

WHAT'S UP WITH U.S.-TURKEY RELATIONS? BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL TURMOIL AND TRUMP 2.0

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Executive Summary

The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency has raised cautious optimism in Turkey. On the one hand, his good ties with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and their shared transactional approach to international politics may foster ad hoc agreements on key issues. Compared to outgoing U.S. President Joe Biden's more rigid and distrustful engagement, this could facilitate a fresh start between Ankara and Washington. However, structural challenges—including divergent priorities in Syria, tensions over the S-400 missile system, and Turkey's delicate balancing act between NATO, Russia, and emerging powers—create significant obstacles to fully restoring mutual trust. This analysis examines the evolving dynamics of U.S.-Turkey relations, exploring how their shared interests hold both risks and opportunities amid complex global challenges.



Introduction

Trump's success in the November 2024 U.S. presidential election has been welcomed enthusiastically in Turkey. President Erdoğan was among the first world leaders to congratulate the incoming tenant of the White House and invited his "friend Donald" to visit Turkey to revitalize the cooperation between Turkey and the United States.¹ Indeed, in the last four years, bilateral relations have been swinging between restrained cooperation, mutual distrust, and conflictual issues, with Turkey seeing direct diplomatic ties kept at a minimum and its strategic value questioned by its transatlantic ally.² Certainly, there is now high hope in Ankara that the personal affability between the two leaders could help refresh bilateral relations.³ However, contrary to the current discourse, the previous Trump presidency did not lack sources of tension. Bilateral issues such as diverging priorities in the Middle East, Turkey's ambiguous relations with Russia, and economic sanctions are of a structural nature rather than merely leadership-based.

As such, it is unlikely that Turkish-American relations under the second Trump presidency will witness a radical departure from current dynamics. Still, it is worth exploring how the latest developments in Syria and hints about Trump's first moves and cabinet nominations could translate into a partnership resembling neither Biden's term in office nor his successors' earlier one.

From Biden to Trump: "So-Called Strategic Partner" No More?

Despite uncertainties, the incoming Trump administration will hardly start with the same poor record of trust-building as its predecessor. Overall, Biden's approach was defined by disen-

agement with and distrust of Ankara from the beginning, with U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken labeling Turkey a "so-called strategic partner."⁴ First, the Democratic president's desire to create a "coalition of democracies" against authoritarian states discomfited Erdoğan for over a year as President Biden postponed calls and meetings multiple times, excluding Turkey from the Summit for Democracy and officially recognizing the Armenian genocide. Second, the two countries' strategic interests have been misaligned in multiple scenarios, from Syria to the Eastern Mediterranean. In this context, finding itself in opposition to many U.S. priorities, Ankara's foreign policy became more erratic and characterized by growing anti-Western rhetoric, conflictual relations with many neighbors, and ambiguous ties with Russia and China.⁵

Against this backdrop, the overlap of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Turkey's normalization efforts with its regional neighbors seemed to hold the potential for setting bilateral relations on a more constructive course. To a certain extent, the war in Ukraine has provided Ankara with the possibility to leverage its partnerships with both Kyiv and Moscow to play the role of mediator, as was the case in early peace talks, the UN grain deal, and prisoner swaps.⁶ Moreover, previous military partnerships with Ukraine enabled Turkish leadership to highlight the country's strategic importance within NATO by providing drones and equipment. However, direct high-level contact remained minimal with perhaps the exception of U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Jeff Flake in Ankara, who attempted to harness this momentum.⁷ Mutual mistrust endured in several scenarios. The negotiations for Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession turned into a do-ut-des saga where Ankara bartered for assurances about Kurdish terrorists and the purchase of F-16 fighter aircraft



before approving, first, Helsinki's and, then, Stockholm's membership.⁸

Seemingly, while Turkey's rapprochement with Egypt and the Gulf monarchies had the potential to realign Ankara with U.S. policies and alliances in the Middle East,⁹ its actions on other fronts underscored the persistence of frictions and divergences with Washington. One such source of friction is Ankara's equivocal continuation of business with Russia. Turkey did not join sanctions against Moscow following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and continued cooperating in the fields of energy and trade. Second is Turkey's willingness to join the BRICS, which was announced by President Erdoğan in September 2024.¹⁰ Even as Ankara's potential economic gains and full membership prospects remain undefined, Ankara's perspective membership in the BRICS bloc represents another political instrument to reinforce Turkey's "balancing act."¹¹ Indeed, these actions confirm that the current era of strategic competition highlights the leverage of mid-sized powers like Turkey, which increasingly pursue pragmatic positions based on mutual advantage or hedge against "Western punitive actions" in the absence of trust and assurance.¹²

In light of these challenges, friendly personal relations between Trump and Erdoğan do not necessarily guarantee good bilateral ties between their countries. In fact, despite the latter's renowned affinity for strong leaders and the apparent chemistry with the former, some of these substantial problems affecting U.S.-Turkey relations arose during Trump's first presidency.¹³ These included Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, which poses a security risk due to its incompatibility with NATO's defense systems. The purchase consequentially triggered U.S. sanctions and Turkey's removal from the F-35 fighter jet program. Adding to the tensions were policy

inconsistencies over Syria. While Ankara enjoyed the green light from Washington to conduct some military operations during the Trump presidency, Ankara views U.S. support for Syrian Kurdish forces as a security threat, which remains a clear source of concern today.¹⁴

As such, Trump's return to office raises questions about whether past patterns will continue or change. "Cautious optimism" aptly defines the prospect of further improvements in U.S.-Turkey relations, as the unpredictable nature of Trump's leadership always carries a risk. In addition, the incoming president is beginning to shape a foreign policy team that, on paper, does not look accommodating to Turkey.¹⁵ Both Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Adviser Mike Waltz have previously criticized Turkey's 2019 military operations in Syria and advocated for support to Syrian Kurdish fighters against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Similarly, serving as Director of National Intelligence will be Tulsi Gabbard, who defined Turkey as "a NATO ally in name only" and has never hidden her sympathy for Greece and Cyprus. This explains why, despite its initial confidence, Turkish leadership has maintained a cautious wait-and-see approach in reacting to Trump's nominees.¹⁶

Converging Interests on Transactional Bases

Divergences on strategic issues will not disappear overnight, but the U.S.-Turkey relationship under the second Trump administration will look quite different than the Biden and the first Trump administration. First, although Trump's nominees might appear unfavorable to Turkey, they could also be much more attuned to his vision and inclinations in a way that might make foreign



and national security policies more predictable.¹⁷ In addition, the incoming team is prone to hard power, geopolitical thinking, and transactional relationships with allies and adversaries alike. Considering security and economic threats stemming from China and Iran, U.S. priorities are set to disregard preoccupations about human rights and democratic backsliding that have previously hindered Turkey's stance.¹⁸ From this angle, one could expect that Trump's sympathy for Erdoğan and his willingness to seek positive relations with Turkey will shape the tone of the U.S.-Turkey relationship. Certainly, the Turkish government would like to continue its transactional streak, eventually indicating room for mutually satisfying ad-hoc agreements over the next four years. Furthermore, with Trump and Erdoğan both serving terms extending through 2028, electoral pressures may pose fewer constraints on cooperative ideas that the two leaders might develop.

Second, the newly elected U.S. administration will deal with a Turkish leadership that sees the country as better positioned and stronger in multiple scenarios than in 2017.¹⁹ Compared to its aggressive modus operandi over the last years and its domestic instability following the failed 2016 coup attempt, Ankara has recently toned down its harsh foreign policy behavior and showed its intentions of pursuing more orthodox socioeconomic policies. Ankara seems to have recognized that a more cooperative approach toward the United States, the European Union, and other regional powers would restore not only the country's international credibility but also partnerships that could help address domestic issues such as economic and migration crises. This is also a pleasant idea for a U.S. administration prioritizing domestic reforms over meddling in international affairs. On the one hand, this was confirmed by Trump's latest declarations about

Turkey's increasing role in Syria after the removal of the Bashar al-Assad regime by rebel groups close to Ankara: "Turkey is a major force [...], and Erdogan is somebody I got along with great [...]. He's built a very powerful army."²⁰ On the other hand, however, adding that "Turkey was behind an unfriendly takeover in Syria" seems to reflect his intention to draw the limits of Ankara's margins of maneuver in the region. Therefore, rather than a complete reset of relations, the current path is more likely to head toward a compartmentalization of mutual interests.

Points of Convergence for Turkish Foreign Policy vis-à-vis Trump 2.0

Syria and the Middle East

The sudden fall of Assad and the rapid territorial expansion of rebel groups close to Turkey—the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—have positioned Ankara as a central actor in shaping Syria's future. Russia and Iran's diminishing influence and Trump's stated intention to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria have further opened the door for Turkey to consolidate its role. Yet, these developments also bring Ankara under the international spotlight and pose the risk of exacerbating sources of friction with Washington.²¹

On the positive side, Turkey's links to the SNA and its tacit understanding with HTS have been instrumental in securing its objectives: repatriating Syrian refugees and curbing the influence of Kurdish groups in Northern Syria. The next president may revisit the U.S. stance in Syria with an accelerated time frame, leading to a withdrawal of American troops, which could drive Washington to lean on Ankara to contain Iranian and Russian influence in the region. Certainly, this might help



Turkey to address its security interest of curbing the presence of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its affiliated Peoples Protection Units (YPG) in Northeastern Syria. However, while Ankara sees these groups as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—considered a terrorist organization by Turkey and many Western countries—they also represent one of Washington’s main allies against ISIS.²²

As Trump’s intentions on the issue remain unclear, Ankara must carefully balance its national security goals with its broader ambitions. Therefore, should Ankara pursue an impulsive stance through military operations, this would risk reigniting instability, displacing civilians, and undermining U.S. counterterrorism efforts against ISIS. Contrarily, a more cooperative and transparent approach would allow Turkey to consolidate its gains while avoiding unnecessary confrontation and restoring trust with Washington, Brussels, and other regional players.²³ As Ankara aims to undermine the U.S. rationale that fighting ISIS depends on cooperation with the YPG and the presence of American forces, it might propose a joint mechanism in counterterrorism activities while managing the detention camps housing ISIS fighters and their families now under the YPG’s control.

In broader Middle Eastern dynamics, U.S.-Turkey relations are likely to remain marked by both deep tensions and pragmatic opportunities for cooperation. As it did with the Abraham Accords in 2020, the Trump administration is expected to carry forward its emphasis on supporting regional allies, prioritizing cooperation among regional partners over direct U.S. intervention.²⁴ This approach could benefit from Turkey’s enhanced regional ties since 2021, when it began reconciling with key U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt. Despite persistent geopolitical challenges, Ankara’s growing defense

industry and expanding role in collective security arrangements make it an increasingly attractive partner in the region, especially if maximum pressure on Iran is further restored. However, the way Trump intends to put this in place and the evolution of Israel’s military actions in the area are set to make the road to cooperation difficult. First, considering the nomination of hawkish pro-Israel figures—such as the next U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee—Washington is likely to keep dismissing President Erdoğan as a viable mediator between Hamas and Israel, largely due to his vocal support for Hamas and sharp criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza, a position that also finds little support among regional Arab countries. Second, although a tough stance against Iran enlarges Turkey’s margins of maneuver, Ankara seeks to protect its “frenemy” relationship with Tehran to maintain vital economic and energy cooperation channels. Third, Israel’s “quiet support” for Kurdish autonomy, including reports of Kurdish outreach for Israeli aid in Northeastern Syria, exacerbates tensions with Ankara.²⁵

Nevertheless, looking beyond current tensions, Ankara attempted a reset with Jerusalem in the months prior to the October 7, 2023 terror attacks. Therefore, a potential ceasefire in Gaza and Lebanon could prompt the Trump administration to push for renewed, albeit limited, cooperation between Turkey and Israel. Despite their political tensions, bilateral trade has persisted, and shared economic interests, such as energy projects and defense technologies, could serve as a foundation for reengagement and align with the U.S. goals of strengthening regional economic and security frameworks through less costly means.

The War in Ukraine, Russia, and the S-400

Looking at Trump’s bold target to “end the War in Ukraine in one minute,” it is clear that his return



to the U.S. presidency will significantly impact the issue.²⁶ The appointment of Keith Kellogg, a retired lieutenant general, as Ukraine's envoy signals the outline of a plan to end the war based on negotiations, a demilitarized zone, conditional aid to Ukraine, and reengagement with Russia. In this sense, Trump's willingness to reapproach Russia and shift U.S.-Russia relations away from ideological confrontation could reshape the trajectory of the conflict, presenting opportunities and challenges for Turkey.²⁷ Ankara has thus far managed a delicate balancing act, supporting Ukraine militarily while maintaining strong economic and political ties with Moscow. This dual strategy positions Turkey as a potential mediator in any ceasefire or settlement, particularly given its strategic role in the Black Sea and proven ability to facilitate agreements.²⁸

At the same time, unresolved tensions between Turkey, Russia, and the United States, particularly over the S-400 missile defense system, remain a critical obstacle. While an American proposal suggests transferring the Russian system to the U.S.-controlled sector of Incirlik Air Base

near Adana, others have proposed bilateral assurance mechanisms that Ankara will not use the system.²⁹ Either of the arrangements could open the door to Turkish demands for reintegration into the F-35 program, not just as a purchaser but also as a partial producer within the supply chain, as originally intended. Washington's stance is not entirely closed off, as evidenced by the recent approval for the sale of 40 F-16 fighter jets to the Turkish Air Force. However, Russia has made it clear that the S-400 purchase includes an end-user certificate prohibiting third-party engagements without Moscow's consent.³⁰ Ankara's decision on this matter will thus have far-reaching implications, risking backlash from Moscow while

potentially improving relations with Washington under a transactional framework.

Moreover, while Turkey is NATO's second largest military power and a cornerstone of its southern flank, such a role faces uncertainties due to Trump's skepticism toward the alliance.³¹ Trump's critical stance on NATO's relevance and burden sharing could undermine transatlantic cohesion, reducing Turkey's ability to leverage its position within the alliance. A weakened NATO would not only diminish Ankara's security framework but could also embolden Russia's regional influence, further complicating Turkey's balancing act.

Trade Wars, China, and the BRICS

Such a difficult equilibrium is also present in Turkey's engagement with China. Despite Minister of Treasury and Finance Mehmet Şimşek's efforts to stabilize the economy, Turkey could face risks from renewed U.S. protectionist measures under a Trump presidency. During his previous term, Trump imposed tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminum exports and removed Turkey from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), a program that eased market access for developing countries. While Biden maintained these policies, Trump's potential escalation of trade wars with China and the European Union poses uncertainties—as well as potential risks—for Turkey. On the one hand, Trump's trade policies targeting the EU could indirectly harm Turkey, given its deep economic ties with Europe. A slowdown in EU economic activity would likely ripple into Turkey's export-dependent industries, weakening its growth prospects. Recent investments by China's BYD to establish electric vehicle production in Turkey further complicates the picture. While this signals Turkey's potential to attract strategic investments as a manufacturing hub, Trump's intensification of trade tensions with China could make such projects a liability.³²



On the other hand, certain Turkish industries could benefit from a depreciated currency, positioning Turkey as an alternative to Chinese exports in U.S. markets. For example, sectors such as textiles and machinery might gain competitive advantages. While Washington might downgrade Turkey's growing role as an intermediary in global supply chains, Ankara could still enhance its position to facilitate a transition away from Chinese goods toward Europe.³³ Finally, although the benefits of Turkey's engagement with non-Western blocs like BRICS are unclear, it is evident that such moves are less likely to preoccupy the upcoming administration when compared to Biden's stance on this issue.³⁴

Conclusion: Change in Continuity?

In this current era of uncertain regional and international power shifts, a middle-sized power like Turkey pursues a “multialignment strategy” that, despite a growing tendency to prioritize interests over ideological solidarity, seeks to maintain significant international leverage and a flexible approach to cooperation.³⁵ Within this context, under a new Trump administration, Turkish-American relations are likely to move along a transactional and unpredictable course. While a Trump-Erdoğan reset might create optimism in Ankara, history shows that miscommunication and superficial camaraderie often mask deeper tensions in this duo. Without addressing structural issues in the relationship, any improvement at the leadership level risks creating false expectations and eventual frustration. At the same time, marginalizing allies risks weakening collective influence in critical regions. Ensuring Turkey remains within the “proverbial tent” is essential for Washington to address shared challenges in the Black Sea, the Middle East, and beyond. Therefore, both

countries must embrace a pragmatic and nuanced approach that reflects present complexities. Still, pragmatism should not overshadow the need to enhance forms of long-term and institutional cooperation. Forging stable environments in multiple fields and geopolitical scenarios could also help achieve national and mutual interests at lower costs.



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