The West and Turkish Aspirations: Limits of the Liberal Gaze

https://www.e-ir.info/2023/11/14/the-west-and-turkish-aspirations-limits-of-the-liberal-gaze/

KOSTAS A. LAVDAS AND PANAGIOTA CHATZILYMPERI, NOV 14 2023

After Erdogan's rise to power, pundits started pondering whether Turkey was a case of Muslim democracy. It appeared that Turkey's ambivalent relations with the West were entering a more predictable trajectory. The bigger picture appeared to be encouraging: In the 2000s, Muslim democracy appeared to evoke the legacy of Christian Democratic parties of Europe by integrating Islam into broader political and socioeconomic demands. In Nasr's influential overview, Muslim democracy was not a platform for religious reform nor a theoretical construct, but rather the product of politics on the ground and electoral competition. Muslim democracy has taken shape in the political process by Islamist parties such as Turkey's AKP, and non-religious parties such as Pakistan's PML. It was supposed to provide 'a model for pragmatic change' with broader influence across the Muslim world, with Turkey representing 'perhaps the most developed instance of Muslim Democracy' (Nasr, 2005: 13-27). In many cases, however, the quest for 'pragmatic change' became confused with diverse and contradictory demands, while in Turkey, Erdogan's governments, especially since the failed coup attempt in 2016, increased the distance between the country and the West. In Turkey, a NATO member, the background was of course somewhat particular.

It was earlier, after the end of the Cold War, that relations between Turkey, NATO and the EU started moving in unpredictable ways, as Ankara sought to increase its strategic autonomy and diversify its geopolitical and economic spheres of reference. In the last few decades, relations between Turkey and the West (TWR) have gone through ups and downs. Approaching TWR through the prism of a modified liberal view, we aim to tentatively consider the potential and limitations of liberalism in approaching cooperation and discord between European and transatlantic institutions and a country that was seen by many as a bastion of Muslim democracy. We consider the reformulation –suggested by Moravcsik and others– of the fundamental liberal insight that state-society relations (including the positioning of states in domestic and transnational contexts) have a defining impact on 'external' state behavior (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019). In this context, we also suggest that the degree of sensitivity and vulnerability of states vis-à-vis changes in diverse issue areas will primarily depend on the states' distinctive features.

The promise of a liberal–republican approach

Factors that mitigate conflict may range widely, from trade to norms and from converging preferences to established institutions. Abbe de St Pierre put emphasis on the significance of international treaties; Rousseau was skeptical about the consequences caused by intense, stressful interactions and favored notions of moderate autarky; Kant defended the role of the links between polities organized through republican constitutions and suggested that the bonds formed by republics under international law could mitigate the constant threat of instability. They would therefore be able to nurture a stable regime of international peace (Joas, 2003: 32-34).

At its core, any approach that includes central liberal tenets, has to somehow make the claim that it is possible to establish international cooperation, institutions, and norms that tend to limit the salience of power and coercion (Keohane, 2001: 1-14). Liberal intergovernmentalism argues that decisions to cooperate internationally can be explained in a three-stage framework: states first define preferences, then bargain to reach substantive agreements, and finally create new (or adjust the existing) institutions to secure those outcomes in the face of future political uncertainty. In this view, each stage is distinct and can be explained by a separate theory. Thus cooperation, or its

failure, emerges only at the end of a multi-causal sequence (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019: 65).

Does a state like Turkey focus on relative or absolute gains in assessing cooperative relations? Neorealists tend to support the view that states are concerned with relative gains. In Waltz's emblematic formulation, states are compelled to ask not 'Will both of us gain?' but 'Who will gain more?' Neoliberals, on the other hand, focus more on a state's overall benefits, as opposed to a state's benefits relative to others. They will often argue that focusing on relative gains is misguided as economic interdependence ensures that neither side can effectively exploit the economic relationship and take advantage of the other politically.

Despite variation, the fundamental liberal insight is that once institutions are established, the actual workings of actors-institutions interactions are such that it will be costly to change or fundamentally reform the established institutional matrix (Keohane, 1989). Even when the original distribution of power underlying the matrix undergoes transformation, the actors whose power increases will not opt to change the matrix unless the distribution of power has shifted so much that the benefits of a new constellation outweigh the costs of change.

At any given moment, achieving a satisfactory level of cooperation does not, by itself, guarantee the prevalence of longer-term views that favor a focus on absolute gains, on a state's own benefit. 'Cooperation and concern for relative gains may co-vary, but one does not cause the other. The causes for both are the underlying features of the states' strategic environment that jointly induce a concern for relative gains and thereby make cooperation difficult' (Powell, 1994: 337). However, as Powell suggests, states may well be trying to maximize absolute gains but the strategic setting in which they are attempting to do so may be inducing a concern for relative gains, thereby adding complications to cooperation efforts (Powell, 1991: 1303-1320). The analytical distance between a state's concern for absolute gains and a strategic setting's propensity to induce a concern for relative gains can be travelled –at least to a point– with the mix of incentives, legitimatory considerations, and penalties associated with the political culture of problem-solving and welfare-seeking that matures in settings dominated by republican regimes rather than autocracies.

The liberal–republican legacy in theorizing suggests that republican regimes, an open public sphere, consolidated international institutions, the encouragement of institutionalized self-restraint, and patterns of democratic accountability, all contribute to the conditions that facilitate taking the long-term view of absolute gains, avoiding the temptations of assessing short-term, relative gains through the prism of a demagogic focus on the other party's standing at any given moment.

In search of a role

Turkey manifested a developmental statist paradigm aiming to reform itself since the 1980s, when Turgut Özal embarked in market-oriented economic reforms with a keen interest in rapid implementation of policy reforms, leaving the issue of democratic deepening for the future (Öniş, 2004: 113-134). We will return to Özal and his period below. But despite considerable regime discontinuities and a strong role for the military at least up to 2016, it is accurate in general terms to suggest that after abandoning single-party rule in 1946, the scope of popular political participation, including rural participation, gradually broadened in Turkey.

In the early 1990s, the end of the Cold War presented Ankara with new opportunities and challenges. Cautiously at first, Turkey started to reassess the country's post-Cold War positioning and potential (Géré, 2002). The development of a new vision for Turkey's role was also encouraged by the new confidence resulting from the intermittently impressive growth rates from 2000. Former Foreign Minister -and later Prime Minister- Davutoğlu's strategic view, aiming to combine an extensive and multidimensional role for post-Cold War Turkish policy and a special role for soft power, was able to underline Turkey's status in regional and international politics. Post-Davutoğlu, the domestic implications of the failed coup in 2016 (Esen & Gumuscu, 2017: 69) combined with an interventionist foreign policy in crises such as the one unfolding in Syria (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021: 1085), gave Turkey's regional presence a more controversial profile. For many observers, the failed coup – in itself a major challenge to the power and influence of the ruling party – offered an alibi to the regime's subsequent authoritarian politics (Esen & Gumuscu, 2017: 69). At the same time, Turkish foreign policy after the Arab Spring was never the same (Kutlay &

Öniş, 2021: 1085).

It is common to suggest that shifts since 2016 have resulted in a stronger focus on national security, a more assertive style in foreign policy, a preference for transaction-based relations, and a quest for increased strategic autonomy. Whether these correspond to a strategic international reorientation, is a question worth debating but one that cannot be easily answered (Haugom, 2019: 206–223). Some suggest that Erdogan's more assertive style is neither entirely novel nor necessarily signifying a rupture with the West. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this appears more questionable. A combination of increased domestic authoritarian trends and external assertiveness bordering on revisionism present observers with problems of assessment and interpretation. Some suggest it is time to "let Turkey go", in the sense of acknowledging a process that has been underway for some time (Danforth, 2020).

Observers with different backgrounds consider today's Turkey a quasi-authoritarian power on a revisionist path. Öktem and Akkoyunlu have described the current political situation in Turkey as an 'exit from democracy', a 'shift to authoritarianism' and 'an Islamic revolution from above' in which Erdogan's discourse is becoming a narrative of 'Islamist nationalism'(Öktem & Akkoyunlu, 2016: 470). The conversion of the emblematic Christian Orthodox Church of Hagia Sophia, which was a museum for decades and is now a mosque is a case in point. President Erdogan even referred to the liberation of the mosque Al-Aqsa in Eastern Jerusalem (Reuters, 2020).

For Hakki Taş, Erdogan's neo-Ottomanism is a 'glorification and romanticisation of the Ottoman Era', with national history 'turning into a battlefield' (Taş, 2020: 132). In this context, openly revisionist references by the country's president to Turkey's 'borders of the heart' have been particularly notable (Haddad, 2020). Yet as Mezri Haddad notes, the Turkish side, in finding blame with the Lausanne Treaty, overlooks the fact that Lausanne expanded Turkish territory compared to the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, to the detriment of Greece and Armenia (Haddad, 2020). Since 2019, Erdogan has referred to a revision of the Lausanne Treaty as one of the objectives to be implemented in one way or another (Haddad, 2020).

There is a stalemate on the EU front. The Association Agreement of the 1960s was killed politically by the 1980 military coup in Turkey and was effectively suspended thereafter. The restoration of democracy and subsequent formal Turkish application for full EC membership in 1987 did not trigger any immediate developments. Further progress had to wait until the 1990s when Turkey eventually started membership negotiations with the EU. As John Redmond put it, there was 'fault on both sides: Turkey was pursuing an economic strategy based on import substitution that was essentially incompatible with the association; equally, the EC was reluctant to implement fully its concessions to Turkey in the face of enhanced competition for its own producers' (Redmond, 1998: 468). The Commission and several member states were skeptical at best, although nobody ever closed the door entirely to Turkey. After the 1999 Helsinki European Council, Greece adopted a strategy of favoring a European course for Turkey. Washington was a staunch supporter of the Turkish EU membership, partly for geopolitical reasons (amplified during the Gulf Wars), and partly due to the belief that Turkey's EU accession could be a litmus test for a secular Muslim country that embraces liberal institutions and norms.

Irrespective of a final verdict on the question '*quo vadis,* Turkey', the failed coup attempt in 2016 and the subsequent orientation of Turkish governments have led some EU institutions and actors to consider suspending the renewal and updating of the Customs Union (Yalcin & Felbermayr, 2021). Nevertheless, since March 2021, there has been a new EU Council approach, namely that there is a possibility of 'modernization' of the Customs Union with Turkey, provided that Turkey should not take any 'unilateral actions' (Yalcin & Felbermayr, 2021). Assessing a variety of policy areas and policy developments, in September 2023 a European Parliament report suggested that Turkey's accession process with the EU cannot resume under current circumstances. The report called for the EU to explore 'a parallel and realistic framework' for its relations with Turkey. In response, Erdogan chose to present this as evidence that the EU 'is trying to break away from Turkey' and, as a result, 'if necessary we could part ways with the EU' (DW, Erdogan: Turkey can part ways with European Union, 16/09/2023).

Complications beyond trade and economic relations

The country's economic system could be characterized as centralized. Since the state acts as 'the regulator of the

economy', there is a strong influence of the political center in all economic sectors (Kıran, 2018: 42–51). The Customs Union between the EU and Turkey, which started in 1996, has been a key factor (Kalaycioglu, 2000).

Relations between Turkey and the West – as a candidate EU member and a NATO member – reflect government policies but also the role of civil society and the evolution of state-society relations. In this mix, nationalism and power politics prevailed over normative change and trade and economic linkages. Turkey represents the case of a bureaucratic-authoritarian state with powerful domestic coalitions favoring preferential treatment in policy and procurement practices. For the Turkish state, responding to accelerated globalization and meeting the challenges associated with domestic regime and policy conflicts generate crises of political development compounded by external commitments that are both extensive and diverse.

The Turkish economy has a rather problematic record when it comes to business ownership concentration and minority shareholder protection. The same applies to established patterns of public procurement. In this difficult context, Turkey – EU trade and economic links have been developing for a number of years (Trading Economics, 2021). In the 1980s and the 1990s, when Turkey went through a transition to a more liberal model of domestic economic management and, in the 1990s, started to explore possibilities for a new geopolitical role in post-Cold War international relations, a range of different parliamentary leaders proved either unable or unwilling to achieve a breakthrough in the country's further integration into European structures.

This is hardly surprising if we view the primary change of the 1980s and early 1990s in Turkey as constituting a gradual subordination of the Kemalist tradition to the new 'Turkish-Islamic Synthesis' manifested by the leadership of Turgut Özal (Yesilada, 1993: 169-192). Özal, who served as prime minister (1983-1989) and president (1989-1993), marked the politics and the policies of a decisive phase in Turkish politics. When the military regime lifted the ban on political parties in 1983, Özal became prime minister with the new Motherland Party (ANAP) which he had founded. An economic liberal, he aimed at a synthesis of economic and technological Westernization and cultural Turkism and Islamism. In this sense, 'Özal's main policy was to make Turkey be able to compete with the West' while Özal also knew that without Western support it would be 'quite difficult to maintain its regime in one of the most strategic and unstable regions in the world' (Ataman, 2002: 148).

Things did not fundamentally change with Mesut Yılmaz, a moderate leader. Then, when Tansu Çiller, Turkey's first female prime minister (Nachmani, 2018: 167), faced a new crisis in the Aegean in 1996, things went downhill. Çiller declared 'three thousand islands and isles' in the Aegean Sea as 'Turkish territory' (Nachmani, 2018: 167). Greece and Turkey almost went to war in 1996 (Nachmani, 2018: 167), over one of the islets in the Dodecanese, and this left a permanent shadow over subsequent developments. A severe crisis that almost culminated in military confrontation was repeated in 2020, with Erdoğan –a very different kind of politician– at the helm in Ankara. Tensions peaked that year after the discovery of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has been argued that the two countries adopting extensive and expensive military expansion plans, increased the risk of further escalation (Choulis, Mehrl & Ifantis, 2022: 779). A war between Turkey and Greece, a NATO and EU member, would derail TWR at several levels.

A view of political economy that stresses the links between national, transnational, and international levels and recognizes the role of systemic variables helps assess the potential as well as the limitations of a simplistic, economic-liberal approach to international relations. Contrary to the liberal economic idea that trade and economic ties result in crucially improved relations, the case of TWR suggest that factors such as trade do play a role but that the role in question can only be crucial if (a) it is combined with domestic and transnational contributing parameters and (b) is amplified by encouraging geopolitical conditions.

In this context, conditions that may hamper or encourage cooperation in the longer-term appear crucial. Will Turkey be able to find both armaments and economic support in the Arab world and its Asian interlocutors to the extent that reliance on the West becomes secondary? And how will systemic realities evolve? Despite intensified international conflict in 2022-23, a 'new Cold War' with clear bipolar features seems far-fetched as a new permanent state of international affairs. To the extent that this is so, the international field for situating national preferences will remain relatively spacious, polycentric, and unpredictable.

Where to next?

In this context, Turkey's international position appears complicated. Strengthening the ties that bind the country to the West? Pivot to Political Islam? Deeper involvement in the politics of Palestinian political representation? Cultivating further the relationship with the Shanghai group? Redefining aspects of the relationship with post-Ukraine Russia? Both economic and geopolitical trends tend to confirm the view that Turkey's increasing detachment from the West is significant irrespective of the question of whether (and when) it leads to the great rupture. Erdogan aims to enhance Turkey's strategic autonomy, but he knows that without Western support it will be difficult to cope in the current economic and geopolitical circumstances.

A consolidation of democratic norms in Turkey would enhance the potential of TWR. Could enlightened elites play this role? After all, in some cases, 'elite preferences may be more convergent than popular ones' (Moravcsik, 1997: 531). But the problems in the system of domestic representation in Turkey and the relative continuity between various versions of an authoritarian-militarist approach to the unity of the state have repeatedly defeated the more pluralist voices.

Trade relations, as such, do not necessarily lead to deepening cooperation. For a variety of reasons, the same applies to Turkey's EU future. In all probability, the ship has sailed for full membership. Leaving aside the unlikely scenario of a total TWR breakdown, a special regime – the most likely future for EU-Turkish relations – can only advance peace and stability in the area if it encompasses quite a lot beyond regulating trade and economic links. That would require hammering out a comprehensive agreement between the EU and Turkey that would include provisions touching on the geopolitical status quo in the Eastern Mediterranean, sufficient to assuage the concerns by EU member states regarding the perceived revisionism that Ankara seems to be pursuing.

Relations between Turkey and the West appear to be more, not less, unpredictable compared to the 2000s. At the same time, earlier optimism on Muslim democracy more generally is on the wane. Developments since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created more difficulties for TWR, Ankara aiming to tread a path between Russia and the West. The war in Gaza after the Palestinian Islamist militant group Hamas attacked Israeli communities in October 2023 added more complications to TWR by derailing the attempted rapprochement between Turkey and Israel, while at the same time exposing Ankara's continuing ambitions in Middle Eastern politics and renewed support for intifada.

It may still be possible to explore ways in which the evolving transatlantic world and Turkey benefit from a strengthening of their mixed strategic capacities in their chosen fields of preferential focus (in terms of geography and/or issue areas) so long as the benefits accrued from such strengthening do not come to bear on areas of contention within NATO or between the EU and its members and Turkey. If followed for a prolonged period, such a path could lead to more advanced stages of cooperation. But the pathway has become very narrow and the conditions that surround us more volatile than in any other period since the end of the Cold War.

References

Ataman, M. (2002). 'Leadership Change: Ozal Leadership and Restructuring in Turkish Foreign Policy',*Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 1 (1).

Brauer, J. (2002). 'Survey and review of the defense economics literature on Greece and Turkey: What have we learned?' *Defence and Peace Economics*, 13 (2).

Choulis, I, Mehrl, M and Ifantis, K. (2022). 'Arms racing, military build-ups and dispute intensity: Evidence from the Greek-Turkish Rivalry, 1985-2020', *Defence and Peace Economics,* 33 (7).

Esen, B. and Gumuscu, S. (2017). 'Turkey: How the coup failed', *J. Democracy,* 28.

Danforth, N. (2020). 'It Is Time to Let Turkey Go. *Foreign Policy'*, Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/15/it-

is-time-to-let-turkey-go/ (Accessed: 12 May 2021).

DW (2023). 'Erdogan: Turkey can part ways with European Union', available at: https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-turkey-can-part-ways-with-european-union/a-66833644?maca=en-rss-en-all-1573-rdf (Accessed: 16 September 2023).

Géré, F. (2002). *Pourquoi Les Guerres? Un Siècle de Géopolitique*. Paris: Larousse.

Haddad, M. (2020). 'Erdogan mène un projet panislamiste et néo-ottoman qu'il faut combattre de toute urgence',*Le Figaro.* Available at: https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/erdogan-mene-un-projet-panislamiste-et-neo-ottoman-qu-il-faut-combattre-de-toute-urgence-20200303 (Accessed: 19 March 2023).

Haugom, L. (2019). 'Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan: A change in international orientation?', *Comparative Strategy*, 38 (3) pp. 206–223.

Joas, H. (2003). *War and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kalaycioglu, S. (2000). 'Economic Partnership in the Aegean: A New Understanding between Turkey and Greece". *Wilson Center.* Available at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/economic-partnership-the-aegean-new-understanding-between-turkey-and-greece (Accessed: 14 September 2023).

Keohane, R. O. (2001). 'Governance in a Partially Globalized World', *American Political Science Review*, 91 (1) pp. 1-14.

Keohane, R.O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kıran, J. (2018). 'Expanding the framework of the varieties of capitalism: Turkey as a hierarchical market economy', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9 (1) pp.42–51.

Kutlay, M. and Öniş, Z. (2021). 'Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: Strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?', *International Affairs,* 97 (4) pp.1085-1104.

Moravcsik, A. (1997).'Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics', *International Organization*, 51 (4) pp. 513–53.

Moravcsik, A. and Schimmelfennig, F. (2019). Liberal Intergovernmentalism, in Wiener/Börzel/Risse, eds., *European Integration Theory*, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nachmani, A. (2018). 'What the neighbor to the west says Greek-Turkish relations' In *Turkey: Facing a new millennium,* Manchester University Press.

Nasr, V. (2005). 'The Rise of "Muslim Democracy",' *Journal of Democracy*, 16 (2) pp. 13-27.

Öktem, K. and Akkoyunlu, K. (2016). 'Exit from democracy: Illiberal governance in Turkey and beyond',*Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16 (4)

Öniş, Z. (2004). 'Turgut Özal and His Economic Legacy: Turkish Neo-Liberalism in Critical Perspective', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40 (4) pp. 113-134.

Powell, R. (1994). 'Anarchy in international relations theory: the neorealist-neoliberal debate', *International Organization*, 48 (2)

Powell, R. (1991). 'Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory', *American Political Science Review*, 85, pp. 1303-1320.

Redmond, J. (1998). Turkey, in D. Dinan, eds., *Encyclopedia of the European Union*. London: Macmillan.

Reuters: Factbox:-Praying at Hagia Sophia, Erdogan crowns long campaign to revitalise Islam in Turkey. (2020). Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-hagiasophia-erdogan-factbox-idUKKCN24P1BE (Accessed: 19 March 2023)

Taş, H. (2020). 'The chronopolitics of national populism', I*dentities: Global Culture and Power*, 29 (2).

Trading Economics: Greece exports to Turkey 2020-21. Available at: https://tradingeconomics.com/greece/exports/turkey (Accessed: 29 May 2021)

Yalcin, E. and Felbermayr, G. (2021). 'The EU-Turkey Customs Union and trade relations: what options for the future?' *European Parliament.* Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653640/EXPO_IDA(2021)653640_EN.pdf (Accessed: 14 September 2023)

Yesilada, B. (1993). 'Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Middle East', in Atila Eralp et al. eds., *The Political and Socioeconomic Transformation of Turkey*, Chavport, CT: Praeger pp.169-192.

About the author:

Kostas A. Lavdas is Professor of European and Comparative Politics and Director of the Graduate Program in International Relations and Strategic Studies at Panteion University. Formerly, he was Constantine Karamanlis Professor of Hellenic and European Studies at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, USA and Senior Research Fellow at LSE, UK. He has published extensively in English, German, and Greek on European politics, comparative foreign policy, transatlantic relations, and applied political theory. He has been a consultant to public and private organizations, has served as a board member at various research centers and think tanks and as chairman of the scientific committee for the content of the examinations required for the acquisition of Greek citizenship at the Ministry of Interior.

Panagiota Chatzilymperi holds a Ph.D. in the Department of International, European, and Regional Studies at Panteion University and has contributed and presented at the international conference of ERGOMAS as she also participated in various seminars. She has studied at Panteion University, specializing in Political Science and History, with postgraduate studies in International Relations and Strategic Studies.