

Precious No More?

A U.S. Strategy for a Lonely Turkey



JINSA Gemunder Center's Eastern Mediterranean Policy Project - March 2021
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The Jewish Institute for
National Security of America

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This report is made possible by the generous support of the Gettler Family Foundation. A portion of the research for this report was conducted on JINSA's 2019 Benjamin Gettler International Policy Trip to Greece.

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I. Executive Summary

“Precious loneliness” is how one of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s main advisors described Turkey’s position in the Middle East as its foreign policy of “zero problems with neighbors” crumbled in the face of the Arab uprisings.¹ The full extent of just how lonely Turkey was willing to be on the world stage did not become clear until 2020, a year in which Erdoğan’s government provoked, entered, or exacerbated conflicts in seemingly every direction.

As recently as October 2020, Turkey was engaged in multiple conflicts ranging from North Africa, across the Middle East, and north into the Caucasus. A focal point of Turkey’s recently aggressive foreign policy has been the attempt to secure rights to energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.² It is by no means, however, the extent of Turkey’s foreign adventures as it now deploys military forces at bases in Qatar and Somalia,³ has apparently sought a military base on Sudan’s Suakin island,⁴ and has actively intervened in the Syrian⁵ and Libyan⁶ conflicts as well as in the renewed war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.⁷

One implication of this “precious loneliness” has been that Turkey has increasingly adopted a hostile approach to American and European interests in the broader region. This is a dramatic contrast to the situation twenty years ago, when Turkey was the chief regional ally of both the United States and Israel and was seeking membership in the European Union.

Yet, Erdoğan appears to have had enough of Turkey’s isolation. As 2020 ended and 2021 began, Erdoğan engaged in a seeming blitzkrieg of diplomatic overtures, suggesting he was willing to reset relations with a number of nations that he had crossed – especially the United States.⁸ However, neither the sincerity of and motivation for this charm offensive, nor Erdoğan’s ability to deliver on his promises are obvious. As Turkey faces growing economic trouble at home and divisions plague the regime’s factions while new regional partnerships are forming that further isolate Turkey, Erdoğan’s foreign outreach could be driven by various factors: a sincere desire to come in from the cold; a need to secure financial assistance; or the hope that rehabilitating his personal standing on the world stage can help keep him in power at home. Each of these variations has different, but significant, implications for U.S. interests and policy.

Although rebuilding constructive relations with Turkey should be an objective for Washington and its allies, the Biden Administration must judge the sincerity and motivation behind Erdoğan’s recent entreaties before deciding how to proceed. This requires first assessing the dynamics at play within the Turkish regime that are driving the current outreach efforts and then evaluating them in light of U.S. interests vis-à-vis Turkey and the history of its recent, mostly failed, attempts to further those interests with Erdoğan.

Ultimately, we conclude that Erdoğan’s pursuit of a reset with the United States and other Western countries is insincere, driven more by political pressures at home than a foreign policy about-face. As a result, though there are real and significant benefits Washington and its allies could derive from a renewed, cooperative partnership with Ankara, there are also major strategic costs to Erdoğan’s continued aggressive pursuit of Turkish unilateralism. The Biden administration would be well-served to pursue a policy that seeks to test the possibility of securing the former while protecting against the latter. The success of such a policy depends on two elements. First, coordination between trans-Atlantic and Mediterranean partners who all have overlapping, but often misaligned and differently prioritized, interests

when it comes to Turkey. Second, unlike recent attempts to paper over differences with Ankara or conduct relations at purely personal, presidential level, a serious effort to offer Turkey a chance to change its behavior, and serious consequences if it does not.

To this end, we recommend a strategy that is bureaucratic, transactional, and simultaneously coordinated with trans-Atlantic and Eastern Mediterranean partners.

The U.S. strategy toward Turkey should be: bureaucratic by focusing diplomatic relations on expert and technical contacts between government officials and eschewing conducting the relationship via personal presidential phone calls; transactional by offering Turkey a clear statement of U.S. expectations for Turkish policy with explicit benefits Washington is willing offer for cooperation, and costs for intransigence – while clearly separating areas of engagement; and coordinated by recruiting European and Mediterranean partners to develop a joint approach to Erdoğan, offering him improved relations with all, or none.

Specifically, we recommend that the Biden Administration:

Right-size the relationship with Turkey. The U.S. relations with Turkey should be conducted via frequent and direct contacts by U.S. bureaucrats and officials with their Turkish counterparts. Meanwhile, presidential contacts should be limited, as the Biden Administration has done thus far, at least until such a time as Turkish policy begins to change. Turkey’s continued belief that it is an indispensable partner for the United States – a belief only reinforced by the recently leaked U.S. suggestion that Ankara host peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban⁹ – should not be abetted.

Assemble a coalition. Washington should make the case to its European partners that the S-400 issue is of the greatest concern for the entirety of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It should also coordinate support for Greece and Cyprus regarding their legitimate concerns about Turkish aggression. However, to ensure a common approach, Washington should be prepared to add issues to the agenda that might not be central to its own interests, but which other countries will want to see addressed, such European concerns about migration.

Offer a clear choice. Working together, such a coalition should offer Turkey the opportunity to improve, as Erdoğan claims he wants to, relations with all of them at once, or risk alienating the entire bloc. Topics that could be considered include cooperation against Russian influence in the Black Sea in return for Turkey relinquishing the S-400, inclusion in plans for transport of Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe in return for ending its maritime aggression, or normalizing relations with Israel and Arab states in return for ending its support Muslim Brotherhood-aligned and Islamist movements.

Stand up for democracy. The United States should make its concerns about democracy, rule of law, and human rights, broadly construed, a talking point at each and every official interaction with the Turkish government. Erdoğan must be brought to understand that U.S. concerns cannot be alleviated by token gestures of goodwill. Absent meaningful human-rights progress, Turkey should not be invited to the reported Summit of Democracies.

Seek a solution in Syria. The Biden administration should work to reconcile the reality of continued U.S. support for the Syrian Kurdish forces with Turkish fears. It should make the

case to Ankara that U.S. influence in northeast Syria is ultimately in Turkey's interest, while pushing for an inclusive power-sharing arrangement in the area and offering Turkey assistance in dealing with legitimate terrorist and insurgent threats.

Plan for the deterioration of relations. Given the possibility that domestic and ideological factors will continue to push Turkey toward an increasingly aggressive and independent foreign policy, notwithstanding the above strategy, the Departments of State and Defense led by the National Security Council, should visibly engage in contingency planning including: relocating U.S. air operations from the Incirlik base to new location(s); mechanisms for sidelining Turkey within NATO if it deviates from the alliance's common interests; further restricting Turkey's ability to obtain U.S. weaponry in its military buildup; and imposing further economic sanctions if Turkey persists with the S-400.

II. Turkey’s “Precious Loneliness”

Turkey has traditionally pursued a highly cautious foreign policy that sought to avoid entanglement in Middle Eastern conflicts. But following the consolidation of President Erdoğan’s power, this caution has progressively been thrown to the wind as Ankara developed growing expeditionary capabilities. Turkey might not yet have been lonely in 2013, when Ibrahim Kalin enunciated the notion of “precious loneliness,” but it certainly was by the end of 2020, a year of pronounced Turkish regional aggression.

In late 2019, Ankara signed an agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) that purported to delimit the Exclusive Economic Zones of the two countries, fully ignoring claims by Greece to the same waters.¹⁰ Turkish drilling vessels also began unilaterally exploring for natural gas in waters considered by the international community to belong to Cyprus.¹¹ This dispute brought Turkey into conflict with EU countries, particularly France. France’s Total corporation is a key player in the energy development of the region, and Paris saw a need to promote freedom of navigation in the Eastern Mediterranean in the face of Turkish challenges to it, provoking Erdoğan’s ire.¹² By late 2020, Turkish President Erdoğan’s rhetoric became so heated that he publicly claimed French President Emmanuel Macron was mentally unstable and appeared to incite Muslims in France toward violence.¹³

Turkey’s combative approach was not reserved solely for the Eastern Mediterranean or countries involved there. In the Middle East, Turkey maintained aggressive postures against Israel and Egypt, supporting Islamist militants against both governments. This past summer, it was reported that Israel’s top spy had told some of his Arab counterparts that Turkey was a bigger threat to the stability of the region than Iran.¹⁴ Turkey attacked Kurds it claims are associated with the terrorist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.¹⁵ Ankara has also been locked in conflict with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over a host of regional issues, most importantly Turkey’s key role in serving as a base for the transnational Muslim Brotherhood. Ankara’s up-and-down relationship with Moscow is also very contentious. While Presidents Erdoğan and Putin maintain cordial personal relations and both chafe at U.S. leadership, the two countries have lined up on opposite sides in confrontations in Syria’s Idlib province, Libya, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and over Ukraine.

In these conflicts, Turkey has displayed considerable military capabilities, with its Bayraktar TB2 drones in particular appearing to be far superior to Russian equipment used by Libyan militias and the Syrian military as well as Armenian forces.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Turkey is rapidly developing naval capabilities, within the scope of its emerging “Blue Homeland” doctrine that aims to make the country a maritime power. Within this framework, it is planning to launch 23 ships, including four frigates, by 2023.¹⁷

This raises the stakes for all sides, including the United States, as it seeks to develop a coherent strategy to deal with Eastern Mediterranean security issues in general and with the challenge posed by Turkey for the broader Middle East.

III. Regional Realignments

If it is the perception of being isolated in the region that drove recent Turkish aggression, then Erdoğan’s embrace of precious loneliness has proven a self-fulfilling prophecy. It has spurred the emergence of new geopolitical alignments in the Eastern Mediterranean to contain and counter Turkey’s growing assertiveness. Relationships that were previously nonexistent or even hostile have grown warm; erstwhile partners have become estranged.

The first notable partnership that has developed unites Israel, Greece and Cyprus in increasingly close defense, diplomatic, and energy cooperation. The Greek-Israeli relationship in particular is a stunning development: Greece previously was among the most hostile countries to Israel in Europe, and long had a strong anti-American tradition as well, in part a result of U.S. support for the country’s 1967-74 military dictatorship. That background made it all the more significant that Greece’s rapid expansion of security and military ties with both the United States and Israel took place under the leadership of the far-left Syriza party.

Greece and Israel’s improved ties took place against the background of the collapse of the Turkish-Israeli partnership, which had blossomed in the mid-1990s and reshaped the regional geopolitics of that time. Indeed, Turkey’s assertive strengthening of ties with Israel was led by the Turkish military establishment. Although it was not a military alliance per se, fear of a joint Israeli-Turkish attack helped pressure then-Syrian President Hafez al-Asad to expel PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, as long desired by Ankara. But following the arrival in office of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, ties with Israel first cooled and subsequently ruptured.¹⁸ That, however, has not prevented commercial relations from continuing, or Ankara and Jerusalem from occasionally seeing eye-to-eye on certain regional matters, such as supporting Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia.

As for Turkey’s ties with Greece – always complex because of their contested history and the delicate maritime issues on the Aegean Sea – an interlude of calm roughly from 1999 to 2016 turned sour somewhat, in large part because of the energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The second partnership that has blossomed is among Greece, Cyprus and Egypt – with the two latter states cooperating effectively diplomatically and in the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones between them. Egypt, traditionally a leader in the Arab world, went through substantial turmoil in the past decade, beginning with the 2011 upheaval that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power. The government of Mohammed Morsi looked to Turkey as a partner and sponsor, but that was quickly reversed following Morsi’s overthrow and the rule of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.¹⁹ Furthermore, the dispute over Egypt generated powerful rifts within the Arab and Muslim world: aside from Turkey, Qatar emerged as the main backer of the Morsi government, while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) strongly backed the Sisi government.²⁰ In turn, the UAE in particular has developed its relations with Greece and Cyprus. More recently, so has Saudi Arabia, which joined Greece in a bilateral air force exercise staged from Crete in March 2021. The UAE also joined Greece in bilateral military exercises in August 2020. Gulf states have also developed their relations with Israel, at first discreetly but from the Abraham Accords onward openly as well.²¹

Because of the depth of historic anti-Israeli sentiments in Egypt, the relationship between Jerusalem and Cairo has not publicly developed to the lengths of either country's partnerships with Greece or Cyprus. But by 2019, the separate partnership relations had developed strongly enough to enable the creation of an East Mediterranean Gas Forum, which includes the aforementioned states, as well as Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority – with France potentially joining later this year.²² Turkey is the one glaring omission in its membership, reinforcing the cementing of a regional alignment that pits Turkey against almost every regional power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

This alignment is also on display in the Libyan civil war. While Cairo and Abu Dhabi – joined by Greece and Cyprus – supported the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Hifter, Turkey and Qatar backed the GNA led by Fayez al-Sarraj.²³ This conflict developed into a proxy war, in which Turkey successfully inserted military equipment and mercenaries to stop the LNA advance on Tripoli and pushed its forces back to eastern Libya.

Finally, but perhaps most significantly in the Turkish imagination, the United States and other international actors partnered with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to oust the Islamic State from northeast Syria, the center of its self-declared Caliphate. Yet, the largest and most important contingent of the SDF is made up of the Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG), itself, Turks say, a subsidiary of the militant PKK, which has fought an insurgency against Turkey since 1984 and is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and EU.²⁴ Although the fact that the PKK created the YPG some two decades ago is beyond dispute, American officials maintain that the PKK no longer exerts operational control of the YPG; most analysts dispute this claim.

While alarm in Western capitals grew as the Islamic State rampaged through Syria and Iraq, Turkey initially turned a blind eye to the group's use of its territory as a transportation, logistics, and financial hub, refused to provide help, or even allow the United States or YPG transit through its territory, to lift the Islamic State's siege of Kobane, and it refused, at first, permission for U.S. forces to use the air base at Incirlik for anti-IS operations.²⁵ With Turkey refusing to engage the Islamic State, Western powers were left with no viable option on the ground other than the YPG to fight back against the terrorist threat, even if they stretched credulity by claiming the YPG was really separate from the PKK.

As the YPG proceeded in destroying the Caliphate with U.S. arms and aided by U.S. advisors and airstrikes, it also effectively assumed governance of the regions of northeast Syria it liberated. For the United States this marked the end of one terrorist state, but Turkey saw it as the rise of another terrorist state – a PKK statelet on its border – one abetted by its American ally. For Turks, this was the ultimate betrayal.

IV. Loneliness Starts at Home

If the lines of regional division are relatively clear, the reasons for their formation are more contentious. Yet, it is critical for U.S. policymakers to assess and arrive at a common understanding of the reasons for Turkey's current isolation, particularly as they consider recent Turkish claims of renewed interest in cooperation.

The Turkish position, shared by some American analysts, casts it as the aggrieved party, surrounded by putative allies that have ignored its core interests and undermined its security, leaving Turkey with little option but to protect itself as best as it can. This view is worth unpacking as it contains two related claims that each, when examined, highlight different aspects of Turkish behavior and what drives it.

The first Turkish claim stresses the actions of other states, describing them as unnecessarily aggressive. Yet, a review of Turkey's foreign policy under Erdoğan shows that, since the demise of the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, Turkey has been the actor provoking confrontations and upsetting existing relations. These actions were driven first by an attempt to push Muslim Brotherhood-aligned movements into power across a region convulsed by the Arab Uprisings and then a nationalist push to broaden Turkey's sphere of influence.

Turkey justifies these actions as self-defense that is required in the face of others encroaching on its interests and security. This anxiety is an accurate reflection, too often poorly understood in Washington, of the deep and widespread insecurity that has seized Erdoğan and Turkey since the 2016 coup attempt. But it is also a characteristic of the new dynamic that has defined Turkish politics since then: Erdoğan's partnership with ultra-nationalists, including the fringe Eurasianist faction that is pre-disposed to Moscow.

Though there is ideological overlap within this coalition – a distrust of Western powers fueled by anti-imperialism – there is also unease between Erdoğan and his new partners. Whether it is acting on their shared views or jockeying for power, it is this domestic political arrangement that may ultimately drive Turkish foreign policy – not foreign aggression, national aggrandizement, or legitimate security concerns – and isolates Ankara evermore.

A. Zero Problems' Demise

A superficial review of the current situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, one that ignores background and context, would seem to lend credence to Turkish claims of victimization. For example, why is Turkey, the largest economic and military power in the region, excluded from the development of Eastern Mediterranean gas resources? Particularly as Greece and Cyprus interpret the international law of the seas, and Greece claims a right to extend its territorial waters to 12 nautical miles, Turkey would essentially be denied access to the Mediterranean Sea, save for a small sliver of water near the Gulf of Antalya. Whether or not this would be in line with international maritime law, seeking to box Turkey in this way surely appears unwise, as it amounts to provoking the region's largest country instead of seeking to include it in regional processes. From this point of view, it would seem to be in the U.S. interest to reassess its own policies while leaning on regional states to include Turkey and thus lower tensions in the region.

While this approach is not entirely without merit, it fails to account for the way this situation has arisen, and the series of self-inflicted wounds, miscalculations and unforced errors that have led Turkey to find itself isolated. To fully understand this requires a short overview of each of Turkey's bilateral relations in the region.

Chronologically, the first of Turkey's important relationships to deteriorate was with Israel.²⁶ While Prime Minister Erdoğan traveled to Israel in 2005 and at first maintained cordial relations with the Jewish state, he also expanded outreach to the Palestinian side.²⁷ This was nothing new, given the traditional level of strong support for the Palestinian cause in Turkish society. What was different this time was that Ankara reached out primarily to Hamas, not the Palestinian Authority. Indeed, Ankara reacted furiously when Israel killed Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin in 2005.²⁸ Furthermore, Turkey's protestations that it reached out to Hamas in order to help mediate a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict soon gave way to increasingly full-throated support for Hamas, albeit without explicit endorsement of that organization's terrorism or its rejection of Israel's existence.

The conflict in Gaza, from 2008 onward, accelerated this shift in Turkish policy, culminating with the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* flotilla incident, in which Turkey actively egged on activists who sought to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza.²⁹ In the years that followed this incident, in which several Turkish citizens were killed by Israeli commandoes storming their ship, relations were effectively frozen, including the complete cessation of military cooperation.³⁰ Under the AKP's rule, ugly manifestations of anti-Semitism emerged in Turkish culture, with the seeming blessing of the government.³¹ Such themes had been visible since the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq but became ubiquitous a decade later.

A rapprochement of sorts in 2013 the culmination of a process initiated by President Obama, led to the normalization of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel but did not prevent Erdoğan and other high officials from continuing to publicly lambast Israel. More recently, through the mediation of Azerbaijani president İlham Aliyev, efforts are underway to bridge differences between Ankara and Jerusalem, but their prospects are probably bleak.³³

Next, Turkey's relationship with Syria turned sour. Erdoğan had for several years cultivated the regime of Bashar al-Assad, but following the 2011 protests in Syria, Ankara sought to convince al-Assad to share power with the Muslim Brotherhood. Assad's refusal led Turkey to support the opposition and seek Assad's removal.³⁴ But Turkish leaders appear to have failed to anticipate Assad's response: vacating the northeastern portion of the country and handing those areas over to the YPG, itself widely seen as a subsidiary of the militant PKK, which has fought an insurgency against Turkey since 1984 and is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and EU. Meanwhile, Ankara escalated its support for radical Sunni militias in Syria, perhaps as a result of the YPG's presence on its border, as well as turning a blind eye – at least initially – to the Islamic State's use of Turkish territory for transit of fighters. Paradoxically, this came to have a strong blowback on Turkey. The rise of the Islamic State's Caliphate prompted the United States and European powers to partner with the YPG, in spite of their own classification of its mother organization, the PKK, as a terrorist organization.³⁵ While Western powers stretched credulity by claiming the YPG was really separate from the PKK, they were left with no other viable option on the ground to fight back against the Islamic State. The result was a dramatic deterioration of U.S.-Turkish relations.

From 2011 onward, Turkey also took a strong interest in Egypt. Erdoğan was among the first world leaders to call for President Mubarak's resignation, and together with Qatar grew into the main external supporter of Mohammed Morsi's government.³⁶ When Morsi sought to concentrate power in his own hands in extra-legal ways in November 2012, Ankara appeared to egg him on rather than urge caution – setting up an increasingly acrimonious dispute internally in Egypt, as well as triggering growing apprehensions in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.³⁷ These powers were already wary of the transnational Muslim Brotherhood but now went into alarm mode, fearing that a Brotherhood takeover of Egypt would be the launchpad for a broader effort to overthrow conservative monarchies across the region. This precipitated the military intervention that brought Al-Sisi to power in 2013 and led to a rupture in Turkish-Egyptian relations.³⁸

Turkey has now become the main base for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in exile, with Erdoğan welcoming up to 30,000 Egyptians to Turkey, from where they continue to agitate against al-Sisi's government.³⁹ Furthermore, when this dispute led to the Saudi-Emirati effort to coerce Qatar into changing its approach to regional matters in 2017, Ankara stepped in as Doha's main supporter, establishing a Turkish base in Qatar⁴⁰ and effectively enabling it to survive the initial deprivations of the GCC embargo that only just ended at the beginning of 2021.⁴¹

Meanwhile, Turkish relations with Greece and Cyprus also began to deteriorate. In this case, the problems stemmed more directly from the controversy over energy resources, as Erdoğan for many years had enjoyed a good working relationship with Greece. When the Republic of Cyprus – internationally recognized as the government of the whole island but controlled by the Greek Cypriots – began unilaterally developing the energy resources in the island's Exclusive Economic Zone, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots in Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus objected. The Turks and Turkish Cypriots insisted that exploitation of those resources await a settlement of the Cyprus problem; the Greek Cypriots hoped to use the development of the resources as leverage to achieve a more favorable settlement.

Rather than push for a solution to the long-standing dispute exclusively through international mechanisms, Ankara resorted to gunboat diplomacy. The Turkish navy was dispatched on several occasions to scare away exploration vessels from waters it disputed;⁴² and Turkey then sent in its own drilling ships into the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone, attempting not only to disturb Cypriot exploration efforts but to establish facts on the ground itself.⁴³ To legitimize these steps, Ankara refreshed its peculiar maritime doctrine emphasizing its expansive EEZ claims, while seemingly rejecting the Republic of Cyprus's claims to any EEZ whatsoever.⁴⁴ While these steps had some success in frightening off multinational energy corporations, they also led to a widespread condemnation of Turkey's actions by both the United States and European Union – though conspicuously only minimal sanctions from the latter. Meanwhile, particularly from 2018 onwards, Turkey also began to escalate its military provocations in the Aegean, including regular and systemic violations of Greek airspace and maritime waters.⁴⁵

Matters were made worse in 2016 when a renegade faction within the Turkish military sought to overthrow Erdoğan in a bloody coup attempt that included the bombing of the Turkish parliament and caused the deaths of over 250 civilians.⁴⁶ Because the coup appeared to be led by followers of preacher Fethullah Gülen, a former Erdoğan ally and a U.S. green card holder who is ensconced in the mountains of Pennsylvania, Erdoğan and his associates suspected U.S. involvement and for some time sought to shore up their position by developing

a strategic relationship with Russia. Turkey and Russia would soon come to blows, indirectly, in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus,⁴⁷ but not before Erdoğan decided to purchase Russian S-400 missiles that are fundamentally incompatible with Turkey's membership in NATO and its role in the development of the F-35 stealth fighter jet.⁴⁸ This purchase did more than anything else to alienate powerful forces in the U.S. Congress and Defense Department that had previously sought to maintain a constructive approach to Turkey. Ultimately, despite President Trump's characteristic willingness to shield Erdoğan from the wrath of Congress, the S-400 sale eventually led his Administration to impose sanctions on Turkey during its last days, in December 2020.⁴⁹

Finally, Turkey began to intervene ever more forcefully in the Libyan civil war. It backed up the internationally-recognized GNA government in Tripoli and began to deploy Syrian mercenaries as well as advanced military equipment to roll back the LNA forces supported by Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Paris, as well as Moscow.⁵⁰ Ankara intervened in Libya after the Sarraj government signed a document delimiting the Libyan and Turkish EEZs in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁵¹ Through this document, Turkey claims an EEZ that traverses waters widely recognized as part of Greece's and Egypt's EEZ's. This includes areas just offshore of Crete, based on Turkey's contention that islands do not have an emanating EEZ. This move, and the ensuing provocative Turkish exploration efforts in Greek waters, naturally led to a strong reaction from Athens, intensifying Greek-Turkish tensions and further complicating already fraught EU efforts to reach consensus on approaches to the Libyan conflict.

This short overview of Turkish bilateral relations with surrounding powers is by no means exhaustive. Its point, however, is to illustrate how Turkey's present isolation is largely a result of Turkey's own actions in the past decade. While Turkey's relations with its neighbors have often been fraught with problems, Erdoğan's government early on launched a foreign policy termed "zero problems with neighbors."⁵² That approach, however, soon gave way to an increasingly interventionist stance, a policy more akin to "nothing but problems with neighbors," through which Turkey began interfering in the domestic affairs of several neighboring powers, and alienating countries such as Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, with which it had previously had cordial relations. The main common denominator in this policy was support for the Muslim Brotherhood or Brotherhood-affiliated actors. Only when the Brotherhood had been largely defeated across the region did Turkey begin taking up other causes of a more nationalist nature. Many regional regimes, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, continue to view Turkey adversarially as a principal backer of the Brotherhood.

B. Insecurity and Ideology in Turkish Regime Politics

The sections above have established that Turkey is regionally isolated and, furthermore, that its own actions are largely responsible for its predicament. But unless we understand the domestic political context of Turkey's actions, it will be difficult to develop adequate policy responses. For example, one possible explanation is that Turkey's actions result from what political scientists call a "security dilemma" – a primarily defensive reaction to perceived external threats. If this is the case, U.S. policy should seek to reassure Turkey of its security commitment. If, by contrast, Turkey's policies are the result of an ideologically motivated, aggressive effort to establish a new sphere of influence in its neighborhood, the U.S. response would have to be very different.

The notion of a “security dilemma” is not entirely unfounded. As lurid as conspiracy theories of U.S. involvement in the 2016 coup attempt may seem, they appear to be genuinely believed by vast segments of the Turkish population as well as political elite – and were repeated by Interior Minister Süleyman Soyulu as recently as February 2021.⁵³ Furthermore, these accusations are compounded by the reality of U.S. support for the YPG, which itself comes on the heels of thirty years, of American support for Kurdish self-government in Iraq. Taken together, these two factors have produced a strongly held view in influential circles in Turkey that the United States is seeking not only to overthrow the current Turkish government and replace it with one run by the Fethullah Gülen community, but that Washington also aims to partition Turkey and create a Kurdish state out of the country’s southeast, possibly merging it with areas of Iraq and Syria. These claims may seem ridiculous, but they are very much a political reality in Turkey, where suspicions of foreign plots to dismember the country date back to the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which sought to achieve exactly that result.⁵⁴ Ever since, a “Sèvres syndrome” has continued to plague Turkish society.⁵⁵ These perceptions have also had an important role in altering the nature of the governing coalition in Turkey in the past five years – and have intersected with the ambitions of restored imperial grandeur held by Erdoğan and other parts of the Turkish elite. These factors, however, do not explain Turkey’s increasing alienation from U.S. priorities long before the 2016 coup attempt.

President Erdoğan succeeded in consolidating power from 2007 onward in large part as a result of his electoral successes. These were in turn fueled by the booming Turkish economy, considerable support from Turkish liberal elites, the United States and Europe, and a publicly announced ambition to seek a peaceful solution to the country’s Kurdish problem. In the halls of power, they also were made possible by Erdoğan’s alliance with the Fethullah Gülen community, which since the 1970s had focused on developing large cohorts of ideologically committed and well-educated civil servants that continuously expanded their influence across the institutions of the Turkish state. By 2011, the Erdoğan-Gülenist alliance had succeeded in essentially marginalizing the remnants of the old, Kemalist elite that had formed the backbone of the Turkish state for decades.

But as soon as they achieved this feat, rifts between them began to develop at alarming speed. The Gülen community seemingly was not satisfied with a secondary role and appears to have demanded at least a veto right over both personnel and policy issues.⁵⁶ By 2012, Erdoğan had come to see Gulenists as a threat to his power;⁵⁷ by 2013, a cold war was brewing between them.⁵⁸ That December, apparently Gülenist police and prosecutors moved in on several of Erdoğan’s close allies, who they implicated in an oil-for-gold scheme that sought to elude U.S. sanctions on Iran. Three ministers were effectively forced to resign, but Erdoğan then cracked down hard on the movement’s supporters.⁵⁹ Tensions between Erdoğan and Gülen supporters in the state kept escalating until the massive purges of Gülen supporters following the July 2016 coup.⁶⁰ While the official Turkish version of the 2016 coup is perhaps a little too neat and based on confessions likely resulting from torture, the Gülen community was likely the driving force behind the coup, joined by other factions and opportunistic elements.

The rift between Erdoğan and the Gülenists occurred at the exact moment when Turkey’s neighborhood caught fire, and Erdoğan sought to embrace a role for Turkey as the leader of a new Middle East, led by the Islamist ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, it is clear in hindsight that Turkish actions in the region from early in Erdoğan’s tenure onward were driven primarily by his Islamist ideology. There is considerable research showing the close connections between Erdoğan’s tradition of political Islam and Brotherhood ideology, as well

as the impact of this ideology on President Erdoğan himself.⁶¹ It explains Erdoğan's enmity toward Israel and embrace of Hamas (the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood); his sympathy for Omar al-Bashir's Sudan; his strong support for Morsi's government in Egypt; and his importuning Assad to accept the Brotherhood into his government; as well as his growing confrontation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

It is worth noting that, whatever his personal beliefs and desires, Erdoğan has not attempted to introduce Sharia law at the national level. To do so would, for most Turks, run unacceptably against the grain of Turkish law and now long-standing political culture. (On a less formal level, AKP government receptions are dry as are, unofficially, many AKP-controlled towns.) Yet, in foreign policy – perhaps showing his true colors – Erdoğan has consistently supported those who do favor imposition of Sharia law in their societies.

Indeed, most of Turkey's troubled relationships can be traced to this misguided ambition and the confrontational stance Ankara took toward Jerusalem, Cairo, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Turkey's Islamist leadership interpreted the 2011 upheavals against the background of their own ideological lenses and concluded the event they had long anticipated had arrived: the collapse of the secular authoritarian regimes of the Arab world, which they thought would be replaced by Islamist forces with which they had long identified. Erdoğan and his then-foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu saw Turkey as a natural leader of this new Middle East that was being formed; to boot, they launched the vision of a "New Turkey" that would take its rightful place on the global scene as a leader of the Muslim world.

Still, these ideological factors do not fully explain Turkey's actions in recent years, including the ups and downs in the relationship with Russia, the renewed embrace of Turkic states in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the confrontation with Greece and Cyprus, and, most of all, Erdoğan's U-turn on the Kurdish issue. After all, Erdoğan invested heavily in the peace process with the Kurds, something entirely consistent with his ideological ambition. In a more Islamic Turkey, the difference between Turks and Kurds would be attenuated or disappear, as their common Islamic identity would be the glue that held the nation together. This was particularly appealing since Turkey's Kurdish population tends to be religiously conservative. This idea was not original: it had been first bruited by President Turgut Özal in the early 1990s. Still, no one took it further than Erdoğan did until 2015, when Turkey once again turned to a military solution to the issue.⁶²

A closer examination of Turkish regime politics provides some guidance to the drivers of Turkish behavior, and explains the recent nationalist turn the country has taken. The rift between Erdoğan and the Gülenists left Erdoğan in a precarious position within the Turkish state. Because Erdoğan's own Naqshbandi branch of political Islam is relatively small and traditional, it lacks the large numbers of educated followers that the Gülenists commanded. Gülenists, in turn, largely came to control the police (including its intelligence service) and judiciary during the first decade of Erdoğan's time in power. They were, furthermore, the leading edge of the effort to break the military's role in Turkish politics from 2008 onward, primarily through the use of highly questionable prosecutions of serving and retired officers.⁶³ As Erdoğan worked to purge the state of Gülen followers from 2013 onward, he needed to replace them with a force that could form a bulwark against the Gülenist challenge. This led Erdoğan's government to release hundreds of nationalist officers, officials and academics that had been jailed on largely trumped-up charges from 2008 onward.⁶⁴ Many of these were fully rehabilitated and acquired influential positions in the military and state institutions.

This process coincided with the mounting challenges Turkey faced in Syria, which led to a full reconsideration of the Kurdish question. By 2014, Turkey's lax approach to the Islamic State as it attacked Syrian Kurdish towns and villages, coupled with Erdoğan's apparent hostility to Syrian Kurdish autonomy, led to a deep disillusionment with Erdoğan's government among Turkey's Kurds. In the June 2015 parliamentary election, the AKP for the first time failed to capture a majority of the seats, while the Kurdish HDP emerged as a would-be kingmaker in Turkish politics with an unprecedented thirteen percent of the vote.⁶⁵ While Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, sought to build a coalition government with the center-left opposition, Erdoğan undermined those efforts. Instead, he whipped up nationalist sentiment by deploying the army against the PKK and sought the support and cooperation of the ultra-nationalist MHP in the snap election called for November 2015. This atmosphere helped the AKP-MHP alliance restore control over parliament and prompted the MHP to support Erdoğan's long-wished transition to a presidential system.⁶⁶

Thus, a new regime dynamic emerged in Turkey. Erdoğan remains in power, but ultra-nationalists have replaced the Gülenists as the President's main supporting force in the bureaucracy as well as securing his parliamentary majority. In particular in security and defense issues, these forces have become a key constituency, contributing to a general securitization of political rhetoric. As a result, the Islamist messaging so favored until recently has abated to some degree and been replaced by an increasingly nationalist rhetoric that depicts opposition to the AKP-MHP alliance as tantamount to treason against the nation.⁶⁷ Importantly, the Turkish public may be more receptive to this message than to Erdoğan's Islamist message. Indeed, in spite of Erdoğan's ardent efforts at Islamization, polls show the population becoming increasingly secularized.⁶⁸ But the same polls show that nationalism is the prevailing ideology among Turkey's population, including among Turkish youth. Within the state, ultra-nationalists have sought to establish themselves as guarantors of the regime and the survival of the state.

As a corollary of this, the Turkish governing coalition has adopted an increasingly authoritarian approach to domestic affairs, in which all deviation from government policy is blasted as treasonous and synonymous with terrorism. The most recent example is the harsh rhetoric against and violent treatment of Bogaziçi University students demonstrating against the appointment of an Erdoğan crony as the university's president in 2021.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Bahçeli has openly endorsed the convicted mafia leader Alaattin Çakici's threats against opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, and himself issued threats against former Prime Minister Davutoglu.⁷⁰

The ultra-nationalists that support Erdoğan are not a homogenous group. A first group, called *ülküçü*, are traditional right-wing nationalists, who have traditionally seen Russia as their main enemy. While these are the largest nationalist formation, a smaller but relatively influential group known as *ulusalci*, self-proclaimed "anti-imperialists" and often referred to as "Eurasianists," are more distinctively anti-American and would like to see Turkey link up with or at least tilt towards Russia and China against the West. The *ülküçü* and *ulusalci* have in common a hardline position on Cyprus and enmity toward Greeks and Armenians, and their newfound influence helps explain Turkey's strong stances on the conflicts in the Aegean Sea and the South Caucasus. They differ on Russia, however, and while the anti-imperialist faction appears to have played a role in convincing Erdoğan to purchase Russian S-400 missiles, the traditional nationalist position has dominated in conflicts like Libya and Syria, where Turkey found itself in proxy confrontation with Moscow.

The issue of the United States also separates them. *Ülkücü* groups were traditionally pro-American, but any sympathies with the United States are long gone, particularly as a result of U.S. support for Kurds in Iraq and Syria. Still, while anti-Americanism is a key element of the anti-imperialists' ideology, that is not the case for traditional nationalists, who take a more pragmatic approach to Turkish security and defense.

Though the stability of this coalition is unclear, Erdoğan's lack of alternative coalition partners – he has burned, spurned, or alienated almost every other political grouping in Turkey – gives him little choice but to cling to the MHP, thereby giving it significant leverage. Turkey's policies, thus, are a product largely of the Islamist-Nationalist coalition and discourse that currently governs the country,⁷¹ and their common reaction to the challenges in Turkey's neighborhood. There appears to be little understanding in ruling circles for the extent to which Turkey's troubles are self-inflicted. While some Turkish nationalists will concede that Erdoğan unnecessarily alienated Israel and Arab states, the predominant narrative is one in which Turkey's legitimate aspirations are held back by an American-led unholy alliance of villains conspiring against Ankara.

V. Erdoğan's Charm Offensive

As the Trump presidency neared its end, Turkey suddenly went on a charm offensive that appeared quite surprising given the country's attitude in recent years. Erdoğan extended an olive branch to the United States and to Europe, including a letter exchange with French President Emmanuel Macron.⁷² Turkey reached out for exploratory talks with Greece, but simultaneously gave notice of naval exercises in the Aegean.⁷³ And Ankara has for some time indicated it might consider repairing relations with Arab states, including Egypt.⁷⁴ Beyond that, Erdoğan has offered to improve relations with Israel, and used the good offices of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in this regard.⁷⁵

This charm offensive is thus far mainly in the declaratory realm. It has yet to be followed up with concrete action that suggests a change in Turkish policy. Nor has Erdoğan even indicated that Turkey is willing to compromise on any of its positions or modify any of its policies in order to improve its relations with any of these countries. As such, it is too early to determine whether the olive branch is seriously intended, and there is plenty more reason than not to be skeptical. But several observations can be made: Turkey's economy is in a highly precarious condition, as evidenced by Erdoğan's unceremonious dismissal of his son-in-law as Finance Minister in November 2020.⁷⁶ This was no small matter: Erdoğan had groomed Berat Albayrak in a way that made him the heir apparent, who could take over in time and ensure the Erdoğan family remained protected from prosecution. But his ouster signified that the economic situation had become untenable, and that Erdoğan needed to gain credibility in international financial markets, which were decidedly skeptical of Albayrak's stewardship of the economy. In addition, Erdoğan's government is reported to be very concerned that President Biden will significantly toughen U.S. policy toward Turkey.

Erdoğan's attempts to address these threats by making a course correction in domestic politics have been haphazard, at best. A November 2020 pledge to enact rule of law and judicial reforms,⁷⁷ for example, was swiftly counteracted by new arrests of opposition members, as well as Erdoğan's blatant effort to impose an unqualified but loyalist President at the prestigious Bogazici University. A similar pledge of human rights reform in March 2021 was rejected by Turkish opposition groups and advocates as an excuse for new constitutional changes that would further enhance and extend Erdoğan's powers.⁷⁸ Similarly, talk of economic reforms have been undermined by a surprise removal of the head of Turkey's Central Bank, who had only been in office for several months.⁷⁹

Against this background, Erdoğan's outreach to capitals that he has alienated in recent years appears to be taken out of necessity rather than as a result of a genuine change of heart.

What, then, should U.S. policymakers do?

VI. Considerations for U.S. Policy

In figuring out how to respond to Erdoğan's recent overtures, and indeed in setting the course of its Turkey policy overall, the new administration must consider the motivations for his initiatives, U.S. interests vis-à-vis Turkey, and an effective strategy for achieving those interests. We believe that Erdoğan's pursuit of a reset with the United States and other Western countries is insincere, driven more by political pressures at home than by serious intent to affect a foreign policy about-face. As a result, the United States must be on its guard. Although there are real and significant benefits Washington and its allies could derive from a renewed, cooperative partnership with Ankara, there would also be major strategic costs to US credulousness resulting in acquiescence to Erdoğan's continued aggressive pursuit of Turkish unilateralism.

The Biden Administration would be well-served to pursue a policy that seeks to test the possibility of securing partnership while limiting the prospect of Turkish unilateralism. The success of such a policy depends on a serious effort to offer Turkey a chance to change its behavior, and serious consequences if it does not. To be effective, therefore, the Biden Administration must learn from the failure of past administrations to impact Erdoğan's calculus and, having identified forms of leverage, guard against the possibility of Turkey disarming them. To this end, we recommend a strategy that is bureaucratic, transactional, and simultaneously coordinated with trans-Atlantic and Eastern Mediterranean partners.

A. The Charm Offensive and Regime Politics

The recent charm offensive must be viewed against the background of Turkish regime dynamics. Simply put, are the forces within the Turkish state seeking reconciliation with the United States and its allies strong enough to prevail?

While Erdoğan remains the most powerful person in Turkey, Turkish behavior is not solely an Erdoğan problem. The strong nationalist streak that motivates Turkish politics is widely held, and unlikely to go away with Erdoğan. In fact, disparate elements of Turkish behavior can be traced to different sources: Turkish enmity toward Israel and conservative Arab states stem almost entirely from the Islamist wing of the ruling coalition, personified by Erdoğan. The aggressive approach to Greece and Cyprus and Turkey's maximalist claims in the Mediterranean, while shared by Erdoğan, appear driven by the nationalists – indeed, an officer with strong “anti-imperialist” leanings, Rear Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, is credited with inventing the concept of a “Blue Homeland” that is the basis for Turkey's emerging maritime doctrine. Similarly, the ultra-nationalist forces in the government appear to be the driving force behind many of the the most recent authoritarian measures in domestic affairs. As for anti-Americanism, it is widely shared in the disparate segments of the Turkish elite but driven chiefly by the Islamist and Eurasianist (or anti-imperialist) elements, and to a lesser degree by the traditional nationalists, many of whom nevertheless still see Russia as the greater danger.

Against this background, Erdoğan seems to be rather alone in his recent overtures to Washington, Jerusalem, Paris, and other capitals. There are few constituencies, at least among those with any power in Ankara today, calling for Turkey to have better relations with the United States or any of its allies. Some of his close associates, like Interior Minister Soyly, even appear to be undermining these overtures by regurgitating accusations that the United

States was behind the 2016 coup attempt.⁸⁰ Ultra-nationalists, led by Bahçeli, staunchly oppose any judicial reforms that would improve Turkey's relations with the West, and block the release of political prisoners like philanthropist Osman Kavala.⁸¹ While Turkey's dire economic situation forced Erdoğan to sack his son-in-law from the position of Finance Minister and to float a trial balloon of a more conciliatory stance toward Europe and the United States, this was immediately contradicted by powerful forces within the government, indicating that deep frictions exist within the ruling coalition.⁸² Similarly, Defense Minister Akar's offer to negotiate a compromise on the S-400 issue modeled on Cyprus's transfer of S-300s to Greece in 1999 was immediately slapped down by presidential advisor Ibrahim Kalin.⁸³

Turkish regime dynamics are anything but stable. In his early days, Erdoğan brought together conservatives, liberals and Kurds to form an electoral majority. He then moved increasingly in an Islamist ideological direction as he consolidated power, but this failed to yield results in foreign policy while increasingly alienating Turkish society, forcing Erdoğan in an increasingly authoritarian direction to maintain power. By mid-2015, he effectively relied only on the support of nationalist forces to govern, and these forces wield considerable influence that Erdoğan cannot ignore or overrule.⁸⁴ Still, the arrangement is far from harmonious, and Erdoğan's initiative to draft a new constitution should be seen as an effort to further strengthen his power and perhaps to limit his dependence on the nationalists.

Further shifts in the regime are certainly possible in the near future, as the regime confronts a dilemma: on one hand, its current behavior, at home and abroad, is alienating the foreign investors the regime needs to keep the deeply wounded Turkish economy afloat. But on the other hand, strong forces in the regime view any reforms as threatening the integrity of the state. Erdoğan would prefer to make only cosmetic changes to domestic policy—changing personnel, making conciliatory speeches—that would appease the West while leaving his ruling coalition intact and maintaining his assertive foreign policy approach. Should this not prove sufficient, however, Erdoğan's recent initiatives suggest he may be far more willing to make adjustments in Turkish foreign policy than in domestic matters that could affect his hold on power. But if there are no changes to the ruling coalition, those adjustments may turn out to be only limited and temporary, with a considerable risk that Turkey will soon once again double-down on the aggressive approach that has characterized the last several years.

The stakes for the United States in reading and responding to Erdoğan's overtures are potentially high. Relations between Ankara and Washington have been strained, if not at a breaking point, as Turkey has grown bolder and ever less bound to its historical allies. Rebuffing his outreach now, if sincere, could further cement the conviction among Turks that the United States seeks only to weaken and divide their country. On the other hand, if Erdoğan's entreaties are not sincere, for the United States to put off punitive measures and seek out common ground could empower him to survive yet another political crisis, tighten his grip on power, and resume Turkey's destabilizing quest for regional primacy.

B. (Not Just) U.S. Interests

In December 2020, the EU and the incoming Biden Administration indicated they would coordinate policies on Turkey, in the framework of a broader effort to restore Transatlantic relations. This begs the question whether the United States would be well-served by efforts to coordinate its Turkey policy with the EU and beyond, including partners in the Eastern Mediterranean like Israel. The answer to this question, however, is predicated first on

U.S. policymakers arriving at a clear analysis and prioritization of U.S. interests vis-à-vis Turkey, something that has eluded past administrations. They must then determine whether Washington's interests align, or can be made to align, sufficiently with those of its partners for such coordination to be successful.

Among U.S. interests in Turkey, the most acute is the S-400 issue. Two administrations and strong bipartisan majorities in Congress have made clear that having an operational S-400 in Turkey, in any form, is a "red line" for the United States.⁸⁵ The S-400 systems are incompatible with, and could compromise, the F-35 fighter jet and would seriously undermine the interoperability of Turkish and NATO forces. Furthermore, it undermines NATO unity vis-à-vis Russia. Washington and Ankara must resolve this question before they can progress to other matters. Second to this is the Eastern Mediterranean issue, because it constitutes a clear and present danger of escalating to a full-scale military conflict involving NATO members as well as other U.S. partners on opposing sides. The prospect of a war that would undermine NATO from within is detrimental enough to U.S. interests to warrant considerable policy attention. Beyond these two paramount interests, there are several more issues that deserve sustained attention. They include the future of U.S. operations at the Incirlik base, the inter-linked issues of Turkey's support for Islamist causes, the regional Kurdish question, and the deterioration of Turkish democracy and human rights.

Incidentally, Turkey's list of priorities would likely be somewhat the inverse: the Kurdish question and U.S. involvement with PKK affiliates ranks highest on the Turkish agenda. The Eastern Mediterranean would also rank near the top, whereas Turkey continues to insist that the S-400 presents, or at least could be made to present, no threat to the F-35 or to NATO interests.

Meanwhile, even though top U.S. priorities vis-à-vis Turkey necessarily apply to European countries – both the S-400 and Turkish aggression in the Eastern Mediterranean threaten NATO's unity and European security, and human rights in Turkey is a long-time EU concern – it is not clear that there is a basis for a common trans-Atlantic approach to Ankara. EU states diverge on priorities in their relations with Turkey. France, Greece and Cyprus are the most vocal group in the EU on Turkish affairs, given their joint concern over Turkish behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean. They have successfully raised this issue at the EU level and obtained at least varying degrees of support for their position. In November 2019, the EU adopted targeted sanctions on Turkish entities engaged in undersea drilling activities in Cypriot waters.⁸⁶ Still, French-Greek-Cypriot advocacy for greater sanctions on Turkey has yet to be supported by a consensus of EU members.

Spain and Italy, in particular, have resisted confrontation with Turkey. Italy has common interests with Turkey in Libya, where both support the same domestic players. As for Spain, its new government enjoys remarkably warm relations with Ankara, and has benefited from Turkish efforts to woo Spanish investors in the Turkish economy, including in defense contracting. Several large European banks, particularly, Spanish, Italian, and French banks, are also exposed if Turkey's economy would go into a tailspin.⁸⁷

The balancer between these factions has been Germany. The EU's leading power has close to five million inhabitants of Turkish origin and suffered a major political backlash following its the 2015 migration crisis. German leaders have felt compelled to take the lead in striking agreements with Erdoğan's government over migration issues, in order to prevent a new

influx of millions of Middle Eastern and South Asian migrants into the EU.⁸⁸ In addition, several European states – including France, Austria and Germany – are alarmed at the Erdoğan government’s actively seeking to organize, mobilize and control their Muslim minority populations, urging them both to resist assimilation into their new home countries as well as to support Turkish policies.⁸⁹

While U.S. and EU interests do not necessarily differ, their priorities may not align. Europe is much more sensitive to Turkey’s possible use of the migration issue as a weapon, while the United States is noticeably more concerned with the S-400 issue and its implications for NATO and the F-35 project. That said, both parties are concerned with Turkey’s Eastern Mediterranean policies, its sponsoring of Islamist organizations, and its authoritarian slide at home.

Israel also shares many of America’s and Europe’s concerns about Turkey. For Israel, however, the overriding concern is Turkey’s support for Hamas and radical Islamism. At the same time, Israel has taken the approach of strategic patience with Turkey, holding out hope that the relationship can be salvaged, or at least not exacerbated. While there are no illusions in Israel about Turkey’s current trajectory, and senior Israelis are increasingly skeptical about the prospects of salvaging this relationship,⁹⁰ Israel continues to maintain a mutually beneficial free-trade agreement with Turkey and certainly wants to avoid a total breakdown.

So long as U.S., EU, NATO and other partners’ interests remain overlapping but misaligned, no country is likely to achieve even its second- or third-best outcomes with regards to Turkey. Erdoğan has, thus far, proven skilled at manipulating divisions and applying counterpressure to forestall a Western or trans-Atlantic coalition forming against him. By exploiting Germany’s migrant fears or Italian interests in Libya, for example, he has kept the EU from adopting a common approach on Eastern Mediterranean issues and kept NATO from formally taking up U.S. concerns about the S-400s. The persistence of these divisions almost certainly means that Erdoğan’s pursuit of a real improvement in relations with the West is at best partial and tactical.

C. Learning from Failure

Over the last decade, as the chasm between Ankara and Washington has widened, U.S. policymakers have adopted many different approaches to dealing with Erdoğan’s Turkey, none particularly successful.

Most often during this time, U.S. relations with Turkey have been driven by personal presidential contacts. President Obama considered, at least publicly and at least for a while, Erdoğan among his best friends on the world stage, until a major falling out in his second term.⁹¹ Such friendliness became even more visible during President Trump’s tenure, when major U.S. policy decisions were made by the president during phone calls with Erdoğan.⁹² Despite boosting Erdoğan’s standing, however, neither Obama nor Trump’s overtures were able to slow, let alone reverse, the building disagreements between Washington and Ankara. Mostly, in Trump’s case, they resulted in U.S. concessions to Turkey with little, or nothing, in return.

On rare occasions, U.S. and Turkish officials have worked to iron out agreements on highly technical issues dividing the two partners. These include attempts to negotiate a solution to the S-400 impasse as well as find a security arrangement in northeast Syria that would

address Turkish concerns.⁹³ These efforts at a more normal, bureaucracy-driven diplomatic relationship have usually failed, either because Turkish counterparts lacked the authority to make decisions, or their superiors lacked the political will to make acceptable compromises, particularly in the belief that they could get a better deal through Presidential-level diplomacy. In instances when the U.S. side thought it had succeeded in securing a mutual agreement, such as the 2019 plan for a joint U.S.-Turkish security arrangement in northeast Syria, the deal would effectively be rejected, or sabotaged, from on high through Erdoğan's personal interventions with the White House.⁹⁴

Almost universally, however, U.S.-Turkish relations have been marked by American rhetorical excess. Whether at friendly presidential one-on-ones or more strained meetings of officials, the U.S. side has gone out of its way to praise the importance and longevity of their alliance with Turkey. This, coupled with only rare public rebukes, at least from the Executive Branch, has helped persuade Turkey that U.S. policymakers see the U.S.-Turkish partnership as "too big to fail." Ankara has convinced itself that, no matter what it does, Washington will come to terms with it, however grudgingly, for fear of "losing" Turkey altogether. Against this background, President Biden's reluctance, thus far, to engage in telephone diplomacy with Erdoğan is a step in the right direction, as it signals to Turkey that the United States might not go out of its way to accommodate Ankara.

Yet, the few instances in which Erdoğan has actually made concessions, betray the fact that Turkey needs the United States more than vice versa. In 2018, when Turkey released Pastor Andrew Brunson, a U.S. citizen whom it had imprisoned on charges of involvement in the 2016 coup attempt, after Trump imposed tariffs on Turkish metals and sanctioned two top Turkish officials, provoking a crash of the Turkish lira.⁹⁵ Confronted with international isolation and economic pain, Erdoğan backed down. The Turkish lira has never fully recovered.

Rarely have these sticks been used against Turkey, particularly the possibility of demoting Turkey's international standing. Only recently, at the end of the Trump Administration, did the United States impose sanctions on Turkey's military sales.⁹⁶ It is still too early, however, to tell what effect this might have on Ankara's behavior. Even less frequent is a U.S. offer of carrots to induce Turkey to return to a Western orbit, perhaps because Erdoğan seldom evinces any interest in anything the United States might actually be willing and able to offer.

Moreover, almost never does the United States approach Turkey as part of a broader coalition. Washington's dealings with Ankara are strictly bilateral, this despite the fact that both are members of a larger alliance and many of the issues on their agenda – Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, S-400s – have wide-ranging implications for NATO and other major U.S. partners, like Israel. In the few instances in which the United States has involved other countries in its dealings with Turkey, it has been in the relatively effective role of mediator. Most prominently, after the Turkey and Israel broke off diplomatic relations following the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident, Obama tried to patch things up in 2013 by orchestrating a phone call, and apology, from Israel's Netanyahu to Erdoğan.⁹⁷

VII. Recommendations

These diverse approaches show that in dealing with Erdoğan the United States often fails to advance its interests when its approach is personalized, high-level, overflowing with symbolism, devoid of clear tradeoffs, and bilateral. Our recommendation, therefore, is for the Biden administration to pursue a bureaucratic and transactional strategy toward Turkey that is coordinated with European and East Mediterranean partners. It should be bureaucratic by focusing diplomatic relations on expert and technical contacts between government officials and eschewing conducting the relationship via personal presidential phone calls; transactional by offering Turkey a clear statement of U.S. expectations for Turkish policy with explicit benefits Washington is willing to offer for cooperation, and costs for intransigence – while clearly separating topics of engagement; and coordinated by recruiting U.S., European, and Mediterranean partners to develop a joint approach to Erdoğan, offering improved relations with all, or none.

Against this background, and on the basis of a more sophisticated analysis of Turkish domestic drivers of foreign policy, the contours of a coherent policy that combines sticks and carrots could take form.

First, the Biden administration should right-size the relationship with Turkey. This requires both rhetorical and procedural changes to the way that relations with Ankara have been handled under previous administrations. In order to avoid further contributing to the illusion that Washington sees its partnership with Turkey as “too big to fail,” policymakers should refrain equally from grandiloquent statements and unnecessary harshness, instead discussing challenges and frustrations openly and frankly.

As part of this change, Turkey should be given to understand that the U.S. bureaucracy will develop and carry out the brunt of U.S. policy, as was the mostly case for decades before the AKP era began. Meanwhile, presidential contacts should be limited, or eliminated, both to prevent further personalized attempts to undermine U.S. policy and to reflect the reality of Turkey’s downgraded status. Erdoğan should be given to understand that the high-level phone calls and meetings he desires can only resume once Turkish policy begins to change.

Second, the Biden administration should seek to assemble a coalition of Atlantic and Mediterranean states that share a joint agenda and pursue a common approach to Turkey. As part of its effort to breathe new life into trans-Atlantic relations, the Biden administration should make the case to its European partners that the S-400 issue is not a bilateral U.S.-Turkish problem, as the Trump Administration approached it, but a concern, indeed the greatest concern, for the entire alliance – a notion to which NATO seems already inclined. The Biden Administration should make sure NATO objections are front and center in the S-400 dialogue with the Turks, many of whom believe that U.S. concerns about Ankara’s S-400 purchase are strictly commercially based. The Administration should also publicly reject the Turks’ misleading talking-point analogizing their S-400 purchase to Greece’s possession of the S-300; in December 1998, Greece agreed to take the S-300 off purchaser Cyprus’ hands – at U.S. request – after the Turks threatened to bomb it before it was assembled.⁹⁸ For years, it was mothballed on the island of Crete. Only in more recent years has it reportedly been used in air exercises and then only to test NATO capabilities against the Russian system.

Washington should also engage its European partners as to how best to coordinate support for Greece and Cyprus regarding their legitimate concerns about Turkish aggression in the Aegean and Mediterranean. U.S. and EU views may not be totally congruent here. The EU tends to take member-state Greece's side, whereas the U.S. view, especially regarding the Aegean, is that they are simply disputes that should be resolved through dialogue. Both Washington and Brussels agree, however, that provocative Turkish actions are unacceptable and should speak out in coordinated fashion when they occur. Regarding Cyprus, the United States should take a firm position in support of Greece's and the Republic of Cyprus' EEZ claims in the Mediterranean, at least where those claims have been negotiated with neighboring states. The Biden Administration could further underline this position by supporting, and meeting with, the Greece-Israel-Cyprus and Greece-Egypt-Cyprus trilateral fora, while making clear to the parties that they should not project themselves as anti-Turkish alliances. Secretary of State Blinken's support for the "3+1 mechanism" (Greece, Israel, Cyprus, plus the United States) in his call with Greek Foreign Minister Dendias in February 2021 was a good first step.⁹⁹

To ensure a common approach in dealing with its Atlantic and Mediterranean partners, Washington should be prepared to add issues to the agenda that might not be central to its own interests, but which other countries will want to see addressed. Thus, in return for Germany taking a tougher stand against Turkey on the S-400, the United States and other countries will have to be willing to pressure Turkey over migration issues. Similarly, to be convinced to come onboard, Spain and Italy will want to have the Libyan file taken up as well.

Third, working together, such a coalition should offer Turkey the opportunity to improve, as Erdoğan claims he wants to, relations with all of them at once, or risk alienating the entire bloc.

For example, EU and NATO countries could indicate to Ankara their interest in cooperation with Turkey to counter Russian influence in the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East. They could propose working together to support Ukraine, work toward a peaceful resolution to the conflicts in the South Caucasus and minimize Russia's role in Libya and Syria. However, such cooperation would be contingent on Turkey relinquishing control of the S-400 missiles it purchased from Russia and desisting from further purchases of S-400 batteries and other Russian weaponry.

Similarly, if Turkey is willing to take relevant and concrete steps to de-escalate tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, the United States, Germany, and France could offer their good offices to facilitate a dialogue between Turkey, Israel, and Egypt on marketing gas to Europe, with the aim of seeking a role for Turkey in the transportation or sale of their resources to Western markets.

At the same time, however, the United States and its partners must make clear the Turkish behavior that they will no longer accept. They must adamantly oppose Turkey's efforts to undermine Israel's security through its relationship with Hamas, call out the anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric embraced by Erdoğan and his followers, and urge Turkey to take a constructive attitude to Israel and stop opposing the peace deals signed between Israel and Arab states. This should also include exerting pressure on Turkey to minimize, and ideally entirely drop, its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic radical groups. This could in turn pave the way for a normalization of relations between Turkey and conservative Arab states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Fourth, either on its own or in conjunction with its European partners, the United States should make its concerns about democracy, rule of law, and human rights, broadly construed, a talking point at each and every official interaction with the Turkish government. This is not merely a matter of continuing to raise this issue but also of changing how the U.S. policymakers address it. Too often, the United States focuses on individual cases of oppression or injustice committed by the Turkish government – such as a recent statement demanding the release of philanthropist Osman Kavala¹⁰⁰ – while ignoring broader patterns of authoritarianism. By treating the topic of the erosion of Turkish democracy broadly, the Biden administration can make Erdoğan understand that its concerns cannot be alleviated by token gestures of goodwill, however welcome progress in individual cases might be. This message could be further strengthened by withholding Turkey’s invitation to the Summit of Democracies reportedly being planned by the administration, unless it implements real reforms.

Fifth, concerning Syria, the United States must attempt to reconcile the reality of its continued partnership with the YPG with Turkey’s concerns. It should continue to work to explain that U.S. support for the YPG does not amount to U.S. support for the PKK and that U.S. influence on the YPG is ultimately in Turkey’s interest (as opposed to the YPG left to its own devices). Meanwhile, the United States should continue to push for a power-sharing arrangement in northeast Syria that incorporates the other Kurdish, ethnic, and political groupings to ensure the territory is governed fairly and inclusively. Likewise, the United States should press the YPG and its political wing to drop their Ocalan iconography and to cease ideological training in schools in their autonomous zone. At the same time, the United States should continue to provide intelligence for Turkey’s anti-PKK efforts in Iraq in an effort to build confidence with Ankara.

Meanwhile, the United States should press Turkey to pledge no further attacks against the Kurdish-dominated autonomous zone in northeast Syria; to open up Turkish-held zones to trade with the autonomous zone; and to begin allowing Kurdish residents of Afrin and Ras al-Ayn to return to their homes. In turn, the United States could consider increasing its financial support for Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Sixth, the U.S. government should let it be known to Ankara that it is engaging in contingency planning for a further deterioration of U.S.-Turkey relations. This planning should include contingencies for relocating U.S. air operations from the Incirlik base to new location(s); mechanisms for sidelining Turkey within NATO if it deviates unacceptably from the alliance’s common interests; further restricting Turkey’s ability to obtain American weaponry and parts for its military industrial sector; and imposing further economic sanctions under CAATSA if Turkey deploys the S-400.

VIII. Endnotes

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