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Strategic Autonomy through Pragmatism:

Reassessing Türkiye's Role in Europe's New Security Architecture

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While disputes are emerging all around the world and political divisions deepen, Europe is increasingly confronted with growing uncertainty in its security environment. For decades, the European Union (EU) operated under a state of 'strategic complacency', effectively outsourcing its survival to the U.S. security umbrella. This structural dependence meant that European defense architectures relied on Washington for critical 'strategic enablers', such as advanced ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance) capabilities, missile defense, and strategic airlift, which Brussels failed to develop independently. However, recent shifts in U.S. foreign policy, particularly during and after the Trump presidency, have raised concerns about the long-term reliability of these long-standing transatlantic commitments.

Washington is increasingly turning its attention toward domestic priorities and the Indo-Pacific. Daniel Berchev (2024) identifies this shift as a 'strategic retrenchment,' evidenced by the reduction of permanent U.S. troop levels in European bases to prioritize a military presence in the Pacific. This retrenchment is further illustrated by the decision to redirect vital intelligence assets and naval strike groups from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea. Coupled with rhetoric linking Article 5 commitments to defense spending, these moves have created a growing 'credibility gap'. Consequently, European capitals may find themselves waiting for support that is no longer guaranteed in the event of a major crisis. In response to this evolving landscape, EU has begun to adjust its policies in a more pragmatic and outward-looking manner to safeguard its security and strategic interests.

Since the end of World War II, Europe's security has been largely depended on the U.S. support, particularly in countering the Soviet threat from the East. However, in recent years, transatlantic relations have come under strain, especially under Trump's 'America First' policies, which weakened long-standing security commitments. At the same time, the Russia-Ukraine war has placed significant economic and political pressure on the EU, with sanctions prolonged instability affecting its internal cohesion. In this context, the EU has become increasingly aware of its vulnerability and the limits of relying on the U.S. as its primary security guarantor. As a result, it is now compelled to seek new partners to ensure its resilience. In doing so, the EU is turning toward its neighbors, such as Türkiye, while also beginning to reassess its long-term approach to Russia.



A Pragmatic Russia Policy

The EU's view of Russia is gradually shifting as the war continues to drain resources and test long-term sustainability. Instead of seeing Moscow solely as a permanent enemy, some European leaders, particularly in Paris and Rome, are beginning to consider the possibility of a future relationship. While acknowledging Russia's actions in the war, it remains a neighboring power with which Europe will eventually need to engage. The more 'pragmatic' approach is gaining traction as the EU confronts the limits of prolonged isolation, particularly in areas such as energy and regional stability. In this context, Türkiye's ongoing trade and dialogue with Russia is no longer viewed as a liability by Brussels. Instead, it is increasingly seen as a potential bridge that could play a role in managing tensions and facilitating future dialogue.

The Missing Link in European Defense

The history of Türkiye and European integration began a long time ago with a three-stage process aimed at full membership in 1963. For decades, Türkiye's membership remained a debated topic because of internal politics and questions about Turkish identity. However, the world has changed and so has the EU's perspective. The emerging idea of a 'European Army' and the urgent need for stronger allies have changed how the EU looks at Ankara. Brussels has realized that its goal of 'strategic autonomy', namely the ability to defend itself without the U.S., cannot be built in isolation.

As Aydın-Düzgit et al. (2026) argue, true strategic autonomy in a multipolar world requires states to focus heavily on the structural and economic infrastructure of their alliances. It necessitates the inclusion of pivotal middle powers such as Ankara, which possesses one of the most powerful and experienced militaries in the region. Now, Türkiye has become an essential candidate rather than a marginal one. This change is visible through recent initiatives that illustrate deep industrial synergy. For example, the participation of Aselsan in BEDEX 2026, a major defense exhibition in Brussels, reflects Türkiye's active role in continental security forums. Similarly, Türkiye's inclusion in the EU's SAFE framework (Security Action for Europe) functions as a strategic mechanism to integrate non-EU partners into defense procurement processes. Furthermore, the industrial collaboration between the Italian aerospace giant Leonardo and the Turkish drone pioneer Baykar highlights a high-tech synergy between European defense expertise and Türkiye's combat proven technological capabilities.

To be sure, this momentum does not imply that long-standing structural mistrust has completely vanished; Ankara has frequently criticized European partners for ignoring its security concerns and imposing de facto arms embargoes on critical defense components. These developments prove, however that military-industrial integration is moving significantly faster than political rhetoric. Confirming that the search for pragmatic and functional partnerships drives cooperation forward even when formal institutional alignment remains stagnant (Süsler, 2025).

Testing the EU's Credibility

If the EU genuinely seeks to position Türkiye as a partner or strategic ally, this requires more than rhetorical openness. It demands concrete and reciprocal steps towards integration. Otherwise, relationship risks remaining asymmetrical, with the EU benefiting from Türkiye's security contributions without offering meaningful institutional inclusion in return. That said, recent developments suggest that Brussels is beginning to move, albeit cautiously, in this direction.

One notable example is the proposal to include Türkiye in the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), which would significantly deepen financial integration and facilitate cross-border transactions. Additionally, the implementation of the Schengen 'cascade' system in July 2025 has eased visa procedures for Turkish citizens, signaling a modest but important shift in mobility governance. More structurally, Türkiye's inclusion in the Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA) in early 2026 reflects a growing recognition of its role within European production networks. By integrating Turkish manufacturing into the 'Made in Europe' ecosystem, this framework positions Turkish factories as an essential part of the EU's broader industrial and supply chain strategy.

These steps indicate a gradual move from symbolic engagement towards more embedded forms of cooperation. While still limited in scope, they suggest that Türkiye's role in being reconsidered in more strategic and less conditional terms, with implications for both regional

The Balance Policy and Conclusion

The era of passive waiting must come to an end. While Türkiye's 'balancing politics' since 1923 remains a defining feature of its foreign policy, it should be viewed by Brussels as a strategic asset rather than an obstacle. Türkiye is committed to being part of the European security architecture, but it is unlikely to abandon its trade and diplomatic links with Russia to achieve this. As we stand in 2026, the growing interest from Brussels is a clear sign of progress, yet the ultimate destination, whether full membership or a specialized military partnership, remains uncertain. This is because the EU has always valued Türkiye as a strategic partner, but has never found it reliable enough for full institutional integration. Therefore, while the EU's 'green lights' are becoming more visible, both parties must move beyond rhetoric towards credible and reciprocal commitments. The key question for the coming years is no longer whether cooperation is necessary, but whether Brussels and Ankara have the political will to institutionalize this partnership.



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Author Bio

Alp Atamert is an undergraduate student at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul University and a graduate of Galatasaray High School. Proficient in both English and French, he is a member of the PLURIEX (Pluriversal Excellence in EU Studies) Youth Voices initiative. He contributed to the TÜBİTAK 1001 project "The Role of Elite Sociology in Understanding the Policy-Making Process of Turkey–European Union Relations" (Project No: 122K720) first as a TÜBİTAK STAR fellow for six months and subsequently as an undergraduate research fellow for three months. Additionally, he served as a term intern at the TÜSİAD (Turkish Industry and Business Association) EU Representation Office in Brussels. His research focuses on bureaucratic elites, governance, diplomacy, and decision-making processes in Turkey–EU relations.



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