



## Conflicts in the EastMed From Germany's and France's Conflicting Strategies to a Dual Approach

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### ► Key Takeaways

- Over the past years, the Eastern Mediterranean has become centerstage of an increasingly internationalized and militarized conflict driven by different albeit interlinked issues and an arena for a growing variety of actors to project their geopolitical ambitions.
- Even though Germany and France broadly share similar concerns regarding Turkey, their views differ on the question of how to best respond to Ankara, impacting the EU's ability to respond to the arising challenges.
- Berlin has favored a more conciliatory approach, not least because Turkey remains an important albeit challenging partner for Berlin. Paris has come to see Turkey foremost as a geopolitical rival whose ambitions and disruptive policies need to be curbed by a harder EU line.
- Structural domestic differences and diverging threat perceptions shape differing responses even to converging concerns.
- The EU's current "dual approach" attempts to bridge these differences. However, France and Germany need to clarify their common expectations to overcome their divergences regarding immediate interests and strategic outlooks.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Unfolding against the backdrop of a restructuring of the wider regional order, over the past years the Eastern Mediterranean has become centerstage of an increasingly internationalized and militarized conflict driven by different albeit interlinked issues. At the heart of it lies the dispute over maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus, further fueled by an intensifying competition for oil and gas resources in the region. At the same time, the Eastern Mediterranean has become a central arena for a growing variety of actors to project their geopolitical ambitions and to play out their competing interests in a contest to shape the reordering of the broader East Med region.

Not least, Turkey's assertive foreign policy has contributed to the escalation and growing militarization of the crisis. Turkey's frequent deployment of seismic research vessels accompanied by navy ships in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as Turkish navy presence off the coast of Libya not only fueled tensions but led to a close clash between Turkey and Greece as well as an incident with France in the summer of 2020. In addition, Turkey's active engagement in several regional conflicts, most prominently in Syria and Libya, as well as the 2019 Memorandum of Understanding with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GAN) redrawing maritime boundaries at the expense of Cyprus and Greece, have contributed to the regionalization of the problem.

While acute tensions have eased since the beginning of this year, key underlying conflicts and challenges remain. Most recently, President Erdogan's visit to Northern Cyprus in July not only underlined Ankara's policy shift towards favoring a two-state solution for the island, stirring up new flames in the conflict, but indicates that Turkey's expansionist foreign policy goals essentially remain unaltered.<sup>2</sup> Even though there is consensus among European Union (EU) states that Turkey's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean oppose broader EU interests, they diverge on the question of how to best respond to Ankara.

## GERMANY AND FRANCE: MEDIATION VS. CONFRONTATION

In response to the conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean, which reached fever pitch in the summer of 2020, Germany increased its diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions. Following a mild collision of a Turkish and a Greek navy ship in August 2020, Chancellor

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1. The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the Federal Foreign Office. CATS is the curator of CATSNetwork, an international network of think tanks and research institutions working on Turkey. This publication was produced as part of the project "The Search for Franco-German Consensus on the Eastern Mediterranean: The Paris/Ankara Row and its Consequences for the EU" which is a project of CATS Network.

2. See also G. Seufert, "Erdoğan the Builder in Northern Cyprus", *SWP Comment*, No. 47, SWP, August 2021; and D. Schmid and Y. Dahech, "La méthode turque en Méditerranée : L'emprise sur Chypre-Nord", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, July 21, 2021.

Angela Merkel spoke directly with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to prevent further escalation. Berlin also joined efforts to re-launch NATO de-confliction mechanisms between Turkey and Greece amid concerns over the risk of a potential military confrontation between the two NATO countries. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas also repeatedly travelled to Ankara, Athens and Nikosia to mediate between the conflicting parties. Since 2019, with the “Berlin Process” Germany has also taken on a more prominent role in international diplomatic efforts in Libya.

While Berlin has seen itself primarily as a mediator, Paris has taken a confrontational approach. Strongly supporting the Greek position on the maritime demarcation dispute, Paris joined calls by Greece and Cyprus for a harder EU line on Turkey. In addition, France increased its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. In late August 2020, the French frigate “La Fayette” participated in a joint military exercise with Greece and Cyprus, accompanied by three Rafale fighter jets. In March 2021, France joined a Greek-Cypriot-Israeli navy exercise west of Cyprus.

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Even though the different approaches have at times been read as a strategy of complementarity,<sup>3</sup> more often than not, actions lacked coordination.<sup>4</sup> In Berlin, France’s activities were seen as hindering German diplomatic efforts,<sup>5</sup> while Paris has criticized European “complacency” towards Turkey, seeing Germany’s conciliatory approach as a major obstacle to formulating a firm common EU position.<sup>6</sup>

## **DIFFERING INTERESTS, DIFFERING APPROACHES**

Germany and France broadly share similar concerns regarding Turkey. However, their different strategic interests and vulnerabilities have resulted in differing priorities and conclusions drawn regarding the best approach to deal with Ankara. Paris has come to see Turkey foremost as a geopolitical rival whose ambitions and disruptive policies need to be curbed and contained by a harder EU line as well as increased cooperation with other regional actors. Meanwhile, Berlin’s position has been more conciliatory, not least because cooperation with Turkey on security, migration and economic related issues remain important for Berlin.

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3. A reading also suggested by the German Chancellor and the French President during their press conference at Fort de Brégançon on 20 August 2020.

4. Interviews May and June 2021.

5. R. Kempin, “Frankreich und die Türkei – Entfremdung und strategische Rivalität”, in: R. Kempin (ed.), *Frankreichs Sicherheits- und Außenpolitik unter Präsident Macron – Konsequenzen für die deutsch-französische Zusammenarbeit*, SWP-Studie 4, SWP, March 2021.

6. Interview by President Macron given to France 5 on March 23, 2021, available at: [www.francetvinfo.fr](http://www.francetvinfo.fr).

## ***Turkey as a challenging but important partner for Berlin***

Unquestionably, Turkey's actions and its increasingly assertive foreign policy, which more and more often conflicts with European interests and weakens cohesion within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance, are also seen as problematic in Berlin. Yet, while the infringement on the sovereignty of Greece and Cyprus is equally seen as unacceptable, Greece's maximalist demands are not entirely seen uncritically.<sup>7</sup> Hence, while Germany has also expressed its solidarity with its EU partners, it has trodden more lightly than France, calling on both sides to engage in dialogue.

Equally, Turkey's muscle flexing in the Eastern Mediterranean and the confrontations with other NATO partners is seen as highly problematic. At the same time, Turkey remains an important security partner, including in the fight against terrorism, and plays an important role for the alliance's southeastern flank (including the Black Sea region).

Correspondingly, Berlin has an interest in keeping Turkey in the Euro-Transatlantic alliance and preventing it from further drifting towards Russia and China, despite all problems. In the context of this balancing act, France's increased security cooperation with actors in the Middle East is not viewed uncritically in Berlin.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, it carries the risk that Turkey feels further isolated and pushed into a corner. On the other hand, one is careful not to be drawn into further regional entanglements.

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## **Migration related considerations play an important part in shaping Germany's view of the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea**

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In addition, migration related considerations play an important part in shaping Germany's view of the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. The EU-Turkey Refugee Statement, which was concluded in 2016 to stem refugee movements via the "Balkan route" and the Aegean, plays a central role here. Given the fact that an intra-European solution on the accommodation and distribution of refugees is still not foreseeable, the continuation of cooperation with Turkey remains an essential interest. In light of the recent developments in Afghanistan and the take-over by the Taliban, the issue has again regained urgency in Berlin. The role of migration related considerations also showed itself in Berlin's view on Libya, where it was mainly such motives that temporarily increased German interest for a dossier to which Berlin attached comparatively little importance for a long time.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, not least Germany's economic interests play a crucial role in shaping Berlin's traditionally rather cautious stance toward Ankara. Even though economic relations have been affected by the deteriorating rule of law in Turkey and episodes of heightened

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7. Interviews, May 2021.

8. Interview, June 2021 and event held under Chatham House rules in March 2021.

9. W. Lacher, "Unser schwieriger Partner – Deutschlands und Frankreichs erfolgloses Engagement in Libyen und Mali", *SWP-Studie 3*, SWP, Februar 2021.

tensions between the two countries, especially since 2016,<sup>10</sup> economic ties remain an important factor. Germany is Turkey's most important trading partner and one of the main sources of foreign investment,<sup>11</sup> all the while Turkey's deep integration into European supply chains make the functioning of supply routes from Turkey paramount for German companies. The renewed offer of a positive agenda, a central element of which is the modernization of the Customs Union, can partly be attributed to recent German efforts, after the decision in 2019 not to undertake any further work on the matter without Turkey's return to the rule of law.

### ***Ankara as a challenger to Paris***

Paris, on the other hand, has declared Turkey “no longer a partner in the region”.<sup>12</sup> Competing geopolitical ambitions and different security priorities have pitted France and Turkey against each other in a number of files, most prominently in Syria and Libya. In light of the repeated terrorist attacks which have shaken France since 2015, the fight against terrorism has clearly moved into the focus of French policy. Viewing the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD)/Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) in Syria as an important partner in the fight against the Islamic State, France has extended support to those groups, which Turkey considers terrorist organizations and a threat to its own national security. In Libya,

it was partly concern about the spread of “political Islam” in the region which led to a greater willingness to increase security cooperation with actors in the Middle East, including Turkey's regional rivals Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and constituted a motive behind France's support for Haftar,<sup>13</sup> even if officials have since emphasized its support for the multilateral process<sup>14</sup> (not least because of the new realities on the ground).

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In addition, Ankara's assertive foreign policy is challenging Paris' own geopolitical aspirations to reestablish its leadership in the Mediterranean,<sup>15</sup> which also found expression in President Macron's call for a *Pax Mediterranea*.<sup>16</sup> This geopolitical rivalry has come to encompass a wider arena not only including Syria and Libya, which Paris considers part of its traditional sphere of

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10. In May 2017, Turkey issued a request for information via Interpol for roughly 700 German companies, it allegedly suspected of having ties to Gülen related organizations and supporters. Even though Ankara eventually withdrew its request and claimed a misunderstanding, the incident left a bitter taste.

11. German Federal Foreign Office, Germany and Turkey : Bilateral Relations, available at : [www.auswaertiges-amt.de](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de).

12. France24, “Mediterranean Leaders Ready for EU Sanctions on ‘Confrontational’ Turkey”, September 2020, available at: [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com).

13. J. Jabbour, “France vs. Turkey in the EastMed: A Geopolitical Rivalry between a “Keeper” of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power”, *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, May 6, 2021.

14. Interview, May 2021.

15. See e.g. J. Jabbour, *op. cit.*; and R. Kempin, *op. cit.*

16. France24, *op. cit.*

influence,<sup>17</sup> and the maritime dispute between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus but also stretching further down on the African continent. Turkey's presence in Libya has since also fueled concerns in Paris that it might help Ankara to grow its cloud on the continent south of the Maghreb. Not least for historical reasons, Germany is lacking any such ambition/geopolitical drive, which in turn impacts the different weighing of priorities.

This is further cemented by an economic rivalry in the Mediterranean as well as the Middle East and Africa which outweighs the importance of bilateral economic relations between France and Turkey. France has noticeably less economic ties with Turkey and economic cooperation has drained even further since France's recognition of the Armenian

genocide in 2001. Turkey's calls for a boycott of French products have further damaged trust in business relations. Instead, as the French energy company Total holds exploration agreements for gas deposits in Cypriot, Greek, Lebanese, and Egyptian waters, France has direct stakes in the rivalry over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. In March 2021 France formally joined the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, which also includes Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the

Palestinian Authority but significantly not Turkey. In addition, the French defense industry has benefitted from the signing of a 2.5 billion Euro deal over the sale of 18 Rafale fighter jets to Greece in January 2021 amidst Greek plans of a "robust" upgrade of its armed forces,<sup>18</sup> which is also meant to send a signal to Turkey. According to the Greek Prime Minister, Greece is also planning on purchasing four French naval frigates with naval helicopters, anti-tank weapons, torpedoes, and missiles. Beyond the immediate economic and political benefit of the arms deals, the issue is also embedded in the emerging competitiveness of the Turkish defense industry. The development of Turkey's own defense industry has not only helped advance its military capabilities, thus providing an important foundation for Ankara's assertive and militarized foreign policy. It has also allowed Turkey to gradually increase the footprint of its domestic defense industry as a new competitor in the armament market.

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### ***The domestic dimension: Structural differences and diverging threat perceptions shape differing responses even to converging concerns***

For both, France and Germany, relations with Turkey have an important domestic dimension. Against the backdrop of challenges France has experienced with radicalization and terrorism at home, the debate about what Paris considers "political Islam" has moved much more strongly into the domestic political spotlight. This has found expression among others in the introduction of a new bill against separatism, which aims to reinforce

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17. J. Jabbour, *op. cit.*

18. France24, "Greece to Buy French Fighter Jets in Message to Turkey", January 2021, available at : [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com).

“Republican principles” in an effort to defeat what President Macron has labeled “Islamist separatism.” In addition, Macron championed the development of the “Charter of the Principles of Islam in France” in collaboration with the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), which reiterates the commitment to republican values and rejects the use of Islam for political or ideological purposes.<sup>19</sup> The fact that two out of the three Islamic organizations who refused to sign the document are Turkish affiliated has reinforced frictions and suspicions towards Turkey. According to Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin, their refusal revealed “a shadowy world of foreign interference and extremist movements operating on [French] soil.”<sup>20</sup>

France is in fact not alone in its worry about Turkey’s potential sway on Turkish diasporas in Europe. Being home to the largest Turkish diaspora in Europe with approx. 2.9 million people of Turkish descent<sup>21</sup> living in the country, Berlin is wary that Turkish domestic politics as well as tensions in bilateral relations carry the risk of being carried over and disturbing domestic peace in Germany. The conflict over AKP political rallies in Germany in the run-up to the Turkish constitutional referendum in 2017, disputes over extradition requests for alleged Gülen supporters following the coup attempt in Turkey in 2016 and the arrest of German citizens of Turkish descent in Turkey are but a number of examples of the sensitive domestic dimension of German-Turkish relations.

In addition, concerns and frictions over Ankara’s influence on Turkish Islamic organizations have also grown in Germany. Accusations that imams affiliated with The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), one of the largest Islamic

organizations in Germany that is directly connected to the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) in Turkey, collected information on alleged Gülen-supporters in their communities and reported back to Ankara, put a spotlight on the issue. Yet, in contrast to Paris, for whom the issue has gained urgency in recent years, the parameters within which Germany’s view of and response to challenges arising from Ankara’s diaspora policy is unfolding are noticeably different.

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For one, the engagement with religious communities, including Muslim communities, has traditionally taken different forms due to differences in principles underpinning the understanding of state-citizen/state-religion relations. In contrast to the French *laïcité*, establishing a strict separation between religion and state, there is an established cooperation between the federal states and municipalities and religious communities, e.g.

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19. French Council of the Muslim Faith, “Présentation de la charte des principes pour l’islam de France au président de la République”, available at: [www.cfc-m-officiel.fr](http://www.cfc-m-officiel.fr).

20. France24, “France Says No Place for Turkish Group which Spurned Charter”, April 2021, available at: [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com).

21. S. Schührer, “Türkeistämmige Personen in Deutschland – Erkenntnisse aus der Repräsentativuntersuchung “Ausgewählte Migrantengruppen in Deutschland 2015 (RAM)”, *Working Paper 81*, BAMF, 2018, available at: [www.bamf.de](http://www.bamf.de).

in the formulation of school curricula for religious classes and welfare provision. Such cooperation has also been built up with Islamic organizations since the late 1990s.

In addition, as people of Turkish origin form the largest group in Germany's Muslim community, the German debate has been predominantly shaped by the perception of and engagement with the Turkish diaspora and Turkish Islamic organizations. In 2006 large dialogue formats, such as the Integration Summit (*Integrationsgipfel*) and the German Islam Conference were established, which have given fundamental debates and dialogue on mutual expectations a more institutionalized framework. Such established structures provide a different framework for dealing with the changed and increasingly problematic developments on this issue. The fact that the debate in Germany is less linked to discussions about radicalization and the fight against terrorism also plays a decisive role.

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On the domestic front, two additional points equally play a role. First, France's traditionally greater skepticism towards Turkey also regarding its EU accession process as well as the presence of the Armenian diaspora have supported the consolidation of a national sentiment against Turkey. Second, cooperation with Turkey on the management of refugees is less important to Paris as it has accepted less refugees

and since has been exposed to comparatively less domestic pressure on the matter. Rather, the EU-Turkey Statement, which has served as the foundation of EU-Turkey cooperation on the matter since 2016, is seen as a predominantly German project that has strengthened Turkey's hand.

## **FROM CONFLICTING STRATEGIES TO A DUAL APPROACH: THE REMAINING NEED TO CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS**

The EU's current approach, expressed in the EU Council's latest statements,<sup>22</sup> is an effort to bridge the different positions by pursuing a dual approach, which seeks to set incentives for Turkey by offering a "positive agenda" on the one hand, but also allows for punitive actions by underlining the reversibility of any progress and working out possible sanctions in case of renewed regressions in the relations with Turkey. However, not only Turkey's Cyprus policy makes progress on "positive agenda" items difficult. For such a dual approach to work, it needs a clearer formulation of common expectations. Not only because of their differing immediate interests but because they look at Turkey through distinctly different prisms, there remain important gaps to be bridged.<sup>23</sup> This in fact is not only true for the German-French tandem but also for the different EU institutions.

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22. Statement of the Members of the European Council SN 18/21 of 25 March 2021, available at: [www.consilium.europa.eu](http://www.consilium.europa.eu); and European Council meeting Conclusions EUCO 7/21 of 25 June 2021, available at: [www.consilium.europa.eu](http://www.consilium.europa.eu).

23. Interviews, May 2021.



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