

TRANSITION 2021

POLICY NOTES FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Defining a Realistic Policy Toward Erdogan's Turkey

Advice for the Biden Administration

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Managing ties with Turkey—and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan—will be a major challenge for U.S. president Joe Biden. Although the bilateral strategic relationship stretches back to the early Cold War era, one cannot describe it as warm today. Many issues divide Ankara and Washington, starting with Turkey's 2017 purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile-defense system, for which the United States has already sanctioned Turkey by suspending Ankara's participation, in July 2019, in NATO's flagship F-35 fighter plane project. Furthermore, the Biden administration is reportedly preparing to recognize the Armenian genocide on April 24, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day,¹ a move that will exacerbate discomfort. Finally, fresh U.S. sanctions against Ankara may be coming, triggered by Erdogan's autocratic domestic policies or suspected violation of Iran sanctions by Turkish banks.



Against this backdrop, the Biden administration will need to adopt a realistic approach to Turkey, striving for less than complete restoration of bilateral ties or a smooth ride with Erdogan. While Ankara and Washington can find some common ground to cooperate, such as in Libya and Syria, Erdogan's close relations with Russian president Vladimir Putin and increasingly oppressive moves at home will hinder a full reset for U.S.-Turkish ties. Overall, the Biden administration's approach to Turkey should be based on three pillars:

- Expanding discrete areas of cooperation while preserving bilateral institutional ties
- Managing differences, such as those regarding the S-400 issue and Syria policy
- Underscoring principled U.S. commitment to democracy and rule of law in Turkey, including by building stronger bridges to youth and civil society institutions.

Turkey at a Glance Today

Each of the pillars outlined above requires that the U.S. administration study current trends in Turkish politics, among them Erdogan's decreasing popularity, his embrace of more autocratic measures to stay in power, and, last but not least, his developing relationship with Putin. Key dynamics in Turkey also include the following:

Erdogan has consolidated political power.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan is one of the most consequential leaders in the history of the Turkish republic. In the last two decades, Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have won more than a dozen nationwide elections, and subsequently Erdogan has consolidated significant political power. A 2018 amendment to the Turkish

constitution has only increased his power. Erdogan is now simultaneously head of state, head of government, head of the ruling AKP, head of the police (a national force in Turkey), and head of the army (as commander-in-chief). In political terms therefore, he is Turkey's omnipotent leader.

But he has lost his spark. Despite being at the height of his powers institutionally, Erdogan's electoral appeal is weakening. This is largely because he can no longer credibly lay claim to his former selling point: that of the underdog fighting for the common voter.

When he became Turkey's prime minister in 2003, Erdogan represented change, and moreover, he could blame the country's problems on its previous elites. Recently, however, Erdogan's victimization narrative has grown stale and dated, and voters, especially younger ones, do not view him as energizing in the same way that their parents and grandparents did. Beyond this, voters now see him as being responsible for the country's problems.

And the Turkish economy has faltered,

damaging his support. The stumbling economy is at the heart of Erdogan's conundrum, with this former strength having become his Achilles' heel. Since 2002, he and his AKP have won elections mainly on a platform of strong growth. The base loves Erdogan because he has lifted many voters out of poverty. For instance, Turkish citizens saw a near record historic low in unemployment, which stood near 9 percent in 2013.

In 2018, however, the economy entered recession, as defined by two quarters of no growth. This is the main reason Erdogan's party lost Istanbul, Ankara, and other key Turkish cities in the 2019 mayoral races, marking a first and enduring defeat for him at the ballot box. The economy exited recession in 2019, but has failed to show signs of robust growth in 2020 due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and economic mismanagement. With unemployment nearing 20 percent and inflation

rising to 14 percent, the future would appear to be bleak for the Turkish president.

Erdogan's problem with younger voters is especially pronounced. In the general election scheduled for 2023, Turkey's voters between the ages of eighteen and forty-two, who have grown up under Erdogan's conservative rule, will constitute over 40 percent of the electorate and will hold much power in determining the outcome, assuming the vote is free and fair. What is more, Erdogan's leadership may have inadvertently produced his nemesis in these voters, who have demonstrated an overwhelming commitment to liberal democratic values.² This is, at least in part, in reaction to the president's governing style. Whereas voters older than forty are generally split down the middle in their support for Erdogan, the ratio plummets for the president—about two-to-one against him—when looking at younger voters. Due to establishment fatigue and declining enthusiasm for Erdogan even among young conservatives, the president's base of dedicated, young voters is fast shrinking.

But he is not falling from power. Erdogan must sense that he will emerge from the pandemic with weaker public support. Until recently, he has run Turkey with a strong plurality, and at times a near majority, but from now on he will likely have to rely on minority support to maintain his rule. The two-year wait for the next scheduled vote, covering the presidency as well as parliament, could perhaps give Erdogan time to maneuver. During this period, he will aggressively counter all efforts to boost his opposition, largely because he fears that a loss will be followed by efforts to prosecute him legally for his various misdeeds in office. He will therefore be compelled to unleash significantly sharper waves of political and ideological repression to maintain control.

Nor will he abandon Putin. The failed Turkish coup plot in July 2016 hardened Erdogan's attitude toward his democratic opposition—prompting him to use his newly acquired emergency powers to

conduct a broader crackdown on these groups—but the event softened Russian president Vladimir Putin's approach toward Turkey. Putin has used the coup attempt to win Erdogan's heart, and peel Ankara away from Washington.

The Russian president was the first leader to reach out to Erdogan after the failed coup, sweetening the gesture with an invitation to visit St. Petersburg the next month. What ensued was a regal welcome at the Konstantinovsky Palace. Putin thus signaled that the czar and the sultan could get along, and that the Ankara-Moscow proxy war in Syria could end—and along with it a persistent headache for Erdogan.

But Putin's warmth never comes for free. At their August meeting or soon after, the Russian leader offered to sell Erdogan a Russian-made S-400 missile-defense system, knowing that this sale would create a permanent fissure in U.S.-Turkish ties. This was the price Erdogan had to pay—and still does—for Putin's "friendliness" and a series of deals with Ankara since 2016 in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus. Since that post-coup encounter, though, Erdogan has genuinely valued Putin as his protector, joining other threatened world leaders—from Bashar al-Assad in Damascus to Nicolas Maduro in Caracas—in their regard for the Russian president.

Erdogan's Move, Biden's Window

Erdogan also knows he has to cultivate good ties with President Biden, given that Washington's support for Ankara strengthens Turkey's hand vis-à-vis Russia and the Assad regime in Syria. Furthermore, for the first time in years, Erdogan believes he needs Washington more than Washington needs him. This is because he

recognizes a relationship between the Turkish economy's health and U.S.-Turkish ties: namely, a brittle Turkish economy paired with bilateral relations in freefall can cause the Turkish economy to tank, as happened in 2018 during the "Pastor Brunson crisis."³ While bilateral trade and investment are low—Turkey's traditional economic partner is Europe—Turkey depends heavily on borrowing and inflows from international financial markets, and that dynamic is endangered by poor U.S.-Turkish relations.

Erdogan needs to reverse the current dynamic by advancing the narrative that he is getting along just fine with Washington. Thus, in this early phase of the U.S. administration, Biden would appear to have a brief window of leverage over his Turkish counterpart, driven by Erdogan's perception that strong ties between Ankara and Washington can boost the ailing Turkish economy.

Persistent Problems

Erdogan's deepening bonds with Putin will pose the longer-term challenge for the Biden administration. The Turkish president is unlikely to return the S-400 missile-defense system to Putin, who regards the deal as a wedge against Washington—and therefore will not free Ankara from it.

Erdogan, meanwhile, is unlikely to take steps that offend his Russian counterpart, given his perception of Putin as his protector since summer of 2016. Further, Erdogan is said to suspect that the United States plotted with the Turkish Air Force in the failed coup, and he was therefore grateful when Putin offered a Russian air-defense system to protect key Turkish political installations. At the same time, Putin could use military force or proxies against Turkey in either Syria, Libya (where Ankara and Moscow back opposing sides in the

country's civil war), or the South Caucasus (where Turkey supports Azerbaijan against Russia-backed Armenia) to cajole Erdogan to activate the S-400 system, a step that would likely trigger fresh sanctions against Turkey.

In Syria, U.S. cooperation with the People's Defense Units (YPG) to combat the Islamic State will continue to mar the relationship between Washington and Ankara. The YPG is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist entity by Turkey and the United States alike. Turkey is currently fighting the PKK at home and in Iraq—where the group has camps and headquarters—and objects to U.S. ties with the YPG. In addition, the continued U.S. residency of Fethullah Gulen, the leader of an opaque religious-political network whose followers are widely believed to have coordinated the 2016 coup attempt, will remain an unresolved bilateral issue.

Still another complication for bilateral ties could come from further sanctions against Turkey. U.S. court and Treasury Department sanctions could be imposed against Halkbank, a publicly owned Turkish financial institution, for violating sanctions on Iran, or U.S. sanctions could directly target the Erdogan administration for its strong-arm measures curtailing democratic rights and freedoms. Either or both of these measures would damage relations between Biden and Erdogan, which are already strained at the outset of the American president's term.

Policy Recommendations

Given the current brief window during which Biden will likely have leverage over Erdogan, the U.S. president should consider taking the following steps on key issues to shape a realistic policy regarding Turkey:

- **HALKBANK.** Potential U.S. court fines against Turkey's publicly owned Halkbank for violating Iran sanctions could put members of Erdogan's family at risk and could be so large (potentially several billion dollars) as to shake the Turkish financial system. President Erdogan tried to get former U.S. president Donald Trump to intervene to achieve a verdict favorable to Ankara in this case—currently under review in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York—but the effort did not yield concrete results. As he strives to rebuild faith in democracy at home, the best course for Biden is to avoid any involvement and let the judicial proceedings run their course; this is precisely what he did when Erdogan approached him during the Obama administration about the very same case. A court decision could come as early as spring 2021, but the best the administration can do is just try to weather this storm.
- **S-400 AND PUTIN.** Beyond the Halkbank issue, Erdogan's deepening bonds with Putin and generally increased Turkish exposure to Moscow will be the long-term challenge for the Biden administration regarding a full reset with Turkey.

As for the S-400 matter, as noted earlier, Washington should be under no illusions that Erdogan will return the system. Russia would extract a high price for such a move—and Erdogan knows this—by, for example, using Russian or proxy forces to target Turkish interests in Syria, Libya, or the South Caucasus. It could also go after Turkey's weakened economy by imposing crippling trade and tourism sanctions. Yet another path for Putin would be to support Bashar al-Assad in his oft-threatened military campaign against Idlib, the last Syrian province controlled by rebels and Turkish-backed forces, potentially pushing nearly three million more refugees into Turkey. With Turkey's economy slowing down and anti-refugee sentiment rising, Erdogan will not be able to withstand the social and political

forces unleashed by a sudden influx of this many refugees, in addition to the nearly 3.6 million Syrian refugees it currently hosts.

What is more, any Putin-backed military move against Ankara, be it in Syria, Libya, or the South Caucasus, would severely undermine Erdogan's domestic image as a global strongman. In a worst-case scenario, together or individually, steps by Putin—who has an array of levers to wield against Erdogan—could compel the Turkish president to activate the S-400 system, potentially triggering fresh sanctions against Turkey.

- **PKK.** If one issue unites most mainstream Turkish political forces irrespective of their views about Erdogan, it is their disgust at the Kurdistan Workers Party and their correct perception that the United States cooperates with its Syrian offshoot, the YPG. Some in Washington tend to dismiss Turkish concerns on this issue. That is a mistake. Turkish abhorrence of the PKK is deep-seated and well founded, and few within or outside Turkey dispute the organic links between the two groups.

Meanwhile, Washington and its European allies are doing all they can to urge Erdogan to return to his policy, in effect up to 2015, of negotiating with the PKK. The United States should point out that this approach worked much better to advance Turkish interests than the current war footing. This is true even though Ankara's anti-PKK counterterrorism campaign has destroyed much of the group's infrastructure inside Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey's recent drone campaign targeting PKK leadership and camps inside mountainous northern Iraq has had considerable success, and the group might be willing to return to the negotiating table.

- **YPG.** When he served as vice president, Biden was instrumental in telling Erdogan that the U.S. relationship with the YPG was temporary



and tactical, aimed at defeating the Islamic State. This messaging was key to facilitating reluctant Turkish acceptance of U.S.-YPG ties. The Turkish perception that Washington has since reneged on the Biden commitment helps explain eroded confidence within the Turkish bureaucracy, including traditionally powerful institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkish Armed Forces, and National Intelligence Organization. While the rank and file of these institutions do not necessarily align with Erdogan on all matters, they completely share his frustration toward the United States regarding the YPG issue.

Persuading YPG leaders to address Turkey's concerns regarding the group would help Washington shore up its standing inside these institutions. Already in 2018, Turkey pushed the YPG away from its border through an incursion into northeast Syria. One additional solution would be for the YPG to move further back from the Turkish border to diminish its perceived threat to Ankara; the lure of continued U.S. support could meanwhile help convince the YPG to jettison Turkish Kurds among its cadres and especially leadership, and to correspondingly sever links to the PKK. Current U.S.-backed intra-Kurdish talks in Syria, aimed at integrating the YPG into the country's wider Kurdish opposition movement, should help achieve these ends.

- **UKRAINE AND CRIMEA.** Despite the recent warming between Erdogan and Putin, Ankara and Moscow have many irreconcilable differences, one of which regards Ukraine. Namely, Turkey has never accepted Russia's annexation of Crimea.⁴ Ankara's hostility toward Moscow's Ukraine policy is driven by Russia's crackdown on Crimea's historic Tatar community, ethnic and historic kin of Turks, as well as the Turkish vision to court Ankara's Black Sea neighbors, such as Kyiv, to maintain strategic balance against Moscow.⁵ Accordingly, Turkey has built

stronger ties with Ukraine since 2014, and Ankara now provides Kyiv with drones for use in its low-intensity war against Russian forces currently occupying eastern Ukraine.⁶ The Biden administration, as it strives to push back against Russia around the Black Sea and eastern Europe, should pursue active cooperation with Turkey regarding Ukraine and the Crimea issue. To be sure, though, the aims will be limited to deterring further Russian provocations. Neither Turkey nor the United States will push Putin into a corner over Crimea, and there is little chance Russia will reverse its annexation.

- **LIBYA.** Another area for potential U.S.-Turkish cooperation is Libya, where Turkey has helped stop Russia-supported and linked military actors led by Gen. Khalifa al-Haftar, whose forces oppose the internationally recognized and Turkish-backed government. Greece, too, has thrown its political support behind General Haftar, adding to Turkish-Greek tensions over the delineation of the two countries' exclusive economic maritime zones located near the Libyan coastline.

At the same time, Turkish policies in Libya have put Ankara at odds with Paris, Cairo, and Abu Dhabi, military backers of Haftar's forces. The perception, at least in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, is that Turkey's stance constitutes a defense of political Islamists. Given that Turkey has become a preeminent home for Muslim Brotherhood figures, the UAE—which views the Brotherhood with much hostility—now regards Turkey as a threat at least equal to Iran.

In Libya, the Biden administration should encourage Turkey to become more active in United Nations-brokered peace talks rather than a military buildup. In turn, efforts to stop the Russia- and UAE-backed military advance should not be allowed to morph into an attack on the entrenched opposition forces in eastern Libya. Nor should Turkey use its position in Libya to

stir up tensions over eastern Mediterranean gas exploration. Washington should firmly insist that only negotiations can produce a resolution on sharing the benefits of the region's gas potential. In addition, deconflicting among U.S. allies in Libya would help defuse tensions between Turkey and Greece in the eastern Mediterranean.

- **IRAN.** Regarding shared concerns about the Islamic Republic, a starting point for potential U.S.-Turkish cooperation can be Syria, where Washington and Ankara are both seeking to pressure the Assad regime—an Iran ally—to change its behavior. Traditionally, Ankara views Iranian power in the Middle East with apprehension, and Erdogan specifically resents the way Tehran has undermined his efforts in Syria. The Turkish president could therefore conceivably support U.S. policies to box in Tehran so as to foster conditions for a new Iran nuclear deal. Such collaboration would also serve Erdogan's near-term goal of trying to charm Biden, and maybe even the U.S. Congress.
- **CHINA.** The U.S. pivot to Asia and Washington's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document singling out China as the only global threat to the United States constitutes an opportunity for U.S.-Turkish relations. Progress would rely specifically on Turkish alignment with the United States in holding Beijing accountable for the genocide against the Uyghur population in China's Xinjiang province. Uyghurs are Muslims who speak a Turkic language, and Turkey hosts a large diaspora community.

In recent years, however, Ankara has relied on Beijing for soft loans and swap lines, and Erdogan has hence shied away from criticizing China's policies in Xinjiang. What is more, Turkey currently depends on Beijing for vaccines to end the pandemic. But public opinion in Turkey strongly favors the Uyghurs—and opposes China. After the pandemic, then, shared U.S.-Turkish pushback against China on its Xinjiang actions

could be a fresh area for cooperation. Given China's centrality in U.S. policy, the issue could even—more than any other discussed in this paper—pave the way for a significant improvement in bilateral ties.

- **DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS.** Turkey earned credit for leading the effort to expose Saudi persecution of journalists, including the late Jamal Khashoggi, and the United States should urge Erdogan to uphold his own stated standards at home regarding the freedoms of expression and media. Ultimately, however, Erdogan's domestic policies will likely provide the most substantial obstacle to productive relations with Biden on democracy and human rights. The Turkish president will undoubtedly avoid any serious concessions to his opposition that could threaten his electoral prospects. Indeed, even as he offers the appearance of ending his crackdown on journalists and other dissidents, he will focus foremost on keeping the reins of power.

Erdogan will take this hard line because he recognizes the threat posed to his rule by the resilience of Turkey's democracy, the robustness of its civil society, and the unhappiness of younger voters with his governance style. In fact, Erdogan has already faced a setback caused partly by these factors: his party's defeat in the March 2019 mayoral elections in Istanbul, Ankara, and other key cities, which tarnished his political brand. Moreover, when Erdogan annulled the Istanbul results due to "irregularities" considered unconvincing by independent observers, his candidate suffered a loss vastly worse than in the initial vote—by an astonishing 800,000 votes, versus 13,000 the first time around. Erdogan's control of national media and institutions, including the electoral commission itself, had failed to guarantee a victory. The June 23 outcome reflected the demise of Erdogan's popularity especially among young voters; the do-over also appeared



to demonstrate the resilience of Turkey’s democratic opposition and traditions.

The Biden administration has shown much interest in promoting democratic values. Turkey could be fertile ground for such efforts given the country’s vibrant civil society and active democratic institutions. Yet U.S. leverage for promoting Turkish democracy will be much greater if Washington works with its European allies, which are Turkey’s main trading and investment partners. Europe may appreciate U.S. support if for no other reason than to dissipate any threat Turkey will once again allow millions of refugees bound for the continent to cross Turkish territory. By standing together, Europe and the United States can most effectively press Erdogan to accept a continuing role for Turkey’s opposition and civil society. He will not surrender power voluntarily, but he is also not immortal.

The challenge is to keep Turkish democracy vibrant while Erdogan remains on the scene. To this end, the administration should build strong ties with Turkey’s civil society institutions, including through outreach to younger voters. Ultimately, Turkey’s citizens will determine the country’s future, but outside engagement with its younger citizens can serve as an investment in the country’s democracy.

Erdogan—who since 2003 has served as Turkey’s prime minister and then president—sees himself as a messianic leader of sorts. He has survived a coup attempt and vanquished the vaunted Turkish military. Still, given recent dynamics, even the seemingly all-powerful Erdogan will almost certainly keep deferring to Putin and be disinclined to return to the American orbit. Nevertheless, there are many issues on which Washington and Ankara can have tactical cooperation. ❖

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NOTES

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