

Opinion **US foreign policy**

A path for Joe Biden to reset US relations with Turkey

Both sides will have to bend if Ankara and Washington are to work together again

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's interests overlap with many of the new American administration's foreign policy objectives © Turkish Presidency/AP

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American presidents set the tone for their foreign policy within a few months. But if Joe Biden wants to repair relations with Turkey, he will have to do so not just for the US but for the whole transatlantic community.

Over the past decade, Ankara's relations with its traditional allies in the west have been so strained that a divorce from the western family of nations is not unrealistic. It is a consequence of the mismanagement of Turkey's rise by its own government — and also by the west.

Turkey has gained greatly in state power during this period. With a national income nearing \$800bn, it is a G20 country. It has the second largest military in Nato. Its burgeoning defence industry projects power across its borders. Its vast network of diplomatic missions is the sixth largest in the world, just above Germany's. And it ranks first in the world in terms of humanitarian aid targeting Syrian refugees, with sizeable programmes also in distressed countries such as Afghanistan and Somalia.

But Turkey has been plagued by the inability of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to express this rise in consensual rhetoric and diplomacy. Instead, he has used the increase in state power for domestic political purposes. Mr Erdogan has combined this with combative rhetoric nurturing claims that Turkey is a country under siege from those unwilling to acknowledge its peaceful progress. Erosion of the rule of the law at home has further strained Turkey's ties with the west.

The reaction of Turkey's western partners to the hardening of Ankara's discourse has added to the country's alienation. With the stalling of Turkey's EU membership bid, Brussels lost all influence on Turkish policymaking. Washington also imperilled its relations with the Turkish state through its decision to fight against Isis in partnership with the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union party (PYD).

So, today, despite being a Nato ally, Turkey is under US and EU sanctions. Last December, the Trump administration invoked the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act to target Turkey's defence procurement agency, on account of Ankara's acquisition of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia. In the same week, the [EU started considering additional sanctions](#) against Turkey for brinkmanship in the eastern Mediterranean.

Under these circumstances, the only way for the Biden administration to reach a proper reset with Turkey is a grand bargain with Mr Erdogan. Failing to secure one carries the real risk of a permanent rift in Turkey's western orientation and a strategic realignment with Moscow.

Fortunately, Mr Biden's foreign policy agenda has many overlaps with Ankara's interests. Strengthening Nato would be helped by a possible reset with Turkey. Re-engaging with Iran would create new avenues of collaboration with Ankara. Stabilising Libya to prevent further encroachment by Russian military assets is a common objective.

There are many obstacles to a grand bargain between Ankara and Washington. Both sides would have to bend. Any road map would at the very least feature: a reappraisal of US support for the Syrian PYD; agreement on the conditions for operating the S-400 missile system; a concomitant lifting of the US sanctions; and Turkey's return to the US F-35 aircraft programme. There would also need to be a role for Turkey in future negotiations with Iran, active American support for improved EU-Turkey relations, and an unambiguous commitment by the Turkish leadership to cease fuelling anti-Americanism and scepticism of the west at home.

This list may appear overly ambitious. But it pales in comparison to the scale of the responsibility facing the US and Turkish presidents. At stake is Turkey's place in the wider world — and the future of the regional order.

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