

Turkey in Trump's world: when in trouble turn to Europe?

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Turkish officials regard Donald Trump's presidency as an attempt to transform the international order and the principles that have underpinned it since the end of the Cold War. They believe that the US President aims to reduce the costs associated with maintaining America's network of regional alliances. Consequently, they anticipate lasting changes in transatlantic relations, including a reduction in US engagement in Europe. Although the authorities in Ankara officially refrain from criticising the actions of the US administration – hoping to secure its favour on issues vital to Turkish interests – they appear concerned about the potential consequences. The government fears that key international issues may be increasingly decided solely by major powers, excluding regional actors such as Turkey. It is also alarmed by the prospect of a strengthened Russian presence in the Black Sea region and the potential fragmentation of the North Atlantic Alliance.

In this new reality, the importance of Turkey's European partners is growing. Ankara seeks to deepen its relations with the European Union and its most influential member states. At the same time, it has signalled a willingness to contribute more significantly to European security, expecting in return the resumption of accession negotiations and full membership in a 'future European security architecture'. However, Turkey's expectations for closer ties with the EU will be difficult to fulfil due to mutual distrust, scepticism among some EU member states, and growing authoritarian tendencies within the country. In a more likely scenario, Turkey will strengthen its cooperation in the defence sector with selected European countries.

Ankara's approach to the US: caution and fears...

Turkey responded to Trump's victory with relative calm, in stark contrast to the euphoric reaction that followed his 2016 win. The reasons for this shift can be traced to his first term (2017–2021), during which he expressed admiration for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and engaged in so-called leader-to-leader diplomacy. During this period, the Turkish president skilfully persuaded Trump to adopt Ankara's narrative, which, among other things, enabled Turkey to conduct its military operations in Syria (see '[Turkish intervention in Syria: a new crisis in relations between Turkey and the West](#)').

At the same time, Trump did not hesitate to act against Turkey's interests when they conflicted with Washington's plans. In 2018, the United States imposed sanctions on Turkey over the arrest of American pastor Andrew Brunson. Towards the end of his term, the President also decided to impose restrictions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in response to Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system. Earlier, citing the same deal, his administration had excluded Ankara from

the F-35 fighter jet consortium and refused to sell the aircraft to Turkey.

The current approach of Turkish officials to Trump is marked by caution. They hope that the President will take a number of decisions favourable to their interests, including the withdrawal of US forces from Syria. This would end US cooperation with the People's Defence Units (YPG), which Ankara views as an extension of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). They also expect Trump to lift the CAATSA sanctions, reinstate Turkey in the F-35 programme, and accelerate both the sale and modernisation of F-16 fighter jets. These issues were discussed during the first phone call between the two leaders on 16 March. Thus, Turkish officials are refraining from openly criticising Trump. They express moderate scepticism towards the US President's plans for the Gaza Strip and present the ongoing negotiations with Russia as an initiative aligned with Turkey's broader peace plans (see '[Turkey's stance on US negotiations with Russia: no discussions on Ukraine without us](#)').

At the same time, Ankara recognises the risks associated with US actions and is concerned that Trump's pursuit of normalised relations with Russia, including the potential decision to end the war at Ukraine's expense, could excessively strengthen Moscow. This could allow Russia to restore its capabilities in the Black Sea and unblock resources that the Kremlin might utilise to undermine Turkish interests in the South Caucasus and the Middle East. Ankara intends to avoid a modern-day 'concert of powers' – a global system in which key decisions are made exclusively by major players, sidelining the interests of smaller states. Although Turkish politicians have frequently criticised the United States in the past for its negative impact on international security (particularly in the Middle East), they now appear increasingly concerned about the strategic consequences of reduced US support to Europe and how that might affect Turkey's own security. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's doubts about the future of NATO and the continued US military presence in Europe should also be interpreted as his lack of confidence in the reliability of the US nuclear umbrella.

...and to the EU: a 'full package' only

Ankara views closer cooperation with the EU and its member states as a way to mitigate the risks linked with Trump's unpredictability and the potential consequences of his actions. For this reason, it has been signalling to European partners its willingness to contribute more significantly to the continent's security. This message was conveyed by Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan during a meeting in London on 2 March, and by President Erdoğan during a videoconference held on 7 March with European Council President António Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. The Turkish President expressed similar intentions during the visit of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to Ankara on 12 March.

At the same time, Turkey emphasises its importance to the future of European security, particularly in the context of stabilising Ukraine and the Black Sea region. Ankara regards itself as better prepared for the shifting international landscape, not least due to the consistent development of its armed forces and domestic defence industry over the past 50 years. It is also aware of the strengths of its defence sector, which could, for example, assist Europe in addressing its shortages of 155 mm artillery ammunition. However, the advantages highlighted by Turkey do not negate the prevailing view that structural changes driven by US policy are drawing the country into closer alignment with its European allies.

Thus, Turkey is interested in developing strategic, multifaceted relations with the European Union. Firstly, it expects the resumption of accession negotiations, which have been informally frozen since 2016. Secondly, it demands broader cooperation in the defence sector. President Erdoğan has stated that Turkish companies should not be excluded from EU programmes aimed at supporting the European defence industry or from joint procurement initiatives carried out by EU member states. Thirdly, Turkey has expressed its desire to become a fully-fledged member of the 'future European security architecture'. By 'full membership' Turkish officials mean both founding-member status and participation in the community's decision-making processes. However, it remains unclear whether this refers to a potential transformation of the EU into a military alliance, the creation of a new NATO-like framework, or a revival of the Western European Union.

Outlook: islands of cooperation or enhanced partnership

It is highly unlikely that the EU will present Ankara with a proposal that meets its aspirations. This is due, in part, to the deep-rooted and multifaceted distrust of Turkey present in many member states. That distrust stems from actions Turkey has taken, especially since 2016, undermining the security interests of EU countries. These include military operations in Syria, a provocative stance in the eastern Mediterranean, and blackmailing the EU by threatening to abandon the migration deal. Another challenge lies in Turkey's strained bilateral relations with several EU member states (particularly France, Greece, and the Republic of Cyprus), as well as its longstanding policy of balancing between allied commitments and cooperation with other partners, including Russia.

EU member states would most likely expect additional gestures from Turkey (such as joining Western sanctions against Russia) as a means of demonstrating that its renewed interest in the EU is strategic in nature. However, such gestures are highly unlikely. Ankara contends that its current policy is a consequence of the repeated rejection of its EU membership ambitions and the failure of European countries to acknowledge its national interests. For this reason, Turkey would only be willing to consider implementing more profound changes if it receives a favourable offer from the EU.

The situation is further complicated by the growing authoritarian tendencies in Turkey, exemplified by the arrest on 19 March of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, a leading opposition figure and potential challenger to President Erdoğan in the next presidential election. This development effectively blocks any serious discussion about resuming accession negotiations. Broader cooperation with Ankara in the defence sector, as advocated by Erdoğan, may also be hindered by efforts on the part of certain EU member states (particularly France) to promote the principle that EU funds should be allocated exclusively to products manufactured within the bloc's own defence industry.

Given these circumstances, it is far more likely that Turkey will seek closer defence-sector cooperation with selected European countries, such as Portugal, Spain, Italy, Poland, and the Nordic and Baltic states, aiming not only to sell arms but also to engage in co-production. Such 'islands of cooperation' could serve as a foundation for building broader trust between Turkey and EU member states. This could be supported by enhanced collaboration in providing military assistance to Ukraine and developing European strategies for the South Caucasus and Central Asia, as their implementation would be more effective with Ankara's involvement. *In light of* the potential reduction of US engagement in NATO, strengthened

cooperation between European allies and Turkey within the NATO framework could be another avenue worth exploring.