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Europe's Strategic Crossroads:

The Perils of Embracing Turkey In the Emerging EU Defence Architecture

Dimitrios Tsailas (ret) Admiral)

(He has taught for many years, operational planning, strategy, and security, to senior officers at the Supreme Joint War College. He is a member and researcher of the Institute for National and International Security)

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Abstract. As Europe races to close capability gaps exposed by Russia's war in Ukraine and by uncertainty in U.S. policy, new EU defence initiatives (Readiness 2030; the SAFE instrument) and Anglo-European pacts have generated pressure to widen the circle of partners. Turkey, vital geographically and militarily, is once again at the center of debate. This paper argues that deepening EU defence ties with Ankara without strict conditionality would be a strategic error, especially for Greece and other states that face direct Turkish pressure. Using historical flashpoints, current industrial links, legal norms, and political trends, the paper explains why Greece's objections merit priority, and offers a three-scenario forecast for the next five to ten years with policy prescriptions for the EU.

I. Introduction: Strategic Urgency, Political Reality

Europe is re-arming. The shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the intense militarization of the Black Sea, and growing doubts about the durability of U.S. guarantees have forced European capitals and Brussels into a rapid reappraisal of defence policy. The European Commission and member states have launched ambitious programmes, most notably the ReArm/Readiness 2030 agenda and the SAFE (Security Action for Europe) instrument, which mobilizes up to €150 billion to finance joint procurement and boost the defence industrial base. [European Commission](#)

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In this strategic climate, interest has revived in integrating external partners into European defence projects. Turkey's case is the most salient: it possesses the second-largest army in NATO, a rapidly expanding defence industry, and unrivalled geographical leverage over both the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean. On paper this looks attractive. In practice, it raises hard questions about trust, norms, and long-term alliance cohesion.

Greece's position is a test case. Athens warns that accepting Turkey into institutionalized EU defence mechanisms without stringent conditions would not simply be politically awkward, it would undercut the very unity and legal commitments that European defence rests upon. This paper explores why. It begins by laying out Turkey's strategic appeal and the liabilities that accompany it, then reviews the Greek experience of repeated crises, maps the EU member-state groupings that shape policy choices, examines the legal and normative constraints, and concludes with a detailed five–ten year forecast under three plausible scenarios and policy recommendations.

II. Turkey's Strategic Appeal — and Hidden Liabilities

Turkey's attractions for a defence-hungry Europe are obvious.

First, the industrial angle. Over the past decade Turkey has transformed parts of its defence sector into globally competitive exports: unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), ammunition, electronic systems and naval platforms. Turkish authorities reported record defence and aerospace exports in 2024 of roughly \$7.1–7.2 billion, a near 29% year-on-year jump that demonstrates both scale and momentum. [Defense NewsAnadolu Ajansi](#)

Second, the geostrategic angle. Ankara's control of the Turkish Straits (and its role under the 1936 Montreux Convention), along with naval and air capabilities in the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea, means Turkey can materially shape maritime access and situational awareness. Its geographical position makes it an attractive partner for both NATO and EU defence planners seeking to secure Europe's southern and eastern approaches.

Third, the hard capability gap. Europe's defence industrial base has long been uneven. SAFE loans and Readiness 2030 aim to correct that, but they will not instantly substitute for years of capacity shortfalls, particularly in ammunition, precision-strike, and UAV production. Turkey's industrial base can, and already does,

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plug some of those gaps faster and at scale than many European suppliers. [European Commission](#)

Yet these positives coexist with important liabilities.

Political-institutional risks. The Turkish polity has experienced a sustained democratic backslide. High-profile arrests of opposition figures, restrictions on press freedom, and systematic weakening of checks and balances have been well documented, and the arrest of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on March 19, 2025 precipitated mass protests and international concern about politically motivated judicial action. These trends undermine confidence that Turkish political behaviour will align with EU norms or that Ankara will be constrained by domestic rule-of-law checks if it chooses to instrumentalise defence ties for political ends. [Al Jazeera Human Rights Watch](#)

A history of strategic hedging. Since 2014 Turkey has pursued a hedging strategy in which it stays in NATO while maintaining pragmatic relations with Russia. That posture includes continued trade and energy links with Moscow and repeated refusals to adopt unilateral Western sanctions as a matter of Turkish principle. Ankara has also, at times, enabled workarounds that complicated sanction regimes. The outcome is a partner who may supply capability to a Ukraine under attack while preserving direct channels to Moscow, a duality that complicates collective strategic responses. [IISS](#)

Transactional diplomacy. Ankara has shown a readiness to use leverage, NATO accession, migration flows, or military posture, to extract political concessions, complicating the trust calculus for European states. Where capability bargains are bargained for geopolitical returns, the risk of strategic surprise for neighbours is real.

In short, Turkey's material attractiveness is real, but it comes bound to political and normative uncertainties that cannot be wished away.

III. Athens Remembers: Historical Flashpoints and the Blue Homeland

Greece's caution is forged in recurring crises.

Imia (1996). This near-war crisis over two uninhabited islets in the southeastern Aegean is a canonical example of how quickly disputes can escalate between two NATO members. Naval deployments and the mobilization of forces brought Athens and Ankara to the brink; intense U.S. diplomacy defused the immediate danger. The

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Imia case remains a cautionary tale about unresolved sovereignty questions and the speed at which domestic politics can inflame bilateral tensions. durham.ac.uk

Eastern Mediterranean standoff (2020). The deployment of the Turkish seismic research vessel *Oruç Reis*, escorted by warships, into waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus sparked the gravest military posturing between the two states in decades. France briefly deployed naval assets in support of Greece; NATO and other actors operated de-confliction channels to prevent miscalculation. The incident underlined that maritime resource competition, combined with assertive naval tactics, can cause wide regional spillover. [ReutersCrisis Group](#)

Escalatory rhetoric — missile warnings (2022). President Erdoğan's public comments in 2022 — interpreted in Athens as threats that Turkish missiles could reach Athens, amplified the sense that Turkish posture blends hard capability with punitive rhetoric. Such public statements both underscore the potency of Turkey's capabilities and show how rhetoric can widen mistrust. [POLITICOAP News](#)

Blue Homeland doctrine. Ankara's maritime doctrine (Mavi Vatan) asserts widened maritime claims across the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean and has clear political implications for Greek and Cypriot EEZs, hydrocarbon exploration and maritime delimitation. The doctrine is not merely strategic posture but a policy driver that complicates any European calculus that treats Turkey as a straightforward defensive partner. [Crisis Group](#)

These episodes feed Greek strategic culture and explain why Athens regards Turkish inclusion in EU defence mechanisms as potentially destabilising. Greece is not merely worried about capability transfers; it is worried about enabling a partner whose doctrine and behaviour are directly inimical to Greek maritime sovereignty.

IV. EU Member-State Groupings: Interests, Industries, and Geopolitics

Across the EU, member states divide into three broad clusters regarding defence engagement with Turkey. Understanding these clusters explains why decisions in Brussels are politically fraught.

Group 1 — Cooperative: Poland, Spain, Italy.

These countries see Turkey chiefly through a capability and geopolitical lens. Poland — focused on containing Russia — was an early buyer of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones, seeking operational capacity at speed and scale. Spain and Italy view industrial partnerships as opportunity: Spain signed MoUs to co-develop the Turkish Hürjet advanced trainer; Italy's industrial web is deepening with Turkish firms

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(culminating in Baykar's acquisition of Piaggio and a Leonardo–Baykar memorandum that has already evolved into a joint venture). For these states, Turkish integration into European defence projects promises near-term gains in production, jobs, and capability. [Reuters+1euro-sd.comleonardo.com](#)

Group 2 — Cautious: Sweden, Finland, Germany.

These states recognise Ankara's importance (in geographic, military and industrial terms) but are cautious because Turkey is seen as unpredictable. Germany, with large economic ties and a sizeable Turkish diaspora, has eased some export restrictions to keep Ankara close to the West — but hesitancy remains. For Group 2, conditional, transactional cooperation that preserves multilateral norms is the preferred route. [European CommissionReuters](#)

Group 3 — Reluctant: France, Greece.

These states view Turkey as a competitor or direct threat. France emphasises European strategic autonomy and prefers strengthening an internal EU industrial base; Paris also worries that Turkish ambitions in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean conflict with French priorities. Greece sees Turkey's posture as an existential security challenge — its concerns are concrete and immediate: airspace violations, naval shadowing, and threatened changes to maritime status-quo. [Financial TimesCrisis Group](#)

This tripartite division matters because SAFE loans and Readiness 2030 will require political consent and sustained cooperation across the Union. Large bilateral deals (e.g., Leonardo–Baykar, Baykar–Piaggio) show how industrial dynamics can outpace political consensus; they also reveal how national economic and industrial interests can push states toward rapprochement with Ankara even when security anxieties persist elsewhere. [The Defense PostReuters](#)

V. Legal and Normative Constraints

EU defence policy cannot be separated from legal commitments and normative expectations.

Article 42(7) TEU binds EU members to mutual aid and assistance in case of armed aggression. It is a legal and political anchor for union solidarity. Funding or otherwise strengthening a partner's military capacities while that partner maintains explicit or de facto threats against a member state strains the normative coherence of the Union. That is not a purely Greek rhetorical point; it is a legal and political dilemma for any institution that claims to uphold European norms. [European Council](#)

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Export governance and conditionality. SAFE's rules — designed to favour European industry while allowing third-party participation under specific limits (the 65/35 preference in procurement) — can be used to exclude actors whose behaviour undermines EU security. But absent strict end-use controls and unanimous political discipline, loans and co-production agreements risk delivering technologies that can be used in ways contrary to EU security interests. Documents accompanying SAFE emphasise conditionality and end-use monitoring; the political question is whether Europe will apply these rules evenly and credibly. [euronews](https://www.euronews.com)

Precedents. The EU has restricted transfers to partners (e.g., Saudi Arabia) when behaviour contravened EU policy. Those precedents create legal and political pathways for conditionality — pathways Greece argues must be actively used with respect to Turkey if integration is contemplated. [IRIS](https://www.iris-online.com)

In short: legal norms give Brussels tools to condition cooperation. The question is whether political will exists to use them.

VI. Crisis Forecast: How the EU Would React (and Why It Might Fracture)

If another major standoff occurs, whether a maritime dispute in the Aegean, a violent encounter in the Black Sea, or a political provocation tied to migration or judicial repression, the EU's divided posture will be exposed.

Short list of plausible triggers. Renewed seismic surveys near Greek EEZs; a Turkish naval harassment episode leading to a skirmish; a Black Sea interdiction involving a NATO asset and a Russian fleet; or an internal Turkish political move that leads Ankara to use bilateral leverage to extract concessions. Each could spark a cascade of reactions.

Likely national responses. Drawing on the three groupings:

- **Group 1 (Cooperative):** Push for de-escalation, protect defence contracts, and treat the event as an operational dispute best solved by diplomacy.
- **Group 2 (Cautious):** Condemn aggression rhetorically, seek mediation, and avoid unilateral punitive measures in order to keep Turkey close to the West.
- **Group 3 (Reluctant):** Demand immediate, robust measures, arms embargoes, suspension from EU projects, and NATO consultations (Article 4 or 5 if applicable).

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The upshot: three competing logics could produce paralysis when swift action is essential. Turkey's strategic culture of leveraging bilateral deals to exploit such divisions would be rewarded, not deterred.

VII. Strategic Autonomy or Strategic Delusion?

Emmanuel Macron's warning about outsourcing European security to authoritarian regimes is apt. If Europe chooses to prioritise capability accumulation over robust alignment with democratic norms, it risks three linked failures:

1. **Political fracture.** When large states pursue bilateral industrial deals that run counter to other members' security requirements, union solidarity erodes. The SAFE instrument and Readiness 2030 will deliver capabilities, but their political sustainability depends on trust, which unilateral deals corrode. [European Commission](#)
2. **Empowering leverage.** Ankara has learned that owning unique capabilities and being an industrial partner yields geopolitical leverage. Rewarding that behaviour without reciprocity and constraints entices further instrumentalisation.
3. **Norm erosion.** The EU's soft power rests in part on normative credibility. Subsidising a partner whose domestic trajectory is authoritarian and who threatens EU members' damages that credibility.

Put bluntly: short-term capability gains can produce long-term strategic fragility.

VIII. Conditions for Turkish Inclusion. A Clear, Credible Test

If Turkey is to be considered for deeper participation in EU defence programmes, European policy should require an explicit package of verifiable commitments:

1. **Renounce the *casus belli*.** Ankara should formally and verifiably remove any parliamentary or executive language that asserts a right to use force over Greek maritime choices. This is a minimum confidence-building measure.
2. **End aggressive overflights and de-escalate maritime behavior.** Measurable reductions in Aegean incursions and the acceptance of binding de-confliction mechanisms and incident-at-sea protocols should be negotiated and monitored.
3. **Robust end-use controls.** Any joint production must include clauses that require unanimous consent among production partners for third-party

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transfers, enforceable end-use monitoring, and revocable access to SAFE loans in the event of misuse. SAFE's rules already envisage strict conditions; they must be applied with transparency and political resolve. [European Council](#)

4. **Democratic benchmarks.** A roadmap for judicial independence, political pluralism and media freedom should be tabled and verifiable, not as an abstract "EU accession" opt-out, but as a specific condition for defence industrial cooperation.

These conditions are not punitive; they are practical. They recognise that defence co-production is not merely industrial cooperation — it is an alliance instrument that requires trust and reciprocity.

IX. A Five-to-Ten-Year Forecast: Three Scenarios

To help policymakers, below are three plausible scenarios for EU–Turkey defence relations over the next five to ten years. They are not exhaustive but are designed to be analytically useful.

Scenario A — “Conditional Convergence” (Most desirable / moderate probability)

Premise. Europe insists on strict conditionality and Turkey reciprocates selectively to secure access to SAFE loans and industrial markets.

Key elements.

- Turkey signs legally binding de-escalation and de-confliction protocols with Greece and Cyprus, publicly renounces *casus belli*, and allows EU monitors on select confidence-building measures.
- Brussels grants limited participation in SAFE-backed procurements under a 65/35 arrangement, with strict end-use clauses and unanimous veto for transfers to third parties deemed security risks.
- Industrial tie-ups proceed with safeguards (e.g., joint ventures headquartered in EU member states with European certification paths), enabling technology transfer while protecting sensitive technologies.

Outcomes.

- European defence capability improves without undercutting cohesion; Greece feels reassured by concrete legal and operational safeguards.

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- Turkey gains market access and legitimacy, but its domestic politics remain under scrutiny; conditionality is enforced through reversible benefits.
- NATO cohesion is strengthened as tensions fall and operational interoperability rises.

Risks.

- Turkey may renege on commitments if domestic politics shift; enforcement must be credible and timely.

Likelihood. Moderate — requires high political will in Brussels and alignment among Group 1 and Group 2 states to follow legal safeguards.

Scenario B — “Transactional Integration” (Plausible / medium probability)

Premise. Economic and industrial imperatives win out. Key member states (Italy, Spain, Poland, parts of Germany) push for rapid integration of Turkish firms into EU projects to scale production quickly, with only symbolic or weak conditionality.

Key elements.

- SAFE loans are used to underwrite joint projects that include Turkish manufacturers; end-use clauses exist but are weakly enforced.
- High-profile joint ventures (UAV production lines, ammunition plants) scale rapidly; Leonardo–Baykar style deals proliferate.
- Greece and France protest; limited sanctionsable actions are vetoed in the Council due to industrial pressure.

Outcomes.

- Short-term capability increases are real: European states gain stocks of UAVs, shells and support services quickly.
- Political trust frays: Greece and Cyprus feel betrayed; EU unity on core foreign-policy items weakens.
- Ankara gains leverage and may use it to extract concessions in other theatres (migration, energy, NATO votes).

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Risks.

- The EU's credibility on norms declines; partner fragmentation inside NATO grows.
- A crisis (e.g., maritime clash) leads to asymmetric responses, risking wider escalation.

Likelihood. Significant — the pressure to deliver tangible capabilities quickly may push many states into transactional deals.

Scenario C — “Sidelined Schism” (Least desirable / plausible under stress)

Premise. Europe fails to agree. SAFE funds are kept largely within an “EU-only” industrial base; Turkey pivots further east and deepens ties with Russia, China or other third parties.

Key elements.

- Political paralysis in Brussels allows Turkey to operate bilaterally: intensified arms exports, regional interventions, and industrial mergers (e.g., Baykar–Piaggio) that position Ankara as an independent supplier to Europe and global markets.
- Lack of integration leaves NATO's southern flank more brittle; Greece's security posture becomes more unilateral, with greater reliance on bilateral partnerships (e.g., with France and the U.S.).

Outcomes.

- EU capability gains are smaller and slower due to lack of scale and industrial fragmentation.
- Ankara's geopolitical orientation becomes less predictable; the risk of Russian-Turkish rapprochement in certain theatres increases.
- The Union's internal trust frays; smaller members feel their security is subordinated to industrial politics.

Risks.

- High: a major conflict or miscalculation in the Aegean or Black Sea could draw in multiple actors and expose the EU and NATO to credibility shortfalls.

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Likelihood. Real if political divisions deepen and Europe prioritises short-term domestic industrial protectionism over measured, conditional cooperation.

X. Policy Recommendations

Given the stakes, the EU should pursue a balanced — not an expedient — path:

1. **Adopt an explicit conditionality framework for third-party participation in SAFE-funded programmes.** Conditions should be operational (de-escalation protocols), legal (no *casus belli*), and political (benchmarks on rule-of-law). SAFE regulations and Commission guidance already permit limits; Brussels must operationalise them transparently. [European Council](#)
2. **Institutionalise de-confliction and confidence-building in NATO's European pillar.** A permanent NATO-mediated mechanism for Greece–Turkey incidents — with EU observers and clear incident-reporting — would reduce risk of miscalculation.
3. **Use SAFE funds to build EU sovereign capability as priority** especially in munitions, air-defence and drone production, while allowing conditional, tightly monitored third-party industrial partnerships where they demonstrably add unique capacity.
4. **Ensure unanimous end-use veto rights for co-producers.** Any country that co-produces systems with SAFE loans must have final say over third-party transfers; this should be non-negotiable.
5. **Maintain the separation of accession politics from defence cooperation.** While the EU can allow tactical defence cooperation on clear, limited terms, accession remains a distinct, normative process that should not be diluted.

XI. Conclusion: Greece's Warning Is Europe's Opportunity

Greece's objections to unguarded rapprochement with Turkey are not parochial reflexes. They raise the central question of whether Europe wants to build security on capability alone or on capability plus the political cohesion and normative consistency that make those capabilities sustainable. SAFE and Readiness 2030 are historic opportunities to shore up Europe's defence — but they must not become instruments that reward brinkmanship and erosion of democratic norms.

If Europe chooses conditionality, enforcement and unity, the Union can both grow its industrial base and reduce regional risk. If it chooses expediency, the result will be

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faster hardware and slower politics — and a strategic landscape in which the very unity that armed capability is meant to defend will be the first casualty.

Greece's warning is a diplomatic gift to Brussels: design a defence architecture that preserves sovereignty, builds capability, and binds partners by rules — not by bargains made under duress. Europe's choice in the coming five to ten years will determine whether it becomes a genuine strategic actor or a patchwork of transactional relationships pulled apart in crisis.

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