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Track II diplomacy meets action research: fostering collaborative foreign policy between Türkiye and the EU in North Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the integration of Participatory Action Research (PAR) into foreign policy design, positioning it as a transformative tool to operationalise Track II diplomacy and foster inclusive, stakeholder-driven approaches. Focusing on EU–Türkiye cooperation in North Africa – particularly in Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt – the study applies PAR methodologies such as search conferences and clinical interviews with triangulation of other methods such as expert surveys to identify stakeholder-driven policy priorities. These include educational mobility, public infrastructure, health, renewable energy, and food security. While designed to engage both Track I and Track II actors, the process revealed the challenges of limited official participation, especially from North African governments, due to civic space restrictions and political sensitivities. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that PAR can build trust, surface actionable cooperation models, and complement conventional diplomacy. By moving beyond traditional security-focused Track II initiatives, the article contributes to rethinking foreign policy as a collaborative and participatory process. Ultimately, PAR is presented as a replicable, action-oriented model that complements conventional diplomacy and contributes to ongoing debates on democratising international relations through more adaptive and inclusive practices.

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Introduction

This paper explores the intersection of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Track II diplomacy, offering a novel framework for inclusive and co-creative foreign policy design. Traditionally dominated by elite actors and state institutions (Hagan 2001; Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 2002), foreign policy has remained insulated from participatory approaches. However, the growing complexity of global issues and the diminishing effectiveness of top-down strategies call for innovative, collaborative methods that engage civil society, academia, and other non-state actors. PAR, with its roots in democratic dialogue, stakeholder engagement, and iterative action-reflection cycles, offers a compelling methodology to bridge this gap.

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This study argues that PAR can serve as a powerful vehicle for operationalising Track II diplomacy, which is characterised by informal, non-governmental initiatives aimed at building trust and generating creative policy solutions (Jones 2015, 9; Montville 1991). By uniting these two paradigms, the research contributes to the evolving field of participatory foreign policymaking. Focusing on EU-Türkiye collaboration in North Africa, this paper demonstrates how PAR methods, particularly search conferences and semi-structured interviews, can facilitate inclusive stakeholder dialogue and co-design of policy options.

Using the cases of Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt, the study showcases how PAR can help overcome political stalemates and foster pragmatic cooperation between diverse actors. While Libya is a key player in North Africa, it was intentionally excluded due to methodological constraints, as the participatory approach used in this study required a minimum level of stability, civic space and stakeholder accessibility. The integration of the Search Conference method, grounded in the work of Fred and Merrelyn Emery (Emery and Purser 1996), and multi-criteria decision-making tools like Thomas Saaty's Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) (1978), provides a replicable model for future Track II interventions. The findings underscore the value of participatory methodologies to transform traditional diplomatic practices into more inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable frameworks for international engagement.

The following sections contextualise the North Africa case, outline the theoretical foundations of PAR, detail the methodology used, present findings on collaboration patterns, and conclude with reflections on the future of participatory methods in foreign policy and international relations.

North Africa as a venue for EU-Türkiye collaboration

In recent years, relations between Türkiye and the EU have been significantly strained due to a range of political and geopolitical issues, including the migration and refugee crises, the Cyprus dispute, concerns over human rights violations, the erosion of democratic norms, and territorial tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Despite these challenges, North Africa offers a unique venue for potential collaboration between Türkiye and the EU, given its historical legacies, geopolitical significance, and complex socio-political dynamics. The region's strategic position, serving as a crossroads between Europe, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, makes it a critical area for EU-Türkiye collaboration in regional development.

The selection of Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt as focal cases for this collaboration was guided by geopolitical relevance, sectoral complementarity, and research feasibility. These countries represent distinct political economies and foreign policy orientations, offering a diverse yet analytically manageable comparative frame. For instance, while Libya holds strategic importance for both actors, its ongoing conflict and constrained civic space pose significant barriers to the participatory engagement required by this study's PAR methodology. Moreover, the absence of consolidated Track I structures and clearly recognised legitimate actors further complicates inclusive stakeholder dialogue in the Libyan context. In contrast, Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt maintain longstanding institutional ties with both the EU and Türkiye, making them particularly suitable for exploring trilateral cooperation. Their selection thus reflects both strategic salience and the practical need to enable meaningful stakeholder participation across Track I and Track II actors.

Despite growing interest in sub-Saharan or East Africa in the foreign policies of both Türkiye and the EU, North African countries still top their list in terms of their trade, economic, political and social relations. Türkiye's engagement in North Africa has increased significantly, rooted in a historical presence that dates back to the Ottoman Empire (Akpınar 2022, 495; Hazar 2011, 110–119). In January 2025, Türkiye's exports to North African countries rose by 12.7%, with Egypt receiving \$256.3 million, followed by Morocco with \$253.2 million and Algeria with \$186.5 million (Turkish Time 2025). In recent years, Türkiye has bolstered its influence in the region through humanitarian aid, peacebuilding initiatives, and investments, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Çavuşoğlu 2020).

Meanwhile, the EU's relations with North Africa are guided by various initiatives aimed at addressing challenges such as climate change, migration, and governance (Skouri 2021). Through the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Africa-EU Partnership, the EU has developed strong ties with North African countries, including Morocco, Egypt, and Algeria (European Commission 2021c; Soler i Lecha 2020). These relationships are governed by agreements and partnerships that focus on specific priorities, including economic development, governance, and security (European Commission n.d.). Although historical tensions and colonial legacies continue to shape some EU member states' individual interests in the region, the collective goal remains to maintain and strengthen influence in North Africa.

While the EU and Türkiye share overlapping strategic interests in North Africa, they often operate through distinct foreign policy modalities. The EU's engagement is largely institutional and value-driven, emphasising democratisation, rule of law, sustainable development, and conditional aid frameworks aligned with its Neighbourhood Policy and the Green Deal (European Commission 2021c; Soler i Lecha 2020). Türkiye, by contrast, tends to adopt a more pragmatic, interest-based approach, prioritising bilateral relations, economic investment, infrastructure development, and cultural outreach (Çavuşoğlu 2020). This divergence reflects not only differing policy instruments, but also deeper contrasts in how each actor conceptualises stability and cooperation. While the EU focuses on long-term reform through normative alignment, Türkiye emphasises relational diplomacy, rapid engagement, and mutually beneficial economic ties. These diverging approaches make the region a valuable testing ground for collaborative mechanisms like PAR. Despite complex political dynamics, both Türkiye and the EU share a common goal of expanding their engagement with North Africa, which presents numerous opportunities for collaboration (Chiriatti and Dessi 2022, 89–90). The recent conflict in Ukraine has further underscored the value of North Africa as a critical source of agricultural products and energy, heightening the region's importance in the current geopolitical landscape.

Theoretical foundations: PAR in international relations and foreign policy

Participatory Action Research (PAR) traces its roots to the pioneering work of Kurt Lewin (1946), who introduced action research as a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. As a social psychologist, Lewin (1946) emphasised the interdependence of theory and practice, viewing sustainable social change as requiring participants to co-create knowledge rather than serving merely as subjects. William Foote Whyte (1943) significantly expanded Lewin's collaborative vision through his seminal ethnographic study *Street Corner Society*, demonstrating the value of embedded, long-term participation in community life. Whyte advocated shifting from 'research on' to 'research with' marginalised

groups, fundamentally shaping PAR's democratisation in urban, organisational, and global development contexts.

PAR evolved further in the 1970s and 80s through scholars like Chris Argyris (1982), whose work on organisational learning emphasised collaboration and co-learning between researchers and participants to drive social change. Rather than changing others from the outside, PAR fosters joint reflection and action to improve practices through iterative implementation and evaluation cycles (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006; Bradbury 2015, 2). Argyris (1977) and Argyris and Schön (1978) also introduced 'double-loop learning', encouraging stakeholders to reassess not only their actions but the assumptions behind them, positioning PAR as a methodology for adaptive, institutional change through shared knowledge production.

Another influential advancement came from Pragmatic Action Research by Greenwood and Levin (2007), integrating pragmatist philosophy and systems thinking. Their approach prioritises real-world utility, scientific rigour, and democratic legitimacy, advocating solutions emerging from shared experiences of practitioners and researchers. Greenwood and Levin (2007) emphasise that knowledge must emerge from action and be judged by its effectiveness in addressing tangible social and organisational challenges, aligning closely with the practical orientation of this study through stakeholder engagement, iterative design, and collaborative policy experimentation.

PAR has been widely applied across diverse fields such as health research (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006; Grbich 1998; Koshy, Koshy, and Waterman 2011), education (Kolb and Fry 1975), organisational development (Bradbury 2015; Coghlan 2015), and social justice and activism (Fals Borda 1985; Freire 1972; Reason and Bradbury 2007). In international relations, PAR literature remains relatively limited yet is gradually expanding. Existing studies primarily focus on climate change and social movements (Reitan and Gibson 2012), transitional justice (Mbazumutima 2021), feminist participatory action research (Santamaría et al. 2020), and post-conflict peacebuilding (Scholtens and Bavinck 2018). Scholars have also begun exploring PAR's potential to challenge epistemic hierarchies in international relations, particularly between the Global North and South. These studies have provided critical insights into how PAR can be used to foster participation, challenge power imbalances, and facilitate social change in various international contexts. For instance, Tripathi (2021) highlights that asymmetries of power in global politics manifest within knowledge production itself, reinforcing intellectual hierarchies that influence international policy formulation and inclusivity.

While studies on the use of PAR in international relations are emerging, there remains a gap on its application in foreign policymaking. This study aims to address that gap by exploring the use of PAR in EU-Türkiye collaboration in North Africa. With its emphasis on active collaboration and stakeholder engagement, PAR offers a methodology well-suited to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of international diplomacy. This is particularly significant, as foreign policymaking traditionally remains elitist and bureaucratic, conducted predominantly through formal, Track I diplomatic channels by state officials, diplomats, and high-level actors, often excluding wider public engagement (Allison 1971; Hagan 2001; Snyder, Bruck and Sapin 2002).

The stalemated situation in Türkiye-EU relations exemplifies challenges associated with formal diplomacy. In contrast, Track II diplomacy – informal dialogues involving civil society, academia, and non-state actors – offers flexibility and creativity in exploring solutions (Jones

2015). Defined by Montville as ‘unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversarial groups or nations’, Track II diplomacy seeks to build trust and explore solutions outside formal structures (Jones 2015, 9). Referring to the Oslo negotiations of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Kelman argues that ‘private, nonofficial individuals and settings can play a significant role in advancing a negotiating process that had reached an impasse at the official level (Kelman 1995, 19). However, polarisation and gridlock at the Track I level can constrain the effectiveness of Track II, limiting the scope and sustainability of informal dialogue.

The fact that foreign policy frequently involves negotiations and collaboration primarily at the Track I level renders it inherently elitist, confined largely within state institutions such as the presidency, foreign ministries, or the military (Allison 1971). This securitised approach restricts opportunities for broader public consultation and participation. Global challenges – including armed conflicts, migration, climate change, and pandemics – have further entrenched this dynamic. As of 2024, approximately 72% of the world’s population lives under authoritarian regimes, with merely 2.1% residing in countries characterised by open civic space (CIVICUS 2024, 7–8). Despite the vital role civil society plays in shaping international engagement, its formal inclusion in policymaking remains minimal. Putnam (1993) argues that robust civil society and strong social capital constitute essential foundations for effective governance and successful democratic functioning. Therefore, there remains a crucial need to further examine the inclusion of Track II actors into foreign policy processes to foster sustained collaboration, peace, and stability.

By involving non-state actors and civil society, PAR promotes inclusive and transparent foreign policy processes, challenging elitism and enabling diverse stakeholder perspectives. PAR complements traditional diplomatic approaches by creating informal spaces for dialogue, relationship-building, and innovative problem-solving, often not feasible within formal negotiations. Track II diplomacy initiatives – such as workshops, conferences, and informal consultations – thus provide valuable channels alongside Track I, addressing complex issues flexibly and creatively.

Given critiques of foreign interventions in Africa – often characterised as neo-colonial or neo-Ottoman – the current study strategically adopts PAR’s inclusive and collaborative methodology. By actively engaging diverse stakeholders, including non-state actors and civil society in North Africa, this approach mitigates asymmetric power dynamics and ensures equitable, context-specific outcomes. The primary objective of employing PAR here is to align EU and Turkish strategic interests with those of Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt. Tailored collaborative projects were developed for each country, emphasising cooperation at the collective EU level rather than individual member states, thereby reducing complications arising from diverse national priorities.

Integrating PAR into foreign policymaking highlights the potential of participatory methods to foster peace, cooperation, and conflict resolution by facilitating informal dialogue and incorporating diverse stakeholder perspectives. Unlike traditional diplomacy, PAR empowers both Track I and Track II actors to co-create solutions – particularly relevant in complex contexts like EU – Türkiye collaboration in North Africa. As former U.S. Secretary of State George P. Schultz noted, ‘properly done Track Two does not seek to “get in the way” of Track One diplomacy, as those in office sometimes fear, but rather to complement it, often by going to places where Track One is unable to tread and by tackling subjects it cannot approach’ (Jones 2015, ix). While this study focuses on Track II, it also recognises the relevance of Track 1.5 diplomacy – where semi-official actors like think tanks and business leaders

operate informally but with institutional proximity to Track I (Jones 2015, 19–20). Several participants in this study played such roles, blurring boundaries between diplomatic tracks. Consequently, the study's unit of analysis is not the traditional individual, state, or structural levels, but rather the interactive process of policy co-creation observed and facilitated through PAR.

Data collection methods

The methodological design of this study was informed by participatory action research, emphasising co-creation of knowledge through iterative cycles of reflection and action. As Heron and Reason (2008) note, such co-operative inquiry is underpinned by an extended epistemology that integrates experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical ways of knowing, enabling participants to contribute as both co-subjects and co-researchers. The research relies on mixed sources of data. Primary data was collected through three online search conferences, which involved approximately 20 experts each, as well as 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews and a pre-conference expert survey. All data derived from interviews and search conferences were utilised in aggregate form, without citing individual sources directly.¹ These methods were supplemented by secondary data analysis from various sources such as academic literature, policy papers, official reports, and media publications.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, expertise and influence in North Africa, Türkiye-North Africa relations, or EU-North Africa relations. Gender balance was observed throughout the selection process to ensure diverse representation. Participants represented a diverse cross-section of Track II actors, including academics, think tank researchers, civil society leaders, journalists, policy analysts, business association representatives, and local government officials. Institutional affiliations included leading European and Turkish policy institutes, business associations, international media, EU institutions, and local development agencies. Geographically, the participants were drawn from Türkiye, EU member states, and North African countries. Some of the stakeholders involved in the study were from institutions such as the European Commission, European Parliament, United Nations, Nurol Construction, EUROCHAMBERS, TOBB, European External Action Service, BUSINESS EUROPE, CIDOB, Sabancı University, Koç University, Abdi İbrahim, as well as anonymous officials from Turkish state institutions, ensuring a diverse range of insights and perspectives. While several participants held or previously held government-adjacent roles – such as ambassadors, ministry officials, or EU policy officers – they participated in a private capacity. Their contributions were anonymised to allow open dialogue and mitigate institutional sensitivities. This cross-regional and cross-sectoral composition enabled a broad exploration of cooperation dynamics.

Although the study was not originally designed to privilege Track II diplomacy, the composition of participants evolved in that direction due to the limited accessibility of Track I actors, especially from North African countries. Invitations were extended to officials from both the EU and Türkiye, and while a small number did agree to participate, they did so under strict conditions of anonymity. No Track I officials from Egypt, Morocco, or Algeria accepted the invitation to engage in the study. While the absence of North African Track I actors limited direct institutional representation, the engagement of regionally based scholars, analysts, and policy entrepreneurs ensured that local perspectives and contextual nuance were meaningfully integrated into the PAR process. Track II actors

were significantly more responsive and willing to engage in open dialogue. This uneven participation was not a methodological choice but a reflection of the broader context: one shaped by securitised policy environments, institutional hesitancy, and shrinking civic spaces. As a result, the research leaned more heavily on Track II engagement, not by design, but by necessity.

This trajectory illustrates a key strength of PAR, as it offers an important empirical reflection on the dynamics of access, trust, and openness within foreign policymaking processes: its ability to adapt to emergent opportunities and constraints. In this case, it provided a platform for inclusive policy dialogue even when formal diplomatic actors were reluctant to engage. The study also highlights how PAR, as a flexible and iterative methodology, is particularly well-suited to navigate and respond to such shifting stakeholder landscapes – offering not only adaptability in real-time but also a structure that actively incorporates diverse voices throughout successive cycles of reflection, action, and redesign. This echoes Babüroğlu and Ravn's (1992) vision of normative action research, where knowledge is generated not from static observation but from stakeholder-driven efforts to construct desirable futures through participatory engagement.

Search conferences and collaborative discussions

The Search Conference method employed in this study draws heavily on the work of Emery and Purser (1996), who developed it as a form of democratic, participative planning grounded in open systems theory. Originating from the Tavistock tradition, the Emerys designed the Search Conference to enable stakeholders to collectively design a desired future in response to their system's environment. Unlike traditional top-down planning approaches, this method transfers both content and process control to participants, empowering them to collaboratively explore future scenarios and formulate shared strategies as active agents (Babüroğlu and Garr 1993; Babüroğlu and Göker 2014). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conferences were conducted online *via* Zoom, with participants remaining anonymous to ensure openness and robust participation.

During the conferences, participants discussed the future options, driving forces, and desirable scenarios for EU-Türkiye, Türkiye-North Africa, and EU-North Africa relations. These discussions were structured around a series of guiding questions designed to elicit participants' insights and potential solutions for collaborative foreign policy initiatives. Participants were asked to consider:

What are the emerging options shaping the relations between Türkiye, the EU, and North Africa?

What key factors are driving these relations, and how might they evolve?

What are the most desirable and feasible scenarios for future collaboration?

The discussions resulted in the creation of output matrices that compiled the key insights from participants. These matrices served as a foundation for identifying specific policy options and collaboration opportunities.

Each search conference consisted of both plenary sessions and breakout group discussions. In the breakout sessions, participants were divided into smaller groups (4–5

individuals) to explore the key questions in greater depth. The participants of the breakout rooms were carefully selected to represent diverse countries, genders, and professional backgrounds, ensuring inclusivity and democratic brainstorming. A facilitator from the project team was assigned to each room to guide the discussion and ensure that all participants contributed actively. Subsequently, the groups reconvened to share their findings and further refine the output matrices.

Rather than predefining the thematic focus of cooperation, this study employed a stakeholder-led approach to identify and prioritise policy domains. Following two conferences and initial interviews, sixteen policy options and priorities were identified. These were then evaluated by regional experts through a structured online survey using Thomas L. Saaty's (1978) Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), a method designed to facilitate complex decision-making through weighted pairwise comparisons. Developed in the 1970s, AHP enables users to assign weights to criteria through pairwise comparisons, facilitating quantitative decision-making based on qualitative judgments. Saaty's contributions to the field of Multi-Criteria Decision Making (MCDM) offer an objective framework for evaluating alternatives in high-stakes policy contexts. AHP was applied to determine the relative importance of policy options according to impact, probability of success, feasibility, and actionability, ensuring that selected strategies aligned with stakeholder priorities in a rigorous and transparent way.

Notably, the top five ranked options – education (with a focus on mobility), public infrastructure, health (post-Covid recovery), Green deal and renewable energies, and food security – reflect stakeholder preferences for pragmatic, non-contentious forms of cooperation. These areas can be likened to what Kim and Mauborgne (2005)'s analogy of 'blue oceans': relatively underexplored, low-conflict areas that offer high potential for constructive engagement. While much of the Track II diplomacy literature emphasises security cooperation – particularly in regions such as South Asia, the Asia-Pacific (e.g. ASEAN regional dialogues, arms control discussions), and the Middle East (Ball, Milner, and Taylor 2006; Capie and Evans 2007; Jones 2003, 2008, 2014; Kaye 2001, 2007) – our findings indicate a marked shift towards actionable, low-politicization issues where mutual interests align and the space for inclusive policymaking is more accessible. This divergence highlights the need to expand the conceptual horizons of Track II beyond traditional security paradigms, especially when guided by participatory methodologies like PAR.

Stage 1: 16 policy options were identified:

There were 16 policy options:

- A1 Economic cooperation on construction with a focus on public infrastructure
- A2 Economic cooperation on textile
- A3 Cooperation on education with a focus on educational mobility
- A4 Cooperation on education with a focus on capacity building
- A5 Cooperation on migration with a focus on border management
- A6 Cooperation on migration with a focus on aid
- A7 Cooperation on the Green Deal with a focus on renewable energy
- A8 Cooperation on agriculture with a focus on food security
- A9 Cooperation on natural resources with a focus on water management
- A10 Cooperation on digitalisation with a focus on e-government
- A11 Cooperation on health with a focus on post-COVID recovery
- A12 Cooperation on financial sector with a focus on digital banking

- A13 Cooperation on good governance with a focus on local governance
- A14 Cooperation on women's rights
- A15 Military cooperation with a focus on capacity building
- A16 Military cooperation with a focus on military equipment

Stage 2: Experts were asked to rate the 16 policy options/priorities² for collaboration between Türkiye and the EU in North Africa based on 4 evaluation criteria:

C1 Impact – Mutual Benefit (29.17%)

C2 Probability of success (29.17%)

C3 Actionability (ease of implementation) (21.67%)

C4 Purposefulness (20%)

Stage 3: Rank order method based on Saaty's (1978) AHP to convert the criteria rankings given by experts to the importance of criteria was used.

Stage 4: Weighted Average method and Manhattan distance-based normalisation were used to reveal normalised weights (Yoon and Hwang 1995).

According to the survey outcomes, the 16 policy options were ranked in the following order of which the top five was scrutinised to identify solid project ideas in the third conference (Table 1):

A tripartite collaboration model was formulated for each policy option, followed by the development of specific project ideas that assessed their impact, probability of success, actionability and purposefulness. Participants of the final (third) conference were then asked to:

1. Identify options in trilateral relations in the general brainstorming session.
2. Divide into breakout rooms of four-five people, review the list of options, and choose the options that they think would generate collaboration among Türkiye, EU, and NA countries.
3. Share and list the options chosen by each participant in the group and develop 2–3 project ideas that will generate a constructive way forward for all parties.

Table 1. The global scores of the policy options.

Policy Options	Score
A3 – Cooperation on education with a focus on educational mobility	3.4167
A1 – Economic cooperation on construction with a focus on public infrastructure	3.3313
A11 – Cooperation on health with a focus on post-Covid recovery	3.1742
A7 – Cooperation on the Green Deal with a focus on renewable energy	3.1138
A8 – Cooperation on agriculture with a focus on food security	3.1129
A9 – Cooperation on natural resources with a focus on water management	3.0883
A4 – Cooperation on education with a focus on capacity building	3.0783
A6 – Cooperation on migration with a focus on aid	3.0542
A5 – Cooperation on migration with a focus on border management	2.9946
A16 – Military cooperation with a focus on military equipment	2.9654
A15 – Military cooperation with a focus on capacity building	2.9400
A2 – Economic cooperation on textile	2.9263
A10 – Cooperation on digitalisation with a focus on e-government	2.9142
A12 – Cooperation on financial sector with a focus on digital banking	2.8796
A14 – Cooperation on women's rights	2.7971
A13 – Cooperation on good governance with a focus on local governance	2.7579

4. Determine the necessary actions, project owners, potential collaborators, budget, and duration for each project.

To ensure thorough verification, follow-up interviews were conducted before and after the conferences, providing an opportunity to refine and validate the project ideas through stakeholder feedback. Consent forms were obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, and data usage was tailored to the preferences of the participants, with many opting for anonymity, particularly among Turkish and EU officials.

A key feature of the methodological design was the emphasis on transforming data and stakeholder input into *actionable knowledge* – a central aim of action research (Reason and Torbert 2001). The participatory structure of the study facilitated a dynamic process in which ideas generated during the search conferences were not treated as static data points but as evolving insights. These were further refined and verified through follow-up interviews, allowing for an iterative validation of emerging priorities.

By employing these AR methodologies, this study aimed to foster collaborative dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders. The resulting insights and policy recommendations provide a robust foundation for future collaboration between the EU, Türkiye, and North Africa, underscoring the value of participatory research in addressing complex international challenges.

Patterns of collaboration

The application of PAR in this study uncovered key patterns and opportunities for strengthening cooperation between Türkiye, the EU, and North Africa – particularly in Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt. By engaging both Track I and II stakeholders, the research mapped sectoral challenges and entry points for deeper collaboration. Out of sixteen identified policy priorities, the following emerged as top areas for joint action.

1. Cooperation on education with a focus on educational mobility: Participants underlined the need to increase student and academic mobility to boost capacity-building and employability, facilitated through programs like Erasmus, Socrates, and Mevlana, could play a significant role in fostering collaboration between Türkiye, the EU, and North Africa. It was stated that Türkiye, with its cultural affinity and integration into the EU's Bologna system, can act as a bridge, offering accessible, high-quality education. The EU, through programs like Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, provides the financial and institutional backbone. A tripartite model was proposed: North African countries define needs, Türkiye offers implementation and adaptation models, and the EU supports with funding and quality assurance. Participants envisioned this as a long-term investment in human capital, intercultural ties, and regional stability.
2. Economic cooperation on construction with a focus on public infrastructure: Public infrastructure, encompassing assets like roads, bridges, wind turbines, public hospitals, and universities, plays a key role in economic growth the region. The construction industry, significant in Türkiye, the EU, and North Africa, is a major economic driver, with a compound annual growth rate of 7.1 between 2020 and 2024 (Globe Newswire 2025). Turkish firms are well-established in Algeria and Libya, offering cost-effective and culturally

attuned expertise in housing, water treatment, and energy projects. Participants emphasised a co-created model where North African countries define needs, Türkiye contributes implementation capacity, and the EU supports financing and regulatory frameworks, particularly through its €300 billion Global Gateway initiative (European Commission 2021a). This tripartite approach was seen as a constructive alternative to China's Belt and Road, emphasising sustainability and local ownership. Aligning with the EU Green Deal, such collaboration could modernise regional infrastructure while advancing shared development and climate goals.

3. Cooperation on health with a focus on post-Covid recovery: The Covid-19 pandemic exposed long-standing weaknesses in healthcare systems across the EU, Türkiye, and North Africa, but also opened new avenues for collaboration. The EU launched EU4Health, its largest health program, alongside initiatives to expand vaccine production in Africa (European Commission 2021b). Despite these efforts, countries like Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt faced vaccine shortages and limited healthcare capacity. By contrast, Türkiye's early reforms and pandemic diplomacy including medical aid and vaccine donations positioned it as a proactive regional health actor (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). Participants envisioned tripartite cooperation involving EU financial and research support, Türkiye's operational capabilities, and North African health priorities. Suggested areas included vaccine supply chains, system strengthening, and collaborative research, advancing a shared goal of regional health security.
4. Cooperation on the Green Deal with a focus on renewable energy: The Mediterranean is warming 20% faster than the global average, intensifying climate-related disasters like the wildfires seen in Türkiye, Greece, and Algeria (UNEP n.d.). The European Green Deal targets climate neutrality by 2050, with renewable energy at its core (European Commission n.d.). Achieving these goals requires regional cooperation, particularly with North African neighbours that hold substantial solar and wind energy potential. Participants highlighted opportunities for tripartite green energy collaboration, where the EU offers funding and technology, Türkiye contributes expertise – especially in wind energy, and North African countries serve as implementation hubs. Such partnerships were seen as advancing energy security, boosting renewable capacity, and supporting shared climate objectives.
5. Cooperation on agriculture with a focus on food security: Food security – ensuring access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food – is a global priority and a central focus of UN Sustainable Development Goal 2. While the EU promotes sustainable agriculture through Mediterranean investment plans, North African countries struggle with volatile production and high import tariffs (European Commission 2021c). Agriculture remains vital to the economies of Türkiye, the EU, and North Africa, with countries like Morocco and Egypt particularly dependent on the sector for employment. In a potential tripartite collaboration, it was suggested that Türkiye and the EU contribute expertise and technology, the EU provides funding, and North African states host and implement sustainable agriculture initiatives. This approach would enhance regional food security and economic resilience, aligning with rising global demand for sustainable food systems and reinforcing North Africa's role as the 'orchard of the EU'.

Challenges and opportunities for Track I and Track II diplomacy

Participants in the study consistently stressed the importance of Track II diplomacy as a means of building trust and fostering relationships between stakeholders in politically sensitive environments. It was noted that Track II efforts could help lay the groundwork for more formal agreements by allowing for dialogue and the exploration of innovative solutions outside the constraints of official diplomatic negotiations. For example, in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean tensions, informal discussions between civil society groups and academic institutions were seen as instrumental in diffusing potential conflicts and identifying areas of cooperation that could be later formalised through Track I diplomacy.

However, the research also identified several challenges to effective collaboration, particularly in terms of stakeholder coordination and the balancing of diverse political interests. During the research, challenges were encountered in recruiting bureaucrats. Although we were unable to recruit any bureaucrats from Morocco, Algeria, or Egypt, we were able to recruit two from Türkiye and six from the EU; however, all of them preferred to remain anonymous, suggesting a growing trend towards the securitisation of issues and restriction of spaces for open discussion. Moreover, the political crisis between Türkiye and Egypt posed another significant challenge to recruiting participants from Egypt. As such, the geopolitical context and domestic political culture and dynamics emerged as obstacles for the effective conduit of PAR. Although the ambition of PAR is to embrace the whole system with formal and informal immersions, in practice it is almost always inevitable to be content with incomplete participation from the entire ecosystem of stakeholders.

In the Turkish context, this marks a significant departure from previous periods when Turkish officials were eager to participate in such projects. Some notable triggers were the Gezi Park protests in 2013, the July 15th, 2016 coup attempt, and Türkiye's transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system, which had profound impacts on the restriction of civic space and the autocratisation of state institutions (Akpınar 2019, 61–63; Esen and Gumuscu 2016). This shift parallels the securitisation of Turkish foreign policy, following a brief period of desecuritisation in the early 2000s, marked by developments such as the initiation of Türkiye's EU candidacy process and the adoption of a foreign policy aligned with the EU's neighbourhood policy, focusing on cooperation and stability, embodied by the renowned 'zero problems with neighbours' policy (Aras and Polat 2008, 499; Çakmaklı 2015, 424). Engagement with civil society actors in foreign policy-making processes was encouraged during Türkiye's brief democratisation period, as seen with initiatives such as the EU accession process, the Armenian opening, the 'zero problems with neighbours' policy, and Türkiye's peace-building and humanitarian diplomacy efforts. However, this engagement has since slowed down. While businesses have been involved to some extent through institutions like DEİK, the involvement of NGOs, academics, and other civil actors has remained limited.

The process of autocratisation has also been reflected in Turkish foreign policy, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) becoming increasingly bureaucratic and top-down, reporting directly to the presidency (Coşkun and Ülgen 2022; Neset et al. 2019). As one of Türkiye's oldest institutions, the MFA has traditionally been a highly bureaucratic entity, resembling the Turkish Armed Forces in terms of its hierarchical structure and *modus operandi*. Although there have been some institutional reforms within the MFA, aimed at aligning it with Türkiye's new geopolitical vision, these efforts have largely been hindered by the transition to the

presidential system (Aras 2015). The top-down nature of the system allows political priorities to overshadow national ones, with a focus on achieving foreign policy 'victories' – particularly in the lead-up to elections.

In recent years, European foreign policy has undergone a similar process of securitisation, largely driven by migration issues, populist politics, and the growing influence of far-right movements, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 migration crisis and Brexit. Populist movements across Europe have framed migration and security as existential threats, prompting the adoption of more restrictive foreign policies focused on border security and diminishing the role of civil society in political processes, alongside significant increases in military spending by EU member states (Farinha and Youngs 2024; Müller and Gebauer 2021).

In addition, European states have reviewed or suspended support for civil society organisations (CSOs) working in conflict areas such as Palestine and Israel, further limiting civil society's role in foreign policy (CIVICUS 2024, 13). This reflects a broader trend where securitisation reduces civic engagement, as evidenced by Germany's downgrade from 'open' to 'narrowed' civic space by the CIVICUS. This development signals a retreat from Europe's traditionally strong support for democratic freedoms and a shift towards prioritising security over civil liberties (Pirozzi and Barana 2021).

The securitisation of foreign policy and the shrinking of civic space were apparent in our research, as the research team encountered difficulties in recruiting participants, many of whom preferred to remain anonymous or were reluctant to share detailed information. Paradoxically, this reinforces the importance of PAR more as a vital method to desecuritise the foreign policy sphere by actively incorporating non-state actors into the dialogue.

A critical yet often overlooked concept in Track II diplomacy is transfer – the process through which ideas, perspectives, and policy proposals generated in Track II are communicated to, and potentially adopted by, Track I actors (Jones 2015, 15). In one of the earliest documented Track II initiatives, John Burton and his colleagues facilitated a series of discreet workshops in 1965–66 aimed at resolving a border dispute among Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. At the time, they assumed that participants would naturally carry the outcomes into official channels. However, subsequent scholarship revealed that transfer is neither direct nor guaranteed. Building on Burton's work, Kelman (2002) and others reframed 'controlled communication' (Burton 1969) as 'interactive problem solving' and conceptualised transfer as a layered process, involving both personal transformation and broader policy influence. Fisher (1997, 225) underscores that transfer can occur through informal relationships, private briefings, internal memos, and public channels like speeches and op-eds. Yet he also critiques the lack of systematic evaluation, noting that assessments often rely on anecdotal affirmations rather than empirical evidence – a concern echoed by Rouhana (2000, 319) in his critique of the weak methodological foundations of problem-solving workshops. Expanding on this, Çuhadar (2009, 642) distinguishes between upward (towards elites), downward (to the public), and lateral (to other Track II processes) forms of transfer. She emphasises that factors such as timing, access to decision-makers, and trust networks are key to success, while also noting that Track II efforts often fall short in transmitting concrete policy proposals into formal negotiations.

Our PAR-based Track II initiative deliberately planned for transfer at multiple levels. Ideas developed through participatory workshops, expert surveys, and interviews were

communicated circularly through launch events, post-conference briefings, and targeted dissemination among bureaucrats, politicians, academics, business associations, journalists, and the public. The initiative fostered what Jones (2015, 149) calls 'process-oriented transfer' creating new conceptual spaces and slowly reframing dominant narratives in policy and public discourse.

In the context of EU–Türkiye relations, the ongoing stalemate over the modernisation of the customs union constrains opportunities for transfer. This impasse often stems from deeper political disagreements over issues such as the rule of law, democratic backsliding and increased authoritarianism in Türkiye, and tensions surrounding migration. These factors contribute to institutional inertia and a diminished appetite among Track I actors for engaging with Track II-generated policy proposals. Despite our concerted efforts to include Track I participants in workshops and consultations, the lack of political momentum at the formal level has limited the potential for meaningful transfer and institutional uptake.

In PAR, the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders is essential for ensuring meaningful engagement, participation, and successful transfer. The role of the convenor – those who initiate and facilitate dialogue – is especially important. While academic institutions were widely regarded as credible convenors a decade ago, their influence has diminished in many contexts due to increasing authoritarian tendencies. Nonetheless, the AR process in this study enabled the formulation of mutually beneficial and actionable solutions through collaboration. AR typically requires sustained engagement over time, as large-scale change processes demand long-term dialogue and trust-building among stakeholders. Encouragingly, there was significant interest from relevant sectors to continue such transformative efforts. Although collective action planning was initiated to influence Track I processes, limitations in funding and project duration curtailed follow-up activities. Still, concrete recommendations were developed to support future efforts. Moreover, the PAR methodology adopted in this study was well received by the funding institution and has since been incorporated into their own workshops and activities. This recognition not only validates the approach's relevance and adaptability but also reflects its potential for broader application in fostering inclusive, multi-stakeholder dialogue within foreign policymaking processes.

Implications of PAR for foreign policy

The findings of this study provide substantial insights into the effectiveness of PAR, particularly in the realms of international relations and foreign policymaking. One of the key strengths of PAR was its ability to facilitate inclusive and collaborative diplomacy. By integrating both Track I and Track II, PAR creates an inclusive dialogue space, bringing together a diverse array of stakeholders. In contexts where traditional diplomacy can be restrictive, especially in sensitive geopolitical environments, PAR may offer a platform for informal actors to make meaningful contributions to the conversation by fostering trust-building. This study aligns with Hilary Bradbury (2015) and William Torbert's (2004) works on action knowledge – a mode of inquiry where knowledge is produced through action and reflection, not apart from it.

Another significant insight from the study is how PAR encourages stakeholder ownership and empowerment. In the participatory nature of PAR, stakeholders are not passive participants but active agents in the research process, taking ownership of both the process and its outcomes (Babüroğlu and Garr 1993; Babüroğlu and Göker 2014). This is particularly vital

in international relations, where the inclusion of local actors can lead to better formulation and implementation of policy (Paffenholz 2014). This sense of ownership is particularly effective in post-conflict scenarios or regions with a history of external intervention like North Africa, where local engagement is key to long-term success.

The study also highlights how PAR can resolve protracted relations between adversarial parties. While Track I diplomacy often focuses on high-level negotiations, Track II diplomacy, facilitated by PAR, can address sensitive or complex issues in ways that formal processes may not. This is especially useful when formal negotiations stall due to political sensitivities, as informal dialogues can continue to explore common ground. Track II actors can also contribute to confidence-building measures, which can later be formalised in official negotiations. This approach fosters a more sustainable, long-term approach to international relations.

The flexibility of PAR also enhances its applicability in international contexts. Its iterative nature allows it to adapt to varied geopolitical landscapes, as demonstrated in the study's examination of Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt, where PAR was tailored to account for differing political and economic conditions. This adaptability is a major advantage over more rigid methodologies that struggle to keep pace with the dynamic nature of international relations.

However, the study also identifies challenges in applying PAR to foreign policy. Power imbalances remain an issue, as more powerful actors may still dominate discussions despite PAR's efforts to mitigate such dynamics. Political sensitivities also present difficulties, as governments and stakeholders in highly securitised regions may be reluctant to engage openly. Additionally, coordinating the diverse array of actors involved in PAR can be challenging, making effective facilitation and communication crucial.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that while PAR aspires to integrate both Track I and Track II actors, real-world application may require flexibility due to external constraints. In this study, limited participation from Track I officials – especially from North African countries – highlighted the challenges of engaging formal diplomacy actors within securitised and institutionally cautious environments. Nevertheless, PAR's ability to adapt and redirect the process towards more responsive Track II actors ensured that collaborative dialogue could continue. This reinforces PAR's value not only as an inclusive methodology in theory, but as a resilient mechanism in practice – capable of navigating institutional silences and still fostering policy co-creation through available, engaged stakeholders.

PAR is not only applicable but highly effective in foreign policy, especially albeit as Track II policy making which is when stakeholder engagement, inclusion, and trust-building are essential. PAR's ability to address complex, multifaceted issues make it a valuable methodology for developing sustainable foreign policy initiatives. As such, the participatory, iterative, and flexible nature of PAR makes it invaluable for navigating the complexities of international relations and foreign policymaking.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the value of integrating Participatory Action Research (PAR) into the practice and analysis of Track II diplomacy, particularly in the context of EU–Türkiye–North Africa cooperation. By applying PAR's inclusive and iterative approach, the research engaged a wide range of stakeholders – including policymakers, experts, and civil society actors – across multiple rounds of workshops, interviews, and expert surveys. This participatory structure not only identified key policy areas such as education, public health, energy, and food security but

also facilitated co-learning and the formulation of actionable, mutually beneficial recommendations. These findings reflect the power of PAR to generate 'blue ocean' cooperation strategies that move beyond contentious or securitised policy domains (Kim and Mauborgne 2005).

Methodologically, this paper contributes to the literature by adapting PAR to a trans-regional, multi-actor setting and combining it with tools like the Analytic Hierarchy Process (Saaty 1978) to rigorously evaluate stakeholder priorities. This hybrid model strengthens the strategic use of Track II diplomacy by ensuring that proposed initiatives are not only participatory but also analytically robust and policy relevant. In doing so, the study advances the methodological toolkit available for foreign policy co-creation, especially in contexts where formal diplomatic channels face trust deficits or bureaucratic inertia.

The paper also critically engages with the concept of transfer – the process through which ideas generated in Track II settings influence Track I policymaking. While institutional and political constraints – such as the EU – Türkiye customs union impasse and democratic backsliding – limited opportunities for formal uptake, the project demonstrated multiple pathways of soft transfer. These included stakeholder briefings, conference dissemination, and the involvement of Track 1.5 actors who maintain proximity to official institutions. This highlights how PAR can create informal mechanisms of influence even in difficult political environments.

By expanding the conceptual horizons of Track II diplomacy beyond security-focused dialogues, this study positions participatory diplomacy as a strategic tool for fostering inclusive, adaptable, and forward-looking foreign policy practices. In an era marked by geopolitical fragmentation, mistrust, and democratic fatigue, embedding participatory methodologies into diplomacy is both timely and normatively urgent. Future research should examine how PAR-informed Track II processes evolve over time and interact with formal diplomacy across diverse geopolitical contexts. Comparative studies across issue domains such as climate adaptation, migration, or digital governance could test PAR's broader applicability in co-creating policy in a multipolar world. To strengthen both theory and practice, future scholarship must also grapple with the internal power dynamics of participatory processes to avoid reproducing existing asymmetries. Practically, next steps include scaling PAR methods to reach underrepresented sectors and regions – such as the South Caucasus, the Sahel, or Southeast Asia – and forging stronger institutional linkages between Track I and Track II actors to ensure sustainability and impact. Ultimately, this research offers a pathway towards a more inclusive and resilient model of diplomacy suited to the complex realities of global cooperation.

Ethical approval

Interviews were conducted with ethical approval from the Sabancı University Research Ethics Committee (protocol number FASS-2021-51). Approval was granted by the Committee Chair, Prof. Mehmet Yıldız, and can be verified by phone at 0090-216-483-9010 or by email at meyildiz@sabanci-univ.edu. Interviewees gave written informed consent and were provided with detailed information about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of their involvement, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. Where participants could be identifiable, explicit consent to publish was also obtained.

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Notes

1. See [Appendix A1](#) for a complete timeline of Interviews, Search Conferences, and Survey.
2. See [Table 1](#) - The Global Scores of the Policy Options.

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