



# TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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**Vol. 5, No. 2, March - April 2021**

## **The way forward for Turkish-American relations: Partnership à la carte?**

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As the Kremlinologists of yesteryear tried to deduce who was in favor in Moscow by examining the position of senior leaders in a May Day parade, so observers of Turkish-U.S. ties have often looked at how long a telephone tête-à-tête lasts between the countries' leaders to divine the health of Ankara and Washington's relations. Given that, the fact that U.S. President Joe Biden has not yet deigned to call President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan even after two months in office – despite having spoken to more than 60 other leaders already – speaks volumes about the current state of bilateral ties.

Turkish-American ties have long been in a steep decline – something that is true for Ankara's relations with the West in general. In fact, even in the heyday of the Atlantic alliance, Turkey and the United States pursued different foreign policy priorities and held contrasting threat assessments stemming from their asymmetrical power relations. But since the end of the Cold War, divergent interests have become more pronounced between the two in the absence of a common enemy. Today, the number of issues the sides disagree on exceeds the number of ones they agree upon. All the while, mutual distrust is deepening, as Turkey and the United States fail over and over to reconcile their differences. Worse, the erosion of the institutional pillars of their partnership over the years presents a formidable obstacle to any attempts to restore bilateral cooperation.

Given the new Biden administration's sensitivity toward democracy and human rights, Turkish-American relations are expected to enter a tough period, at least in the short run. Ankara is well aware that President Erdoğan will no longer enjoy the privileges he had in his highly personal relations with former President Donald Trump. Unlike his predecessor, Joe Biden has pledged to bring back traditional diplomacy by championing norms, rules and institutions in the conduct of foreign policy. More importantly, his administration is set to strengthen the rule-based liberal democratic order under U.S.

leadership, meaning Washington will likely act in greater coordination with its European allies in this regard.

In parallel with international developments, Ankara has recently adopted a more conciliatory tone toward the United States and Europe; indeed, it seeks to compartmentalize its relations with Washington. With NATO's second-largest army, Turkey remains essential to preserving European security as a significant player in the region – even as it drifts ever further away from democratic norms. Ultimately, against the backdrop of a second Cold War brewing between the United States and China, how the Biden administration balances values and interests in managing relations with Turkey will not only shape the future of Turkish-American relations, but also have profound regional repercussions.

This article duly explores the degree that Turkey's pragmatic approach accords with the Biden administration's foreign policy vision – especially its emphasis on respect for democratic values – and whether it is possible to build a more realistic basis for Turkish-American cooperation lest there be a complete rupture in the relations between Ankara and the West.

### **The Turkey-U.S. relationship status: “It’s complicated”**

Last March featured the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Truman Doctrine, a major turning point in the history of Turkish-American relations that launched Turkish-American collaboration in the wake of the Cold War and paved the way for Turkey's inclusion in the Western security umbrella of NATO in 1952.

Much has changed since then. The U.S.-led liberal international order has been struggling in the face of various challenges both at home and abroad. The country's global power has been in decline, as has its leadership – mostly due to Washington's own misguided foreign policy decisions since the end of the Cold War. The jury remains out on whether American institutions will eventually emerge stronger after repairing the damage caused by the Trump presidency. As for the United States' trans-Atlantic allies, the European Union is suffering from a structural lack of cohesion that was exacerbated by the economic crisis of 2008, the refugee influx of 2014 and Brexit in 2020. And then there are actors like Russia and China, both of which have been defying U.S. global leadership in seeking an equal share as great powers.

Against this backdrop, many things have also changed for Turkey, particularly its threat perceptions regarding Russia. The Kremlin's active involvement in the Syrian civil war, its green light to Turkey's military operations in Syria and, without question, the failed coup attempt to topple Erdoğan in 2016 (an event that Ankara has perceived as an international plot by its putative Western allies, the United States in particular) have altogether dramatically altered Turkey's threat assessments. While the basic pillars of the Turkish-U.S. alliance traditionally remained strong enough to reconcile the countries' differences, Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 air defense system from Russia in 2019 led

to a genuine paradigm shift in Turkish-American relations, driving a wedge into the NATO alliance.

Turkey, like many other actors in the region, has felt emboldened to pursue a more independent foreign policy line in the last decade amid the void created by the U.S. retrenchment from the Middle East and the resulting disarray among its Western partners. The ruling AKP's consolidation of power at home has also given it greater room to maneuver in foreign affairs, which has meant ideological preferences and domestic political concerns often dictate Ankara's foreign policy decisions. Yet, it is primarily this power vacuum that has allowed Turkey to bend the boundaries of the alliance to its interests by seeking alternative partners when it saw fit and frequently playing one power against another at minimum cost.

### **Biden vows 'America is coming back'**

Now that the Biden administration has pledged to bring American leadership back on track, it will be harder – and costlier – for Turkey to play the Russia or China card against the United States. The U.S. Interim National Security Strategy Document of March 3 outlines a rather ambitious set of goals, including rebuilding at home, restoring American credibility abroad, revitalizing democracy and bolstering alliances in order to meet challenges in a changing global security landscape. It remains to be seen whether Biden's team will succeed in squaring its idealistic goals with the requirements of realpolitik. However, it is noteworthy that the document defines China as the “only potentially capable competitor” to the U.S.-backed international system; Russia, by contrast, is portrayed as an ambitious player with a “disruptive role.”<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact, the Biden administration recently adopted a tougher stance towards both Russia and China. In an interview in March, Biden said Russian President Vladimir Putin would “pay the price” for meddling in the 2020 election in an effort to “denigrate” Biden's candidacy. What's more, Biden also called Putin a “killer.”<sup>2</sup>

The first high-level talks between the United States and China that took place in Alaska last month also got off to a rocky start. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken opened his remarks by lambasting China for undermining the rule-based international order and expressed his “deep concerns with actions by China in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan,” cyberattacks against the United States, as well as efforts to economically coerce Washington's allies.<sup>3</sup>

Since actions speak louder than words, both China and Russia have chosen the path of escalation in the face of public spats. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi signed a 25-year, \$400 billion strategic partnership deal with Iran that will pave the way for Chinese investment in Iran's banking, telecommunications, transportation, health care and other sectors in return for a discounted supply of oil.<sup>4</sup> The deal with China will certainly ease the economic distress in Iran amid the United States' suffocating sanctions and the Biden administration's slow moving efforts to resume nuclear negotiations with the Islamic republic.

On the other hand, Russia's huge military buildup on Ukraine's eastern border and in Crimea a week after four Ukrainian soldiers were killed by Russian-backed militias in the Donbass region has alarmed NATO. Biden affirmed his country's unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity against Russian aggression.<sup>5</sup> In response, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov warned that a renewed war in Donbass would destroy Ukraine.<sup>6</sup>

### **For Turkey, peril and promise with Eurasia's big powers**

Escalating tension among the United States, Russia and China puts Turkey in a difficult spot. Turkey and Russia have been in close communication in Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan even though they back opposing sides in the three distinct conflicts. But as a staunch supporter of Ukraine's territorial integrity, it opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. And in addition to its close defense cooperation with Kyiv, Turkey, as of January 2021, assumed command of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) - which was created to enhance deterrence against Russian aggression on NATO's eastern flank. Therefore, in the event that the military tension in Ukraine spirals out of control, Turkey could become embroiled in a fight against Russian forces. All the while, the recent flare-up of violence in Idlib in northwest Syria as Russian jets hit Syrian towns near the Turkish border could be interpreted as an attempt by the Kremlin to tie Turkey's hands by forestalling its efforts to side with the West outside the Syrian theater.<sup>7</sup>

Turkey-China relations, on the other hand, harbor their own increasingly visible internal contradictions. Ankara, which is interested in becoming a logistical hub in the Middle Corridor Project aspect of China's Belt and Road Initiative, has been pursuing close relations with Beijing in line with its multidimensional approach to foreign policy. As such, Chinese investments in Turkey have grown over the years, reaching \$1.2 billion in 2019; nevertheless, that is just a drop in the bucket compared to the \$100 billion in investments from Europe during that same time.<sup>8</sup>

Still, China has come to Turkey's aid at critical times, such as in June 2019, when the Chinese Central Bank transferred \$1 billion in funds to Turkey just before a rerun of Istanbul's important municipal elections as part of a lira-yuan swap agreement.<sup>9</sup> And when Turkey failed to procure European-made Covid-19 vaccines due to economic constraints, China again stepped into the breach by agreeing to provide 100 million doses of a vaccine made by its Sinovac Biotech.<sup>10</sup>

However, delays in the shipping of a new batch of vaccines – which just happened to coincide with a delay in the Turkish Parliament's ratification of a bilateral extradition treaty – has exposed the fact that Beijing has indeed been using investments as political leverage to silence Turkey's criticisms against China's repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's emphasis on elevating "the Turkey-China strategic cooperative ties" during his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi's visit to Ankara in March, not only conflicted with Ankara's commitment to an

“autonomous” foreign policy, but it also raised questions about its sincerity in seeking a reset in Turkish-U.S. relations.<sup>12</sup>

### **The fine line in U.S.-Turkish relations**

The list of issues that divide Turkey and the United States are long: Turkey’s deployment of the Russian-made S-400s, U.S. support for the People’s Protection Units (YPG) – an affiliate of the PKK – in Syria and the impending trial of Halkbank in a New York court are just a few. The Biden administration has previously indicated that sanctions imposed by the Trump administration on Turkey’s defense industry over its acquisition of the S-400s under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) could be expanded if Ankara and Washington fail to reconcile their differences.

In February, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar suggested that Turkey was open to a compromise that would echo the one Greece reached in 1997 after it acquired Russia’s older S-300 defense system from Greek Cyprus and stationed it in Crete.<sup>13</sup> It remains to be seen whether the United States would accept Turkey’s deployment of the S-400 on its soil but keep the system deactivated or whether Turkey would agree to the establishment of a monitoring mechanism to ensure that the defense system is not activated. Meanwhile, the Halkbank trial, which is expected to resume in May, portends another coming storm between Ankara and Washington. The Turkish state-owned bank could face a fine of up to \$20 billion for helping Iran evade sanctions.<sup>14</sup> On top of this is the possibility that Biden could recognize the massacre and deportation of Ottoman Armenians as a genocide on April 24, the anniversary of the events.<sup>15</sup>

Given the packed agenda of issues, each of which require painstaking negotiations between Ankara and Washington, the short-term goal seems to be preventing bilateral ties from hitting another low. From this perspective, Biden’s silent treatment of Erdoğan suggests he is deferring solutions until the atmosphere is more conducive to dialogue while avoiding the optics of cozying up to a leader whose country is backsliding on democracy. Besides, the Biden administration has its own priorities, particularly in controlling the Covid-19 pandemic and resurrecting the economy. And on the foreign policy front, the United States is more focused on dealing with China, Russia and Iran rather than on the contentious topics that have driven a wedge between Washington and Ankara.

But as indicated by Blinken at the NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting in March, the United States and NATO have a strong interest in “keeping Turkey anchored in the alliance.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike its predecessor, the Biden administration does not shy away from expressing its concerns with regard to the democratic backsliding in Turkey, however, it also leaves the door open to restore cooperation. In this respect, the United States’ proposal for Turkey to mediate between the Afghan government and the Taliban conveys a message that urges Ankara to help settle disputes rather than provoke new ones.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Biden’s invitation to 40 leaders, including Erdoğan, to a virtual summit on climate change indirectly aims to encourage Turkey to ratify the Paris Climate Agreement.<sup>18</sup>

To the dismay of many who look to the West to help ensure Turkey's democratization, the Biden administration's suggestion that EU officials not impose further sanctions on Turkey in the wake of the EU Summit on March 25, has understandably raised eyebrows.<sup>19</sup> The White House's approach is a clear indicator that, rhetoric on human rights aside, interests prevail over values; after all, the move coincided with a number of critical – and in terms of Turkish democracy, worrying – decisions by Ankara, including a lawsuit to shutter the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the ousting of the well-regarded Central Bank governor and Erdoğan's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, an agreement to prevent violence against women of which Turkey was the first signatory.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the day, Washington has to walk a fine line in coaxing Turkey back toward democracy without alienating the country and pushing it further into the arms of Russia and China. Accordingly, embracing issue-based cooperation may offer a more realistic platform for Turkish-American relations for now. At the very least, it may prevent bilateral ties from flying off the rails, thereby keeping Turkey within the Western alliance. However, this does nothing to conceal the fact that Turkey's democratic backsliding renders it an unpredictable actor in foreign affairs while reducing the country's international significance to its mere geopolitical location – which would be unfortunate when Ankara could play a far more constructive role in the region and the world at large.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “[Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#),” *The White House*, March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> “[Russia reacts angrily after Biden calls Putin a 'killer'](#),” *CNN International*, March 18, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> “[US and China publicly rebuke each other in first major talks of Biden era](#),” *The Guardian*, March 19, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> “[China and Iran sign 25-year agreement to expand ties](#),” *Financial Times*, March 27, 2021.

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- <sup>5</sup> [“Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine,”](#) *The White House*, April 2, 2021.
- <sup>6</sup> [“Russia warns new Donbas conflict could ‘destroy’ Ukraine, NATO rebukes Moscow,”](#) *Euroactive*, April 2, 2021.
- <sup>7</sup> [“Turkey says raised concern with Russia envoy over Syria violence,”](#) *Reuters*, March 23, 2021.
- <sup>8</sup> [“International Investment Position,”](#) *The Central Bank of Turkey*, January 2021.
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- <sup>12</sup> [“China, Turkey reject politicization of COVID-19 vaccine cooperation,”](#) *China Daily*, March 26, 2021.
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- <sup>16</sup> [“NATO must keep Turkey close despite differences, Blinken says,”](#) *Reuters*, March 23, 2021.
- <sup>17</sup> [“Blinken proposes plan to accelerate peace process in Afghanistan,”](#) *Al Jazeera News*, March 7, 2021.
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- <sup>19</sup> [“Exclusive: EU halts sanctions on Turkey oil executives as ties improve,”](#) *Reuters*, March 18, 2021.
- <sup>20</sup> Murat Yetkin, [“Erdoğan back-pedals from reforms in rights, economy,”](#) *Yetkin Report*, March 20, 2021.