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# SWP Comment

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## Problematic Prospects for US-Turkish Ties in the Biden Era

Human Rights, Sanctions Likely among Early Tests

*Alan Makovsky*

Minimal discussion of foreign policy during the US presidential campaign has left President-elect Joe Biden pinned to very few specific foreign policy positions and given him great flexibility in carrying out his program. He would probably prefer to avoid confrontation with Turkey; in fact, he will likely explore areas of potential US-Turkish cooperation, especially against Russia. However, Biden's core positions on human rights and rule of law, his long-time focus on Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean issues, and his seeming inclination to continue to fight ISIS in cooperation with the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia – deemed “terrorists” by Ankara – probably augur deepening difficulties in US-Turkish ties. Down the line, a make-or-break decision on the future of US-Turkish ties will likely hinge on the Biden Administration's assessment of Turkish-Russian relations. Europe may have an important say on Biden's Turkish policy; a senior Biden adviser has said the new president will coordinate his approach to Turkey with the European Union.

In a now-famous interview with the *New York Times* late last year, President-elect Biden – then one of many candidates vying for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination – spoke with unbridled harshness about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He called Erdoğan “an autocrat” and, remarkably, threatened to work to replace him, quickly adding that he meant not by a military coup but by supporting the political opposition – as if a foreign government's open support for an elected leader's opposition were somehow perfectly normal. Biden added, without specificity, that Erdoğan “must pay a price.”

The interview took place in December 2019 and was published in January, but in Turkey, oddly, it only saw the light of day in mid-August, on the eve of the Democratic Party's nominating convention. Once publicized, the interview provoked a firestorm in Turkey.

Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin accused Biden of “pure ignorance, arrogance and hypocrisy,” adding, “The days of ordering Turkey around are over. But if you still think you can try, be our guest.” Also without specificity, he warned Biden, “You will pay the price.”

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Biden and Erdoğan have a rocky personal history, and this flare-up convinced many analysts that heightened US-Turkish tensions are inevitable once Biden, itching for a fight, takes office.

Heightened tensions probably are inevitable, but not for the reasons suggested by Biden's *New York Times* interview.

## Biden the Cautious

It is highly unlikely that Biden would follow through on the threat to support Erdoğan's opposition, whatever that would mean. Instead, the interview should be chalked up to a mixture of "tough-guy" campaign talk aimed at a highly unpopular foreign leader, genuine exasperation with Erdoğan's anti-democratic behavior, and anger over Turkey's then recent invasion of northeast Syria, conducted with the Trump Administration's acquiescence.

Biden is generally cautious in foreign policy, not at all quick on the trigger. True, he advocated for US intervention in Bosnia for humanitarian reasons and, probably reluctantly, voted for the 2003 Iraq War. As vice-president, however, Biden was most often a source of restraint. In Barack Obama's inner councils, he is reliably reported to have opposed the US intervention against Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and the surge in Afghanistan, as well the audacious operation that took out Osama Bin Laden — the first two because he questioned the value to US national interests, the last because he feared a problematic failure. He was also on the losing side of an internal debate on whether to push Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to resign during "Arab Spring" demonstrations in February 2011.

In fact, despite a range of differences he will likely have with the Turkish government — some of which have their origins in the Obama Administration — it is difficult to imagine the circumspect Biden openly seeking confrontation with Turkey, unless provoked. One of Biden's first foreign-policy initiatives is likely to be an effort to patch up relations with North Atlan-

tic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, badly frayed by four years of neglect, even hostility, under the Trump Administration — and Turkey is still one of those allies.

## Biden's Values Replace Trump's

Regardless of Biden's likely intent not to roil further the troubled US-Turkish relationship he will inherit, it is a virtual certainty that things will get worse almost immediately upon Biden's taking office. Simply by being himself — his commitment to human rights abroad and rule of law at home forming much of the core of his political being — three changes are likely to come quickly in US policy as it affects Ankara, and all in a manner unwelcome to the Turkish government.

First of all, Biden is likely to return human rights to a central focus of US foreign policy. This will be a change not merely of degree but of kind. President Donald Trump did not believe in raising human-rights issues, except in rare circumstances. In fact, Trump often praised Erdoğan for his effectiveness in governing his nation. Trump paid little mind to Turkey's broad range of human rights transgressions — whether repression of free speech, unjust arrests of journalists and political opponents, removal of legitimately elected Kurdish mayors, or the embarrassing laws against "insulting the president," which have resulted in tens of thousands of prosecutions.

In contrast, Biden's 2020 Democratic Party platform vows to "put democratic values at the core of our foreign policy." The United States, Biden says, will host a global "Summit for Democracy" during the first year of his Administration, which will prioritize "fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights," and will, inter alia, "honestly confront nations that are backsliding." In addition to governments, the summit is envisioned to include civil society organizations "that stand on the frontlines in defense of democracy" — the type whose leaders are regularly harassed or imprisoned in Tur-

key. Moreover, the platform vows to “hold to account those who perpetrate human rights abuses.” None of this is music to Erdoğan’s ears. Erdoğan knows that such bold rhetoric from Washington is likely to embolden Turkish dissenters.

Second, Biden will return to a traditional “hands off” approach regarding US Department of Justice prosecutions. That means that the Southern District of New York almost certainly will continue to prosecute its case against Halkbank, a Turkish state bank accused of helping Iran circumvent US sanctions to the tune of possibly tens of billions of dollars. An almost inevitable guilty verdict could result in a major fine that threatens the bank’s viability and damages Turkey’s teetering economy. The *New York Times* recently detailed President Trump’s vigorous, but failed, efforts to shut down that prosecution.

Third, on the unavoidable near-term agenda, and perhaps most immediately, are Congressionally mandated sanctions flowing from Turkey’s purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia. Exploiting a loophole in the law, Trump simply ignored it, protecting Turkey from sanctions. Given bipartisan Congressional demand for its implementation, it seems unlikely that Biden would do likewise.

The relevant sanctions legislation is known as the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), passed in 2017. It requires the president to impose sanctions on any nation that conducts a “significant transaction” with Russia’s defense or intelligence sectors. CAATSA sets out a menu of 12 different sanctions, with a range of impact, from which the president is directed to choose at least five.

Biden probably is not eager to impose sanctions, which would poison his relations with Erdoğan and could have a devastating effect on Turkey’s fragile economy. Still, he may have little choice. Biden is unlikely to ignore the law as Trump did. He may choose to impose the five least harsh sanctions, which is well within the law, but it is almost inevitable that he will implement the law and sanction Turkey in some fashion

unless Ankara disposes of its S-400s to Washington’s satisfaction. A waiver is possible, but Biden would pursue that course only if he can persuade a consensus in Congress of its wisdom.

## **Problems Likely to Fester: YPG, Gülen**

Regarding what Ankara considers the two most neuralgic issues in US-Turkish relations — US cooperation with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)-associated YPG against ISIS in northeastern Syria, and the presence of 79-year-old Fethullah Gülen in the United States — there is unlikely to be much change. Neither the Obama or Trump Justice Departments have felt there is sufficient evidence to warrant an extradition case against Gülen. Meanwhile, Biden’s support for the US relationship with the YPG is clear. He savaged Trump for pulling back US troops and allowing Turkish troops to enter northeast Syria and displace the Kurds. Unless Trump withdraws the 500 or so remaining US troops from Syria prior to January 20, Biden will almost certainly leave them in place. The Democratic platform promises to pursue ISIS in Syria, while “stand(ing) by Kurdish and other critical partners in that fight.” And, of course, it was the Obama-Biden Administration that began the relationship with the YPG.

In recent times, Turkey has not raised either the Gülen or the YPG issues as frequently or as forcefully as in the past. Regarding Gülen, Ankara may have come to recognize the futility of its extradition demand, although Erdoğan will not discard the talking point. As for the YPG, it may loom somewhat less large these days; three Turkish military operations since 2016 have succeeded in pushing the YPG off most of the Turkish-Syrian border. Still, Erdoğan recently threatened further military action against the YPG in northeast Syria, which could prove to be an early test of Biden’s resolve.

Even absent further Turkish military threats or action, the United States’ relationship with the YPG will continue to sour

bilateral relations with Ankara. Biden will probably pursue a belated effort begun under Trump to fashion a coalition of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the political arm of the YPG, with other Syrian Kurdish groups more acceptable to Ankara; success in that effort is at best a long shot, however.

### **Old Issues, New Attention: Cyprus, Eastern Mediterranean, Hamas**

There are other enduring Turkey-related issues where Biden may make an immediate difference, or at least strike a noticeably different tone than did Trump. One is Cyprus. Whereas the Cyprus problem makes many observers' eyes glaze, Biden has a longstanding interest in the Cyprus problem, forged by his memory of the origins of that problem and shaped in significant part by his traditional closeness with the Hellenic-American community. He is one of only two still-active politicians who participated in the vote on the arms embargo that the US Congress placed on Turkey following the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus; he supported it. Reflecting his personal interest, he visited Cyprus as vice-president in 2014, the highest-ranking US official to do so since Vice-President Lyndon Johnson in 1962. Over the years as a Senator, he frequently crossed swords with Turkish officials regarding the Cyprus issue.

Efforts to reunite the divided but peaceful island would normally rank low among any new president's immediate priorities. It will not be a priority for Biden, either, but he knows the issue well and is invested in it. He will want renewed talks on reunification between the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots. And he will be sensitive to Turkish efforts to upset the status quo, as Erdoğan has recently done by partially opening Varosha and declaring that the only solution for Cyprus is "two states for two peoples," contrary to longstanding efforts at unification. Should Erdoğan insist on this approach, there will inevitably be tension with Washington, both at the White House and in Congress.

Related to this — and like the Trump and Obama Administrations — Biden will firmly object to active Turkish efforts to explore for hydrocarbons in waters that constitute the Greek and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) as well as in waters in the Aegean that the US considers disputed between Turkey and Greece. However, Biden is likely to express his objections more consistently and more forcefully than did his predecessors. If Turkey nevertheless persists in its explorations, it will find itself in a crisis with Washington. If Turkey stands down, Ankara probably will find Biden balanced in his approach to Greek-Turkish relations.

Biden is also likely to want to build on the United States' growing security ties with Greece, albeit without destabilizing Greek-Turkish relations. Likewise, he will unquestionably support the burgeoning Greek-Israeli-Cypriot "alliance," while working closely with it to try to ensure that it is not seen as too provocative in wary Ankara.

Another longstanding, potentially problematic issue involves Turkish ties to Hamas, which the United States and the European Union (EU) label a terrorist group. Turkey has had open relations with Hamas since February 2006, about which the United States has remained largely silent. Only with a senior Hamas visit to Ankara three-plus months ago — the latest of many such visits — did the US State Department criticize Turkey-Hamas ties for the first time. Ankara indignantly rejected the criticism.

In recent years, with mounting Israeli accusations that Hamas is actually planning terrorist operations from Turkish soil — not merely hosting an office — it seems likely that the pro-Israel Biden Administration as well as the US Congress will pointedly raise this issue.

### **The "Russia-Turkey" Issues: Syria/Idlib, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh**

There are three sets of issues in which Turkey and Russia are arrayed on opposite sides: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

In all three cases, Turkey's military involvement was the result of independent decision-making, without any known consultation with the United States or other NATO allies. In all three cases, Turkey and Russia are either discussing possible solutions, cooperating to maintain stability in the interim, or both.

There is a split in the US policy world over how to view this multi-front clash. Some see a NATO ally counterbalancing Russian aggression; those who see it this way tend to think that common opposition to Russia can be the basis for reviving faltering US-Turkish ties. Others see Turkey as "out of control" and moving toward partnering with Moscow in a condominium that encompasses increasing portions of the Mediterranean and Black Seas regions. From the latter perspective, the growing number of fields of Russian-Turkish competition actually lead to more Russian-Turkish bilateral coordination, and thus to stronger Russian-Turkish ties, pushing Turkey further away from the Western orbit — and, as some see it, that is exactly what Ankara wants.

The former view was epitomized by US Ambassador James Jeffrey, who, until last month, served as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Special Representative for Syria Engagement and the Special Envoy to the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS. Following Turkish clashes in February with Russian and Syrian troops in Idlib, Syria, Jeffrey publicly praised Turkey's role in Idlib and spoke of common US-Turkish geostrategic interests in Libya, meaning as a counterweight to Russia. He went so far as to refer to Turkish troops killed in a Russian bombing raid as "our martyrs." Jeffrey spoke of the possibility of material US or NATO support for Turkey's military mission in Syria, but that was not forthcoming — probably because of privately expressed Congressional resistance.

Under Trump, issues involving Russia were always complicated by the president's mysterious warmth toward Russian President Vladimir Putin. By contrast, Biden takes a transparently harsh view of Russian

intentions toward the United States. Shortly before the US election, Biden labeled Russia "the biggest threat to America right now in terms of breaking up our security and our alliances."

For now, it is not clear if Biden views Turkey as more an asset or an impediment in the US competition with Russia. In statements made before the US election, Biden tilted heavily in favor of Armenia, calling Turkish military involvement "irresponsible" and calling for a cutoff of the United States' limited military assistance to Azerbaijan. Biden has not addressed the Idlib situation, where the Turkish-Russian face-off is most direct. Nor has he addressed the internal military situation in Libya.

Libya is the most complex of the three situations. Multiple US allies are on each side of the conflict: Turkey and Italy support the UN- (and US-)recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) under Fayeza al-Sarraj; France, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and other pro-US Arab states join Russia in backing rebel Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the GNA, in exchange for crucial Turkish military support, recognized Turkey's expansive EEZ claims in the Mediterranean — claims that trespass on Greece's internationally recognized claims.

The Trump Administration divided Turkey's Libya intervention into two parts, criticizing the maritime agreement but, at least initially, projecting approval of the intervention on behalf of the Sarraj government. Biden no doubt likewise disapproves of the maritime claims, but it is not clear what his view will be regarding Turkish military involvement, which is unquestionably the GNA's life-support system.

Michael Carpenter, a leading Biden adviser on Europe, recently characterized Turkey's intervention in Libya — as well as its actions in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Aegean and its purchase of the S400 — as acting "irresponsibly and aggressively in undermining our shared interests." Regarding Libya, Carpenter did not specify whether he was objecting only to the maritime



agreement or to the military intervention as well.

Somewhere amidst the Russian-Turkish-US triangle sits Ukraine, with which Turkey appears to be developing increasingly close relations. Turkey last year sold Ukraine six of its domestically-produced combat drones and has been unwaveringly critical of the Russian occupation of Crimea, certainly a plus for the United States and its allies. But Turkey and Ukraine have also reportedly signed agreements calling for cooperation on dozens of military projects, including development of an aircraft engine. This could be a dramatic boost to Turkey's expanding military-industrial sector, a major source of its new-found foreign-policy independence — and thus perhaps, in the view of its NATO allies, an undesirable development.

Biden ultimately will decide whether Turkey is seeking to act more as an asset or an impediment to US interests in Washington's own confrontation with Russia, and that will go a long way toward determining whether a serious improvement in US-Turkish ties is possible. But Biden is unlikely to reach a positive determination about Turkey unless Washington and Ankara come to an accommodation regarding the S-400s.

## Pragmatism Trumps Problematic Personal History

It is no secret that Erdoğan was rooting hard for Trump's reelection. His relationship with Biden has been as rocky as his relationship with Trump has been warm. Erdoğan was famously one of the last foreign leaders to congratulate Biden on his victory.

For one thing, Biden served in the US Administration that Erdoğan seems to believe devised the 2016 coup that sought to overthrow him. While there is no evidence that the United States had prior knowledge of — much less planned — the coup attempt, Süleyman Soyulu, a top Erdoğan cabinet member, accused the United States of being its architect, and it is un-

likely that he spoke without the boss' blessing. Washington indeed was inexplicably slow to condemn the coup. Biden may bear an unfair share of the brunt of Erdoğan's anger regarding the US response to the coup, as it was he whom Obama designated to visit Turkey and patch things up — a full five weeks after the coup attempt took place. During the visit, Biden felt constrained to apologize for the belated US response.

It was not Biden's first apology to Erdoğan. In 2014, Biden publicly apologized after Erdoğan reacted heatedly to statements Biden made in an appearance at Harvard's Kennedy School. Biden provoked Erdoğan's anger by claiming that Turkey had armed "anyone who would fight" Bashar al-Assad — clearly meaning jihadists — and that Erdoğan had acknowledged to the Obama Administration that Turkey had allowed too many jihadists to pass through its territory into Syria. Erdoğan denied both claims.

Biden and Erdoğan certainly have more than a passing acquaintance. Including the post-coup trip, Biden visited Turkey four times as vice-president. During a visit in January 2016, Biden publicly criticized Turkey's democratic backsliding, defended Turkish academics under fire for signing a petition opposing Turkey's Kurdish policies, and made a point of holding public meetings with journalists fired for criticizing the government as well as with the wife of an imprisoned prominent journalist. That was another occasion on which Biden angered Erdoğan, but, that time, there was no apology.

From Erdoğan's perspective, Biden has been on the wrong side of almost every issue of importance to Turkey. In addition to his sympathy with Greece and Greek Cypriots and his backing of the US partnership with the YPG, Biden has indicated support for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide and is a long-time booster of the Iraqi Kurds and their Kurdistan Regional Government. In 2017, Biden ruefully blamed deference to Turkish sensibilities for the fact that, as vice-president, he did not do "more for the Kurds."

According to former Obama adviser Ben Rhodes, in White House meetings Biden would “repeatedly” assert that his long experience had taught him that “all foreign policy is an extension of personal relationships.” If that is the case — and, fortunately, it is not — it would seem that US-Turkish relations under Biden will have a steep hill to climb. Both Biden and Erdoğan are pragmatists, however; personal history might play a role, but issues mostly will determine the course of bilateral ties.

Despite these tensions, Biden seems to think he has at least somewhat of a rapport with the Turkish leader. In the same interview in which he labeled Erdoğan an “autocrat,” Biden also boasted that he was Erdoğan’s preferred interlocutor in the Obama Administration because the Turkish leader trusted that he “wasn’t anti-Islam.”

### Foreign Policy: Biden’s Comfort Zone

To be sure, Biden’s primary preoccupations upon taking office will be domestic — primarily, the pandemic and the economy. However, it is wrong to think Biden will leave foreign policy on the back-burner for long, if at all. Trump has left behind many problems (not all of his own making), and foreign policy is a realm in which a US president can make a quick difference — unlike the slog of passing legislation through Congress, especially one that may be divided. Foreign policy is also a realm in which Biden feels particularly comfortable.

Biden will come to office with the most foreign-affairs experience, and foreign contacts, of any US president since George Bush *pere*. A former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden is a classic internationalist, strongly supportive of NATO and all the other post-World War II multilateral institutions that Trump demeans. And, unlike the more isolationist Trump, he believes US leadership is vital for international stability and prosperity, as well as for the United States’ own national interests. He set out his views in that regard

during the campaign in a *Foreign Affairs* article entitled, tellingly, “Why America Must Lead Again.”

Accordingly, Biden’s Administration is far more likely than Trump’s to anticipate and avert potential crises and manage them effectively when they arise. This proposition will be tested over time, of course, but one can assume that in circumstances where US allies are on the verge of hostilities, as has happened in Libya and quite recently in the Aegean, the Biden Administration will not leave it to Europeans alone to calm things down.

### Biden’s Braintrust

Given his long experience in the region, Biden will feel fully at ease making the final call on decisions related to Turkey. And, based on their writings and public statements, Biden’s top foreign-policy advisers — Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser-designate Jake Sullivan — will mainly reinforce Biden’s own instincts.

Probably no previous US Secretary of State has come to office with as much knowledge and experience about Turkey as will Blinken. As Senior Director for European Affairs at the National Security Council, Blinken was President Bill Clinton’s point-man on Turkey in the late 1990s. He joined Biden’s staff in the US Senate in 2002 and — as Biden’s chief foreign-policy adviser in the Senate and the vice-presidency, then later as deputy secretary of state — has been engaged with Turkey ever since. Blinken is the only person to have accompanied both Clinton on his successful, nearly week-long visit to Turkey in 1999 and Biden on his awkward, post-coup-attempt visit in 2016.

Both Blinken and Sullivan have acknowledged Turkey’s importance to the United States and called for intense engagement with Ankara to address the many difficulties besetting bilateral ties, while also expressing concern and skepticism about Erdoğan’s long-term foreign-policy direction.



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Both have also expressed views, prior to the campaign, that probably rankled in Ankara. Writing in the *New York Times* in 2017, Blinken called on President Trump to arm the YPG as the United States' most effective partner against ISIS. At the same time, he showed awareness of Turkish concerns by calling, inter alia, for the United States to support a Turkish buffer-zone in northern Syria, increase its support for Turkey against the PKK, and push the YPG to dissociate itself from the PKK. In a 2018 *Politico* oped co-authored with former US Ambassador to Turkey Eric Edelman and focused on the then-prevalent concern that Turkey might make good on Erdoğan's threats to attack US troops in Syria, the authors called for a "tough-minded and transactional approach" to bilateral ties, including consideration of sanctions, while also advocating "sustained, high-level dialogue."

## Biden's Challenge: Changing Turkey's Course While Preserving US-Turkish Ties

The United States may be increasingly focused on Asia these days, but Biden also will want to resuscitate relations with the country's European allies. Nor is he likely to neglect the Middle East, which has such a powerful impact on those allies and in which Turkey has such deep interests. Europe and the Middle East, including the Greece–Turkey–Cyprus nexus, are the regions Biden knows best. And tensions with Turkey, Biden aide Carpenter says, "will require a lot of attention at *the very start* [emphasis added] of the next Administration," so Turkish issues are hardly likely to be neglected.

Notwithstanding his close relationships in the Hellenic world, Biden has always been pragmatic, and he is appreciative of Turkey's geostrategic value. As president, Biden will certainly not go out of his way to antagonize Ankara, at least from his own perspective, although Ankara may see some of his positions as unnecessarily antagonistic. He will seek to alter Turkey's course, both domestically and externally, and he will do so – according to Carpenter – "in coordination with the EU." But Biden and his Administration will face what has become a perennial problem: How to change Turkey's behavior without devastating its economy or causing – in the words of Turkey analyst Nicholas Danforth – "a permanent rupture" in US-Turkish ties.

Biden will want to preserve a sound diplomatic and security relationship with Turkey, to the extent possible – but it may not be possible. Led by human rights and the S-400 purchase, many difficult issues are looming. The Biden Administration will almost certainly let Turkey know early on what is expected of it, along the lines suggested in the first part of this paper. Perhaps it will even consider a senior-level dialogue, as Blinken and Sullivan have suggested at times. The wild card will be how Erdoğan – now seemingly bent on an assertive, nationalist, and independent foreign policy and a role as a leading regional power, and seeing these ambitions lashed to his domestic political prospects – will respond.

It is not what Biden will seek, but further deterioration in US-Turkish ties in the early months of the Biden Administration seems almost inevitable, barring a sudden change in Turkey's domestic and regional posture.

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