



COMMENTARY

Bring US-Turkish relations in from the cold

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 Print

In one sense, U.S.-Turkish relations had a productive 2024, reversing a decade and a half of tension and deterioration. The [exchange](#) of Turkish approval for Sweden's NATO accession for American approval of Turkish purchase of new F-16V aircraft and upgrade kits marked positive momentum after years of drift on defense industrial cooperation and regional security. Moreover, the second year of the [Strategic Mechanism](#) implemented to address bilateral problems and opportunities provided greater transparency, while quiet diplomacy by the U.S. ambassador in Ankara, Jeff Flake, helped facilitate a significant new [coproduction](#) deal for

artillery ammunition.

Yet as 2024 enters its final months, the momentum seems to have stalled. The Turkish F-16 order has been [scaled back ↗](#). The relationship between Presidents Joe Biden and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [deteriorated over the course of the year, ↗](#) largely as a result of divergence over the war in Gaza. Tensions over spotty Turkish enforcement of [export bans ↗](#) of U.S.-origin sensitive equipment to Russia have grown.

U.S.-Turkish relations have always had their difficulties, but an additional development makes navigating such obstacles even trickier. Specifically, a view has gained currency in Washington centered on the premise that U.S.-Turkish tensions may not be worth solving. According to this view, Washington has little to gain from addressing Turkish concerns, Ankara can't or won't make transactions in good faith, or Ankara has adopted positions so irreconcilable with U.S. and Western interests that there is no point in trying. Proponents of this view get several important points wrong but have effectively amplified the message nonetheless.

Pitching hardball

The [most extreme version ↗](#) of the leave-Turkey-out-in-the-cold argument asserts that Ankara actively undermines U.S. interests—interest antagonism rather than divergence—and is irredeemable as an ally as long as Erdoğan remains in power. The argument denies both the potential and actual geopolitical value of the U.S.-Turkish alliance, and typically rests on an exaggerated litany of outrage citing Turkish statements, diplomatic stances, trade actions, and regional interventions that their authors consider

outrageous. According to this narrative, Erdoğan should be treated as [“a transnational threat that is an insult to democratic governance worldwide.”](#)

A more [nuanced version](#) of the argument concedes Turkey’s weight and value as an ally but holds that the current relationship requires a punitive and coercive approach by Washington to get positive movement on key U.S. interests. The [prescription for this diagnosis](#) consists of attempting to bypass and isolate the Turks while pressing for political change in the country. Over the longer term, this line of thinking [concedes the loss of Turkey](#) as a functioning ally and cautions against efforts to forge consensus by navigating contentious issues on a transactional basis. Instead, Washington [should ignore Ankara](#)—where our interests overlap, cooperation will emerge on its own, and where they do not, we [should work against the Turks](#) together with other regional actors.

The list of analysts and think tanks in Washington espousing the avoid-Turkey line is not short. Interestingly, it is less common across the Atlantic, where [Chatham House](#), the [Royal United Services Institute](#), the [German Institute for International Security Affairs](#), and other sober analysts remain engaged and balanced, if still critical, in their Turkey analysis. The more shrill tone of the Washington-based commentariat helps explain why the Biden administration pursued a [“cold shoulder” approach](#) during its first year, despite [prior warnings](#) against a rift from some Biden policy hands. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and deteriorating conditions in the Middle East reaffirmed the need for close bilateral dialogue and cooperation on regional issues with Turkey, the Biden administration [pursued closer engagement](#) and [renewed collaborative projects](#), but the tone of policy commentary has not really changed much. For a variety of reasons, numerous policy shapers and analysts want to see the United States keep

Turkey at arm's length.

Wisdom or folly?

What could possibly go wrong with a policy based on sidelining, marginalizing, ignoring, or punishing a potent ally? In a world of perfect hegemony, the policy would carry little risk: the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. The logic of ambivalent antagonism toward Turkey rests upon a presumption of hegemony that has clearly been debunked, however, by an era of great power competition. The positive value of U.S.-Turkish relations when they are based on forged consensus, and their negative value when they are marked by estrangement and antagonism, implies a need for a shrewd mix of incentives and disincentives that reflects warmth in public and tough bargaining in private.

There are at least five good reasons why marginalizing or punishing Turkey is neither prudent nor, in a final analysis, possible. The first is that Ankara has adroitly expanded its diplomatic and trade networks over the past two decades, enjoying partnerships with a diverse array of powers great and small, thereby reducing its vulnerability to coercion or isolation by the West. The Turks now deploy the [third-largest network](#) of foreign representations in the world. Turkish statesmen have proven agile enough to improve ties with even bitter regional rivals over time, including [Egypt](#), the [Gulf countries](#), [Greece](#), [Armenia](#), and (prior to the post-October 7 Gaza war) [Israel](#). This diplomatic agility makes it very hard to assemble coalitions to pressure Ankara, as the Turks have built an impressive array of diplomatic partners disinclined to try to force their hand. Especially given [prevailing views](#) in Europe and the Middle East that America's ability to responsibly

orchestrate world events—[hegemony](#)—has declined, the value of a stable and prosperous Turkey as part of the emerging regional order has commensurately risen—making pressure campaigns directed from Washington even less likely to succeed.

Secondly, Ankara has developed [effective hedging strategies](#) to balance great power pressure by deepening strategic dialogue, trade ties, and defense cooperation with international actors—first and foremost with the United States and NATO, but also with Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Ukraine, Qatar, and numerous states in Central Asia and Africa. Turkey has developed [power projection strategies](#) and military partnerships with dozens of countries, none of whom should be expected to join coercive campaigns. Because Ankara engages with the West, anti-Western powers, and the Global South [simultaneously](#), its trade and security networks are difficult to curtail or collapse. Ankara still depends more on the West than any others in economic and strategic terms but has mitigated the degree of dependency (and thus vulnerability to coercion) through this hedging.

Thirdly, in light of the diversification and resiliency of Turkish diplomatic, trade, and security networks, simply ignoring or working around Ankara is tantamount to ceding influence over a potent geopolitical actor to its other partners. The European Union has already committed this error, and [Turkish aspirations to join the BRICS](#) bloc were a pointed signal to Brussels that cold shoulders open doors for other actors. How would “working around” Turkey work, exactly, in the Black Sea region, the eastern Mediterranean, Central Asia, and North and East Africa? Turkey’s access and influence over these areas are significant, whereas the U.S. interest in them tends to be more partial and intermittent. By not forging cooperative approaches in these areas, the United States greatly reduces the prospects of successful policies

in any of them.

Fourthly, divergence and distance in U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations incur significant opportunity costs which undermine both players' regional strategies. In the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Black Sea, Africa, and Central Asia, the two allies' interests significantly overlap in advancing political stability and trade, improving humanitarian conditions, and limiting control by Russia, China, or Iran. Libya is an interesting example wherein Washington and Ankara both supported the Tripoli government while it was under assault by the forces of Khalifa Haftar and Russian mercenaries. Turkey acted unilaterally and over U.S. warnings to halt Haftar and stabilize Tripoli, rather ironically laying the groundwork for [U.N.-led negotiations](#) that largely halted the war. There are at least a dozen other crisis and conflict zones that would benefit from the United States and Turkey working together for stability, but coordinated strategy and action do not forge themselves—and cannot occur in a “cold shoulder” environment.

Finally, in an era of great power competition, successful coalition and alliance management greatly impacts competitive outcomes. In a [world](#) in which Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea are working together actively to undermine U.S. power and interests, ignoring or marginalizing allies—even imperfectly aligned ones—is strategic folly. The United States and its closest allies must keep every powerful partner in the proverbial tent to the greatest degree possible, needing [all the friends it can get](#) in such a struggle; they do not have the luxury of playing hard to get.

Productive steps

The binary proposition of full and predictable alignment with Washington or punitive consequences is a false dilemma, and the complicated geopolitics of the 21st century call for something more feasible, and more likely to garner positive results. A 2023 study by the German Marshall Fund (GMF) sketched out such an approach for "[global swing states ↗](#)," defined as having "significant leverage in international affairs but varying preferences for cooperation." Turkey was one of the six most prominent pivotal players, along with Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. All practice some version of "strategic multialignment," with transactionalism rather than solidarity as their driving force.

In an era marked by strategic competition, mid-sized powers [enjoy greater power ↗](#) and greater flexibility than during periods of strict bloc alignment (bipolarity) or unipolar hegemony. They are positioned to choose positions on the basis of mutual advantage and carefully crafted compromise with the United States and the West, or to hedge against Western punitive action in the absence of trust and assurance. "The United States and its allies will continue to see their global influence wane unless they take steps to reverse the trend through greater engagement with these powers," as the GMF report puts it, by avoiding binary equations and showing mutual respect for national sovereignty.

The Turkish case shows that adroit senior-level diplomacy can produce effective transactional relations and build a modicum of trust. Through energetic and sustained engagement by several senior officials in the Biden administration—including recently departed Ambassador Jeff Flake, the State Department's Victoria Nuland, and CIA Director Bill Burns—mutually beneficial deals on NATO accession for Sweden, the sale of F-16 fighters, and coproduction of artillery ammunition were hammered out. Much more is

possible, and there is [no time to waste](#) in pursuing broader reconciliation and collaborative efforts. The results could be beneficial for both partners with regard to mitigating China's and Russia's revisionist impulses, stabilizing the Middle East, aiding Ukraine's survival and Africa's development, enhancing trade, and pursuing interests in other areas. To argue against seeking convergence in these areas is policy malpractice, despite any therapeutic or cathartic value obtained by counseling it.

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