

A Tale of Wasted Opportunities: The EU, Turkey and Iran's Nuclear Issue

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Of the many negative side-effects of Turkey's stalled EU accession process, EU-Turkish non-cooperation on Iran's nuclear issue is amongst the most lamentable. Iran's controversial nuclear ambitions are a source of concern both in Ankara and European capitals, and yet the courses of action chosen by EU and Turkish leaders have been, if not on opposite ends of the spectrum, certainly far away from one another. Turkey remains unconvinced that the combination of incentives and sanctions adopted by the EU3+3 – the group of EU and world powers negotiating with Iran, represented by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton – will ever bring results. It therefore insists that sanctions, particularly the ones unilaterally adopted by the EU and the US, be dropped. The EU, in turn, maintains that Turkey's diplomacy-only approach is delusional, as Iran should not be permitted to get away with defying successive United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions demanding the halt of sensitive nuclear activities and full cooperation with UN nuclear inspectors.

Critics of Turkey's EU bid probably view such divergence as a further confirmation that the two are too poorly suited a couple for their marriage to be a happy one. They point out that Turkey, as an EU candidate, should be expected to pursue a policy course in keeping with the EU's Iran policy, and not get in the way of it. Supporters of Turkey's accession contend instead that Ankara's *Sonderweg* on Iran is the consequence, not the cause, of its growing estrangement from the EU. Had the EU shown commitment to Turkey's accession, so the argument goes, the latter could have been more forthcoming on Iran. Supporters of Turkey's EU bid rightly complain about the lack of any serious EU attempt to involve Turkey on Iran. They are nonetheless wrong in implying that Turkey's Iran policy is the by-product of the mismanagement of Ankara's EU accession process. Rather, it originates from the ambition of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development party

(AKP) to turn their country into a regional pivot by cultivating good relations with its neighbours. Furthermore, the Erdoğan government's take on the nuclear issue is quite different from the EU's. Whereas the Union sees Iran's nuclear ambitions as a danger to regional security and the non-proliferation regime, Turkey's opinion is that they should be understood against the backdrop of an unstable regional environment in which Iran feels increasingly isolated and threatened by the West and Western-backed countries. Hence, while the EU thinks of coercive measures as an instrument to extract concessions from Iran, Turkey maintains that they only increase Tehran's anxiety and mistrust of the West. Inferring that the gap between the Turkish and EU positions is unbridgeable, as opponents to Turkey's EU accession claim, is however wrong. EU-Turkey non-cooperation on Iran hinges more on poorly thought out policies than on incompatible strategic differences.

In fact, in the past there has been potential scope for the EU and Turkey to coordinate their Iran policies without compromising on their respective redlines. There has never been any need for Turkey to fully embrace the EU-championed 'dual track' approach to contribute to managing the crisis. As the EU and the US have opted for accelerating on the sanctions track in the absence of any progress in their talks with Iran (and in the face of the latter's steady, albeit irregular, nuclear advancements), Turkey's good offices could have been key to preserving the credibility of the diplomacy 'track' of the dual approach. That the EU and the US have failed to do so, however, is only partly their fault. The blame also rests with Turkey's erratic Iran policy, itself a reflection of the AKP's strategic goal of having, in the words of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, 'zero problems with the neighbours'. While many, including within Turkey, have read such a policy course as a 'shift towards East', its rationale has never been that of repositioning the country outside the Euro-Atlantic framework. It is rather an attempt to provide Turkey with a more flexible foreign policy platform to deal with its troubled neighbourhood. In this regard, Erdoğan's effort to reverse the traditionally adversarial pattern of Turkey-Iran relations is in kee-

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ping with its government's desire to pre-emptively contain the risk that regional tensions spiral out of control.

For a while, the Erdoğan government convincingly pursued this objective. It refrained from chastising the Iranian government's crackdown on the Green Movement following the controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. It presided over a huge expansion of bilateral trade and referred to Iran as Turkey's main energy supply alternative to Russia. Having its roots in political Islam (although of a more moderate version than Iran's), the AKP abandoned any talk about the risk of an Islamist 'regime import' from Iran, thereby signalling a willingness to engage it on an equal footing.

The AKP government initially won what the EU had lost after imposing sanctions upon Iran: Iran's trust. Coupled with Erdoğan's credibility in the West, this would have made Turkey a potentially effective mediator between Iran and the West. Lacking any form of coordination with the EU, however, Turkey opted for going its own way. Far from playing a mediating role, it made an attempt at solving the dispute by striking, together with Brazil, a nuclear deal with Iran: the Tehran Declaration of May 2010.

The agreement, however, was flawed in many respects, and eventually foundered. Meant to be a de-escalating measure, it lacked any significant confidence-building provision. Moreover, the timing could not have been worse, as the EU3+3 were in the process of finalizing talks on new UN sanctions and were in no mood to ease pressure on Iran – actually, they credibly maintained that the deal was nothing else than a desperate attempt by Iran to derail the sanctions train. The main weakness of the Tehran Declaration lay however in the fact that it excluded the EU3+3 from the picture. Thus, its only effect was that of driving a wedge between the West and Turkey, which felt compelled to vote against the new round of UNSC sanctions, while an abstention would have been a fairly acceptable compromise for both Turkey and the EU3+3 under different circumstances.

The disagreement on Iran has added to several difficulties the EU and the US have been recently experiencing with Turkey, ranging from the unsolved Cyprus issue to the severe deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations after Israel's Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip and the Freedom Flotilla incident. In an attempt at mending fences, Turkey eventually agreed to host on its soil a radar tracking system which is part of a US-built and NATO-operated missile defence infrastructure. The problem is that such a system is ostensibly designed to protect the Alliance from potential ballistic threats from Iran. While Turkey obtained an exclusion of any mention of Iran in NATO's official documents, its decision nonetheless undermined its credentials as a balanced interlocutor in Tehran. Erdoğan's support for Syrian rebels fighting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, a long-time ally of Iran, has further eroded the Iranians' trust in him.

The EU's failure to coordinate with Turkey on Iran's nuclear file is unfortunate, not least because Turkey is an EU candidate with significant stakes in the issue. Turkey's attempt at carving out a crisis management role independent from the EU3+3 could have been prevented had the EU coordinated its strategy with Turkey. But Turkey's Iran policy has equally been a blunder, eventually resulting in a weakening of Ankara's credibility both in the West and Tehran.



It is far from certain that Turkey's mediation would have steered EU3+3-Iran talks on the path towards resolution of the nuclear dispute, but it would have nonetheless helped in several respects: Turkey would have gained credit by both sides while emptying of substance any talks of its supposed 'shift towards East'; any alternative to the EU3+3 as the framework for negotiating a settlement would have been eliminated; and the EU and Turkey would have proved that their bilateral cooperation is not hostage to the accession process.

Now Turkish officials insist that their country can still play the role of 'facilitator'. They point out that Istanbul is one of the venues where Iran has agreed to meet the EU3+3 representatives, and that Erdoğan still has the ear of Iranian leaders and the trust of US President Barack Obama. While it might be regarded as a watered-down version of a mediator, a facilitator might still be useful. Turkey could still, for instance, guarantee and host an eventual shipment abroad of Iran's enriched uranium. The fact remains, however, that EU-Turkey (non)cooperation on Iran, measured against its unexploited potential, is a tale of wasted opportunities.