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# Transatlantic allies in action: Unpacking EU-US cooperation on Turkey ahead of elections

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Europeans celebrated Joe Biden's election, immediately publishing "[A new EU-US agenda for global change](#)" outlining areas where they could cooperate with the incoming administration. The agenda highlighted issues ranging from global health to combating climate change, regulating technology to restoring trade – all pressing issues in need of enhanced cooperation after four years of distraction under President Donald Trump. The document also touched on the need to develop joint approaches to third countries, particularly China and Russia, but also Turkey. This general desire for improved cooperation was lent urgency by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has rapidly solidified the transatlantic alliance and increased policy cooperation on Russia while, if anything, further clouding the Euro-Atlantic bloc's relationship with Turkey. Ankara has attempted to maintain its balancing act between Russia and the West. As a NATO ally that is nonetheless preventing Sweden's (and until very recently Finland's) accession to the alliance, a long-standing candidate country for EU accession with almost no prospect of membership, and with critical elections just around the corner, policy towards Turkey requires strategic thinking and political capital from both sides of the Atlantic.

From the beginning, President Joe Biden communicated his vision of a world increasingly divided into democratic and authoritarian blocs, with European-American cooperation integral to any effort to confront assertive autocrats in Moscow and Beijing. While many Europeans were reluctant to accept this dichotomy, Vladimir Putin's horrific invasion of Ukraine has settled the debate – at least for now.

The initial reaction to the war presented a showcase of transatlantic cooperation, reinvigorated NATO, and supercharged European efforts to further integrate and bolster the continent's foreign policy and defense capacities. The coordination between Washington, Brussels, Berlin, Paris, and London – not to mention many other European capitals from Lisbon to Warsaw – to confront Russia's aggression has been impressive.

Ankara, however, has largely pursued a more independent course of action. Naturally, much has been coordinated between Turkey and its allies, from the closing of the straits to the grain deal, but notably the country has decided not to align with Western sanctions and has maintained regular contact with the Russian government. It remains unclear the extent to which Turkey is helping Russia evade sanctions, though the EU and the U.S. have begun to exert [pressure](#) on this issue – this common approach exemplifies the sort of coordination needed in policy toward Turkey.

This paper aims to understand the dynamics of transatlantic coordination on Turkey, considering both day-to-day institutional arrangements, the big picture of shared or differing interests, and the question of how to shape policy towards non-democratic allies with whom relations trend toward rivalry. Turkey offers a striking case study with which to address these issues.

## **Coordination on non-democratic allies: The case of Turkey**

Today, EU-US cooperation focuses on day-to-day coordination to counter Russia. Beyond this top-tier strategic issue, the relationship is characterized by rapidly deepening coordination in thematic policy areas like trade and finance, climate change and energy, and technological regulation. Beyond top-tier issues like facing up to Russia or China, however, coordination is more opaque and less institutionalized; Turkey fits into this category, of non-democratic allies with which the transatlantic allies share deep ties. Turkey is a long-standing NATO ally, in addition to being a candidate country for EU accession – even if the process has been officially frozen since 2018 and, in reality, is a dead letter on any reasonable timeline. It is therefore difficult for other allies to talk *about* Turkey *without* Turkey, however necessary it may be, as the very premise that such coordination is needed undercuts the spirit of these institutional ties.

Turkey's integration into the Western alliance has been strengthened through these institutions, which enabled deep, structured cooperation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, this general trend of increasing institutional alignment – despite periodic setbacks – has definitively reversed in recent years. Political relations between Turkey and its Western allies have become quite volatile, and that reality has increasingly undercut institutional cooperation. Despite this, no shared agenda to recast institutional ties with Turkey has emerged due to a combination of hope for a return to better relations, a reluctance to jeopardize remaining institutional ties, and an understanding that much could change with new leadership in Turkey. Yet today, many European allies and the United States have profound problems with Turkey that could benefit from a coordinated response.

Broadly speaking, the EU and the U.S. share many key goals vis-à-vis Turkey: both wish to keep Turkey close to the Western alliance and coordinate foreign and security policy, deter President Erdoğan from a full autocratic lurch in 2023, help Turkey to manage its sizable refugee community, and encourage regional de-escalation, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean and northern Syria. Differences indeed emerge regarding relative prioritization and risk exposure, but not out of any fundamental divergence of interests. The EU's priorities are shaped by its greater degree of interdependency on trade, migration, and counterterrorism; the bloc's risk exposure extends beyond these areas, however, as EU member states Greece and Cyprus face direct threats to their sovereignty. Despite rapidly [growing bilateral trade](#), economic ties are less important to the U.S., and Washington is more focused on securing Turkey's full participation in confronting Russia

and maintaining NATO coherence, including on defense procurement; Washington is also more exposed in Syria.

The EU and the U.S. also have different levels of risk tolerance and decisiveness – the EU generally requires unanimity while the U.S. can act unilaterally – but both act when their respective priorities are at risk, even if they remain cautious and reluctant to cut institutional ties. For example, the U.S. moved very quickly to remove Turkey from the F-35 program and imposed [CAATSA sanctions on Turkey](#) over its purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system, which made it the first and so far only NATO ally to be sanctioned under the act. [The EU has also sanctioned individuals in Turkey](#) in response to unauthorized drilling activities in disputed Cypriot waters, while threatening to administer more punitive steps.

Following years of disputes, the U.S. has adopted a compartmentalized approach to Turkey that seeks to wall-off disputes to allow for ad hoc cooperation where interests align and preserve basic institutional ties, particularly NATO functions. The Russian invasion of Ukraine raised hopes in the United States that the crisis would reinforce Turkey's links to the West, but recent months – particularly in relation to the issue of Sweden and Finland's NATO accession – have shown that President Erdoğan remains focused on domestic control and asserting Turkey's particular interests with little heed given to questions of alliance solidarity.

Likewise, the European Union has tried to wall-off remaining areas of positive cooperation from the broad political crisis with Turkey. These efforts at compartmentalization are complicated by the extensive, albeit now dysfunctional, [institutional framework provided by candidate status](#). Geographic proximity inevitably brings deep economic integration and an immediate need for cooperation on migration, energy, and terrorism. There have been differences between EU member states' approaches to Turkey, given how deeply Turkey's foreign policy choices have impacted some of them, like Greece and Cyprus. This mixed picture is visible in EU strategy papers like the [Strategic Compass](#). Lately, Turkey's balancing act towards Russia has shaped how the country is perceived in Brussels and European capitals, as well as in Washington.

All in all, both the European Union and the United States share a basic assessment: Turkey under Erdoğan seeks strategic autonomy while concurrently reaping the benefits of membership in a Western economic and security architecture, and pursuing narrow cooperative efforts with allies when interests align. Turkey, long embedded in the institutions established in the aftermath of World War II, was assumed to share a strategic outlook with its NATO allies. Turkey's fraught policy coordination with Russia to manage shared interests and disputes demonstrates that this reality has changed. And disputes stemming from Ankara's fundamental strategic differences with Europe has left Turkey falling behind developments across wider Europe – while most of the countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighborhood increase their integration with Europe. This more complicated reality makes cooperation between the EU and the U.S. even more important.

## **What is the state of coordination?**

Despite this alignment in perceptions towards Turkey, there are few venues for structured policy coordination between the EU and the U.S. on Turkey. It is particularly rare to find opportunities to address longer-term issues, outside of the periodic crises that have characterized relations since 2013. This could be down to the differences of prioritization

rather than actual disagreements. And while the EU and the U.S. are aligned on issues like migration, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the web of defense procurement issues including the Russian S-400 missile system, they attach varying levels of importance to each dossier.

More important than differing goals for transatlantic allies are the realities of internal differences between member states and institutions on Turkey and the limits of political possibilities with the current Turkish government. In the EU, divisions clearly arise between member states with different interests, as well as between EU institutions with distinct bureaucratic levers and cultures. In the U.S., the division tends to fall between executive branch departments, as well as between the executive branch and Congress. These factors hint at the potential costs of over-institutionalization: it is important to preserve flexibility to do more or less on different issues, while not every action should be coordinated by applying the “27+1” formula. Still, there are compelling reasons to develop processes whereby a coordinated, lowest common denominator strategy can be developed and resourced.

### **EU institutions or member states?**

Broadly speaking, for the most forward-leaning policy proposals and on urgent matters, the U.S. goes directly to certain member states. This is understandable, as the EU by definition (and, to some extent, design) has longer processes to set policy. Beyond bilateral relationships, the Biden administration has prioritized the Quad format (France, Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. in Europe; Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific). This reality is not likely to change, nor should it, given the frequent need for more rapid or aggressive action. But this reality does not obviate the need to build overlapping and concentric circles of coordinated action and planning to include EU institutions, however unwieldy they can be.

Today, there are different layers of policy coordination. At the top, there is infrequent and rather unstructured leader-level contact at bilateral meetings and on the sidelines of international summits. These meetings are the most important in times of crisis or tension. For instance, when the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean were at their peak, interviewed officials stated that consultations between allies on the sidelines of summits played a central role.

The second and most important layer of policy dialogue and coordination happens between the mid- to senior-level officials below the leaders, for example from the US Under Secretary of State to different high ranks of the European Commission and European External Action Service. There is a regular flow of information and contact at this level, where officials are senior enough to move policy but have sufficient time and focused portfolios to grapple with complicated questions outside of crisis situations.

A third layer of coordination takes place among the embassies and delegations of the EU, who are primarily responsible for the tone and messaging of day-to-day relations as well as program implementation. Today, the US Embassy and the EU Delegation in Ankara maintain constant dialogue that is extremely important in coordinating statements and keeping the State Department and EEAS informed. The EU Delegation in Washington likewise liaises with the State Department, as does the US Mission to the EU with European institutions. Member state embassies in the U.S. also play an important role – mostly France and Germany when it comes to coordination with the EU, and the United Kingdom when it comes to NATO. The US embassies in Berlin and Paris similarly help

coordinate messages and tone. While much business is still conducted in private and through demarches, social media is frequently used for public diplomacy, with statements and Tweets carefully crafted and coordinated if necessary.

So, what else could be done when it comes to policy coordination and cooperation without undue bureaucratic burden? The EU and the U.S. could work to regularize this consensus-building, including through more frequent joint policy planning sessions or, perhaps, strategic foresight exercises. While the EU rarely acts quickly or boldly, it can be an effective and powerful partner to the U.S. (and obviously vice versa) on a number of issues. In fact, *because* the EU is not structured to respond particularly quickly in a crisis, the planning, argumentation, and consensus-building needs to be done slowly and in advance – these kinds of institutionalized shared exercises could help shape a common approach and let the transatlantic allies discuss their differences openly. The United States’ influence could occasionally prove useful in influencing outlier member states’ opinions. If additional formal institutional structures are seen as a burden, more frequent US participation at Council and European Council meetings could fit the bill.

There is one core problem, however. Historically, the U.S. has supported Turkey’s firm institutional anchoring to the European Union, wholeheartedly backing Turkey’s early integration to the Customs Union and its candidacy for EU membership. These ties, alongside NATO membership, have constituted Turkey’s strongest anchors to the West. Progress toward EU membership was the engine of Turkey’s democratic reform until the second half of Erdoğan’s rule. Today, these institutional relations are deadlocked, with accession negotiations officially frozen. The Association Agreement, which is the foundation framework of the relations, is almost 60 years old, and there is no political will or mandate to modernize the Customs Union. Issues of mutual interest – from migration management to energy transition, to name a few – are handled with ad hoc arrangements. This “manage-things-along” approach makes sense at present, given the limitations of Turkey’s current politics, but it does restrict the effectiveness of policy cooperation between the EU and the U.S. As long as Turkey does not have an institutional path to advance, it is hard to maintain long-term cooperation. But if there is some democratic improvement in Turkey, a new institutional path with the EU – this time with realistic goals for which there is genuine political will – should be outlined, with US support.

## **Elections in Turkey and the road ahead**

Transatlantic relations have significantly improved under the Biden administration. Yet the question of how to foster more systematic and proactive cooperation towards third countries, particularly non-democratic allies, in order to prepare for crises remains open. Turkey is at the top of this list: a NATO ally that is maintaining [a balancing act with Russia](#); a backsliding democracy facing a decisive election in May 2023; a crumbling economy playing host to 3.6 million Syrian refugees; a key player in conflicts in Syria, Libya, the Caucasus, and Ukraine; a thorny neighbor with deep sociocultural roots in Europe’s domestic politics; and a gatekeeper to meaningful shares of both energy and migratory flows to Europe.

Despite all this, there is no “grand vision” for or with Turkey in either the European Union or the United States, let alone a shared one. Both the EU and the U.S. have hit upon similar approaches to “manage things along” with Turkey. Both have sought to bureaucratize disputes that Erdoğan often makes highly personal. Both have endeavored to slow things down, to allow Brussels to mediate differences between member states and EU

institutions and Washington's decentralized policy apparatus to reach consensus. Both have been understandably risk-averse, with EU institutions held hostage by both Erdoğan and the Hellenic member states forced to adopt a lowest common denominator policy. And, indeed, there are compelling reasons for *not* to pursue a shared grand vision with Turkey right now: the Erdoğan government has not shown any interest in returning to the path of democratic reforms nor a particularly firm dedication to the Western alliance. Further, Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policy could change, if – and that is a big if – the opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu manages to win Turkey's upcoming presidential election. Still, it is exactly this possibility of change that should prompt advance planning.

Most critically, the EU and the U.S. should prepare a coordinated campaign to pressure Erdoğan to allow a free and fair election and lay out severe consequences should he disrupt the conduct or dispute the outcome thereof.

On the other hand, the EU and the U.S. should also start preparing a new, cooperative vision with Turkey – now, ahead of a possible change. Turkey will almost certainly need an economic recovery package to stabilize its economy. Ankara will require ongoing, long-term assistance dealing with the millions of refugees the country currently hosts and managing ongoing migration. The energy transition, climate action, and grid integration offer promising avenues for engagement with Turkey. For the European Union, this ties into broader discussions on the enlargement policy and the prospects of the “European Political Community.” Turkey was invited to the first meeting of this new continental platform, which could be a good first step toward a new multilateral framework that can incorporate Ankara's specific interests. The European Union should use this opportunity to embrace Turkish civil society and signal that a democratic Turkey belongs in Europe. While no panacea to high-level political disputes or Turkey's domestic division, civil society cooperation, people-to-people contacts, and political dialogue between party families and parliaments can also be very important.

Finally, the EU and the U.S. need the right venue for coordinated planning on these files. This venue cannot be NATO, for obvious reasons, and bilateral approaches are necessary but not sufficient. This is why opportunities for structured, long-term planning and coordination – beyond the lines of communication described in this paper – would benefit the transatlantic allies. The continent's politics and strategic outlook have been dramatically altered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and while there are many reasons to try to keep Turkey on board, Ankara's democratic credentials must be central to any sustainable new arrangement. Indeed, the time to better coordinate a policy towards Turkey is now.

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