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TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY AFTER PRESIDENTIALISM

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Introduction

Since transitioning to the presidential system in mid-2018, the existing problems in Turkey's foreign policy have intensified and new issues have emerged. Turkey has become more nationalist, more authoritarian, more anti-American and anti-Western, more confrontational, more isolated, and more pro-Russian, and its foreign policy has been militarized.

Turkey has become involved in a number of military engagements in recent years: It carried out three large-scale incursions and one limited military operation inside Syria, established a growing military presence in northern Iraq, got involved militarily in the Libyan proxy war through military advisers and drone warfare, and participated in an interstate war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It has also become entangled in numerous regional geopolitical disputes, becoming a party to the conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE (including deploying troops to Qatar), entering into naval competition with NATO allies like France and Greece, and establishing its largest overseas military installation in Somalia. Ankara has adopted new and more aggressive tactics as well, instrumentalizing refugees, using foreign nationals to blackmail the EU and the U.S., and purchasing a ground-to-air missile system from Russia despite U.S. objections. It has seen wars, conflicts, military operations of all sorts, the rise and fall of a short-lived strategic doctrine, sanctions and embargos (including

those imposed by the U.S., Canada, the EU, and several European countries like Britain and Sweden), the disruption of relations, and the transformation of neighbors into rivals that have then gone on to form alliances among themselves.

For almost a decade, Turkey did not have ambassadors in Cairo, Damascus, or Tel Aviv and had problems in its relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia and troubled ties with Greece, France, and the U.S. Under domestic and external strains, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government has had to take conciliatory steps to fix its broken relations with neighbors and former friends, but on the whole the outcome has been mixed. While Israel agreed to a formal exchange of ambassadors and Saudi Arabia and the UAE responded to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's pleas to mend ties, Egypt and Syria have a list of preconditions that Erdoğan finds hard to accept.

The roots of Erdoğan's authoritarianism at home and assertiveness abroad lie in the domestic alliances he made and the close ties he established with former U.S. President Donald Trump. Erdoğan allied with the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) to form a government after the AKP lost its majority in parliament in the June 7, 2015 elections, and allied with the Eurasianists after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016.¹ The Trump administration's policy

1. Eurasianism is a political movement represented by the Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*) that has a limited voter base but remains influential in the security bureaucracy; it

of reducing its commitment to the Middle East and the former U.S. president's tolerant approach toward autocrats also gave the Erdoğan government more room to act assertively in the region. As will be discussed below, while Erdoğan was trying to consolidate his power, he had to satisfy the various nationalist elements within Turkey. His Islamist-nationalist coalition has always been more aggressive in its foreign policy thinking, driven by a defensive-offensive logic that Turkey has been under constant threat and has to be assertive to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The AKP has adopted different political identities and ideologies since it came to power in 2002. The founders of the AKP were inculcated in closed Islamist circles with an anti-Western and anti-Israel outlook, and the party's adoption of a liberal, Western-oriented identity in the first decade of its rule represented a dramatic transformation. The formerly anti-European Union (EU) Islamists, defining themselves as "conservative democrats," sought membership in the EU, had no problem developing ties with Israel, and pursued a liberal foreign policy dubbed "zero problems with neighbors."²

It has since become clear that the AKP leadership instrumentalized Turkey's EU membership bid to transform the Turkish political scene to fit its broader political design. The "moderate Islamists," as they were called at the time, were coming from an anti-Western political tradition and in their first phase they had to prove to the domestic and Western power centers that they had transformed their Islamist ideology and now espoused liberal ideas. However, after Erdoğan garnered 49% of the vote in the 2011 elections, up from 34% in 2002, he realized that he no longer needed the support of liberal circles, and the EU's requirements for membership, which include reforms in the areas of rule of law, human rights, and democratization, became more of a hindrance than a help. At that point Erdoğan had already achieved most of his objectives, such as forcing the powerful military into submission by using the EU requirements, breaking the intransigence of the secular establishment, and controlling the majority of the media. The Erdoğan government unilaterally declared that it would not cooperate with the liberal intellectuals and broke up with them, jettisoning its democratization efforts and respect for human rights, and entered into a new authoritarian period.

demands alignment with Russia and China and the severance of ties with the West.

2. Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," May 20, 2010, *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>.

In its second phase, starting with the onset of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the AKP government moved to a policy of Islamism domestically and Neo-Ottomanism abroad.³ Under the influence of Ahmet Davutoğlu, then the foreign minister and later the prime minister, the AKP leadership considered the fall of secular autocratic regimes across the Middle East as a historical opportunity to install its ideological brethren in power in countries like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Turkey tried to take advantage of the political turmoil in the Middle East and forged close ties with members of the Muslim Brotherhood across the Arab world in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, and with the opposition in Syria, which led to the beginning of the divide in Turkish-Saudi relations. The idea was that Erdoğan would become a regional leader and Turkey a Middle Eastern hegemon, relying on its influence stretching from Tunisia to northern Iraq. Initially, such a goal seemed possible to the ideologically driven AKP leadership since Turkey was economically more powerful, the U.S. was withdrawing from the Middle East, and the resulting power vacuum might be filled by a stronger Turkey. However, after the Arab Spring collapsed in Egypt following the military coup in July 2013, and partly in Tunisia with the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood-backed Ennahda coalition government, and then descended into bloody civil war in Libya, Yemen, and most importantly Syria, there was little space for Turkey to reclaim its previous position in the region.

The third and ongoing phase in the evolution of the AKP's identity is its nationalist/Eurasianist turn since June 2015, and especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. In keeping with his long-established pattern, Erdoğan shifted his alliance once again, this time allying overtly with the nationalist MHP and covertly with the pro-Eurasianist Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*) along with elements within the military that previously served jail sentences in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases.⁴ Since 2015-16, Turkey has become politically even more authoritarian, ideologically more nationalist, more Eurasianist in its foreign policy orientation, and more militarized in its security policy, and all of these traits have been heightened and accentuated since Turkey transitioned to a presidential system in 2018. While Ankara's previous foreign policy orientation was Neo-Ottomanist and it tried to dominate the region by relying on the various

3. Neo-Ottomanism is an expansionist thinking espoused by Islamists that aims to re-institute Turkey as a regional leader.

4. Following the latter trials in 2008-11, leading civilian and military personalities were sentenced to jail for their alleged membership in a clandestine deep state network known as Ergenekon and for plotting to overthrow the AKP government.



Photo above: Libyan military graduates loyal to the Government of National Accord take part in a parade marking their graduation, a result of a military training agreement with Turkey, at the Omar Mukhtar camp in Tajoura, southeast of Tripoli, on November 21, 2020. Photo by MAHMUD TURKIA/AFP via Getty Images.

branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, in this new phase Turkey has adopted a nationalist and militarist course, aiming at intimidation rather than domination.

The Turn in the Decision-Making Process

The primary consequence of the transition to the presidential system is, as expected, the accumulation of power in the hands of the president and his close entourage. This has created a number of problems as the new governing model has eliminated all checks and balances. The personification of the decision-making process and the exclusion of traditional mechanisms has led to the weakening of institutions. Especially hit hard is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which has traditionally been a Western-oriented institution with a highly capable staff of career diplomats known for its professionalism. The presidential system has dealt a serious blow to this once well-functioning, bipartisan institution that prioritized merit over party loyalty.

Under a presidential decree issued in 2018, the MFA was re-organized according to the principles of the presidential system, the most important of which was to allow pro-AKP public officials from other government offices to be employed in the ministry's lower ranks. The Erdoğan government has already increased the number of AKP members that are not career diplomats serving as ambassadors, reaching a total of 25. This has resulted in a hollowing out of the country's most institutionalized ministry. The consequences have been severe, including low morale among the traditional career diplomats responsible for the main functioning of the ministry, a decline in the quality of the diplomatic corps, and the weakening of the role of the MFA in making foreign policy. With the personification of decision-making, the role of the MFA diminished and the control and accountability of decisions by the Turkish parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee declined sharply. Many former diplomats point to a decline in the traditional functions of the MFA, like contributing to decision making, providing counsel, and conducting contingency planning.⁵ Senior diplomats have

5. Namık Tan, "Dışişleri Bakanlığı; Yeniden," December 27, 2021, *Ankara Politikalar Merkezi*, <https://apm.org.tr/2021/12/27/disisleri-bakanligi-yeniden/>.

been sidelined in international meetings, while Erdoğan relies on his own advisers in bilateral meetings, excluding experienced diplomats. In the two meetings held between Erdoğan and U.S. President Joe Biden in 2021 on the margins of international summits, no diplomats accompanied Erdoğan and notes were taken by inexperienced staff from a family with close ties to the president.

Erdoğan's Palace has risen to prominence in decision-making, while there has been a concomitant decline of the MFA institutionally. A new Council on Security and Foreign Policy was formed by presidential decree. In many cases, the spokesperson for the Presidency, İbrahim Kalın, has also assumed a role in foreign and security meetings, emerging as the counterpart of U.S. national security advisers.⁶

The Alliance with Nationalists and Eurasianists

Although Erdoğan's informal coalition with the nationalists and Eurasianists began in mid-2015, its impact on Turkish politics and foreign policy has become more visible in the wake of the transition to the presidential system. Three interrelated developments have marked Turkey's presidential turn. Domestically, democratic backsliding has gained new momentum and this has had serious implications in terms of human rights violations. Ideologically, the new Islamist-nationalist coalition has promoted nationalism and laid the groundwork for a more assertive foreign policy. As a consequence Turkey has tilted toward Eurasianism, enhancing energy cooperation and expanding trade and tourism with Russia, while Erdoğan has formed a strong bond and personal rapport with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Most critically, Turkey purchased the S-400 missile defense system from Russia despite strong U.S. objections and warnings that it would lead to a disruption in relations with Washington and Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 fighter jet project.

The most important transformation in Turkish foreign and security policy has been Ankara's involvement in many of the crises and conflicts within the broader Middle East and the Caucasus. At no time in its history has Turkey been involved in

6. "Statement by NSC Spokesperson Adrienne Watson on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Meeting with İbrahim Kalın, Spokesperson and Chief Advisor to the President of Türkiye," October 2, 2022, *The White House*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/02/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-adrienne-watson-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-meeting-with-ibrahim-kalin-spokesperson-and-chief-advisor-to-the-president-of-turkiye/>.

so many crises and conflicts all at the same time. From Libya to Nagorno-Karabakh, from Qatar to the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has either been part of ongoing crises or the instigator of disputes. Turkey's nationalist/Eurasianist turn has resulted in the militarization of its security policies. A nationalist, state-centric, and security-focused mindset has long dominated the core of the Turkish state, and those who share this view believe Turkey has been under constant threat by foreign powers. Since the 1980s, the Kurdish issue and the support given to Kurdish politics, and especially to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), a Kurdish separatist group that has fought against Turkey since early 1980s, by some of Turkey's allies have nurtured this perception of an existential threat. During the 2010s, the nationalists and Eurasianists argued strongly that Turkey has been encircled by the U.S. in the south, i.e., the U.S. protection of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) in northern Syria, which is the Syrian arm of the PKK, and by the EU in the eastern Mediterranean. Eurasianist thinking converged with already strong nationalist politics and ushered in a return to a traditional security-focused mindset reminiscent of the 1980s and 1990s. In order to break the perceived encirclement, Turkey began to use its military to project power across borders and even overseas. Thus, Turkey's military operations in Syria were justified on the grounds that Ankara had to divide the so-called unified Kurdish state in northern Syria, while its militarization of the eastern Mediterranean and involvement in the Libyan civil war were aimed at protecting its rightful maritime claims.

Turkey's three incursions in Syria, in August 2016, January 2018, and October 2019, were militarily successful, and Ankara also waged a limited military operation in February 2020 against Syrian forces near Idlib after a major attack on Turkish troops in the area. For the first time in its history, the Turkish military used foreign jihadists quite effectively in its military operations. Ankara not only removed the PYD, which Turkey lists as a terrorist organization, from these areas in northern Syria, but it also set up administrative mechanisms appointing local governors.

In the eastern Mediterranean the AKP government, along with its Eurasianist allies, pursued an assertive naval policy dubbed "Blue Homeland."⁷ Claiming that Turkey has been

7. İlhan Uzgel, "Turkey and the Mediterranean Imbroglia: the Story of an Aspiring Regional Power," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, November 2020, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/17494.pdf>.

encircled in the Mediterranean, the Eurasianists developed a more aggressive strategy to defend its maritime rights. In line with this new naval doctrine, which envisaged the protection of its maritime zones by force if necessary and promoted maximalist claims of sovereignty in a larger sea zone, Turkey deployed its drillships to carry out seismic surveys in contested waters, accompanied by naval vessels. On one occasion, a Turkish warship collided with a French naval vessel,⁸ and the Turkish navy blocked and chased drillships exploring the maritime areas claimed by the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). This has had strong repercussions, especially for the EU, but also for the U.S., since such disputes have weakened NATO's southern flank. Turkey's second move in the Mediterranean was the conclusion of a memorandum of understanding on the delineation of maritime zones in November 2019 with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, followed by a military agreement.⁹ Since then, Turkey has formally become part of the ongoing conflict in Libya. It sent its armed Bayraktar TB2 drones, leading to the world's first drone war in the skies over Libya against the forces of Gen. Khalifa Hifter, supported by the UAE, Russia, and France.

Turkey's bold moves in the eastern Mediterranean and the deterioration of its relations with many countries helped foster the formation of new security ties in the region. Greece-RoC-Israel and Greece-RoC-Egypt have initiated trilateral summit meetings and expanded defense cooperation, and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have developed defense ties with those eastern Mediterranean countries, including carrying out joint military exercises, a first in the region. The formation of the East Med Gas Forum in late 2019,¹⁰ which excluded Turkey, a country with one of the longest coasts in the eastern Mediterranean, highlighted the extent of Turkey's isolation in the region, which Presidency Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin optimistically dubbed "precious loneliness."¹¹

8. Alexandra Brzozowski, "NATO opens probe into France-Turkey naval incident in Mediterranean," June 18, 2020, *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/nato-opens-probe-into-france-turkey-naval-incident-in-mediterranean/>.

9. Daren Butler and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkey signs maritime boundaries deal with Libya amid exploration row," November 28, 2019, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-libya/turkey-signs-maritime-boundaries-deal-with-libya-amid-exploration-row-idUSKBN1Y213I>.

10. Sergio Matalucci, "EastMed Gas Forum fuels energy diplomacy in troubled region," October 10, 2020, *DW*, <https://www.dw.com/en/eastmed-gas-forum-fuels-energy-diplomacy-in-troubled-region/a-55206641>.

11. David Gardner, "Turkey's foreign policy of 'precious loneliness,'" November 15, 2015, *The Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/69662b36-7752-11e5-a95a-27d368e1ddf7>.

Turkey's relations with the EU had already been stalled well before its recent foreign policy shift; the AKP government had lost interest in seeking membership, while the EU, under pressure from rising right-wing populism across the continent, also preferred a Turkey that was less enthusiastic about membership. Ties between the two sides evolved, especially after Erdoğan discovered the EU's vulnerability in the face of a pressing refugee problem, made abundantly clear by the 2015 European migrant crisis. In March 2016 he struck a deal with the EU to keep Syrian and other refugees from crossing into the EU in return for economic assistance,¹² though he has since occasionally pushed refugees to the border to penalize the EU.

On any number of issues, disputes, conflicts, and an inward-looking mentality have dominated the thinking of the government, which has disseminated conspiracy theories implying that a "supreme mind" is working to undermine it and Western powers, fearful of a rising Turkey, are trying to stop a would-be regional hegemon.¹³ This has led to the rise of anti-Western and anti-American sentiment among the public and the spread of the unfounded idea that Western powers are jealous of Turkey's success. This is coupled with the perception that the U.S. is encircling Turkey in northern Syria and the Aegean and that the West intends to set up a Kurdish state stretching from northern Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea.

End of a Dream

Turkey is a mid-sized country with a dynamic but dependent economy. Erdoğan's growing authoritarian trajectory has adversely affected investments, triggering an outflow of capital, leading to the cancellation of some investment plans, and exacerbating the volatility of the Turkish lira. Since 2017 Erdoğan has consolidated his power politically but the country has weakened economically. Turkey is isolated regionally, its military is overstretched, and its efforts to play Russia off against the U.S. while keeping the EU at arm's length are not sustainable. Turkey remains the only isolated country in a volatile region — the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East — while its rivals have developed close partnerships driven by security, diplomacy, and energy. Military overstretch

12. James Kanter, "European Union Reaches Deal With Turkey to Return New Asylum Seekers," March 18, 2016, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/19/world/europe/european-union-turkey-refugees-migrants.html>.

13. Cengiz Candar, "Why weakened post-coup Turkey may drift from the West," August 22, 2016, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/08/turkey-power-vacuum-pkk-exploit.html>.



Photo above: The Blue Homeland-2022 exercise held in the Black Sea, Aegean Sea, and eastern Mediterranean by the Turkish Naval Forces Command in Mugla on April 21, 2022. Photo by Durmuş Genç/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

also brings its own vulnerabilities, a fact made clear by the February 2020 attack on Turkish forces near Idlib, Syria, which killed 34 troops, and the strike on al-Watiya Air Base in Libya in June 2020 after Turkish-backed forces captured the site, which injured several Turkish officers. Military involvement in cross-border areas and in the eastern Mediterranean have also resulted in confrontation with some of Turkey's allies (like Greece, France, and the U.S.), as well as regional players (such as the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Egypt) and major powers (like Russia). Confronting all of these powers at the same time on various fronts has been militarily and economically costly. U.S. and French military and diplomatic support for Greece has disrupted the strategic balance between the U.S., Turkey, and Greece in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean, and has been a huge strategic setback for Turkey.

In this period, the Trump administration's plans to scale back U.S. involvement in the Middle East helped Turkey to gain more leverage in the region. Trump stated that he admired strong leaders, and Erdoğan found an opportunity to pursue leadership diplomacy and establish close ties with him. But

Trump's election defeat in 2020 was a blow to Erdoğan. The U.S. was already disturbed by Turkey's unilateral actions in northern Syria and the S-400 deal with Russia, which led to the imposition of sanctions pursuant to the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in December 2020.¹⁴ When the Biden administration came into office, it was determined to institutionalize relations and the leadership diplomacy came to an end. Even more dramatic for the Erdoğan government was that the EU and the U.S. took a common position against Turkey. For the first time in its history, Turkey was sanctioned by both the EU and the U.S., and for the first time in Turkish-U.S. relations both sides of the aisle in the U.S. Congress turned against Turkey. In December 2020, the EU Council called Turkey's actions in the eastern Mediterranean provocative, accused Ankara of escalating the situation, and declared¹⁵ that it would coordinate with the U.S. on matters relating to Turkey and the situation in the eastern

14. Michael Pompeo, "The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231," December 14, 2020, *U.S. Department of State*, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231/index.html>.

15. "European Council, 10-11 December 2020," December 11, 2020, *European Council*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2020/12/10-11/>.

Mediterranean. Confronting both the U.S. and the EU at the same time was beyond Turkey's capacity, especially when it was suffering from an economic downturn and the government was losing popular support.

Consequently, the Erdoğan government had to revise its overambitious foreign policy posture. Its new policy is called a "problem-free circle" and the government has gradually taken a conciliatory position, beginning with the eastern Mediterranean, ending its seismic searches, withdrawing its drillships, and agreeing to start exploratory meetings with Greece.

In its second round, the AKP government has tried to fix relations with Egypt, Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. However, as Turkish policy in the region has proved, it is usually easier to damage relations than to fix them. While the UAE, with its new policy line of engaging a multitude of actors, agreed to mend relations, Egypt came up with a list of preconditions, including Turkey's withdrawal from Libya, extradition of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the termination of their media activities. Israel has been proceeding gradually, sending its president for an official visit in February 2022 and agreeing to restore full diplomatic ties in August.¹⁶ While Turkey showed interest in entering a new round of reconciliation talks with Armenia, the Saudis were hesitant about taking a similar step, demanding that Ankara first dismiss its case against the perpetrators in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. Turkey eventually acquiesced and transferred the court case to the Saudi authorities, paving the way for Erdoğan to pay an official visit to the kingdom in May 2022, with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman travelling to Ankara the following month.¹⁷

Facing severe criticism from the U.S., and realizing that the Biden administration was keeping its distance, the Erdoğan government has tried to prove that it is a valuable ally in a critical region, avoiding disputes with other U.S. partners and attempting to curry favor with the Biden administration. Unable to develop a personal relationship with Biden, even though the two leaders know each other, Erdoğan's first move was to try to take over the running of Kabul airport after the U.S.

16. "Turkey, Israel to restore full diplomatic ties," August 17, 2022, *France 24*, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220817-turkey-israel-to-restore-full-diplomatic-ties>.

17. "A new era': Saudi Arabia's MBS in Turkey as nations mend ties," June 22, 2022, *Al-Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/22/saudi-crown-prince-mbs-visits-turkey-as-countries-normalise-ties>.

withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Nevertheless, despite Turkey's efforts, its bid ultimately failed due to the Taliban's intransigence. The outbreak of war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion in late February 2022 has provided a new opportunity for the Erdoğan government to emphasize Turkey's strategic position. Ankara was quick to call the occupation a war, enabling the government to implement the Montreux Convention of 1936, which regulates the conditions under which vessels may pass through the Turkish Straits.¹⁸

So far, the Erdoğan government's efforts to reset relations with its neighbors and allies have not yielded the expected results. There are a range of reasons why Turkey's moves have not received a warm welcome. The first is the issue of trust. With so many zig-zags over the years, Erdoğan is not considered a reliable ally, partner, or counterpart. Second, Turkey's vulnerabilities are well-known, and it is the Erdoğan government that has been isolated and is in dire need of repairing broken relations. This has pushed Turkey into a weaker position diplomatically, and many of Ankara's rivals and neighbors are slow in responding to its initiatives.

The Way Ahead

Erdoğan is trying to make a new deal with the Biden administration and the EU. He is offering a somewhat trouble-free relationship, cooperation on regional issues, and close ties with U.S. allies in the region, in exchange for a free hand in domestic politics. This would be a win-win situation for him: getting the support of the U.S., reviving a stalled relationship with the EU, and giving him an opportunity to continue his authoritarian style in domestic politics and thereby increase his chances of winning the next elections, set to be held in June 2023.

If Erdoğan wins the upcoming elections, he will most likely maintain his adept transactional style in foreign policy, as demonstrated by his negotiations with Sweden and Finland over their NATO membership bid. Erdoğan used the opportunity to strike a hard bargain with both the two aspiring NATO members and the U.S., trying to secure the purchase of F-16 fighters and remove the ongoing U.S. court case over Halkbank's alleged breach of Iranian sanctions.¹⁹

18. "Turkey to implement pact limiting Russian warships to Black Sea," February 28, 2022, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-implement-international-pact-access-shipping-straits-due-ukraine-war-2022-02-27/>.

19. Amanda Macias, "NATO reaches a deal with Turkey to admit Sweden and Finland,

Over the past two decades of dealing with serious setbacks and ordeals, Erdoğan, as a seasoned leader, has gained insights about the vulnerabilities of his counterparts. He has realized the degree of EU sensitivity over any refugee flows and has effectively played on its fears. He has used the members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey as a bargaining chip to ameliorate relations with Egypt and his government's ties with Hamas to fix relations with Israel.

The problem with a possible continuation of Erdoğan's rule is that many of Turkey's allies have lost trust in his government after so many changes and reversals in foreign policy. Erdoğan has alienated many of his allies, both in the West and in the region. Even if the government can repair its troubled relations with neighbors and allies, some of the strategic losses will endure. Turkey's recent use of hard power has disrupted the balance of forces in the eastern Mediterranean. Israel has already given guarantees to Greece that their cooperation will not be affected by a restoration of Turkish-Israeli relations.²⁰ The U.S. has terminated a long-term arms embargo on the RoC and intensified its military and defense ties with Greece. Turkey has no exit strategy in Libya or Syria, nor does it seem to have a plan for how to handle Idlib or get rid of the S-400 missiles that have been such a roadblock in relations with the U.S.

After it failed to dominate the region by pursuing a neo-Ottomanist ideology and using soft power instruments during the Arab Spring, the AKP government, through its alliance with nationalist/Eurasianist forces, adopted a militarized approach exerting regional influence through hard power instruments, mainly its military, which led Turkey to drift away from its Western orientation. Between 2016 and 2020, Turkey reached the physical and material limits of what it could achieve through a militarized foreign policy, and its second bid for regional influence once again failed under strong and united Western pressure. Erdoğan's push to launch a new military operation in northern Syria in the summer of 2022 to unite the two separate Turkish-dominated areas was resisted by both the U.S. and Russia. Alienated from the West, isolated regionally, with an economy in free fall, it was too risky a move for Erdoğan to pursue as he prepared for the upcoming 2023 presidential elections.

secretary-general says," June 28, 2022, *CNBC*, <https://www.cnbcm.com/2022/06/28/nato-reaches-deal-with-turkey-to-admit-sweden-and-finland-secretary-general-says.html>.

20. Israel's president heads to Greece to calm ally ahead of Turkey visit, February 24, 2022, *i24*, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy/1645686204-israel-s-president-heads-to-greece-to-calm-ally-ahead-of-turkey-visit>.

The Biden administration has been adamant about keeping its distance from the Turkish government, and Erdoğan had to put the regional house in order, mend ties with Israel to burnish his tarnished image in Washington, and restore relations with the Saudis and Emiratis to attract much-needed foreign currency to slow the depreciation of the Turkish lira. However, his recent moves to fix relations with many U.S. allies have been perceived as a mere "charm offensive." The Turkish president's ups and downs have already made many of his former supporters and allies wary, giving rise to "Erdoğan fatigue" in a number of Western capitals.

Turkey needs a reset and a new paradigm, not only in its foreign and security policies, but also in politics in general. Many of the problems the country faces are a direct result of misjudgments, poor decision making by unqualified staff, and putting domestic electoral concerns above national interests. Turkey is associated with radical Islamists jihadists in Syria, seen as the protector of the region's Islamists (including members of the Muslim Brotherhood), and has become known for blackmailing Western countries through arrests, a textbook tactic of rising authoritarian regimes in the 2010s. A fresh start and a new mentality based on democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and secular politics are desperately needed. This would restore Turkey's place in the region and the world. In foreign policy, instead of trying to balance great powers against one another, Turkey needs a more a balanced overall approach, normalizing relations with neighbors, returning to the use of soft power, and maintaining good ties with the U.S. and the EU as well as rising powers, but without too much entanglement.

What Would an Opposition Victory in 2023 Mean?

The AKP has been gradually losing ground at home due to the economic downturn, and Turkey's opposition parties are closer to an election victory than they have been in the last 20 years. However, in terms of foreign policy, the opposition in general is either too opaque in its vision or follows Erdoğan's path on some critical issues. Any new government will have to expend considerable time and energy to end Turkey's regional isolation and mend ties with the U.S. and the EU. Moreover, it will probably take over a ruined economy and will desperately need foreign currency flows as it tries to recover and rebuild.

In the event of an opposition victory in the 2023 elections, the first task should be to reorganize decision making, restoring professionalism and meritocracy, and re-arranging the various overlapping government institutions involved in implementing foreign policy. This can be handled relatively easily since Turkey still has significant, well-educated human capital.

The main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), historically places special importance on regional stability and cooperation. If it comes to power, it may be expected to re-establish diplomatic ties with the Assad regime as the party has already reiterated its position publicly. Moreover, the CHP has envisaged the formation of a "Middle East Security and Cooperation Organization" in an effort to enhance cooperation among Turkey's neighbors. Any new government will definitely face a dilemma between maintaining Turkey's military presence in northern Syria and pursuing normalization with the Assad government.

Any alternative government would likely reorient Turkish foreign policy toward the West since there is a growing discontent, especially among the urbanized sections of Turkish society, regarding "over-Middleeasternization" and Islamization of Turkish domestic and foreign policy. The country's young generation is pro-EU, with more than 70% support for membership, even though relations with Brussels are stalled.

In the case of a new government, Turkey is expected to establish a greater distance in its ties with Russia, replacing Erdoğan and Putin's close personal ties with a more institutionalized relationship. The opposition parties have in general been critical of the AKP government's decision to purchase the S-400 missiles and would try to find a reasonable solution to the issue that would restore Turkey's involvement in the F-35 fighter jet project.

Turkey under the AKP government is considered an unreliable, unpredictable, and untrustworthy country by many of its allies, friends, and neighbors. The most critical task going forward will be to restore Turkey's image, position, and place in a turbulent world.

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