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EXPECTATIONS IN LIGHT
OF NEW REALITIES:
TURKEY-WESTERN
RELATIONS IN 2021**

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InBrief Series

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Turkey’s relationship with the West has always been an odd one. Both sides claim that they place a large premium on their partnership and realise that they need each other’s cooperation on a wide variety of issues. At the same time, it is a relationship that is characterised more by disagreement than harmony, with Ankara, Brussels and Washington jumping into a diplomatic tussle over virtually every development.

Although the history of this relationship is littered with constant ups-and-downs, the “downs” have outweighed the “ups” in the last few years, deepening the rift between Turkey and the West. Several factors have contributed to this. First is the hard power favoring, expansionist foreign policy Turkey is pursuing in the regions from which the US has withdrawn and in which Turkey is keen to become the pre-eminent force. These ambitions already brought Turkey’s relations with France, Greece and Cyprus to the breaking point in the eastern Mediterranean

in the summer of 2020. They have also placed Ankara at loggerheads with several Middle Eastern and European states in Libya. Another factor is the inherent mistrust between Turkey and the West, which has pushed Turkey to forge more intimate relations with Russia. The starkest symbol of Ankara’s drift away from the West and towards Moscow has been its purchasing of the S400 missile system from Russia — that triggered the imposition of sanctions by the US Congress through the *Countering of America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)* on 14 December.

As a result, Turkey now finds itself strong and relatively autonomous in its foreign policy, yet isolated. The question is, for how long and to what extent can this last?

In this regard, 2021 will be a turning-point. The developments within the coming months will determine whether Turkey will remain a part of the Western alliance or move further into the Russian orbit. Although Turkey has taken

several steps that suggest it is leaning towards the second option, Turkey and Russia, in fact, have too many conflicting objectives to be able to strike a framework of partnership that is any more sophisticated than a transactional cooperation. Furthermore, these conflicting objectives would mean that Turkey would lose the bandwidth to pursue its own, autonomous agenda entirely.

The first option is possible, but only with a caveat. Any sort of a reset in the relationship will have to factor in the reality that Turkey now sees itself as a regional power with its own set of priorities; it will have to allow Turkey the space to make its own foreign policy choices, which, at times, may not always overlap with those of its partners. In return, Turkey should recommit to the Western alliance; adopt a foreign-policy style that aims to diffuse tensions and overcome differences with its allies; and embrace Western values.

All (Western) eyes on Biden

At the last European Council summit in December 2020, the members of the European Union (EU) agreed to postpone their decision on whether or not to impose sanctions on Turkey until their next summit in March. In other words, the EU wants to wait and see how the incoming US administration under Joe Biden handles its relations with Ankara before it formulates its own Turkey policy. Then, whether or not the EU opts for a heavy-handed approach will depend on the trajectory of US-Turkey relations in the coming months.

In a way, the fact that the former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had already unleashed the CAATSA sanctions before leaving office boded well for the start of US-Turkey relations under Biden; Biden did not have to pursue confrontation with Ankara from day 1.

However, Biden is adamant to repair transatlantic ties and build back Western unity, the strength of which will be reflected in the strength of multilateral institutions. This implies that neither Biden nor Congress will back down from “punishing” Turkey for the embarrassing breach of trust and cohesion the purchase of S400s caused within NATO. It also means that without resolving this issue, any significant progress or reset is unlikely.

To reach a resolution, Biden and Ankara will have to work within the bounds set by the CAATSA legislation. Since Russia will not accept the return of S400s, as demanded by Congress, Turkey will have to find another way forward, and most likely convince Congress that the presence of this equipment on Turkish soil does not constitute a security threat. For instance, some sort of an agreement will have to be struck, whereby Turkey keeps the equipment in place, but does not operationalise it.

Of course, Turkey currently does not have the reputation of being a reliable ally — which will make the negotiations with Congress rockier. To be able to convince Congress that it will remain true to its word, Turkey will have to demonstrate that it is committed to protecting and maintaining Western unity. This will likely require Turkey to find a *modus operandi* in the eastern Mediterranean with France, Greece and Cyprus. Connected to this, there are suggestions that the US may even consider moving its regional bases to Greece, now that Turkey risks evolving into an even more problematic ally that the US may not count on at times of crisis. Both these factors will result in more pressure on Turkey to change tack and become less confrontational.

However, expecting Turkey to become less confrontational should not be tantamount to expecting Turkey to surrender its key priorities. What does need to change is the language and attitude of cooperation. Ankara needs to start communicating its interests in a diplomatic man-

ner, instead of what it has typically done in the past — bellowing them out with a nationalistic bravado and a defiant attitude.

In return, the EU needs to show that it understands Ankara's concerns. At the moment, the EU has a tendency to see Turkey as an aggressor and a disruptor, conveying the impression that such a foreign-policy actor could not possibly be engaged with. Even if the EU no longer views Turkey as an accession candidate — as the conclusions of the last EU summit made clear — it still needs to treat Turkey as a participant that sits on an equal footing at the negotiating table, with its own set of talking-points and objectives.

A global alliance of democracies

Biden had long been vocal about how strengthening democratic institutions would be a major part of his agenda during his time in office. After the events of 6 January, when a mob of insurrectionists stormed Capitol Hill to interrupt Congress' certification of election results, and on top of four years of a Trump administration that ignored human rights and civil society, the US foreign policy will be recalibrated to reflect the more democratic profile the new administration wants to construct for the country. This means that there will be stronger calls for Turkey to address the democratic backsliding and the erosion of the rule of law domestically. This will likely embolden the EU to dial up its own criticism of Turkey's deteriorating human rights record, too.

And if Turkey is indeed keen on a reset, it will have to introduce some reforms that show that it is committed to upholding these Western values. Such a move will also be necessary, if Turkey is to stop being the region's *bête noire*. Ankara should remember that its continued diplomatic isolation will not result in greater leeway to pursue an autonomous foreign policy. It will likely force Turkey to enter into a closer alliance with Russia, whose foreign-policy objectives are fundamentally at odds with those of Turkey. This will make it substantially more difficult for Turkey to defend its own interests in the region.

The way to a reset

As stated, the first goal should be for Ankara to take the actions that will help Biden convince Congress to ease the sanctions. To this end, Turkey should continue being active within the Western fold, developing itself into a reliable team-player that pursues a more conciliatory foreign policy in the neighbourhood and plays by the democratic rulebook. In return, the West should accept the reality that Turkey has its own national interests on the world-stage — which, at times, may require Ankara to follow an agenda that does not align with that of the Western alliance.

Only then could the sides strike a reset that has a real chance of ending the mistrust and bitterness that have plagued Turkey-Western relations for so long.

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