

# **TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH THE US AND THE EU AT THE BEGINNING OF THE BIDEN PRESIDENCY**

**PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE?**

**Toni Alaranta**



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## PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE?

- US-Turkey ties are strained because of conflicting interests in Syria and on a more fundamental level due to Turkey's different interpretation of the ongoing global power shift, and its concurrent search for strategic autonomy and cooperation with Russia and China.
- EU-Turkey ties have long been dysfunctional, with the EU focusing on maintaining the refugee deal, while Turkey has become increasingly authoritarian and aggressive in its external relations, resulting in a permanent 'wait-and-see' approach by the EU.
- While the US and the EU have recently agreed that they should synchronize their stance on Turkey, both are also characterized by an increasingly feverish internal debate about how best to respond to Turkey's behaviour.
- A genuine fresh start in Turkey-West relations is somewhat illusionary as most of the underlying problems are more likely increasing rather than decreasing, pointing to a more permanent dual-track policy of cooperation and containment, both by the US and the EU.



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## PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE?

### INTRODUCTION

The Biden presidency in the US and the EU's increasing concern regarding Turkey's unpredictable actions under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have recently led to an extensive debate on whether or not Turkey-West relations could witness a fresh start with a cleaner slate. This has been further exacerbated by Turkey's increasingly isolated status in its neighbourhood and economic troubles that underscore the country's need for European direct investments and loans from Western financial institutions.

In this context, many analysts have emphasized that harsh rhetoric and mutual distrust notwithstanding, the EU and Turkey are closely interdependent and the US, on the other hand, can't afford to push Turkey too far in its ever-increasing geopolitical competition with China, or allow Turkey to become too friendly with Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, there have been clear expectations in Europe that the Biden administration will bring back the transatlantic alliance in its 'traditional' form, and that the US and the EU will manage to unite forces in a global defence of democracy and international order based on multilateral institutions. The EU Commission has published its transatlantic agenda for global change, which identified relations with Turkey as among the subjects for cooperation. According to the new agenda, the EU and the US share a strategic interest in a stable and secure Eastern Mediterranean, and the two should seek a coordinated approach in relations with Turkey, including by addressing current challenges.<sup>2</sup>

By analyzing a number of interrelated issues in both US-Turkey and EU-Turkey relations, this Briefing Paper notes that a genuine fresh start would require not only new Turkish domestic and foreign policies, but also finding a workable solution to thorny foreign policy issues, not least in terms of the Syrian war. The paper concludes that in practice the fresh

start can only mean underscoring a 'dual-track' method – increasing cooperation in some issues, and a procedure of containment and crisis management in others. To a large extent, this is already starting to take place.

### TURKEY'S TROUBLED DEMOCRACY AND THE WEST

Some analysts commenting on Turkey-West relations nowadays assert that President Trump's unwillingness to talk about human rights or democracy allowed increasing authoritarianism in Turkey, without any external pressure to halt it. However, Turkey had become authoritarian much earlier, with all the significant undemocratic characteristics defining the country's transformation even during Obama's presidency. By and large, there has long been a tendency in previous studies to overemphasize external actors' ability to transform Turkey for the better.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that the US or the EU in particular should not repeatedly comment on Turkey's withdrawal from liberal democracy, or that they should decrease engagement with civil-society actors. However, it has been increasingly recognized that engagement and institutional attachments have not been able to halt Turkey's authoritarian development. As a matter of fact, the country has experienced one of its most dramatic increases in authoritarianism at a time when it has simultaneously been an EU candidate country, characterized by strong institutional links and economic interdependence.

This development has led some observers to blame the EU for Turkey's authoritarian turn, arguing that if only the EU had accepted Turkey as a full member rapidly after 2005, the country would have avoided its current malaise.<sup>4</sup> This is also a highly problematic and improbable argument, however, with Hungary being a telling example of the fact that EU membership is not sufficient to hinder an authoritarian turn.

1 See, for instance, Pinar Dost and Grady Wilson, 'How Joe Biden can put US-Turkey relations back on track', Atlantic Council, December 2, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/elections2020/how-joe-biden-can-put-us-turkey-relations-back-on-track/>.

2 'EU-US: A new transatlantic agenda for global change', European Commission, December 2, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_2279](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2279).

3 Nicholas Danforth, 'Why a Turkish dictator let himself lose an election', Al Monitor, August 6, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/why-turkish-dictator-let-himself-lose-election#ixzz72pR48nIQ>.

4 Bahadır Kaleağası, 'Europe's Geostrategic Sovereignty and Turkey', Atlantic Council in Turkey, March 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/europes-geostrategic-sovereignty-and-turkey/>.





Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and US President Joe Biden met at the NATO summit in Brussels in June 2021.  
Source: NATO

Further, ‘the EU is to blame’ argument also ignores several long-term structural factors of Turkey’s political culture; for instance that there has been a comprehensive internal power struggle regarding the possession of the state during Turkey’s EU negotiations, and that the EU reforms were misused in this domestic power struggle. First, this was about the ruling AKP together with its civil society partner, the transnational Islamic Gülen movement, purging all secular forces. Subsequently, it turned into an intra-Islamic battle over the state between previous allies of the AKP and the Gülen movement. Although these processes were often depicted at the time as ‘normalization’ and a healing of state-society relations, they were at least as much attempts to fill all state institutions in terms of ideology and loyalty to a political movement that does not tolerate any opposing voices.

This has led to a problematic cycle, now lasting over a decade, whereby the EU is paying Turkey pre-accession money earmarked to consolidate democracy and good governance, and has simultaneously blocked several negotiating chapters. In its most recent phase, the EU has threatened Turkey with sanctions in a desperate balancing act to counter the country’s aggressive foreign policy. The fact is that to this day, there has not been a period during which Turkey could have been accepted as a member without considerably

weakening the EU’s conditionality approach, namely the idea that Turkey’s membership requires clear progress in key areas such as the rule of law, fundamental rights and the protection of minorities.

### KEY ISSUES IN US-TURKEY RELATIONS

There are three issues in particular that strongly affect current US-Turkey relations: Turkey’s purchase of a Russian S-400 missile defence system, US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), of which the Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s (PKK) Syrian branch PYD and its military wing YPG (People’s Defence Units) forms the core, and the increasingly authoritarian system established by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The purchase of the S-400 missiles was first announced in 2017, and Turkey, despite being a NATO ally, has stubbornly advanced their installation in the face of equally stubborn US demands to drop them as they are not compatible with NATO systems. The result has been the imposition of sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, a 2017 law that mandates sanctions against any entity engaging in ‘significant transactions’ with Russia’s military or intelligence agencies. However, the real price paid by Turkey is that it was dropped from

the F-35 fighter jet programme. By and large, the S-400 conundrum is only a symptom of an increasingly strained relationship and lack of trust between Turkey and the US.

Another lingering issue, US support for the SDF, is the result of several foreign policy decisions both by Turkey and the US during the ten years of Syrian war. To begin with, the US and Turkey were on the same page with their decision to arm and organize the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA). From autumn 2011 onwards, the maintenance of this rebel formation was largely due to Turkey's determined attempt at regime change in Syria.

The FSA groups armed by the US and Turkey also cooperated with radical jihadi militias, either willingly or because they had no other choice, as noted by Aron Lund as early as 2012: 'Joint operations including both jihadi and non-jihadi groups are common, and many families have members in different factions. For example, Abdelaziz el-Salama, leader of the FSA's Tawhid Division in Aleppo, has a cousin who is a Jabhat el-Nosra commander'.<sup>5</sup> The regime change attempt also opened the door for the PKK to take over large swathes of northern Syria. The PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, marginalized all other Kurdish factions in northern Syria, and was able to create a semi-autonomous administration, which Turkey has perceived as an existential threat.

Turkey has used its Syrian proxies to fight the SDF Kurds, in addition to a direct occupation of Syrian territories in the north of the country. The problem for US-Turkey relations in all this is that the SDF is the US's main local partner in its fight against the Islamic State (IS) organization. The US had no option but to arm the SDF, as Turkey was unwilling to take on the Islamic State – it had in fact greatly contributed to its formation by allowing IS and other jihadi factions to use its territory for recruiting.

Like the FSA since 2012, the SDF is also mainly a public relations title meant for the international community. At its core, it is a PKK-led organization. Recently, the US has continued its support for the SDF, not only to fight the Islamic State but also to keep oil-producing Syrian territories in friendly hands, so that the Syrian government cannot return to the area. Whereas Turkey and the US share the desire to keep Syria divided and obstruct the Assad regime, Russia and Iran seek to further consolidate their positions, and the Kurdish-led SDF remains a significant

issue of controversy preventing any comprehensive US-Turkey agreement on Syria.

The third distinct issue, Turkey's increasingly authoritarian domestic regime, is also a long-term factor. In the words of Asli Aydintaşbaş, 'over the past decade, Turkey has incrementally become more authoritarian, emerging as a symbol of democracy's global retreat. As a NATO ally, it thus represents a critical piece of the Biden administration's declared goal to reverse the authoritarian tide across the world'.<sup>6</sup>

This comes down to the ongoing debate in the US regarding the best possible way to engage with undemocratic governments. Its most recent example is the controversy within the Atlantic Council following a policy paper by Emma Ashford and Matthew Burrows, where the authors suggested that at least in the case of Russia, emphasis on human rights was unlikely to bring about the desired outcome, while it could further worsen prospects for cooperation in areas of crucial US strategic interest, such as arms control.<sup>7</sup>

Turkey is not Russia, but a similar kind of tension between human rights promotion and strategic interests is at play. Turkey increasingly suppresses political dissidents at home and abroad, and yet the US has a long-term strategic interest in not letting relations with Turkey deteriorate any further. As in Russia, it is highly unlikely that doubling down on human rights issues will succeed to any great extent in preventing the authoritarian practices of President Erdoğan's regime. From these premises, the Biden administration's declared goal of forging a wide international democratic platform, and the attempts to resolve several foreign policy disputes with Turkey, point to an uneasy compromise where both factors play a role.

## KEY ISSUES IN EU-TURKEY RELATIONS

Turkey's increasing authoritarianism, the updating of the 2016 EU-Turkey refugee deal, and tension in the Eastern Mediterranean are the three strongly interrelated issues currently defining EU-Turkey relations. The global context – increasing great power competition and the rise of China – naturally go some way towards defining the way in which these issues are

<sup>5</sup> Aron Lund, 'Syrian Jihadism', UI Brief No. 13, pp. 24–25. September 14, 2012. Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

<sup>6</sup> Asli Aydintaşbaş, 'Opinion: Can the Biden administration help save Turkey's democracy?', Washington Post, March 15, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/15/turkey-erdogan-biden-administration-democracy-human-rights/?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-human-rights%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=wp\\_opinions](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/15/turkey-erdogan-biden-administration-democracy-human-rights/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-human-rights%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=wp_opinions).

<sup>7</sup> Emma Ashford and Mathew Burrows, 'Reality Check #4: Focus on interests, not on human rights with Russia' Atlantic Council, March 5, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/reality-check/reality-check-4-focus-on-interests-not-on-human-rights-with-russia/>.

addressed, not least because both Turkey and the EU claim to possess significant ‘actorness’ in their partly shared neighbourhood.

Domestic democracy is at the core of the EU, as its self-understanding is built on the idea of a community of liberal democratic states. Further, the claim that the EU functions in global politics as a ‘normative power’ has underscored that human rights, the rule of law, and democracy are also pivotal in its relations with external actors. Even when the EU takes a more interest-oriented approach – as it is often recommended to do nowadays by many observers – this is frequently countered by arguments that it is ultimately in the EU’s own long-term interests to emphasize democracy and human rights, not least in its southern neighbourhood where authoritarian regimes abound.

In any case, in terms of enlargement and candidate countries, the functioning logic of the EU is based on the idea of political conditionality in the famous Copenhagen Criteria, defining whether a country is eligible to join the EU. This means that, as long as Turkey remains an official candidate, the EU’s relations with it are inextricably accompanied by the language of normativity, based on the principles of conditionality, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, even when the EU decides to deal with Turkey in a transactional way, trying to secure its interests in a political bargaining process.

The official discourse of conditionality – demanding concrete steps in democratic consolidation and protecting human rights – has created a ‘horizon of expectations’ that is difficult to adhere to in an increasingly competitive environment. In this context, Turkey’s political opposition struggling for its survival under Erdoğan’s one-man rule expects the EU to push back hard and hold Erdoğan accountable in all engagements. However, particularly after the 2015 refugee crisis, the EU’s relations with Turkey have centred on the refugee deal.

One can also notice how the conceptual toolkit has turned from strict conditionality to what can be called the ‘governing through resilience’ approach. In other words, the resilience of not only the EU member states but also the increasingly ‘unruly’ neighbourhood has been emphasized, in a spirit that ultimately attempts to keep external anarchy at bay. The refugee deal with Turkey exemplifies this stance. As one anonymous German official put it at the time:

‘Who would have thought that after all the past squabbles, Erdoğan would rescue Merkel’s political career’.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, while strongly criticized by human rights organizations, the refugee deal with Turkey is seen by member states as one of the EU’s main foreign policy achievements of recent years, halting ‘anarchy’, and saving the European centrist parties in the face of a populist far right eager to exploit the fears and worries, either real or imagined, that a large population movement from the Middle East – over a million refugees in Germany for instance – caused among the European publics.

Perhaps more than ever before, the EU’s position towards Turkey is now based on playing for time in the absence of a coherent long-term strategy. As a matter of fact, the EU’s ‘wait-and-see’ approach in terms of Turkey’s candidacy seems to have become the main policy option in dealing with Turkey’s aggressive foreign policy as well.

It must also be noted that the refugee deal signed in 2016 exemplifies even more fundamental problems inherent in the EU’s official interpretation of its unruly neighbourhood. It is based on the questionable narrative according to which Turkey has only adjusted its policies to the civil war in neighbouring Syria and has heroically taken care of the four million refugees. This is then accompanied by the view that Turkey is legitimately demanding the EU to share the burden, hence the EU’s need to pay money to Turkey.

Although the idea of burden-sharing is valid, the dominant narrative behind it misrepresents the Syrian war: there is a large body of research demonstrating how the external arming of rebel militias in civil wars makes these wars much longer, more brutal, and difficult to end. The Syrian war is a textbook case of this. Turkey has been one of the main external actors enabling the devastating war to continue, and has subsequently established a modern-type colonial rule in the Syrian territories it has occupied. In short, regarding the refugee crisis, Turkey is as much a cause as it is part of the solution.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, it needs to be highlighted that the US and Turkey participated significantly in the rebel-arming programme, and this was politically

8 According to Turkish journalist Barçın Yınanç, this is what an unnamed high-level German official told her in March 2016 after the signing of the EU-Turkey refugee deal. Barçın Yınanç, ‘Göç anlaşmasının 5. yılında AB ile ilişkiler yine çıkmazda’, Yetkin Report, March 18, 2021, <https://yetkinreport.com/2021/03/18/goc-anlasmasinin-5-yilinda-ab-ile-iliskiler-yine-cikmazda/>.

9 In the words of Nikolaos van Dam: ‘Officials who now complain of the large numbers of Syrians who have taken refuge in their countries helped cause the refugee flow themselves through their intervention in Syria. Turkey, which has most of Syria’s refugees, is a clear example in this respect.’ Nikolaos van Dam, ‘War Crimes in Syria: a shared responsibility’. Syria Comment, July 2, 2021, <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/>.



supported by European countries, the UK, France, and Germany in the front row. Thus, together with the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran, Turkey's aggressive regime change policy, unprecedented in the country's history, has significantly prolonged the war.

Indeed, the active rebel-supporting policy has perpetuated the war and enabled radical salafi-jihad factions, such as the early form of the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra (current name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), Jaish-al Islam and Ahrar al-Sham to become the dominant players in the anti-Assad camp.<sup>10</sup> Instead of self-critically reflecting on these issues, or requiring Turkey to address its years-long 'jihadi highway' policy, the EU has externalized the handling of refugees to Turkey and consequently severely undermined its ability to convincingly address Turkey's increasingly authoritarian regime, militarized foreign policy, and deteriorating human rights record.

In terms of the Eastern Mediterranean tension, there now seems to be a more conciliatory phase compared to autumn 2020, when Turkey and Greece were on the verge of war. At the core is the competition to establish the rules according to which Turkey, Greece and Cyprus should determine their exclusive economic zones (EEZs).

A non-participant in the current international law of the seas, Turkey has tried to advance its agenda with gunboat diplomacy, sending research vessels and military ships into Greek and Cypriot waters. In its recent attempt to avoid sanctions and rebuild its ties with the West, Turkey has de-escalated by withdrawing its ships. However, when it comes to the Cyprus issue itself, the line has become even less compromising.

Since President Erdoğan helped Ersin Tatar to become the President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is recognized by Turkey alone, the duo have started to talk about a two-state solution as the only viable road ahead on the island, thus completely undoing the UN-led attempts at unification. To a significant extent, this uncompromising stance is Turkey's postponed reaction to the short-sighted decision in 2004 by the EU to accept the Republic of Cyprus as an EU member after the Greek Cypriots had just voted down the Annan Plan for the unification of the island.

Be that as it may, in its current form the Eastern Mediterranean tension is largely the product of

Turkey's new, more aggressive foreign policy doctrine. One can argue that President Erdoğan's risky game has delivered: by creating a crisis that almost culminated in war, he can now present himself as a peacemaker that the EU should reward. Indeed, the Union seems to be playing its part. If the refugee deal is updated in satisfying terms, Turkey will avoid all sanctions and can, in the longer term, repeat its aggressive foreign policies that will likely continue to be increasingly at odds with the EU's interests.

## CONCLUSION: DUAL TRACK OF CONTAINMENT AND COOPERATION

Both the US-Turkey and EU-Turkey relations have become theatres of high expectations by various protagonists. In the US, one line of reasoning expects the Biden administration to make Erdoğan pay for his transgressions, such as oppressing the domestic opposition, inciting regional tension, and purchasing Russian weapons systems. The other line of reasoning, in contrast, expects the US to resolve its quarrels with long-time NATO ally Turkey in order to consolidate the ring of friendly states, while confronting the true adversaries, China and Russia.

All of this is likely to forge a policy of cooperation and containment that might lead to the kind of relationship that Turkey has with Russia: there are several difficult issues, yet these are 'compartmentalized' and cooperation between the two continues on other issues. Recently, the argument for cooperation has been on the rise again as Turkey indicated its willingness to take responsibility for Kabul Airport at the time of the US-led coalition forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan – a plan that ultimately came to nothing due to the Taliban's sudden march to power.

Regarding the EU's position on Turkey, as exemplified by the recent European Council (EUCO) conclusions, one can also discern a dual-track approach. It suggests a renewed dual strategy, where economic cooperation and high-level meetings are to take place if Turkey takes the right steps in terms of both domestic and foreign policy, while the EU simultaneously prepares for containment measures if Turkey continues an authoritarian line at home and an aggressive foreign policy. Increasingly, Turkey is approached by the EU not as a candidate country (which it still is *de jure*), but as a third country with which the Union has a multi-level but complicated relationship.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Philips 'Syria war: The myth of Western inaction in Idlib', Middle East Eye, 20 March 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/syria-war-myth-western-inaction-idlib>.

In this context, a fresh start in Turkey–West relations is somewhat illusory, as most of the underlying problems are still present. In terms of US–EU coordination, the otherwise shared view is complicated due to the fact that by many EU countries, such as Germany and Italy, Turkey is seen as a major trading partner, whereas the US views Turkey from the perspective of the NATO alliance in the strategic context of increasing great power rivalry.

What is new, however, is the mounting pressure to re-conceptualize Turkey as ‘no longer an ally, but not an enemy either’, to forge policies that enable both containment and cooperation. Everything that is known about Turkey’s long-term search for ‘strategic autonomy’, combined with President Erdoğan’s Islamic vision, indicates that this is the new normal of Turkey–West relations for the foreseeable future. /