



Degrees of Difficulty:

Trends and Contingencies in US-Turkish Ties

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- Relations between Turkey and the West will remain strained.
- Neither the evolving war in Ukraine nor rapprochement in the Middle East will overcome these strains.
- Within this, Turkey's economy and U.S. presidential elections create points of volatility.

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FOLLOWING PRESIDENT RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN'S RE-ELECTION ON MAY 28 2023, there was renewed speculation about whether he might moderate with victory and perhaps pivot back toward the West. But if such hopes truly seems to spring eternal, they have been met with ever greater skepticism as problems and disappointments mount.¹

With Erdogan's mandate now confirmed till 2027 and expectations for democratic change at a new low, there is little reason to anticipate any major shifts in Turkish foreign policy in the near future. Even optimists are resigned to an increasingly transactional, not to say dysfunctional, relationship between Turkey and its Western allies.² The appointment of Ibrahim Kalin and Hakan Fidan to key ministerial posts has created some optimism that the dysfunction might be managed more competently going forward, but this will not shift the core dynamics.³

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Among policymakers in Washington, there appears to be less focus on how to improve relations with Turkey as a goal in itself and more on how to advance broader US interests in the face of presumed Turkish obstruction.⁴ Some, particularly within the Biden Administration, continue to look for ways to find common ground with Ankara, but they are operating in an environment where Turkey is ever more seen as a problem to be managed. Brussels, meanwhile, remains committed to dealing with Ankara pragmatically based on the need for Turkish cooperation on migration and the recognition that a Turkish economic collapse would quickly spill over to Europe.⁵ Yet among European leaders as well there is also a growing sense that pragmatism may call for a firmer stance.

Against this backdrop, it would be useful to explore some of the other trends and developments that could shape the course of Turkey's relations with the US and EU over the coming years. These include the fate of the Turkish economy, the results of the next US presidential election, the course of the war in Ukraine and the finally the future of regional dynamics within the Middle East. In each case, the correlation between the trend in question and the state of relations might not be linear or straightforward.

A weak Turkish economy will likely force Erdogan to adopt a more accommodating posture – until that policy becomes unsalvageable, potentially leading to geopolitical adventurism. From the perspective of US domestic politics, a Democrat victory in 2024 would presumably perpetuate the status quo. In the case of a Republican winning, the difference between Donald Trump and one of his primary rivals could be dramatic. Moving into the realm of international politics, continued stalemate in Ukraine will shape Turkish decision-making in paradoxical ways. Ankara has exploited Moscow's weakness to advance its regional interests at the expense of Russia and its clients while also seeing its leverage with the West diminish. Finally, in the Middle East, to the extent regional powers pursue better relations with one another while their relations with Washington remain strained, Turkey is well positioned to deepen its regional rapprochement. The results, from a Western perspective, would be a mixed blessing.

¹ <https://warontherocks.com/2023/07/natos-prodigal-son-is-not-returning/>

² <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/turkey/recep-erdogan-post-western-turkey>

³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/06/who-hakan-fidan-turkeys-new-foreign-minister-spy-powers>

⁴ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/turkey/erdogan-nato-survivor-united-states>

⁵ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/653662/EXPO_IDA\(2022\)653662_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/653662/EXPO_IDA(2022)653662_EN.pdf)

Economic Exigencies

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Turkey's economy has long been described as Erdogan's potential Achilles heel.⁶ If so, he nonetheless managed to limp to victory last spring with an arrow lodged firmly in it. Even if many of Erdogan's supporters were unhappy with the state of the economy, they accepted his framing of it. As a result, they blamed others for the country's economic problems, trusted Erdogan to fix them, or simply patriotically prioritized national security concerns over pocketbook issues.⁷

Erdogan, for his part, has consistently treated the economy as a priority, but within his own political parameters. Before the election, he sought to mend regional ties, particularly with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in the hopes of securing an economic lifeline.⁸ He has also previously reached out to China in search of support. But China, even more so than the Gulf, appears hesitant to sink money into the Turkish economy purely for the geopolitical payoff.⁹ And where selling off state assets to secure a short-term influx of cash may be tempting, it also risks creating a political backlash and compromising the government's commitment to sovereignty.

Since the election, Erdogan has also shown a reluctant but nonetheless unprecedented willingness to let Mehmet Simsek pursue orthodox economic policies. And while Erdogan has consistently rejected the prospect of a bailout from the IMF, with all the political and financial constraints that might entail, he appears to view the status of Turkey's relations with the West as important for maintaining the health of the economy.¹⁰ In consistently pushing a positive spin on US-Turkish ties or insisting on including the fiction of EU accession in its deal over Swedish NATO membership, Ankara has shown that, if nothing else, it sees cultivating a positive narrative as an important measure to keep markets happy.

Put differently, Turkey's economic ties with the West may act as a guardrail, but of the sort that will only save you if you scrape against it; hit it full speed and you'll careen into the valley below.

This recent history suggests that Turkey's economic concerns are likely to play a definite role in mitigating tensions with the West over the short or medium term, but also that Western leaders should not count on them to play this role indefinitely. So long as the economy remains weak or shaky, Erdogan will likely avoid taking steps that would create a deeper rift, or that carry the threat of new sanctions. But in a more dramatic crisis, it would be a mistake to think that he would turn to Western governments or institutions seeking a bailout on whatever terms they offered. To the contrary, if the economy gets bad enough Erdogan might decide that the political benefits of picking a fight with the West outweighs the costs it will create economically. Put differently, Turkey's economic ties with the West may act as a guardrail, but of the sort that will only save you if you scrape against it; hit it full speed and you'll careen into the valley below.

Presidential Possibilities

With Turkey's election over, the next major contest shaping the country's relations with the US and Europe will be America's 2024 presidential election. While it would be foolhardy to speculate about the outcome of this race or completely rule out the

⁶ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2014-08-08/erdogans-achilles-heel>

⁷ <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-06-02/turkey-erdogan-rode-nationalism-wave-win-reelection>

⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-erdogan-gulf-saudi-uae-qatar-8fa285fcb3bb66152c0d6d89a0474a98>

⁹ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/05/05/china-s-response-to-t-rkiye-s-volatile-authoritarianism-pub-89690>

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-sets-new-western-tilt-foreign-policy-economy-weighs-2023-07-11/>

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unexpected, there are three realistic possibilities: Either Biden or another mainstream Democrat candidate will win, Trump will win, or a non-Trump Republican will win.

Of these three, the consequences for Turkey of Biden or a successor winning seem easiest to predict. They would almost certainly entail a continuation of the status quo.¹¹ This administration holds little hope for better ties with Turkey but remains committed to cajoling the bare minimum of cooperation where necessary. As a result, Biden has been happy to give Erdogan the cold shoulder but also selectively lavish attention on him in pursuit of specific goals.¹² Likewise, he has been willing to apply targeted pressure where necessary but remains wary of doing anything that risks gratuitously alienating Ankara or pushing it toward Russia. Barring any major geopolitical changes, this approach will likely continue, perhaps amidst an even greater degree of frustration. Were Ankara to make its support for Trump too public, it might give the frustration a slightly more personal note, while in the case of a contested election with events mirroring January 6th, the president might put a slightly greater symbolic emphasis on solidarity with other democratic governments.

Many of Turkey's longstanding human rights issues have also become increasingly bipartisan in Washington through the injection of a religious dimension.

If Trump wins, it also seems safe to predict a return of the same dynamics that marked US-Turkish relations during his first term.¹³ Trump's personal and familial relationship with Erdogan would again take center stage, with all the attendant possibilities for corruption, accommodation and the occasional blow-up. Beyond this, many other shifts would likely work to Turkey's advantage as well. Erdogan would presumably face no further pressure to show solidarity with NATO over Ukraine, and might only have to accept that his role in mediating an end to the conflict would inevitably be secondary to Trump's. Another Trump term would also be far more disruptive than the first in its impact on America's domestic stability and global posture.¹⁴ With Washington less relevant on the world stage and US-European relations unmoored, Ankara would face a more fluid environment with more opportunities to deploy hard power in pursuit of its interests.

While Trump remains the candidate to beat in the current Republican primary, it is also possible another candidate will secure the nomination and win the election, leading to less predictable results for Turkey. A different Republican could well decide to emulate Trump's approach, trying to recreate his personal relationship with Erdogan. To the extent this relationship was the target of criticism from Democrats and media outlets like the *New York Times*, other candidates might decide that that itself was reason to embrace it.

At the same time, a different ideological trend might come to the fore, leading to a more antagonistic relationship. Alongside Trump's aggressively transactional approach, there has also been a growing tendency to prioritize Christian identity in Republican foreign policy.¹⁵ This, coupled with a perennial inclination toward with-us-or-against-us nationalism could make Erdogan's own mix of Islamist and nationalist-inspired anti-Americanism the perfect foil for an incoming Republican administration. It is striking for example, that the most confrontational moment between Trump and Erdogan came over the imprisonment of pastor Andrew Brunson, which garnered widespread attention within American evangelical circles.

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/23/us/politics/turkey-nato-ukraine-russia.html>

¹² <https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/1679198943174098944?s=20>

¹³ <https://www.cfr.org/article/trump-happy-seem-weak-next-erdogan>

¹⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-a-second-trump-term-would-mean-for-the-world/>

¹⁵ <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/09/21/most-republicans-support-declaring-the-united-states-a-christian-nation-00057736>

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Many of Turkey's longstanding human rights issues have also become increasingly bipartisan in Washington through the injection of a religious dimension. Due to Cold War-era political alignments, the Kurdish cause was traditionally more popular on the Left. Now, the SDF's role in defeating ISIS, enhanced through political outreach with Christian communities, has won greater Republican sympathy. Likewise, the demographics of the Armenian diaspora in the United States has historically made genocide recognition a more prominent cause among Democrats. But, particularly with the war in Nagorno-Karabagh, the Armenian community has been increasingly effective in presenting its cause as a Christian one.¹⁶

As evidence of these trends, it is revealing that Turkey was one of the few areas where Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly broke ranks with Trump at the end of his term. Presumably with his own political ambitions in mind, Pompeo appeared eager to present himself as standing up to Erdogan on behalf of Christian interests.¹⁷ In addition to championing the creation of the East Med Gas Forum, he made a point of visiting Cyprus in September of 2020 and then, in November, visiting Istanbul to meet the Ecumenical Patriarch without also seeing Erdogan. While Ankara's experience with Trump and Biden would almost certainly lead it to prefer any Republican challenger, one who followed Pompeo's lead would have a very different relationship with Turkey than Trump did.

Russian Realities

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When Russia launched its full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many observers predicted that Turkey would eventually be forced to pick a side.¹⁸ So far, Ankara has steadfastly refused, making it clear in word and deed that it will navigate between both sides in pursuit of a balanced, independent foreign policy.¹⁹ As such, it has sold drones to Ukraine while refusing to impose sanctions on Russia. It has closed the Black Sea to Russian warships, and NATO ones as well. Finally, it has sought to mediate between both parties in the conflict, achieving real, but ultimately limited success with the now-defunct grain deal.

Before the invasion, Turkish analysts regularly justified the country's pivot to a more independent foreign policy with reference to increasing multipolarity and the decline of the West relative to Russia and China.²⁰ Ironically, though, it has been Russia's military setbacks, and the strength of Western support for Ukraine, that have help facilitate the partial success of Turkey's current fence-sitting. Had Moscow succeeded in rapidly toppling the Ukrainian government, Turkey would face a dominant and empowered Russia in the Black Sea and its wider neighborhood. Following a Russian victory, NATO capitals would likely have been increasingly upset over Turkish neutrality, potentially leaving Ankara with less room to maneuver on both sides. Instead, however, Ankara has benefited from the fact that Russia is distracted and weakened. In Syria, for example, the risk of a renewed regime assault on Idlib has dissipated, while in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan has been left to tighten its control over Nagorno-Karabakh without any pushback from Russian peacekeepers.

¹⁶ <https://csi-usa.org/csi-condemns-turkish-azerbaijani-and-syrian-jihadist-aggression-against-armenian-christians/>
<https://csi-usa.org/csi-condemns-turkish-azerbaijani-and-syrian-jihadist-aggression-against-armenian-christians/>

¹⁷ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/pompeo-turkish-presidency-pence-tried-break-door>

¹⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/10/turkey-ukraine-russia-war-nato-erdogan/>

¹⁹ <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/you-go-to-war-with-the-turkey-you-have-not-the-turkey-you-want/>

²⁰ <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/how-much-multipolarity-does-a-strongman-need-why-erdogan-has-benefited-from-russias-failure-in-ukraine/>

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While ultimately justifying its balanced approach to the war with reference to Turkish interests, Ankara has also argued that it benefits the West as well.²¹ In addition to emphasizing the direct value of Turkish drones to Ukraine, Turkish policymakers have insisted that by remaining neutral in the conflict, they have won Russia's trust, enabling them to play a unique and valuable role as a mediator. Even before the collapse of the grain deal, this argument garnered little sympathy in Washington. There was appreciation for the concrete achievements of Turkish mediation. But the prevailing opinion remains that the challenge is how to bring Putin to the negotiating table, not who will host the negotiations. As a result, the preference would be for Ankara to help apply pressure against Russia in order to end the war sooner, and leave hosting the peace talks to one of the many other non-NATO countries eager to do so.²² Now, any further delays in ratifying Sweden's NATO membership will only intensify Western frustration with Turkey's role in the conflict.

Tellingly, while the erosion of Russian power in southeastern Europe has presented Turkey with opportunities, it has not eased tensions with the West. The collapse of the grain deal has already weakened Turkey's prime argument for why its fence-sitting could actually benefit Western interests. Now, by opposing the creation of an alternative grain corridor and pushing instead for concessions to Moscow to resurrect the deal, Ankara has further diverged from the Western position.²³ If naval tensions increase in the Black Sea, Turkey's decision to bar the entry of NATO ships, beyond the limits set by Montreux, will generate further frustration in Washington. Meanwhile, as Ankara seeks to negotiate an end to Russia's blockade of Ukraine, it has thrown its full support behind Azerbaijan's ongoing blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh. With Russian influence and peacekeepers sidelined, Baku is seeking to assert its full sovereignty over the region by starving the population into submission. The ensuing humanitarian crisis has not been a major concern for leaders in the US or Europe with a strategic interest in their ties to Baku, but it will nonetheless drive deeper hostility among voters and members of the US Congress.²⁴

Turkey's outreach to Israel, Egypt and the Gulf can be read as part of a broader effort to mend ties with West. Or it can be read as reflecting a growing alignment with a number of other states that are also frustrated with US foreign policy and trying their best to avoid taking sides in Ukraine.

Middle East Modalities

Over the past three years, Ankara has abandoned its stance of "precious loneliness" and eagerly pursued rapprochement with a number of its estranged neighbors in the Middle East.²⁵ Quick progress with the United Arab Emirates was followed by similar success with Saudi Arabia, cemented by reciprocal state visits and considerable optimism about expanded economic ties. Erdogan has also succeeded in putting his relations with Israel back on a proper footing, even if deepened suspicions on both sides still prevent this from having the full payoff he expected. Progress with Egypt moved more slowly, but, with tensions reduced in Libya, both governments recently announced that they would be restoring relations at the ambassadorial level. Meanwhile, Ankara's attempted rapprochement with Damascus has followed different dynamics and so far

²¹ <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/erdogans-pioneer-role-in-ukraine-grain-deal>

²² <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/one-year-into-the-war-its-time-for-turkey-to-reconsider-its-ukraine-russia-balancing-act/>

²³ WotR, forthcoming, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/09/side-stepping-turkey-using-minesweepers-to-increase-allied-presence-in-the-black-sea/>

²⁴ <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/safeguarding-people-nagorno-karabakh>

²⁵ <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/%ce%bd%ce%ad%ce%b5%cf%82-%ce%b4%cf%85%ce%bd%ce%b1%ce%bc%ce%b9%ce%ba%ce%ad%cf%82-%cf%80%ce%b1%ce%bb%ce%b1%ce%b9%ce%ac-%cf%80%cf%81%ce%bf%ce%b2%ce%bb%ce%ae%ce%bc%ce%b1%cf%84%ce%b1-%cf%84%ce%bf%cf%85/>

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demonstrated less success.²⁶ Still, Erdogan appears committed to the effort, and may eventually participate in Assad's regional reintegration.

Before the start of 2023, Ankara's Middle East charm offensive appeared aimed, in part, at isolating Greece by preventing Athens from deepening its ties with new Middle Eastern partners. Following the February 6 2023 earthquake, however, Turkey has sought to put a more positive spin on its relations with Greece as well.²⁷ This coincides with its push to overcome congressional opposition in order to purchase US F-16s. While this outreach has been accompanied by real reductions in Turkish overflights of Greek territory, there has been little further evidence that Ankara is prepared to resolve outstanding diplomatic problems. Moreover, fears that this progress could be merely temporary or opportunistic have been exacerbated by recent Turkish challenges to the status quo in Cyprus.

It remains to be seen how Ankara's campaign to restore ties with its neighbors will intersect with US-Turkish ties, in large part because Washington's ties with many of these same neighbors are experiencing newfound strains.²⁸ As a result, Turkey's outreach to Israel, Egypt and the Gulf can be read as part of a broader effort to mend ties with West. Or it can be read as reflecting a growing alignment with a number of other states that are also frustrated with US foreign policy and trying their best to avoid taking sides in Ukraine.²⁹ America's relationships with its traditional Middle East allies remain more solid than concerned commentary might suggest, but the divergences aren't going away either, even if Saudi-Israeli normalization continues to progress. As a result, Ankara may be able to achieve the best of both worlds. To the extent Erdogan is currently seeking to keep relations with Washington on an even keel, improving ties with US allies and partners eliminates an extra source of friction. To the extent Erdogan is still seeking to pick specific fights with Washington, or with EU members like Greece and Cyprus, he can play on the unease in America's relationships in the region to give himself a little more room to maneuver.

Independent of Washington, the broader regional trend toward normalization will continue to constrain Turkey's policy options. Ankara's turn toward hard power was both driven and facilitated by a period of conflict, where it could achieve real influence through its willingness to deploy force in places like Libya and Syria. While is certainly the possibility of new or renewed fighting, the end of active conflict would render the array of hard-power tools Turkey has developed less relevant. Some of these may still prove valuable as Ankara seeks to expand its footprint in Africa, using drone sales and military assistance to secure diplomatic and financial gains. But if this remains a realm in which to jostle for influence with other Western or Middle Eastern states, it is unlikely to decisively shape relations with them.

Finally, as the world moves toward accepting Assad's victory, other countries will begin to exert greater diplomatic and economic influence in Damascus. This may in time put more pressure on Ankara to seek accommodation on the regime's terms lest it be sidelined. It is difficult to see how Erdogan and Assad's conflicting demands – about the presence of Turkish troops in Syria and the return of Syrian refugees – can be reconciled. Yet if Russia's weakness prevents Damascus from confronting the presence of Turkish

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²⁶ <https://newlinesinstitute.org/turkey/for-turkey-and-syria-signs-of-rapprochement-are-likely-misleading/>

²⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/greece-pm-kyriakos-mitsotakis-turkey-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-agree-fresh-start-bilateral-relations-vilnius/>

²⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-saudi-relations-biden-mbs-animosity-11666623661>

²⁹ <https://warontherocks.com/2023/04/mind-the-middle-powers/>

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forces directly, both sides might have the incentive to continue, albeit slowly or in fits and starts, their path to rapprochement.

Conclusion

The potential interplay of Turkey's economic trajectory, America's elections, Ukraine's battlefield fortunes and political trends in the Middle East make confident predictions impossible. To date, however, unexpected events have only managed to slow or ameliorate, rather than reverse, the steady decline of Turkey's relations with the United States and Europe.

To date, unexpected events have only managed to slow or ameliorate, rather than reverse, the steady decline of Turkey's relations with the United States and Europe.

Even through Turkey's economic difficulties, Erdogan has continued to pick fights with the West where he found it politically or geopolitically useful. When Trump's election created an unexpected degree of synergy between Washington and Ankara, it did not preclude tensions even while he was in office, and may have worsened them afterward. Many observers expected that Russia's invasion of Ukraine would push Turkey back into the Western fold. But Ankara has refused to take sides, and the war has created new areas of disagreement with the rest of NATO. Finally, in the Middle East, Ankara's rapprochement with many of America's allies has coincided with their own fraying ties with Washington.

As this history suggests, Turkey's relations with the West could develop in a number of different ways, but the distinctions would largely reflect differing degrees of difficulty.