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Erdogan Will Play Biden, But Stick to Putin

by [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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Articles & Testimony

The new U.S. administration will have a brief, early window to exert leverage, but Erdogan's asymmetric relationship with Moscow may keep him from substantially altering Turkish policy on the S-400 dispute and regional issues.

A key foreign policy challenge for President-elect Joe Biden is going to be getting along with Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and managing Washington's ties with Ankara. To this end, Biden needs to understand the dynamics and fears that inform the decisions of Erdogan, Turkey's powerful president, including the latter's view of Russian president Vladimir Putin.

Erdogan, who has won over a dozen nationwide elections in Turkey since 2002, lately faces multiple challenges at home: The Turkish economy is shrinking as a result of the Covid pandemic and recent mismanagement of the country's finances. Accordingly, Erdogan has a series of problems, first and foremost: Dwindling support base at home, coupled with a vigilant and rising opposition. To complicate things, Ankara is involved in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus, where Erdogan is increasingly exposed to the vicissitudes of his Russian homologue, Vladimir Putin.

The latter's most forceful, and immediate, lever against Erdogan: Help Assad capture Idlib, the last rebel-held territory in Syria, sending another 2-3 million refugees across the border to Turkey. Ankara already hosts nearly 4 million Syrian refugees. Though with Turkey's economy slowing down and anti-refugee sentiments rising in the country, even Erdogan will not be able to stand the social and political forces unleashed by a vast and sudden increase in the country's refugee population. Putin can also spoil tenuous ceasefire deals between his allies and Turkey and its allies in Libya and the South Caucasus, further undermining Ankara's interests, as well as creating

troubles for Erdogan, who thrives on his global strongman image domestically.

Accordingly, Biden should not expect Erdogan to abandon Putin and walk into America's arms. The first—and a key—point for President Biden to digest regarding his Turkish counterpart is that Erdogan, who served as Turkey's prime minister between 2003 and 2014 and as president since, is a messianic politician of sorts—as he sees himself. What is more, Erdogan is bound to Putin, who knows how to manage the Turkish leader's political fears.

FROM “ETERNAL CHIEF” TO “ETERNAL MASTER”

Turkey's twentieth-century leaders, known as “Kemalists” after the country's first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk who established the Turkish republic in 1923, believed that Ataturk's legacy could not be torn down in a thousand years. As a revolutionary leader, Ataturk ruled Turkey until his death in 1938. But his legacy, including the Europe-facing and secularist political system that relegated religion conveniently to the private sphere, survived into the twenty-first century—until the rise of Erdogan.

Ataturk's twentieth-century followers admiringly labeled him “ebedi sef” (eternal chief). Erdogan is the most consequential Turkish leader since Ataturk's death nine decades ago. Erdogan tore down key elements of the latter's system in less than a decade, with ramifications for Turkish society, making Islam a guiding principle of Turkish politics, and jettisoning a Western orientation for “multi-axial diplomacy” growing roots in the Middle East, Africa, and Eurasia.

Erdogan is the main actor of this revolution and will suffer most from its collapse. I believe that, as Turkey's new revolutionary leader, Erdogan, adoringly called “reis” (master) by his followers, will rule Turkey so long as he is alive—Covid pandemic, economic downturn, or Russia's challenges in foreign policy notwithstanding. Erdogan is Turkey's “eternal master.”

Erdogan hails from the political Islam movement, which in general aims to use state power to Islamicize a society top-down. After becoming prime minister in 2003, he gradually undermined his opponents, and then flooded Turkey's government and education system with a conservative form of religion. To this end, and even more importantly, he has ended secularism as the dominant ethos of the Turkish military and security forces. Army officers, who used to swear that they would defend Ataturk's secularism, now lead prayers in communal Islamic style before battle in Syria.

Erdogan must feel the presence of the divine in driving his success—he could not have brought his revolution to success without God's help—and a bit of Machiavellian planning.

In foreign policy, too, he has been consequential, this time with ramifications beyond Turkey's borders. Pivoting the country away from Ataturk's Eurocentric regional stance, Erdogan has attempted to extend Ankara's reach into the Middle East, starting with Turkey's immediate neighbors, such as Iraq and Syria, and later reaching further beyond. In recent years, Ankara has meddled in wars and conflicts from Syria to Libya, as well as establishing military bases along the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.

THE FAILED COUP: ERDOGAN VS. GULEN

The failed Turkish coup attempt in July 2016 hardened Erdogan's attitude towards his democratic opposition—soon after the failed putsch, he started a broader crackdown on these groups, using his newly-acquired state of emergency powers—but softened Putin's calculus towards Turkey. The coup attempt brought Erdogan and his former ally-turned-nemesis Fethullah Gulen into violent conflict.

One of the main reasons I love writing about Turkey is because I believe that if countries could be vegetables, Turkey would be the metaphorical onion. Analytically speaking, the country is all layers, but it has no “core.” Just as you think you have grasped Turkey's “essence,” a new layer appears, forcing you to reconsider everything you thought

you previously knew about it. Turkey defies simplistic generalizations and Manichean binarisms alike. The Erdogan-Gulen relationship is a case in point.

Erdogan and Gulen were allies for nearly a decade when the latter helped the Turkish leader intimidate his opposition, undermine democratic institutions, checks and balances, and push aside the Kemalist military. The mass resignation of the Turkish military's top brass in 2011 threw the self-serving nature of the Erdogan-Gulen relationship into the open, setting in motion a wave of events, which culminated in the 2016 coup attempt, and which have fundamentally changed Turkey and global perceptions of Erdogan.

After 2011, Erdogan and Gulen each wanted to run Turkey singlehandedly, catalyzing a raw power struggle. In December 2013, Gulen-aligned cops and prosecutors pressed corruption allegations against Erdogan and his family members, leaking illegally taped conversations between Erdogan and his son, among others, to the public. Erdogan demoted and arrested these prosecutors and cops, as well as arresting and harassing the Gulenists countrywide. Gulen's next move: strike back with the 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan.

According to Sigmund Freud's theory of "narcissism of small differences," the more similar two people are, the more they hate each other after a falling out. This intensification of animosity is what happened between Erdogan and Gulen after 2011, and even more so after 2016; the two men loathe each other more than they despise other political actors in Turkey.

Grasping Turkey's unique political dynamics from the perspective of the "analytical onion," Putin avoided Manichean binarisms regarding Turkey after the coup. Whereas some in Washington and European capitals concluded that because the coup failed, Erdogan must have "manufactured" it, the Russian president saw a strategic window in the coup plot: an opportunity to reach out to Erdogan to catalyze a deeper trend of alienation between Ankara and Washington.

ENTER PUTIN, THE 3-D CHESS PLAYER

Putin has used the coup attempt against Erdogan to win the latter's heart, and peel Turkey away from Washington. The aftermath of the coup attempt against Erdogan was indeed Putin's moment to step in. The Russian president was the first leader to reach out to Erdogan after the abortive coup, as well as inviting him to a meeting in St. Petersburg for consolation. Enter Putin the chess master: Erdogan's first trip overseas after the coup attempt against him was not to Washington to meet U.S. President Barack H. Obama or to Brussels for a NATO summit of support, but to Russia's imperial capital, where the Russian president welcomed Turkey's sultan regally at St. Petersburg's tsarist-era Konstantinovsky Palace. Just imagine how reassuring this must have been for Erdogan in terms of his relationship with Putin; not only were his troubles with Moscow in Syria over, but Russia's president was also offering Erdogan protection and the political equivalent of a warm hug.

Of course, Putin's platitudes do not come for free. If you asked me when and where he offered to sell Erdogan Russian-made S-400 missile defense system, knowing that this sale will create a permanent fissure in U.S.-Turkish ties, I would say at their 2016 St. Petersburg meeting. This is the price Erdogan had to—and still has to pay—in return for Putin's protection and the deals the latter has been cutting Ankara in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus since 2016.

Putin is a 3-D chess player, who achieves so much strategically, while doing so little tactically. He used Erdogan's visit to St. Petersburg to divide NATO's second largest military, Turkey, against the alliance's leader, the U.S., thus achieving Russia's historic goal vis-a-vis the Alliance.

Whereas Putin was prescient in reaching out to Erdogan, Obama was not. It took Washington four days to do so, and the call came not from President Obama himself, but Secretary of State John Kerry. For Erdogan, it was clear who was on his side, a conclusion that would yield grave ramifications for U.S.-Turkish ties.

Putin's outreach came with a power sharing agreement in Syria that would soon be unveiled. Putin and Erdogan's signature post-2016 move has been to broker ad hoc deals in Syria—while ignoring the U.S. Following the coup, Erdogan and Putin started to speak often. In each conversation, Putin took something from Erdogan in Syria, often in return for allowing the latter to undermine the U.S.-partnered People's Protection Forces (YPG), allied with the Turkey-opposed and terror-designated Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), there.

As in Syria, Putin has used Libya's civil war to create a strategic vulnerability for Ankara—this time playing the arsonist and the firefighter. In early 2019, thanks to increasing Turkish support of Libya's internationally-recognized Tripoli government, it looked as if the war in Libya could settle on some sort of stasis—until Putin decided to enter the war theatre in summer 2019. The introduction of Russian support to General Haftar in the form of mercenaries, known as “Wagner's Army,” which added new technology and precision to the general's war against Tripoli, suddenly made him a mortal threat to the Tripoli government.

In December 2019, Libya's capital city almost came within Haftar's grasp. Realizing that his core interests in Libya were under threat—that if Haftar captured Tripoli, he would rip up Libya's maritime treaty with Ankara, as well as telling Erdogan to forget about Gadhafi-era debt, or new contracts—Erdogan rushed to Moscow for a ceasefire deal.

Arsonist-turned-firefighter Putin hosted a “peace conference” in Moscow on January 13. Although, and not so shockingly, the conference failed to produce a lasting ceasefire to end the war, Putin—a strategic chess player who excels in linking conflicts, and making countries involved in such conflicts dependent on him for their resolution—had just made his unrelenting point to Erdogan: if the latter rejects Putin's “offers” to him in Syria, or cancels the S-400 sale, things can get much worse for Ankara in Libya.

This is why although as of May 2020, Turkish support had helped the Tripoli government push back Haftar's forces from the Libyan capital, Erdogan still needed Putin's good services in Libya. In my view, absent a robust U.S. role, the future promises a new status quo in Libya in which Ankara and Moscow will play a key role in sharing the country. Similarly, most recently in November, Putin interfered in the Armenian-Azeri war in the South Caucasus, brokering a ceasefire between Ankara-ally Baku and Yerevan, and once again positioning Russia simultaneously as a counterbalance to and partner for Turkish interests in another war zone.

ERDOGAN VS. PUTIN

Erdogan and Putin are effectively and simultaneously opposing and cooperating with each other—in three different war theatres. The fact, however, is that the Russian-Turkish relationship is asymmetrical in nature as is the Erdogan-Putin relationship. For the most part, Putin calls the shots, and Erdogan follows.

This being said, Putin is aware that he has to keep Erdogan happy. Although the Russian leader calls the shots in Syria, he ultimately does not want to turn the screws too tight on Erdogan. This is because Putin has been playing the long game regarding Turkey. His policy since 2016 has been consistent on a key guiding principle: never completely alienate Turkey. Putin wants to keep Ankara as close to Moscow as possible, and simultaneously as far away from NATO as possible.

The Turkish president has relied on Moscow diplomatically since Putin reached out to him following the failed 2016 coup attempt, and his frayed international relationships have only made him more dependent on such support since then. Moreover, Russia's military capabilities and historical scorecard against Turkey make Erdogan wary of a major conflict.

Finally, I believe that since their August 2016 meeting in St. Petersburg, Erdogan has valued Putin as his protector. After all, Putin has established his credentials as the protector of other threatened leaders globally, from Assad in Damascus to Nicolas Maduro in Caracas.

BETWEEN RUSSIA AND U.S.

Erdoğan, however, now needs to cultivate Biden. This is especially the case now while the former is aware that the perception of good ties between Turkey and the U.S. will provide a shot in the arm for Turkey's ailing economy.

On the strategic side, too, Erdoğan appreciates the U.S. and I believe this is a recent development. Turkey's president is aware that Washington's support of Ankara in Idlib strengthens Turkey's hand vis-a-vis Russia in Syria.

I believe, therefore, that Erdoğan will seek a good relationship with Biden—at the least in the short-term—and the U.S. with Ankara. There is a consensus inside the U.S. government that Washington should do whatever it takes to keep Turkey on its side. Lately, this has meant preventing Ankara sliding further towards Moscow.

ECONOMY IS ERDOGAN'S ACHILLES HEEL

This means, in foreign policy, Erdoğan will keep playing Russia and the U.S. against each other. He will also continue with Ankara's engagements in Libya's and Syria's civil wars. Erdoğan's ability to juggle these balls simultaneously depends on the state of the Turkish economy. An economic meltdown will increase Washington's leverage over Turkey, throw into the open the tenuous nature of the Erdoğan-Putin relationship, as well as forcing Ankara to wind down its involvement in Syria and Libya.

The economy is indeed Erdoğan's Achilles heel. Since 2002, he and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have won elections mainly on a platform of strong economic growth. The base loves him because not only has Erdoğan lifted many voters out of poverty but he has also improved living standards. For instance, Turkish citizens saw a near record historic low in unemployment, which stood at 8 percent in 2013. In 2018, however, the economy entered into a recession, as defined by two quarters of no growth.

By early 2019, despite the economy exiting the recession, unemployment had jumped to nearly 14 percent. With a weakened lira, surging external debt, and low foreign currency reserves, the Turkish economy was already in a fragile state before the onset of the pandemic in early 2020.

BIDEN'S "WINDOW"

Thus, there will be a brief window at the beginning of the Biden presidency, when Erdoğan will approach Washington with the understanding that he needs the U.S. more than he thinks the U.S. needs him. Turkey will emerge with even more economic troubles from the Covid pandemic, and this is bad news for Erdoğan, who has won over a dozen national elections since 2002 mainly by delivering economic good governance. Erdoğan is aware that he will emerge from the pandemic not stronger, but weaker in terms of public support. Erdoğan also knows that there is a relationship between the Turkish economy and U.S.-Turkish ties: If the Turkish economy is in brittle shape, and if U.S.-Turkish ties are freefalling at the same time, Turkey's economy simply tanks, as happened in 2018 during the "Pastor Brunson Crisis."

ERDOGAN'S GAME

Erdoğan now needs to reverse this dynamic, by creating a narrative that he is getting along just fine with Biden. This means Biden can ask Erdoğan to limit his crackdown domestically. But, ultimately Erdoğan will avoid any serious concessions to his opposition that would result in his ouster at the ballot box. In other words, Erdoğan will make it look as if he is ending his crackdown at home, while keeping the reins of power in his hands.

Similarly, I doubt that Erdoğan will return the S-400 missile defense system to Putin. The latter wants to use the missile defense issue to permanently cleave Ankara and Washington. Erdoğan sees Putin as his protector, and it is unlikely that the Turkish president will deeply offend his Russian homologue.

Ultimately, I believe that Erdoğan is an intelligent student of U.S. politics. I have followed his career for two decades.

He knows well how to play the Rorschach test with each U.S. president, politically becoming what American presidents want to see in their Turkish counterpart. For Bush, a faithful Christian, Erdogan was the “faithful Muslim” in return. For Obama, wishing to speak to Muslims, Erdogan served as that “window to the Muslim world.” And in this last administration, for deal-loving Trump, Erdogan matched him as a deal partner.

Unless Biden tells Erdogan not to worry regarding Putin’s machinations, that the U.S. is completely committed militarily to back the Turkish positions in Syria, Libya, and South Caucasus, and that Washington will look the other way regarding Erdogan’s democratic transgressions—a very tall order—Erdogan will play Biden, but ultimately stick to Putin. Accordingly, I have no doubt Erdogan will become whatever Biden wishes him to be—at least in the short term.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the Hoover Institution’s Caravan webpage](#). ❖

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