

## BETWEEN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND EUROPEAN CONDITIONALITY: RETHINKING TURKEY–EU RELATIONS IN A FRAGMENTED GLOBAL ORDER

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### ABSTRACT

*This article reassesses European Union (EU)–Turkey relations in an increasingly fragmented global order, focusing on how Turkey’s pursuit of strategic autonomy and the EU’s reshaped understanding of conditionality are redefining bilateral interactions beyond the framework of membership. Adopting a qualitative approach, this article employs discourse analysis and policy document analysis to trace shifts in institutional discourses, bilateral agreements, and regional interventions. Drawing on the concepts of strategic autonomy and post-conditionality, the study interprets the evolution of Turkey’s foreign policy behavior and the EU’s adaptation to these dynamics. This article demonstrates that EU–Turkey relations are evolving from normative convergence to a functional, interest-based partnership. While strategic interdependence in areas such as migration, security, and energy is intensifying, political cohesion continues to decline. Thus, it concludes that EU–Turkey relations are best understood through a hybrid model termed strategic partnership-plus. This concept highlights that relations combine pragmatic cooperation with elements of EU conditionality, selective sectoral integration, and Turkey’s pursuit of strategic autonomy, offering a more accurate lens to capture their complexity within the current fragmented global order.*

**Keywords:** EU–Turkey relations, strategic autonomy, conditionality, geopolitical order, partnership models

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## ÖZ

### **STRATEJİK ÖZERKLİK VE AVRUPA KOŞULLULUĞU ARASINDA: PARÇALANMIŞ KÜRESEL DÜZENDE TÜRKİYE-AB İLİŞKİLERİNİN YENİDEN DÜŞÜNÜLMESİ**

*Bu makale, küresel düzende giderek parçalanın Avrupa Birlięi (AB)–Türkiye ilişkilerini yeniden deęerlendirmeyi amaçlamakta; Türkiye’nin stratejik özerklik arayışı ile AB’nin yeniden şekillenen koşulluluk politikasının, üyelik çerçevesinin ötesinde ikili ilişkileri nasıl dönüştürdüğüne odaklanmaktadır. Nitel bir yaklaşım benimseyen makale, kurumsal söylemdeki deęişimleri, ikili anlaşmaları ve bölgesel müdahaleleri izlemek üzere söylem analizi ve politika belgeleri incelemesi yöntemlerini kullanmaktadır. Makale, Türkiye’nin dış politika davranışları ile AB’nin bu yeni düzene uyumunu, stratejik özerklik ve “Post-koşulluluk” kavramları üzerinden yorumlamaktadır. Araştırma, AB–Türkiye ilişkilerinin normatif yakınsamadan işlevsel ve çıkara dayalı bir ortaklığa evrildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle göç, güvenlik ve enerji gibi alanlarda stratejik karşılıklı bağımlılık artarken, siyasi uyum giderek azalmaktadır. Makale, AB–Türkiye ilişkilerinin, iş birliği ile ayrışmayı dengeleyen “stratejik ortaklık-artı” adlı hibrit bir modelle en iyi şekilde açıklanabileceğini savunmaktadır. Bu model, uluslararası ilişkilerdeki daha geniş ölçekli dönüşümleri yansıtmakta ve AB’nin çevre ülkelerle gelecekteki ilişkilerine örnek teşkil edebilecek bir yapıyı işaret etmektedir.*

**Keywords:** AB–Türkiye ilişkileri, stratejik özerklik, koşulluluk, jeopolitik düzen, ortaklık modelleri

## 1. Giriş

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and Turkey has long been one of the most complex, dynamic, and strategically important partnerships in the EU's external relations. Initially based on a normative framework shaped by alignment with EU values, this relationship has evolved into a more transactional and fragmented structure in recent years. This transformation has been shaped not only by Turkey's internal transformations and the EU's expansion fatigue, but also by broader geopolitical rifts such as the ongoing Ukraine War, the deepening strategic rivalry between the United States (US) and China, and the growing instability in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean.

In this rapidly evolving international context, two strategic logics have begun to shape the EU-Turkey relationship: Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy and the EU's reshaped, post-conditionality-based approach to external engagement. On the one hand, Turkey has redefined its foreign policy stance, positioning itself as a regional power that increasingly distances itself from the

EU's normative framework (Yalvaç, 2020; Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2025). This trend includes independent military interventions in Libya, Syria, and the Caucasus; defense cooperation with non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) actors; and institutional consolidation under a presidential system that frequently conflicts with the EU's expectations of the rule of law.

Meanwhile, the EU has gradually moved away from expansion-oriented conditionality in its relations with Turkey. With the accession process losing its credibility, the Union has turned to issue-specific, interest-based cooperation mechanisms, particularly in areas such as migration management, energy security, and economic regulation (Schimmelfennig, 2021; Nas, 2019). In the literature, this shift has been described as a shift to a 'post-conditionality' approach, where sector-based harmonization is pursued without a genuine accession perspective (Tocci, 2021; Bicchi, 2020). The resulting structure represents neither a complete rupture nor deepening integration; it represents a hybrid form of engagement, conceptualized in this article as 'strategic partnership-plus' -a model in which political separation coexists with functional interdependence.

Building on this conceptual framework, this article seeks to explain how the interplay between strategic autonomy and conditionality reshapes the structure and meaning of EU–Turkey relations in a fragmented global order. Rather than treating these dynamics as abstract policy concepts, this article interprets them as evolving discursive and institutional practices that redefine the parameters of cooperation beyond the accession logic. To capture this transformation, it adopts a qualitative methodological approach that integrates discourse analysis and policy document analysis. This dual method allows for a systematic exploration of how official narratives and policy instruments interact, revealing the gradual shift from a normative, membership-oriented relationship to a pragmatic and functionally driven configuration. The next section elaborates on this methodological framework and outlines the analytical steps taken to link discursive change with institutional adaptation.

## **2. Literature Review**

The academic literature on EU–Turkey relations has long been shaped by conceptual frameworks such as Europeanization, conditionality, and the politics of accession. However, recent geopolitical transformations -particularly the Russia–Ukraine War, the erosion of liberal norms, and the transition to a multipolar global

order- have necessitated a reassessment of the paradigms used to understand this complex relationship. Thus, this section examines three overlapping areas of academic study: studies on evolving EU conditionality mechanisms and post-accession interaction models.

### **2.1. Turkey's strategic autonomy**

Building on these conceptual discussions, recent empirical research has increasingly examined how Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy has materialized in practice through concrete policy domains such as defense industrialization, regional interventions, and multi-vector diplomacy. Studies emphasize that the development of a domestic defense industry symbolized by the rise of drone technologies like the Bayraktar TB2 has transformed Turkey from a security-dependent actor into a proactive regional power (Yalvaç, 2020). Similarly, analyses of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine and Ankara's military and diplomatic engagements in Libya, Syria, and the South Caucasus illustrate how autonomy has been exercised through territorial assertiveness and pragmatic realignments (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2022; Ulutaş, 2020). Scholars also note that Turkey's diversification of partnerships with Russia, China, and the Gulf states constitutes a broader redefinition of its strategic geography, reflecting a multidirectional and post-Western orientation (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2025; Keyman, 2025). Collectively, this body of work bridges theoretical debates on autonomy with Turkey's evolving foreign policy behavior, revealing that strategic autonomy functions not merely as a discursive construct but as an operational doctrine shaping Ankara's engagement with both regional and global actors.

### **2.2. Evolving EU Conditionality Mechanisms**

Since the early 2000s, the EU's conditionality framework -anchored in the Copenhagen criteria and designed to guide candidate countries through democratization, rule of law, and human rights reforms- has undergone significant transformation. In the context of enlargement fatigue, crises of liberal democracy within the EU itself, and shifting geopolitical realities, conditionality has become increasingly selective, politicized, and instrumental. Scholars note a move from normative conditionality based on consistent rule application toward strategic conditionality, in which geopolitical and migration-related considerations override

strict adherence to democratic standards (Schimmelfennig, 2021; Börzel & Lebanidze, 2022).

In Turkey's case, the credibility and consistency of EU conditionality have eroded markedly after the accession process stalled in the late 2000s. The EU's approach has shifted from accession-driven transformation to issue-based engagement, especially in areas such as migration management, energy, and security cooperation. This has redefined the conditionality framework as a pragmatic instrument of functional cooperation rather than a transformative mechanism of political convergence.

### **2.3. Post-Accession Interaction Models**

Parallel to this, post-accession and quasi-accession models of EU-third country relations -developed through frameworks like the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the European Economic Area (EEA), and the new 'partnership-based' models- offer conceptual tools to understand the EU-Turkey relationship after the de facto suspension of the accession process. Scholars such as Kochenov (2019) and Lavenex (2020) emphasize that these models reflect the EU's growing tendency to externalize its governance without offering full membership. In Turkey's context, this resembles a post-accession-type interaction without accession: a hybrid form of association based on functional differentiation, regulatory alignment in selected sectors, and geopolitical bargaining rather than rule-based convergence.

This perspective situates Turkey within a broader European trend of differentiated integration and variable geometry, where strategic cooperation replaces conditional transformation. It highlights how Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy intersects with the EU's own recalibration of conditionality, producing a relationship marked by interdependence, contestation, and mutual pragmatism rather than normative convergence.

Much of the early literature on EU-Turkey relations focused on the EU's transformative power. In the early 2000s, the prevailing assumption was that if the accession process were sustainable, it would foster domestic reforms, institutional harmonization, and democratic consolidation in Turkey (Grabbe, 2006). Scholars such as Tocci (2005) and Müftüler-Baç (2005) emphasized the EU's capacity to drive internal change through conditional incentives. However, the post-2013 period marked a significant rupture in this assumption. The Gezi Park protests, the

2016 coup attempt, and the subsequent authoritarian consolidation led to discussions in the literature on the phenomenon of ‘de-Europeanization’ (Aydın-Düzgit & Kaliber, 2016). It has been observed that EU norms lost their influence in Turkish politics and society during this period.

Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber (2016) argue that Turkey has transformed from a ‘Europeanizing’ country to a ‘distancing’ country, and that this transformation stems from both internal authoritarian tendencies and increasing skepticism toward the EU. Kaliber and Tocci (2019) also note that the EU’s influence on Turkey has significantly diminished, particularly as the accession process lost momentum after 2016. Nas (2019) interprets this as the emergence of a ‘post-accession framework’, arguing that relations are being maintained through ad hoc mechanisms rather than a structured institutional course.

While the concept of strategic autonomy was initially developed within EU foreign policy discussions (Biscop, 2020; Tocci, 2021), it has recently been increasingly used to analyze Turkey’s changing international orientation. Scholars apply this concept to Turkey’s behavior as a regional and medium-sized power within the framework of its defense policies, multilateral diplomacy, and energy security strategies.

Yalvaç (2020) offers one of the most comprehensive analyses of Turkey’s pursuit of strategic autonomy, emphasizing Ankara’s goal of reducing its dependence on Western security structures and increasing its influence in surrounding regions. Akçapar (2023), on the other hand, argues that Turkey is moving toward a pragmatic and multilaterally oriented ‘functional autonomy’ approach rather than an ideologically anti-Western stance. Aydın-Düzgit et al. (2025) argue that Turkey’s strategic autonomy is not monolithic, but fragmented, and that this pursuit of autonomy exists simultaneously despite its continued economic and institutional ties with the West. These analyses contribute to understanding the asymmetric interdependence between Turkey and the EU in the current geopolitical context.

On the EU side, recent literature highlights the limits of enlargement-based conditionality and the rise of the ‘post-conditionality’ approach (Schimmelfennig, 2021). This approach refers to a form of external engagement based on selective and sectoral cooperation on specific issues such as migration, energy, and trade; rather than rules-based transformation. Bicchi (2020) and Börzel and Risse (2020) argue that the EU is increasingly turning to a more pragmatic interactional logic,

particularly in the Mediterranean and Eastern Neighborhood regions where democratization incentives have weakened.

In the context of EU-Turkey relations, conditionality is no longer tied to accession progress; instead, it is implemented tactically through the 2016 EU–Turkey Migration Agreement (Özler, 2020), discussions on the modernization of the Customs Union, and green regulatory instruments such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) (Demirtaş, 2022). While such regulatory conditionality instruments are weaker in terms of their political impact, they maintain the technical and economic interdependence between the two actors.

Recent contributions propose alternative models to explain the current trajectory of EU-Turkey relations. Tocci (2023) proposes a ‘functional strategic partnership’ model that acknowledges the impossibility of full membership but aims to institutionalize cooperation in areas of mutual interest. Similarly, Aydın-Düzgit et al. (2025) advocate for an asymmetrical relational partnership model in which parties interact based on necessity rather than shared identity. While these new models acknowledge the structural incompatibility between the EU's normative agenda and Turkey's growing autonomy, they also underscore the need for rules-based and institutionalized cooperation mechanisms.

In this sense, the literature converges on the idea that EU-Turkey relations have entered a post-normative and post-accession phase. While political harmony has decreased, functional cooperation has increased in areas such as migration, energy, and security. This changing structure necessitates developing updated analytical frameworks based on flexibility, resilience and strategic pragmatism in a multipolar context, rather than evaluating relations solely through the membership-exclusion dichotomy.

### **3. Methodology**

This article adopts a qualitative research design to analyze the evolving dynamics of EU–Turkey relations in light of changing global and regional structures. For this aim, it combines discourse analysis and policy document analysis, two complementary methods that together allow for both interpretive and empirical examination of institutional change and foreign policy behavior.

Discourse analysis is employed to trace how the key concepts of strategic autonomy and conditionality have been framed and reinterpreted in official EU and Turkish narratives. This involves the examination of European Council

conclusions, European Commission progress reports, European Parliament resolutions, and major speeches and statements by Turkish policymakers between 1999 and 2025. These texts are analyzed to identify shifts in language, framing, and normative positioning that reveal underlying transformations in both actors' self-perceptions and mutual expectations.

Policy document analysis, on the other hand, is used to connect these discursive transformations to concrete institutional and policy developments. It includes a systematic review of pivotal documents such as the EU–Turkey Customs Union, the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement on Migration, the European Council's Strategic Agenda 2019–2024, and Turkey's foreign policy strategy papers. This analysis helps to map the practical manifestations of evolving discourses, especially in policy domains such as migration governance, energy cooperation, and security coordination.

Together, these two approaches enable a multi-layered understanding of EU–Turkey relations that transcends a purely descriptive account. By linking discursive narratives with policy practice, this article highlights how the interaction between strategic autonomy and post-conditionality has produced a hybrid model of engagement. This methodological framework, therefore, not only captures the ideational shifts shaping bilateral relations but also uncovers the institutional and strategic dimensions underpinning the emerging 'strategic partnership-plus' between Turkey and the EU. Thus, this article is structured around three interconnected research questions:

1. *How has Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy reshaped its relations with the European Union?*
2. *How do the European Union's conditionality mechanisms respond to Turkey's assertive foreign policy and domestic transformation?*
3. *How do global geopolitical shifts, such as the Ukraine war and the restructuring of transatlantic relations, affect the balance between cooperation and conflict in EU–Turkey relations?*

These research questions are grounded in the concepts of relational asymmetry and post-normative external governance, which provide the theoretical and analytical framework for this study. Relational asymmetry captures the uneven distribution of power and interdependence between Turkey and the European Union, helping to identify how asymmetrical relations shape Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy and the EU's application of conditionality. Post-

normative external governance allows the analysis to move beyond formal normative frameworks and examine the EU's influence in practical, informal, and contingent ways. By using these concepts as the base, this article systematically links empirical observations to theoretical insights: relational asymmetry guides the assessment of power dynamics, while post-normative external governance frames the evaluation of policy mechanisms and conditionality tools. Together, they ensure that both the formulation of research questions and the interpretation of findings are conceptually coherent, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between autonomy and external constraints in Turkey–EU relations.

#### **4. Historical Context: From Accession to Ad-hocism**

The EU-Turkey relations, dating back to the 1963 Ankara Agreement (also known as the Association Agreement), have a long and complex history, shaped by cycles of rapprochement and conflict. Initially structured around the logic of integration and economic partnership, the initial stages of this relationship were shaped by Turkey's goal of full membership in the European Community (EC), and later in the EU. The 1963 Association Agreement laid the groundwork for Customs Union integration, while the 1970 Additional Protocol deepened this framework. However, political instability in the 1970s and 1980s -particularly the 1980 military coup- and the EC's normative reservations on democracy and human rights delayed political rapprochement (Nugent, 2007; Müftüler-Baç, 1997).

Although Turkey's application for full membership in 1987 was not met with a positive response, this step demonstrated the country's long-term commitment to the Europeanization process. While the EU-Turkey Customs Union, established in 1996, did not offer a political membership perspective, it did establish a structural framework for economic integration and trade liberalization (Ülgen, 2017). This period was characterized by asymmetric cooperation, stemming from Turkey's exclusion from decision-making processes while adopting and implementing certain parts of the EU *acquis*. This structural inequality paved the way for increasing skepticism toward the EU among the Turkish public and political elite in the following years.

The 1999 Helsinki Summit, with Turkey officially declared a candidate country, marked a turning point in relations. This development provided political momentum and introduced the conditionality framework shaped by the

Copenhagen Criteria. The period between 1999 and 2005 saw Turkey implement comprehensive democratic and legal reforms, including the abolition of the death penalty, the reorganization of civil-military relations, the expansion of minority rights, and the strengthening of judicial independence (Tocci, 2005; Grabbe, 2006). These reforms were largely considered a response to the EU's credible conditionality mechanism and increased Turkey's alignment with EU norms and institutions.

The official launch of negotiations in 2005 was considered the high point of normative rapprochement. However, the following decade also revealed the fragility of this process. The Cyprus issue, the vetoes of some member states, particularly France and Austria, and enlargement fatigue within the EU significantly slowed down progress on the negotiation chapters. In Turkey, particularly after the 2013 Gezi Park protests, there was a decline in adherence to democratic norms; these events were met with harsh state intervention, and trends towards authoritarianism and centralization became evident (Aydın-Düzgıt & Kaliber, 2016). These trends deepened after the failed coup attempt in July 2016, leading to extensive purges of state institutions, restrictions on media freedom, and the controversial 2017 referendum and the transition to a presidential system (Özbudun, 2015).

Concurrent with these developments, EU-Turkey relations have increasingly shifted towards a more pragmatic and transactional framework. The most prominent example of this is the EU-Turkey Declaration signed in March 2016, publicly known as the 'Migration Compact'. This agreement, which was effective in significantly reducing irregular migration, symbolized a shift away from the logic of the accession process and towards an issue-based cooperation model based on mutual strategic interests (European Council, 2016; Tocci, 2021). From this point on, the relationship entered a phase many scholars have referred to as the 'post-accession period' -a phase characterized by stagnation in negotiations, the weakening of democratic conditionality, and situational, flexible, and often reactive forms of engagement defined as 'ad-hocism' (Nas, 2019; Schimmelfennig, 2021).

The 2020–2025 period, accompanied by increasing regional instability and shifting global alignments, has witnessed further institutional fragmentation in relations. Turkey's assertive foreign policy in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus, coupled with its attempt to strike a balance between

Russia and NATO, has increased strategic interdependence but further accentuated political divergence, particularly in the context of the Ukraine war (Yalvaç, 2020; Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2023). Turkey's veto of Sweden and Finland's NATO accession process demonstrated that Ankara is using its regional influence as a bargaining tool to extract concessions from its Western partners, leading to a further departure from the EU's normative framework.

During this period, Brussels attempted to promote cooperation through softer and more selective tools that can be described as 'post-conditionality'. This concept refers to a shift in the EU's external governance approach, moving beyond traditional, rigid conditionality mechanisms towards more flexible, context-specific instruments. These tools include selective incentives, informal agreements, and technical assistance, which aim to influence third countries without imposing strict compliance requirements. Such an approach reflects a post-normative strategy, where the EU adapts its methods to the political and institutional realities of its partners, allowing for a more pragmatic and less intrusive form of engagement.

This study adopts the concept of post-conditionality as defined in the existing literature, particularly in works by Becker (2024) and Fasone and Simoncini (2025), which emphasize the EU's turn towards more adaptable and less coercive tools in its external relations. By framing Brussels' softer and selective measures as post-conditionality, this article provides a conceptual lens to examine how EU-Turkey interactions evolved in this period, highlighting the interplay between strategic autonomy and conditional influence. Specific examples include selective funding programs, technical cooperation on migration management, and sectoral trade incentives, which illustrate how post-conditionality operates in practice.

In conclusion, the period spanning from 1963 to 2025 reveals a fundamental transformation in EU-Turkey relations, reflecting a shift from institutionalized conditionality toward strategic pragmatism. In the early decades, relations were characterized by structured conditionality, emphasizing legal institutionalization, normative convergence, and formal accession-oriented frameworks. These mechanisms sought to align Turkey with EU standards through clearly defined obligations and incentives.

Over time, however, this formal, norm-driven model gradually gave way to a flexible, interest-based approach, marked by selective engagement, ad-hoc

cooperation, and functional interdependence. This transition was shaped both by Turkey's domestic political and economic transformations and by broader geopolitical shifts in Europe and beyond. Today, EU–Turkey relations are largely guided by strategic pragmatism, where cooperation is driven by mutual interests and geopolitical imperatives rather than by normative alignment alone.

By using the framework of structured conditionality → interest-based pragmatism → strategic pragmatism, this article maintains conceptual consistency while capturing the evolution of the bilateral relationship. This approach also aligns with the broader analytical argument of the article that contemporary relations are now shaped by functional interdependence and geopolitical considerations rather than normative convergence.

### **5. Turkey's Strategic Autonomy in Action**

Over the last decade, Turkey has sought to restructure its role in the international system and adopted a multidimensional foreign policy doctrine often referred to by political elites as 'strategic autonomy'. This doctrine encompasses elements such as independence in defense capacity, territorial assertiveness, and diplomatic diversification. While the concept also finds a place in the EU's strategic discourse (Tocci, 2021), in the Turkish context it signifies a conscious break from traditional dependence on the West, particularly in the areas of security cooperation, arms procurement, and regional interventions. This section examines how Turkey has implemented its strategic autonomy through regional engagements, defense industry initiatives, and diplomatic realignments.

One of the fundamental pillars of strategic autonomy has been Turkey's efforts to develop an independent defense industry. This initiative aims not only to reduce dependence on NATO suppliers but also to serve as a geopolitical lever. In particular, the effective use of domestically produced Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) such as 'Bayraktar TB2' in conflicts including Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh has provided Ankara with the opportunity to project regional power with a low-cost but highly effective tool (Yalvaç, 2020). The S-400 air defense system, acquired from Russia in 2017, demonstrated that Turkey prioritizes strategic autonomy over alliance harmony, despite opposition from NATO allies and The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) of the US (Kardaş, 2020). These choices marked a significant shift from Turkey's post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic orientation.

Turkey's assertive diplomacy is also a significant indicator of its autonomous foreign policy orientation. In the Eastern Mediterranean, its efforts to redefine maritime jurisdictions within the framework of the 'Blue Homeland' doctrine through military deployments, energy exploration, and initiatives such as the maritime jurisdiction agreement signed with Libya's Government of National Accord in 2019 have attracted attention (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2022). These initiatives increased Turkey's regional bargaining power but also escalated tensions with the EU, particularly with Greece and Southern Cyprus, leading to threats of sanctions and attempts at diplomatic isolation (Bicchi, 2020).

In the Syrian crisis, Turkey has engaged in military interventions on its southern border since 2016 through operations such as Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring, often acting outside of NATO and negotiating directly with Russia. While these interventions aim to contain Kurdish groups that Ankara perceives as a threat, they also reflect Turkey's strategy of bypassing multilateral diplomatic channels to gain influence in surrounding regions (Ulutaş, 2020). Similarly, the strong support given to Azerbaijan in the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War demonstrated Turkey's readiness to act autonomously even in a complex geography under Russian influence.

Beyond military activism, Turkey has shifted its focus to restructuring its foreign policy with a multi-vector diplomacy approach. While commitment to institutional anchors such as the EU and NATO continues, Turkey's relations with non-Western actors such as Russia, China, and the Gulf states have deepened significantly. Normalization with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, strategic investments from Qatar, and increased engagement in Africa and Central Asia demonstrate Ankara's efforts to forge alternative strategic partnerships to counter Western political pressures (Aydın-Düzgüt et al., 2025). At the same time, Turkey's interest in global multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) reflects a symbolic and practical shift away from an EU-centric institutional architecture.

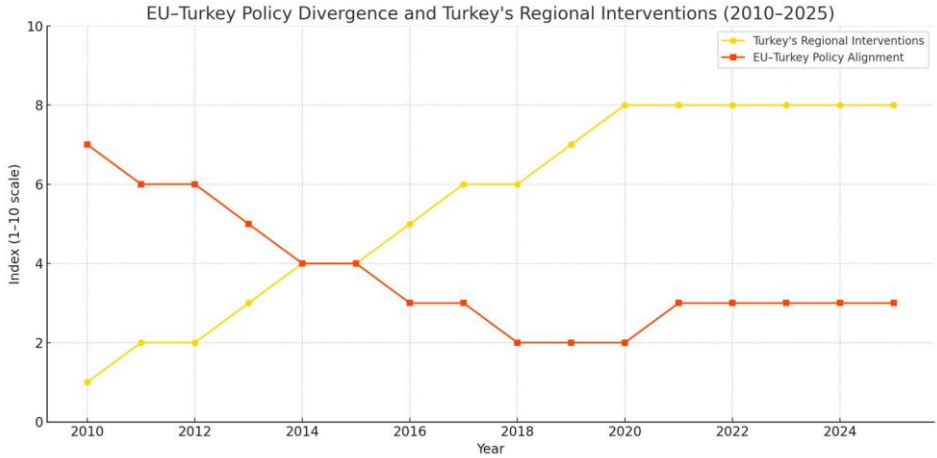
This foreign policy recalibration is not merely a tactical response; it is also based on a discursive infrastructure constructed by political elites that frames autonomy as a requirement of national sovereignty, strategic honor, and historical continuity. Aydın-Düzgüt et al. (2025) argue that the concept of strategic autonomy is deeply ingrained in Turkish political discourse; Keyman (2025) argues that it enjoys bipartisan approval and fosters both neo-Ottomanist and

Eurasianist fantasies. This conceptualization blurs the lines between domestic political legitimacy and foreign policy projection, presenting international independence as a prerequisite for regime security and national resilience.

Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy, however, does not imply a complete break with the West or integration with an alternative bloc. On the contrary, this approach can be described as a flexible, pragmatic, and at times contradictory orientation within the multipolar international order. While this strategy provides Ankara with room for maneuver, it also narrows the scope of structured engagement with the EU and limits the impact of conditionality mechanisms on Turkish behavior. This disconnect between autonomy and conditionality is central to the current restructuring of EU-Turkey relations, necessitating a new conceptual and policy framework -a framework that will be explored in the following sections.

The analytical trajectory outlined above can be further clarified with a figure that visualizes the impact of Turkey's strategic engagements on regional geographies. Figure 1 maps the geographical and thematic scope of Ankara's foreign policy activism, encompassing a variety of areas, from military operations in Syria and Libya to the diplomatic balance between Russia and NATO and strategic partnerships in Africa and the Gulf. This visual synthesis reveals how Turkey has implemented its strategic autonomy not only as a discourse but also as a multi-vector practice, and how it has increasingly distanced its foreign relations from the EU's normative framework.

**Figure 1.** The EU-Turkey Policy Divergence and Turkey's Regional Interventions (2010-2025)



**Source:** The Figure has been created by the author based on data from EU Progress Reports (2010–2023), Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2010–2023), official statements and strategic documents, Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) (2010–2023), UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, Department of Peace and Conflict Research and Council on Foreign Relations (2010–2023), and Global Conflict Tracker.

Figure 1 reveals a clear divergence between Turkey's increasing regional activism and its declining policy alignment with the European Union between 2010 and 2025. While Turkey's regional interventions have intensified, particularly in the wake of the Arab uprisings and the Syrian conflict, its alignment with EU foreign and domestic policy norms has gradually weakened. This trend reflects the erosion of accession-based conditionality and broader geopolitical shifts, suggesting that Turkey's foreign policy stance is shaped by strategic autonomy rather than the EU's normative agenda.

## 6. The EU's Recalibrated Conditionality

While Turkey has strengthened its claim to strategic autonomy over the past decade, the European Union's approach to conditionality has also undergone a significant restructuring. Moving away from the inclusive and normative framework of the enlargement process, EU-Turkey relations are increasingly shaped by selective, issue-specific, and transactional forms of engagement. This transformation stems not only from the stalled Turkish accession process but also

from changes within the EU itself including enlargement fatigue, internal democratic erosion, and the redefinition of geopolitical priorities following the Russo-Ukrainian War. In this context, the EU's reshaped conditionality appears as a reactive, layered, and pragmatic set of tools that attempt to balance interests and values, rather than a coherent and holistic grand strategy.

Traditionally, the EU's conditionality mechanism was defined within the enlargement framework, where clear criteria and the logic of institutional convergence were at the forefront. Schimmelfennig (2021) argues that conditionality was effective in the early 2000s. In this context, he points out that the EU possessed both normative authority and material incentives to promote democratic reforms in candidate countries at the time. In the case of Turkey, this leverage weakened significantly after 2006, as key negotiation chapters were frozen due to political disagreements, and the internal reform process lost momentum due to authoritarian tendencies. From this point on, the EU's conditionality instruments detached from the logic of accession and evolved into what Schimmelfennig (2021) termed as 'post-conditionality', where cooperation is structured around functional objectives rather than long-term integration goals.

One of the most prominent examples of this transformation is the 2016 EU-Turkey Migration Agreement. With this agreement, Turkey gained access to benefits such as financial assistance, visa liberalization, and Customs Union modernization in exchange for a commitment to curb irregular migration. Although it is not a treaty, it institutionalized a transactional model of conditionality that prioritized short-term strategic interests over normative convergence (Aydın-Düzgüt & Tocci, 2017). The Financial Assistance Program for Refugees (FRIT) in Turkey, which followed this agreement, operated with the same logic, prioritizing the preservation of stability over democratic reform. Dalkıran (2023) argues that this approach reverses conditionality, using Turkey's migration management role as a tool to extract concessions from the EU, and this transforms the asymmetrical structure in the relationship.

Beyond migration, the EU is also attempting to use sectoral tools such as the modernization of the Customs Union and green transition cooperation to maintain its influence. The modernization of the 1995 Customs Union remains on the agenda, but progress has been stalled due to political reasons such as the rule of law and democratic backsliding. Despite this, economic instruments related to issues such as digital trade, environmental standards, and value chains offer

strategic entry points to shape Turkey's policy preferences without reopening the EU's accession dossier (Nas, 2019). Similarly, the EU's Green Deal diplomacy, and particularly the proposed Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), have generated new incentives for Turkey to comply with environmental standards. That being said, this compliance is based more on geo-economic calculations than normative persuasion (Demirtaş, 2022).

At the same time, the EU is increasingly resorting to coercive means. Concomitantly, targeted sanctions and political statements have been used to respond to Turkey's activities, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean. The restrictive measures implemented in 2019 and the threat of additional sanctions in 2020 demonstrate a shift from incentive-based conditionality to a deterrent-based approach. However, these measures have had limited impact due to internal divisions among member states and the EU's reluctance to escalate tensions with a NATO ally (Bicchi, 2020). The result is a strategically limited but rhetorically harsh application of pressure.

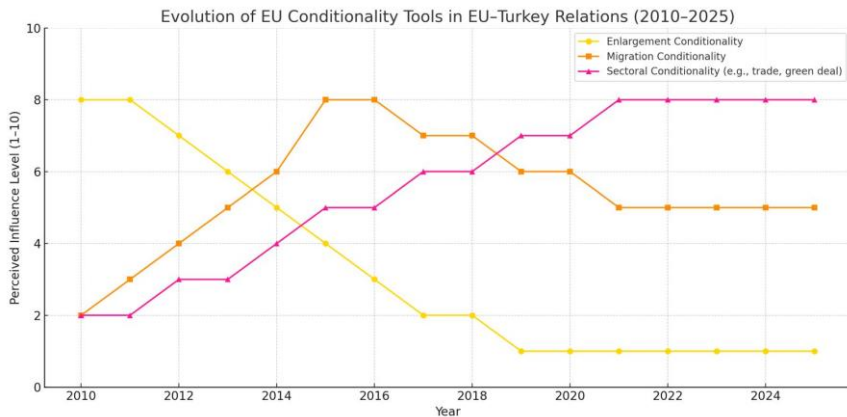
Recent developments, particularly the Ukraine War and its impacts, have triggered a rethinking of the EU's engagement tools. The self-positioning of the EU Commission under Ursula von der Leyen as a 'geopolitical Commission' demonstrates that strategic interests have overtaken the rhetoric of enlargement. In this context, Turkey has been redefined beyond the perspective of full membership as a necessary but challenging partner in areas such as regional security, energy corridors, and NATO integration. The critical role Turkey played in the NATO accession process for Sweden and Finland in 2022–2023 is one example of this new balance. Ankara has become an actor not conditioned but rather one won by making concessions, while the EU has largely left the process to NATO (Tocci, 2023). Therefore, the EU's reshaping conditionality can be characterized by three overlapping trends: 1) The decline of enlargement as a credible incentive; 2) The rise of transactional and issue-based cooperation; 3) The rise of deterrence-based strategies rather than convergence.

While this approach reflects the EU's strategic alignment efforts as it attempts to adapt to a multipolar and conflict-ridden international order, it also limits its capacity to promote democratic values in Turkey. More importantly, this approach aligns with Turkey's drive for autonomy, thereby transforming the relations from hierarchical into one that is more reciprocal, yet at the same time more fragile. In this hybrid context, conditionality no longer operates as a singular

and coherent logic, but rather as a fluid tool that changes according to the issue, time, and interdependencies.

In order to better grasp this evolution in the EU's conditionality approach towards Turkey, Figure 2 visually summarizes the shift from rule-of-law-centered accession criteria to a more pragmatic and sectoral engagement strategy. As the figure shows, conditionality has become increasingly selective, issue-specific, and reactive -focusing on areas such as migration management, Customs Union modernization, and climate adaptation- and away from comprehensive democratic reforms. This transformation is a strategic response to both Turkey's changing political landscape and the EU's need to recalibrate its external leverage in a more volatile international environment.

**Figure 2.** Evaluation of the EU conditionality Tools in the EU-Turkey Relations (2010-2025)



**Source:** An interpretation figure based on Schimmelfennig (2021), Aydın-Düzgüt & Tocci (2017), Dalkıran (2023), Nas (2019), and policy documents from the European Commission.

Figure 2 reflects the temporal evolution of the EU's conditionality strategies towards Turkey. The impact of membership conditionality, based on enlargement and normative alignment, exhibits a significant decline after 2013 and almost completely collapses following the coup attempt in 2016. In contrast, migration conditionality peaked between 2016 and 2019, reflecting the impact of the EU-Turkey Agreement and subsequent developments. Meanwhile, sectoral

conditionality, implemented in areas such as trade modernization, energy transition, and environmental regulations, has been steadily increasing and is expected to become the EU's most adaptable and enduring interaction tool by 2022. This visual progression confirms the evolution of EU conditionality from a value-based enlargement framework to an interest-based model tailored to specific policy areas. It also highlights the limited impact of traditional conditionality instruments on a partner like Turkey, which seeks strategic autonomy.

### **7. The New Geopolitical Order and the Future of the Relationship**

The profound transformations in the global strategic environment in recent years have fundamentally reshaped the context in which EU-Turkey relations have developed. Russia's comprehensive invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the escalation of US-China rivalry, and the restructuring of security architectures in Europe, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean have created both limiting factors and new opportunities for Ankara and Brussels. In this fragmented geopolitical order, Turkey and the EU have not only become increasingly interdependent but also structurally incompatible. Differently put, two actors bound together by necessity but divergent in terms of values and strategic orientations. Therefore, the future relationship will likely be defined not by a return to a logic of accession, but by a hybrid and functional partnership structure shaped by selective engagement, mutual deterrence, and strategic pragmatism.

The Ukraine war has raised Turkey's profile as a geostrategic actor in the Euro-Atlantic security complex. Turkey's capacity to engage in dialogue with both Kyiv and Moscow –in particular its facilitating role in the Black Sea Grain Initiative- has once again demonstrated Ankara's value in managing conflict spillovers for NATO and the EU (Tocci, 2023). Furthermore, Turkey's decisive role in approving Sweden and Finland's NATO membership applications in the 2022–2023 period has demonstrated Ankara's potential to shape Western security, even if its domestic politics and foreign policy preferences contradict EU norms (Yalçın, 2023). Rather than reacting to these normative deviations, Brussels has opted to accept Ankara's autonomy, taking into account shared geopolitical imperatives.

Meanwhile, the EU has shifted to a more strategic and interest-based foreign policy stance. The von der Leyen Commission's emphasis on building a 'geopolitical Europe' has shifted the Union's foreign relations paradigm from one

focused on expansion and transformation to one focused on resilience and impact. The European Security Strategy (2022) and the Strategic Compass initiative reflect this trend, presenting a more muscular, less idealistic, and issue-based vision of EU foreign policy-partnerships envisioned with actors such as Turkey, Ukraine, and the Western Balkans (Bicchi & Martinelli, 2022). In this context, Turkey is no longer viewed as a binary of ‘membership or not’ but rather as a fluid partner, seen as indispensable in some areas (e.g., energy, migration, defense) and problematic in others (e.g., rule of law, media freedom).

This strategic realignment has concrete consequences for the future of EU–Turkey relations. Firstly, Turkey's prospects for full EU membership have lost political viability, although legally they remain on the table. Neither side possesses the political will to revitalize the accession framework, and the necessary conditions, such as normative convergence, institutional cohesion, and public support, have largely eroded (Nas, 2019). Secondly, sectoral cooperation is likely to deepen especially in areas where interests align and transactional logic prevails. These include energy security (e.g., Turkey's role in the Southern Gas Corridor logistics), climate diplomacy (e.g., alignment with the EU Green Deal and CBAM), and digital trade (e.g., Customs Union modernization) (Demirtaş, 2022; Üstün, 2023). Last but not least, the growing strategic interdependence between the EU and Turkey makes the institutionalization of a model that could be called ‘strategic partnership-plus’. This model could offer a structured framework that goes beyond enlargement but recognizes Turkey's role in regional governance. It could include calibrated mechanisms in areas such as dialogue, economic cooperation, and crisis management; it could be supplemented by a reformed Partnership Framework or a new bilateral agreement. This model does not require full democratic compliance; but it relies on predictability, transparency, and rules-based interaction -a hybrid structure blending conditionality and *realpolitik* (Tocci, 2023; Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2025).

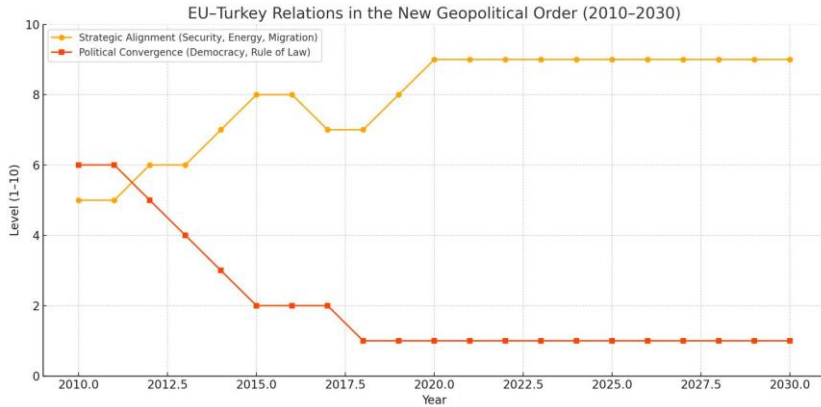
However, this evolutionary process carries risks. The lack of a long-term normative anchor could lead to the normalization of democratic backsliding in Turkey and weaken the EU's credibility as a value-based actor in its neighborhood. Similarly, increasing transactionalism could set a precedent for other partner countries, blurring the distinction between candidate country and strategic partner. Furthermore, unresolved bilateral tensions -for instance maritime jurisdiction disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, migration policies, and arms

embargoes- continue to hinder the development of a stable institutional framework. These inflection points can flare periodically, revealing the fragility of the emerging order.

In summary, the new geopolitical order has not eliminated the structural tensions in EU-Turkey relations. It has, however, transformed the engagement tools and incentive structures of both sides. Strategic autonomy and recalibrated conditionality have created a relationship centered on strategic negotiation, not integration. This reflects not only the limitations of past approaches but also the need for more adaptable and durable models of cooperation in a fragmented global order. A forward-looking EU-Turkey partnership will depend not on the resurrection of old paradigms, but on the construction of new engagement tools that can manage divergence while maintaining interdependence.

This strategic recalibration in EU-Turkey relations cannot be fully understood without placing it within the context of changes in the broader global geopolitical order. Figure 3 visualizes how significant international developments, such as the Ukraine War, NATO expansion debates, and shifts in the balance of power among global actors, have restructured the foreign policy priorities of Ankara and Brussels. By mapping areas of overlap and divergence, this figure reveals how exogenous shocks increase political distance while simultaneously deepening functional dependency and reinforcing the need for a hybrid, flexible partnership architecture.

**Figure 3: The EU-Turkey Relations in the New Geopolitical Order (2010-2030)**



**Source:** The Figure has been created by the author based on data from European Commission Annual Turkey Reports (2010–2023), Tocci, N. (2021), Aydın-Düzgit, S., & Keyman, E. F. (2020), Öniş, Z. & Kutlay, M. (2022) and European Council conclusions and official EU–Turkey statements (2010–2024).

The Figure 3 visualizes the widening gap between strategic alignment and political convergence in EU-Turkey relations from 2010 to 2030. Following geopolitical developments such as the 2015 migration crisis and Russia's war on Ukraine, cooperation in areas such as migration, energy, and security increased, while political convergence sharply declined. This is a clear reflection of the democratic backsliding in Turkey and the weakening influence of EU conditionality. The projection for the 2025–2030 period assumes the continuity of these dynamics and demonstrates that the partnership is increasingly based on pragmatic interests rather than shared values. This projection for the 2025–2030 period is based on estimates of strategic alignment and political convergence levels derived from developments observed between 2022 and 2025. Unless there is a significant disruption, such as a change of government through a democratic election or a structural political transformation, current trends are expected to continue. In this context, strategic cooperation will remain strong due to geopolitical imperatives. However, political convergence will remain limited, reflecting the ongoing democratic backsliding in Turkey and the weakening of EU conditionality.

## 8. Findings and Discussion

The conceptual and empirical analysis presented in this article reveals that EU–Turkey relations have undergone a significant structural transformation. The relationship has evolved away from a participatory and normatively driven engagement towards a hybrid model characterized by selective cooperation, strategic interdependence, and normative divergence. This restructuring is not merely the result of bilateral tensions or domestic political developments. It is also a reflection of deeper systemic shifts, as both the EU and Turkey recalibrate their foreign policies in response to the global geopolitical order.

Above all, the findings confirm that strategic autonomy has become a defining principle in Turkey's foreign policy. With its assertive roles in regions such as Syria, Libya, the South Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara has maintained an independent stance in defense, diplomacy, and regional engagement (Yalvaç, 2020). The development of its domestic defense industry, the purchase of the S-400 Defence System from Russia, and the pursuit of multilateral diplomacy with actors such as China, the Gulf countries, and Russia demonstrate Turkey's departure from traditional Euro-Atlantic alignments (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2025). This understanding of autonomy is not isolationist, but rather it is a situational, flexible, and transactional model that aims to create room for maneuver without completely detaching Turkey from Western institutions.

At the same time, the EU's approach to conditionality towards Turkey has significantly shifted. This is because the accession framework is no longer an effective or politically viable lever, the EU has adopted a new approach called 'post-conditionality' (Schimmelfennig, 2021). This approach includes functional cooperation mechanisms on issues such as migration, trade, and climate, while relying more on symbolic and episodic normative responses to democratic backsliding. The EU-Turkey Migration Agreement and the discussions surrounding the modernization of the Customs Union demonstrate that cooperation is no longer governed by legal or political convergence, but by pragmatic interdependence (Dalkıran, 2023; Nas, 2019). The EU Green Deal has introduced a new form of regulatory conditionality that forces Turkey to adjust environmental policies to remain integrated into European value chains (Demirtaş, 2022).

One of the most striking findings is the growing asymmetry between strategic interdependence and political trust. Following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, cooperation in security and economic areas intensified, but political

cohesion declined. This has created what can be described as a ‘functional rupture’ (Kirişci, 2020; Saatçioğlu, 2019; FEUTURE Project, 2025; Haferlach, 2018) where parties cooperate out of necessity, without a shared political vision or institutional roadmap. This pattern aligns with Tocci's (2021) observation that the EU is moving towards a flexible partnership model, where it attempts to balance geopolitical needs with its normative identity. The findings highlight the institutional adaptability of both sides. Turkey has been able to negotiate with comparative advantage on issues such as migration management and NATO diplomacy by leveraging its geostrategic position. The EU, on the other hand, has demonstrated the ability to compartmentalize its engagement and detach itself from the accession narrative. This suggests that the parties have developed policy tools, but within a more fragmented and transactional framework.

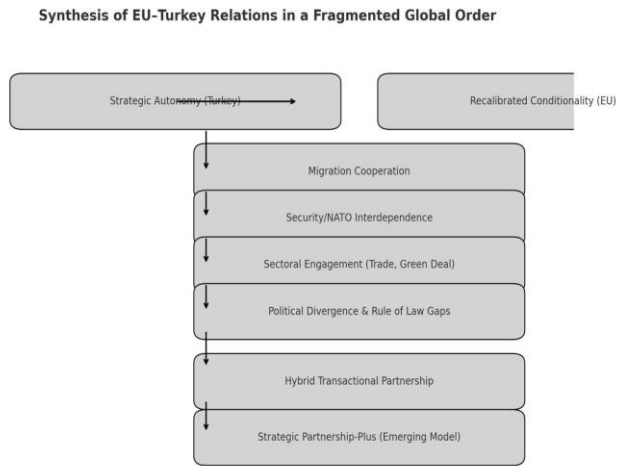
From a theoretical perspective, the analysis demonstrates the inadequacy of interpreting EU-Turkey relations solely through a dichotomy of convergence or divergence. Instead, the relationship is better understood through the perspective of relational realism. More clearly, strategic autonomy and conditionality are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they shape each other. Turkey's autonomy does not exclude cooperation; on the contrary, it necessitates new forms of engagement. Similarly, EU conditionality has not disappeared; it has been reframed to accommodate asymmetries and issue-specific logics.

This leads one to a final and critical conclusion which is the ‘strategic partnership-plus’ model. This model is a conceptual space between full membership and disengagement. Although not formally institutionalized, it reflects the empirical reality of EU-Turkey relations. It is flexible enough to tolerate value differences and structured enough to sustain dialogue and cooperation. Whether this model can translate into a stable, long-term framework is uncertain, especially given the unresolved tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the fragility of democratic institutions in Turkey. Nevertheless, it appears to be the most viable path in a multipolar and uncertain global order.

In order to synthesize the core arguments and empirical findings of the previous sections, Figure 4 provides a visual summary of the changing dynamics between Turkey and the EU. This model demonstrates that the interplay between Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy and the EU's post-conditionality toolkit has created a complex and hybrid relationship characterized by sectoral cooperation, normative divergence, and strategic interdependence. The figure

emphasizes that relations are no longer based on a logic of participation, but rather on a flexible and transactional architecture shaped by global uncertainties and regional realignments.

**Figure 4.** Synthesis of the EU-Turkey Relations in a Fragmented Global Order



**Source:** The Figure has been created by the author based on data and analyses from European Commission Progress Reports (2010–2023), official communications from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and scholarly literature on EU–Turkey relations (Nas, 2019; Tocci, 2021; Aydın-Düzgüt & Keyman, 2020; Öniş & Kutlay, 2022), as well as regional conflict assessments (UCDP; CFR).

The Figure 4 conceptually maps the evolutionary dynamics of relations between Turkey and the EU in light of changing global and regional contexts. The figure reflects the complex interplay between Turkey’s pursuit of strategic autonomy and the EU’s restructured conditionality strategy, particularly in the wake of geopolitical disruptions in the 2020s (e.g., the Ukraine war, the US–China rivalry, and regional instability). The Figure’s vertical flow demonstrates the continued existence of sector-specific cooperation, such as migration management, NATO security coordination, and trade/Green Deal alignment,

despite deep divergences in normative areas such as democracy and the rule of law. These layered interactions have given rise to a hybrid, transactional partnership characterized by selective alignment rather than participation-based integration. On the other hand, the final phase of the Figure, Strategic Partnership-Plus, signals the emergence of a new model that institutionalizes pragmatic cooperation while acknowledging the limitations of the full membership perspective.

## **9. Conclusion and Policy Implications**

This article analyzes the evolution of EU-Turkey relations in a rapidly fragmenting global order through the conceptual frameworks of strategic autonomy and conditionality. The central argument here is that these relations have undergone a radical transformation. In this context, moving away from the official participation framework based on normative convergence, a mixed partnership model based on interests has emerged, defined by strategic interdependence and political differences. This transformation is not merely reactive; it is also a consequence of global systemic changes such as the decline of liberal institutionalism, the rise of multipolarity, and the securitization of regional interdependencies.

The findings indicate that strategic autonomy has become a defining principle in Turkey's foreign policy. Military activities in Syria, Libya, the South Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean, domestic defense industry investments, and multilateral diplomacy with China, the Gulf states, and Russia all demonstrate Turkey's departure from its traditional Euro-Atlantic alignment. However, this autonomy is not isolationist. It represents a transactional, flexible, and context-specific orientation.

Meanwhile, the EU's engagement strategy towards Turkey has undergone significant restructuring. As participation-based conditionality has ceased to be an effective tool, the EU has adopted a pragmatic, sectoral, and transactional approach. Issue-based cooperation has developed in areas such as migration, trade, and climate policy, while remaining content with symbolic and intermittent responses to democratic setbacks. For example, the EU-Turkey Migration Compact and the discussions on the modernization of the Customs Union demonstrate that cooperation is no longer driven by legal or political convergence, but rather by pragmatic interdependence. The EU Green Deal is one example of

regulatory conditionality, requiring Turkey to adjust its environmental policies to remain integrated into European value chains.

The most striking finding, however, is the growing asymmetry between strategic interdependence and political trust. While cooperation in security and energy has deepened, political harmony and trust have eroded. This situation points to what could be described as a ‘functional rupture’ where parties cooperate out of mutual necessity, without a shared political vision or institutional roadmap. This pattern aligns with Tocci's (2021) observation that the EU is moving towards a flexible partnership model.

The findings also point to the institutional adaptability of both parties. Turkey has gained bargaining power by leveraging its geostrategic position in areas such as migration control and NATO diplomacy. The EU, on the other hand, has demonstrated the ability to compartmentalize cooperation, decoupling it from the accession narrative. This suggests that both sides are developing new policy tools within a more fragmented and transactional engagement structure.

From a theoretical perspective, this analysis demonstrates that explaining EU-Turkey relations solely through binary frameworks of ‘either convergence or divergence’ is inadequate. Rather, the relationship can be more accurately grasped through the lens of relational realism. This comes to mean that strategic autonomy and conditionality are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they complement each other. Turkey's autonomy does not preclude cooperation, rather it necessitates more flexible forms of engagement. Similarly, EU conditionality has not disappeared; it has been restructured to accommodate asymmetries and issue-specific logics.

This leads one to a final and critical conclusion which is the ‘strategic partnership-plus’ model. This model is an institutionally weak but increasingly functionally realistic structure, situated between full membership and disengagement. It is flexible enough to tolerate value differences and structured enough to sustain dialogue and cooperation. Whether this model can translate into a stable, long-term framework is uncertain especially considering the unresolved crises in the Eastern Mediterranean and the fragility of democratic institutions in Turkey. Nevertheless, this model stands out as the most viable path in a multipolar and uncertain global context.

The article concludes that EU–Turkey relations are best understood through a hybrid model that can be termed a strategic partnership-plus. While the

notion of strategic partnership has long been invoked to describe pragmatic cooperation outside the accession framework, it does not adequately capture the layered character of contemporary ties. The ‘plus’ emphasizes three additional dimensions. First, EU–Turkey relations involve not only functional cooperation in trade, migration, and security, but also the persistence of EU conditionality on democracy, human rights, and rule of law. Second, the relationship extends into selective and sectoral integration such as customs union modernization, energy cooperation, and adaptation to the European Green Deal that goes beyond classical partnership. Third, it reflects Turkey’s quest for strategic autonomy, whereby Ankara seeks to balance interdependence with Europe while preserving its independent geopolitical posture. Taken together, these elements highlight that the current EU–Turkey relationship is neither full membership nor a simple partnership, but a hybrid form of cooperation and contestation that is more accurately described as strategic partnership-plus.

The EU’s biggest challenge is its failure to clarify its long-term vision for Turkey. Despite its formal candidacy status still being maintained, the lack of progress in implementation undermines Brussels’ credibility. The EU should consider creating a new engagement framework that recognizes the post-accession period but maintains rules-based sectoral cooperation. Sectoral instruments such as the Green Deal, CBAM, and digital trade standards should be used more strategically to influence Turkey’s policy choices through regulatory harmonization. At the same time, red lines on human rights and democratic backsliding should be maintained, and a normative stance should be maintained, even if enforcement mechanisms are weak.

Ankara’s primary task should be to reassess its normative distance from Europe. While strategic autonomy provides flexibility in the short term, it increases the risk of exclusion in the long term without institutional trust and legal predictability. The interest in topics such as visa liberalization, Customs Union modernization, and trade facilitation demonstrates that Europe remains a significant economic pillar for Turkey. To maintain these ties, Turkey must strengthen its domestic political stability and engage more consistently in rules-based dialogue with the EU. Otherwise, the benefits derived from strategic autonomy could be offset by diminished access to European markets, investments, and soft power networks.

From the perspective of transatlantic and regional actors (e.g., NATO, neighboring countries), the EU-Turkey relationship should not be understood as a frozen conflict. On the contrary, it should be seen as an adaptive and evolving one. The Ukraine War highlighted Turkey's importance as a regional stabilizer. Moreover, it demonstrated the limits of the autonomy of the EU and Turkish foreign policies. This demonstrates the shared interest in developing multilateral platforms based on institutional cooperation, but outside the framework of accession, in areas such as Black Sea security, energy transportation, and regional diplomacy.

On the other hand, from an academic perspective, the EU-Turkey example offers an important case for examining international partnerships in the post-liberal and post-enlargement era. Strategic autonomy and conditionality are no longer contradictory, rather they are increasingly emerging as intertwined constructs. As this article demonstrates, autonomy can be transactional rather than isolationist, while conditionality, on the other hand, can acquire a selective and issue-specific character rather than being tied to participation. In this new logic of foreign relations, flexibility and adaptability will shape the fundamental dynamics not only of EU-Turkey relations but also of the EU's general neighborhood policies.

Future research could examine whether the 'strategic partnership without participation' model has developed with similar dynamics in examples such as the Western Balkans, Ukraine, or the post-Brexit United Kingdom. Such comparative studies will contribute to the understanding of how global fragmentation is transforming not only foreign policy strategies but also international cooperation architectures.

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