

The Three Phases of Turkey's Decline: A Tragedy in Three Acts

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Turkey's trajectory over the last two decades can be seen as a gradual slide from the ambition of becoming a regional power into a declining role that generates concern and uncertainty.

This development was not instantaneous; rather, it unfolds across three distinct chronological phases, reminiscent of the acts of a tragedy.

The term "tragedy in three acts" aptly captures this transition: from contested reliability to active destabilization, and finally to the perception of Turkey as a strategic threat. This trajectory from 2005 to the present can be interpreted as a process of gradual distancing from the Western security architecture and transformation into a source of uncertainty. It may also be characterized as a progressively misguided shift away from Western and European integration toward a more autonomous - and at times confrontational - geopolitical role. Turkey's course from the mid-2000s to the present essentially constitutes a complex geopolitical transition: from an accession partner of the West to a controversial and ultimately dangerous confrontational actor. Below, we analyze the three Acts of this drama in greater detail.

Act One (2005-2015): The Unreliable Ally

During the first period, NATO treated Turkey as a difficult but necessary partner. Ankara still maintained ties with the West, while at the same time pursuing a more autonomous foreign policy. The objective of accession to the European Union coexisted with growing domestic tensions and selective compliance with alliance obligations. This dual posture cultivated mistrust: Turkey had not yet broken away from the Western camp, but it was no longer considered fully predictable. It was an ally that caused unease, though not fear.

During this period, Turkey indeed remained institutionally integrated into the Western security architecture as a member of NATO, while at the same time maintaining a relatively active accession path toward the European Union as a candidate country. The country was engaged in a process of reform, although with significant deficiencies in the rule of law (European Commission, Progress Reports 2005-2013; https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/turkey-report-2013_en).

However, divergence was already apparent by the end of the 2000s. The implementation of Ahmet Davutoglu's new doctrine of "strategic depth" introduced a more multidimensional policy and strengthened the autonomy of Turkish foreign policy, with openings toward the Middle East and the Balkans. At the same time, the deterioration of relations with Israel after the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 marked a turning point. It signaled a serious crisis in relations with Israel, while Turkey's gradual domestic authoritarian turn (see Freedom House Reports, 2013-2015) generated reservations among Western partners.

Although Turkey participated in NATO missions, its selective stance and growing domestic authoritarianism created doubts about its strategic orientation (see analyses by the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations).

Despite its participation in NATO missions, such as ISAF in Afghanistan, Turkey was specifically viewed as an increasingly "selective ally" (Council on Foreign Relations; <https://www.cfr.org/background/turkey-middle-east>).

The First Act is characterized by ambiguity.

Act Two (2015-2025): The Factor of Instability

The second period marks a clear deterioration. After the failed coup attempt of 2016, Turkey adopted a more aggressive and revisionist posture. The failed coup led to a rapid concentration of power under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accelerating the transformation of both the political system and foreign policy. The political system shifted toward a presidential model with increased concentration of authority (see Venice Commission, 2017, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2017\)005-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2017)005-e)).

The military interventions in Syria, the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the instrumentalization of migration flows strengthened the image of a country operating as a destabilizing factor. Specifically, Turkey undertook military operations in Syria, including Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch (sources: U.S. Department of Defense reports), while intensifying its claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and clashing with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus.

The culmination of this phase was the purchase of the Russian S-400 systems, a move that directly called into question the Alliance's cohesion. Strategic-level cooperation with Russia caused serious ruptures, leading to Turkey being characterized as a "major instability factor."

This decision to procure the S-400 system from Russia in 2017 was decisive. It led to severe sanctions by the United States under the CAATSA law and to Turkey's definitive exclusion from the F-35 aircraft program, as this decision violated NATO interoperability (sources: U.S. Department of Defense, Congressional Research Service; <https://www.state.gov/caatsa-sanctions-on-turkey>).

At the foreign policy level, Turkey adopted a more aggressive stance in our region as well. In particular, we observe:

- Tension with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus over EEZs and energy resources (European Council Conclusions, 2019-2020; <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/11/european-council-conclusions/>).
- The Evros crisis of 2020, involving the instrumentalization of migration flows, which reinforced the image of a country using asymmetric and hybrid means of pressure.

At this stage, Turkey was not merely unreliable; it had become a source of risk for the cohesion and security of NATO's southeastern flank. It ceased to be simply a "problematic and difficult ally" and transformed into a "dangerous and active destabilizing factor."

A clear rupture characterizes the Second Act.

Act Three (2025-present): The Perception of an Existential Threat

In the current period, Turkey's image has deteriorated even further. Some analyses go further: Turkey is no longer considered only a destabilizing factor, but in certain cases is treated as a potential strategic, and even existential, threat within specific regional contexts. Israel, in particular, is watching developments with increasing concern, as geopolitical conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean intensify.

The Cyprus issue is returning to the foreground with renewed momentum. The continuing presence of Turkish forces in the northern part of the island and aggressive rhetoric create an environment in which more forceful reactions by third actors cannot be ruled out, especially from the trilateral cooperation among Israel, Cyprus, and Greece. Turkey now appears to be moving outside the framework of balance that once characterized its position, as the strengthening of its relations with non-Western actors and its aggressive rhetoric heighten tensions and now justify, at the international level, the undertaking of dynamic action.

Israel, in particular, amid broader geopolitical realignments and in the context of energy and defense cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, is reassessing the balances in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially Turkey's stance. However, there is no publicly confirmed evidence of an immediate military intent against Turkey. Relevant assessments come mainly from think tanks such as the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Analyses by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) point to growing strategic suspicion (<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/strategic-assessment/>).

At the same time, reports by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace underline Turkey's "strategic autonomy" as a dual phenomenon - both an effort to project power and a source of isolation (<https://carnegieendowment.org>).

In the current phase, perceptions of Turkey deteriorate even further in certain analytical and strategic contexts. The continuing illegal military presence in Northern Cyprus, combined with the rhetoric of the "Blue Homeland," reinforces concerns.

Additional factors of concern include:

- Turkey's balancing act between the West and Russia, for example, through energy agreements and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant;
- Its involvement in multiple fronts, including Libya and the Caucasus;
- Its effort to achieve strategic autonomy in the defense industry;
- Its treatment of domestic opposition through criminal rather than political procedures, which creates the image of a power acting both outside the rule of law and outside traditional allied frameworks;
- Its rhetorical and substantive support for Hamas, partly for Hezbollah, and for the Muslim Brotherhood;
- Its effort to assume a regulatory role in issues concerning Muslims worldwide, at a time when the spiritual and religious leader of Muslims worldwide is primarily the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which hosts the two holy cities of Islam.

The Third Act is characterized by Turkey's complete devaluation and its emergence as a significant threat that requires an immediate response.

Epilogue: The Structure of the Tragedy

Turkey's "tragedy" consists not in a linear decline, but in a transition from cooperation to contestation and ultimately to suspicion. A choice of strategic autonomy without corresponding institutional balance led to a loss of trust.

This "tragedy" is the result of political choices that affected allied trust and regional stability. From a necessary partner, Turkey became a controversial actor and, in certain scenarios, a significant threat.

Turkey's trajectory constitutes an unfortunate attempt to move away from its role as a reliable ally. The country unsuccessfully moved toward greater autonomy, with aspirations to become a regional factor that were disproved, and is now definitively accompanied by diminished trust on the part of allies and neighbors.

The gradual distancing from cooperation and the adoption of a power policy, without sufficient institutional counterweights and substantive economic, diplomatic, and political prerequisites, led to isolation and suspicion. Turkey thus gradually evolved from a valuable ally, first into a problematic partner, then into a source of instability, and today, for some, into a significant strategic threat.

Future developments will depend on whether there is a strategic readjustment or further intensification.

As in every tragedy, the crossing of limits (hubris) leads to the system's reaction (nemesis), leaving the final outcome open.

The specific question that remains open is whether the third act will lead to catharsis or escalation.

There is, of course, always the "Deus ex Machina," which in ancient tragedy provides the definitive dynamic solution of catharsis.

Will such catharsis occur - a return to balance - or will the tragedy move toward an even more dramatic climax, with the deterioration of Turkey's geopolitical and geoeconomic parameters and even a reduction in its territorial dimensions?

We will analyze the possible dramatic deterioration in greater detail in a subsequent note, while for the moment hoping for catharsis through the "Deus ex Machina," whoever that may ultimately be...

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