

# WHAT DOES BIDEN'S VICTORY MEAN FOR TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA?

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*US President Donald Trump's four years at the White House have been a blessing for Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan squeezed out one concession after the other from his counterpart in Washington D.C. Among other things, Erdoğan was able to proceed with business as usual with Russian President Vladimir Putin without coming under US sanctions.*

Sure enough, the Turkish leader made many enemies in Congress, in the Pentagon and in the State Department, along with other federal agencies. Turkey's expulsion from the F-35 fighter jet consortium in response to the purchase of Russian-made S-400 air-defense missiles vividly shows how bad relations between Ankara and Washington have turned. Yet so long as Trump held the presidency, Erdoğan had a friend to call on. The alleged interference by the Justice Department in the Halkbank court case, a thorn in the side of the Turkish government, proves the point — according to no less an authority than John Bolton, former national security advisor. Turkey has likewise been spared penalties under the 2017 Countering American Adversaries with Sanctions Act (CAATSA). With such protections, Erdoğan could have his cake and eat it: cashing in on economic and strategic cooperation with the Russians while also extracting concessions from the Trump administration, including the go-ahead to set up a buffer zone in northeast Syria in October-November 2019.

Is this set to change once Joe Biden is inaugurated on 20 January, 2021?

The new administration comes on a promise to put American foreign policy back on conventional footing: restore ties with allies, bring back the US into multilateral institutions and make foreign policy about long-term interests and fundamental values rather than personal relationships. The appointments of Antony Blinken to Secretary of State, Jake Sullivan to the president's national security advisor, and John Kerry as an envoy for climate policy are a clear enough signs. Biden et al are intent on bringing democracy, human rights and good governance back on the agenda. The contrast with Trump's handling of foreign affairs cannot be more complete. Even if Biden fails to fully live up to the promise of holding authoritarian governments and worldwide kleptocrats accountable, he has planted the flag. Given that ideological message, it is understandable why neither Ankara nor Moscow were thrilled about the Democrats' winning in the US.

The Turkish government has reasons to worry about Biden's response to the S-400 deal. The prospect of sanctions is real and will enjoy bipartisan support in Congress. Chances are however that Erdoğan will try again to apply the usual salami tactics. He could argue the surface-to-air missiles will be kept in storage rather than fully deployed. That of course is a hard sell given that the system has already been tested in a military drill. In addition, Turkey might come into the crosshairs of new legislation targeting corrupt practices, should it pass the Senate.

A skilled politician, Erdoğan would try to adapt to the new tone coming from Washington. He could offer the US concessions: e.g. increased commitment to NATO and partial reforms at home. Even if Biden is likely to ramp up criticism of Erdoğan over his ties to Putin, his actions in the Eastern Mediterranean or even his authoritarian politics inside Turkey, the US president-elect's instinct will be to engage with Ankara rather than burn all bridges. The US and Turkey won't be friends, to be sure, but they will try to manage tensions and navigate their differences.

No such adaptation is to be expected in Moscow. Biden is the first president since the early 1990s that is not pushing for a fresh start with Russia. There will be no repeat of the Clinton-Yeltsin partnership, Putin's post-9/11 outreach to Bush, the 2009 reset under Barack Obama, and much less of Trump's overtures to the Kremlin. Biden's team characterize Russia as the principal threat to US national security, a partial contrast with China defined as a strategic competitor. Washington

will reassure European allies with regard to NATO's Article 5 security guarantee in contrast to the outgoing administration's decision to withdraw troops from Germany. America will step up security cooperation with Western-leaning countries in the Black Sea area like Ukraine and Georgia, next-door neighbors of Turkey. At the same time, the US will engage Russia on issues of common interest — e.g. extending the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START treaty) on nuclear armaments. The expectation in Moscow is the following four years will bring more of the same.

Biden's more muscular approach to Russia is not necessarily bad news for Turkey. In an interview for NTV aired last month, Erdoğan's advisor and spokesperson İbrahim Kalın condemned the West for not standing up Russia in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria or Libya.<sup>1</sup> He, apparently, would be happy if America ups its game. Despite the deepening rifts with the US and key European states like France, Ankara is dependent on NATO's collective defense guarantee to balance power dynamics against Moscow. The Atlantic Alliance, including the so-called "tailored forward presence" in the Black Sea, provides a counterweight to Russia, which has gained strategic advantage with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the build-up of its military capabilities in direct proximity to Turkish borders. NATO's multi-lateral format is helpful as Turkey does not need to confront Russia directly, like it does in Syria and more recently in Libya, running the risk of unwanted escalation. Ankara's muted response to the war in Georgia (2008) and the still ongoing conflict in Ukraine indicates its preference to avoid a direct collision with

Moscow. Turkey is “soft balancing” Russia in different ways — e.g. via three-way economic and security cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan as well as by expanding its ties with Ukraine, often times under the radar. Erdoğan’s recent military intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict wrong-footed Putin. Even if Ankara is a long way from becoming Moscow’s peer when it comes to diplomatic and political influence in the Southern Caucasus, Turkey’s ambitions pose a challenge to Russian policy in the so-called “near abroad.”

It is highly unlikely that changes in the White House will fundamentally alter the dynamic between Russia and Turkey in the Middle East and North Africa. During Trump’s tenure, Moscow, Ankara and Tehran—the Astana trio—became the chief powerbrokers in Syria. The US is out of the picture thanks to its reluctance to intervene, which is a common thread linking the Obama and the Trump administrations. Since 2016, the Turkish strategy has been to work through Russia in order to contain Syrian Kurds, as well as influence the Syrian Pres. Bashar al-Assad regime and its Iranian backers. For the most part, the policy has worked although Ankara had to resort to force in Idlib in early 2020 to prevent a humanitarian disaster and a refugee influx from across the border. But even there, Putin eventually came back to the negotiating table to cut a deal with the Turks in March 2020. Erdoğan’s gamble paid off. With Russia entrenched in Syria, the Turkish president has no choice but to work with the Kremlin. Yet greater American attention to the conflict — be it in the form of further sanctions on Da-

mascus or even sending additional troops to the northeast — will strengthen Turkey’s hand even if the latter will play into the hands of Syrian Kurds as well. Such a scenario is unlikely to happen in Libya — where Moscow and Ankara both compete and trade horses — because the US will stay out of the fray.

Biden’s approach to Iran will be closely watched in Turkey as well as Russia. Both are invested in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), of which Russia is a signatory as are the UK, France and Germany. A decrease of tensions between the US and the Iran would be welcomed, though a return to the 2015 nuclear deal would be difficult. With the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, described as one of the fathers of the Iranian nuclear programme, the Trump administration set yet another hurdle to a future rapprochement — however tentative — between Tehran and Washington. Biden’s victory has already led to recalibration of Turkey’s policy in the region. In past weeks, Ankara has extended a hand to both Israel and Saudi Arabia, two key players it has been at odds with for many years. Trump’s imminent departure is compelling the Turkish government to seek reconciliation with core American allies. Turkey’s policy in the Middle East might end up looking a bit closer to Russia’s: that is, engagement with both Iran and its bitter rivals.

The change of guard in Washington D.C. therefore will alter Turkey’s calculus on a range of issues but it will not fundamentally transform Russian-Turkish relations. Ankara needs Moscow to attain its foreign policy ob-

jectives while Moscow will continue to exploit the cracks in Ankara's relations with the United States. Turkey will continue balancing between Russia and the West in a bid to assert its status as an independent actor in a growingly competitive, multipolar regional and world order. Ankara and Moscow will be sim-

ultaneously cooperating and competing, as they have done for over two decades now. The challenge for the Biden administration will be to devise a workable set of carrots and sticks to enlist Turkish help in dealing with Russia. But alignment between the US and Turkey is bound to be limited.

## NOTES

1. İbrahim Kalın interviewed by NTV, Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü İbrahim Kalın NTV'de, 21 November 2020. <https://www.ntv.com.tr/video/turkiye/cumhurbaskanligi-sozcusu-ibrahim-kalin-ntvde.jN7pBkGBBE6PPVRo37g05Q>



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