



## Turkey and the West: A Hostile Dance

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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### Summary

- Many observers see both Turkey and its Western partners as too dependent on each other to risk a major break.
- Yet the sheer number of ideological and strategic difference between Turkey and the West lead others to see a major crisis as almost inevitable.
- Both arguments are plausible. While both sides will probably compromise just enough to muddle through a hard break is impossible to rule out.
- The result will likely be a hostile dance whose ultimate outcome remains difficult to predict.

## Introduction

As Turkey's relations with the United States and European Union have grown ever more strained over the past five years, analysts have struggled to anticipate how this trend will develop, and where it will ultimately lead. To aid in this inevitably speculative act of prognostication, they have suggested a number of scenarios, running from the likely to the unlikely and the optimistic to the pessimistic. This report will offer an overview and analysis of the scenarios that have been put forward, then hazard some speculation of its own.

A number of predictions begin from the assumption that, when relations eventually reach a breaking point, Erdoğan will be forced to back down, enabling Ankara and its estranged allies to muddle through. Others start from the opposite position but reach a similar conclusion, assuming that the West will continue to back down and thereby preserve some semblance of the current status quo. There is also an optimistic streak of pro-Western analysis which assumes that, as Turkey's problems mount under Erdoğan's mismanagement, he will sooner or later be forced out of office by elections, leading Turkey to return to its traditional transatlantic orientation under a new government. There are also optimists in Ankara who seem to believe that the West will eventually see the light and accept or even embrace the "new Turkey," allowing good relations to be restored on Erdoğan's terms. Finally, a number of more or less dramatic nightmare scenarios exist in which a complete breakdown of relations leads Turkey to become either a rogue actor or Russian ally.

A plausible scenario that could play out in the coming years involves both Ankara and its Western partners offering just enough concessions at key moments to avoid an irrevocable rupture, even as the relationship steadily becomes more hostile. In this adversarial dance, Ankara would continue many of its provocative activities, while the US and EU would slowly shift toward a policy of containment. Yet Erdoğan, eager to avoid a complete economic collapse or unwinnable military conflict, would always step back from provoking too forceful of a backlash. America and Europe, meanwhile, would continue to ratchet up the pressure, but, equally wary of an economic crisis or military conflict, recoil from anything that might push Erdoğan over the brink.

The question remains, of course, whether a misstep by either side could throw off this constantly recalibrated arrangement, or whether at a certain point it will simply become untenable. So far Turkey and the West have already muddled through longer than many pessimists thought possible. They will probably continue to for the near future, but a hard break should not be ruled out.

## Scenarios

### Turkey Gives In

One longstanding school of thought holds that, because [Erdoğan is ultimately pragmatic and Turkey is ultimately dependent on the West](#), at a certain point [Western pressure will become great enough that Ankara will be forced to back down and return to a less provocative foreign policy](#).

After seven decades as a NATO member, Turkey's foreign policy alignment has come to appear too deeply rooted for Ankara to revise according to its political or ideological

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**Turkey and the West: A Hostile Dance**

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interests. [Many analysts have invoked the metaphor of a marriage, suggesting that even if Ankara flirts with Russia, or perhaps takes things even further, it will never abandon its longstanding partnership with NATO.](#) Less romantically, it is certainly true that Ankara has more room to cooperate with Russia so long as it maintains the security provided by NATO’s Article V. In purely pragmatic terms, there seems little reason for even the most anti-Western Turkish statesmen to escalate tensions with America and Europe to the point where they lose the strategic benefits provided by the alliance.

Perhaps more importantly, Turkey’s economy remains heavily enmeshed with its Western partners as well, particularly in Europe. [In 2019, for example, the EU was Turkey’s largest trade partner, while Turkey was sixth for the EU.](#) Thus while the EU has been slow to use economic leverage against Turkey – only sanctioning a handful of individuals and companies in response to Ankara’s East Med exploration – the Turkish economy would certainly be vulnerable to more forceful measures. Similarly, while [the United States represents only 5.9 percent of Turkey’s total exports, U.S. sanctions could also have an outsized impact.](#) In the summer of 2018, for example, [doubling steel and aluminum tariffs, coupled with targeted sanctions against two Turkish ministers, led the lira to lose roughly 20 percent of its value within a week.](#) It has never recovered, and the knock-on effects for Turkey’s economy as a whole have been considerable.

Moreover, Turkey’s economic success was a central factor in Erdoğan’s rise to power over the past two decades, and he appears acutely concerned with what the economy means for his electoral prospects. Turkey’s economic woes in recent years correspond with an unprecedented drop in Erdoğan’s poll numbers. Surveys show [the economy remains a central issue for voters, and complaints about the high cost of living have become widespread even among committed AKP supporters.](#)

Against this backdrop, analysts have pointed to the many times Erdoğan has compromised in the face of foreign and economic pressure. In 2018, for example, he eventually released pastor Andrew Brunson to prevent further economic sanctions. He also proved willing to temporarily warehouse Turkey’s S-400 missiles as part of an arrangement with U.S. congressional leaders to avoid the implementation of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Then late in 2020 Erdoğan pulled back the Oruç Reis, a Turkish survey ship whose exploratory activities in contested waters had led the EU to threaten sanctions of its own. More dramatically, Erdoğan subsequently replaced his son-in-law as Finance Minister and, in opposition to his own long-held ideological views, allowed the central bank to raise interest rates.

Despite these measures, Turkey’s economy continues to struggle under the dual weight of the pandemic and government mismanagement. Erdoğan’s poll numbers keep slipping.

### **Turkey Democratizes**

A more optimistic version of this scenario holds that not only will Erdoğan be tempered by the mounting pressure he faces, but that eventually his [economic, foreign and domestic challenges will become so great](#) he will be forced to step down, [following either scheduled elections in 2023 or early elections before that.](#)

Without dismissing Erdoğan’s willingness to hold power through undemocratic means, optimists insist that he cannot do away with elections completely, nor manipulate their results too blatantly. Citing Turkey’s 2019 Istanbul mayoral elections – where Erdoğan reran the vote after losing, only to see his candidate defeated by an even greater margin

**Turkey and the West: A Hostile Dance**

– they argue that the institutional strength of electoral democracy is stronger than many pessimistic observers assume.

While some analysts speculate that rising tensions with the West will help precipitate the moment that Erdoğan is forced to face the electoral music, many see ongoing internal dynamics as sufficient to produce this result. The opposition's newfound willingness to cooperate, the rise of splinter parties from within the AKP that could pull away a small but crucial sliver of votes, and perpetual tensions between Erdoğan and his hyper-nationalist coalition partner have all provided a glimmer of hope.

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Crucial to this scenario, of course, is not only the assumption that Erdoğan will leave office, but also that the government which replaces him will pivot toward a more pro-Western foreign policy. [In their foreign policy statements, leaders from the Republican People’s Party \(CHP\) have given mixed messages.](#) The party has staked out an anti-Western and nationalist stance on a number of key issues, specifically on the Eastern Mediterranean and U.S. support for Kurdish forces in Syria. Yet they have also suggested that they would likely abandon some of the policies that have most aggravated Western leaders, criticizing Erdoğan over his support for Hamas, his confrontational approach to Egypt and even, at times, his decision to purchase Russian S-400s. While the CHP, once in power, would undoubtedly face intense nationalist pressures from public opinion, they would also be met with considerable goodwill from the West, leaving both sides with an opportunity to show that a more cooperative relationship could pay dividends all around.

### **The West Gives In**

In contrast to [the view that Erdoğan will inevitably give in when he faces sufficient pressure is an equally longstanding assumption that the Western leaders are incapable of getting tough with Erdoğan](#) because, rightly or wrongly, they [view Turkey as too strategically important to lose](#). While the conviction that Erdoğan will cave often focuses on Turkey’s economic dependency, the expectation that the West will never really get tough also includes a number of broader geopolitical factors.

Economically, of course, many EU countries clearly see Turkey as being too big to fail. The deep economic ties between Turkey and Europe cut both ways, and a significant economic crisis in Turkey would send shock waves through Europe. To date, some of the countries that have been most sympathetic to Turkey on geopolitical issues are those with the greatest stake in Turkey’s economy. [Spain, for example, has been a consistent advocate of engagement with Ankara; as of 2018, Spanish banks were estimated to be holding 35 billion dollars in foreign currency denominated Turkish debt.](#) [For Germany, whose exports to Turkey totaled just over 20 billion dollars in 2018, economic risks are exacerbated by constant fears that a rupture with Turkey would strain relations with Germany’s own ethnically-Turkish population.](#) European leaders also remain susceptible to Turkey’s willingness to play the refugee card, even if the ugly scenes at the Greek-Turkish border in March 2020 show this no longer provides as much leverage as Ankara hoped. Moreover, though seldom stated explicitly, some Europeans have expressed concern that a major political or economic crisis in Turkey would lead to a new influx of Turkish refugees.

For analysts focused on the US angle, Turkey’s “indispensability” is often seen in more strictly strategic terms. The importance of specific military resources like the Incirlik airbase has declined in recent years as Washington has sought new alternatives. But many policymakers remain convinced that Turkish cooperation is crucial for pursuing

**Turkey and the West: A Hostile Dance**

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broader policy objectives, specifically containing Russia and countering Iran’s regional influence. Even amidst growing frustration over Turkey’s undermining these goals – whether by facilitating Iranian sanctions-busting or buying Russian weapons – it remains undeniable that Turkey could always be less cooperative. For some, the fear is that tougher US policies would actually ‘lose Turkey,’ pushing it to join the ‘Russian camp’ or ‘Iranian-led axis of resistance.’ From this perspective, accommodating Turkey is necessary not as much to preserve Turkish cooperation but to prevent Turkey from becoming actively hostile.

[Analysts have also emphasized that Turkey’s NATO membership will act as a check on the desire of other NATO states to implement confrontational policies toward Ankara.](#) Indeed, even for many officials who see Turkey’s behavior as the real threat to NATO’s cohesion, there is concern over what a break with Turkey would mean for the strength of the alliance. As has often been noted, [there is no mechanism for formally removing a country from NATO, creating the risk that antagonizing Turkey will simply result in the alliance being stuck with an openly antagonistic member who continues to hold veto power over the organization’s decision.](#) There is also a psychological dimension to these assessments. As with those who assume Turkey could never break with NATO, many people who anticipate that the West will eventually accommodate Ankara see Turkey’s geopolitical alignment as being too fundamental to Western, particularly American, strategic thinking for leaders to ever willingly take steps that would bring it to an end.

### **The West Comes Around**

A variant on this scenario, largely limited to pro-government analysts in Turkey, envisions that tensions between Turkey and the West will eventually be resolved when the West finally accepts Turkey’s new status as a powerful and independent actor on the world stage. Though almost all of these writers insist the ball is now in Washington’s court, they tend to display a consistent confidence that U.S. policymakers will recognize their errors and change policies accordingly.

[As explained by the pro-government think tank SETA, Erdoğan does not “subscribe to a new ideological approach that seeks to sideline the US or leave NATO.”](#) Instead, the problem lies with a series of poor choices made by both the Obama and Trump administrations. In response, Turkey is considering new strategic and economic partnerships to achieve its interest. But these will not come at the expense of relations with the United States, as Turkey is increasingly “capable of playing several strategic roles simultaneously.”

A more extreme version of this argument posits that America has long sought to dominate Turkey and is only now coming to terms with the fact that it can no longer do so. According to a number of Turkish columnists, Washington treated Turkey as a de facto colony, whose foreign policy it controlled through its relationship with the Turkish army and traditional elite. When Erdoğan sought to chart a more independent course, Washington redoubled its efforts to bring him down using every means at its disposal. Yet even authors with such a cynical and conspiracy laden view of the United States have been surprisingly confident that Washington will belatedly adjust its expectations in light of Turkey’s newfound independence. Emphasizing America’s growing isolation in the world and the ongoing transformation of the global order, they argue that an increasingly weak United States will have no choice but to come to terms with an increasingly powerful Turkey.

**Turkey and the West: A Hostile Dance*****A Hard Break***

There are also a number of observers who believe that [Turkey and the West](#) are [moving steadily](#), even inexorably, toward a more formal, [definitive and acrimonious](#) break. Like Tolstoy's unhappy families, these scenarios are all disastrous in their own unique way. Some imagine Turkey formally leaving NATO, launching a nuclear program or going to war with one of its neighbors. Some picture Turkey going rogue like Iran, becoming indebted to China or entering into an alliance with Russia. In many cases these scenarios are accompanied by a more nakedly authoritarian turn in Turkey's domestic politics, with Erdoğan forcibly overturning elections and violently crushing protests.

*“Like Tolstoy's unhappy families, scenarios envisioning a decisive break between Turkey and the West are all disastrous in their own unique way.”*

Interestingly, pessimistic predictions vary in the degree to which they see this geopolitical break as the fulfillment of Erdoğan's own ideological agenda or the result of circumstances escalating beyond his control. Erdoğan has made it clear how committed he is to a more “independent” Turkish foreign policy, one that would make his country a civilizational and geopolitical center in its own right, rather than a part of any other great power's sphere of influence. He has also made it clear that he expects to have to achieve this in the face of sustained Western resistance. Yet, as laid out in the previous scenario, Erdoğan seems convinced that Turkey's success in this venture will eventually bring Western powers around. Thus, while there is good reason to think Erdoğan's worldview or domestic political needs might lead him to take provocative measures that could trigger a break, it seems unlikely that he would see the break as a goal in itself.

There remain, however, plenty of ways Turkey and the West could find themselves caught in a dynamic that neither side could fully control. [Were Turkey to make good on its threats](#) to close Incirlik airbase, or perhaps, like France and Greece at various points, [withdraw from the NATO command structure](#), it would not necessarily trigger an immediate crisis, but it would remove one of the last real institutional ties between Turkey and the West, making it easier for future crises to spiral. In the face of CAATSA sanctions and removal from the F-35 program, Ankara suggested it might purchase more S-400s and even Russian fighters in response. Were it to do so, [this would trigger more sanctions which would then make further Russian weapons purchases even more appealing, thereby creating a vicious cycle](#). There have also been several situations in recent years where military standoffs and saber rattling created concern about the possibility of a military clash, whether between Turkish and US forces in Northeast Syria, Egyptian and Turkish forces in Libya or Greek and Turkish ships in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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**Conclusion: The Hostile Dance**

There are plausible arguments for almost all of these scenarios. In seeking to navigate between them, a few cautious predictions seem possible. A democratic breakthrough remains too unlikely to count on, and a complete vindication of Turkey's foreign policy appears even more remote. The incentives to compromise on both sides are real, and will likely prove strong enough to enable Turkey and the West to continue to muddle through for the foreseeable future. But these incentives are not strong enough to rule out the possibility of a hard break.

The result is likely to be an intensification of the pattern that has developed over recent years, in which Turkish policies provoke increasingly forceful reactions from the US and the EU, but both sides consistently prove willing to pull back to avoid further escalation. It is difficult to imagine a situation where the respective parties actually change their

**Turkey and the West: A Hostile Dance**

positions enough to solve their bilateral disputes, but it is easy to imagine a situation where everyone is willing to do just enough to ensure that relations continue to worsen at a steady rather than catastrophic rate. In the West, running fears about losing Turkey will continue to mitigate mounting anger against Ankara and there will be an enduring, if diminishing, interest in finding avenues for constructive engagement. Turkey, for its part, can continue its periodic charm offensives, calling for resets and restored ties even as it pursues policies that make this impossible. Much as Turkey's EU accession process has never formally ended, even though it long ago became a fantasy, the perpetual promise of finding a "positive agenda" could persist long after it stopped being possible.

The problem is that this now appears to be the best-case scenario. Tensions have risen more slowly than many pessimists predicted. But this does not mean they cannot erupt suddenly as problems, un-or-much anticipated, take on a life of their own. As outlined in the previous scenario, the sheer variety of ways that mounting pressures could lead to a miscalculation means that a more serious and lasting crisis will always remain a risk.

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**Turkey and the West: A Hostile Dance**

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