

USEFUL ENEMIES: HOW THE TURKEY-UAE RIVALRY IS REMAKING THE MIDDLE EAST

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SUMMARY

- Turkey and the United Arab Emirates are engaged in a decade-long feud that is reshuffling the geopolitical order in the Middle East and North Africa.
- They see each other as existential rivals and are waging a series of proxy wars between the Horn of Africa and the eastern Mediterranean.
- Their rivalry also plays out in the halls of Washington and Brussels, the global media discourse, the energy industry, and, lately, ports and the high seas.
- Europe should avoid being sucked into this power struggle to redefine the Middle East and North Africa.
- Instead of using the UAE to push back against Turkey or vice versa, Europe should develop its own strategy on their rivalry.
- Europe should establish a NATO deconfliction mechanism, push ahead with the political process in Libya, and design a constructive new framework to insulate European-Turkey relations from the rivalry.

Introduction

Despite the asymmetry in their size, population, and military prowess, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates are engaged in a decade-long feud that is reshuffling the geopolitical order in the Middle East and North Africa. The confrontation is not only feeding instability in areas that have an immediate impact on European interests, such as Libya and the Horn of Africa, but is also seeping into Europe itself, in the eastern Mediterranean. The rivalry is deepening Europe's divisions, making it more difficult for the European Union and its member states to develop a cohesive policy on the Mediterranean.

Both Turkey and the UAE are eager to develop competing narratives on the supposedly ideological character of the conflict, and to find various platforms on which to present their competing visions for the region. But these efforts mask the true nature of the struggle. While the two countries have been on the opposite sides of nearly every regional conflict since 2011, it is debatable to what extent ideology – ‘moderate versus Islamist’ for Abu Dhabi, and ‘competitive democracy versus authoritarian monarchy’ for Ankara – shapes their rivalry. The dispute is complicated but, at its core, primarily involves a struggle for internal regime consolidation and regional influence.

Turkey has shown an affinity for Muslim Brotherhood parties in the past. Yet since the failure of the Arab uprisings of 2011 – and particularly since 2016 – Ankara has been pursuing a nationalist and revanchist course in its foreign policy. This policy has largely aimed to strengthen President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's domestic support, but it has also been marked by a naked desire for regional leadership. It is not about the spread of political Islam in and of itself. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi has presented itself as the torch-bearer for moderation against Islamist forces. Yet its strategy is focused on containing and confronting an assertive Turkey that it sees as a threat to its influence in the region.

Turkey and the UAE have engaged in a series of proxy political-military conflicts between the Horn of Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. Beyond this, their rivalry plays out in the halls of Washington and Brussels, the global media discourse, the energy industry, and, lately, ports and the high seas.

Paradoxically, Turkish and Emirati leaders have benefited politically from the confrontation, using it to bolster their domestic and international positions. For the UAE, countering Turkey has opened the door to new alliances with Western actors, including European countries such as France and Greece, and has enhanced its position in Washington. For Ankara, its depiction of the UAE as intent on undermining Erdogan has provided fuel for the official narrative that outside forces are trying to sabotage a rising Turkey – a key theme in Turkish leaders' explanations of foreign policy objectives to

voters.

Regardless of its ideological character, the Turkish-Emirati feud has been damaging for Europe – exacerbating regional instability and dividing the EU as it attempts to reposition itself in a changing Middle East. For example, the Libyan conflict helped shift the rivalry between Turkey and the UAE closer to Europe’s southern border. As the two countries fed the Libyan war, France backed the Emirati-sponsored forces of General Khalifa Haftar and Italy aligned with Turkey by supporting the Government of National Accord (GNA). Similarly, by providing strong political and military support for Cyprus and Greece in their dispute with Turkey over maritime borders in the eastern Mediterranean, the UAE has inflamed an already volatile situation and leveraged the enmity between Paris and Ankara – making it nearly impossible for the EU to develop a common policy on Turkey’s assertive posturing. These conflict dynamics have also affected NATO: Turkey’s veto has prevented the organisation from engaging in closer cooperation with the UAE and, therefore, strengthening its role in the Gulf.[1]

This paper traces the origins of the Turkey-UAE conflict and discusses how the EU can prevent it from destabilising European security and foreign policy. Europeans should not allow themselves to be sucked into the vortex of this regional feud, and should define their common interests. So far, Europe has been unable to determine or protect these interests in nearby conflicts that have provided an arena for Turkish-UAE rivalry, such as those in Libya, Syria, and the eastern Mediterranean. Europe should develop ideas to contain and manage the spillover effects of the conflict. Maintaining a relatively stable and constructive relationship with Turkey is a strategic imperative for Europe, for reasons that range from migration policy to trade. And the UAE is set to remain a critical player in the Mediterranean and the wider region – something that calls for strong European engagement. Europe should remain equidistant between the two countries.

Turkey and the UAE may one day decide to pursue a detente – or at least tone down the overt hostility in an effort to build new coalitions or, in Ankara’s case, break out of regional isolation. But Europe cannot afford to wait for the two countries to reconcile before setting its own course in its neighbourhood. It should proactively prepare for continued rivalry.

It is not in the interests of the EU or its member states for the conflict to escalate across the Middle East and in their backyard. Europeans may not be able to resolve the Turkish-Emirati confrontation, but they can find ways to mitigate, manage, and contain the rivalry and its ripple effects – thereby preventing disputes between the EU and Turkey from being subsumed under, and heightened by, the

rivalry as it plays out across the region.

Competing visions for the region after the Arab uprisings

The origins of the conflict go back to the Arab uprisings of 2011 – which Ankara saw as an opportunity to not just rattle the *ancien* power structure in the region but also expand its own influence. As friendly governments took office in Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt, Erdogan’s Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP) – which is sympathetic towards the Muslim Brotherhood – hoped that the new regional order would remodel the Arab world in the AKP’s own image, ushering in an era of Turkish-allied elected Sunni governments in lieu of secular elites or monarchies.

By 2011, AKP elites had begun to express neo-Ottoman sentiments and wanted Turkey to play a bigger role on the world stage. They regarded then-foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s doctrine of “zero problems with neighbours” and his desire to expand Turkey’s soft power across the Middle East as the best instruments to help Turkey become a geopolitical powerhouse. One former Turkish ambassador described how in 2012 Erdogan “believed that the entire region would soon fall under Turkey’s influence, with the exception of Israel”.[2] During the Arab uprisings, Ankara developed close political ties with, and publicly supported, the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Muhammad Morsi in Egypt and the Ennahda government in Tunisia. In 2011 Erdogan took a firm position in favour of regime change in Syria, and Ankara threw its weight behind opposition groups in the country’s war.

All this signalled danger to several Gulf monarchies. They faced limited internal opposition but saw the revolutionary tide in the region as a potential challenge to the authoritarian bargain in their own societies. In the UAE, the very limited form of dissent that emerged during the Arab uprisings was linked to the local chapter of the Brotherhood, Islah.

In this context, the UAE made the strategic assessment that the regional order was being redrawn, that the United States and Europe were reluctant to take the lead, and that, as UAE-based analyst Mohammed Baharoon puts it, “the unipolar world order was going to be substituted by a network world order, in which regional players could become catalysts”. (This concept refers to a geopolitical order in which great powers rely on and support regional allies to gain access to, and influence on, political and economic networks.)[3] Abu Dhabi saw Ankara as being in a worryingly strong position to act as such a catalyst. The only country in the region that was successfully governed by an Islamist party, Turkey was the natural leader for the Islamist dissident movements that emerged from the

uprisings.

Moreover, Ankara could join forces with a wealthy partner in Qatar – which, unlike other Gulf monarchies, saw Islamist movements as a vehicle to reinforce its influence in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and beyond. The Emiratis feared that Ankara and Doha would position themselves at the heart of a region-wide Islamist network, and the UAE would be cornered. By 2020, Turkey had emerged as a more significant rival than other regional players – such as Iran, which the UAE saw as having been weakened by both covid-19 and sanctions under the Trump administration’s ‘maximum pressure’ campaign.

Both the public discourse and the media narrative in the UAE have embraced a hawkish anti-Turkey tone in recent years, an effort spearheaded by high-profile, influential Emiratis. In 2017 UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan shared a tweet that accused Turkish troops of looting the holy city of Medina a century ago, causing a diplomatic incident with Ankara. In 2020 the Emirati minister then responsible for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, spoke about the need to confront Turkey’s expansionist agenda as much in the media as in diplomatic meetings. In an interview with Germany’s *Die Welt*, he invited Europe to follow France’s lead by taking a united position against Erdogan’s Islamist ideological project to “revive their empire”. Former Dubai police chief Dhahi Khalfan called in 2020 for a popular boycott against Turkey, claiming that “when you travel to Turkey under Erdogan today, you are travelling to a repressive state”.

While the UAE was portraying itself as a moderate alternative to “Islamist Turkey” to domestic and foreign audiences, Ankara portrayed the Gulf monarchies as a destabilising force in the region – by virtue of their style of governance. “We have a fundamentally different outlook from the UAE”, said one senior Turkish official.[4] “They like military dictatorships. We are different. While we have an imperfect democracy, we still are a democracy. Just being who we are, we pose a threat. There are elections and opposition and a competitive system here. Does that exist in the Gulf?”

Both of these narratives seemed flawed to European and US decision-makers, as Turkey was rapidly undoing decades of liberal reforms and the Gulf monarchies hardly appeared to be paragons of democratic freedom.

Morsi's downfall and the beginning of the rift

The real fallout between Ankara and Abu Dhabi began in 2013, when the Egyptian military deposed Morsi in a coup backed by the Gulf monarchies and led by General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. Erdogan and other AKP leaders were outraged by the removal of a friendly government; they often expressed their bitterness publicly. Erdogan popularised this anti-coup sentiment by making the four-fingered Rabaa sign part of his political platform – in honour of those killed protesting against the coup in Cairo's Rabaa Square.

Morsi's downfall coincided with Gezi, a widespread urban uprising in Turkey against Erdogan's government. By flashing the Rabaa sign at every opportunity, the Turkish leader consolidated his conservative base against the secular street demonstrators – often drawing parallels between Morsi's detractors and Turkish protesters, while suggesting that the Turkish demonstrations were driven by outside forces trying to bring Erdogan down. Accusations that domestic opponents are the pawns of outside powers have been the cornerstone of Erdogan's domestic agenda since 2013, forming the basis of his campaigns for re-election. His fierce opposition to the junta in Egypt allowed him to build a narrative in which the AKP was the guardian of democracy against anti-democratic forces inside and outside Turkey – a justification for his crackdown on domestic enemies.

Ironically, this closely resembled the narrative and political strategy of the Emirati leadership, which between 2011 and 2013 used the same arguments to justify large-scale, draconian repression of the small domestic opposition movement tied to Islah. By drawing links between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Islah, the UAE also justified its backing of the coup against Morsi in Egypt as a matter of national security.

AKP leaders believed that the coup in Egypt was partly intended to curb Turkey's growing influence in the region, and that their position increased the popularity of Turkey and Erdogan on the Arab street. These were two of the few points on which Ankara and Abu Dhabi agreed. Since 2013, the UAE has been on a mission to do just that. Having enabled Sisi's success, Abu Dhabi tried to co-opt the Tunisian government, including its Islamist elements, in the hope of persuading it to maintain a healthy distance from Ankara.

The 2016 coup attempt in Turkey

If the Egyptian coup began to damage Turkish-Emirati ties, the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey was the real breaking point. Only two weeks after elements within the Turkish military tried to depose Erdogan, senior Turkish intelligence officials claimed that “the UAE government collaborated with coup plotters in Turkey before the unsuccessful attempt was launched, using exiled Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan as a go-between with the US-based cleric accused by Turkey of orchestrating the plot.” Similar stories ran in Turkish media outlets. Publicly, Turkey directed its ire at its long-time ally, the US, for harbouring Fethullah Gulen, the alleged mastermind of the coup. But, privately, Turkish officials claimed that the UAE supported the coup – citing allegations that Gulen was in touch with Dahlan, as well as coverage in the Dubai-based Sky News Arabic and Al Arabiya on the night of the coup that described the putsch as successful.

Within months, Turkish pro-government commentators began a campaign suggesting that the UAE – and specifically its de facto leader, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed – was leading an anti-Turkey regional project that was behind the coup attempt. Turkey’s foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, told a group of journalist in 2017 that the UAE had funnelled \$3 billion to the Gulen movement for the putsch – a claim that *Sabah*, a newspaper with close ties to the Erdogan family, also underlined. Since 2016, Turkish officials have continued to blame the UAE for supporting the Gulen movement in exile, engaging in anti-Turkish lobbying in Washington, and financing publications critical of the Turkish government, such as the internet site Ahval, which is run by exiled Turkish journalists. In December 2019, shortly before Turkey signed a security treaty with the GNA and deployed troops to Libya, Turkey issued an arrest warrant for Dahlan, describing him as a “regional pawn of the UAE” and accusing him of “organising the 15 July coup attempt with the Parallel State Structure/Gulenist Terrorist Organization [FETO]”. In 2020 Turkey issued a red notice for Dahlan’s arrest through Interpol.

This positioning helped Ankara build its narrative that the failed coup attempt and Turkey’s subsequent regional isolation were the products of a vast global conspiracy against Erdogan and his friends – and not the result of domestic tensions or Turkey’s drift from the West. This “siege” rhetoric has also helped Erdogan frame his domestic opponents as proxies for outside powers. In a piece entitled, “the US-Saudi-UAE Plan”, a columnist whose work often reflects the AKP’s thinking wrote that the coup attempt “was not just a project of the US, Israel, and Europeans who are harbouring Gulenists, but also of regional powers. There are financiers and terror states who are commissioned. FETO was financed by Gulenists; they were at the centre of the attack, with their hired guns, terror organisations, secret deals with Dubai. They are still at the centre of operations against Turkey, encouraging and running them. Just like Israel, just like the US, they want to rein in Turkey.”

Turkish commanders and military cadres who took part in the failed putsch did not really need a foreign state to organise their internal dealings – and none of the evidence in court proceedings points to a direct UAE role. But Erdogan’s government believes that the coup attempt was encouraged by a coterie of outside powers. What is undeniable is that, by 2016, Abu Dhabi regarded Erdogan as a key rival in the fight for regional influence and as a dangerous and erratic figure.^[5]

An escalating rivalry

With the election of Donald Trump as US president in November 2016, the rivalry between Turkey

and the UAE escalated. Both sides were emboldened by what seemed to be a green light from Trump and the end of US pressure on regional actors to seek negotiated solutions to crises. With its desire to end America's "forever wars" and its lack of interest in diplomacy, the Trump presidency signalled in separate ways to the UAE and Turkey that there was a regional vacuum to fill.

This prompted the UAE to lead Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt into a coordinated political and economic embargo on Qatar in June 2017, with the aim of limiting Doha's ability to finance Islamist policies and Turkish adventurism in the region. The result was that Qatar redirected some of its vast financial resources towards dealing with domestic issues – between 2017 and 2018, at least. But, ultimately, the growing threat from its neighbours pushed Qatar much closer to Turkey and turned their diplomatic alliance into a military partnership. Ankara enlarged the capacity of its military base in Doha and deployed more than 5,000 troops to the facility, providing a vital layer of added deterrence. In turn, as soon as it recovered from the initial shock of the boycott and the embargo, Doha doubled down on its financial support for Turkey, providing billions in currency swap agreements and investment loans to the country's cash-strapped treasury between 2018 and 2020.

Meanwhile, the UAE took its fight against the Muslim Brotherhood to new theatres. For example, having participated in the Saudi-led war against Houthi rebels in Yemen since 2015, Abu Dhabi increasingly convinced Riyadh it was necessary to also confront the Yemeni branch of Islah, whose younger leaders had developed relations with both Ankara and Doha.

In Syria, meanwhile, Abu Dhabi cautiously reached out to the Kurds and supported a vigorous campaign against Turkey's successive incursions into the country. The UAE, joined by Saudi Arabia, loudly condemned Turkey's military operations in Afrin in 2018 and north-eastern Syria in 2019. The Emiratis and the Saudis even engaged with Turkey's key rivals in northern Syria – the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – by offering to underwrite US stabilisation aid for SDF-held areas. There were rumours in 2019 that, shortly before the Turkish incursion into north-eastern Syria, SDF leader Mazloum Kobani visited Abu Dhabi. A senior Turkish diplomat said that Emirati support for the Syrian Kurds was "not at a level that poses a real problem for us, but it's annoying. Their sole purpose for being in Syria is opposition to Turkey." [6]

In 2020, under the pretext of coronavirus-related humanitarian diplomacy, the UAE re-engaged with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, strengthening his ability to resist growing Turkish influence in northern Syria. Reportedly, the UAE was encouraging Assad to break the Russian-mediated truce in Idlib to fight Turkish-backed rebels.

Since 2018, the UAE has invested time and resources in cultivating ties with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somaliland to reduce Turkish influence or confront Turkish-backed leaders there, such as Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed. The UAE brought Sudan under its influence unchecked by taking advantage of the revolution of 2018 and 2019 that deposed the regime of Omar al-Bashir, who was close to Turkey and Qatar. Turkish newspaper *Yeni Safak*, which often reflects Ankara's views, interpreted the Sudanese coup as an effort to reduce Turkey's political and economic influence in Sudan, and to install an administration close to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Libya and the eastern Mediterranean

Among the many arenas of the Turkey-UAE conflict, Libya and the eastern Mediterranean have the most direct effect on European interests and policy.

Libya has become the key battleground for the proxy war between Turkey and the UAE. The Emiratis have been active in Libya since the start of the 2011 NATO intervention in the country. In 2013, with the acquiescence of the US and in coordination with France and Saudi Arabia, the UAE became more assertive in Libya, providing military backing to Haftar's self-declared counter-terrorism campaign. This enabled him to conquer eastern Libya and, eventually, launch a military campaign to take over Libya's capital from the UN-recognised GNA, led by Fayeze al-Sarraj. This prompted Turkey and Qatar to redouble their support for the GNA, in the hopes of preventing the establishment of another UAE-backed regime in North Africa (and, in Turkey's case, of reclaiming some of Libya's debts to Turkish companies).

In April 2019, Turkish military advisers helped repel Haftar's attack on the capital. The following December, Turkey signed a security and maritime-jurisdiction agreement with the GNA, before deploying Turkish troops to Libya. Within months, Turkey's intervention changed the dynamics of the conflict, pushing Haftar's forces out of key towns in western Libya. In August 2020, following an attack by an unknown aircraft at the Turkish-controlled Watiya base in Libya, Hulusi Akar, Turkey's minister of defence, told Al Jazeera that "the UAE supports terrorist organisations hostile to Turkey with the intention of harming us". He warned of retribution.

The Libyan conflict brought about the formation of a battleline on Europe's southern border, with Turkey supporting the GNA while Egypt, the UAE, Russia, and France backed Haftar forces. The conflict bled into the eastern Mediterranean in 2020, branching out into European countries'

confrontation with Turkey over both territorial sovereignty and energy resources. Having discovered large gas fields off the coast of Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt, eastern Mediterranean actors wanted to quickly develop opportunities to access and trade these resources. In 2019 Greece, Israel, and Cyprus signed an agreement to build a pipeline linking Israel's Leviathan and Cyprus's Aphrodite gas fields to mainland Europe. The pipeline would run through Greece and, notably, bypass Turkey. In January 2020, Egypt spearheaded the establishment of the EastMed Gas Forum, an international organisation it led with Cyprus and Greece, before being joined by Israel, Palestine, and Italy – with the UAE becoming an observer in 2021.

The EastMed Gas Forum was particularly attractive for Abu Dhabi as, once the new pipeline was built, it could directly compete with Qatar's gas exports to Europe, providing a cheaper and more stable alternative. Most importantly, it would prevent Turkey from becoming a strategic hub linking Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe – and, accordingly, an energy catalyst in the network world order. The EastMed pipeline project has also allowed the Emiratis to develop a stronger relationship with EU member states that share their concerns about Turkey – Cyprus, Greece, and France – and Mediterranean players such as Israel. The UAE's and Israel's August 2020 deal to normalise relations builds on this, providing an additional way to coordinate against Turkey and other rivals.

Turkey viewed the EastMed Gas Forum and Haftar's siege of Tripoli as part and parcel of the same policy – an effort to drive Turkey and its allies out of the Mediterranean. A steady and firm response came in Turkey's military support for the GNA and its assertive unilateral posturing in the eastern Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, military developments in the Middle East and North Africa seemed to confirm Ankara's fears about the formation of an anti-Turkey front. Since 2017, the UAE has participated in Iniohos, Greek-led annual military drills in the Peloponnese, alongside the US and Israel – and latterly Cyprus, Italy, and Egypt. Turkey saw this as a common front designed confine Turkey to its own shores geopolitically and militarily. The UAE sent F-16 fighter jets to Greece to participate in the exercise with the Hellenic Air Force, while France sent Rafale fighters to Crete for the same purpose. In 2020 the UAE, France, Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt increased their military cooperation by conducting their first joint multinational aeronautical exercise. Nicknamed "Medusa", the exercise took place in Alexandria. While its official purpose was to enhance defence and operational cooperation, the exercise gave the participants an opportunity to demonstrate their military muscle to Turkey. In early 2021, both Cyprus and Greece inked defence cooperation agreements with the UAE.

In February 2021, Greece sought to institutionalise this flexible alignment against Turkey, inviting the UAE, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia to participate in a diplomatic forum in Athens

named “Philia” (Friendship). The final communiqué of the meeting reflected the countries’ attempt to develop a comprehensive anti-Turkish front on several crises involving Turkey, including the Cyprus question, Syria, Libya, and the eastern Mediterranean gas and maritime disputes.

The establishment of an anti-Turkey front in the eastern Mediterranean has deepened the EU’s internal divisions. This is because successive attempts by France, Greece, and Cyprus to push for punitive measures against Turkey at the European Council have met with resistance from member states such as Germany, Spain, and Italy, which advocate a more balanced approach to Ankara.

Maritime geopolitics

The Mediterranean is set to remain a focal point of the geopolitical confrontation between Ankara and Abu Dhabi, given that the maritime domain could easily become the next big theatre of conflict between the sides. As Turkey rebalances its geopolitical rhetoric away from Islamism and towards hyper-nationalism, its regional rivals are adapting. For instance, the strategic calculus and discourse in the UAE now routinely accounts for Turkey’s “Mavi Vatan” (Blue Homeland) strategy – a nationalist concept in which Ankara, surrounded by a hostile alliance, has no option but to become a hegemonic maritime power.^[7] The UAE has its own plan to become a global maritime player.

In recent decades, the country has invested heavily in becoming a global hub of maritime trade and infrastructure. Dubai Port World (DP World) is now a global leader in port management and infrastructure development. While it is a Dubai-based private company driven by commercial interests, DP World has signed deals that can become conduits for strengthening the UAE’s political ties. Indeed, DP World has often conducted operations that overlap with Emirati foreign policy. The multinational now has privileged access to coastal facilities in southern Yemen, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Cyprus, and elsewhere. In many of these locations, the UAE has explicitly moved in as an alternative to Turkey. In Sudan, Abu Dhabi has derailed negotiations between Ankara and Khartoum to develop and operate the port on Suakin Island, on the Red Sea.

The UAE may strengthen DP World’s posture in the eastern Mediterranean beyond the Cypriot terminal of Limassol by obtaining privileged access to more local coastal assets. This would allow Abu Dhabi to establish a ‘string of pearls’ running from Dubai’s Jebel Ali Port to the heart of Europe, bypassing Turkey.

For a country its size, Turkey is lagging behind its rivals in the maritime geopolitical competition – partly because its private sector is independent and has not been subsumed under the government’s foreign policy objectives. Nonetheless, Turkey and Italy agreed in 2019 to form a transport network that “slices across the center of the Mediterranean, creating an arc of commercial connectivity from the Maghreb to the wider Black Sea”, as political scientists Dimitar Bechev and Michaël Tanchum put it. This has brought Turkey and Italy closer in the Libyan conflict, and – following a sizeable Turkish investment in the port of Taranto, on the southern tip of Italy – could lead to the creation of a major Turkey-Italy-Africa trade corridor and a new gateway to Europe.

The escalation of the Turkey-UAE rivalry on maritime issues would increase the political tension between the sides in the eastern Mediterranean. It would reinforce the idea that Europe’s southern neighbourhood is a theatre in which Ankara and Abu Dhabi can stare each other down, regardless of the impact on stability.

The global war for influence

As the competition between Turkey and the UAE has deepened, the two sides have openly engaged in a propaganda war. They are fighting for public support in Arab countries, and for the political backing of international players. The UAE is largely winning this struggle, due to its effective public relations machine and widespread international anger with Turkey on a range of issues. Because EU member states such as France, Cyprus, and Greece have felt threatened by Turkey’s unilateral actions and bellicose rhetoric, the UAE’s efforts to insert itself into a European dispute have gone largely unnoticed.

The UAE has consistently branded Qatari and Turkish media outlets, such as Al Jazeera and TRT respectively, as instruments of authoritarian governments that are bent on spreading Islamist propaganda to indoctrinate the Arab masses and destabilise incumbent regimes. As Abu Dhabi saw it, the differences between Islamist parties ranged across a broad political spectrum were irrelevant or inconsequential, and the Islamist groups or political parties supported by Turkey and Qatar posed an existential threat to the stability of the region – even when they seemed to espouse parliamentary politics. This consistent message resonated with Paris more than any other European capital.

As Turkey’s image deteriorated due to its democratic backsliding, the UAE’s effort to rebrand itself as a modern power and an Arab pioneer of space exploration caught on in the West. Abu Dhabi

portrayed its campaign to promote “tolerance” – more accurately described as “religious pluralism” – as being in direct opposition to an Islamist front representing a long tradition of religious obscurantism. By hosting Pope Francis and building a monumental synagogue in 2019, the UAE embraced Christianity and Judaism before it embraced Israel for geopolitical and geo-economic reasons. The Emiratis have often compared and contrasted these moves with some Islamists’ rhetoric on non-Muslims, using this as one of the main elements in their argument that the Muslim Brotherhood is a ‘gateway drug’ to the radicalism of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group.

The UAE has promoted these same messages for a decade though intense lobbying efforts in Europe and the US. Since November 2019, UAE-employed lobbying firms have pushed US lawmakers to approve the House-passed ‘Protect Against Conflict by Turkey Act’ – calling for punitive sanctions against the country and Erdogan. The UAE has also lobbied for the US to punish Turkey using the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, in retaliation for Ankara’s purchase of the Russian S-400 air-defence system. The Trump administration announced in December 2020 that it had done so.

Meanwhile, in lobbying the EU and its member states to push back against Turkey, the UAE has focused on an anti-Islamist message. French President Emmanuel Macron, in particular, has accepted the UAE’s version of the schism within the Muslim world, positioning Turkey as a force that promotes anti-secular views and organisations inside Europe. France has developed closer political and diplomatic relations with the UAE – often to the detriment of those with Turkey. France also adopted a position similar to the UAE in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean. In 2020 Erdogan and Macron engaged in several diplomatic spats, which escalated into a naval stand-off between Turkish and French naval ships in the Mediterranean.

The ‘Biden effect’ and the future of the rivalry

The arrival of a new administration in Washington will undoubtedly soften the Turkish-Emirati rivalry. Indeed, shortly before Joe Biden took office, Saudi Arabia and Qatar normalised their relationship, ending the three-year crisis that brought the smaller Gulf state even closer to Turkey. This was followed by a thaw in relations between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the first in a rivalry that had driven geopolitical competition in the Middle East for several years.

But, as yet, there has been no real prospect of reconciliation between Turkey and the UAE. Saudi

Arabia's decision to seek a detente with both Qatar and Turkey has not been received well in Abu Dhabi, which remains sceptical of Ankara's geopolitical ambitions and the Turkish president personally.^[8] Abu Dhabi acknowledges that the detente is Riyadh's way to end its international isolation and to seek Biden's approval, as he has been critical of Saudi Arabia and the conduct of US-Saudi relations under Trump. The Emiratis worry that Ankara and Doha will work hard to turn this detente into a warmer geopolitical dialogue, which they firmly oppose – particularly in relation to, for example, Qatari-Turkish support for Saudi Arabia in Yemen, where the Saudi and Emirati strategies are not fully aligned.

Biden's emphasis on diplomacy and his unwillingness to unequivocally back the Gulf monarchies in their Middle East conflicts is already causing regional powers to adjust their policies. According to one senior Emirati thinker: "the name of the game for 2021 is de-escalation". Abu Dhabi is now working to maintain its strong relationship with Washington, keen to remain a close regional partner of the US. This will require the UAE to take a step back from its assertiveness on the frontline of conflicts (such as those in Libya and Yemen), sharpen its rhetoric on moderation, and beef up its credentials as a mediator, including by backing US diplomacy with Iran. Yet it remains unclear if this will be just a tactical and temporary move.

Washington is concerned about the spillover from the Turkish-Emirati rivalry in Syria, Libya, and the eastern Mediterranean but, so far, has shown no sign that it plans to play a heavy-handed role in these areas. Meanwhile, having achieved many of its foreign policy goals in 2019 and 2020, Turkey is facing international pressure on several fronts, including the eastern Mediterranean. Ankara is concerned about a tougher line from the Biden administration on its human rights record and its purchase of the S-400. As such, Turkey would like a reset with its Western partners, including the US. However, while both Turkey and the UAE want good relations with the West, neither seem eager for better relations with each other.

Recommendations for Europe

Despite the current lull in the Turkish-Emirati conflict, there is a strong chance that this Biden effect will dissipate, and the rivalry will eventually reignite in Libya, Syria, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Horn of Africa. It is important for Europe to avoid being drawn into the competition or damaged by its after-effects. Europeans have failed to do so on both counts in the last few years, as countries such as France and Cyprus have formed an alliance with UAE based on an anti-Turkey front. This has

poisoned the EU's internal politics, created divisions between its member states, and hampered its ability to develop coherent policies vis-à-vis Turkey.

It was no small incident when, last summer, the navies of NATO allies France and Turkey confronted each other over their rival claims in the eastern Mediterranean. This incident, and the ongoing Turkey debate within the European Council, show how damaging the Turkish-Emirati rivalry has been for Europe's interests. European alignment with the UAE has heightened tensions between France, Greece, and Cyprus on one side, and Turkey on the other. It has also hindered the EU's ability to formulate deterrents to, and incentives for, Ankara – even though there is a general understanding among European policymakers that Turkey is an essential partner for Europe on a significant number of issues, ranging from migration to counter-terrorism.

It is not in Europe's interest to become alienated from Turkey. This is why, after much debate between EU capitals, successive European Council meetings have resulted in meagre warnings to Turkey – as opposed to tougher sanctions on the country for its assertive naval posturing in the Mediterranean or the termination of its customs union agreement with the EU.

If left unmanaged, the instability that stems from Turkish-Emirati rivalry could prompt further military escalation in Libya, marginalise Turkey, and lead to a breakdown of Ankara's migration deal with the EU. More significantly, importing a Middle East conflict into the European space displays the EU's weakness at a time when it is trying to develop its strategic sovereignty.

Insulate Europe-Turkey relations from the Turkey-UAE rivalry

Europe should avoid being sucked into this struggle to redefine the Middle East and North Africa, and should be clear-eyed about how it affects European strategic interests. For Europe, the UAE is an important partner in the Gulf region and a critical actor in the Biden administration's efforts to revive regional diplomacy with Iran. Similarly, as a NATO member, Turkey is a key part of the Euro-Atlantic community and a security provider for EU member states in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria (in Idlib), and the Black Sea. Turkey remains one of Europe's top trading partners and, due to its 2016 refugee deal with the EU, plays a key role in controlling migration flows to the continent. Despite the challenges in the sides' relationship, Ankara is tied to the EU through the accession process and the Council of Europe.

These are ample reasons for Europeans to reject the toxic influence of the Turkish-Emirati feud on their formulation of an autonomous policy on Turkey. By staying out of the conflict, Europeans can

reduce the likelihood of its escalation on the periphery of the EU. But they should also develop mechanisms to contain its spillover effects.

One way to do so is to challenge Turkey's and the UAE's misleading rival narratives about the role of Islam in society. Another is to limit the UAE's defence role in the eastern Mediterranean. Europe should provide assurances to Cyprus and Greece that their territorial integrity will be protected by Europeans – and not by the UAE, whose involvement fuels Turkish aggressiveness. There is no doubt that Turkey has been engaged in destabilising acts on Europe's periphery. Yet Europeans should respond not by picking sides but by establishing credible military deterrence of their own, and by intensifying their diplomatic engagement with both Turkey and the UAE.

The French approach to the Turkey-UAE rivalry is a cautionary tale for European policymakers. By treating Abu Dhabi as a helpful partner in containing Ankara, Paris has pushed the Turkish government towards adopting a siege mentality in Libya, Syria, and the eastern Mediterranean. This endangers Europe's attempts to develop a constructive relationship with Turkey. Similarly, Cyprus and Greece have been charmed by the prospect of using their bilateral relations with the UAE against Turkey, but may be underestimating the long-term consequences of doing so. While it is important for Greece and Cyprus to maintain good relations with a wealthy and powerful Gulf monarchy, it is not in their interests to provoke Turkey's enmity – or estrange it from Europe – lest this fuel Turkish nationalism. Military or political alliances with the UAE are no panacea to problems with Turkey. To insulate Europe from Middle Eastern feuds, France, Cyprus, and Greece need to pivot towards the EU and push for a European solution to protecting their core geopolitical interests and addressing their concerns about Turkey.

Do not pick sides in Libya

The absence of European diplomacy on Libya throughout 2018 and 2019 created a power vacuum, allowing Turkey and the UAE to move into the country and become the driving forces on opposite sides of the civil war there. Europe needs to enforce its primacy as a global actor by stabilising Libya. The Libyan conflict has been driven by external actors, particularly Turkey and the UAE. And Europeans have failed to pressure both to stop settling their scores on Europe's doorstep. Europeans have been too divided to call out Turkey and the UAE for their respective roles in this conflict – let alone to block them both through a neutral and enforceable arms embargo.

The 2020 Berlin Process and the UN talks that stemmed from this initiative have been steps towards

correcting some of Europe's earlier errors. But Europeans need to do more. They should send a strong message to both Ankara and Abu Dhabi that events in Libya affect European interests – and that the country cannot serve as a staging ground for a destabilising proxy war. To do so, it is critical for Europeans to avoid directly supporting the forces of either Haftar or the GNA in the conflict, and to push for an inclusive UN-led political process that has a chance of creating a representative government, minimising the military conflict, and forging a sustainable peace.

Invite Turkey into the EastMed Gas Forum

Turkey has responded to the formation of the EastMed Gas Forum – which it views as a direct threat to the Turkish presence in the Mediterranean – in a belligerent manner, by increasing its deployments in Libya and flexing its muscles in the Mediterranean. By doing so, it has made a future pipeline that bypasses Turkey politically and militarily unviable. Participants in the forum need to be pragmatic. The organisation, in which the UAE is an observer, holds the key to reducing tensions in the Mediterranean. As a net importer of energy, Turkey can emerge as a top buyer of Mediterranean gas or enter into condominium arrangements with other players for its energy-exploration ventures. Europeans should either invite Turkey to join the forum – as an observer or a member – or create an association agreement under which the country could purchase gas from its members or engage in joint ventures.

Hold a Mediterranean conference

Given the new maritime focus of both Turkey and the UAE, the Mediterranean will remain a key battleground for geopolitical competition between the two countries. In this environment, Europe needs to establish its own process for deconfliction in the region and to minimise the effects of the Turkish-Emirati rivalry there. It is in the EU's long-term interests to create its own mechanisms for de-escalation.

The Berlin Process on Libya is a good example of an EU-owned process that came to involve multilateral organisations. While it is imperfect, the process provided Europeans with a mechanism to coordinate de-escalation, feeding into a ceasefire and a re-energised UN political process.

The EU should now organise a pan-Mediterranean conference that could develop into a multilateral

framework akin to the Berlin Process. The conference would discuss maritime borders and hydrocarbon resources. By involving participants from coastal nations – including Cyprus – and representatives from the Turkish Cypriot community, the conference would create a new space to encourage settlement negotiations in Cyprus. This could also serve as a platform to bring competition for hydrocarbons in line with the standards of the European Green Deal – a consideration that is absent from the current geopolitical struggle. Such an effort would likely win the backing of the Biden administration and reduce Europe’s internal divisions.

Use the NATO platform for deconfliction

NATO is an important and underestimated instrument for its members to help contain the Turkey-UAE rivalry. The UAE, nicknamed “Little Sparta” for its interest in gaining military prowess, has long wanted to develop its relationship with NATO. The country has been a member of NATO’s Istanbul Cooperation Initiative since 2004, was among the first members of the initiative to sign up for an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (in 2016), and was active in NATO-led missions in Bosnia, Libya, and Afghanistan. The development of the UAE’s relationship with NATO has slowed since 2016, partly due to the Turkish veto in the consensus-driven organisation. As one NATO official recently said: “we have problems with the UAE because Turkey has problems with the UAE.”[9]

Given the prospect of US retrenchment in the Middle East and the Biden administration’s emphasis on multilateralism, NATO is likely to be reinvigorated in the coming years – as is the UAE’s interest in closer cooperation with the organisation. As NATO is increasingly attentive to security issues on Europe’s southern flank, Europeans have an opportunity to persuade the UAE and Turkey to establish a deconfliction hotline within the alliance, as well as a platform to define military deconfliction protocols.

Conclusion

The Turkish-Emirati rivalry is an intractable problem that now affects Europe’s internal dynamics. The conflict, which is more about geopolitics than ideology, helps both regimes extend their reach across the region and consolidate their domestic support. Turkey and the UAE have tried to promulgate their own narratives on the dispute in European capitals and Washington, highlighting

their purported strengths and lobbying against the other side. In fact, both aim to extend their influence over Europe's neighbourhood in a way that is deeply problematic for European interests.

Instead of using one actor to push back against the other – thereby linking European politics to regional conflicts and a zero-sum rivalry – Europeans should develop their own agency and independent strategy, and should look to manage the destabilising effects of this rivalry in the Mediterranean. If the EU wants to develop its strategic autonomy in its southern neighbourhood, it will need to create a European-owned deconfliction mechanism in the Mediterranean, proceed with the Berlin Process in Libya, and design a constructive new framework for its relationship with Turkey.

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[1] Interview with a NATO official, Brussels, 2019.

[2] Interview with a Turkish diplomat, Istanbul, 2017.

[3] Interview with Mohammed Baharoon, January 2021.

[4] Interview with a Turkish official, January 2021.

[5] Interview with an Emirati diplomat, 20 January 2021.

[6] Interview with a senior Turkish diplomat, January 2021.

[7] Interview with a senior Emirati official, 25 January 2021.

[8] Interview with a Saudi diplomat, January 2021.

[9] Conversation with a senior NATO official, 2021.

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