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Research Report

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SWP Comment

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From Biden to Trump: Waning Turkish-American Relationship Demands Greater European Engagement

Mehmet Yegin and Salim Çevik

President Biden's term is coming to an end. Turkish-American relations have reached a low, with Erdoğan noting that Biden is the first US president with whom he has had no meaningful dialogue. The Erdoğan government believes this is due to the Biden administration's "overemphasis" on democracy and human rights, and hopes that election of Donald Trump will open a new page. However, the bilateral problems are deeper than Erdoğan realises and relations will remain at a low level for the foreseeable future. Turkey's strategic importance to the United States is in decline not only because of Washington's "pivot to Asia", but also due to Erdoğan's considerable liabilities, his waning political credibility, and diverging interests between Ankara and Washington in the region. This steady downturn has direct implications for the European Union, which does not have the luxury of downgrading its engagement and will have to take the lead.

The Biden administration's approach to Erdoğan was unfavourable from the outset. During his campaign, Biden emphasised his pro-democracy stance and opposition to authoritarian leaders. He criticised Trump's unrestricted support for Egypt's President Sisi, whom he called "Trump's favourite dictator", and pledged to punish Saudi Arabia for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Biden also targeted Erdoğan, predicting in a *New York Times* interview that he would be ousted by a strengthened opposition.

Unsurprisingly, Turkey's government and pro-government media reacted nega-

tively, expressing a clear preference for Trump. When Biden won, Erdoğan adopted a more reconciliatory tone, seeking to improve ties with the United States, the EU and Israel, after tensions between Turkey and the West (Greece, the EU and the United States) in the eastern Mediterranean peaked in summer 2020. This shift was part of Turkey's broader recalibration of foreign policy in response to its increasing isolation and a dire economic situation that made a confrontational foreign policy unsustainable. The joint US-EU initiative to resolve tensions in the eastern Mediterranean also played an important role.



So despite the negative tone set by Biden, Erdoğan tried to create a more positive environment and open a new chapter in Turkish-American relations. Erdoğan's ultimate goal was to curry favour in Washington and avert the possibility of adverse US influence on his position in Turkey. His strategy involved securing Washington's tolerance for his authoritarian actions at home and acquiring greater freedom in foreign policy, particularly regarding Turkey's ties with Russia and opposition to US support for Kurdish groups in Syria.

Erdoğan also sought recognition as a global leader. His image as a statesman of global stature is particularly important for his domestic posture, and he attaches particular importance to his meetings with major global leaders and especially American presidents. But Biden remained distant, marking the beginning of a more disengaged era in US-Turkey relations.

Era of avoidance

Biden's engagement with Ankara contrasted sharply with Obama's, who prioritised Turkey from the outset, recognising Ankara as a crucial partner for Washington's efforts to restore its image among Muslim populations after the Iraq War. Biden waited three months before communicating with Erdoğan at all, which Ankara saw as a snub. When he did finally call, it was to announce his decision to recognise the Armenian Genocide — a step previous presidents had avoided despite significant lobbying efforts by the Armenian diaspora. This decision underlined the White House's diminishing desire to shield Ankara.

Biden's approach was defined by disengagement. This meant minimising contact with Erdoğan while emphasising democracy and human rights issues, in line with Biden's value-based approach to bilateral relations. Biden also issued a statement criticising Turkey's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and domestic violence, calling the move "deeply disappointing".

During meetings with their Turkish counterparts, American officials also insisted on a policy shift regarding Turkey's relations with Russia and its acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defence system, as well as normalisation with Greece. Facing a stubborn White House that was essentially ignoring Erdoğan, Ankara sought opportunities to regain favour in Washington. One such opportunity emerged in summer 2021, when Turkey offered to guard Kabul Airport during the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. This offer was welcomed in Washington and earned Erdoğan his first meeting with Biden at the 2021 NATO summit. In the end, the unprecedented speed with which the Kabul government collapsed prevented Ankara from using Afghanistan to rebuild relations. From that point until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Turkey has desperately looked for an opportunity to increase its standing in Washington.

Repercussions of the Ukraine war: Changing US strategic calculations

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 gave Erdoğan the opportunity he was seeking. Initially the war put Turkey in a tight spot. On the one hand, Turkey has opposed Russia's interventions since 2014 and clearly sides with Ukraine. On the other hand, relations with Russia were too entrenched and intricate for Ankara to directly challenge Moscow. Overall, Turkey pursued a pro-Ukrainian policy without being anti-Russian.

The war improved Turkey's and Erdoğan's standing in several ways. First of all, it underlined Turkey's geostrategic importance as the guardian of access to the Black Sea. Turkey promptly applied the Montreux Convention and closed the straits to all warships, crucially undermining Russian supremacy in the Black Sea. Turkey also did not hesitate to supply arms to Ukraine and its renowned drones proved vital for Ukraine's defence, especially in the early stages of the war. And finally, Erdoğan

attempted to exploit his personal relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine/the West. One outcome was the short-lived grain deal. Turkey's enhanced importance forced Washington to tolerate its non-participation in sanctions against Russia.

As the war enhanced Erdoğan's global standing, he received a golden opportunity when Sweden and Finland applied for NATO membership in May 2022. This afforded Erdoğan a unique opportunity to re-negotiate the parameters of US-Turkish relations, as NATO's decisions must be unanimous. Erdoğan held up Sweden's application for almost two years, using the process as leverage with the Biden administration. Throughout the long negotiation process, Biden was forced to engage personally with Erdoğan and they had a number of phone calls and meetings. And as Turkey gained leverage through its veto in NATO, Washington stopped raising human rights in bilateral meetings. The Biden administration preferred to wait for the outcome of Turkey's May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections before devoting its full diplomatic attention to this problem and resetting its relations with Turkey. In fact, most Western countries took a "wait-and-see" approach throughout the year leading up to the 2023 elections, given the realistic prospect that Erdoğan's era might be nearing its end.

Failure to fully restore the relationship

Once it became clear that Erdoğan would continue to lead Turkey for at least another five years, ignoring him became increasingly costly and unsustainable for Washington. Biden was among the first global leaders to call to congratulate Erdoğan, signalling that the era of avoidance was coming to an end. Eventually a deal was negotiated involving the modernisation of Turkey's F-16 warplanes in exchange for Turkey's approval of Sweden's membership of NATO. This showed that Biden's policy of limited en-

gagement actually worked. Every time Biden contacted Erdoğan during the long negotiations for Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership, he managed to bring him one step closer to Turkish acceptance and approval. But there is another side to the coin. The negotiations probably took longer because of Biden's policy of giving Erdoğan the cold shoulder. Still, after almost two years of delay, the Biden administration threw its full weight behind pushing the US Congress to accept the deal. Moreover, State Department officials signalled the possibility of Turkey receiving the F-35 joint strike fighter if it agreed to shelve its Russian S-400s (procurement of which was the original reason for its exclusion from the F-35 programme). This expression of intent reflected a genuine desire to improve relations with Turkey.

The Turkish side wanted to capitalise on the situation to generate momentum for better relations. Two US Senators, Chris Murphy and Jeanne Shaheen, visited Ankara and spoke of "a moment of significant momentum." The most concrete outcome was the decision of US Department of Defense to collaborate with Turkish subcontractors to create a facility in Texas to manufacture 155 mm artillery shells. On top of all these developments, two meetings between Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in March and April 2024 signalled the possibility of a new phase in the bilateral relations. Moreover, an invitation to the White House, for which Erdoğan had been pushing for years, was mooted for May 2024. The hope was that this visit would mark a fresh start.

In the end the Turkish side postponed the meeting without a clear explanation, while the Americans issued a statement indicating that they had not yet established definitive arrangements for the visit. Although the parties referred to technical disagreements, the problem was that the Biden administration preferred to avoid staging a high-level visit that could increase Erdoğan's profile in the international and domestic arena. In that context, it was no

coincidence that the planned meeting was announced unilaterally by the Turkish side on 26 March, five days before the municipal elections.

When the Gaza crisis blew up, Erdoğan treated it as parallel to the situation in Ukraine, positioning Turkey as a potential mediator between Israel and Hamas. He plainly misread the situation, however, since his meeting with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Istanbul in April 2024 created international controversy. Washington does not regard Erdoğan as a possible mediator between Hamas and Israel nor was such an initiative welcomed by regional Arab countries. The Biden administration was juggling full support for Israel in its war on Gaza with attempts to placate Muslim Americans during a difficult election season at home. A state visit by Erdoğan would have drawn attention to the issue – which the Biden administration wanted to avoid.

Ongoing collaboration and potential overtures

Despite the cancellation of Erdoğan's visit, the Biden administration-quietly maintained cooperation with Ankara. Turkish intelligence helped to arrange prisoner swap between Russia and the United States (mainly Russian intelligence operatives for American and German citizens). While the Biden administration did not deny Ankara's role in the exchange neither it did specify the importance of Ankara's role vis-à-vis several other allies. After Biden called Erdoğan on 1 August 2024 to express gratitude for the collaboration, the readout was published by the Turkish Directorate of Communications but not by the White House. As the second matter the US officials confirmed a likely deal with Turkey to station Russian S-400s at Incirlik airbase in exchange for readmittance to the F-35 programme. In return, Erdoğan signalled incremental improvements in bilateral relations even if Harris won in November.

Recently, Erdoğan and his coalition partner have indicated the potential for a peace

process with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), prompted by the escalating instability in the Middle East stemming from tensions between Israel and Iran. If successful, this initiative could potentially resolve a significant rift between the United States and Turkey regarding the legitimacy of the People's Defence Units (YPG) in Syria, which are linked with the PKK. The peace process has the potential to alleviate Turkey's threat perception regarding the YPG, which has been a significant component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and a key ally of the US coalition in the fight against ISIS for nearly a decade. Most analysts view the actions of the Turkish government with scepticism, regarding them as components of a broader strategy aimed at securing Erdoğan's re-election. Moreover, the previous peace initiative not only failed but in fact exacerbated confrontations between Turkish security forces and the PKK in urban areas. Still, if it is successful, this process holds the potential to enhance the relationship between Turkey and the United States.

Limits of rapprochement

Overall, while the circumstances emerging from the Russian invasion of Ukraine benefited Turkey in its dealings with the US and elevated its status in Washington, this has been a limited rapprochement.

Comparison with Saudi Arabia and Egypt reveals the limited nature of the rapprochement with Turkey. Although Biden distanced himself from the former during his campaign and his first year in office, on grounds of democracy and human rights, the sanctions placed on Russia increased the importance of oil from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, the growing influence of Russia and China in the region forced Washington to convey a clear message that it intended to stay in the region. Biden visited both Saudi Arabia and Egypt – but not Turkey. President Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia in June 2022 was a particularly important milestone.

Biden wrote an apologetic op-ed explaining the reasons behind the visit — which was at odds with his avowal of the importance of democracy and the Western alliance in the same newspaper just a year earlier. Nevertheless, the Biden administration never endorsed Erdoğan, nor did it grant him the long-awaited legitimacy of an official visit in Ankara or Washington.

There are two principal reasons for Biden's limited engagement of with Erdoğan. The first is the of Turkey's declining overall geostrategic significance for the United States. Although the Ukraine war has increased Turkey's importance, it has not made it indispensable. While Ankara did establish itself as a mediator early in the conflict, for example through the grain deal, this was a short-lived moment. Turkey is not central to the Sino-American rivalry in the Middle East, and it is not among China's five principal partners in the region — Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey was conspicuously absent from Xi Jinping's 2022 Middle East tour, which centred on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. US military investments in countries from Greece to Jordan have relativised Turkey's indispensability for US security calculations in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean.

The second reason stems from Erdoğan's personal reputation, which is shaped by more than two decades of political baggage and fluctuating foreign policy positions. Turkey has evolved from a stronghold of relative stability and economic progress to a source of instability, marked by a worrying economic landscape. Reversing that perception will be challenging. While Erdoğan's pragmatism made reconciliation possible in the first place, it also ensures that no agreement with him is ever final. Bilateral problems are never resolved, merely placed to one side for the time being. Consequently, Erdoğan, who has made many foreign policy U-turns over the years, is not seen as a reliable ally, partner or interlocutor by most regional and global actors. Therefore, while transactional cooperation is certainly on the table, a grand bargain and a new

beginning are improbable. This limits Turkey's ability to set a constructive long-term agenda and means it has to wait for crises to engage with the United States.

These factors indicate that the deterioration in Turkish-American relations cannot be attributed exclusively to ideological differences, such as Biden's emphasis on normative values, or personal dynamics, including what the Turkish side perceives as a lack of chemistry between Erdoğan and Biden. Instead, it is driven by structural issues and Erdoğan's own (lack of) credibility. Ankara's expectations that relations will improve significantly under a second Trump presidency are therefore unrealistic. Of course amicable personal relations between leaders do not necessarily guarantee good bilateral relations between their nations. In fact, despite Trump's known affinity for autocratic leaders and the apparent chemistry between Erdoğan and Trump, some of the most significant problems in Turkey-US relations occurred during Trump's first presidency. These included Turkey's purchase of Russian S400 missiles and the corresponding CAATSA sanctions, and sanctions over the imprisonment of Pastor Brunson.

Building on Biden's legacy

Overall, Turkish-American relations saw a significant downgrade under the Biden administration, with engagement limited to a transactional, issue-based approach. Even tectonic geopolitical shifts such as the Ukraine war and the subsequent deals on NATO enlargement brought only limited reconciliation. The quid-pro quo deals neither resolved fundamental differences between the two, nor elevated Turkey's importance for the United States in the region.

The new administration may revive a number of quid-pro-quo deals inherited from the Biden administration. Ankara may shelve its Russian S-400s in exchange for F-35 warplanes and consider a new Kurdish peace initiative, as Erdoğan seeks to improve relations to bolster support for the

Turkish economy. The economic challenges are adversely impacting the Turkish electorate, diminishing Erdoğan's electoral support at home. Nonetheless, any and all measures are subject to reversal should Erdoğan decide that an anti-Western narrative more effectively bolsters his position in the domestic arena. This scenario appears increasingly likely, given his alliance with the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party, which steers the coalition further away from the principles of democracy and rule of law.

The experience and trajectory of Turkey-US relations under Biden provides valuable insights for EU leaders. Most importantly, EU leaders should recognise Erdoğan's emphasis on high-level bilateral meetings and use them sparingly to secure concrete outcomes. This approach grants significant leverage, as Biden demonstrated by engaging with Erdoğan only when essential, and avoiding actions that might bolster his image domestically. Unlike Biden, Erdoğan typically uses public exchanges with Western leaders, whether friendly or hostile, to strengthen his standing at home. Biden's reserved engagement, neither overtly supportive nor openly confrontational, has been particularly frustrating for Erdoğan, who usually benefits from visible interactions with Western leaders. By limiting his commitment, Biden also minimised the risk of becoming a scapegoat in Erdoğan's domestic political discourse, where anti-Americanism is a constant. Biden's low profile ensured that Erdoğan could not further inflame anti-Americanism and force the opposition to condemn the United States.

It may be difficult for EU leaders to completely sideline Erdoğan, but they can still be more selective when it comes to high-level meetings. That would require better coordination between member states. A balanced approach that avoids both verbal clashes and gestures of endorsement is essential. Clearly distinguishing between Turkey and Erdoğan himself is a promising strategy. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's visit in April exemplifies this

approach: as well as Erdoğan he met with prominent opposition figures including Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu.

EU-Turkey relations and the next US administration

While the United States has downgraded its relations with Turkey, the EU cannot. As a neighbour, the EU has to work with Turkey on various issues, above all security and migration. According to the political guidelines published by second-term European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, cooperation with non-EU countries in these two fields will continue. The appointment of a Commissioner for the Mediterranean might direct more attention to this area, while public pressure on migration may push EU decision-makers to pursue a more pragmatic approach.

Nonetheless, as also indicated in the political guidelines, the EU's democratic values must still be defended and upheld. The EU therefore needs to develop a structured Turkey policy that balances migration, security and economic stability with democratic principles and respect for human rights. Such a policy requires better coordination with member states in order to implement a coherent Turkey policy within the EU Council and among member states with diverging interests. Given the varying and often conflicting interests of the member states, the High Representative may be tasked with mediating among the member states to create a unified EU approach. Ankara's eagerness to negotiate support for the Turkish economy, modernisation of the Customs Union and visa liberalisation expands the manoeuvring space available to negotiators. The visa liberalisation issue also aligns with the principles of democracy and the rule of law, in particular given Ankara's commitment to employ a terrorism definition that adheres to those foundational values. This includes Turkey complying with European Court of Human Rights rulings on prominent cases such as Osman Kavala, Selahattin Demirtaş and

Yuksel Yalcinkaya — steps crucial for both justice and Turkey's economic well-being.

The migration deal overshadows all other policy dimensions and is currently the sole point of cooperation between Turkey and EU. However, this generates scepticism towards the EU in Turkey as it creates the impression that the EU is engaging with an authoritarian government solely over migration, while sidelining broader democratic and human rights concerns. To address this, the EU should avoid creating any impression that it is making deals with Erdoğan that ignore democratic rights and civil liberties. A climate of Euroscepticism would jeopardise Turkey-EU relations in the long term — when dealing with a more democratic future government in Ankara could bring better cooperation and more constructive synergy.

Turkey's commitment to the Western geopolitical alliance has waned over the past two decades. Traditionally, Ankara's ties with the West were shaped largely by its relationship with Washington. With that anchor weakening, the EU must now take greater initiative in managing its relationship with Turkey. The EU must now step into a leading role in the West's relations with Turkey, rather than relying on US guidance.

As the EU takes a more active role, it still needs to factor in the US-Turkey relationship. American policies, and the associated Turkish-American relations, will remain an important factor. Here the EU should take the lead and work to bring Washington on board even if this only amounts to rhetorical or symbolic support.

During Trump's first term, NATO's credibility and future were questioned and the Trump-Erdoğan relationship contributed to instability in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. It is reasonable to expect that that situation will return during Trump's second term. Trump developed a relationship with Erdoğan and at times expressed

his personal admiration. But their relationship was not stable and failed to address the core issues. Instead, they made personal side-deals that have created additional challenges for the EU in terms of stability and democracy on its eastern perimeter.

Collaboration between the United States and the European Union, along with Turkey's recent foreign policy shifts, have already helped reduce tensions between Turkey and Greece/Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean. However, this relative calm should not be taken for granted, and the EU must be prepared for potential turmoil between Turkey and Greece. The establishment of a new Commissioner for the Mediterranean is particularly timely in this context. It would be wise for the EU to implement pre-emptive measures before Trump's inauguration in January, to mitigate the risk of reescalation in the region without depending on uncertain US support. Agreement on a code of conduct for encounters between Greek and Turkish naval and coastguard vessels could reduce the risks of unnecessary provocation and escalation.

Managing relations with Turkey will require the EU to adopt a proactive approach that balances regional security needs with democratic principles. As American priorities shift, the EU must be ready to take the lead on migration, security and economic stability, aligning with Washington wherever possible. A consistent and coordinated EU strategy will be essential for a stable, constructive relationship with Turkey in the years ahead.

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