

A COOL, CAUTIOUS CALM: US-TURKEY RELATIONS SIX MONTHS INTO THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

President Joe Biden has made it six months into his term without a new U.S.-Turkish crisis. Amidst simmering tensions, strategic disagreements, and so many potential flashpoints, even this comparative calm counts as an achievement. It is a product of both the White House's new approach to Turkey and Ankara's eagerness to maintain the appearance of good relations in the face of more pressing problems. Biden has been appropriately cool and consistent in his dealings with Turkey, emphasizing human rights in his rhetoric and seeking to establish a new tone for the relationship that will give the United States greater leverage. This has corresponded with a period of consolidation and greater caution in Turkish foreign policy. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for his part, has been on an international charm offensive as he confronts regional isolation, economic turbulence, and his own dwindling poll numbers.

Biden and Erdoğan's June 14 meeting in Brussels, on the sidelines of the NATO summit, seemed to confirm the comfortably dysfunctional contours of this new relationship. None of the two countries' outstanding issues were resolved, but both leaders walked out gamely insisting they could be.¹ The challenge for Washington now is to maintain the benefits of Biden's current approach as conditions in Turkey and its region inevitably shift in unpredictable ways. Rather than appear over-eager to improve relations, Washington should simply leave the ball in Ankara's court. This means staying the course while minimizing Turkey's ability to disrupt U.S. and European interests. At best, Biden can seek to establish a modus vivendi with Erdoğan premised on perpetuating the status quo in the absence of any further provocations.

NO CALL'S A GOOD CALL

For months after Biden's inauguration, one of the most-discussed aspects of the president's Turkey policy was something he didn't do: call Erdoğan. While Ankara requested a call with Biden in December, the new administration deflected the request.² Turkish and American commentators soon came to see the non-call as a conscious snub. Whether Biden's cold shoulder represented a calculated strategy or was simply the result of

too many competing priorities, the administration proved happy to make the most of it. In response to a question in early March, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki casually told a reporter she was sure Biden would call Erdoğan "at some point."³

When the call finally came on April 23, it was not the one Erdoğan wanted. The official readout emphasized Biden's commitment to expanding areas of cooperation and effectively managing disagreements.⁴ But the real substance of the call

was an advance warning that Biden would break with longstanding U.S. policy the next day and officially recognize the 1915 Armenian genocide. Biden's statement, duly released on the genocide's April 24 commemoration day, took pains to keep the focus squarely on commemorating the suffering of the victims rather than casting blame on the perpetrators. "Turkey" did not even appear in the text, which referred only to "Ottoman authorities." Yet after a succession of U.S. presidents pointedly refused to use the term "genocide" for fear of antagonizing a longstanding NATO ally, Biden's statement showed just how much the U.S.-Turkish relationship had changed.⁵

As striking as Biden's non-call was Erdoğan's subsequent non-response. After decades of apocalyptic speculation, Ankara proved surprisingly restrained in the immediate aftermath of the genocide statement. Erdoğan said that Biden's "unjust and untrue" comments opened a "deep wound" in the bilateral relationship.⁶ But he nonetheless kept the focus on his planned meeting with the U.S. president in June. "We now need to put aside our disagreements and look at what steps we can take from now on," Erdoğan declared, emphasizing that he hoped the two leaders could still "open the door for a new period" in relations. Seemingly responding to the suggestion Ankara's reaction had been underwhelming, a pro-Erdoğan columnist explained that "Turkish policymakers seek to ensure that the magnitude and timing of their response won't hurt their country's strategic interests."⁷

In the immediate aftermath of his June 14 meeting with Biden, Erdoğan remained optimistic, saying that there were no problems between the United States and Turkey that could not be resolved. But there appeared little in the meeting itself to justify this optimism. Despite some predictions of a grand bargain, Erdoğan admitted the two sides had made no progress on resolving the tensions surrounding Turkey's sanctioned purchase of Russian S-400 air defense missiles. Rather than a make-or-break moment, Erdoğan and Biden's tête-à-tête seemed more like a ratification of the status quo.

For now, at least, Washington has implicitly conveyed its intention to be less accommodating toward Ankara's concerns. Ankara, in turn, has implicitly conveyed that it has no choice but to be accommodating, at least up to a point. The following sections explore how this basic dynamic has been shaped by domestic developments in Turkey, and how it has played out in a number of key policy areas.

ERDOĞAN'S CHARM DEFENSIVE

Erdoğan has never lacked for political difficulties, but he now faces a more impressive array than usual. In November 2020, he accepted his son-in-law's sudden resignation as finance minister and has cycled through two central bank heads in equally dramatic fashion since then.⁸ Not surprisingly, this has taken its toll on the Turkish economy. The lira has fallen roughly 20% since the summer of 2020, and the central bank's net international reserves are now at their lowest level since 2003.⁹ With the opposition going on the offensive over the government's financial mismanagement, Erdoğan has tried to keep the focus on national security, but here too there have been setbacks. In February, a failed rescue operation ended with the death of 13 hostages held by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq.¹⁰ In the aftermath, Erdoğan turned once more against Turkey's pro-Kurdish political party: A government-aligned prosecutor opened a court case to shut down the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and ban its members from politics. Throughout all this, Erdoğan's poll numbers have continued to drop. In May, one credible survey showed him trailing several potential challengers in a hypothetical presidential race.¹¹

Internationally, Ankara has also begun to feel the accumulated backlash from several years of foreign policy adventurism. In December 2020, Washington belatedly imposed Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions on Turkey's defense sector in response to Ankara's purchase of Russian S-400 missiles. At the same time, the EU also moved

incrementally toward more substantial sanctions over Turkish energy exploration in contested waters southeast of the Greek island of Rhodes. At the regional level, Ankara's isolation became more acutely felt during fall 2020: the Abraham Accords demonstrated a new alignment between Israel and the Arab Gulf states while the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum deepened cooperation between an array of countries including Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel. Meanwhile, relations with Damascus, Russia, and Iran remained volatile: Despite a series of cease-fires and a growing number of Turkish troops, the Syrian regime's desire to retake Idlib has created a constant risk of conflict.

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Against this backdrop, Erdoğan launched a concerted charm offensive aimed at easing Turkey's isolation and preventing tensions with Washington and Brussels from doing further damage to the economy. His goal seemed to be to generate as much positive momentum in Turkey's bilateral relationships as possible without fundamentally altering any of the policies that had strained those relationships in the first place. Thus, in January the Turkish foreign minister ambitiously declared that Ankara was ready to launch a road map for reconciliation with France, hold an international conference on the eastern Mediterranean with the European Union, resume exploratory talks with Greece, "set up a joint committee" to solve the S-400 issue with Washington, "fix our ties" with the United Arab Emirates, and take positive steps to "put things back on track" with Egypt.¹² Unaddressed at the time, and still unclear today, is what the substance behind all these initiatives might be.

DEMOCRACY AND DÉTENTE

In response to Ankara's optimistic outreach, the Biden administration has sought to communicate in its rhetoric a renewed emphasis on human rights and democracy. In February, the State Department spoke out against the Turkish government's crackdown on student protestors, making a point to "strongly [condemn] the anti-LGBTQI rhetoric surrounding the demonstrations."¹³ The next month, when Turkey withdrew from an international agreement aimed at preventing violence against women, Biden declared that the "sudden and unwarranted" withdrawal was "disheartening" and "deeply disappointing."¹⁴ The State Department also announced that it was "closely following... troubling moves" against a prominent opposition lawmaker and "monitoring" efforts to close the pro-Kurdish HDP, "a decision that would... further undermine democracy in Turkey."¹⁵ This new tone has been a striking departure from that of the previous administration. But it remains less clear how effective this rhetoric is and what further measures Washington might consider. As all of these developments attest, Erdoğan still appears committed to doing what he feels is necessary to stay in power. The closure of the HDP in particular would represent a dramatic step toward authoritarianism.¹⁶ The risk is that the further Erdoğan continues on this path, the more Washington's steady stream of condemnation and concern will begin to look ineffectual rather than principled.

There are certainly those who are already pushing for more forceful action. In late April, several prominent Democratic senators announced their plans to reintroduce the Turkey Human Rights Promotion Act of 2021, which would impose Global Magnitsky sanctions and travel bans on Turkish officials responsible for the detention of journalists and political prisoners.¹⁷ If the human rights situation in Turkey continues to deteriorate, it is entirely possible that targeted sanctions would be imposed on select Turkish officials. Realistically, though, the appetite for such measures would be heavily influenced by the state of U.S.-Turkish bilateral ties.

So long as Erdoğan opts to maintain the current state of foreign policy *détente*, Washington will be hesitant to take more aggressive measures on human rights.

The European Union recently demonstrated how awkward it can be when economic pressure succeeds in securing foreign policy concessions from Erdoğan without any corresponding democratic progress. For Brussels, Turkey's conflict with Greece and Cyprus emerged in the late summer of 2020 as the leading cause of tension with Ankara. Though EU countries differed on how aggressively to respond – with France joining Greece in pushing for sanctions and Germany seeking further negotiations – they came together to credibly threaten sanctions if Turkey continued on a provocative course.¹⁸ In response, Ankara lowered the temperature, pulling back the *Oruç Reis* drill ship from contested waters, restarting “exploratory talks” with Athens, and discussing the possibility of renewed Cyprus negotiations.

Yet in its eagerness to capitalize on this geopolitical success, Brussels appeared to be giving *carte blanche* to Erdoğan's domestic repression. In April, European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen came to Ankara in order to emphasize the “carrot” side of Brussels' carrot and stick approach. Praising Ankara's “more constructive attitude,” EU officials announced that if the “positive momentum” continued, they could move ahead with a cooperative agenda that included an upgraded customs union and visa liberalization.¹⁹ The problem was, however, that this positivity coincided with both Ankara's high-profile backsliding on women's rights and its move to close the HDP.²⁰ As a result, the timing of the visit telegraphed more clearly than Brussels intended how easily Erdoğan could sideline human rights criticism with a modicum of foreign policy cooperation.

As with the United States, Turkey's ties with the EU seem to have reached an equilibrium where both sides know they will not dramatically improve under Erdoğan's undemocratic rule, but both sides are

equally aware they will not worsen on account of human rights violations alone. A month after Michel and von der Leyen's visit, the European Parliament issued its “toughest” report yet. The document condemned Turkey's democratic regression, demanded principled conditionality for any further cooperation, and even suggested EU accession negotiations could be suspended.²¹ But the damage was already done. The crucial point for Ankara was not necessarily to secure closer ties with the EU, but simply to maintain the market-calming illusion that such progress might be just over the horizon.

Indeed, even in the realm of foreign policy, the “positive momentum” in the eastern Mediterranean appears more like a pause than any momentum *per se*. Turkey's exploratory talks with Greece are certainly an improvement over the saber-rattling of last summer, but the latest round follows over 60 previous ones, and the two sides have yet to formally agree on which issues they are actually prepared to negotiate.²² On Cyprus, three days of talks in April ended with U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres concluding that “at the end of our efforts, we have not yet found enough common ground to allow for the resumption of formal negotiations.”²³ Ersin Tatar, the Erdoğan-backed president of the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, has pushed for ratifying the island's division through a “two-state solution,” which the Greek side has repeatedly rejected out of hand.

In May, Israel's war with Hamas created both new opportunities and obstacles for Turkey's regional diplomacy. By increasing tension between Israel and its new Arab partners, the conflict helped lessen Turkey's fears of isolation. Erdoğan made a show of coordinating his support for the Palestinians with Arab leaders such as Jordan's King Abdullah II and Saudi Arabia's King Salman rather than trying to upstage them, as he sometimes has in the past. But, of course, Erdoğan's inflammatory rhetoric also set back any prospect of improved ties with Israel. And when he went on to accuse Biden of having “blood on his hands,” it demonstrated just how quickly Turkey's strained ties with America's partners can

create further strain with Washington.²⁴ Yet, even here, Ankara's desire to promote the pretense of a positive agenda proved irrepressible. On June 13, one Turkish journalist reported that officials were "hopeful that a new era between Israel and Turkey could begin with the ouster of Netanyahu."²⁵

More positive, though still far from complete, has been Turkey's attempted rapprochement with Egypt under President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi. Ankara has been eager to advertise the progress of this process at every stage, with Cairo more cautiously insisting it expects concrete concessions from Ankara.²⁶ Officials from the two countries finally met in May, though neither side appeared particularly enthusiastic about the outcome.²⁷ One encouraging sign is the fact that Cairo and Ankara are both supporting the current peace process in Libya. The two governments continue to back different actors and advance irreconcilable demands — Turkey hopes to maintain a military presence in Libya and preserve the maritime delimitation deal it signed in 2019. But with Libyan elections scheduled for December, Ankara appears willing to work through the country's fractious political process to advance its goals. The most tangible sign of Erdoğan's rapprochement with Egypt to date is his willingness to suppress anti-Sissi criticism from Istanbul-based Muslim Brotherhood TV channels. Ironically, rather than expand freedom within Turkey, Erdoğan's efforts to relieve his regional isolation have led him to simply target new media outlets on behalf of another autocrat.

RUSSIA AND REGIONAL CONFLICTS

Washington has quietly encouraged Turkey's détente in the eastern Mediterranean while struggling to develop a positive agenda on a number of other regional issues, including Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Syria. Looming over these efforts is Ankara's complex relationship with Russia, which continues to confound hopes for U.S.-Turkish cooperation.

The most immediate obstacle, from Washington's perspective, is the impasse over Turkey's new S-400 missiles. In the aftermath of Biden's

election, Ankara again proposed a working group to resolve the issue, and yet the two sides remain at loggerheads.²⁸ Washington insists Ankara give up the missiles, while Ankara insists it will keep them and wants Washington to give up its sanctions. With Washington officially notifying Turkey of its removal from the F-35 fighter jet program in April, the issue appears to have come to a standstill.²⁹ The challenge for both sides is now preventing this dispute from spilling over into other bilateral files.

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One test will be whether the Washington and Ankara can compartmentalize their differences to cooperate in Afghanistan. After Biden announced he would withdraw U.S. forces from the country, the State Department revealed that Turkey would host talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government aimed at ensuring post-withdrawal stability. The choice appeared to confirm that, despite giving Erdoğan the cold shoulder, the new administration was still eager to provide Ankara with opportunities to cooperate on areas of mutual interest. Initially, concerns emerged that Ankara might use its role in the talks as leverage with Washington on the S-400 and other issues.³⁰ But these became moot when talks were delayed and derailed by a host of problems unrelated to Turkey. Focus then shifted to the question of whether Turkish forces could run the Kabul airport after the U.S. withdrawal.³¹ If Ankara and Washington are able to work together constructively in Afghanistan, it could lay the groundwork for targeted cooperation in the future. Conversely, if they prove unable to, it could serve as a cautionary tale about the dangers of seeking Turkish support.

The role of Erdoğan's relationship with Russia in limiting the possibility of cooperation was also on display when Russian-Ukrainian tensions surged following the build-up of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border in April. Erdoğan was quick to demonstrate diplomatic solidarity with Ukraine, holding a personal meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Istanbul at which he expressed support for the country's territorial integrity.³² Speculation surged as to whether Turkish drones could play the same role in Donbas as they had in Nagorno-Karabakh, giving Ukraine an advantage over its Russian-backed adversaries.³³ But while Ankara's diplomatic stance irritated Moscow, Erdoğan did not appear willing to provide the kind of support, political or military, that would have generated real Russian retaliation. In the words of one analyst, "for all its swagger, Ankara makes sure competition with Moscow does not get out of hand" and thus seeks to "avoid conflict without losing face."³⁴

As Ankara tries to sell itself to Washington as a necessary partner in countering Russia, the contrast with its actual behavior appears even more dramatic in other parts of Eastern Europe. In May, the Belarusian government forced down a passenger plane flying through its airspace to seize a dissident onboard. Ankara, which has engaged in its own extra-legal efforts to capture dissidents abroad, subsequently sought to water down a joint NATO statement condemning the Minsk government.³⁵ Specifically, Turkey objected to language calling for the release of political prisoners and supporting EU sanctions.³⁶ The Belarusian foreign minister, in turn, expressed his country's gratitude to Turkey for its solidarity.³⁷

Perhaps the biggest question moving forward is how Turkey's attempted balancing act between Russia and the United States will play out in Syria. The province of Idlib has long proven the most difficult place for Ankara to keep its competition with Moscow in check. Over the past five years, multiple Russian-backed regime offensives have pushed Turkish-backed rebels and millions of refugees into a smaller and smaller patch of territory.

Each offensive has ended with a Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement, followed by a pause, followed by a new offensive. Since last spring, Turkey has tried to break this dynamic by deploying at least 10,000 troops to the province to prevent a new regime advance.³⁸ So far, Turkey's show of force has worked. But Syrian President Bashar al-Assad appears intent on eventually retaking much of the remaining territory. The risk is that Ankara thinks it has deterred the Syrian regime and the regime thinks Ankara is bluffing. Were Russia to support a new regime offensive, once again bombing Turkish forces, the situation could prove explosive.³⁹

In northeastern Syria, a tenuous truce has also endured since the Turkish incursion of October 2019. At least 1,000 U.S. troops remain deployed there alongside the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG). Biden has restored U.S. stabilization assistance to the region while signaling his commitment to continued counterterrorism cooperation with the YPG.⁴⁰ But the administration has yet to develop a clear long-term plan for its presence in northeastern Syria or articulate how far its commitment to the region's autonomy will go. This creates a degree of uncertainty that Turkey, the regime, or the regime's backers might eventually seek to exploit. Washington would undoubtedly respond forcefully to a clear attack against U.S. partners. But Biden may be forced to develop a policy on the fly if another actor decides to push back, perhaps in a more subtle way, against the current status quo.

CONCLUSION: A HOSTILE DANCE

Relations between Turkey and the West have come to resemble a hostile dance. Both sides are committed to policies that are guaranteed to antagonize the other, but neither side is ready to risk the consequences of a real rupture. Thus, even as Washington and Brussels have grown increasingly frustrated with Turkey's foreign policy provocations, and proven increasingly willing to threaten sanctions in response, they have been eager to seize on any evidence that a positive agenda is possible. Ankara,

in turn, has been willing to dial back tensions in response to mounting economic pressure and regional isolation. The opening months of the Biden administration have shown how these two dynamics can come together to produce a period of relative calm in the U.S.-Turkish relationship. But the political, ideological, and geopolitical dynamics that drove previous confrontations have not fundamentally changed.⁴¹ As Erdoğan faces further obstacles in his quest to retain power, his incentives might again shift to prioritize confrontation over conciliation, creating a new cycle of antagonism. In short, the Biden administration appears to be managing Washington's relationship with Turkey about as well as possible, but the challenge could quickly become harder.

Moving forward, Biden should further clarify U.S. expectations for continued calm with Erdoğan. In coordination with European capitals, Washington should articulate what aggressive steps — from further energy exploration in the eastern Mediterranean to cross border operations in Syria — will preclude even the pretense of positive ties. Future tensions are inevitable. But so long as Erdoğan accepts the terms of the current *modus vivendi*, Biden should welcome the chance to ignore him and focus on the rest of his international agenda.

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