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## Disadvantages to Turkey's EU Accession: Turkish Perspective

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## Disadvantages to Turkey's EU Accession: Turkish Perspective

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper argues that Turkey is in a position where it would be more beneficial to remain a separate entity from the EU. While EU accession would not severely damage Turkey's economy, entrance is no longer necessary given its present state and the state of the EU. Refraining from membership is more advantageous for Turkey's foreign policy makers because remaining an individual actor would allot Turkey more political freedom within its borders. Turkey's administration would be able to pursue its own strategic interests more easily if it is not tethered to EU objectives. Turkey would be at a strategic advantage in the coming years if it chooses to balance between the Middle East and United States rather than dedicate the majority of efforts towards the EU. Independent from the EU, Turkey can decide its policies in relations with the EU, US, or Middle East depending on its own international ambitions.

### **KEYWORDS**

European Union, Turkey, foreign policy, eurozone, political strategy

## **INTRODUCTION**

Negotiations for Turkey's accession to the EU have lingered for fifty years. Since the 1960s Turkey has modified its economic and social policies with the target of European Economic Community membership, followed with pursuit of full EU membership since the 1980s, which is the longest period of time that any country has waited for acceptance. While Turkey originally could not join the EEC because of its underdeveloped economy and inadequate living standards, it has since modernized to a level at which it can compete in the European market. As Turkey's membership became less of a priority for Europe among various other Eastern European applications, Europe has prolonged Turkey's entry despite its acquisition of a secure economy for the last ten years. While it has awaited acceptance, Turkey has spent the last several years improving its relationships with various other non-EU countries, in particular the Middle East and the United States. Given its new economic and strategic potential, Turkey no longer needs to rely on EU acceptance to prove that it is a modernized country on the international market.

## **EUROPEAN ECONOMIC INTEGRATION**

In the short period since the creation of the Eurozone in 1999 the EU has not experienced the productivity and condition of integration that it anticipated. The division of macroeconomic structures of certain countries – Cesaratto and Sirati refer to them as “core” and “peripheral” countries (2010, p. 58-9) – continues to widen, indicating that a unified European currency is impractical. The “core” countries—Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and Finland, for example—benefit from trade with the “peripheral” countries—such as Spain, Greece, and Ireland—to which they export. For the peripheral countries, the new Eurozone policies (including the currency itself) caused a spike in demand without growth in exports or productivity, and as such they experience worsening account balances. Although the zone possesses overarching economic policies, not all countries are created equally. This interconnectedness threatens to hurt everyone if just one country is brought down. For example, in Greece, badly managed (nepotistic) public spending paired with the global economic recession led to a government debt crisis. Because many EU banks are “exposed” to Greece (also through bailout money-lending), the failure of the Greek part of the Eurozone would mean a “110% chance of recession” (Curtis, 2011).

Furthermore, Europe's bailout policies are reaching the limit of their effectiveness: European taxpayers continue pay for the purchase of Italian bonds, but the country's ten-year debt continues to worsen (Hannan, 2011); Germany's patience towards Greece has reached its limit, now demanding not only austerity measures but also an improvement in market competitiveness (Hurriyet, 2012); Greece and Spain have unemployment levels hovering around 20 percent (CIA World Factbook, 2012). The EU and its respective members thus far lack adequate public and economic policy alternations that could put an end to the money-lending and productivity divide.

For Turkey, all of this reveals a warning sign. It would certainly not be economically fatal for Turkey to drag itself into the current mess, but it is an unnecessary step. During the next ten years, economists predict that Turkey could have the fastest growth rate apart from India and China (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). It may boast the world's 12th largest economy by 2050 (Platt, 2012). Its economy indeed looks positive: it has fairly stable growth and inflation rates – both were about 8.5 percent in 2010 but last year growth decreased to 6.6 percent while inflation only to 7.8 – and low public debt to GDP – only 42.4 percent

of GDP, a figure similar to the Scandinavian countries and much lower than the 80 percent that many EU countries possess (CIA World Factbook: Turkey, 2012). Greece is already in economic chaos and with other Mediterranean states hinting at a step in that direction, another European recession is not unlikely. If Turkey were accepted to the EU, such an incident during its crucial growth period could drag down the progress the country has already made towards economic advancement and stability. Although some may argue that Turkey could avoid bearing the brunt of economic crises within the Eurozone by joining the EU but not the Eurozone, there is at present no evidence of considerations by Turkey to adopt an “opt-out” that would allow it to refrain from implementing certain Eurozone policies (as is present in the UK and Denmark, for example).

Other than this potential setback, Turkey should reconsider its intentions to enter the EU simply because it is no longer a necessary step in the country’s economic development. The pre-entry steps the country has taken in the past fifty years have allowed Turkey to take care of many of the goals that it hoped to accomplish by joining the Union. After signing the Ankara Agreement with the European Economic Community, in the 1960s Turkey cultivated new industries by means of import substitution and protectionism. Then, after increasing its production capacity, the Agreement allowed for gradual tariff eliminations and eventual entry into a customs union with the EEC (Çakır, 2011). In the 70s and 80s it continued to further privatize and liberalize. The accelerated modification and implementation of economic policies allowed Turkey to quickly modernize and improve living standards, and supplied it with the economic integration and high foreign investment that it experiences today.

Turkey already possesses a customs agreement with the EEC. It is similar to the customs union shared by EU members. Turkey and the EEC share a free trade flow except for products of the coal and steel industries and unprocessed agriculture goods, for which bilateral trade concessions are present instead (European Commission, 2012). The agriculture industry represents the largest barrier to free trade with Europe because the industry is not considered fully developed (USDA, 2009); however, this is being acknowledged through EU structural and development funds (European Commission IPA, 2011). Despite agriculture gradually decreasing as a share of Turkey’s total GDP, exports are on the rise (European Commission Bilateral Relations: Turkey, 2011). This, in addition to the rise in productivity, is evidence of thriving trade despite the presence of these tariffs. Even with trade barriers present, most of Turkey’s agricultural exports go to Europe and 46.3 percent of Turkey’s total exports are to Europe (European Commission Bilateral Relations: Turkey, 2011). Hence, although there are still “barriers” in place, trade with Europe is already prospering quite like it would if Turkey were a true member.

Rather than potentially experience setback that would stem from being a fully integrated member of the EEC that would be hit stronger by turmoil in Europe, Turkey would fare better as an independent economy given the trade advantages already in place. It possesses the market integration needed to maintain a successful trade relationship with the EU. By staying separate from the union, it will retain the ability to act individually in times of crisis and perhaps shield itself a bit from reverberations of economic problems that any one individual EU country may experience. This view is starting to become more prominent among Turks who are concerned about the EU’s economic problems and skeptical about Greece’s loss of sovereignty, now in the hands of “outsiders” owing to its domestic troubles (Hurriyet, 2012). These concerns also extend to domestic policy affairs.

### **TURKISH DOMESTIC AGENDA**

Turkey is a secular republic, which in this case means that there is prohibition of religion in government and public institutions. Additionally, the government controls and regulates religion to promote their idea of a Westernized, democratic country. The republic is currently administered by the AK Parti (commonly referred to as the AKP), which is a conservative, right wing party with Islamic based roots that has taken the Turkish nation by storm with its morally strong policies and upstanding politicians. The EU operates on a strictly democratic, secularist manner and promotes the extreme separation of church and state. This has caused many controversies between Turkey and the EU, as the AKP refuses to revoke their Islamic roots while the EU states it is mandatory before accession.

A prime example of this controversy happened recently when Turkey's Prime Minister greeted a crowd in Egypt with traditional Muslim greetings and stressed the importance of a close partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood (Fahmy, 2011). This type of open religious practice in Turkey's leaders worries the secular EU that Turkey may be influenced by its' beliefs rather than what is best for its people. It is important to note though that while the EU strives to stay on the path of their secular model, there are many controversies within the EU itself such as the Queen of England claiming the head of the Church of England, which has made Turkey question why EU member states currently can keep their Christian backgrounds yet Turkey must disavow their Muslim background. Agenda issues such as the debate on secularization and the lengths it needs to be applied is an issue that Turkey will have to consider the benefits of and whether it is worth acceptance into the EU.

Another area where there are agenda conflicts between Turkey and the EU are the disagreements on human rights practices in Turkey. The Kurdish population in Turkey consists of approximately 15 million people, yet over 30,000 have been killed since the 1980's due to the fact that the Turkish government sees this minority as a threat to national security due to separatist actions in the regions (Corbett, 2008). Since the start of its official EU membership application, Turkey has modified many of their policies toward this population to coincide with EU beliefs on human rights (Corbett, 2008). But it is still a major issue over which the two sides, especially Turkey, take an unwavering position. This refusal to compromise on the Turkish end stems largely from the fact that Turkey is an extremely nationalist country. Turkish popular approval of the AKP and its agenda is very high at almost 55 percent and Turkish people believe it is their duty to strongly support their leaders (Turkey polls, 2011). This nationalism has transferred to the popular opinion in favor of the AKP's opposition against the separatist activities of the Kurdish (Webb, 2011). These longstanding, heavily discussed controversies delay Turkish accession and it remains up to Turkey to decide if it is willing to change its agenda to fit the EU's.

### **TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

Turkey and the Middle East's long and checkered history has grown increasingly positive. Turkey now boasts about its "shiny new alliance" with the Middle East, placing less emphasis on its relations with Europe (Turkish Foreign Policy, 2012). Turkey exhibits an example of a successful, predominantly secular, Muslim country that other Middle Eastern countries can look to for support and guidance. In light of its Westward-looking relations remaining at a standstill over the EU issue, Turkey has begun to use its geographic advantage to focus its energies on improving relations with the Middle East. Furthermore, Turkey's influence and relationship with countries in the region vary, but if Turkey can find a balance

between the Middle East and Europe, it could become an important mediator between the two.

Trade between Turkey and the Middle East is more positive than ever, rising at a rapid rate and is currently at approximately 6 percent of all exports. This may seem like a small figure compared to the 46 percent of exports that the EU boasts but considering the very recent stabilization of Turkish–Middle East economic relations this figure is significant because trade relations between Turkey and the Middle East have just recently become expansive again (European Commission, 2011). Turkey is even considering opening a free trade zone with some Middle Eastern states (Lutz, 2010). The Middle Eastern economy grew exponentially in 2011 at almost 5.2 percent and is expected to keep increasing, which will signal a consequential rise in trade between Turkey and the Middle East (International Monetary Fund, 2010). The projected growth rate in trade between the Middle East and Turkey provides a convincing economic incentive for Turkey to branch its market and foreign relations endeavors towards the Middle East. Middle Eastern politicians and crowds of supporters alike welcomed Turkey's Prime Minister Erdoğan during his recent diplomatic visits. Early on in the Arab Spring, Turkey offered its full support, gaining large numbers of fans across the region (Capgaptay, 2012). Given these developments, Turkey is in an ideal position to become a strategic player in the region.

The European Union's relationship with the Middle East is, however, not so positive. The Middle East sees the West's involvement in its affairs as uneducated to say the least, with popular opinion being that the many Middle Eastern people believe the West cannot understand Islam, or the effect and influence it has over the region (Mazin, 2011). While some Middle Eastern countries support Turkish accession to the EU as it signifies a great success of a Muslim country, most do not see it as Turkey turning their back on the Middle East and adopting all EU policies and attitudes, which are strongly unvalued in the region. If a free trade zone—which is being discussed—materializes between Turkey and the Middle East, Turkey will be in the perfect geographical location to trade equally with Europe and the Middle East.

Turkey will experience maximum economic and political benefits if it plays the role as a mediator between Europe and the Middle East. The West longs for an ally with strong standing in the Middle East to help them fulfill their agenda plans without the backlash of popular opinion in the Middle East, which Turkey can supply if it increases its power in the Middle East and plays the part of a successful, predominately Muslim country. The Middle East values a powerful ally with ties to the West through which they can discuss trade and international agenda policies without compromising their faith and non-secular government structures. If it were a member of the EU, Turkey would be grouped in among Western powers that interfere in the Middle East in order to vie for their own interests. As a separate entity from the EU, the Middle East is much more willing to sympathetically view Turkey as a Muslim ally, especially with the Islamic based political party, the AKP, as the main power of Turkey. As an individual actor with equal relations between Europe and the Middle East, Turkey will find itself much more strategically advantageous when pursuing its own interests and when acting as a mediator between the two regions.

### **TURKISH-UNITED STATES RELATIONS**

US–Turkish relations have remained largely positive over the last fifty years throughout which the US has consistently supported Turkey. The US has stated that it has hopes for a

model partnership with Turkey, and it is important for Turkey to note this strong potential ally should they not join the EU and should there be negative consequences from the EU for doing so. Turkish relations with the US peaked in 1984 when the US provided over 700 million dollars of monetary aid to Turkey (Fuller, 2008). While there have been mild disputes among the two nations, for the most part the two share a common vision for the future of the Middle East. Shared interests include a peaceful and centralized Iraq, a non-nuclear Iran, the eradication of terrorism, a continuation of good ties with Israel, stability in the Middle East, and an end to radical Islam (Fuller, 2008).

After decades of collaboration, the United States and Turkey have recently have become particularly bonded over the fight to end terrorism, which is a major priority of the US. In 2005 Turkey showed signs of hesitancy in assisting the US in the War on Terror by providing their country as a home base for US troops as they felt that the US may bring the terrorists to their country. To indicate its loyalty to and trust in Turkey, in 2006 the United States signed a document stating that Washington supported its ally as, “a chief figure in relations in the Middle East, acknowledging that Turkey would be helpful in crisis situations and a much more preferable ally in the region than Russia, China, and even Europe,” (Fuller, 2008). This situation accurately depicts the positive trend in the quality of bilateral relations. The US is encouraging confidence in Turkey’s growth as a major influential power in the Middle East and Central Asia; Turkey is responding with a consistent, though hesitant, support in return.

The US’s failed attempts at democratization in the Middle East have ushered Turkey into a potentially powerful position, should Turkey choose to go toward a US/Middle East focused foreign policy rather than an EU focused foreign policy. Turkey could play an intermediary, diplomatic role for US-Middle East relations. In return, the US could provide monetary, military, and political support for Turkey particularly in terms of their problems with the PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party) and other terrorist organizations, for which the US and Turkey share a commonly strong stance and for which Turkey needs additional advisors and power. The EU on the other hand seems to show a hesitant, though present support on Turkey’s war against the Kurds. Though the EU certainly approves of a fight against terrorism, there has been extreme criticism against the ways in which Turkey has enacted their war, often becoming quite a case for human rights issues (Alasor, 2012). The US on the other hand does not show nearly as much protest against these acts, as they deem the fight against terrorism a number one priority and tend to overlook the processes to eradicate it (US Takes Turkey’s Side, 2010). The EU’s divergence in opinion is a serious issue for Turkey and one that they may avoid should they deal more with the US.

While the Arab Spring has led to a completely new Middle East, it has also ushered in a new era in US-Turkish relations. Washington’s ability to influence the Arab Spring is restricted in terms of politics, economics and military standings but Turkey, who has been a strong supporter of the revolution since the beginning, has an increasingly powerful stance. Since Turkey has shown developing interest in being the conductor in this region, opportunity to partner with the US has arisen.

If Turkey chooses to remain separate from the European Union, it will not be tethered to EU agenda and can more easily partner with the United States on Middle Eastern policy developments. Economists have predicted that through this cooperation, the US and Turkey will form a bond in the Middle East that reaffirms their positive relations for years to come (Ayhan, 2011). The US has been a longtime supporter of Turkish accession to the EU, but Turkey’s new potential to become a mediator between the West will likely change the US’s

opinion. If Turkey joins the EU they are no longer a single independent state with which the US can partner and support. As a member of the EU, Turkey must abide by EU policies and agenda plans such as warfare strategies, trade deals, and secular policies. Turkey would not be able to form such a vital partnership with the US because it would be highly unlikely that the EU member states would approve US-oriented plans in the Middle East rather than those that are Euro centric, consequently causing a loss in all the potential monetary, military, and political support Turkey could get from partnering with the US. Turkey has the opportunity now, with certainty, to become a major power in the Middle East should it form a partnership with the US. Such power is uncertain with EU membership since there are many other prominent members, particularly France, which are vying for that same power (Cagaptay, 2012). Therefore, Turkey would be better suited towards developing its own US oriented foreign policy in the Middle East rather than policies as part of the EU.

### **TURKEY'S ROLE IN THE ENERGY MARKET**

The current state of the Eurasian energy market presents a crucial opportunity for Turkey to strategically utilize its geographical advantage. Europe is concerned about its over-dependence on Russia for fossil fuel transit; accordingly certain EU states want to build natural gas pipelines running through Turkey, the so called “Southern Corridor” (Petersen & Barysch, 2011, p. 8-9). Correspondingly, the Caspian littoral states are looking to increase production and want diverse export routes. A pipeline carrying gas produced in Azerbaijan’s Shah Deniz gas field runs from Baku, Azerbaijan to Erzurum, Turkey. Europe has strongly advocated its Nabucco pipeline project, which would carry that gas from Erzurum into Austria. There are critical weaknesses to the proposal that have delayed construction: a lack of supply routes and, consequently, a lack of investors (Nabucco is over, 2012).

On top of the construction delays, there are reasons why Europe hasn’t given Turkey a particularly strong incentive to continue pushing for this expensive pipeline. The purchaser, the European Commission, wanted to pay transit fees to Turkey; Turkey wanted to import the gas and then, after taking what it needs, sell it to Europe (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009). Turkey’s method would provide it with more profits and economic freedom, as well as the ability to supply its own population with energy first. As it is closer to the producing countries, it would not be easy to stop Turkey from pursuing its own method, *unless* Turkey were a part of the EU and had to abide by certain customs agreements. The building of this pipeline could have been an important step in Turkish-EU economic integration and perhaps towards its EU ascension. However, in light of pipeline difficulties along with opportunities for Turkey to make strategic decisions about transit, Turkey has recently decided to prioritize other pipeline projects.

First, it signed onto Russia’s Blue Stream project to build a pipeline carrying natural gas from Russia to Turkey (Gazprom, 2011). Russia currently holds the monopoly on export of Caspian oil and gas to Europe. It imports Turkmen and Kazakh gas then sells it to Europe via pipelines running through Ukraine (Petersen and Barysch, 2011). As Europe’s main concern is the instability of these pipelines through Ukraine because of past Russian-Ukraine energy conflicts, this potentially takes care of that by utilizing Turkey instead. Yet the European Commission is opposed to Blue Stream.

Within the last three months Turkey has agreed to a new project with Azerbaijan as the main partner rather than Europe (EUCERS, 2012). The Trans-Anatolian pipeline will carry Azeri gas to the Turkish-European border. Although there are some European companies in

on the deal, the Commission as a whole does not prefer this project over Nabucco. This deal gives Turkey, which has state-owned pipeline construction companies, more freedom to act in the best interests of its own economy and energy needs. Furthermore, it allows Turkey to cultivate relations with other countries involved in energy transit that Europe's plan did not intend to include. In addition to opposing Russian involvement in a Southern Corridor, the Commission also did not want to include Iran as a supplier country for Nabucco, despite desperately needing it, because of poor US-Iran—and consequently poor EU-Iran—relations (Özkan, 2009).

Turkey's role as an energy transit country is a prime example of how Turkey will benefit more from acting separately from the EU than acting within it. Were Turkey a member of the EU, it would not possess the freedom that it currently enjoys in making decisions regarding energy transit procedure. As an individual actor it can gain more profits from transit; when not tethered to the EU agenda the Commission has less influence over what agreements Turkey's state-owned energy companies take part in; and finally, other countries are able to see Turkey not as part of the Western conglomerate that just wants a piece of them, but as a separate actor with its individual concerns, and this makes Turkey more appealing as a trading partner.

## CONCLUSION

During the long period of European discourse regarding Turkey's entry into the EU, Turkey has grown into a modernized nation with enough stability to qualify as an economic and regional power. Its individual status will only grow stronger in international markets and power politics. Turkey no longer needs a European Union membership in order to ensure a dominant position for itself in world affairs. Given the recent economic hardships in Europe and other indicators of the union's weakness, combined with Turkey's own growing economic prowess, membership is no longer economically necessary. Moreover, Turkey's growing capability at strategically advantageous interaction with other important global players also makes such a strong bond with the EU obsolete and even detrimental to its own agenda. Accordingly, Turkey will pave a more beneficial path for itself by remaining separate from the EU rather than tethering itself to EU economic and political activities.

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