of Turkey's status in the short and medium terms, with due attention and respect that Turkey's diplomatic and economic rank, its capacity for cooperation and its power to cause harm call for.

Restarting the accession negotiations launched in 2005 would be a false lead in the current circumstances: on the one hand because these negotiations have been frozen for years, and on the other hand because President Erdogan's desire for geopolitical affirmation no longer seems to be focused on EU membership. The Europeans must therefore offer Turkey an alternative status in place of EU membership; one that is sufficiently attractive to serve as a framework for effective, if not always harmonious, cooperation.

The earlier «Association Agreement» of September 1963<sup>4</sup> can be used as a basis for such a new status, provided that it is deepened and updated. This can be achieved by modernizing the EU-Turkey Customs Union established in 1995, extending it to other sectors (agriculture, services, public procurement, etc.) and using the process to accommodate the voice of the Turkish side. The adoption of the EU's multi-annual budget for the period 2021-2027 provides an opportunity to develop Turkey's participation in certain Community programs, such as "Erasmus +" for higher education, "Horizon" for research, «Creative Europe», etc.

However EU-Turkey agreement of November 2015 on the management of refugee and migrant crisis provides naturally the most promising framework, provided that it is effectively respected and implemented... This means that Turkey does not instrumentalize the flow of

refugees towards the Greek islands, as was still the case in the fall of 2019, but also that Europeans commit to facilitating the obtaining visas for Turkish nationals - a very symbolic measure, even in the eyes of the most pro-European Turks...

*Last but not least*, it is also essential that a permanent high-level dialogue between Europeans and Turkey be institutionalized and kept functional even when relations deteriorate, as in August 2020. Our bilateral relations will benefit from being imbued with the «Realpolitik» inspired by such regular exchanges, and staying as far as possible from emotional irritation and moral judgments.

In this respect, it is regrettable that the EU-Turkey Association Council has not met since March 2019 - and it is desirable that its 55<sup>th</sup> meeting should take place in the near future. Just as it is regrettable that Europeans have not adhered, against all odds, to the spirit and the letter of the EU-Turkey Joint Declaration of 29 November 2015, which provides for the establishment of «*a structured and more frequent high-level dialogue (...) essential to explore the vast potential of Turkey-EU relations, which has not been realised fully yet.*»<sup>5</sup> Since «*both sides agreed to have regular Summits twice a year, in an appropriate format*», it is high time to honor these felicitous resolutions by 2021, following the restoration of the minimum required conditions by defusing the war of words.

Perhaps the «Brexit» will allow the Europeans and Turkey to take the necessary step that will carry them towards a mutually beneficial relationship that is more utilitarian than intimate?

<sup>4</sup> Agreement establishing an Association between the European Economic Community and Turkey can be accessed online: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:21964A1229\(01\):FR:HTML](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:21964A1229(01):FR:HTML)

<sup>5</sup> UE-Turkey Statement on 29 November 2015 :

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/press/press-releases/2015/11/29/eu-turkey-meeting-statement/pdf>

Even though the United Kingdom is no longer a member-state of the EU, Europeans indeed know that in one way or another, they have to establish a good relationship with it and to determine the paths towards a new partnership after January 1, 2021.

They would be well advised to proceed in a similar manner with Turkey, even if it never becomes a member-state of the EU, simply because it is there, on our doorstep, with its strengths and

weaknesses; and it would be up to Ankara to agree to join to a «club of neighbors» whose prestige will be clearly enhanced by the arrival of «London». Without doubt this would be much better than rendering EU-Turkey relations similar to those established between the Europeans and post-Soviet Russia -and this alone justifies continuing diplomatic and political efforts over the coming months, with patience and perseverance.

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