



MULTILATERALISM MATTERS: TOWARD A RULES-BASED TURKEY-EU RELATIONSHIP

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Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the current stalemate in the Turkey-EU relationship and proposes that the relationship should be analyzed through a global lens, not a bilateral one. It examines the paradigmatic shift toward multilateralism globally and in Europe and shows how multilateralism matters for the EU against the current global turbulence. In fostering multilateralism in this context, the EU needs to be more inclusive and should further cultivate its partnerships with outside actors such as Turkey. Based on this analysis, the policy brief proposes that the EU's relationship with Turkey should not only be based on transactionalism but should also include rules-based frameworks such as the upgrading of the Customs Union. The upgrading of the Customs Union is important not only in revitalizing the economic dimension of the Turkey-EU relationship but also for the inclusion of Turkey in the rules-based multilateral system. The paper concludes by examining the future of the relationship and proposing policy recommendations.

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About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative

The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

Introduction

The international system is experiencing a period of turbulent change, with two paradigmatic shifts that affect all actors and their relationships: the rise of a multipolar system and the proliferation of populist/authoritarian tendencies. As a result of such shifts, it is no longer meaningful to separate the internal from the international arena as the two spheres closely interact with each other. In this turbulent context, there are definite links between the rise of the multipolar system and the proliferation of populist/authoritarian tendencies as reflected in the widespread analysis on the “illiberal turn” and diffusion of power in the international system.¹

This policy brief will focus on the diffusion of power and turbulent change in the international system and its impact on the long-standing EU-Turkey relationship. It will analyze the recent rise of populist/authoritarian tendencies and how they interact with the turbulent change in the international system. In this context, an analysis of global change is crucial in contextualizing the EU-Turkey relationship. As both the EU and Turkey are affected by these global paradigmatic shifts, it is no longer useful to understand only the bilateral relationship but rather how the bilateral relationship fits into the global context.

Turbulent Global Context

The international system has experienced several systemic changes over the past century with the rise and decline of different modalities, characterized as unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems. In the present era, we witness a major diffusion of power in the international system away from the West, with the rise of new actors in the international system leading to the formation of a multipolar system. Although the international system in the 19th century was a multipolar system, it primarily involved state actors. This time it is more “complex” and involves not only new state actors but also transnational, societal, and even individual actors.²

The multipolar system in general has evolved toward two primary tendencies: multilateralism, where patterns of cooperation predominate, or unilateralism, where power politics and conflict dominate the system. At present, promoting multilateralism is increas-

ingly challenging as a result of the rise of unilateral/bilateral orientations among major actors, coupled with the proliferation of populist/authoritarian tendencies. Alternative modes of governance have increased their salience with the rise of China and Russia in the multipolar system as these countries exercise power politics and unilateral orientations. The change of orientation in the United States from a multilateral to a unilateral one, brought on by the Trump presidency, has also led to tensions in transatlantic relations as well as made the post-war multilateral framework more fragile. In addition, the rise of populist/authoritarian tendencies and the “Brexit” issue in Europe have created a more conducive environment for unilateral and bilateral tendencies.

In this rather gloomy context, multilateralism has become an “existential issue” for the EU.³ More than any other actor in the international system, multilateralism matters for the EU. The project of European integration has been a turning point in European history that has challenged unilateral orientations based on power politics. It has been crucial in addressing and solving long-lasting conflicts in Europe, such as the German-French dispute. The post-war process of European integration created a rules-based institutional system that aimed to foster cooperative interactions and minimize conflictual relations. At first, Western European countries, particularly Germany, benefitted from the creation of such a rules-based multilateral system. Over time, the whole of Europe has benefitted from this system.

In the present context, the European integration project faces major challenges to its rules-based multilateral institutional order from within and outside. The EU has no choice but to defend multilateralism and strengthen and transform it in line with global trends. In this turbulent context, it is critical for the EU to foster a multilateral system to restrain the adverse effects of power politics in the multipolar system and the rise of populist/authoritarian tendencies.

European Context

The project of European integration has faced multiple crises in recent years, ranging from economic downturn to refugee crisis and the rise of populist/authoritarian challenges. The ensuing

“Brexit drama” in this context has even created a debate about the “disintegration” of the EU. It is not yet known how Brexit will evolve, but it has not yet resulted in the disintegration of the EU. It has, however, made the multilateral orientation of the EU even more fragile. Whether the UK will strike a “deal” with the EU and continue to be part of the rules-based multilateral order or it will exit without a deal and follow policies in line with unilateral or bilateral tendencies will be a crucial factor in determining the future of the multilateral system. As the rules-based multilateralism system gets more fragile and the “jungle grows back,” as aptly characterized by Kagan, European actors, including the UK, must realize the significance of the EU’s multilateral framework and the difficulty of going alone in the context of turbulent global change.⁴

In line with these global trends, the EU’s recent strategic documents all underline the importance of its role in fostering a rules-based multilateral system. Until recently, the EU emphasized the importance of an “effective” multilateral system; at present, it is evolving toward an “inclusionary” multilateral system.⁵ In order to foster such an inclusionary multilateral system, the EU needs to focus on “partnering” relationships with other actors. This issue was underlined in the FRIDE/Chatham House Report for European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) back in 2013, when it was noted that the EU’s partnerships would empower Europe’s role in the changing global world.⁶ The report also noted that the future course of the UK and Turkey would prove critical for the future of Europe and its place in the world. It should be noted that this reflection was made before the Brexit vote and the growing discord in the EU-Turkey relationship.

The EU’s more recent strategy documents such as the Global Strategy and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) all formulate perspectives and policy recommendations that underline the need to create partnerships on concrete issues such as migration, energy, and security.⁷ The recent “Future of Europe debate” also situates the EU’s challenges within global issues and debates the significance of a rules-based multilateral order. However, it focuses too much on issues and changes inside Europe and, even more myopically, inside the EU. The discussions on differentiated

integration clearly reflect such an orientation. A clear example is the recent PESCO defense pact. While within the framework of the pact there is potential to establish relations with candidate and third countries, this potential has yet to be explored.⁸ Such an orientation shows a bias toward “internal differentiation” but not much concern over a vital issue of “external differentiation.” In the turbulent global context, it is quite critical for the EU to achieve partnership relations with candidate and third countries particularly on critical security and foreign policy issues in order to enhance a rules-based multilateral system. This issue is even more important if the aim of the EU is to transform multilateralism into an inclusive system. It should be underlined that the need for inclusive multilateralism and effective partnerships gains particular significance for the EU in the context of the challenges faced by multilateralism and rising alternative models of governance and geopolitical competition.

Framing the Turkey-EU Relationship

Turkey has been an active participant in the rules-based multilateral order since the Second World War. It joined and has taken an active role in global multilateral institutions such as the UN, in transatlantic alliances such as NATO and the OECD, and in European organizations such as the Council of Europe. With such a multilateral orientation, Turkish policy-makers were enthusiastic in applying as one of the first associate members of the then European Community soon after its foundation. The drive toward membership in the evolving European integration project remained as one of the most continuous elements of Turkey’s institutional orientation. In a recent Horizon 2020 project analyzing the narratives of major Turkish political actors from 1959 until present, the research group working on predominant narratives shaping Turkey’s attitudes toward the EU found that all Turkish narratives share the same goal of Turkey’s membership in the EU.⁹ The goal of membership is even prominent in more recent competing narratives in Turkey, despite their challenges to Turkey’s membership orientation. Such a finding is a reflection of Turkey’s drive towards a rules-based multilateral order. Whilst in recent years we have witnessed

the rise of unilateral and bilateral tendencies in Turkey's foreign policy, it should be underlined that Turkey is at present a member of NATO, the Council of Europe, G-20, and all major multilateral institutions as well as an EU candidate country. Such an institutional orientation clearly shows that multilateralism also matters for Turkey and the EU-Turkey relationship. The role of a candidate country and an important regional actor such as Turkey gains particular significance in fostering inclusive multilateralism. An effective inclusive multilateralism cannot be based only on an inward-looking EU. The EU should facilitate coalitions and partnerships to transform its fragile multilateralism into a more inclusive one. As the accession negotiations between the EU and Turkey are frozen and will remain frozen in the foreseeable future, it is critical that the EU establishes a working relationship with Turkey to enhance its rules-based multilateral system and transform it into a more inclusive one.

In line with global trends, the EU has characterized Turkey as a key strategic partner in its recent strategy and policy orientations, such as the Global Strategy and the ENP. In the European Commission's last country report on Turkey, the term "key strategic partner" is the most often used characterization of the EU-Turkey relationship. Turkey's role is addressed in the context of functional issues such as migration, energy, and security. However, these characterizations remain at a rhetorical level; the substance is rather weak and remains ad hoc. The partnership relationship cannot be sustained in this manner in the context of fragile multilateralism, it needs to be strengthened into a working relationship, an effective relationship. The need for such an effective partnership gains particular importance in the context of the turbulent multipolar system and the rising alternative geopolitical models of governance. In this context, the relationship between Turkey and the EU should not only be reduced to refugee/migration issues but needs to aim at including crucial foreign policy and security challenges, particularly in their joint neighborhood, as well as economic relations. Particularly, the security/defense and foreign policy areas have become a promising dimension of the European integration project as reflected in the rising discussions in this field. Unfortunately, this promising field is too inward-looking and exclusive as it only

includes discussions among the EU member states as reflected in the PESCO defense debate and other arrangements. In this area, it is critical to have a more inclusionary orientation and engage actors like Turkey in order to foster an inclusive multilateral system based on conditions and partnerships.

In addition to the foreign policy/security-defense area, the economic dimension is a crucial aspect of the Turkey-EU relationship. This dimension is particularly significant in the context of rising economic crises in Turkey and the importance of European trade and business for Turkey. These developments make the upgrading of the Customs Union a critical issue in the revitalization of the dormant Turkey-EU relationship. This conclusion is one of the primary findings of the recently completed FEUTURE project.¹⁰ In this project, the upgrading of the Customs Union is characterized as the "backbone" of the "dynamic association" between the EU and Turkey. It is a win-win situation both for Turkey and the EU, with important societal implications. The Customs Union has been important in transforming the private sector in Turkey, making it more competitive and attracting foreign investment into the country. Its upgrading will help to increase the resilience of the private sector in difficult economic times. The upgrading of the Customs Union is also critical in revitalizing a rules-based arrangement between Turkey and the EU and the inclusion of Turkey in a new rules-based multilateral system. In that respect, the Customs Union issue should not be treated merely as an economic issue but as part of a larger issue in strengthening the multilateral system.

The issue of the Customs Union has crucial relevance in the context of rising "transactional" relations between the EU and Turkey and the debate whether these transactional relations should be interest-driven or rules-based. The present context in the relationship is more conducive to the creation of interest-driven transactional relationships, as witnessed in the refugee/migration deal or in security issues. The challenge is, however, to add more rules-based factors into transactional relationships, primarily because we witness a backsliding of the Turkey-EU relationship increasingly toward interest-driven transactions.

On this issue, the upgrading of the Customs Union together with the long-lasting visa liberalization saga are critical because they keep a more institutionalized rules-based arrangement. They help to strengthen an effective working relationship between the EU and Turkey, be it along the lines of an effective partnership or dynamic association as part of a rules-based institutional arrangement.

This discussion on the revitalization of Turkey's relationship in terms of effective partnership or dynamic association is also related to the debates on differentiation and the future of Europe. With the rise of discussions on differentiated integration and the future course of European integration, the future of the EU-Turkey relationship could fit into the more general framework of internal/external differentiation rather than bilateral relations, which is a toxic issue at present. The evolution of the Brexit issue could be an important issue to observe for Turkish opinion-makers in this context, primarily because, as underlined in the preceding pages, Turkish policy-makers have been quite adamant on the membership issue. It is not easy for them to view alternatives to membership, as the discussions on a privileged partnership have clearly shown in the past. However, if the UK exits from the EU with a deal and creates a new institutional arrangement with the EU, it could change the long-lasting orientation of Turkish policy-makers. Brexit could serve as an example and a possible escape from the binary membership or no-membership deadlock in which Turkey is trapped.¹¹ Since both the EU-UK and the EU-Turkey relationships are toxic issues, a general framework on internal/external associations could serve as a positive outlet for both relationships and help to revitalize the dormant Turkey-EU relationship. This may facilitate alternatives for both Turkish policy-makers and public opinion, which strongly opposes any alternative solutions and perceives them as the EU's opposition to Turkey's membership. As long as such arrangements are not presented as alternatives to membership but in parallel to the accession track, they could serve to create an effective working relationship between the EU and Turkey. In this context, the FEUTURE project formulated the possibility of dynamic association in the areas of energy, economy, migration, and security that

would complement the frozen accession negotiations and upgrading of the Customs Union. Be it an effective partnership or dynamic association, it is crucial to anchor Turkey in the EU institutional framework with an effective working relationship; it is necessary for the EU to focus more on modalities of external differentiation and the linkage between institutional matters (differentiation) and changes in the global context. There is a need for the EU to transform its understanding on internal institutional matters and differentiation to include external differentiation. This would create a more comprehensive modality of differentiation toward fostering an inclusive multilateral system. To put it shortly, multilateralism, as it is strengthened and reinvented by the EU, needs to be more inclusive and focus more on issues of external differentiation.

In the process of reinventing multilateralism, the case of the EU-Turkey relationship and the UK-EU relationship are critical in affecting the EU's role globally, particularly in the context of the EU's fragile multilateralism. As the EU reinvents and redefines multilateralism within a more inclusive framework, it should be sensitive to changes in the multipolar-multicentric world. The existing multilateralism of the EU is too exclusive and hierarchical. An inclusive multilateralism cannot be based solely on EU actors and inside EU discussions. If inclusive multilateralism matters for the EU, it needs to build conditions, partnerships, and associations. The role of candidate countries and regional actors such as Turkey gains significance in this context of fostering multilateralism. There is also an increasing need to rethink the political economy of reinvented multilateralism. There should be more awareness of rising social and economic inequalities globally, in Europe, and in the neighborhood; more focus is needed on how to address them. No European actor alone can meet such challenges. The role of the EU is crucial in sustaining and transforming the rules-based multilateral system. Within the EU, French-German leadership has played an important role in critical junctures in revitalizing the integration process. At present, there is a need for other members to take on more active roles, although the role of Germany is still central — primarily because Germany has been the main beneficiary and contributor of both the Euro-

pean integration project and the rules-based multilateral system. This is particularly important in the context of the rising geopolitical competition between different models of governance, which affect state actors and their relationships.

It is crucial in this turbulent international system to anchor both Turkey and the UK in the rules-based multilateral system of the EU. The need for such effective working relations both with Turkey and the UK gains particular significance in the context of international competition with China and Russia. In this climate of rising geopolitical competition, alternative orientations for Turkey gain more salience and credibility. Turkey has increasingly been involved in building “flexible alliances” in its neighborhood and engages in alternative orientations because of the important changes in the international system, its neighborhood, and internally.¹² Turkey’s Western orientation is changing inside the country, and the question of whether the West is “losing Turkey” is in frequent discussion. While this debate on “losing Turkey” is not a new one—we have witnessed it before in the 1970s and 1980s and even more recently in 2010-11¹³—it seems more critical and credible this time because of the global context of rising multipolarity, fragility of multilateralism, and proliferation of populist/authoritarian tendencies. In this global context, the EU-Turkey relationship and how it evolves still matter and are critical for the future of Europe and the multilateral system.

Conclusion: Policy Implications

In the context of global paradigmatic shifts, this policy brief proposed that the Turkey-EU relationship needs to be contextualized within the present international system, not within a bilateral context. With global changes in the diffusion of power and the rise of new actors, the international system is evolving toward a multipolar framework. In this turbulent environment, unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral orientations compete as multilateralism becomes increasingly more fragile. More than any other actor, multilateralism matters highly for the EU as underlined in this policy brief. In fostering a multilateral system, the EU has emphasized the need to create partnerships and coalitions with other actors.

Based on this analysis, the main policy recommendations are as follows:

- The EU needs to focus more on external differentiation. The focus of the EU has so far been mainly on internal differentiation; however, it should aim at a more comprehensive form of differentiation and include candidate and third countries.
- The EU has to be more inclusive. Although the EU has emphasized the importance of inclusive multilateralism, the main debates on institutional matters and critical foreign policy/security issues take place inside the EU. The EU needs to open up and include other actors.
- The EU has to base its partnerships on more effective working relationships and on concrete issues. In addition to refugee/migration issues, mechanisms for solving foreign policy/security issues and economic/societal challenges are critical in partnership relations.
- Viewing the Turkey-EU relationship and its implications on a global scale could help Turkey to see that a partnership or association relationship does not necessarily challenge the accession track. However, such a relationship needs to include substance particularly on addressing foreign policy/security issues and economic/societal challenges.
- The EU-Turkey relationship should not only be based on interest-driven transactional relationships but also a rules-based framework. Concerning this issue, the upgrading of the Customs Union is the backbone of an effective working relationship. The Customs Union issue is more than an economic issue. It is critical to including Turkey in the rules-based multilateral system.
- In the turbulent global context, multilateralism needs to be redefined and reinvented if it matters not only for the EU but also for the Turkey-EU relationship. On this issue, the roles of particular EU member states, such as Germany, are critical in fostering a more inclusive, reinvented multilateral system.

Endnotes

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