**EU loses out as Turkey gets stronger**

**The cost to the EU of its stalled talks with Turkey is growing, as geopolitics moves to Turkey's advantage**

Recent developments in the eastern Mediterranean are likely to tilt the geopolitics of the region in Turkey's favour, requiring the European Union to reconsider its policy towards Turkey if it is to avoid isolation in its own neighbourhood.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has declared a ceasefire and is likely to withdraw its rebels this summer. For almost 30 years, the PKK served as a tool for Turkey's opponents to limit Turkish activism in the region. Now, with the prospect of ending this vulnerability, Turkey can extend its reach in its neighbourhood.

The negotiations coincide with the drafting of a new constitution that is expected to bring Turkey's democracy and human rights closer to EU standards – this despite the lack of EU influence, since negotiations with the EU are blocked for reasons unrelated to its constitutional standards. Turkey now makes its own reforms and resolves its problems without EU support.

As a result, the EU is likely to miss out on the opportunities that these developments may offer: ending the conflict with the PKK and democratic reforms will allow Turkey to transform its Kurdish problem into an opportunity for its foreign policy and at the same time reaffirm its political model in the region. Turkey already enjoys good political and economic relations with the Kurdistan regional government in northern Iraq; and now it may extend its soft power to other Kurdish-populated regions in the neighbourhood.

Second, Israel's US-brokered apology for the attack on Turkish ships in Gaza in 2010 has permitted the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Israel, allowing the pair to co-operate on regional issues. Turkey can reaffirm its mediator role in conflicts involving Israel. The US secretary of state, John Kerry, has already asked for Turkey's support to revive the stalled Middle East peace process during a visit to Ankara on 7 April.

Improved relations with Israel will also boost Turkey's potential as an energy hub. Turkey is already a future transit country for gas from Azerbaijan and from Iraq's Kurdish north to European markets. Energy co-operation between Turkey and Israel and a possible pipeline to transport eastern Mediterranean gas via Turkey to central Europe would enhance the EU's energy security.

Moreover, the reconciliation creates an opportunity to carry Russian oilvia Turkey and Israel to Indian and Chinese markets. That would strengthen Turkey's strategic geopolitics.

Turkish-Israeli co-operation in energy issues is, however, likely to sideline Cyprus. The island is currently gaining geopolitical significance thanks to its rich hydrocarbon reserves, but its frozen conflict makes the politics very tricky while the need to build liquefied natural gas terminals makes exploitation very expensive.

As an EU member state, Cyprus had an advantage over Turkey, the EU hopeful, in negotiations on the island's future. Now the cost of the frozen conflict has started to weigh heavily on Greek Cypriots. The Cypriot government may have to consider energy co-operation with Turkey.

All this demands a response from the EU. By stalling Turkey's accession process, the EU has not only reduced its influence on Turkey, but has also deprived itself of the many strategic benefits of co-operation with Turkey. One consequence is that the EU is unable to integrate Turkey, with NATO's second-largest army, into its own security and defence decision-making process.

Another is the EU's exclusion from the developments in the eastern Mediterranean. The partnership between Turkey and Israel would change geopolitics in the eastern Mediterranean – with the EU possibly left outside.

The solution is not hard to identify: a revised visa policy would help the EU gain the interest and trust of the Turkish public and, in turn, regain its leverage over the Turkish political agenda.

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