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What challenges and opportunities does Turkey's hybrid approach to conflicts and stabilisation pose for the EU and its member states' policies?

In a context of intensifying geopolitical rivalry, accelerating militarisation, and weakening multilateral conflict-resolution frameworks, middle powers are assuming more visible roles in both war-making and peacebuilding. Turkey stands out in this regard, adopting an increasingly hybrid approach that strategically combines mediation, militarisation, and economic instruments. Over the past few years, Ankara has expanded its military footprint in Somalia, recalibrated its engagement in Libya, deepened defence-industrial partnerships across Africa and the Gulf, supplied armed drones to Ukraine, and positioned itself as a diplomatic broker in conflicts from the Black Sea to the Middle East and Africa. In conflict-affected states, Turkey also pursues economic interests. Turkish companies' involvement in Libya's and Syria's reconstruction contracts, port and energy deals with Somalia, and connectivity projects such as Iraq's Development Road are some examples. By simultaneously engaging in security, pursuing economic footholds, and offering diplomatic mediation, Ankara has inserted itself into crises as a multifaceted stakeholder. What challenges and opportunities does Turkey's hybrid approach to conflicts and stabilisation pose for the EU and its member states' policies?

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Turkey's model of conflict engagement does not separate mediation, military assistance, defence-industrial expansion, energy, reconstruction, and connectivity into distinct policy tracks. Instead, Ankara treats them as reinforcing instruments of its foreign policy and regional strategies. This makes Turkey a transactional, adaptive, and multi-instrumental conflict actor whose impact varies by theatre on the one hand, and attractive to conflict-affected governments seeking rapid security assistance, diversified partnerships, and access to infrastructure, energy, and reconstruction opportunities, on the other.

Turkey's model complicates EU policy in four ways. It often undercuts EU influence by offering faster, more integrated security-economic packages. It contributes to securitised conflict management and reinforces elite-centred bargains that bypass governance questions. More fundamentally, Turkey does not fit neatly into the categories of partner, rival, or spoiler. A purely normative critique risks missing Turkey's practical appeal to conflict-affected states, while deepening intra-European divisions over engagement.

As a result, the implications are twofold for the EU. First, Turkey's growing role in conflict theatres requires a tailored strategy, considering some of its member states seek cooperation where Ankara has become a significant security, diplomatic, or economic actor. By doing so, the EU can also pursue a policy dialogue with Ankara for setting clearer standards on defence transfers and security-sector support. Second, Turkey's model points to a wider transformation in stabilisation itself, which is becoming more militarised, transactional, and geo-economically embedded. The EU therefore needs to revise its stabilisation toolkit, integrating security, diplomacy, development, economic instruments, and mediation more effectively while preserving its strengths in governance, accountability, and conflict-sensitive institution-building.

Adam Michalski, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Warsaw

The EU has long viewed Turkey's activism in neighbouring conflicts as destabilising, criticising its military interventions in Syria, its backing of Azerbaijan in the 2020 Karabakh war, and its role in Libya. Yet this perception has become harder to sustain. Following the fall of the Assad regime, the EU itself moved to support Syria's recovery by lifting most economic sanctions, creating clearer overlap with Turkey's interests in preventing renewed collapse on its border. At the same time, renewed Armenia-Azerbaijan diplomacy and Ankara's broader contacts in Libya suggest that Turkey is no longer seen only as a partisan actor, but also as a power with leverage across conflict lines.

This creates an opportunity for the EU. In Syria, Libya, and parts of the South Caucasus, Turkey can help shape more stable regional orders that matter directly to European interests, from migration management to connectivity and economic recovery. But Turkey's hybrid approach also poses clear challenges: its interventions are driven by national interests that do not always align with the EU's priorities. Ankara will prioritise its own security and strategic interests first. The EU should therefore pursue selective, issue-based coordination with Ankara, backed by reconstruction support and economic incentives, so that Turkish influence is channelled toward stabilisation rather than merely the expansion of its own regional footprint.

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Turkey's hybrid approach to conflict poses a challenge to the European Union, but it also provides an opportunity to reconsider the EU's role in regional crises. In recent years, Ankara has shown an increasing ability to deploy military, economic, and diplomatic tools effectively in fragile regions, from the Horn of Africa to the wider Mediterranean. In an era of global transformation and fragmentation, Turkey's adaptability enables it to swiftly fill governance and security gaps. The benefits of the Turkish approach are particularly evident when the European

response seems slow, hesitant, or hindered by complex decision-making procedures.

The main challenge for the EU lies in engaging with a difficult-to-read and unpredictable partner. Turkey acts both autonomously and assertively, sometimes diverging from European priorities, particularly in security, resource access, and political influence. However, it would be a mistake for the EU to either ignore Turkish activism or view it solely in terms of competition. Ankara now has political channels, operational levers, and local connections in various arenas that Europe is struggling to establish, and on which Europe should begin to rely.

Consequently, rather than focusing on containing Turkey, an EU seeking to establish its own robust and credible strategic autonomy should adopt a selective, pragmatic approach toward Ankara. In other words, the EU should cooperate with Turkey on shared interests, such as stabilisation, maritime security, and infrastructure, while simultaneously strengthening its capacity for strategic initiative to avoid dependency and marginalisation.

Elisa Domingues dos Santos, Université Catholique de Lille, Lille

Turkey's hybrid approach to conflict and stabilisation presents the EU and its member states with a nuanced mix of challenges and opportunities in the Horn of Africa. This region, one of Ankara's earliest areas of engagement since the early 2000s, has become a focal point of intensifying geopolitical competition involving non-European actors such as Gulf states, China, and Russia. Turkey's increasingly assertive presence adds a further layer to this crowded, militarised landscape, with the potential both to fragment external engagement and dilute EU influence, but also to open space for selective cooperation.

On the one hand, Turkey's model challenges EU approaches by operating largely outside multilateral frameworks and relying instead on flexible, bilateral—often opaque—channels. Its engagement in Somalia, spanning humanitarian assistance, infrastructure, military training, diplomatic mediation, and energy investments, illustrates a strategy integrating state, private sector, and humanitarian instruments. However, such an approach can sideline EU priorities related to governance standards, conditionality, and institutional reform.

On the other hand, Turkey's role also creates openings for collaboration. The deterioration of security conditions in the Red Sea and around the Strait of Hormuz highlights the strategic importance of this interconnected region. In this context, Turkey's contributions to shared interests—such as countering Al-Shabaab, strengthening Somali maritime security, and mediating regional tensions, as exemplified by the 2024 Ankara process between Somalia and Ethiopia—partially converge with EU objectives.

Against this backdrop, the EU could benefit from selective cooperation with Turkey. Enhanced coordination, particularly in maritime security and stabilisation efforts, may help bridge differing approaches while fostering more coherent engagement in the Horn of Africa.

Maryna Vorotnyuk, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), London

In a context of polycrisis and turbulence in its defence environment, Turkey's approach reflects what middle power theories describe as strategic hedging – maximising limited capabilities through flexible alignment. Turkey acts as a middle power pursuing its interests amid geopolitical turmoil, often interpreting them differently from what might be expected of a member of the collective West.

Nowhere have the benefits and drawbacks of Turkey's approach for the EU's strategic interests been scrutinised as much as in its position regarding Russia's war in Ukraine. The oft-discussed issues of complementarity and competition between Ankara's and Brussels' strategic interests are at the forefront here. To what extent can Ankara's position towards Moscow, and its attempts to contain Russia, counterbalance what many see as its enabling Russian aggression, and vice versa? What many see as a fundamental contradiction in Ankara's policy – supporting Ukraine and developing compartmentalised cooperation with Russia – is, in Turkey's own reading, a strategy of neutralising strategic risks. This logic suggests that divergence from Western policies on Russia has provided Ankara with leverage vis-à-vis Moscow, enabling it to position itself as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia.

Turkey's regional clout in the European neighbourhood offers opportunities in areas where the EU seeks partners to advance its policies, including stabilising the Black Sea region, containing Russia, supporting Ukraine, and engaging in the South Caucasus. At the same time, challenges arise where closer policy convergence with the EU might be expected, yet Ankara has opted for flexible alignment. The key challenge is how to secure greater convergence when hedging and selective alignment appear to offer more immediate rewards.

Theodore Murphy, European Council for Foreign Relations (ECFR), Berlin

Turkish officials point to the perils and profits of Turkey's position as a geographical crossroads to explain its interest in mediation. Blowback from Syria to Ukraine, Turkey argues, creates a stake in conflict resolution.

But Turkey's Sudan mediation must flow from a different interest given its geographical remove. Turkish power projection, in the context of an unravelling global order, seems the more apt motivator. Jockeying for pole position in the Horn

of Africa against other regional middle powers invested in that region: the Gulf actors, Egypt, Iran, and, more recently, Israel.

In Sudan, Turkey's leverage stems from a two-pronged foreign policy approach: building influence with both parties via incentives unavailable to the EU. Security assistance—mostly via drone sales—to the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), one of the conflict parties, constitutes one pillar of Turkey's influence. Turkey also utilises softer tools, including providing haven to extended family members linked to both sides. Extending this privilege to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) serves as a hedge, giving Turkey inroads with both sides.

Beyond the main parties, Turkey's Islamist credentials facilitate contacts with the marginalised, yet influential, Sudanese Islamist Movement (SIM), a difficult-to-manage supporting element of the SAF's broader military effort. Shunned by the EU, Turkey hosts SIM members and appears to tolerate their financial and media activities on its territory.

EU mediation efforts could benefit from Turkey's ability to convene actors that the SAF does not permit the EU to bring together. Thus, Turkey could support EU-led mediation by focusing on actors where it holds leverage, while ultimately playing a supporting role within broader EU lead.

Judith Vorrath, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

Two developments shape today's landscape of armed conflicts: the rise of internationalised intrastate conflicts and the decline of the liberal peace model and its instruments. Turkey is a key player in these trends. It has directly engaged militarily in Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan, while also expanding "drone diplomacy" in contexts like Somalia or the Sahel. From a German perspective, two aspects are essential. First, the Turkish approach is neither new nor merely security-focused. It includes humanitarian and development assistance, mediation, and stabilisation focused on security and institutions. At the same time, important European donors have scaled down their funding in these fields, and the German Foreign Office is even closing its Stabilisation Department. Possibly European actors will be less able to use their instruments in a targeted manner across conflicts in the Middle East and Africa.

The second aspect is the outcome, or rather the "desired end-state". Expressions like (regional) stability or peace conceal very different conceptual understandings and aspirations. The focus should be on what Turkey's state-centric, illiberal approach actually delivers. For one, Turkey's geopolitical stance — its rivalry with Israel, its alignment with the current US administration — already plays out in different contexts like Gaza, Syria and even Cyprus. Moreover, mediating is one thing; implementing sustainable solutions quite another. If bilateral agreements

and ad hoc coalitions, like the Board of Peace, of which Turkey is a member, fail to deliver on the ground, this may open the door again for stronger international cooperation. Germany and European partners should be prepared and articulate clearly what their own concepts of stabilisation and peacebuilding are, rather than adapting to a supposedly transactional deal-making model.

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