

It was always obvious that the change of Administration in Washington was going to make things more difficult for Turkey and for President Erdogan personally. Erdogan had got used to going over the heads of the US bureaucratic system, using phone calls to pitch to President Trump direct – the result being some predictably unstaffed, uninformed and impetuous decisions by tweet (notably Trump's later partially reversed announcement that all US forces would forthwith be withdrawn from North Eastern Syria). Trump, who seems to have a soft spot for autocratic heads of state, also slowballed the Congressionally mandated sanctions arising from Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 surface to air missiles, as well as proceeding with the legal case against the state owned Halkbank, accused of violating Iran sanctions to the tune of billions of dollars and likely not only to incur a huge fine but to reveal damaging information about the corrupt involvement of senior figures in the ruling party.

President Biden has a different way of doing things. Calls to and from other leaders are to be properly prepared and briefed. No more going bypassing of officials to engage in special pleading. Erdogan is not the only head of state or government to receive this more distanced treatment. The signal, deliberately, is that this is an orderly, competent and well-prepared Administration.

The delay in first contact having become a matter of mockery by the opposition parties, President Erdogan did eventually receive his first call from Biden, on Friday 23 April. The purpose was clearly to warn Erdogan that Biden intended the next day to pronounce that the mass killings of Armenians in 1915 under the Ottomans amounted to genocide. This is a charge that the Turks have fiercely resisted and resented for decades, but Biden is a long-time supporter of it.

The Turkish response has been relatively muted by Erdogan's standards. His chief foreign policy adviser has stated that Turkey's reaction will become known in the weeks and months ahead. There is always considerable domestic advantage to be gained from appealing to nationalist sentiment and Turkish paranoia about 'foreign plots', but Erdogan has to balance this against the need to build a good working relationship with the new Administration against a background of difficult issues.

The latter include the sanctions arising from the S-400 missiles, already paid for and delivered. Scrapping them would involve a humiliating climb down and would do nothing for Erdogan's ambivalent relationship with President Putin. Keeping them would involve significant economic and NATO related cost: the formal announcement that Turkey had been removed from an ambitious joint programme to develop the F35 fighter aircraft was made in Washington around the same time as Biden's call.

As noted above, the Halkbank legal case will now work its way through the courts: a huge fine and further scandal are likely to result.

Serious differences also exist over US support for and cooperation with YPG Kurdish forces in North Eastern Syria, whom the Turks regard as an offshoot of the PKK terrorist organisation (links undoubtedly exist but the YPG are intent on developing a distinctive Syrian identity). And the Biden Administration are going to be considerably less tolerant than Trump of Erdogan's increasingly repressive crackdowns against the democratic opposition in Turkey, with more in prospect as the critical 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections loom ever larger, the parlous economy crumbles and popular support for the ruling party erodes.

The outlook is not great. There has always hitherto been a certain tolerance for Turkish behaviour because of Turkey's key geostrategic position on the South East flank of NATO – a reliable ally in a 'rough neighbourhood'. Great importance was attached to keeping Turkey firmly tethered in her western orientation. Now the balance has changed. The US no longer seems to feel that this gives Turkey leverage. Turkey will increasingly be judged by universal standards of human rights and democracy. The relationship is becoming less one between allies and more transactional (a rather

Dragoman

disturbing term which I have heard used more than once recently). Turkey has few friends in Congress. The Armenian and Greek lobbies carry far more weight.

Something rather similar has been happening on the Turkish side. Anti-Western feeling has been growing for some considerable time, even if largely below the radar. Polls show that few Turks trust the US. In fact, the United States ranks number one among countries regarded by the Turkish public as hostile to Turkey (the EU ranks number two, and Russia – astonishingly given the history of the two countries – comes in only at number five or six). Most Turks polled believe that the CIA was behind the failed 2016 military coup. There is much resentment that the US has refused to extradite the exiled Turkish cleric, Fethullah Gulen, whose shadowy followers were the main instigators of the coup.

Repeated rebuffs from the EU to Turkey's European aspirations have led many Turks to look East. There is a strong Eurasian tendency in the military: concern about Turkey's strategic orientation is believed to be the reason for the involvement of many Atlanticist officers in the coup. Erdogan has flirted with membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The Belt and Road Initiative, with the possibility of major Chinese investment, also carries considerable attraction to an economy in desperate need of foreign investment. Disillusion with the West also explains Erdogan's minuet with his frenemy Putin.

There's a lot at stake. Putin would undoubtedly like to detach Turkey from her Western moorings. However, ever since they arrived from Central Asia more than 1,000 years ago the Turks have always looked West. English or German are the second languages, not Russian or Chinese. Turkey's hopes of a special relationship with the Turkic republics of Central Asia have proved a disappointment.

Rocky times ahead, particularly if Erdogan deepens the democratic deficit with further crackdowns on democratic activity as the 2023 elections approach: efforts to ban the main Kurdish parliamentary party are already under way. The relationship on both sides may become increasingly fraught – and transactional on both sides. But it would go against a thousand years of history, and the whole thrust of Ataturk's reforms of the 1920's for Turkey to turn her back on the West.



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