

Does Turkey still belong to the West?

Perspectives by Andreas Nick and Taha Özhan

- The relationship to Turkey is severely strained. Andreas Nick is certain: Especially at a time when Turkey, once again, increasingly sees itself as part of the Islamic world, we should strengthen and develop its connections to the West.
- Taha Özhan argues that the question of whether Turkey is still part of the West dates back to 20th century geopolitics. Nowadays, it has lost its meaning. Instead, the “geopolitical West” itself is in question.



Photo: Jan Kopetzky

Andreas Nick

Strengthen connections Neither co-optation nor exclusion of Turkey

Does Turkey still belong to the West? An all too simple answer to this question runs the danger of being misunderstood as either excessive co-optation or complete exclusion. Above all, Turkey is a meeting point and a lively bridge between the West and the Islamic world. However, in order to be permanently stable and sustainable, a bridge needs to be firmly anchored on both banks.

Institutionally, Turkey has been strongly integrated into the West for decades: Since 1949 it has been a member of the Council of Europe, since 1952 a member of NATO, and since 1961 a member of the OECD. Turkey has been associated with the EU since 1963 and became an official accession candidate in 1999. However, the EU accession talks held since 2005 have had a quite ambivalent effect: In Turkey itself they awoke unrealistic expectations, inevitably leading to disappointments at a later stage. In contrast, in the EU Member States, the requirements for full membership became the primary benchmark for all questions relating to Turkey.

At the latest, this proved to be an additional burden on relations as the domestic political polarisation in Turkey escalated and the country developed in the direction of an increasingly authoritarian model of governance: From the Gezi Park demonstrations in 2013, the 2015 elections and the resurgence of the conflict with the PKK, the attempted putsch in July 2016 and the subsequent state of emergency, to the referendum on the changes to the constitution and the snap parliamentary and presidential elections in 2018.

This results in a dilemma: The state of Turkey's internal affairs must not be allowed to come into increasing conflict with its own strategic interests – and without doubt this includes good relations with the

West, politically and economically. For our part, we in the West continue to have a vital interest in a thriving Turkey with a stable democracy and a lively civil society – together with a strong orientation to the West and linkage to Europe.

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The current worsening currency crisis is threatening not only a further destabilization of Turkey, but at the same time an aggravation of the alienation between Turkey and the West, especially the US. Should the potential need to avail of IMF aid not be met for political reasons, this could push Turkey closer towards possible other financiers.

In the foreseeable future the West will face the challenge of pursuing a difficult double strategy with respect to Turkey: On the one side taking a clear and unequivocal position with respect to the fundamental values of democracy and the rule of law, freedom of the press and human rights – on the other side, not giving up on Turkey and its people as a result, but instead continuing to maintain a dialogue and cooperation where possible and necessary – especially with respect to Turkey’s civil society.

“For the foreseeable future, full membership of the EU is no longer a realistic perspective on both sides.”

As a consequence it will be increasingly important to cultivate and strengthen existing connections between Turkey and the West from both sides, since membership of NATO as well as the Council of Europe are tied to concrete expectations:

- NATO is in no sense just a defence alliance, it is primarily a community of values. However, NATO partners, in particular the US, must more explicitly recognise and consider Turkey’s legitimate security interests in its difficult neighbourhood.
- In particular, the Council of Europe possesses suitable instruments for supporting Turkey with respect to the central questions of protecting human rights, observing the rule of law, and maintaining a pluralistic democracy. It will be of decisive importance how Turkey

responds to the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, the so-called monitoring procedure of the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly, as well as the recommendations of the Venice Commission.

Full membership of the EU is no longer a realistic perspective on both sides. Therefore it is time to reassess the foundations of the relationship. In the near future, one should concentrate on those topics where it is possible to achieve concrete improvements in relations. This includes, for example, the expansion of the customs union and step-by-step measures for visa liberalisation (e.g. for scientists and students), the strengthening of youth exchange programmes, and increased cultural encounters – not by chance measures which are primarily directed at civil society. Nevertheless, Turkey is and remains an important neighbour and partner, therefore this should, where possible, proceed by way of dialogue and not further confrontation.

“Turkey is and remains an important neighbour and partner. We should proceed by way of dialogue and not further confrontation.”

Especially at a time when Turkey, once again, increasingly sees itself as part of the Islamic world, we should strengthen and develop its connections to the West. Neither Turkey’s co-optation nor exclusion are the right and relevant strategies. Respect and mutual appreciation in the spirit of Johann Wolfgang Goethe (“God’s is the Orient! God’s is the Occident!”) would be helpful to increasingly look for connecting as opposed to dividing elements in relations between Turkey and the West.



Taha Özhan

Time to look ahead

The “geopolitical West” itself is in question

The question of whether Turkey is still part of the West dates back to 20th century geopolitics. Nowadays, it has lost its meaning. At a time when we are discussing whether post-Brexit UK still belongs to Europe and when the US is undermining the Western political, security and economic order it helped to build over decades, the issue in question is not ‘who belongs to the Western camp’ but rather whether the ‘geopolitical West’ itself still exists. Ours is a period in which there are severe difficulties in even conceptualizing the social, political and economic dimensions of the West. Turkey’s foreign policy preferences and geopolitical choices should therefore not be assessed in the light of 20th century categories of ‘axes’ and ‘camps’.

“Contrary to the claim that Turkey had shifted its Western orientation, Turkey started the EU accession process in 2004.”

We are in a new era, but the 20th century still persists politically. This is a transition period par excellence. Our global political and economic organizations and the majority of states that make up the UN today arose after WWII. The geopolitical West and the new Turkish Republic also emerged in the 20th century. Turkey’s borders were reshaped after WWI and the contours of its political relations with the West redrawn after WWII. In the 21st century, the

question of whether Turkey still belongs to the Western camp is more complicated to answer. It was debated most intensively following the year 2002.

When Turkey refused to participate in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the allegation of ‘Turkey’s shift of axis’ made headlines in the Western press. Turkey’s opposition to the US, NATO’s largest military force, caught all actors by surprise. Contrary to the claim that Turkey had shifted its Western orientation, Turkey started the EU accession process, and negotiations began in 2004. If reviewed carefully today, those areas and issues that brought Turkey and the West together and led them to co-operate in the past are still in place.

Instead of seeking culprits in Turkey or the West for the difficult period we are in at the moment, we should take into account the global political depression that emerged after the Arab revolts and had a major impact on Turkish-American relations.

“The historical, geographical, demographic and economic interdependency between Turkey and Europe should be enough to create a positive agenda.”

Contrary to the Obama administration’s discourse, the US reacted in favor of maintaining the regional status quo, without caring about popular demands for change in the Middle East. Grave mistakes, especially those committed in Syria and Iraq, proved costly not only for the region, but for the whole world.

This inevitably put Ankara-Washington relations under strain. As Russia filled the geopolitical void the US left in the region, a new but hardly permanent period began. It was exactly in this period that Turkish-Russian relations rose to another level. When the migration crisis and terrorism hit Turkey and other countries, including European nations, both Turkey and the West began to realize the cost of having neglected these policy issues. Instead of reacting calmly to this crisis, many steps were taken disregarding Turkey’s sensitivities.

To make things even worse, two political earthquakes hit Turkey and Europe within a month in 2016.

First, the British decision to leave the EU was not only an earth-shattering event for the latter; it also called into question the very notion of the EU. At a time when hundreds of migrants were dying in the waters of the Aegean and Mediterranean every day

and additional hundreds of thousands were seeking to reach the continent, the fallout from Brexit generated a huge geopolitical impact.

Another political earthquake hit Turkey a few weeks later – at a time when the country was still grappling with ISIS and PKK terrorism. The bloody failed coup of 15 July 2016, for which the Turkish leadership holds Fethullah Gülen and his supporters responsible, changed Turkey’s political agenda and priorities radically. The weak response by Europe and Washington to the coup attempt added even more strain to the relationship. Two years have passed since, and now – following fresh elections – it is time for both the Western nations and Turkey to look ahead and embrace a positive agenda.

“We should not interpret Turkish-Western relations through the lens of 20th century geopolitics. A world divided into ‘camps’ and ‘axes’ is outdated.”

Regardless of the ups and downs in the relationship, just considering the historical, geographical, demographic and economic interdependencies between Turkey and Europe should be enough to create a positive agenda. We should understand that it is futile to interpret Turkish-Western relations through the lens of 20th century geopolitics. A world divided into ‘camps’ and ‘axes’ is outdated. It is only within the existing interdependency that a new basis for relations can be built between Turkey and the West.

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Körber Policy Game

The contributions are based on the Körber Policy Game on “Crisis Management in Turkey’s Neighborhood”, which took place on 2 July 2018 in Berlin. In the Körber Policy Game a small group of high-ranking international politicians, government officials, and experts discuss and analyze the interests of various foreign policy actors in the context of a fictional scenario. The Körber Policy Game is based on the idea of projecting current foreign and security policy trends into a future scenario – seeking to develop both a deeper understanding of the interests and priorities of the different players and policy options.

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