

# BETWEEN COOPERATION AND CONTAINMENT: NEW U.S. POLICIES FOR A NEW TURKEY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The last four years have been marked by a series of running crises in U.S.-Turkish relations. While many have been defused or deferred, they have hardly gone away. Although President Donald Trump's personal willingness to accommodate Turkish demands often prevented these crises from blowing up, his approach only exacerbated the underlying dynamics that gave rise to them. Put simply, the Turkish government views the United States as a strategic threat rather than an ally, and a growing majority in Washington have come to view Turkey the same way. Turkey now presents the Biden administration not with a relationship to be restored but with an unsolvable foreign policy problem to be managed and mitigated as best as possible.

This policy brief begins with a short look at the global, regional, and domestic factors driving Ankara's increasingly adversarial approach to its erstwhile Western partners. It then offers a survey of the main sources of disagreement between the U.S. and Turkey: Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, relations with Russia, and a number of rival legal cases in both countries. Finally, it offers a set of broader recommendations for how policymakers can capitalize on points of leverage and areas of agreement to advance U.S. interests in the face of Turkey's new foreign policy. Specifically, it advocates: 1) planning around Turkey; 2) coordinating with allies and partners to counter Turkish provocations where necessary; 3) leaving the door open for cooperation where possible.

Under the new administration, U.S. policy toward Turkey will almost certainly continue its gradual shift from cooperation toward containment. Following these recommendations will help to ensure this transition occurs in the most measured and beneficial way possible.

## INTRODUCTION

In the weeks leading up to the November 2020 U.S. elections, Turkey carried out a high-profile test of its new Russian air defense missiles, announced it would be continuing hydrocarbon exploration in contested waters off the Greek island of Kastellorizo, and sentenced an employee of the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul to five years in prison on spurious terrorism charges.<sup>1</sup> Next, on November 10, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan officially

congratulated President-elect Joe Biden, stating that "the strong cooperation and ties of alliance between our countries will continue to provide a vital contribution to the cause of world peace, in the future as they have in the past."<sup>2</sup> Then, as some commentators spoke optimistically of a "reset" between Ankara and Washington, columnists in Erdoğan's loyal pro-government press predicted Biden would try to destabilize or subjugate Turkey, charged Turks who welcomed his election with

treason, and, for good measure, repeated wild rumors about the incoming U.S. president's sexual perversions.<sup>3</sup> It was, in short, the opening of yet another chapter in a deeply dysfunctional U.S.-Turkey relationship.

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In fact, the challenge facing the incoming administration extends beyond the problems in the headlines. Since 2016, Ankara has been quite candid in its embrace of a new security doctrine — the impact of which has sometimes been obscured by the chaos of the Trump administration.<sup>4</sup> Convinced that the West is both hostile and in decline, Erdoğan and his circle have called for a more independent foreign policy that they believe will ultimately enable Turkey to reset its relations with Europe and America on their preferred terms. This approach relies heavily on the assertive use of hard power, both to advance Turkey's interests in an unstable world and to thwart a perceived axis of regional states seeking to encircle it. Until these ideologically-based and widely-shared assumptions change, meaningful cooperation will remain impossible and the ties of alliance will continue to fray.

Against this backdrop, managing relations with Ankara will require being clear-eyed about what the United States actually needs from Turkey, working to downplay these needs as much as possible, and using targeted political pressure to achieve those that cannot be minimized. With Ankara now facing off against a growing number of American allies and partners across Europe and the Middle East, U.S. policymakers will also need to coordinate closely with these countries. This will enable Washington to both support them in resisting Turkish provocations

and lead efforts to de-escalate confrontations that arise. Washington should be prepared to take advantage of short-term tactical shifts in Erdoğan's policies while maintaining the possibility of rebuilding the relationship in the more-distant future. In other words, Washington should preserve incentives and opportunities to work together while recognizing that the decision is ultimately Ankara's and that no one should hold their breath.

## **APPROACHING ANKARA'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY**

The Turkish government, firmly dominated by Erdoğan but backed by a wide coalition of nationalists and religious conservatives, has seen both threats and opportunities in the tumultuous events of the past decade.<sup>5</sup> Although many of the threats have been self-created, and many opportunities may prove short-lived or illusory, they nonetheless shape Ankara's strategic thinking. Erdoğan and his allies view hostile Western policies as part of a concerted effort to bring a newly powerful and independent Turkey to heel, but remain convinced that projecting Turkish power and independence will eventually force the West to accept the country's new status.<sup>6</sup> The result is a coherent, if not always accurate, worldview that fuses Erdoğan's political needs with a widely-shared vision for Turkey's emerging role on the global stage.

On the third anniversary of Turkey's July 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan declared: "Despite our political and military pacts with the Western alliance, the fact is that once again the biggest threats we face are from them."<sup>7</sup> More than anything, it was the coup attempt itself that had consolidated this conviction. With so many members of U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen's movement involved in the putsch, many in Turkey were quick to blame it on Washington. Since 2016, Erdoğan's government has consistently promoted these conspiracies theories for political gain — but, more problematically, it almost certainly believes them as well.

The Syrian civil war also came to compound the threat Ankara perceives from the West. The collapse of the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition and violent breakdown of an implicit truce with the Islamic State group (IS) was only the backdrop to a more dangerous development for Turkey: the burgeoning relationship between Washington and the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). In the 1990s, a growing number of Turks became convinced that the U.S. was supporting Kurdish separatism, even when Washington was actually helping Turkey fight it. Now, suddenly, this paranoia had become reality.

In the wider region, Turkey has increasingly found itself on the wrong side of almost all of Washington's friends. In the wake of the Arab Spring, Erdoğan saw the deepening anti-Islamist alignment between Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as a direct threat. The 2013 coup against Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, 2017 blockade of Qatar, and 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul made the feeling all the more personal and principled. At the same time, Turkey's disputes with Israel, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus led to its exclusion from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, a joint effort to exploit the sea's recently discovered natural gas resources. While perhaps a predictable result of Turkey's policies, this development further intensified Turkey's sense of encirclement.

In the face of these threats — real, self-created, and imagined — Ankara has sought to exploit the opportunities inherent in a changing global order to turn the tables in its favor. With cross-border military operations in Syria and Iraq, military deployments in Libya and Azerbaijan, and some literal gunboat diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara has been quick to bring hard power to bear in disputes where it feels the reigning status quo is both unfavorable and brittle.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Turkey has also sought to forge a new relationship with Moscow that combines competition and cooperation to strengthen Turkey's position against regional adversaries and a weakening West.

The problem for Washington is that Turkey's new combative approach to foreign policy has already brought Erdoğan enough political and geopolitical benefits that, whatever happens, he is unlikely to abandon it any time soon. Domestically, these wars have proved popular, consolidating Erdoğan's flagging base.<sup>9</sup> What's more, some of the fights most provocative for the U.S. and the European Union — against YPG forces in northeast Syria, and against Greece in the Mediterranean — have the broadest appeal across Turkey's political spectrum. And to the extent that they provoke hostile reactions from Western powers, even Erdoğan's most committed critics are often quick to rally around the flag in response.

In strategic terms, Turkish interventions have also secured real gains. Although they carry a host of long-term risks and are not always as impressive as Ankara insists, Turkish military power has indubitably changed facts on the ground in Syria, Libya, and now Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, because Ankara already assumes preexisting hostility on the part of its neighbors and former allies, the actual hostility these interventions create only reinforces Turkish policymakers' assumptions — rather than appearing as a dangerous and lasting cost of their policies.

Turkey's relationship with Russia, along with its clear risks and costs, has also brought real benefits. Turkish commentators have consistently claimed that they do not want to replace dependence on Washington with dependence on Moscow.<sup>11</sup> They are also well aware that Russian President Vladimir Putin does not have Turkey's best interests in mind, as demonstrated most dramatically by Russia's role in killing 33 Turkish soldiers in Syria's Idlib province last spring. Yet the two countries have worked out a win-win form of competitive cooperation. Through their regional conflicts, both sides are able to consolidate control over their proxies at the expense of other actors, then further curtail Western influence by negotiating resolutions on bilateral terms. The problem for Ankara, of course, is that while Turkey can bring considerable military

muscle to bear, to the extent it finds itself facing off against Russia without Western support, Moscow will always have the upper hand. Thus, while Russia has accommodated significant Turkish gains in some theaters, it has also been quick to enforce red lines, and, as in Syria, ensure that its interests ultimately win out when necessary.

What all of this means for the new administration is that:

- Washington should not expect to resurrect the old U.S.-Turkish alliance or achieve some sort of lasting reset. The fundamental assumptions of Turkish foreign policy thinking ensure that both countries will continue to work at cross purposes and face future crises. Exerting further pressure will only confirm Turkey's belief in Western hostility, while concessions will be taken as evidence that Turkey's aggressive tactics are effective.
- Washington cannot count on Turkey to balance Russia. The Turkish-Russian relationship works for both countries because it excludes the West. But the dynamics of the relationship may eventually force Turkey to make a partial recalibration toward Washington.
- Washington will have plenty of opportunity to work with regional partners in Europe and the Middle East to push back against Turkey's adventurism. But there is also a real risk that if these efforts escalate too quickly, Washington could be faced with a war pitting a NATO ally against other friendly powers.

## **FESTERING FLASHPOINTS**

There are at least four specific areas of tension in which the Biden administration will quickly be forced to articulate its approach toward Ankara.

### ***Syria***

After 2014, Washington's support for Kurdish forces (the YPG) in the fight against IS became the most explosive item on the U.S.-Turkish agenda.<sup>12</sup> From

2016 to 2019, it was only the presence of U.S. forces embedded with the YPG that prevented Turkey from carrying out its threats to attack Kurdish-controlled territory in northeast Syria. Then, in October 2019, President Trump approved a Turkish ground operation — which was only curtailed when the YPG brought in Russian and Syrian regime forces for protection. The result is now a multi-sided standoff where a residual U.S. force continues to support the YPG alongside Russian troops, all while Turkey occasionally threatens further offensives.

Efforts by the new administration to increase military or diplomatic support for the YPG — whether by deploying more troops to Syria or backing the group in its negotiations with the regime — will inevitably generate a Turkish backlash. Policymakers should anticipate this backlash, prepare for it, and, without expecting to mitigate Turkish concerns, communicate their intentions as clearly as possible to Ankara in the process.

### ***Eastern Mediterranean***

Libya's civil war, the Cyprus conflict, regional energy politics, and a decades-long dispute between Greece and Turkey over maritime rights have now merged into a single interlinked crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup> The situation in Libya has reached an uneasy ceasefire, as negotiations continue between the Turkish-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in the west and General Khalifa Hifter's forces in the east. In Cyprus, after the failure of two attempts at a negotiated settlement in 2004 and 2017, Erdoğan recently suggested that Turkey would make a renewed push to gain recognition for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. In 2019, Ankara's frustration over the Republic of Cyprus's energy exploration and Turkey's exclusion from the EastMed Gas Forum led it to sign a maritime agreement with the Libyan GNA in Tripoli, claiming a dramatically expanded Turkish Exclusive Economic Zone at Greece's expense. Ankara then began conducting its own energy exploration in these contested waters, prompting a naval showdown with Greece in the summer of 2020. This led France to deploy ships and jets

to the region and the EU to threaten sanctions. Germany, in turn, worked to mediate, and Ankara, after backing off briefly, resumed its exploratory activities. The EU has imposed sanctions on a handful of Turkish individuals and companies in response, but postponed discussion of stronger measures until this spring.

In recent years, Washington, driven in part by concerns over Turkey, has expanded its air and naval bases in Greece, while also supporting energy cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt. The U.S. Congress voted to lift restrictions on weapons sales to Cyprus while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited the island at the height of last summer's standoff. The new administration can now build on these efforts, showing greater initiative both in coordinating with regional partners and in encouraging negotiations to defuse tensions.

### **Russia**

Washington's concerns over Ankara's deepening relationship with Moscow have come to focus on Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 air defense missiles.<sup>14</sup> The delivery of these weapons in summer 2019 and their testing several months later was expected to trigger U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). In defiance of congressional pressure, however, Trump declined to apply sanctions at that time. During a period of acute stress on the Turkish economy, Erdoğan subsequently proved willing to temporarily warehouse the missiles, only to activate them again on the eve of the U.S. elections. Then, in December 2020, the Trump administration belatedly imposed sanctions, principally targeting Turkey's Defense Procurement Agency.

President Biden now has an opportunity to use CAATSA as a more consistent and effective policy tool moving forward. This would involve providing a clear path to lifting sanctions in return for verifiable steps to de-operationalize the S-400s, while also threatening further measures if Turkey instead chooses to significantly deepen its defense cooperation with Moscow.

### **Legal cases**

A number of rival legal cases have also driven the breakdown of U.S.-Turkish relations. On the Turkish side, these have been manufactured for political purposes, while on the American side, one of the most important was politically suppressed by Trump. After convicting an executive at Turkey's state-owned Halkbank for facilitating massive busting of Iran sanctions, the Southern District of New York (SDNY) is now pursuing a case against the bank itself, which could bring billions of dollars in fines.<sup>15</sup> From the outset, the case set off alarms for Erdoğan, particularly as it built on a 2013 Gülenist-led Turkish corruption investigation that targeted his government. As a result, the Turkish president invested millions of dollars in lobbying to have the case dismissed, and ultimately convinced the Trump administration to exert pressure on the SDNY toward this end as well.<sup>16</sup>

The Turkish judiciary, which now operates under Erdoğan's control, also launched a series of wildly implausible cases targeting U.S. citizens, U.S. government employees, and liberal civil society activists for their supposed role in conspiring against the Turkish government. Washington ultimately used sanctions to secure the release of pastor Andrew Brunson in 2018, but proved less successful in its more modest efforts on behalf of jailed Turkish nationals working for the Department of State. Meanwhile, Ankara has linked its ongoing and increasingly surreal case against philanthropist Osman Kavala with charges against Turkish-American academic Henri Barkey, claiming that both plotted against Erdoğan on Washington's behalf.<sup>17</sup>

The new administration should work to reestablish the rule of law at home while also insisting on greater respect for it in Turkey. This requires allowing the Halkbank case to proceed without political interference, while simultaneously insisting on the release of political prisoners as a precondition for any substantial improvement in the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

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## **BEYOND COOPERATION**

For the last four years, the debate over U.S. policy toward Turkey has been between those who want to “get tough” with Erdoğan and those who continue to seek new avenues for engagement. This debate will likely continue within the Biden administration, which includes advocates of both approaches. CAATSA sanctions, as well as the continuation of the Halkbank case in March, will contribute to a tougher stance from the outset. But at the same time, the administration may well look for areas where the two countries can still pursue a positive agenda. Were Ankara to couple its talk of a reset with sincere gestures, such as the release of Osman Kavala, it would help build the case for engagement. In the more likely event that this rhetoric proves hollow, the debate will soon shift in favor of those calling for something closer to containment.

### **1) Plan around Turkey**

While this debate unfolds, participants should keep in mind that — given Turkey’s new foreign policy — neither carrots nor stick will secure the cooperation that Washington wants from Ankara. The understandable desire for a policy that will save the U.S.-Turkish alliance has sometimes prevented policymakers from stepping back and having a wider debate about Turkey’s place in U.S. foreign policy. During the Cold War, Washington worked with Turkey to successfully contain the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, Washington hoped that, with American support, a strong, wealthy, democratic, and institutionally-European Turkey could help integrate its turbulent region into an expanding liberal order.<sup>18</sup> But so long as Turkish foreign policy facilitates the expansion of Russian

influence and destabilizes its neighborhood, cooperating with Ankara is no longer inherently in Washington’s interest. Rather, U.S. policymakers must ask themselves how best to advance their goals absent Turkish cooperation.

At the very least, this should lead Washington to continue reducing its strategic dependence on Turkey and developing alternatives for military facilities on Turkish soil. Turkey will and should remain in NATO for the foreseeable future; if nothing else, maintaining Turkey’s territorial integrity in the face of foreign invasion remains a shared U.S.-Turkish interest. The problem is that Turkey has already proven willing to use its veto power to extract concessions in ways other alliance members see as disruptive. In November 2019, Turkey threatened to block NATO defense plans for Eastern European members until the alliance recognized the YPG as a terrorist group.<sup>19</sup> While NATO’s structure will make it difficult, members should begin thinking seriously about mechanisms to prevent Ankara from abusing its veto power moving forward. More broadly, U.S. policymakers should be fully aware that any regional strategies requiring Turkish participation will give Ankara renewed leverage over U.S. policy.

### **2) Coordinate with partners to counter Turkish provocations where necessary**

The risk is that working around Turkey will intensify Ankara’s efforts to play the spoiler role, as it already has in the Eastern Mediterranean. To counter this possibility, Washington can work more effectively with a growing number of countries alarmed by Turkey’s new foreign policy. If done correctly, such a strategy will both strengthen pressure on Ankara while simultaneously reassuring other actors and minimizing the dangers of unintended escalation. Moreover, as the incoming administration seeks to restore ties with the EU, Washington and Brussels would be well served by working together in dealing with Turkey.

In the most recent round of escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean, European leaders seemed to have ultimately achieved a workable good cop-bad cop

routine, with France pushing for sanctions while Germany offered Turkey a path to back down through negotiations. Washington should seek to emulate both aspects of this approach. Indeed, between 2018 and 2019, Washington managed Turkish threats against the YPG-held Syrian territory of Manbij using a similar strategy: deploying U.S. forces to stop a Turkish invasion while simultaneously conducting ongoing, inconclusive negotiations under the rubric of the “Manbij Roadmap.” The term that some have applied to this strategy — “containment” — undoubtedly captures how awkward and cumbersome it may prove.<sup>20</sup> But to date, it still appears the most plausible method for checking Turkey’s destabilizing policies.

### ***3) Leave the door open for cooperation where possible***

In his approach to both foreign and domestic politics, Erdoğan combines short-term flexibility with long-term consistency. He has repeatedly made tactical pivots under pressure, offering positive rhetoric and limited concessions to countries with whom he previously tussled. As shown by his willingness to temporarily warehouse the S-400s or free Andrew Brunson, Erdoğan can certainly back down when necessary. But the pattern of Turkish policy shows that he reverts to aggressively advancing his interests as soon as he feels it is possible. This means that Washington does indeed have real leverage over Ankara, especially if Turkey’s economy continues to worsen or its relationship with Russia becomes more unbalanced. But it also means that this leverage should be used to secure concrete concessions rather than pursue lasting diplomatic achievements or some sort of elusive “reset.”

There is a built-in limit to how aggressively Western governments can use sanctions. Trump secured Brunson’s release by threatening to “totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey.”<sup>21</sup> The threat worked in part because Trump appeared genuinely unfazed by the destabilizing consequences of carrying it out. A Biden administration, by contrast — not to mention European governments — will be more worried about the financial blowback they

would face from pushing Turkey’s economy off a cliff. This is all the more reason to tie sanctions to specific and realistic targets, while also employing them in conjunction with other non-economic forms of leverage.

No amount of U.S. pressure will bring about a peace deal between Ankara and the YPG or a maritime settlement between Greece and Turkey so long as these are irreconcilable with Erdoğan’s political survival. Were the conditions for such breakthroughs to ever emerge, Washington should certainly support them, but these conditions do not currently exist.

In the meantime, limited cooperation will only be possible on subjects where clear and common interests are already present. In places where Turkey appears truly committed to confronting Russia, such as Idlib or the Black Sea, limited U.S. assistance could still pay dividends. Washington should also work with Ankara to assist Syrian refugees, if only for the refugees’ sake. It will also be important to expand opportunities for cultural and educational exchange, rather than allow them to fall victim to political tensions. But more significant cooperation will have to wait until Ankara and Washington once again share a broadly compatible worldview.

Ultimately, it will be up to a democratically-elected Turkish government to decide that Turkey would benefit from restoring ties with the West. Until then, the challenge for Washington will be to maintain enough pressure to make this apparent without rendering the relationship so hostile it becomes impossible.

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