

Barriers to a 'pragmatic policy' towards Turkey: Chancellor Merz in Ankara

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On 30 October, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz paid his first visit to Ankara since taking office. During a press conference with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, he highlighted Turkey's important role at a time when global powers are reshaping international politics and the threat of Russian revisionism is growing, stressing that both countries support a swift end to the war in Ukraine. He also reaffirmed Germany's support for Turkey's EU membership once it fulfils the Copenhagen criteria, while subtly criticising the state of the rule of law in the country. Erdoğan, for his part, emphasised Turkey's determination to join the EU, welcomed Germany's decision to approve the sale of Eurofighter jets to Turkey, and called for joint projects in the defence sector. The two leaders discussed ways to continue the strategic dialogue, including convening a joint committee on the economy, trade, and defence industries. They also addressed the situation in the Gaza Strip and the mechanism for deporting migrants residing illegally in Germany to Turkey.

From Germany's perspective, the visit was intended as another step towards building pragmatic relations with Turkey, in which contentious issues such as democracy and human rights would play a lesser role, with greater emphasis placed on enhanced security cooperation and sectoral collaboration. However, the lack of tangible results – particularly in areas of specific interest to the Turkish hosts – and the fundamental differences between the two leaders' views on issues such as Turkey-EU relations and policy towards Israel and Gaza indicate that implementing this new model will prove extremely challenging.

Commentary

- **Merz's remarks on strengthening security cooperation and deepening a 'strategic partnership' with Turkey reflect a realist shift in German foreign policy** (see: *'The outline of the Merz doctrine: Germany as a global player'*). The chancellor is continuing efforts initiated in 2024 to build closer relations with Turkey, as demonstrated by his government's decisions to ease restrictions on German arms exports and to approve Ankara's purchase of 20 Eurofighter jets. Last year, Germany exported arms to Turkey worth €230 million. The shared perception of Russia as a threat is expected to strengthen this cooperation. Germany had also hoped that Turkey would exert pressure on Hamas to implement its agreement with Israel. Cooperation on curbing irregular migration to Germany remains a key priority. Since the beginning of the year, Turkish nationals have filed 9,200 asylum applications in Germany, representing a 60% decrease on the previous year, yet they remain the third-largest group of applicants. In 2024, 1,087

individuals were deported to Turkey (see: *'Germany: a significant drop in the number of asylum applications'*). As Merz noted, that figure has increased since the CDU/CSU and SPD assumed power last May. However, his visit has also underscored the enduring dilemma in German policy, which hinders its efforts to build pragmatic relations with Turkey. Although Merz sought to avoid sensitive issues – notably by choosing not to meet the Turkish opposition – he was unable entirely to sidestep the question of the rule of law during the press conference.

- **Turkish officials had welcomed Merz's statements and placed overly high hopes on his visit.** They expected to secure his support on three fundamental issues: modernising the EU-Turkey customs union, lifting the visa requirement for Turkish citizens travelling to the EU, and overcoming the objections of Greece and Cyprus to Turkey's inclusion in the EU's financial instruments for defence procurement (SAFE). Ankara also hoped for support from the German government in securing contracts for the construction of high-speed rail. According to media reports, Turkish officials also sought talks on joint investment projects in Africa and even aimed to persuade Germany to revise its stance on Israel and Hamas – specifically, to recognise the militant group, provided it fulfilled the conditions set out in Donald Trump's peace plan, including its complete disarmament and transformation into a political party.
- **The visit demonstrated that building a strategic partnership based on the parameters outlined by Merz will be difficult owing to diverging interests and perspectives.** Lofty political statements were overshadowed by the fact that the two sides failed to reach any significant decisions and that the chancellor arrived without a business delegation. This was all the more striking given that Merz's visit followed a trip to Turkey by the German Foreign Minister, Johann Wadephul (CDU). From Ankara's perspective, it was particularly disappointing that Merz did not address Turkey's potential participation in the EU's financial instruments for defence procurement. When speaking about Turkey's EU membership, he emphasised the importance of the Copenhagen criteria and the role of the European Commission, possibly indicating his reluctance to meet Turkish expectations that Germany would exert a decisive influence over the EU's policy in this area. Turkish officials may also have been unsettled by Merz's remarks regarding Germany's commitment to enforcing Western sanctions against Russia and curbing efforts to circumvent them. The two leaders' press conference confirmed that their positions on Israel remain fundamentally at odds: while Merz stressed Israel's right to self-defence, Erdoğan described its actions in the Gaza Strip as genocide.