

A catalogue of disputes. The head of Turkish diplomacy visits the US

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The head of Turkey's foreign ministry, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, paid an official visit to Washington from 17 to 20 January, holding talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other officials within the framework of the Turkish-American 'strategic mechanism' established in 2022. The discussions covered all the problematic aspects of bilateral relations, including the sale of F-16 multirole jets to Ankara, the issue of Turkey's ratification of Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership, the fight against the Islamic State and the Kurdish terrorist organisation the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as well as the civil war in Syria. The topics of stability and security in the South Caucasus and the Aegean, as well as the continued functioning of the Black Sea grain corridor, were also raised. The two heads of diplomacy did not hold a joint press conference and only issued statements summarising the meeting, while Çavuşoğlu asserted that the White House had not made the sale of its F-16 fighter jets to Turkey conditional on Ankara's approval of NATO expansion to include Sweden and Finland.

Commentary

- The 'strategic mechanism' launched in April 2022 is designed to strengthen and systematise communication channels between Ankara and Washington at the institutional and ministerial levels. It represents an attempt to revitalise and develop their relations amid a profound bilateral crisis and limited dialogue between the Turkish and US presidents. The joint meetings being held within the framework of this mechanism are therefore intended to find areas of potential cooperation and to alleviate any tensions.
- Ankara's removal from the F-35 multirole fighter jet programme can be seen as the most serious part of the Turkish-US dispute. It was the result of a decision taken by the US in 2019, followed by CAATSA sanctions, which were placed on Turkey in 2020 after it acquired S-400 air defence systems from Russia. Since Ankara failed to get the restrictions lifted or even recover the \$1.4bn it had invested in the programme, it has been seeking to purchase F-16s and upgrade packages for the aircrafts it currently has in use. The Biden administration has been providing active political support to Ankara in this process for about a year, but Congress keeps opposing such proposals and drags out the procedure. In January this year, the F-16 issue escalated further when a group of Democratic senators made their consent to the sale of these fighter jets conditional on Turkey's approval of NATO enlargement to include the two Scandinavian countries.

- A constant sticking point in relations between the two countries is Ankara's allegation that US-Greek cooperation is aimed against Turkey. As problems in relations with Turkey mount up, Washington has stepped up cooperation with Athens expanding military infrastructure and supplying arms to Ankara's regional rival. The US Congress, as well as US public opinion, have for years been highly distrustful of Turkey and open to pro-Greek lobbying: in May 2022, the Greek prime minister bluntly called on Congress to halt the sale of F-16s to Ankara. In turn, Turkey's anti-Greek rhetoric has fuelled tensions with the United States, going as far as making explicit threats to unleash war (as it did last autumn), and offering provocative support to the unrecognised Republic of Northern Cyprus.
- The situation in Syria is another aspect of the Turkey-US dispute. As part of the fight against the Islamic State, Washington has since 2014 actively supported the Kurdish-created Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which include the People's Defence Units (YPG) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). For its part, Ankara considers the SDF to be the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, which Turkey, the US and the EU recognise as a terrorist organisation. As a country under permanent threat of terrorist attacks (the most recent one took place in Istanbul in November 2022), Turkey sees US assistance to the SDF not only as support for hostile terrorist organisations, but also as an anti-Turkish policy that encourages Kurdish separatism. For Washington, in contrast, the SDF and the YPG are its loyal and indispensable allies in Syria, who are closely aligned by virtue of their proclaimed liberal political agenda and who (contrary to Ankara's view) have no affiliation with the PKK. Similarly, the ongoing Turkish-Syrian talks, mediated by Russia, are also exacerbating the feud between the US and Turkey, and may result in the further marginalisation of the SDF.
- As envisaged by the 'strategic mechanism', the talks between Çavuşoğlu and Blinken provided an opportunity to discuss a long list of divergences between the two countries. The terse statements following the meeting suggest that no breakthrough of any kind was made. The US administration appears to be maintaining an impression of openness to the development of bilateral cooperation, including on the F-16 issue, without any strict conditionality regarding, for example, Turkey's blocking of NATO enlargement to include the Scandinavian countries. At the same time, however, there is no indication that Congress will soften its position on this issue. It is highly likely that the sale of F-16s to Ankara will be delayed and the debate around them will escalate as the Biden administration is also considering the sale of F-35 fighter jets to Greece, which Turkey views as yet another disruption to the balance of power in the region. This state of affairs will raise Ankara's frustration with Washington in the future; the room for compromise on its part will narrow further as campaigning begins ahead of early presidential elections scheduled for 14 May (see [‘Turkey: early elections ahead’](#)). The issues of Turkey's subjectivity and security are likely to take centre stage in the campaign.