Crisis of the Turkish Model and Its Impacts on Turkey-EU Relationship*

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The Turkish model, which has had the power of example, was beset with crises in recent years. The increasingly authoritarianization of Erdoğan, lasting economic stall and unsolved diplomacy dilemma have largely undermined dynamics of the Turkish model. Faded democracy coupled with stalled economy and diplomatic dilemma, led to the decline and even crisis of the Turkish model. Crisis of the model has impacts on Turkey’s international influence and its accession to the EU as well. The foundation of the bilateral relationship between Turkey and the EU has been negatively influenced internally and their contradictions have also been intensified by crises such as refugees externally. Currently, the relationship between Turkey and the EU is at the crossroad of adjustments and reconstructions.

Keywords: Turkey, the Turkish model, Erdoğan, Turkey-EU relations

Introduction

In recent years, internal and external dilemmas become increasingly obvious to Turkey which is a regional power in the Middle East. The attempted coup in July 2016 changed domestic political environment, strongman position of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been enhanced. Diplomatically, relationships between Turkey and outsider powers encounter crisis, the diplomatic dilemma in its neighboring area has not fundamentally changed. Meanwhile, the stalling of economy has lasted, the rise of Turkey was seriously impacted and the glorious of the Turkish model has also faded, demonstrated by its external and internal challenges as well as the uncertain development direction.

Most of scholars believe that the crisis of Turkish model generated from the dramatic changes and multiple dilemmas faced by Turkey politically and diplomatically. For example, one scholar argued that, Erdoğan transforms Islamic democracy into authoritarianism and populism through “election hegemony” and “political hegemony”. Turkey’s images of democracy and prosperity are replaced by politically authoritarian, economic cronyism and corruption, and diplomatic deadlock (Taşpinar, 2014). Another scholar argued that, viewing from the domestic political turmoil and frequent terrorism attacks, Turkey is more and more like a Middle East country, which indicates the crisis of Turkish model (LIU, 2017). The crisis also shows that the content, path, and the effects of the model call for re-examination. The political tension and security

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deterioration, diplomatic dilemma, and stalled economy are among vital factors that causing the crisis of Turkish model. Therefore, it will be clearer to discuss the crisis of the Turkish model and its impacts on Turkish-EU relationship against the backdrop of the multiple dilemmas.

Multiple Dilemmas of Turkey

Political Tension and Security Deterioration

Firstly, the attempted military coup occurred in July 2016 had a significant impact on Turkey’s political ecology. Erdoğan and the Turkish government quickly accused of Fetullah Gülen, a preacher living in the United States, and its followers in Turkey launched the failed coup, regard him as the leader of Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETO), known as the “Gülen movement”. And thus nationwide implementation of a large-scale suppressing operations, arrested thousands of suspected people in the army, internal affairs, police, justice, media, education, and other fields spread up to more than 100 thousand people. After the failed coup, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s dominance is more consolidated, while the opposition parties, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) are greatly weakened. The People’s Democratic Party (HDP) has lost its support base in the atmosphere of fighting the Kurdish forces, meanwhile, the military forces have been further weakened.

Secondly, the power and political influence of president Erdoğan has been further strengthened, and quickly pushed the constitutional change to pursue presidential system. “Erdoğan has never hidden his ambitions to legitimize his de facto executive presidency… Turkey seems to be stuck between two unpleasant options: Erdoğan’s increasingly authoritarian, de facto one-man rule or the same rule legitimized by a rewritten constitution” (Bekdil, 2016, pp. 1-8). After a short period of turbulence because of the failed coup, the Turkish government has stepped up the pace of constitutional change. The Turkish Parliament passed the constitutional amendment in 339 to 142 votes on 21 January 2017, the main content of which is the reform of the Parliamentary system to the presidential system, and submitted the final decision to a referendum. The referendum had been approved by a surprisingly narrow margin of 51.41% to 48.59% on April 16.

Finally, the increasing terrorist attacks highlighted Turkey’s severe security challenges since the end of 2015. The bombing attacks in Turkey have increased dramatically in the latest two years, Ankara and Istanbul—the capital and the largest city of Turkey—become the hardest hit. The insecurity of Turks is becoming more and more serious, and the security pressure of Turkey government has increased dramatically too. For example, two suicide bombings occurred at the Ataturk International Airport in Istanbul on June 28, killing more than 40 people and injuring more than 200 people. Karlov, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, was shot by terrorists in Ankara on 19 December.

The Stalled Economy

Since the taking power of AKP in 2002, more than a decade’s economic booming and the economic achievements have strongly promoted the rise of Turkey. In recent years, however, due to the impacts from unfavorable factors internally and externally, economic growth of the country has lost speed.

Firstly, the growth rate of Turkish economy has declined significantly. According to the data released by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the growth rate of Turkish economy was only 2.2%, 4%, 2.9%, 3.8%, and 2.7% in 2012-20161, which is totally different from it was in the last decade. Secondly, the inflation rate

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1 IMF Executive Board concludes Article IV consultation with Turkey, 2014, 2016.
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...and unemployment rate has kept in high level. According to the statistics of Turkish government, the inflation rate was 6.1%, 7.4%, 8.2%, 8.8%, and 8.53%, and the unemployment rate was 9.2%, 9.7%, 9.9%, 10.3%, and 11.8% in the period of 2012-2016. Thirdly, although the trade deficit of Turkey has declined, the total foreign trade is shrinking, and the fiscal deficit has even risen. The total volume of Turkish foreign trade was $403.5 billion, $399.8 billion, $351.1 billion, and $341.2 billion in years of 2013-2016, and the trade deficit was $99.9 billion, $84.6 billion, $63.4 billion, and $ 56 billion during the same period. The pulling effect of the foreign trade on economic growing has been declining, and the financial situation of the government has been worsening. Fourthly, currency devaluation and the climbing of external debt, especially short-term external debt, has become increasingly serious. In recent years, Lira, the Turkish official currency, has been the most vulnerable currency of emerging countries to impacts, and has been devaluated. President Erdoğan even called for people to exchange their foreign currency to Lira or golden to maintain the stability of domestic exchange rate. In recent years, foreign debt of Turkey has once again shown the tendency of increasing, the proportion of which has increased from 39.2% in 2011 to 59.6% in 2016 in GDP. During the same time, short-term foreign debt has climbed from 16% to 23.8%.

Turkish government has been tried to stimulate export, promote economy, and stabilize the market through financial and monetary policies. However, such policies also face lots of difficulties. On the one hand, the high-level inflation rate has limited Turkish central bank’s policies in reducing interest rate to stimulate economic growth; while, on the other hand, economic slowdown put other pressures on central bank’s independent monetary policies. At the same time, declining of credit rating has directly impact on its attractiveness of investment, monetary devaluation and outflow of funds hided the risks of bad debts. Sluggish economic growth, high inflation, rising debt, and lack of politic means all demonstrate the severity of Turkish economy and reflect the development bottleneck and lack of motivation of it under the new international circumstance.

Diplomacy Dilemma

Turkey’s foreign policy experienced a major adjustment and became more pragmatic and rational since the failed military coup. However, Turkey’s regional policy is still showing a tough and insatiable features, opportunism and capricious diplomatic behavior increased its difficulty and complex on relations with other powers.

Firstly, there has been a noticeable downturn—an undeclared crisis—in the relations between Ankara and Washington since 2016. The disagreements come mainly from two areas now well known: One is the U.S.’ support to the Syrian Kurds; the other is Turkey’s demand for the extradition of U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen labeled by Ankara as the mastermind behind the failed coup. Ankara believes that the Syrian Kurds’ People’s Protection Units (YPG) affiliated to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), attached to the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), is a terrorist organization and accuses the U.S. of using “double standards” on counter-terrorism issue. After the failed coup, the suspicions of prior U.S. knowledge or even support of the coup and disputes on the extradition of Gülen exacerbated the crisis of mutual confidence, the relationship between the two sides growingly rushed into deterioration.

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Secondly, Ankara and Moscow has quickly restored substantive cooperation after the attempted coup, which have a significant impact on regional situation. Against such circumstances of the improvement of Turkish-Russia relations, Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran began to carry out a trilateral cooperation mechanism on the Syrian issue, which exposed a significant impact on Syrian issues and regional international relations. Turkey’s rapprochement with Russia triggered the suspicions and dispute that whether Ankara will “abandon the U.S. to embrace Russia”.

Finally, Turkey actively involved in the Middle East affairs and tries to change its marginalized situation by easing relations with other regional powers and outsider, and sending troops to the northern Syria directly. It is suppressing the domestic and regional Kurdish forces that become the primary goal in the Ankara’s regional policy. Subsequently, Turkey insists to send troops to northern Syria and Iraq, regardless of the opposition from regional countries and beyond. However, Turkish new regional policy makes its relationship with Syria and Iraq more complex.

The Crisis of the Turkish Model

The Turkish model, which combines both moderate Islamism and Western democratic system, has drawn global attention in the last decade. The Turkish model is integrated based on success and experiences in aspects of politics, economy, and diplomacy of Turkey, with the characteristics of both Islamic democracy and market economy. The prosperous development of domestic economy and the secularization principle, especially the successful grafting of Islam and democratic politics, has composited the main contents of the model (LI, 2012). The model has been viewed as a “business card” of Turkey to show on the global stage, and has received appreciation from the West. Its image has been erected as the “democratic model of the Islamic world”, which previously had enhanced Turkish soft power and its significance in the world.

In recent years, Turkey has faced dilemmas both at home and abroad, which cause challenges for the Turkish model. The crisis of the Turkish model is the result of multiple problems including domestic political crisis, fatigue economy, and diplomatic dilemmas, among which the internal politics and external shocks have played a more direct and important role. On the one hand, the combination of moderate Islam and western democracy is the main characteristic of the Turkish model, which determines that the political problems are the starting point of the crisis. In recent years, the political disputes and turbulence caused by the “election hegemony” (Keyman, 2010) of the AKP and the authoritarian tendency of Erdoğan have eroded the democratic connotation of the Turkish model gradually. After the attempted coup, Erdoğan’s strong oppression of the oppositions, and the implementation of the constitutional change to the presidential system, highlighted the domestic political and democratization crisis. On the other hand, institutional contact with the West and the appreciation from them is the important reasons for rising of the Turkish model. However, in recent years, gap in the relationship between Turkey and the West led to the sharp reduce of its international influence.

Authoritarianization of domestic politics and existed diplomatic dilemma limited Islamic democracy and active diplomacy—two pillars of Turkish model. At the same time, the stalled economy has significantly undermined the dynamics of Turkish model. Stalled economy, political turmoil, and diplomatic dilemma have changed the relative stability of the country and people’s positive expectations, and induced disorder and turbulence, deviating Turkey from the development path of moderate Islam, which has directly hurt Turkey’s international influence and its capability in participating in regional affairs. Economic capability, which Turkey was proud of, has become its new weak points. Therefore, the stalled economy, the fade of the democracy and
the dilemma of the diplomacy, which represent three pillars of the Turkish model, have sunk into crisis and even bankrupted.

Firstly, the stalled economy, political turbulence, and the conservative trend of the country accelerated Erdoğan’s paces toward strongman politics and authoritarian rule. The AKP and Erdoğan’s domestic political position have been impacted directly by the multiple dilemmas. In such a case, to maintain their ruling position, the conservative trend of AKP government has been growing prominent, it begun to maintain its influence through relying on topics including the religion and nationalism, which worsened the multilateral tense relationships in the country. Achievements of healthy economy are the vital basis for the AKP and Erdoğan ruling and their public support, as well as one of the important connotations of the Turkish model. In recent years, “elective hegemony” of the AKP and Erdoğan’s tendency toward the centralization of the power made it possible of his ignorance of economic problems and losing of the driving force in promoting economic reforms and resolving economic problems. After successive election victory and stay in reign, the AKP and its leaders’ governance receptions have unknowingly deviated from economic growth and domestic good governance, and driving force of promoting domestic reform and service inevitably weakened, the original inclusive feature of AKP has also lost, turned to security, antagonism, and narrowing (Keyman & Gumuscu, 2014, pp. 50-51).

The stalled economy has undermined the ruling foundation of the AKP, resulting in the reducing of its public support, the AKP tried to enhance and maintain its status and right of speak through non-economic issues such as nationalism, which could be proved by the changes in AKP’s policies between two general elections in 2015. In June 2015, after the AKP lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since it came to power, it has dramatically changed its reconciliation polices toward the Kurds, which strengthened the domestic nationalism and limited the oppositions. AKP once again won the election and got the majority of parliamentary seats in November, preventing from a coalition government. The Erdoğan and AKP’s renewed victory by political maneuver illustrated the hopelessly divided and polarized state of the Turkish political scene (Bekdíl, 2016, p. 2). With the goal of winning election and taking power, the maneuver has split the public opinion, making the development strategies strayed from the original path and worsening the turbulence. Around Erdoğan’s and the national development path, split among the people has been increasingly prominent. The primary divide is between those Turks who seem to adore their president Erdoğan and those who abhor him (Salt, 2016), resulting in the confrontation between two groups of Turks who support and oppose the referendum respectively. The constitutional change for presidential system has further pushed forward the authoritarianization of Erdoğan, which worsened the political split in the country and caused worries from international community.

Secondly, political chaos and weak economy of Turkey has expanded the gap between Turkish diplomatic goals and its real capability and highlighted the diplomatic dilemma, which affected the carrying out of its “active diplomacy”. Since the Middle East upheaval, Turkey was eager to intervene in the regional affairs and exert influence as a power. However, due to shortage of its capability and its wrong strategic judgment on neighboring areas, it could neither shape the order of the region nor maintain its own security. In addition, Erdoğan has created too many enemies and too much chaos, both domestic and external, for his own good (Gunter, 2016). Growing authoritarianism led to the plunge of its international status, worsened its relationship with the West, and limited the achieving of its diplomatic goal. Failure of the “economic failure” has interacted with domestic turbulence, which limited Turkish capability in intervening in regional affairs with full efforts,
and affected the country’s external attraction. The dilemmas intertwine with each other and together worsened the decline of Turkish model.

The dilemmas have not only affected Turkey’s capability in achieving domestic political and economic goals, but also influenced its foreign policy preferences, forcing the country to make more pragmatic and reasonable adjustments. Recently Turkey’s policy toward the region attaches more importance to contain the Kurds, while other regional affairs are beyond its grasp. In such a case, it has no better choice but to lower their posture, for example easing its attitude on Syria issue. However, the gaps between Turkey and the EU and contradiction with the U.S., have been increasingly larger, and also its regional policy is still in great risk. Hence, Turkish role has transformed from a development model which could stabilize the region, to a source of regional conflicts. Against such backdrop, Turkey’s image in the eyes of international community has transformed from positive to negative, the “active diplomacy” that Turkey advocated became nothing but empty talks.

Finally, the prospect of Turkish rise is in great uncertainty, and the collapse of three pillars of the Turkish model has increased the risks and the policy dilemma of the country. After AKP came to power in 2002, the sustained and rapid economic growth, the continuous election victory, and impressive achievements have greatly enhanced Turkey’s domestic and international ambitions. Erdoğan, then serving as the prime minister, put forward the Turkish “Vision 2023” in 2011. The grand vision plans to achieve the GDP of two trillion dollars and become one of the top 10 in the world in 2023 of Turkey’s 100th anniversary, and per capita increasing to $25,000, foreign trade amounting to one trillion dollars, and set a series of specific goals in many other sectors, which is regarded as a new “Turkish Dream”. However, Turkey needs reach average annual economic growth rate of at least five percent if it could achieve the development strategy above. Against the backdrop of continuous weakening of the economy, the GDP and growth of its foreign trade has sharply declined. Low domestic savings rate and a decline in foreign capital inflows also undermined its capability in expanding investment. The development goals set by the Turkey’s “Vision 2023” has already proved to be impossible.

Crisis in political, economic, and diplomatic pillars of the Turkish model have intertwined with each other and presented a trend of the vicious circle, which increased the uncertainty and worsened internal and external dilemmas. Political conflicts and the tense security environment have undermined the confidence of the market. What’s more, Turkish economy is still negatively impacted by turbulent surrounding situation. Neighboring turbulence and diplomatic dilemma have seriously limited the advantages of Turkish geo-economics and its potential economic growth.

**The Uncertain Future of Turkish-EU Relations**

The Western element played an important role in Turkey’s rise and the establishment of the Turkish model. To a large extent, the achievements and the success of the Turkish model rooted in the institutional linkages between Turkey and the West, especially the EU. Since Turkey’s liberalization reform, the EU has played an important leading role in standardizing Turkish political and economic reforms and shaping the relationship between Turkey and the outside. However, due to the disagreements on issues such as Turkish accession into the EU, Turkey’s domestic political reforms, the refugee crisis and policies toward the Kurds, the relationship between Turkey and EU has been increasingly complex. The contradictions between the two were intensified because the main foundation of the bilateral relationship—EU’s expectation on Turkey’s democratization and
Turkey’s expectation on accession into the EU—has been eroded. The two even go against each other under the impacts of the refugee crisis, the Kurdish issue, and other elements. The crisis of the Turkish model and the frustration of Turkey’s accession into the EU have undermined the main foundation of the bilateral relationship, which made the latter easily come by crises in case of external impacts.

Firstly, with the fading of the democratic background of the Turkish model, the EU has been increasingly worried and disgusted with Turkish authoritarian tendency and even dictatorship. For a time, Erdoğan and the AKP have successfully weakened the power of Turkish military forces with the help of the EU, and formed the “election hegemony”. Turkey has also been viewed as the “democratic model” for the Islamic world. Over time, however, the dominant position of the AKP and Erdoğan’s increasingly authoritarian tendency has been drifting away from EU’s expectation. After the attempted coup on 15 July, 2016, Turkish government declared a state of emergency and carried out mass arrests and firings of suspicious Gülenists, and considered to reinstate the death penalty. It is totally contrary to the expectations of the EU on Turkey, leading to the EU’s severe criticism and counter. The EU has stated for many times to observe the highest standards in respecting the rule of law and fundamental rights, in line with Turkey’s international commitments and status as a candidate country (European Commission, 2016). Criticisms on Turkish government from the EU linger on, which makes the subtle bilateral relationship even more tense. The attempted coup and its follow-ups have dramatically changed EU recognition on Turkey. The anti-West sentiment in Turkey has risen, which further pushed the Turkish-EU relationship toward a negative direction.

Turkey speeded up its reform on presidential system and referendum on constitutional amendment verified EU’s worries. The EU has gradually given up its expectation on Turkish democracy. European countries generally believe that the constitutional change in Turkey is a democratic setback and will lead to the dictatorship of Erdoğan. Before the referendum, Turkish government sent a number of ministers to Germany, Netherlands, and other European countries for propaganda campaign on the constitutional change referendum, however, Turkey’s efforts have been blocked, which triggered a diplomatic dispute between Turkey and Europe. From the perspective of the EU, Turkish paces toward authoritarianism or even dictatorship mark the failure of its long-term democratization efforts, it could no longer expect the stabilization of the border through Turkish democratic demonstration.

Secondly, the crisis of Turkish accession process also seriously undermined Turkey’s expectation on the EU and EU’s standardizing role to Turkey. To successfully join the EU, Turkey has carried out systematic and institutional reforms according to EU requirements and standards, and long-term accession process has deepened the institutional linkages between Turkey and the EU in political, economic, and social aspects, and promoted Turkish economic and political liberalization transition. However, as time goes by, Turkey has not successfully joined the EU and this process becomes even more difficult to be achieved. In such a case, Turkey has gradually lost the driving force of the reforms according to endless EU standards. EU, whose role as a leading force and the external norms of the reform, is losing its influence on Turkey. The EU’s anchor for Turkish institutional reforms and leverage over Turkish politicians came to an abrupt end at around 2010 as the accession process almost completely stalled (Acemoglu & Ucer, p. 23). The bilateral relationships between the two have also been reversed then and Turkey has even shown a tendency of “de-Europeanization” (Cebeci, 2016, p. 119).

In recent years, due to the contradiction on refugee crisis, political suppression after the attempted coup and Turkish authoritarian transformation through democratic procedures, EU’s distrust or even disgust toward
Turkey has been increasing. Without a surprise intervention, what some term democracy, and others populism, is steering the EU and Turkey apart—or towards collision (Wood, 2016, p. 38). Turkey has long been the most unpopular candidate in Europe, which reflects the bleak prospect for Turkey’s access to the EU. Turkey has been disappointed with the EU for many years. Erdoğan has repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the EU’s delay in the Turkish accession process on the grounds of democracy and human rights. He has publicly stated that “Turkey will not wait indefinitely for the EU’s decision, 2023 is the deadline” and said that the EU is not the “only” choice, and they was considering to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which reflects Turkey is losing patience and issued signals to give up accession.

Finally, External factors such as the refugee crisis has intensified the structural contradictions of the Turkish-EU relationship, complains and disputes between the two have been increasingly prominent. The refugee crisis and the Kurds problem are vital factors standing in the way of the development of Turkish-European relationship. On the one hand, it is suppressing the rise of domestic and regional Kurdish forces that become the primary goal in the Ankara’s regional policy. Turkey requires its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies to support this policy. However, Turkey’s request has not been the active support from European countries, causing Turkey’s dissatisfaction and complains. The EU does not agree with Turkey’s Kurds policy that defines the domestic and regional Kurdish forces as terrorist organizations and suppresses them by military strike. As a result of Germany’s military assistance to Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq, while Germany has also become the main base for Kurds activities overseas, diplomatic disputes between Germany and Turkey breakout for several times.

Long-existing refugee crisis seriously undermines mutual trust between Turkey and the EU, which impacts the stability of the bilateral relationship. Turkey has made agreement with the EU on refugee issue in March 2016, the EU promised to provide financial support in refugee placement, so as to control and ease the crisis through Turkey. Originally, Turkey hoped to achieve the refugee agreement with the EU and made it as a supportive element of its accession while things go contrary to its wishes, refugee issue became the intensification factor of the contradictions instead. On the other side, the EU believes that Turkey made use of the refugee problem and even intentionally worsened the refugee crisis. Since Turkey has progressively reversed the asymmetries of power by demonstrating the indispensability of its continued commitment to act as gatekeeper vis-à-vis an increasingly fragmented and anxious EU (Okyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2016, p. 51). After the blockade on Turkish ministers who were barred from holding public rallies in Europe, the Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu claimed that Turkey probably have to reconsider the refugee agreement with the EU; Erdoğan also said that Turkey will re-evaluate the political relations with the EU, including the refugee resettlement protocol.

In short, both Turkey and the EU’s expectations on each other have shattered into pieces, made the two, especially Turkey, become increasingly impatient to its accession into the EU. Turkey is very dissatisfied with EU accusations and becomes growing hard line. While on the other side, due to refugee crisis and Turkish tendency toward authoritarianism and dictatorship, Turkey’s image has been a trouble maker and a bad example of democracy to the EU, not to mention its role in stabilizing the border. The gaps between the two in ideas and recognitions have been expended. The possibility of an even worse bilateral relationship cannot be ruled out in the future.
Conclusion

Long-lasting stalled economy, fade of the democracy, and the diplomatic dilemmas have shattered the “miracle” of Turkish economy, democracy, and stability. Three pillars of the Turkish model have sunk into the crises to different levels. The crisis of the Turkish model is the result for intertwined political crisis, economic dilemma, and external impacts.

Viewing from the ups and downs of the Turkish model, it could be found that there are unbalances and vulnerabilities in the internal structure of Turkish-EU relationship. The EU’s expectation on Turkey’s democratization and stability, and Turkey’s expectation on the accession into the EU are the basic variables of the development of the bilateral relationship. Viewing from the direct influencing factors, the refugee crisis and the “7·15” attempted military coup are the two key events that induce the crisis of the Turkish-EU relationship. During the process of the crisis of the Turkish model, the shattered expectation of the two to each other has undermined the foundation of the healthy bilateral relationship. External factors, such as the refugee problem caused by regional turbulence and the Kurdish issue, worsened the divergence and contradictions between the two. Crises frequently break out in bilateral relationship, which created new uncertainty to the Europe, the Middle East and even broader regions.

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