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Report

Turkey and Europe after Brexit: Looking beyond EU membership

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Turkey's EU minister arrives at the EU-Turkey accession conference in Brussels [Reuters]

Abstract

Turkey's bid to join the European Union has long been decoupled from its broader relations with Europe. Britain's exit from the EU will likely further derail Turkey's EU membership bid, although a Brexit may well open new opportunities for Turkey's bilateral relations with individual European states and bodies.

Introduction

Turkey's bid to join the European Union has long been decoupled from its broader relations with Europe. Britain's imminent exit from the EU will likely further derail Turkey's EU membership bid, but a Brexit may well open new opportunities for Turkey's bilateral relations with individual European states and bodies. As the UK negotiates a new relationship with the Continent, this special arrangement may provide an enticing template for future Turkish-EU relations.

The regional reshuffling created by Brexit provides new incentives for Turkey and the EU to contemplate alternative arrangements and overcome the anxieties and expectations created by the long defunct and largely illusory membership process.

A long slog for Turkey's EU membership bid

Despite the opening of a new chapter in the accession negotiations in June 2016, (1) Turkey's EU membership negotiations are going nowhere. Since Turkey began accession negotiations in October 2005, (2) 16 of the 35 chapters that Turkey needs to complete have been opened, but only one—Chapter 25 on Science and Research—has been provisionally closed. (3) Even if Turkey eventually satisfies the requirements of the other 34 chapters, the bid would still need to earn the support of the EU Council, the Commission, the European Parliament, the Turkish electorate, and every single EU country. (4) Some member states, like France, have signaled they will refer Turkey's bid to a popular referendum. This shows how little progress has occurred in the talks. It is

also an indication of a bleak future for Turkey's prospects. To further aggravate the case, neither Ankara nor Brussels have shown much appetite for reviving the membership process beyond empty gestures. The departure of the UK from the EU means that Turkey's bid will have one less important ally in Brussels.

With the exit of the UK, Turkey will lose the principal supporter for its European Union bid. In the aftermath of a Brexit, there are two likely possibilities for the direction of the EU. One possibility is that, in line with the history of European integration, the EU will seek to strengthen its core bonds, particularly among the founding and well-off members, in order to weather the turbulence caused by Brexit. In such a scenario, the identity, political culture, democratic credentials, and levels of economic development of new candidate countries will matter much more. Turkey, as a developing country with a troubled democracy and a hardening Islamist ideology, will find no place for itself. Its membership prospects will be dimmer and face many new hurdles.

Another possible scenario is that the EU will experience a period of uncertainty and chaos, crippling the functioning of the EU's crisis-ridden mechanisms. Such an inward-looking EU will likely put a brake on the enlargement process altogether, keen to avoid the prospect of further disintegration.

In either case, Turkey's EU membership bid will be deeply damaged by the British departure from the European Union.

Beyond the bid

This is not the whole story. It is a common mistake to view Turkey's path to EU membership and the country's relations with Europe as identical. For many years Turkey and Europe also treated these relations as practically the same thing. But this is no longer the case. The decoupling of these two relationships has become palpable in recent months, and looks set to continue. A British exit from the EU will affect these two tracks very differently.

While Turkey's EU membership bid lacks momentum, and would further stall in the aftermath of a Brexit, Turkey's relations with Europe are experiencing a revival, and appear to offer a relatively promising future.

This reinvigoration of Turkey's relations with Europe, mostly on bilateral terms, is driven primarily by shared interests and geopolitical imperatives, rather than common values. The Syrian refugee crisis, (5) a growing tide of radicalism, (6) the collapsing regional order in the Middle East and North Africa, (7) and the Russian defiance of NATO (8) are drivers of this new dynamic in relations. Indeed, Turkey appears determined not to let its

European ties be held hostage to progress on membership talks. Yet *realpolitik* rather than normative considerations dictates the boundaries of this new relationship. As such, Turkey is losing one of its most significant anchors of democratization: the EU membership process. Unfortunately, there is no longer any comparable anchor in sight that can hold Turkey to the democratization process, as did the promise of the EU between 2002-2007.

Brexit is likely to contribute to Turkey-European relations. First, Britain is leaving the EU, not Europe. Given that Britain has deep and mutually beneficial economic ties with the Continent, it is clear that a new arrangement that lessens the negative consequences of Brexit is in the cards. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has called upon the remaining 27 EU member states not to make any rash decisions and instead to rationally consider the EU's future path. This attitude stands in contrast to earlier reactionary announcements by officials from the EU and member states calling for a speedy British exit from the Union. (9) Merkel's measured position is likely to represent the way forward in reimagining the nature of relations between Britain and the EU. After all, the EU is the largest economic bloc in the world and Britain has a large market, so the incentives are strong for both parties to create mutually beneficial future relationships.

The EU is not a monolith. It maintains a diversity of arrangements (10) with a number of outside countries (Switzerland, Norway, Canada, etc.) that may serve as a precedent for a future model of EU-British relationships. Despite this, the prospective model is still likely to be unique, representing the first between the EU and a former member country. This new arrangement may even set a precedent for Turkey to follow—allowing Turkey to bypass the membership impasse and enter into a robust, beneficial relationship.

A “privileged partnership”

In fact, starting from around 2004, when Turkey seemed to be fully geared towards EU membership, anti-Turkish circles in Europe began speculating about alternative arrangements in order to stifle the prospect of full membership. At that time, Angela Merkel (then the leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union Party), joined by then-French interior minister and presidential hopeful Nicolas Sarkozy, proposed a “privileged partnership” as an alternative to membership. (11) This proposal was put on the table in haste and lacked substance. Later that year, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, who later served as Germany's Minister of Economy and Technology and Minister of Defense, published a study in order to add detail to the bare-bones concept. (12) Guttenberg's study, however, offered few advantages to Turkey. The thrust of the study covered areas of EU interest rather than Turkish interest. (13) In any case, most formulations of a “privileged partnership” were already covered by the Turkey-EU customs agreement. Later proposals within this framework, such as the eight-point proposal prepared by the European People's Party of the European Parliament, were even less elaborate and less generous towards

Turkey. (14) A common denominator of all the proposals, however, was increased cooperation between Turkey and the EU on defense and foreign policy.

Turkey has always categorically rejected any schemes seen as alternatives to full EU membership. The main reasons appear to be two-fold. First, Turkey has viewed these moves as replacing the possibility of membership (which, in fact, was the reason they were proposed by Merkel, Sarkozy, et al.). Second, Turkey regarded the proposals as reducing its status to a second-class power in the European system. Turkish leaders regarded the deals as both denigrating and misaligned with the parity it sought with the major European countries. The resistance thus incorporated both political and psychological aspects.

Revisiting a privileged partnership anew

With the benefit of hindsight, this rejectionist stance may have been the wrong approach. Turkey's membership prospects are no brighter now than they were in 2004-2005—if anything, they are bleaker—and a search for alternative arrangements is long overdue. There is a need for Turkey to move beyond an all-or-nothing mindset as this approach, frankly, has achieved the latter: nothing.

From this perspective, it is worthwhile to revisit the contours of a privileged partnership. In fact, Turkey should also consider putting its own proposal on the table. This will unburden Turkey's European engagement from its EU membership anxiety. Here again, a new arrangement between Britain and the EU might show the way out. A British privileged partnership (or special status) with the EU would help overcome Turkey's psychological resistance to such measures, as these arrangements would no longer be seen as reducing Turkey to second class power status in the European system, and would hence be more acceptable to Turkey's political elite and general public.

NATO's heightened role after Brexit

Less often discussed but no less important is the place of NATO and security relations in the post-Brexit era. When the EU Council—comprised of the heads of state and governments of member countries—met to discuss the fallout of Brexit on in June 2016, they had another important item on the agenda: EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini's presentation on a global strategy for the EU's foreign and security policy. (15) Though important and timely, the EU Global Strategy Review was overshadowed by discussions of Brexit, and hence received little attention from the public or media.

Britain was one of the major European powers that contributed most to the EU's foreign and security posture. It has the largest defense budget in the EU (\$66.5 billion) compared to second place France (\$52.7 billion), according to IHS's 2015 data, (16) and arguably the most able diplomatic corps in Europe. As was put plainly by NATO Secretary General

Jens Stoltenberg, British defense spending represents almost a quarter of what NATO's European members spend in total. (17) This is why Stoltenberg was quick to point out that "the UK will continue to play an essential role in NATO—and hence in Euro-Atlantic security." (18) In fact, there is now ever more reason to strengthen the NATO alliance to undergird EU stability, especially in the face of a resurgent Russia and increasing security challenges of all types.

After the British departure, the EU's chance of formulating a strong foreign and security policy will be significantly reduced, at least in the short- to mid-term. Thus, NATO is likely to gain further salience and importance for the security of Europe and in transatlantic relations, as it will serve as a platform that brings together Britain, EU member countries, and the United States. Britain is likely to attach more importance to its place in NATO, a factor that will benefit Turkey by default as a NATO member.

Despite shortages in capacity, the new EU will likely want to demonstrate that it is not taking an isolationist turn, withdrawing itself from and downsizing its ambitions in terms of international affairs. It will strive to keep its commitments to and engagement with outside countries. An obvious partner in this is Turkey, given its role in the two most pressing challenges that the EU currently faces: the refugee crisis and radicalism. Indeed, both French and German leadership reassured prospective EU members in the Balkans about the EU's commitments at a Balkan Summit in Paris in July. (19)

Turkey's drive to upgrade its custom union agreement with the EU will test the EU's resolve in the pursuit of an engagement-oriented foreign policy. As a member of the customs union with the EU, Turkey aims to upgrade the status of this agreement to cover agricultural products and services, in addition to industrial products. (20) If this agreement materializes, it may set a precedent for the UK to seek a customs union arrangement with the EU that includes provisions for its financial industry and services.

Brexit has put the European integration process to one of its most daunting tests. But not all the repercussions of the Brexit are adverse, at least not for everyone. If Turkey can show political dexterity and seize the opportunity, Brexit will open new opportunities for the country to exploit.

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