



# Five More Years

## *Foreign Policy Implications of Erdoğan's Reelection*

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### THE IMPACT OF TURKEY'S MAY ELECTIONS

The Turkish elections of May 14 and 28 were arguably the most consequential elections the world has seen in 2023. A state with a G20 economy, NATO's second-largest and the world's eleventh-most-potent military, and a critical geopolitical position held a meaningful contest between clearly distinct political movements with engaged, competitive bases that turned out at a rate between 87 percent (first round) and 86 percent (second round).<sup>1</sup> The results secured a final presidential term for a political leader with passionate supporters and detractors both domestically and abroad, assuring a degree of foreign policy stability for an actor influential in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Now that the dust has settled on the contentious election, and the new cabinet in Ankara has been formed, an initial assessment of the outcome and its implications for Western policy makers can be made.

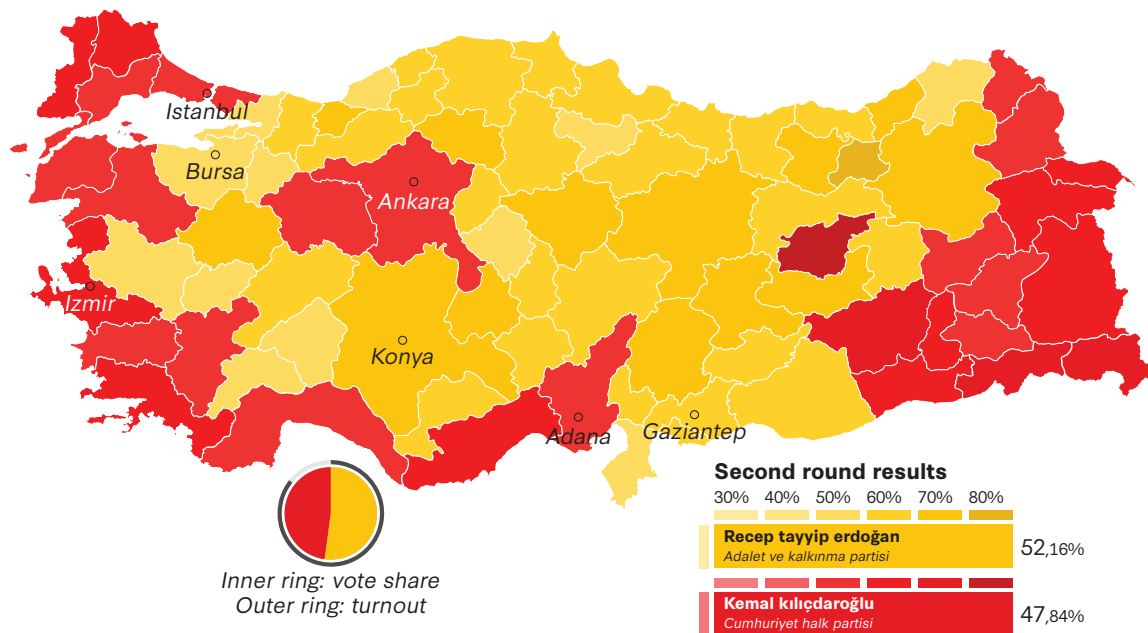
### ELECTION BY THE NUMBERS

The official results were quickly tabulated by the Turkey Supreme Election Council and tracked by both the semiofficial Anadolu Agency and the opposition-leading ANKA news agency. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the presidency in the second round with 52.18 percent of the vote. The runoff became necessary because no candidate met the 50 percent threshold in the first round, with Erdoğan and rival Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu at 49.52 percent and 44.88 percent, respectively, while two minor candidates split the remaining 5.6 percent. The participation rate was 87 percent in the first round and 86 percent in the second round, with roughly 52 million voters from a population base of 86 million.<sup>2</sup> Province-by-province votes are reflected in the map in figure 1 from the opposition-aligned Sözcü daily.

Turkish election law allows parties to combine efforts by supporting a common candidate in an electoral alliance. Erdoğan's alliance, the Cumhuriyet İttifakı (People's Alliance), included his own Justice and Development Party (AKP in Turkish), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP),

**FIGURE 1** Breakdown of presidential voting by province

**2023 Turkish presidential election**  
2023 Türkiye cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimi



**Source:** Random, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2023\\_Turkish\\_presidential\\_election\\_map\\_second\\_round.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2023_Turkish_presidential_election_map_second_round.svg). Data from Anadolu Agency. Used under CC BY-SA 4.0.

and an AKP splinter (the New Welfare Party, or YRP). The opposition parties known informally as the “Table of Six” ran as the Millet İttifakı (Nation Alliance), including the center-left Republican People’s Party (CHP), the nationalist Good Party (İyi Parti), and four smaller conservative and Islamist parties. These alliances reflected a fundamental split in the electorate between the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, the major cities, and the southeast, all of which favored the opposition; and interior Anatolia and the Black Sea coast, which favored the incumbent. The voting margin in favor of Kılıçdaroğlu in opposition-leaning regions was thinner than Erdoğan’s margins in the conservative heartland, indicating something of an enthusiasm gap. Erdoğan managed to split the Kurdish vote in the southeast, finishing ahead in several provinces (Şanlıurfa, Bingöl, Elâzığ, Adıyaman) and garnering between 33 and 48 percent in a number of others.

The parliamentary elections held on May 14 saw the opposition make gains, but not enough to take control of the unicameral chamber. Comparisons to the previous parliament are charted in table 1.

In a presidential system—which Turkey has had since a 2018 referendum—parliamentary competition can constrain, but not dictate, policy directions.<sup>3</sup> Opposition gains are thus unlikely to cause the president to lose much sleep, though they will necessitate deal making in some areas.

**TABLE 1** COMPARISON OF 2023 AND 2018 ELECTION RESULTS BY PARTY

Party	2023 result	2018 result	Net change
AKP (ruling party)	268	295	-27
MHP (AKP-aligned nationalists)	50	49	+1
YRP (new Refah/AKP splinter)	5	0	+5
CHP (main opposition party)	169	146	+23
İyi Parti (opposition nationalists)	43	43	0
HDP/YSP (heavily Kurdish party)	61	67	-6
TIP (communists)	4	0	+4

**Source:** "Seçim sonuçları: 2023 Cumhurbaşkanlığı ve TBMM seçimlerinde oy oranları," BBC News Türkçe, May 12, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-65576557>.

In terms of procedural democracy, the election was a success. The opposition presented meaningful alternatives to the ruling party, the campaign was vigorously contested, turnout was high by Western standards, ballot security was maintained, voting place disputes were settled rapidly, and concerns over violence by either side did not materialize in a meaningful way. Pre-election concerns over street violence, overt electoral manipulation, or provocations to distort or even suspend the election proved unfounded. European observers praised the efficiency, turnout, and "democratic spirit" of the elections.<sup>4</sup>

Yet those same observers noted that the campaign environment provided an "unjustified advantage" to the ruling party and that transparency in dispute resolutions was limited. An election with genuine alternatives—yet conducted in an atmosphere of media bias and constrained public freedom of expression—cannot be characterized as an entirely level playing field.<sup>5</sup> This has led some to describe the Turkish elections as "free but not fair."<sup>6</sup>

It seems evident that the incumbent's use of selective prosecution, political bans, media dominance, populist giveaways, and smear and fear tactics to discredit the opposition made the opposition's task more difficult. Yet the strong turnout, narrow margin of victory, and pre-election polls indicate that this was a winnable race, rather than a foregone conclusion.<sup>7</sup> Keep in mind that roughly 80 percent of Americans believe their own electoral playing field is not level and that our system may not be immune to political dirty tricks in election years.<sup>8</sup> By the standards of Turkish electoral history, and that of most countries outside northwest Europe, it may be more accurate to call this one "free and reasonably unfair," as a Turkish political observer commented wryly to the author. The opposition made its case strongly enough that many observers believed that Erdoğan's defeat was nigh, but the electorate on the whole did not find that case compelling.<sup>9</sup>

## READING THE ELECTORATE

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What does the recent election tell us about public mood, political party (and leader) landscape, and the evolution of the electorate? First of all, Turkish pre-election opinion polling was deeply flawed and mostly wrong.<sup>10</sup> Most prominent polling firms saw Kılıçdaroğlu in the lead and the ruling coalition taking serious losses in parliament. The spread among these polls was quite wide, and while some predicted a second-round runoff, most had Kılıçdaroğlu leading or the two neck and neck. The most common error seems to have been sampling too few nationalists—secular or conservative—and underestimating the impact of security issues as opposed to economic issues in the minds of Turkish voters.

The electorate remains weighted to the right, with nationalists, conservatives, religious voters, and business interests heavily represented in both the AKP coalition and the opposition.<sup>11</sup> In a center-right electorate, national elections swing on who projects the image of stronger leadership for a secure, prosperous, strategically independent country; in this sense the outcome reflects the failure of the opposition to secure support from enough of the center-right groups.<sup>12</sup> Part of the reason for that is the impression among these groups that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was soft on PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terrorism and beholden to the PKK-aligned Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) / Green Left Party (YSP).<sup>13</sup> It has been argued that the clear, perhaps cloying, preference of leaders and press in the West for an Erdoğan defeat worked in the president's favor.<sup>14</sup> Another factor was the belief within the Table of Six (the opposition coalition) that Kılıçdaroğlu was the least charismatic and forceful among the joint candidates who could have been chosen. This prompted the temporary withdrawal from the coalition of Meral Akşener, leader of the İyi Parti, a month before the election.

The Table of Six agreed in broad terms to Kılıçdaroğlu's reform program, especially the return to a parliamentary system.<sup>15</sup> The joint opposition program laid out in fair detail reforms to improve economic management, restore institutional autonomy and press freedoms, and pare back AKP-aligned interests that have benefited from AKP rule. Yet the program was short on security and foreign policy specifics, and the campaign showed weakness in these areas. Signaling that an opposition-run government would align more closely with the West ran afoul of nationalist sentiment.<sup>16</sup> Whispers from PKK-aligned circles that Kılıçdaroğlu had offered significant concessions to the group alienated many.<sup>17</sup> Statements about Syrian refugees and the conflict in Syria sowed confusion and doubt, too.<sup>18</sup> The AKP was able to portray Kılıçdaroğlu as inept or inexperienced at foreign policy, likely to undo significant gains in Turkey's strategic independence and regional standing.<sup>19</sup>

It might be fair to conclude that in a contest between pain tolerance and risk tolerance, the Turkish electorate preferred the former. Erdoğan and his coalition represented pain tolerance in the sense that his unorthodox monetary policy, regional brinksmanship, friction with the West, and authoritarian tendencies were known costs for Turkish consumers and voters. Yet his willingness to use military force abroad, to disregard Western disapproval, and to pursue populism at home strengthened his appeal in turn, and he retained enough charisma to navigate economic headwinds, a devastating earthquake with over fifty thousand dead, and what some had

predicted to be a growing case of “Erdoğan fatigue,” especially among younger voters.<sup>20</sup> The electorate knew his strengths and weaknesses, but knew far less about the opposition and its candidate: there were unknowns about the coalition, the policy, the candidate, and how they would react to the challenges of ruling. Security concerns defeated economic concerns, personalized rule defeated institutional governance, and the Turkish heartland beat the coasts and cities; thus, Erdoğan defeated Kılıçdaroğlu.<sup>21</sup> Now, with a final five-year term, Erdoğan will look to shape a lasting legacy in the final chapter of a quarter century at Turkey’s helm.

## TASKS AT HAND

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There were two immediate postelection tasks for President Erdoğan. The first was to obtain broad recognition of the legitimacy of his reelection, and the second was cabinet formation. The Turkish opposition decried unjustified incumbent advantages but did not challenge the result of the election, boosting the perception of legitimacy. Large public celebrations in Ankara, Istanbul, and other Turkish cities reinforced the sense that the will of the majority—slim though it may have been—was reflected in the outcome. A broad array of international leaders, including President Biden and leaders from across Europe, Africa, and Asia, quickly recognized the outcome and congratulated Erdoğan. Leaders with close personal ties to Erdoğan—such as Qatar’s Sheikh Tamim Al Thani, Azerbaijan’s Ilham Aliyev, Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro, and Hungary’s Viktor Orbán—were particularly generous in their public appreciation of the result. Street celebrations were held in parts of the Balkans, Germany, Pakistan, the Palestinian territories, and elsewhere. This combination of public acclaim, international recognition, and concession by the opposition make arguments against legitimacy difficult and tortuous to make. Critics may question the preferences expressed by public will in Turkey, but not the fact that it was exercised legitimately.

The second key priority was to form a cabinet responsive to the needs of the moment. Over the past two decades, Erdoğan has shown a pragmatic willingness to hire and fire key assistants to reflect evolving preferences, policy, and politics. It was never likely that the pre-election cabinet would survive intact, but markets and capitals familiar with the current players and their potential replacements eagerly anticipated the week after the election, the results of which were announced on June 3. The old saw among policy analysts that personnel equals policy applies to a higher degree in Erdoğan’s Turkey than in most places, so the moves are consequential.

To Western ears, perhaps the sweetest note struck by the newly harmonized cabinet was the appointment of Mehmet Şimşek as minister of finance. A former Merrill Lynch economist, Şimşek is associated at home and abroad with fiscal discipline, monetary orthodoxy, and professional economic management. The appointment has been interpreted as a signal of Erdoğan’s desire to rein in inflation and regain the favor of Western financial institutions and investors.<sup>22</sup> Should he be able to convince his president to hew closer to internationally trusted monetary and fiscal management, economic ties between Turkey and the West, especially in terms of foreign direct investment, could benefit significantly.

A strong signal of Erdoğan's intent to sustain a muscular and independent foreign policy was the appointment of Hakan Fidan, former chief of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), to the post of foreign minister. Fidan has been at the center of Erdoğan's transition over the past decade from the "zero problems with neighbors" accommodationist foreign policy to a more hardline, securitized approach. Fidan is likely to be hawkish on Syria, having overseen both targeted counterterror strikes and discreet outreach to Damascus. He has been a key player in Ankara's renewed outreach to Egypt and the Persian Gulf countries since 2021, conducting counterpart meetings out of the public eye ("intelligence diplomacy") to prepare the way for renewal of higher-level public contacts.<sup>23</sup> Fidan was viewed critically in Israel, especially early in his decade at the helm of Turkish intelligence, but also played a key role in improving security and counterterror ties more recently.

The man replacing Fidan as the intelligence chief, İbrahim Kalın, is a well-known and trusted interlocutor in Washington. A US-educated scholar of Islam, history, international relations, and interfaith dialogue, Dr. Kalın has long-standing professional relationships with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of US diplomats, senior officials, and academics, including the current national security advisor, Jake Sullivan. He understands the nuances of Washington and has worked long and hard to find areas of overlapping interest and potential compromise. Yet he has also staked out unyielding positions on security concerns Ankara sees as critical, including the counter-PKK campaign, geopolitical balancing, and Turkish strategic independence. On his watch, Turkey's vigorous conduct of counterespionage, counterterror, and regional security partnerships can be expected to continue.

The new defense minister, Yaşar Güler, is a career officer and most recently the chief of the General Staff. Replacing Halusi Akar in the post, he is known as a competent, low-key professional soldier and is not considered particularly hawkish.<sup>24</sup> Gone from the cabinet is the most strident anti-US voice in Ankara over the past half decade, Süleyman Soylu; he has been replaced by the former governor of Istanbul province, Ali Yerlikaya. A new addition and potential wild card is Akif Çağatay Kılıç, a former minister of youth and sports who has replaced Kalın as chief advisor to President Erdoğan. The role was part spokesman, part special envoy, and part national security advisor under Kalın; if the new advisor plays a similar role, he will be part of sensitive, high-trust discussions and negotiations on behalf of the president.

All in all, this cabinet opens the door for improved US-Turkish ties, with the strong caveat that Turkey will continue to be independent, nationalist, and activist in foreign and security policy—and therefore a difficult ally to manage. The new cabinet is a highly experienced, professional group, capable of effective relations with NATO alliance partners and with Washington, but also capable of shrewd deals and balancing with competitors of the West when the Turkish national interest so dictates. As work resumes on the thorny foreign policy issues facing Erdoğan and his team, the search for an effective transactional relationship with Western allies moving forward will involve less bombast. The electoral pressure is off, and there will be multiple opportunities for effective deal making.

## THE NEAR HORIZON: SWEDEN, WAR, AND PEACE

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One pressing early issue will be a decision by the Turkish parliament, with cues from President Erdoğan and his cabinet, about the candidacy of Sweden for accession into NATO. Turkey, along with Hungary, has yet to approve the Swedish accession badly desired by Stockholm, Brussels, and Washington prior to the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius. President Biden raised the matter during his congratulatory call to Erdoğan. Turkish reticence stems from the long-standing tolerance by Swedish authorities of recruitment, propaganda, and fundraising by the PKK on Swedish territory. Sweden has promised tougher enforcement against these activities and passed new antiterror legislation last year that took effect in June 2023. As Ankara demonstrated by approving Finnish accession once Finland took steps agreed to through trilateral consultations, the goalposts don't really move for Ankara: tougher steps against the PKK will very likely lead to approval. A step in this direction was taken by Stockholm with the extradition in early June of PKK supporter Mehmet Kokulu over drug charges. Whether approval in the Turkish parliament happens in time for the Vilnius summit hinges, most likely, on how Ankara views this and similar steps: as temporary and symbolic or as the new Swedish approach.

As for the broader campaign against the PKK in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, expect the new team to continue full steam ahead. Kalın, Fidan, Güler, and Erdoğan's nationalist coalition partners (and much of the opposition) share a commitment to reducing the organization's capabilities to threaten Turkish forces, territory, or interests. Turkish military and security forces have continued to conduct tactical strikes against PKK-linked targets in Iraq and Syria, usually by drones and small-scale ground combat, since the last major combined arms operation in November 2020. Erdoğan retains the desire to widen his "safe zone" for refugee returns and counter-PKK security in Syria, though, and will have one or more decision points this year about a proposed operation in Arab-majority towns under control of the PKK-linked YPG, such as Manbij and Tel Rifaat.

The decision about a possible large operation in Syria depends, in turn, on Erdoğan's position regarding relations with the Assad regime. Erdoğan, lest it be forgotten, at one time broke Turkish political taboos by reaching out to Assad, easing historical tensions, working on Syria-Israel peace talks, conducting joint military exercises in 2009, holding joint cabinet meetings, and inviting the Assads to join his family for a holiday on the Turkish coast. After Assad spurned his neighbor's advice on how to defuse growing unrest judiciously—and proceeded to jail, torture, and kill protestors instead, leading to conditions of civil war—Erdoğan sided with the opposition, and relations with Damascus became poisoned. More than a decade later, Erdoğan seems to have concluded that Assad will remain in power and that the game now is to afford the anti-Assad opposition only a modicum of protection rather than secure their ascent to power. Just how to do this—what combination of carrot, stick, and mutual profit must be deployed—will require significant attention from Erdoğan's security and foreign policy team in the coming year or more.

Erdoğan also sees himself as uniquely positioned to broker a cessation of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine, and the Turkish government hosted peace talks at the ministerial level in 2022 twice (in Antalya and Istanbul). The talks did not yield an end to the war, but they made possible the UN-sponsored grain deal by which Ukraine and Russia agreed to the export of grain from both countries to world markets, unmolested by Russian warships or other attack. Ankara has staunchly assisted the defense of Ukrainian territory by ramping up long-standing defense cooperation agreements but has also refused to join sanctions against Russia. While some in the West yearn for a catastrophic defeat or governmental collapse to end Vladimir Putin's offensive war, Ankara would settle for a peace that restores lost territory to Ukraine but also keeps Russia as a stable neighbor and trade partner for Turkey. Erdoğan would likely prefer that Putin, with whom he has amicable relations, remain in power. This may seem a hard needle to thread, but it involves less wishful thinking perhaps than Western hopes for a sweeping Ukrainian victory and Putin's fall.

The attendance of Armenian president Nikol Pashinyan at Erdoğan's inauguration hinted at another near-term priority for President Erdoğan. Having assisted his close friend President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan in the 2020 war to regain territories occupied by Armenia since the early 1990s, Erdoğan would like to broker a peace that ends the state of war between the two Caucasian neighbors, reduces Russian leverage over both, and opens new trade routes to benefit the entire region. Russia and Iran oppose such efforts, and the United States has remained rather aloof. A diplomatic breakthrough in this case would require clear leadership and energy from the Turkish president but would be a generational accomplishment if it occurs.

Finally, Greece remains a bit of unfinished business in the regional reconciliation policy that Erdoğan has pursued since 2021. While mending fences with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and most recently Egypt, Ankara has not successfully forged a *modus vivendi* with its neighbor to the west. Frictions over maritime demarcation in the Mediterranean and airspace claims in the Aegean, together with Greek fears that Turkey's Mavi Vatan ("blue homeland") naval doctrine foreshadows territorial claims on Greek islands, have prompted Athens to seek deterrent assistance from Washington.<sup>25</sup> To Ankara, the Greeks appear to be overhyping their threat assessments in order to reap more defense assistance from the US Congress while complicating Turkish relations with the same—and the languid pace of consideration by Congress of a proposed sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Turkey would indicate that the strategy is working. Both Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Greece and Erdoğan in Turkey benefited electorally from the enmity of the other, but with both now reelected (Mitsotakis for four years and Erdoğan for five), the tension may attenuate enough to reopen negotiations on maritime matters. An understanding with the Greeks likely matters less to Erdoğan than a more favorable standing with Congress, but whatever the motive, there is likely to be an effort.

## **THE FURTHER HORIZON: REALPOLITIK, PERSONALIZATION, AND LEGACY**

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In a broader sense, Erdoğan will take the affirmation of the electorate in this most challenging of his reelection campaigns as a mandate for certain broad policy lines. The success of



nationalist candidates in parliament and the role of nationalist voters in pushing Erdoğan across the finish line was not lost on Beştepe (the presidential compound, sometimes also called the Külliye or “university”). It will likely be reflected in the continuation of a foreign policy rooted in *realpolitik*, hard power economic and security interests, and great-power balancing rather than great-power alignment. The *sine qua non* for strategic independence is sustained growth of the domestic defense industrial base and exports, which Erdoğan has effectively promoted and undoubtedly will continue to do.

Erdoğan’s Turkey has long been lamented in the West as a less-than-predictable (untrustworthy) ally.<sup>26</sup> Yet in 2023, it is by no means the only US ally that is practicing balancing and hedging. Witness in 2023 Saudi Arabia’s willingness to accept Beijing’s brokering of diplomatic relations with Iran, as well as refusal to adjust oil output to Washington’s preferred levels. The United Arab Emirates has dropped from the US Fifth Fleet–led Combined Maritime Forces in the Persian Gulf, while considering the idea of joining a similar arrangement that includes China and Iran but not the United States. Allies such as Israel and India have disappointed Washington in their stances on Ukraine (and for India, Iran as well). It might be fair to ask if greater alignment is expected from a NATO member than from other regional allies. Yet the Turks scrupulously fulfill the specified commitments of NATO membership, bring NATO indispensable force and strategic heft, and point out that the alliance is a collective defense organization, not a blank check for control of every member’s foreign policy.

The Turks, with the benefit of hindsight, may have been early movers in a more generalized trend—one popular enough that *The Economist* has framed the concept of “the T25” for twenty-five large and midsized “transactional” powers with a growing degree of international influence and a disinclination to take sides in great-power competition. The Turks are the paradigmatic case, and they show every sign of continuing to do what’s in their own assessed best interest. The job for American statecraft is to find and maximize mutual benefit, rather than to expect fealty on specific issues out of a generalized sense of loyalty or alignment. With Erdoğan firmly committed to his Turkey-first approach, and assured of five more years, finding overlap makes a lot more sense than working around him or waiting him out.

Had the Turkish opposition won, the bareness of their platform on matters of foreign policy left much to the imagination. They did make clear that they would eschew the highly personalized style of foreign policy preferred by Erdoğan and put institutions (the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, the National Security Council) back in the lead.<sup>27</sup> As with any bureaucratic process, institutional foreign policy lowers risk tolerance and can lead to least-common-denominator decision making. Erdoğan has been able to take risks and make abrupt shifts in foreign policy precisely because his advisory circle is fairly small, his institutional checks fairly weak, and his network of personal relationships with world leaders established and, in many cases, enthusiastic. His relationships with Aliyev (Azerbaijan), Al Thani (Qatar), Orbán (Hungary), Putin (Russia), the Kurdish Barzani tribe (northern Iraq), and dozens of other countries set the tone for the corresponding national bilateral relationships. He has built trust based on predictability—ironic, perhaps, when we consider his erratic rhetoric.

Observers close to the AKP have spoken of the upcoming presidential term as one in which Erdoğan focuses on “legacy-building” projects as a core concern—generally opportunities to solve long-running conflicts or to cement military and diplomatic gains into lasting strategic achievements. How he tries to do so will vary by case and by the actions of other players. His Syria legacy will turn on preserving the Syrian opposition and achieving the safe return of refugees to Syria. His PKK legacy may involve reversing tactical gains by the organization near Turkish borders, ending the PKK’s terror campaign against Turkey, strengthening non-PKK Kurdish groups, reviving a political dialogue to end the PKK armed campaign against Turkey, or some combination of all of these. Other potential legacy projects include the aforementioned talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a settlement of the war in Libya in conjunction with a normalization between Ankara and Cairo, and broadening and deepening of the Organization of Turkic States into a formidable regional bloc.

The early postelection assessment gives reason to believe that Erdoğan may want to improve ties with the West as part of his legacy, too. While anti-Americanism featured prominently in AKP election rhetoric, US national security advisor Jake Sullivan noted that this has been the case in many past elections and is a poor barometer for reading serious intent.<sup>28</sup> The appointment of ministers who work well with Western counterparts signals a desire to mend fences, and Erdoğan’s apparent return to orthodox monetary policy demonstrates commitment to reassuring Western investors and trade officials. Ankara has taken steps to shore up relations with European countries, too, especially the post-Brexit United Kingdom, in addition to pursuing the F-16 deal with Washington as a major symbolic reset of bilateral relations. Geopolitics centered on Turkey’s immediate neighborhood (especially Syria and the Mediterranean) have created frictions with the West over the past decade, but the geopolitics of great-power conflict—especially the war in Ukraine and Turkish intentions to outcompete China as a critical link in global supply chains—provide plenty of opportunities for convergence, too.

## **BILATERAL RELATIONS IN A TRANSACTIONAL ERA**

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Bilateral ties between the United States and Turkey have gone from bad to worse over the past decade. Remarkably, President Barack Obama listed President Erdoğan as one of his five closest colleagues in a 2012 interview with Fareed Zakaria.<sup>29</sup> By the end of Obama’s second term, though, a succession of crises destroyed trust between the two men and the policy communities they led: the war in Syria, suppression of the Gezi Park protests, deteriorating Turkish-Israeli ties, the failed coup in July 2016, and growing Turkish military assertiveness in its neighboring regions. In Washington, the Congressional Caucus on US-Turkey Relations shrank significantly, and Turkish lobbying efforts proved woefully inadequate to the task of countering anti-Turkish lobbies. The US government imposed sanctions on its Turkish ally over purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system (2020) and anti-PKK operations in Syria (2019) and has threatened or implied sanctions over a variety of matters. Commentators in Washington call for punishments of Turkey, including expulsion from NATO.<sup>30</sup> The urge to punish, isolate, and work around Turkey has become generalized and normal on Capitol Hill and in the Washington press.

The Turks are not blind to this, of course, and the repeated threats reinforce inclinations toward hedging and balancing behaviors internationally. Turkish commitment to NATO has not been seriously questioned, and fears that Ankara will turn away from the West and align with anti-Western powers have little substance. At the risk of positing an arbitrary number—but for the sake of necessity and convenience—we might say that Turkey wants a 51 percent Western-aligned foreign policy. On trade, collective self-defense, and broad strategic alignment, the Turks move with the West and strive to maintain solid ties. For the other 49 percent—regional conflict and crisis management, sanctions, domestic governance—the Turks will jealously guard their prerogatives. Anyone who thinks this is a new phenomenon would do well to reread their history of the Cold War, especially the chapters on the 1960s and 1970s. Ankara’s ambassador to Washington, Hasan Murat Mercan—an AKP cofounder and presidential confidant—has made clear in writing, through podcasts, and in engagements with members of Congress and think tankers that Erdoğan wants to restore a closer degree of bilateral cooperation.<sup>31</sup> Yet Ankara has its doubts that the American side has the inclination, or competence, to conduct positive transactional relations.

Mutually beneficial outcomes are at the heart of transactional approaches in foreign policy. Transactionalism centers on eschewing claims of shared values or fixed alignment in favor of shared benefit. The minimums for effective transactionalism are that both sides clearly delimit demands and specify rewards, adopt neutral or positive rather than adversarial tones, and follow through on commitments. While the term is often used pejoratively, implying insufficient commitment to values promotion or moral solidarity, the truth is that in an age that defies revolution, consensus, or transformation, compromise-based transactions are the key to stability. This has been true at least since the age of the Roman Republic. Yet if the key ingredients are missing—especially on tone and follow-through—transactionalism remains aspirational, rather than just the least bad option.

This is where the United States and Turkey have been stuck for the past half decade: unable to even pull off an effective transactional relationship. A large portion of the blame lies with Washington, for violating the transactional precept of follow-through. Having incorporated Turkey as an early partner in the F-35 consortium without conditions, it imposed conditionality via the *Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act* in 2017 and involuntarily terminated Turkish partnership in 2019. Worse, in Turkish eyes, is that the United States has failed to uphold its own proscription of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) by supporting the YPG, an affiliate of the anti-Turkish PKK FTO, to further its counter-Islamic State campaign in Syria. Somewhat less plausibly, Turks from across the political spectrum believe that Washington supported the attempted coup against President Erdoğan led by supporters of the exiled sect leader Fethullah Gulen.<sup>32</sup> Supporting the overthrow of an ally’s government certainly undermines the basis of minimal trust required for effective transactional relations. Erdoğan may also still remember the Obama administration’s ex post facto denial of a deal it asked him and Brazilian president Lula da Silva to contract with Iran on nuclear matters. Ankara can hardly be blamed for doubting assurances from Washington that there is a commitment to mutual security, transparency, and trust.

On the other hand, Ankara—and Erdoğan personally—clearly bear some of the blame for the trust deficit that has become endemic in bilateral relations over the past decade. Erdoğan has tolerated supercharged anti-American invective from subordinates, especially former minister of the interior Soylu, in order to mobilize nationalist opinion.<sup>33</sup> While suspicion of American power and intentions is popular and long-standing among Turks, the AKP government instrumentalized and exacerbated these instincts like no prior administration. Even when Erdoğan and his team have called for better ties with the West, they have made clear that this was done not from sincere affinity but from prudence.<sup>34</sup>

## QUO VADIS, AMICE?

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For partners that find each other neither entirely trustworthy nor entirely dispensable, transactionalism presents a natural, and ultimate, resort. To that end, the Biden administration may be adapting to reality, albeit more than halfway through the presidential term. Erdoğan got a distinctly cold shoulder from Biden's inauguration through to his own reelection, being excluded from consecutive Summits for Democracy, snubbed at an informal NATO meeting in Bali, and denied senior-level contacts for the better part of two years. A "strategic mechanism" announced in 2021 yielded little progress on myriad differences and no notable "strategic" progress. Biden had announced his support for Erdoğan opponents as early as 2020 and avoided actions that might strengthen Erdoğan's hand for reelection.<sup>35</sup> Yet faced with the reality that Erdoğan and the AKP will be in place for the next five years, things may be changing.

Biden's national security advisor Jake Sullivan may have signaled a new, more engaged approach in an interview with Fareed Zakaria shortly after the election. Asked about anti-Americanism in the Turkish election, Sullivan responded that (a) Turkey is a democracy, (b) Turkish support for Ukraine has been of the utmost value, (c) there is room for more constructive relations, including in the defense sphere, and (d) Biden looks forward to greater engagement moving forward.<sup>36</sup> Each lobe of the answer was important, and each will be mutually reinforcing in the direction of pragmatic—and effectively transactional—policy inclinations ahead.

All eyes are on the F-16 deal as a leading indicator of closer cooperation postelection. Granted, there are dozens of overlapping interests where Erdoğan's search for legacy coincides with US geopolitical interests: Ukraine, the Caucasus, Iraq, Africa, Central Asia, and elsewhere. The potential F-16 deal is ready to go, unlike the other cases. Congressional insiders note a slightly softened tone from previous opponents of arms sales to Turkey, including key committee leaders such as Michael McCaul and Gregory Meeks (House Foreign Affairs Committee) and even Bob Menendez (Senate Foreign Relations Committee).<sup>37</sup> There is no guarantee, of course, that Menendez, Meeks, or others might not demand additional concessions from Turkey, or put conditions into play prior to actual delivery, which could drag out or derail the whole thing. That, for better or for worse, is part of how US arms sales work. It is also a concern for later consideration. For now, a major symbolic step in bilateral relations, which the F-16 deal would represent, is in the interest of both presidents—and is long overdue.

In the final analysis, there is a real opportunity during President Erdoğan's third term for a period of closer cooperation between these two NATO allies. There are many areas of overlapping concern and interest, despite long-standing estrangement between policy elites—and the presidents. The key to obtaining mutual benefit will be to (a) manage areas of divergence coolly and realistically, (b) find "legacy" projects of Erdoğan that are consistent with US interests, and (c) establish a little traction through business, including defense industry deals. If Washington, and especially Congress, can get past failing to get the result it might have preferred (an opposition victory) and instead maximizes the potential of the result that occurred, the worst might be behind us.

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