



Flashpoints in U.S.-Turkey Relations in 2021

By Max Hoffman January 2021

Contents

1 Introduction and summary

7 Potential flashpoints

36 Conclusion

38 About the author

38 Acknowledgments

39 Endnotes

Introduction and summary

Relations between Turkey and its Western allies in the United States and Europe have been on a steady downward trajectory for some eight years. While Presidents Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan established a measure of rapport, their highly personalized dealings only papered over the structural differences undermining the relationship. With President Joe Biden unlikely to continue Trump's laissez-faire approach, several of these simmering disagreements could bubble over in 2021 and lead to a deeper rupture in relations. Beyond the change of tone and approach from a new U.S. administration, several key strategic and energy decisions could determine Turkey's direction for years to come.

Indeed, with Turkey militarily engaged in Syria, Iraq, and Libya—and at loggerheads with Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and France over Eastern Mediterranean maritime boundaries and potential energy resources—there is no shortage of potential flashpoints. The possibility that Turkey will fully activate the S-400 air defense system purchased from Russia or pursue deeper cooperation with Moscow in response to U.S. sanctions continues to threaten the strategic relationship. The separate threat of sanctions against Turkey's state-owned Halkbank for evading Iran sanctions hangs over the already-weakened Turkish economy. The lira's weakness and Turkey's persistent current account deficit, coupled with Ankara's exhaustion of its foreign currency reserves, could lead to further economic turbulence and, potentially, greater repression from President Erdoğan of his domestic critics. In Libya, a fragile ceasefire has so far held back a new phase of that internationalized conflict, but Turkey stands against an array of regional players in supporting the U.N.-recognized government. The Libyan conflict is now also tied into a broader standoff between Turkey and its Hellenic neighbors over Cyprus, maritime delineation, and energy exploration.

In northern Syria, frequent skirmishes along tense, complicated lines of control hold the risk of escalation into direct clashes with the Assad regime, Russia, and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. And in Nagorno-Karabakh, the map of the Caucasus has been rapidly recast, with Turkey and Russia once again facing

off—and both sides’ observers and proxy forces in close proximity along a disputed boundary. Hanging over all these issues is Turkey’s assertive, independent foreign policy line under President Erdoğan and his close, if fraught, coordination with Russian President Vladimir Putin—trends that have led many in the U.S. government to question whether Turkey remains a fully committed ally.

This report discusses the conditions that could shape U.S.-Turkey relations under the new administration before outlining possible flashpoints and trying to provide a risk outlook for 2021. While these challenges overlap and influence one another—President Erdoğan’s decision on the S-400, for example, could shape the U.S. posture on other issues—they can be grouped into three broad categories: 1) human rights, democracy, and the rule of law; 2) defense procurement and strategic alignment; and 3) regional conflicts and revanchism. The complexity of these problems and the speed at which they are changing makes it difficult to offer comprehensive recommendations. Likewise, a single, unified approach—as satisfying as that might be—cannot fit all these different situations. Nonetheless, this report seeks to offer some ideas to guide responses to 2021’s flashpoints.

The United States has significant leverage with Turkey, a NATO ally whose economic and military security is largely dependent on its Western allies. Four of Turkey’s top-five export markets in 2019—and eight of the top 10—are NATO members.¹ Still, the U.S. interest is in a stable and democratic Turkey that is part of NATO and able to help confront Russia, manage the refugee crisis, and work with Washington in the Middle East. The Biden administration, like those before it, will have to balance these core interests with the fact that overly punitive steps could cripple Turkey’s economy while doing little to strengthen its democracy and pushing Ankara toward Moscow. The United States cannot therefore be hard-line on every front with Turkey. Nor can U.S. or European pressure save Turkey from Erdoğan; the Turkish president is not going to change his stripes or significantly moderate his domestic repression under duress. But Turkey will hold an election in 2023 or before, and there is a real chance that Erdoğan will lose. The United States and Europe can therefore seek to coordinate to signal clear red lines and credible responses to deter further Turkish escalation. In order to have an effect, these responses must be significant and must be enforced, but they should ideally be easily reversible.

Beyond attempting deterrence, the United States should engage in firm transactionalism with Turkey, seeking to slow escalatory cycles that cannot be stopped, bureaucratize what have too often been emotional public disputes, and compar-

mentalize among the many discrete disagreements the countries face. Taken together, the goal should be to put the relationship with Turkey on ice—preserving institutional ties where possible—in the hope that relations can be more meaningfully revived in the future. While some aspects of current Turkish policy might continue under potential Turkish successor governments, most of the likely alternative domestic political coalitions point to a softened stance, and Erdoğan’s particular brand of aggressive unilateralism could fade. American and European leaders should understand that there is every possibility this approach will fail to rein in Erdoğan; he is likely to escalate on multiple fronts in the run-up to his reelection campaign. The United States should prepare by building partnerships in Europe to multiply leverage, by drawing red lines, and by proactively establishing lines of communication and deconfliction so that this escalation does not come as a surprise.

A new U.S. administration

The Biden administration will inherit a U.S.-Turkish relationship worn thin by nearly a decade of increasing tension and deteriorating trust. The litany of serious policy disagreements between Washington and Ankara is long and well-known, revolving primarily around Turkey’s autocratic lurch under President Erdoğan, President Barack Obama’s initial reluctance to create safe zones in Syria and subsequent decision to support the mainly Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) against the Islamic State group, and Ankara’s decision to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense system, among other disagreements.

Many of these disagreements are rooted in President Erdoğan’s efforts to pursue a more assertive, independent Turkish foreign and defense policy. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has militarily intervened in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the Caucasus while establishing military bases in Qatar and Somalia, alongside its long-standing presence in Northern Cyprus, and trying to expand its influence in the Red Sea. Turkey has worked hard to develop its domestic defense production, including armed drones used to devastating effect in the recent fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Turkey helped its close ally Azerbaijan take back disputed territory lost decades prior to mutual rival Armenia. Ankara has also made significant new maritime claims in disputed waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, leading to severe tensions with Greece, Cyprus, and France.

President Erdoğan and his supporters argue these are necessary and proper steps to restore Turkey to what they deem its rightful place as a dominant regional player and major global power, as well as a necessary corrective to Western neglect of Turkey's sovereign interests and the country's perceived encirclement by hostile states. To many in the U.S. government, however, Turkey's aggressive attempts to redraw the regional order are reckless, while the coziness with Putin is flatly unacceptable in a treaty ally; it seems Turkey wants all of the benefits of NATO membership while shirking the core responsibility to present a united front toward Russia. Meanwhile, many in Washington argue it is Turkey's own actions that have turned some neighbors against them, while its aggressive pursuit of regional goals pays little regard to U.S. interests.

This view has led many U.S. policy experts and government civil servants to advocate a firmer line toward Turkey, particularly with regard to Erdoğan's relationship with Putin.² Attitudes have hardened even more dramatically on Capitol Hill, where Turkey has been swept up in congressional concerns about Trump's coziness with Putin and affinity for autocrats. The resulting Trump-era approach to Turkey was incoherent, fragmented between the deliberate moves of some government officials to hedge U.S. bets vis-à-vis Turkey, congressional hostility, and President Trump's open-handed, friendly treatment of the Turkish president and willingness to jettison U.S. policy positions at Erdoğan's request. Indeed, President Trump seemed to enjoy dealing with Erdoğan, who could operate without constraint in Turkey, despite some signs of declining popularity.³

President Trump's term in office therefore represented a confused interlude in a longer-term deterioration of U.S.-Turkish ties—a pause achieved primarily by acquiescing, at the presidential level, to many Turkish demands. For Ankara, Trump's affinity for Erdoğan offered a path around the deepening suspicion the wider U.S. government has of Turkey; Ankara repeatedly used the presidents' personal relationship to circumvent or overturn the policies preferred by the broader U.S. administration. This dynamic was visible in Trump's two announcements of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, both subsequently walked partially back, each of which followed phone calls with Erdoğan.⁴ It was visible, too, in Trump's refusal to levy sanctions mandated under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for Turkey's purchase of significant Russian defense articles until forced to by Congress, as well as in the administration's interference in the case against Turkish Halkbank executives for circumventing Iran sanctions.⁵ The bilateral relationship became so personalized at the leader level that it has been difficult to tease out where U.S. or Turkish government policy stops and the personal preferences of the Erdoğan and Trump families begin.⁶

More broadly, Trump's hands-off approach exacerbated the dramatic tumult in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Unquestionably, the region was in flames before Trump took office, and Turkey's more direct military interventions abroad began in the wake of the July 2016 coup attempt. But Trump threw gasoline on the fire. For several regional actors, Turkey prime among them, Trump's manifest disinterest in the region—aside from Iran—was seen as either an opportunity to redraw the status quo to their advantage or, in some cases, a threat that required more forceful policy responses. With the United States absent from its traditional role mediating and arbitrating disputes—however unevenly it had previously done so—regional actors were more willing to throw their weight around. This assertiveness often came in hard security terms through direct military interventions or brazen proxy deployments—and disturbingly often included the use of U.S.-made military hardware. Wider trends around the use of proxies and drones, offering a measure of deniability and lowering the costs for aggressors, also played a role in this regional militarization.⁷ Certainly, countries like Turkey could act wholly unburdened by any risk of American reproach for human rights abuses or democratic backsliding, issues that fell entirely flat with Trump and his team.

President Biden is likely to reverse many of these trends. He is almost certain to depersonalize the presidential relationship and close the gap between the White House's stances on Turkey and those of the rest of the U.S. government bureaucracy as well as Congress. This, in turn, will likely mean a resumption of the slow adjustment of U.S. posture toward a Turkey of diminishing loyalty to the Western alliance—an adjustment that Trump partially paused. Biden's comments about Turkey on the campaign trail, when he called Erdoğan an "autocrat" who should "pay a price" for his repression,⁸ led many to assume that he would take a much harder line toward Turkey; indeed, this expectation led to a barely concealed preference in Ankara for a second Trump term—hardly likely to endear Ankara to the Biden team.

Yet Biden is unlikely to lurch into a reflexively punitive approach toward Turkey; a more useful way to think about the prospects is to focus on what closing the gap between the professional ranks of the U.S. government bureaucracy and the White House will mean in tangible terms. Before getting into the details of these shifts and potential flashpoints in U.S.-Turkey policy, some general observations are possible. First, American policy will likely be more consistent—Erdoğan will not be able to upend U.S. policy with one call to the White House—and deliberate, more of a hedging strategy than a sharp pivot. Second, human rights, democracy, and the fight against corruption will be back on the agenda; Biden

cares about these issues and will raise them, a departure from Trump that could anger Erdoğan.⁹ Third, Biden has long been sympathetic to Kurdish political and cultural rights and helped orchestrate the Kurdish-led campaign that defeated the Islamic State in Syria. He will likely maintain support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which will continue to rankle the Turkish government. Fourth, Biden will certainly reinforce the U.S. commitment to NATO and the broader relationship with Europe. This reengagement could cut in several directions for Turkey, given not only its importance to NATO but also its complex ties to Russia and its disputes with fellow NATO allies Greece and France.

Major sources of uncertainty complicate this general picture. It is assumed that the Biden administration will take a harder line toward Russia, but the extent of this shift is not yet clear and will influence decisions on Turkey, Syria, Libya, Iran, and NATO. Congress adds an additional layer of complexity in trying to predict U.S. policy toward Turkey, given the extent to which Capitol Hill has driven developments in recent years. There is always the potential for unexpected events to upend the picture—the COVID-19 pandemic’s unexpected arrival, for example. But above all, the major question is how Turkey will respond if the Biden administration pushes a little harder than Ankara has grown used to. Will President Erdoğan double down on his assertive line, perhaps prompting a complete breakdown in relations? Or will he cast an eye over Turkey’s deep involvement in three regional conflicts and its cratering economy and seek a measure of accommodation?

Potential flashpoints

Despite these sources of uncertainty, there are some predictable flashpoints in the U.S.-Turkey relationship. They fall into three broad categories: 1) human rights, democracy, and the rule of law; 2) defense procurement and strategic alignment; and 3) regional conflicts and revanchism.

Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law

In the area of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, the picture is bleak. Indeed, the fact that things have deteriorated so far is one reason this set of issues can easily raise tensions but is unlikely to be the spark for an outright rupture in relations. Traditionally, U.S. administrations have raised concerns on issues of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law but have, in the end, subordinated them to geopolitical imperatives. Biden and his team have stressed the importance of a genuine commitment to democracy and human rights; certainly, unlike Trump, they will raise these issues regularly, likely upsetting Erdoğan. But the new administration will have to weigh whether to truly prioritize these concerns over the realpolitik imperatives of managing the crises roiling the region. Recent dynamics raise new questions: If Turkey is seen as an unreliable partner on regional issues or in confronting Russia, will the United States be more direct in its criticism? And has the United States lost sight of its fundamental interest in a stable, democratic Turkey—and how that desired stability flows from functioning democratic institutions?

Erdoğan has jailed political opponents, replaced duly elected municipal governments, forced elections to be rerun, muzzled the press, and assumed near autocratic powers. Indeed, the violent response to the Gezi Park protests in 2013 is an often-overlooked part of the breakdown in U.S.-Turkish relations: President Obama had invested a great deal in the relationship but shifted to a more transactional pattern of interactions after Erdoğan's crackdown.¹⁰ The situation dramatically worsened with the resumption of the Kurdish conflict in 2015 and the failed military coup attempt

in 2016, blamed on followers of former Erdoğan ally Fethullah Gülen.¹¹ Erdoğan has been entirely unwilling to make conciliatory gestures in the cases of high-profile political prisoners such as philanthropist Osman Kavala or Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtaş. Of the roughly 20 Americans imprisoned in Turkey,¹² two prominent cases have been resolved: Turkish-American scientist Serkan Golge has now served his sentence after a sham trial, while pastor Andrew Brunson was released after intense pressure and sanctions from the U.S. government, including President Trump.¹³ Turkey has now convicted three Turkish staff at the U.S. diplomatic missions in Turkey—Hamza Uluçay, Metin Topuz, and Nazmi Mete Cantürk—on charges the United States says are unsubstantiated.¹⁴ In these cases, there is little obvious room for deterioration.

The first decision point could therefore come on Armenian Remembrance Day on April 24, around which vigorous lobbying by the Armenian diaspora, Congress, and the Turkish government over whether to label the 1915 atrocities a genocide will once again culminate. President Obama stopped short of an explicit acknowledgment,¹⁵ not wanting to anger Turkey, which recalled its ambassador from Washington in 2007 over a congressional committee’s recognition of the genocide¹⁶ and from Berlin after the Bundestag’s comparable step in 2016.¹⁷ During his presidential campaign, Biden pledged to support a resolution recognizing the genocide—though Obama made a similar pledge and did not follow through.¹⁸ The careful wording of that campaign pledge leaves President Biden some room for maneuver, though Congress passed a resolution in 2019 labeling 1915 a genocide, demonstrating the votes are likely there; that resolution prompted a Turkish presidential spokesman to say it “endanger[ed] the future of our bilateral relations.”¹⁹ If Biden follows through, then, the reaction from Ankara may be severe, given Erdoğan’s own prickly nationalism and reliance on the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), as well as the heightened tensions around the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. It could be an early hint as to the tone Biden will take with Turkey, and Ankara will likely interpret it as such.

A predictable flashpoint could come if President Biden fulfills his pledge to, in his first year, “host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world ... to strengthen our democratic institutions, honestly confront nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda.”²⁰ Turkey is, at best, a backsliding democracy.²¹ If Biden fulfills this promise, either Turkey will not receive an invitation—sparking outrage in Ankara—or it will be confronted by a Biden administration on its shortcomings, certain to elicit comparable anger from Erdoğan and his supporters.

Such a summit could come during a year of continued deterioration in Turkey's democratic credentials. One emerging front is Ankara's draconian new social media law designed to choke off bandwidth and levy fines on platforms that do not participate in a more efficient government censorship arrangement. The law came into effect in 2020 and is aimed at stemming the flow of information on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, the use of which correlates with critical views of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and has grown in importance as Turks have lost faith in the government-controlled mainstream media.²² But in addition to stifling dissent, the law primarily targets U.S. companies; the Turkish government began levying fines in November and December 2020, and these enforcement steps could escalate to the eventual strangling of bandwidth in 2021, potentially auguring another flashpoint.²³

Another issue likely to come to a head in 2021 is the trial of Turkish state-owned Halkbank for evading U.S. sanctions on Iran—scheduled to begin March 1. The bank is unlikely to escape without punishment; the presiding judge has already sentenced Halkbank manager Mehmet Hakan Atilla based on the same evidence and rejected Halkbank's efforts to delay the case.²⁴ Still, the exact timeline is difficult to pin down; French bank BNP Paribas was previously hit with a \$8.9 billion fine over similar sanctions violations despite French pressure on the United States to set aside the case, though that settlement was the result of a mostly cooperative, if drawn out, saga between U.S. investigators and the bank.²⁵ Still, the BNP Paribas fine came down in a sentence imposed by the same U.S. District Court handling the Halkbank case.²⁶

Regardless of when the sentence and fine is handed down, it is certain to provoke an angry response from Ankara. President Erdoğan has invested considerable personal effort lobbying the Obama and Trump administrations to drop the case and has made it a point of domestic political pride. This has left the Turkish president in an unenviable position: If he backs down, his standing at home will suffer. If Halkbank rejects the fine at his behest, it could be banned from conducting financial transactions through U.S. institutions, all but crippling its commercial prospects and potentially necessitating a bailout from already-strained Turkish state coffers. As vice president, Biden rejected a personal appeal from Erdoğan to interfere with an earlier stage of the investigation;²⁷ as president, he will be even less likely to intervene in an independent judicial process, eager to begin repairing norms of judicial independence badly damaged by the Trump administration.

Some observers hope that Turkey's desperate economic circumstances—and the absence of a scheduled Turkish election until 2023—could lead to a softening of Erdoğan's approach, both at home and abroad. Those advancing this idea point to the resignation of Erdoğan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak as finance minister as a welcome sign, as well as Erdoğan's conciliatory comments about Biden²⁸ and his statement that “we see ourselves as an inseparable part of Europe ... we do not believe that we have any problems with countries or institutions that cannot be solved through politics, dialogue and negotiations.”²⁹ Certainly, having exhausted its foreign currency reserves in a failed attempt to defend the lira, and with its economy—based on tourism, construction, and low value-added manufacturing exports—hammered by the coronavirus crisis, Turkey is desperate for external financing. An improvement in the rule of law could reassure wary investors.

But this is wishful thinking that ignores both recent Turkish actions and many years of precedent. The argument that, to paraphrase, “Erdoğan will moderate now that the election is over” has been proven wrong as many times as it has been made.³⁰ This line of reasoning ignores the structural realities of the AKP's patronage system and the entrenched corruption and crony capitalism that sustain it. While snap elections are unlikely in 2021, with the economy in such terrible shape and support for Erdoğan at a low ebb, the basic dynamics of Erdoğan's coalition and his efforts to play on the fault lines in the opposition's electoral coalition point to a continuing hard-line approach.³¹ The case for a reset likewise ignores the realities of the Kurdish question in Turkey—one of the main drivers of government repression and human rights abuses.³² President Erdoğan is more dependent than ever on his ultranationalist coalition partners in the MHP, both in electoral and parliamentary terms and for the administration of the state apparatus. Erdoğan cannot soften his stance on the Kurdish question without losing the nationalist wing; therefore, the prospects of a meaningful improvement in the rule of law or human rights climate in Turkey are dim. Succinctly illustrating the connection between the Kurdish question and the overall deterioration of the rule of law, in December 2020, Erdoğan said, “It is not for me to intervene in the business of the judiciary but we are not going to protect the so-called rights of a terrorist like Selahattin Demirtaş.”³³ Demirtaş, former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a left-wing party with majority-Kurdish support, has been jailed since 2016 on terrorism charges, despite consistently calling for peaceful political dialogue and resistance.³⁴ Furthermore, the argument that economic distress will change this fundamental calculus has not yet proven accurate; Turkey maintained and expanded its aggressive policy, at home and abroad, through the 2018 currency crisis and a wrenching economic slowdown. The toll of the COVID-19 pan-

demic and the deepened economic crisis are unlikely to change Erdoğan's basic calculus and, if anything, may only prompt greater domestic repression in the face of declining public support.

At a minimum, the West can be sure that Erdoğan will spin any punitive steps into a story of imperialist aggression and Turkish resistance, as well as fodder to blame the West for Turkey's self-inflicted economic woes. The political potency of this prickly sovereignty—hardly limited to Anatolia—has made many officials in the West wary of providing a tool for Erdoğan to rally nationalist support. Neither the United States nor the European Union (EU) can save Turkey from Erdoğan; he has shown himself to be defiant in the face of all external criticism. Turkey's democracy is on life support because of Erdoğan, not the West—and only Turks can reinvigorate their democracy. Still, the Biden administration should revive U.S. rhetorical and material support for human rights and civil society activists in Turkey. President Erdoğan should not enjoy complete impunity for his domestic actions, and Western responses should at least enter his calculus, even if they do not change it. Given the constraints outlined above, the United States should opt less for punitive tools, such as sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act, and focus more on constructive tools, such as support for civil society, reinvestment in public diplomacy, and a rhetorical shift to support for universal rights from the narrower religious concerns of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and President Trump.³⁵

Defense procurement, energy, and strategic alignment

This year could be hugely consequential for the trajectory of Turkey's defense procurement, energy, and, linked to those decisions, its overall strategic alignment.

Defense procurement

The ongoing saga of Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system, and the United States' response, remains a primary issue driving the collapse of bilateral relations from the U.S. perspective.³⁶ For years, the United States sought to dissuade Turkey from buying the system, saying its radars would allow Russia to build detailed signatures of NATO planes—including the F-35, the alliance's premier fifth-generation combat aircraft—making it easier for Russia to target NATO planes. The purchase was also seen as a political signal of Turkey's overall trajectory and reliability as an ally, betraying fundamental differences between Washington and Ankara in their understanding of Turkey's place in the world, the threat from Russia, and the role and responsibilities of the NATO alliance.

Despite persistent warnings, Erdoğan went ahead with the purchase of the S-400 and took delivery in July 2019. The United States responded by ejecting Turkey from the F-35 program,³⁷ a massive shared procurement effort due to bring Turkey manufacturing jobs and income, technological know-how, and a prestigious weapons system that provides far more effective and versatile home air defense than two batteries of S-400s.³⁸ Despite attempts to reach a compromise solution³⁹—such as mothballing the system or not activating or integrating its radars—President Erdoğan has forged ahead, testing the S-400 system in October 2020⁴⁰ and musing publicly about the purchase of further S-400 systems as well as the Russian Su-35 and Su-57 combat aircraft.⁴¹

The S-400 purchase put Turkey in violation of CAATSA, which, in Section 231, imposes sanctions on parties engaged in significant transactions with the Russian defense or intelligence sectors. The law requires the U.S. administration to choose from a menu of punitive options,⁴² unless the president deems it is in the national security interests of the United States to waive sanctions, certifies that the sanctioned entity is no longer conducting business with the Russian defense sector, or certifies that they have received assurances that the sanctioned entity will not engage in significant transactions in the future.⁴³ While the core national security waiver is a potentially low threshold, without a Turkish concession on the S-400, a waiver is unlikely. The possible sanctions range from mild, if symbolically important, steps like asset freezes and travel bans for Turkish officials to hugely consequential steps like the denial of licenses to import U.S. goods or technology under the Arms Export Control Act—which governs most U.S. defense sales to and military interactions with foreign governments.⁴⁴ In other words, the U.S. president can decide whether to slap Turkey on the wrist for doing military business with Russia or cut it off entirely from the American defense industry and, in the extreme, U.S. and international financial systems.

For much of his term, President Trump simply ignored the law. The U.S. Congress repeatedly tried to force the issue through its control of the defense budget. To many on Capitol Hill, the S-400 issue had been swept up in a broader effort to rein in the power of the presidency and reassert Congress' prerogatives in foreign policy. In addition to CAATSA, Congress put informal holds on arms export licenses for upgrades of Turkey's existing F-16 fleet as well as for engines used in attack helicopters Turkey has manufactured for sale to Pakistan.⁴⁵ In December 2020, Congress finally succeeded in forcing Trump to act on CAATSA, attaching a forcing mechanism to the year-end National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The step prompted the Trump administration to sanction Turkey's Presidency

of Defense Industries (SSB)⁴⁶ and four senior officials in that office,⁴⁷ likely in an effort to preempt the NDAA. The sanctions included a ban on U.S. export licenses to the SSB and visa and asset freezes for the sanctioned officials.

Of the sanctions, the prohibition on granting U.S. export licenses to SSB is potentially the most serious, though it may only apply to new licenses—and Congress had already placed a de facto hold on most major new licenses. It is also possible that Turkey could work around the restrictions by routing licenses through other entities, such as the Ministry of Defense, though the United States could adjust the sanctions in response. According to Turkish defense analyst Metin Gürcan, the sanctions stand to affect 40 percent of Turkey’s defense imports and could discourage third parties from collaborating with Turkey.⁴⁸ While not immediately devastating, they could be very damaging should they last for more than a year or two. Overall, then, the sanctions were a further warning to Turkey meant to convey that the United States takes the issue seriously and is willing to go further; the refusal to sell Turkey F-35s and the planned expulsion from the overall program remain the most substantial punitive actions taken to date.

The action in December 2020 saves President Biden from having to sanction a NATO ally as one of his first acts in office, which would have immediately locked him into a punitive cycle with Turkey. This was perhaps a factor prompting Congress to force the matter. But the issue is far from resolved; the trajectory depends entirely on Turkey’s next steps. Having successfully staked their prerogative, Congress will likely give Biden space to maneuver with Turkey on CAATSA, for several reasons. First, both the administration and Congress will face pressing challenges in early 2021 that could knock Turkey down the list of priorities. Second, a main congressional impetus for pushing CAATSA was the view that Trump was soft on Russia and too cozy with authoritarian governments. The bill was originally intended to force the Trump administration’s hand on Russia sanctions specifically; Congress is likely to trust Biden more to hold the line against Putin and other autocrats, potentially reducing the urgency of forcing the issue.

Turkey condemned the December sanctions, of course, with President Erdoğan calling the step a “blatant attack” on Turkish sovereignty.⁴⁹ But the reaction was otherwise measured, and Ankara once again floated an earlier idea to try to address the differences through a NATO working group.⁵⁰ The sanctioned head of the SSB, Ismael Demir, downplayed the significance, saying, “We expect this will not influence our relations much... We are NATO allies. As they themselves

said, there is cooperation with Turkey in many areas. We and they expect this to continue.”⁵¹ This muted response will inevitably give rise to hopes in Washington that the mild sanctions have ended the escalatory cycle. But observers should be cautious. President Erdoğan’s familiar playbook is to escalate to the very brink, only to then “settle” for concessions or dangle the possibility of moderation to defuse punitive responses: He has used this approach with the United States for two presidential terms, as well as against the European Union. Ankara is likely now in a conciliatory phase, waiting to see what line the Biden administration will take. Biden and his team experienced this pattern in the Obama years; by the end, the Obama administration had settled on a firm, transactional approach to Ankara. The team will have also noted how Erdoğan, when presented with a firm line from Moscow, has compromised with Putin on issues of importance to Russia. Biden’s choice for national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has written on the importance of clear signals and firm positions when dealing with Erdoğan.⁵² The incoming team has also underlined the importance of democratic values and knows that, in the words of President Obama, Erdoğan’s “commitment to democracy and the rule of law might last only as long as it preserved his own power.”⁵³

President Biden should therefore press Turkey to decide if it will be a full ally or continue the double game with Russia. Ankara ignored NATO concerns on the S-400 and walked across the United States’ fundamental red line on the issue. If Turkey values its NATO membership and alliance cohesion, it should reverse its course by committing to mothball the S-400s and not buy further Russian systems. Until that decision is made, the United States should seek to put the relationship on ice, knowing there will come a day when Erdoğan is no longer in office, and to preserve basic institutional ties until then. In this context, as part of an effort to slow down the crisis, the United States could reconsider the merits of the working group proposal. The United States was clearly opposed to the idea when it was part of a Turkish effort to avoid any response to the S-400 delivery, to which most in the U.S. government felt an answer was needed. But now that Turkey has been putatively ejected from the F-35 program and sanctioned under CAATSA, the idea might theoretically offer a way to prevent further escalation. The message would be that the United States has shown its willingness to sanction Turkey—and will escalate those sanctions if Ankara goes further down the path with Russia—but that Washington wants to find a way out of this mess, if possible. There likely is not much harm in that from the U.S. perspective, provided it is accompanied by a clear line on further Russian arms deals.

But while this is the best course for long-term U.S. interests, there should be few illusions as to how Turkey will respond. Ankara sees these issues differently and will react with hostility to what it will see as the United States' patronizing approach—and they are not alone; many countries dispute America's aggressive use of extraterritorial sanctions.⁵⁴ Erdoğan sees the world as multipolar and feels Turkey should be a power in its own right; since 2016, he has set a more assertive, unilateral course. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu has said: "Turkey doesn't have to choose between Russia or any others. And we don't see our relations with Russia as an alternative to our relations with others. And nobody, neither West nor Russia, should or can ask us to choose."⁵⁵ Backing down on the S-400—after plastering its purchase, arrival, and operationalization across the front pages of the Turkish press—could be humiliating at home, particularly harmful to Erdoğan's standing among crucial nationalist swing voters, though a December 2020 poll showed that many Turks felt the sanctions were mainly the result of the government's foreign policy missteps.⁵⁶ Despite the absence of Russian technology transfer, Erdoğan has trumpeted the deal as part of Turkey's success building up its domestic defense industry and turned the saga of the potential sale of U.S. Patriot air defense systems into a now well-worn story of Turkish resilience and American betrayal.⁵⁷ Previously, Erdoğan had sought to make domestic hay from the threat of sanctions—for example, declaring to a televised party congress that Turkey will not be dictated to, saying, "We are not a tribal state. We are Turkey."⁵⁸ For Erdoğan, his overriding focus is on regime political security, and this concern will likely hold the most weight.

The military-technical side seems no more promising. The S-400 was a major purchase for Turkey, costing a significant share of its annual defense budget. Analysts point out that the S-400 batteries are only useful if they are integrated into a wider air defense system, the exact step that NATO fears will bring potential Russian cyber intrusions and allow the radars to build detailed signatures of NATO aircraft; in other words, the working group is unlikely to uncover technical workarounds to get around the core political disagreement. Either Turkey reverses course on the S-400, unlocking U.S. and NATO rapprochement but rendering its investment in the system a costly mistake, or it tries to weather escalating sanctions to complete a full Russian air defense system that will not integrate with NATO systems.

But, again, the F-35 ejection was the most significant punitive step taken thus far, and it has not seemed to change Erdoğan's mind. Despite the threat of further sanctions, Turkey may follow through on its threats to deepen military ties with

Russia, despite being on opposite sides from Russia in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Indeed, according to Russian state media, Ankara has already signed a contract for a second order of S-400 batteries,⁵⁹ beyond the four previously contracted.⁶⁰ If a second deal were to actually materialize, Washington would almost certainly throw the book at Ankara, implementing harsher CAATSA sanctions that could cut off the full range of defense cooperation. Absent a surprising about-face from Erdoğan, then, 2021 could see a far-reaching rupture in U.S.-Turkish defense ties.

For all Erdoğan's pride in building up Turkey's defense industry and power projection capabilities, this outcome would be hugely harmful to Turkey. Thus far, Congress has blocked upgrades to the Turkish F-16 fleet and put pressure on Turkey's participation in the F-35 program, and the United States has implemented limited sanctions. But nearly all of Turkey's military order of battle is Western—usually American—built and maintained. If relations spiral further and arms export licenses are withheld for existing activities like routine maintenance and spare parts, Turkey's military readiness would collapse at a time when it is militarily overextended and financially stretched. Ankara would struggle to finance alternatives and would face the choice of buying expensive replacements from European, Russian, or Chinese manufacturers, hardly satisfying the desire for self-sufficiency. Even the Bayraktar TB2 drone—the pride of Turkey's domestic production—relies on Canadian-made cameras and engines,⁶¹ exports that Ottawa halted pending an investigation into the Bayraktar's use in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.⁶² Turkey will no doubt adapt to these difficulties around the TB2 supply chain, but the problem is emblematic of its wider approach. Weighing the meager benefits—a Russian system without technology transfer—against the loss of the F-35 and these severe additional risks, Turkish defense procurement decisions do not seem to make sense in rational, realist foreign policy terms. Indeed, the initial decision to buy S-400 was made by President Erdoğan without detailed consultation with the armed forces,⁶³ offering more evidence pointing to the preeminence of domestic political and ideological concerns in Erdoğan's calculus.

NATO

While defense procurement is the weightiest issue, it is not the only factor affecting Turkey's strategic alignment. Turkey's place in NATO has become increasingly uncomfortable, driven in part by the S-400 saga and in part by regional conflicts addressed in the next section. Ankara blocked NATO's defense plan for the Baltics and Poland—drawn up following Russia's annexation of the Crimea—in the hope of getting the alliance to label the Kurdish YPG militia operating

in northern Syria a terrorist organization.⁶⁴ For years, Ankara blocked NATO partnership agreements with countries it disfavored, only recently unblocking agreements with Israel and Egypt; it continues to block deals with Austria and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), while Turkey's complaints over the Cyprus dispute also complicate closer NATO-EU defense cooperation.⁶⁵ Tensions deepened further when a French frigate operating under NATO auspices tried to search a Tanzanian-flagged cargo vessel suspected of smuggling arms to Libya. According to the French, Turkish ships escorting the cargo ship threatened the French ship to prevent the search. The details of the incident have not publicly emerged, but France's objection to the NATO report on the event indicates that there was blame on both sides.⁶⁶ The most recent NATO ministerial meeting on December 1, 2020, descended into bickering between Turkey, on the one hand, and the United States, France, and Greece, on the other, over the many disagreements between them.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, Turkey remains a frontline NATO ally, integrated into the alliance's activities—including those aimed at deterring Russia—and will lead the land component of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force in 2021.⁶⁸ Turkey also remains among NATO's most capable members after the United States, particularly when willingness to use force is assessed alongside its military hardware and force levels.

Increasingly, influential NATO member states point out that the alliance was created to defend a democratic political order, despite its shortcomings on that front during the Cold War. Today, the alliance confronts autocracies that have adopted hybrid tactics designed to weaken democratic cohesion; a genuine commitment to democracy—and a stern line toward Moscow—is therefore nearly as important as military readiness was in the face of Soviet tanks. The United States should not shy away from these conversations, uncomfortable as they may be within the alliance. And while the United States is presently far from a paragon of democratic cohesion, a Biden administration's renewed focus on democratic rights at home and abroad could slowly rebuild American credibility; the new team should be self-critical but persistent in pushing these points. The alliance needs to have a discussion of how to deal with backsliding democracies within its ranks, a trend that parallels the EU's efforts to deal with rule of law concerns in member states such as Poland and Hungary. These conversations are not the cause of alliance discord; they are a symptom of disagreements that already exist, and simply beginning to discuss responses provides leverage for those seeking to strengthen democratic resilience.

Energy

Energy is another factor affecting Turkey's strategic alignment, with big decisions coming in 2021. Of course, this is not a new issue. Ankara has always relied on energy imports, including large purchases from Russia. The United States has historically understood this reliance and, in earlier times, supported Turkey's efforts to build a southern energy corridor to bring Caspian Sea resources through the Caucasus to both the Turkish and European market. In the wake of Russia's annexation of the Crimea, Vladimir Putin announced that he was canceling the planned South Stream pipeline meant to bring huge quantities of Russian gas across the Black Sea to the European market.⁶⁹ South Stream was already likely doomed by EU pressure on Bulgaria, where the pipeline was planned to end, and by anti-monopoly regulations.⁷⁰ Replacing South Stream would be a new pipeline to Turkey—TurkStream—that would bypass Ukraine, now in a hybrid war with Moscow, while maintaining European dependence on Russian energy. For Turkey, meanwhile, the energy was needed for its then-growing economy to replace the gas that Turkey had previously received from Ukraine and that also served Ankara's long-standing interest to position itself as an energy hub.⁷¹ Ankara also commissioned Russian state-owned Rosatom to build a nuclear power plant at Akkuyu, further deepening their energy ties with Moscow. That work has continued, aside from a brief pause in work when Turkish-Russian tensions spiked over the shootdown of a Russian plane that strayed into Turkish airspace from Syria,⁷² and licenses were recently issued for construction of the third unit of the plant, scheduled for completion in 2023.⁷³ When completed, the plant may give Russia a literal nuclear option with Turkey; Russia is responsible for its operation and safety and will have implicit leverage on that front if relations with Turkey seriously deteriorate.

The United States was hardly pleased about Turkey's decision to deepen its energy reliance on Russia, but the issue was considered secondary until Ankara and Moscow began to also deepen political and military ties. Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. election—and President Trump's forgiving line toward Putin in the aftermath—also played a role, deepening Congress' desire to sanction those cooperating with Moscow. TurkStream is actually two pipelines, each with an annual capacity of 15.75 billion cubic meters;⁷⁴ the first pipeline serves the Turkish domestic market and was inaugurated in January 2020, while the second is under construction and is intended for re-export to Europe via Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary.⁷⁵ The prospect of the second line's completion risks seeing Turkey once again swept up in congressional fury aimed at Moscow. The CAATSA legislation brings the possibility of separate sanctions under Section 232, designed to target Russian energy export pipelines. Previous State Department guidance had exempted the TurkStream

2 pipeline—the second pipeline bringing Russian gas to Turkey for re-export to southeastern Europe.⁷⁶ But updated guidance issued on July 15, 2020, clarified that “implementation will include ... the second line of TurkStream.”⁷⁷ Turkish firms and individuals, including BOTAŞ, the state-owned oil and gas pipeline company, would certainly qualify under the CAATSA designation. But these Section 232 sanctions targeting energy pipelines are discretionary, unlike the Section 231 sanctions requiring a response to significant defense transactions with Russia.⁷⁸ Likewise, the 2019–2020 NDAA passed in December 2019 gave the president authority to issue visa bans and asset freezes on people aiding the construction of either pipeline, though it also provided a national interest waiver that essentially leaves the decision to the executive branch’s discretion.⁷⁹

These discretionary sanctions are unlikely to materialize absent additional Turkish actions to deepen ties with Russia. As outlined above, the United States has generally been somewhat understanding of Turkey’s reliance on imported energy, though these sanctions are aimed at onward exports. Unlike with the S-400 purchase, which threatens NATO assets and where Turkey seems to be pursuing closer ties with Moscow against its long-term interests, here, Ankara is likely just following commercial logic in its energy dealings. As evidence of this, Turkey pursued more gas imports from Azerbaijani and American suppliers when the collapse of global energy prices made them cheaper than Ankara’s existing contracts with Russian state energy giant Gazprom, leaving the older Blue Stream pipeline from Russia to Turkey idle in 2020.⁸⁰ Still, despite these shifts, because the deals with Russia were long-term “take or pay” contracts, seven Turkish companies have run up a debt of some \$2 billion to Gazprom, presenting another lingering liability.⁸¹ The pipeline sanctions under CAATSA also bring in wider European considerations; indeed, the conversation is mainly focused on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline bringing Russian energy to Germany. As the Biden administration tries to rebuild ties with close allies such as Germany, it will have to weigh the broad potential impact of the sanctions and the difficulty of coordinating approaches to Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream 2. Regarding Turkey, the new administration should hold off on pipeline sanctions: Turkey’s market power provides leverage on Russia, just as Russia’s supply grants it leverage on Turkey; the new administration should demonstrate that it is not reflexively punitive toward Turkey; and the potential for sanctions would be additional leverage reserved for use if Turkey dramatically deepens its strategic ties with Russia.

Nonetheless, 2021 will bring more evidence with which to evaluate Ankara's decision-making calculus on strategic energy issues. Some 25 percent of Turkey's long-term gas contracts expire in 2021, including imports via pipeline from Russia and Azerbaijan and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Nigeria.⁸² Despite falling Turkish gas demand as the economy contracts—imports were down 22 percent in the 30 months to July 2020—cheap LNG imports have accounted for a greater share of Turkey's portfolio, allowing Ankara to reduce imports from Russia by 40 percent in the first half of 2020 against the same period the year before.⁸³ This shift may be temporary, should the spot price of LNG rebound or new pipeline contracts come in at lower prices, but is more evidence of Turkey's pragmatic approach on energy. Some argue that Turkey could deepen its shift to LNG—including through deliveries from close ally Qatar and the United States—and meaningfully shift its energy axis away from Russia.⁸⁴ Turkey's contract decisions will largely be commercial, but hints of strategic affinity may be discernible.

There is also the question of who Turkey will partner with—if anyone—in exploiting the recently discovered Sakarya gas field in the Black Sea. As energy analyst John Bowlus points out, the field will help reduce Turkey's energy import bill and give Turkey leverage in negotiating new import contracts.⁸⁵ Turkey maintains it will exploit the field itself,⁸⁶ but the geology and depth of the site pose huge technical challenges;⁸⁷ Turkey may require help from an established major energy company with experience in such projects.⁸⁸ If Turkey does partner with a major oil company, that decision could also have significant strategic implications. Taken together, then, 2021 could set Turkey on a multiyear course in both strategic military and energy terms.

Regional conflicts and revanchism

The many proxy conflicts raging around the Mediterranean littoral and the Middle East make the prospects for regional flashpoints less predictable but no less prevalent. As previously mentioned, Erdoğan feels Turkey should be a power in its own right and has set a more assertive, unilateral course—increasingly in military terms since 2016. He has argued that Turkey must rectify a regional order that is unfairly drawn to Turkey's disadvantage and, in that sense, is fundamentally revanchist. Erdoğan has said: “Outside powers ‘will understand that Turkey has the political, economic and military power to tear up and throw away the immoral maps and documents imposed on it [in the past]. They will either understand this by the language of politics and diplomacy or by the bitter experiences ... on the ground.’”⁸⁹

The Eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus

The most direct segue from the strategic energy issues discussed above to this regional revanchism is in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's aggressive tactics are driving the latest round of conflict, though it has understandable grievances. The delineation of Turkish-Greek maritime boundaries, as argued by Athens' default position, does leave Turkey boxed in, and this sense of exclusion increased as Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel deepened energy and other forms of cooperation in recent years.⁹⁰ The problem is likewise tied to the decades-old dispute over divided Cyprus, where the most recent round of reunification talks collapsed in 2017. But in its effort to recast this regional arrangement, Turkey has sent drilling ships into disputed waters, sometimes escorted by warships, prompting dueling military exercises; Greek and Turkish warships collided in August 2020 at a high point in tensions, underlining the stakes of this contest and the dangers of Turkey's approach.⁹¹ This approach is likely to continue. Turkey has made major naval investments in the past decade and expects to add more than 20 warships, including a light carrier, in the next three years.⁹² In addition to this investment, an expansive naval presence appeals to many political segments and "hones in on specific tropes in Turkish history," according to naval analyst Ryan Gingeras, who argues the Turkish navy is a "hammer looking for a nail."⁹³ Turkey feels encircled and contained, yet its efforts to break out of those perceived constraints only deepen the fears of its neighbors.

Turkey maintains that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), supported militarily and economically by Ankara, is a sovereign state with rights to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ). These claims overlap with the Republic of Cyprus, which denies TRNC's sovereignty, as does the rest of the international community, other than Turkey. The collapse of the talks, natural gas finds in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Cyprus' decision to award exploratory drilling plots to Italian, French, Qatari, and American oil companies helped spark the latest crisis.⁹⁴ Cyprus stopped short of awarding plots in areas claimed by the TRNC, but Turkey still moved aggressively to overturn the emerging energy framework from which it felt it was being excluded, dispatching Turkish vessels to conduct exploratory drilling in Cypriot waters. Drilling by the international oil majors has been suspended until mid-2021, and the resumption of any activities marks a possible flashpoint in the coming year. Meanwhile, each Turkish deployment of drilling ships to the disputed areas prompts angry responses from the Greeks, Cypriots, and European Union, as well as expressions of concern from the United States.⁹⁵

The dispute around Cyprus is part of a broader tussle over maritime delineation, EEZs, and energy rights that has drawn in the entire Eastern Mediterranean littoral.⁹⁶ As part of its attempts to overturn what it saw as an exclusive regional energy arrangement, Turkey concluded a maritime delineation deal with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), the U.N.-recognized authority in the war-torn country, which Turkey had militarily saved from the advance of the rival Libyan National Army (LNA). The Turkish-Libyan deal bisected Greek waters, essentially ignoring the entire island of Crete, and was met with fury by the Hellenic community and the European Union. The U.S. ambassador to Greece, Geoffrey Pyatt, likewise called the Libyan-Turkish understanding “unhelpful and provocative” and “inconsistent with the American understanding of international maritime law.”⁹⁷ Greece, in turn, concluded a maritime agreement with Egypt, which cut across waters—somewhat tenuously—claimed by Turkey. Exacerbated by tensions in Libya discussed later, all sides in this convoluted crisis have retreated to their corners. France and Italy have conducted joint exercises with the Greek navy, in part to defend the interests of their respective oil majors, in whose drilling plots Turkey has conducted exploratory actions; and the UAE temporarily deployed fighters to Greek bases in Crete. Turkey is increasingly isolated, though its actions—and the collapse of global energy prices—have likely undermined the commercial viability of the most ambitious Hellenic-Israeli plans.

Cyprus and Greece are EU member states, and the crisis has therefore become a top-tier issue for Brussels. Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades is aggressively pushing EU sanctions on Turkey, backed up by Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and French President Emmanuel Macron. For Anastasiades, this is an existential issue, and Cyprus can hold up crucial EU business to secure forceful action. Following Erdoğan ally Ersin Tatar’s win in the TRNC’s election in October, many feel hopes for a resolution based on a bizonal, bicomunal federation are now dead; Tatar and Turkey are now calling for a two-state solution, but Turkey’s maritime claims are impossible for Cyprus or Greece to accept.⁹⁸ For Greece, too, the maritime delineation disputes—both the Turkey-Libya deal and separate disputes about Greek islands and their EEZs in the Mediterranean and the Aegean—strike at core Greek sovereign interests. Turkey’s Foreign Ministry, in turn, has labeled Greek maritime claims “maximalist and illegitimate” and called Athens “the spoiled child of Europe.”⁹⁹ And Ankara does not recognize the Cypriot government, which is controlled by Greek Cypriots, and rejects any Cypriot claim to an EEZ. The situation is bleak and primed for trouble this year.

Germany has sought to play a mediating role in the dispute over Greek islands and Turkish-Greek maritime boundaries. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has likewise established a deconfliction mechanism at the military level to avoid inadvertent clashes or escalation. These NATO deconfliction efforts—and a glimmer of hope for negotiations—were enough to stave off serious EU sanctions at the EU Council meeting in October 2020. But instead of pursuing negotiations in the wake of that meeting, Turkey promptly dispatched its drilling ships back to the disputed areas. This re-escalation set up the EU Council’s December 2020 meeting as a potential decision point; many expected sanctions to materialize, with Turkey prompting the rare crisis that elicits a strong EU foreign policy response.¹⁰⁰ Instead, the EU punted at the December meeting, outlining only the option of symbolic sanctions, ordering a report to be prepared, and calling for coordination with the incoming Biden administration. Theoretically, the delay allows time for de-escalation, though Turkey’s drilling deployments just before the December meeting hardly bode well.¹⁰¹ In January 2021 Turkey and Greece agreed to reopen exploratory talks—the 61st round of the exchange—though the parties immediately diverged about their scope; few observers hold out much hope of progress, and the step is more likely aimed at again forestalling a stronger European response.¹⁰² The EU’s December delay has simply postponed the problem to March 25–26, 2021, setting up another potential flashpoint.

The EU Council’s muted response underlines the enduring EU member state divisions over whether to pursue a tougher line with Turkey—divisions that illustrate the EU’s limitations as a coherent foreign policy actor in addressing the Eastern Mediterranean crisis.¹⁰³ The limited response is also a result of German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s patience; she has almost single-handedly sought to keep diplomatic channels open. But Merkel is stepping down this year, and German elections in September will change the picture. Turkey will be a major issue in the electoral campaign—given the size of the Turkish diaspora in Germany¹⁰⁴ and the multiple crises with Ankara—and such fraught domestic campaigns are rarely conducive to restrained diplomatic maneuvering. Regardless of who follows Merkel, the most powerful voice for EU restraint toward Turkey will be gone in 2021, and her successor may have staked out some aggressive positions toward Turkey. Still, the delay of meaningful action against Turkey to allow for coordination with the new U.S. administration makes sense. Few analysts expect sanctions to change Turkey’s behavior—if anything, they will likely prompt an angry Turkish reaction—and it is hard to see a way out of this escalatory spiral absent some outside mediation.

While the outcome of the December 2020 EU Council meeting was a relative win for Turkey, the Foreign Ministry nonetheless said it “reject[ed] the biased and illegal approach” adopted by the EU Council and condemned the “pushbacks of the refugees in the Aegean Sea by Greece and inclusion of FRONTEX [the European Border and Coast Guard Agency] in these actions” as “disgraceful.”¹⁰⁵ The ministry’s mention of the Aegean refugee issue is no coincidence and points to a core political concern of EU heads of government: that Turkey will break the EU-Turkey migration deal struck in 2016 and escalate the refugee issue at the Greek border if the EU adopts a tough line regarding the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, or Libya. Indeed, Erdoğan fired a warning shot in early 2020,¹⁰⁶ intentionally driving a small group of refugees to the Greek border.¹⁰⁷ Turkey is not alone in using hard-edged tactics at the border; human rights organizations have documented Greek authorities engaging in illegal returns and “pushbacks,” sometimes using rough tactics that endanger migrants.¹⁰⁸ While Turkey’s ability to actually drive refugee inflows to the EU is likely overstated, given how unwilling most Syrians are to uproot their lives in Turkey, after the 2015 crisis, European political leaders are sufficiently terrified of the prospect that it only takes some spectacular incidents at the border to send them running for political cover, fearful of right-wing populist challenges at home.

But as the EU-Turkey migration deal showed in the first place, the leverage goes in both directions. The deal was cynical but addressed key needs on both sides: The EU values Turkey’s cooperation to control migration, and Turkey values the EU’s financial support for the Syrian refugees in Turkey. The first two tranches of funding—some 6 billion euros, or \$7–8 billion—of the EU’s Facility for Refugees in Turkey have been almost entirely contracted to projects to aid integration and education of Syrians in Turkey. Particularly in the wake of its economic downturn and COVID-19, which has starved Turkey of the foreign currency brought by tourism, Ankara will desperately want to secure follow-on funding for refugees, including the billions of direct cash transfers that almost immediately circulate in Turkey’s economy.¹⁰⁹ But the EU has been reluctant to commit to another multiyear program, given the many issues it faces with Turkey. In July 2020, the EU allocated an additional 485 million euros—almost \$600 million—to support education efforts and cash transfers to refugees in Turkey, topping up the fund through the end of 2021.¹¹⁰ Undoubtedly, support will be needed beyond 2021; the December 11, 2020, EU Council conclusions indicated a willingness to extend further support for refugees in Turkey. But the debate around these programs in 2021 could be wrapped up in intra-EU politics and the wider showdown between Brussels and Ankara. Erdoğan has already shown his willingness to negotiate at

the border, and some observers feel his escalation in early 2020 subsided in part because of the onset of the coronavirus pandemic—if so, that could prove another factor pointing to a 2021 re-escalation on the Greek-Turkish border.

The United States' involvement in these exchanges—particularly over the Eastern Mediterranean—has not been entirely constructive. Secretary Pompeo was very supportive of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum and has worked to deepen ties with Greece and Cyprus.¹¹¹ Both efforts are fine in their own right, but taken together and coupled with Pompeo's new, abrasively anti-Turkish line, they served to deepen Turkey's sense of exclusion and encirclement. A measure of rhetorical firmness is warranted in the face of Turkey's revanchist efforts, and the United States has previously played a mediating role in crises between NATO allies Greece and Turkey. But Pompeo's most recent efforts—including a visit to Turkey in which he took no meetings with government officials while meeting with the Greek Orthodox patriarch—seemed aimed at causing intentional and unnecessary offense. Pompeo even refused Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's invitation to Ankara, instead asking Çavuşoğlu to come see him in Istanbul;¹¹² such diplomatic insults needlessly antagonize Turkey and undermine American interests.

The Biden administration should bring a change in tone and a renewed focus on mediation, if not a dramatic shift in policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. President Biden himself has long personal experience with the Eastern Mediterranean and will understand the crisis and its history. He will need to mediate disputes between NATO allies France, Greece, and Turkey to avoid escalation and as part of the broader attempt to strengthen alliance cohesion. As vice president, Biden visited Cyprus in 2014 in an effort to broker a lasting settlement.¹¹³ His new administration is also likely to throw its weight behind NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg's efforts to further develop existing military deconfliction mechanisms between Greece and Turkey to reduce the risk of inadvertent clashes and cancel preplanned but antagonistic exercises. Regarding the broader crisis, Biden will certainly want to coordinate more closely with Berlin, London, Paris, and Brussels to manage political tensions, a coordination that has been sorely lacking amid Trump's attacks on Chancellor Merkel and the European Union. The EU's punt of the problem to late March 2021 offers a brief window in which to coordinate U.S. and EU policy.

Biden and his team should try to reclaim the mantle of fair arbiter to de-escalate the immediate crisis, but there is a broader shift in U.S. regional policy underway that may prove durable. Turkey's autocratic drift, regional revanchism, and close

ties with Putin—as well as Russia’s own renewed presence in the region—have prompted a U.S. effort to hedge its bets in the Eastern Mediterranean and reduce its dependence on Turkish installations. The United States has expanded basing options in Jordan as well,¹¹⁴ and the moves to deepen defense ties with Greece and Cyprus should be seen in this wider context. The fiscal year 2020 NDAA, enacted in December 2019, lifted a 32-year-old arms embargo on Cyprus; in July 2020, the United States announced limited new military training, and in September, it lifted restrictions on some nonlethal defense articles.¹¹⁵ This year’s NDAA included several measures to expand the U.S. military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea broadly, though many of these steps are aimed at Russia. Secretary Pompeo’s highly publicized visit to the U.S.-Greek base at Souda Bay on Crete was, perhaps, a more direct signal to Turkey.¹¹⁶

Aside from the headline-grabbing travels of Secretary Pompeo, the more incremental steps reflect a deliberate hedging strategy advanced by the professional bureaucracy. This more measured course is likely to continue under the Biden administration, absent the public focus from the Trump administration on U.S. LNG exports and open boosterism for sovereign commercial interests at the expense of the U.S. position as a mediator. Still, in keeping with a broader approach of compartmentalization and slowing of escalatory cycles, Biden should consider pairing this continued shift with an effort to nudge Turkey and Greece back toward negotiations. If Turkey’s sense of exclusion helped drive its aggressive action, perhaps conveying to Ankara a desire to include Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum would help to secure a moratorium on energy exploration in disputed waters.¹¹⁷ Turkey is unlikely to back away from its unilateral course, but there is little downside to trying.

That U.S. engagement is badly needed, as most other potential mediators have effectively chosen sides or are otherwise unsuitable. NATO is a valuable venue for dialogue and mediation but is currently limited to military deconfliction. The EU does not include key powers, including Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom—important primarily due to its bases in Cyprus and its role as a guarantor power on the island. The EU also must fundamentally support member states Greece and Cyprus in order to defend its overall integrity, understandably compromising Turkey’s view of its even-handedness. Finally, the bloc is substantially held back by the de facto requirement for unanimity, as well as important differences among key member states on how to deal with Turkey.

Perhaps most importantly, key EU member France is itself a vociferous party to the conflict. France has chosen to back Greece to the hilt, and the dispute has become highly personalized—and publicized—between Presidents Erdoğan and Macron, a rhetorical battle both may welcome.¹¹⁸ In the latest salvos, Erdoğan said, “Macron needs some sort of mental treatment.”¹¹⁹ On December 4, he went on to say, “Macron is a trouble for France... I hope that France will get rid of Macron trouble as soon as possible.”¹²⁰ Some argue that President Macron is equally happy to stoke tensions as part of his domestic play to stave off the far-right challenge of Marine Le Pen and a wider strategic play to assert French power in the Mediterranean and within the EU.¹²¹ Certainly, the context and rhetoric point to some domestic considerations.

Libya

France’s overall approach again illustrates how the Eastern Mediterranean crisis has become entangled with the Libyan war and wider regional contests over energy and political Islam. Alongside its backing of Greece, France has made naval deployments and provided military material and political cover for the forces of Khalifa Haftar, siding in Libya with his counter-GNA forces backed by Russia, Egypt, and the UAE.¹²² For France, the Libyan involvement is important in bolstering its influence in the Mediterranean, securing commercial contracts, controlling migration, and boosting counterterrorism efforts across the Sahel. But France is also sympathetic to the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia’s ideological opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and associated groups across the region; it has taken sides in the regional contest on this issue that has raged since the Arab uprisings. President Macron recently gave Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi France’s highest honor, the Légion d’Honneur, at the Élysée Palace during a state visit, horrifying human rights activists in light of Egypt’s record.¹²³

France has also helped drive an EU maritime arms embargo of Libya. Limiting the flow of arms to the Libyan conflict is a worthy goal, but the implementation of the embargo has angered Turkey. Ankara sees the EU’s embargo—particularly given France’s role—in the context of the wider regional struggle, rather than as a disinterested effort to de-escalate the Libyan war. The embargo is enforced only at sea, thereby limiting Turkey’s shipments but letting the UAE, Egypt, France, and Russia supply Haftar freely by air and land. Indeed, the UAE has conducted 850 airstrikes on Haftar’s behalf, deployed drones, and brought in hundreds of flights of weaponry and material with little interference, while Turkish ships have been stopped and searched.¹²⁴

Turkey, meanwhile, is seeking to protect four main interests in Libya and this wider context. Ankara hoped its maritime deal with the GNA would help drive a wedge in the Egypt-Israel-Cyprus-Greece energy alliance, as well as provide a chit to potentially trade in the maritime disputes with Athens. Ankara also has serious potential commercial interests at stake and hopes to reduce the haircut on debts from the days of Moammar Gaddafi—debts the Turkish side says total \$16 billion.¹²⁵ The ideological dispute over political Islam is likewise important in explaining Turkey's support for the GNA and hostility toward the counter-revolutionary forces of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Russia. For Erdoğan, this regional rivalry is deeply personal; in his view, Sisi is a “tyrant” running, to paraphrase, a coupist government¹²⁶—and Egypt and its backers are inveterately opposed to his own, self-righteous anti-coupist government.¹²⁷ In all this, Turkey is also supporting the U.N.-recognized government, also backed, if less aggressively, by Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy. For Turkey, the Libyan deployment was also tied to Syria—and Idlib in particular. The timeline of Turkey's escalation in Libya in late 2019 and early 2020 lines up with Turkey's desperate attempts to slow or stop the Russian and Syrian regime offensive in Idlib and prevent another influx of refugees. Libya is also tied to Syria in a less obvious way, representing an outlet for Syrian fighters that is useful in Turkey's efforts to manage proxies in their zones of control in northern Syria.

To secure these interests, Ankara deployed military advisers and thousands of Syrian opposition fighters and brought in shiploads of supplies, drones, and other military hardware.¹²⁸ This intervention saved the GNA and pushed the LNA back from Tripoli to the gates of the key energy and military installations at Sirte and Jufra, facilities that determine control of the country's main energy export terminals. Facing a Turkish-dominated Libya, Egypt declared Sirte and Jufra a “red line,” and Russia reportedly echoed that warning and deployed powerful new military hardware to the front, signaling its willingness to escalate.¹²⁹ At that point, negotiations paused the fighting, and a ceasefire deal was concluded that left both sides able to avoid both a full defeat or, alternatively, a serious escalation. Thus far, the ceasefire has held.

But Libya remains a potential flashpoint. On the ground, the removal of foreign fighters was meant to be completed by the end of January 2021, but both sides have continued to train their forces. The opposing Libyan forces are also meant to retrench, a delicate process requiring trust between longtime antagonists.¹³⁰ Russia has continued to rhetorically back the U.N. de-escalation effort,¹³¹ but the process to agree to a framework to monitor the deal and give it heft remains

complicated.¹³² LNA leader Khalifa Haftar threatened a new offensive in late December 2020 after Turkey extended the legal mandate for its deployment to Libya.¹³³ More broadly, key regional issues are at stake. Turkey has continued to build its presence, with two permanent military bases and some 3,000 to 5,000 Turkish personnel and Syrian mercenaries.¹³⁴ Russia always takes a keen interest in developments that could affect their share of the oil and gas export market to Europe. Russia also seeks low-cost ways, such as the deployment of mercenaries, to demonstrate that it is an international player to be reckoned with. Moscow also shares some interest in the regional struggle against political Islam and has developed commercial interests. The Wagner Group has made major deployments to Libya; these mercenaries may not make a profit if the government that pays them is run out of power—or denied a share of energy exports. It is unclear the extent to which Wagner’s deployment is purely commercially motivated, or whether it is part of a meaningful Russian push to assert itself as a Mediterranean power. In addition to its well-established base in Syria’s Tartus, Russia has recently deepened ties with Egypt, conducting the countries’ first joint Black Sea military exercise. In this context, a Libyan government in debt to Russia and Wagner is valuable, bringing access to ports, influence on the energy market, and some leverage with Europe over migration.

It is not hard to imagine the Libyan ceasefire getting caught up in the dense thicket of issues between Russia and Turkey. Either side could decide to attempt a military move to recast the status quo; equally, the respective proxies on the ground could escalate matters. The connections with the broader Eastern Mediterranean crisis mean it is not just the fraught dynamics on the ground in Libya itself that could determine whether the ceasefire holds or 2021 brings a new escalation and flashpoint. Just as developments in Idlib and Cyprus played a role in Turkey’s deeper intervention, so could events in other domains of this broad Eastern Mediterranean contest lead any of the actors involved to stir the Libyan pot. If either Turkey or Russia took direct losses in Libya, it could easily spark a new crisis, potentially involving—at least in political and economic terms—the EU and the United States. Inversely, if Russia and Turkey continue to manage the Libyan ceasefire between them, it could remove one potential source of Turkish-Russian conflict that could alter Turkey’s procurement decisions.

Turkey’s intervention in Libya’s civil war aligned with U.S. interests in some ways, helping counter Russian influence and stabilize the U.N.-backed government. But Ankara’s attempt to use its leverage over the GNA to upend the Eastern Mediterranean maritime and energy picture was hardly helpful from Washington’s

perspective, deepening a dispute between two treaty allies and complicating the Libyan crisis.¹³⁵ And regardless of the overall calculus, it has significantly increased tensions with the Europeans and the risk of clashes with Russia, the UAE, and Egypt. Going back to the initial intervention in 2011, the United States always hoped to, essentially, outsource Libya to the Europeans. Since then, the United States has mainly tracked counterterrorism concerns. The limitations of this approach have become clear as the conflict has slowly been internationalized, drawn in all sides of the wider regional tussle, and become thoroughly enmeshed with Turkish-Hellenic disputes. President Trump bears a lot of responsibility for implicitly green-lighting the Russian-UAE-Haftar offensive and failing to engage in even basic mediation¹³⁶; his call to Haftar just eight days after Secretary Pompeo had condemned the military offensive against Tripoli was widely seen as a White House blessing.¹³⁷ But this proxy escalation has also shown that the EU—struggling with its need for consensus amid divisions between key member states—is unlikely to effectively manage the Libyan conflict or respond to Turkey’s revanchism without coordinated U.S. engagement.

The United States should throw its diplomatic weight behind the current cease-fire, expand its efforts to “name and shame” Russia for its mercenary activities in Libya to include Egypt and the UAE, and prod the European Union to redouble its humanitarian support and broaden its efforts to limit arms to include both sides. Likewise, as part of its compartmentalized approach, the United States should make clear to Turkey that the United States supports the GNA but does not support further military offensives. Perhaps a measure of reassurance will allow for conversations about demobilizing Turkey’s Syrian proxies and abrogating its disruptive maritime agreement with the GNA as a step toward broader negotiations. The aim should be to decouple Libya from the broader Eastern Mediterranean crisis by pushing Turkey to step back from its unworkable deal with the GNA, which could, in turn, be used to push Greece and Egypt to temper their approach. Turkey will want something for any concession, and the administration will have to carefully weigh the odds of meaningful de-escalation with the risk of rewarding Turkey for its unilateralism.

Syria

Syria remains the bloodiest and most intractable conflict of the past decade and a major source of U.S.-Turkish tension. The conflict and the associated refugee crisis are deeply enmeshed in Turkish domestic politics, and the mistrust and anger that surround U.S. policy on the issue is hard to overstate. Ankara has launched four significant military interventions in Syria since 2016, three of which mainly tar-

geted the Syrian Kurdish YPG. Ankara views the group as a wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), its main terrorist threat. The United States supported the YPG against the Islamic State, rolling the Kurdish group into a wider multiethnic umbrella group, the SDF, which defeated the Islamic State and remains a close American partner and the force maintaining a fragile stability in eastern Syria. Turkey's interventions were aimed at preventing an autonomous Kurdish-led statelet along Turkey's southern border, which Ankara feared might strengthen the PKK insurgency. Beyond crippling the chances of Kurdish autonomy, Erdoğan sought to establish a buffer zone along the Syrian border, into which Turkey could resettle some of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. The Syrian refugees are a huge political liability for Erdoğan and the AKP, driving their popularity to new lows at a time of economic austerity and anxiety.

In October 2019, at Erdoğan's behest, President Trump abruptly pulled U.S. troops from parts of northern Syria, where their presence had effectively prevented a Turkish attack on the SDF. The Turkish military and its Syrian proxies moved in, forcing the SDF to invite Syrian regime and Russian forces to move into parts of the northeast to contain the Turkish offensive. This has resulted in a patchwork of effective control in northeastern Syria,¹³⁸ with Turkey and its proxies holding a salient from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn as far south as the M4 highway, where the SDF retains control with some Syrian regime presence and periodic patrols by both American and Russian forces.¹³⁹ The proxies Ankara relies on to secure its zones of control are violent and ill-disciplined, and there are regular clashes along the lines of control.

In northwestern Syria, meanwhile, thousands of Turkish forces line the perimeter of a pocket of Idlib and Aleppo provinces, where some 4 million Syrians—many internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other parts of the country—live under the primary control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian jihadist rebel group. This narrow band of northwestern Syria represents the last redoubt of the rebellion against the Assad regime, pushed further and further toward the Turkish border in successive regime and Russian offensives. The most recent offensive, in early 2020, ended with a deal in which Turkish and rebel forces once again retrenched and Turkey and Russia agreed to a security corridor and joint patrols along this western stretch of the M4 highway.¹⁴⁰ The deal was prompted by the fourth major Turkish military intervention in Syria, this time a largely aerial campaign targeting Assad regime forces in retaliation for regime shelling and a Russian airstrike that killed 33 Turkish troops in the preceding offensive.¹⁴¹ Here, too, there are regular clashes, shelling, and airstrikes along the border of the rebel-held area.

Here, then, are the two obvious flashpoints in Syria—in the northeast and in the northwest—that could affect U.S.-Turkish relations, both directly and through their potential to recast Turkish-Russian relations and, therefore, Ankara’s decision-making calculus on the S-400s. For some in Washington, with the Islamic State crippled, these two Syrian flashpoints are not top-tier issues, but rather the latest chapters in a tragic war that, for the United States, has settled into a sad stalemate. But it is worth reinforcing that, for Ankara, these are omnipresent, critical issues where both Turkish personnel and President Erdoğan’s political standing are directly at risk. And while the United States can accept de-escalation on humanitarian grounds and continued pressure on the Islamic State, some in Turkey have longer-term ambitions to reshape the region. Indeed, Erdoğan has effectively created a Sunni Arab-Turkmen belt in northern Syria, where some 6 million people live in Turkish-administered or influenced areas. Turkey’s revanchism is not a theory; it is a fact.

For Erdoğan, Syria is a question of domestic politics and regime security tied to his reliance on nationalist voters and the toxic politics around the Syrian refugee issue and the Kurdish conflict.¹⁴² Across the Turkish political spectrum, there is fury about the Syrians’ presence in major Turkish cities. Erdoğan’s fundamental calculus weighs whether it is more costly—both politically and financially—to continue protecting the Turkish-controlled zones in Syria or to potentially face several million more refugees in Turkey, should those zones collapse. There could be a potential third option, should Erdoğan explore a rapprochement with the SDF and its U.S. backers in eastern Syria, but here the Turkish president is again boxed in by the domestic imperative to maintain nationalist support, which would balk at such a pivot.¹⁴³ These political realities mean Erdoğan and the Turkish government must be seen to take aggressive steps to stem Syrian outmigration and resettle Syrians in the Turkish zones—the only approach the Turkish public favors.¹⁴⁴ Beyond these political concerns, President Erdoğan and a segment of his party base have ideological reasons to favor an activist approach in Syria—for some “compassionate Islamists,” to burnish Turkey’s image as the leader and protector of the wider Islamic community; for other more nationalist sectors, to underline Turkey’s strength and regional influence.¹⁴⁵ Taken together, then, Erdoğan will likely find it difficult or impossible to give up more ground in Syria.

The likeliest risks are therefore further Turkish military moves into the northeast or further regime and Russian moves into the northwest.

As recently as October 2020, a year after the routinely violated ceasefire, Erdoğan again threatened a new military incursion against the SDF.¹⁴⁶ In the northeast, there are some signs that Turkey would like to seize Ayn Issa, an important cross-roads along the M4 that would allow Turkey to impede SDF communications—as well as international humanitarian assistance—across the northeast.¹⁴⁷ Tell Tamer or Kobani are other possible targets. Turkey is limited by the Russian and Syrian regime forces now present along the line of control, meaning any major Turkish attack would need to be coordinated with Moscow or risk Russian personnel. Ankara has shown itself willing to target Syrian regime forces, but direct exchanges with the Russians would be a major escalation that could bring in NATO. In normal times, that would be more than enough to deter both sides, but the severe erosion of alliance cohesion might make Moscow more likely to take a risky, confrontational line with the hope of splintering the Western allies. The risk is not so much that NATO would be directly drawn into a crisis in Syria—after all, many NATO member states opposed Turkey’s unilateral interventions—but that the alliance’s refusal to back Ankara could drive a further spiral of alliance disunity.

Still, that is a low-probability, high-impact scenario. More likely, clashes will remain localized and manageable. The last Turkish incursion elicited international condemnation, arms embargoes, and further congressional efforts to sanction Turkey—and that came under a Trump administration that had tacitly approved the incursion. There are few justifications for additional Turkish action. Ankara has effectively crippled the prospects of Syrian Kurdish autonomy, seized territory in which to resettle refugees, and now faces severe demands on its resources; the strategic rationale for a further incursion is flimsy. But domestic politics—specifically, the desire to splinter the opposition electoral coalition over the Kurdish issue—could always interfere with any rational analysis. To further reduce the risks of a new Turkish incursion and a new wave of conflict and displacement, the Biden administration should take a clearer, more forceful line in Syria in defense of the ceasefire with the SDF. The United States’ interests in eastern Syria are to alleviate humanitarian suffering, prevent an Islamic State resurgence, and—to the limited extent possible—push for some broader de-escalation in Syria to allow for an eventual political settlement. Each of these interests requires a capable partner to provide security on the ground, and the SDF is that partner; Turkey’s continued threats toward the group undermine U.S. interests, and the new team should outline consequences in advance in case a new attack materializes. The administration could explore pairing this clear line in defense of the SDF with an offer to explore additional humanitarian cooperation in certain Turkish-controlled zones.¹⁴⁸ There are severe limitations to this approach and good reasons that the United States

has not done more to legitimize Turkey's incursions; any such effort would require Turkey to take steps to rein in its proxies' human rights abuses. But there may also be benefits to being seen to attempt positive action.

In the northwest, Turkey has bolstered its military posture and, in early 2020, shown its willingness to use military force against the regime to defend the last pocket of rebel and IDP territory in Idlib. The regime is still intent, theoretically, on recovering the entire country and, as a more immediate goal, would like to take back the M4 in the northwest to allow transit from Aleppo to Latakia without harassment and to push the rebels further toward the Turkish border.¹⁴⁹ But the regime's resources are limited, and HTS is entrenched in Idlib; the regime needs Russian support for such an offensive.¹⁵⁰ For Russia, it either did not feel it could stop Turkey's strikes on the regime in early 2020—either technically or for fear of sparking a more coherent NATO response—or it did not mind letting Turkey cut the regime down to size, further reinforcing Damascus' dependence on Moscow.

For Russia, there is little urgency, and the near-term rationale for pushing another offensive in Idlib is unclear. It would back Turkey and Erdoğan into a corner, perhaps prompting an aggressive response. It might also prompt Erdoğan, in desperation, to pull the plug on the S-400 purchase and pivot back toward the United States. For Putin, better to let Turkish-HTS tensions play out and use Idlib as a useful pressure point against Turkey on other fronts in Libya or Nagorno-Karabakh, while continuing to focus on the long game of deepening the Turkey-U.S. split through the S-400 deal. This balance explains why the March ceasefire is more or less holding in strategic terms, though there are local clashes and frequent regime shelling of rebel areas; proxies on the ground want to fight, while their great power backers favor stasis for the time being. It is possible that Russia may eventually back the regime in retaking M4 in order to maintain its own relative influence in Syria vis-à-vis Iran, but the number of Turkish troops and rebel fighters—and the difficult terrain around the key city of Jisr al-Shughur—mean it does not appear imminent.

The overall picture, then, is of a balkanized Syria with blurry and violent borders between zones of control and widespread human suffering. Any further military move by Turkey in the northeast would trigger outrage—and possible sanctions—from the United States and Europe. A move on Idlib by the Syrian regime and Russia would spark a humanitarian catastrophe on a scale not seen since Aleppo and, possibly, a Turkish military response. Turkey's justifiable sense of abandon-

ment by the international community—and Erdoğan’s political desperation—would have uncertain outcomes, but a new crisis at the Turkish-Greek border could be expected. Depending on the timing—in other words, if the damage has not already been done—a Russian-backed attack on Idlib might torpedo Russian-Turkish relations and scrap the chances of further S-400 purchase or other defense cooperation. Syria therefore brings no shortage of potential flashpoints.

Conclusion

It will take deft diplomacy, a bit of luck, and restraint from multiple parties to get through 2021 without a more fundamental break in Turkey's relations with the United States and Europe. Washington and Ankara see the current impasse in fundamentally different ways and struggle to even agree on a narrative of what has taken place since 2015. Yet both sides have crucial interests that stand to suffer if such a break occurs.

The new administration in the United States will likely not seek an early break with Turkey, but the reality of these many flashpoints—and political machinery set in motion by Turkey's own actions—means that a firmer line is all but certain. The United States should try to keep the relationship broadly frozen until something changes—either Russia and Turkey fall out over one of the many issues that separate them, the economic crisis becomes so dire that Ankara is forced to make concessions, or the next election brings political change. Indeed, many in the West only hope to hold things together in the knowledge that there will be a day after Erdoğan.

But Erdoğan himself has a habit of forcing Turkey on to the agenda and can easily do so by raising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, Syria, or the Caucasus. It is Erdoğan's actions that will drive events this year. There are severe costs to his aggressive line at home and abroad, but his political imperatives and personal history offer little reason to believe he will make meaningful concessions. Absent such concessions, there will be more painful readjustments to come on both sides. The United States will have to continue adjusting to Ankara's assertiveness and Erdoğan's insistence on charting an independent course with little deference to the wishes of Turkey's traditional Western allies. For Turkey, there will be painful consequences to this unilateral path. Turkey has suffered at times from Western disregard for its concerns, as Erdoğan never ceases to point out, but it has also benefited tremendously in socioeconomic, political, and military terms. For Turkey in the short term, there will be a difficult transition from the laissez-faire, right-wing hyperrealism of Trump and his administration to the more values-based, liberal internationalist approach of Biden and his team.

Erdoğan sees a multipolar world and wants to chart a more independent course and build Turkey into a major power with less deference to the West. Toward that end, he has adopted a transactional approach toward traditional allies and deepened ties with Russia and other countries. As Turkish officials often say, Turkey does not want to choose between Russia and the West. But Russia has militarily intervened in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and Libya; repeatedly bombed hospitals in Syria; harassed U.S. diplomats and murdered dissidents at home and abroad; hacked U.S. companies and government institutions; and, most egregiously, interfered in elections in the United States and Europe. Increasingly, choosing a side is exactly what the West demands of an ally.

If Turkey does not wish to choose, that does not make it an enemy; but it does mean Ankara is no longer on the team. And while Turkey, as a sovereign state, may purchase arms from whomever it likes, that decision should not be free of consequences within a Western security architecture designed to guard the democratic order against Russian aggression. Often, when observers of Turkey talk about a reset in relations, it is shorthand for a magical process by which things will go back to how they were in 2012 or so. In fact, the reset that is needed is more of a memory wipe—to clear some of the mistrust and mythology and to close the gap between rhetoric and reality. To stretch the metaphor, perhaps a functional new operating system could then be installed. Such a new system would need to recognize that, for all the talk, the United States and Turkey are not presently strategic partners; Turkey is pursuing strategic autonomy, and the United States should accept this and respond with firm transactionalism, not hostility or false hopes.

Finally, all of the issues discussed in this report will have huge effects on—and often in—Europe. Turkey’s decision on the S-400 and the U.S. response under CAATSA will have an impact on NATO cohesion and European defense. Washington’s line on TurkStream 2 is tied to the Nord Stream 2 dispute and will reverberate through European energy markets. The posture in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean will shape the migration issue and the internal politics of the European Union. These complex crises cannot be disentangled, making a mockery of both “America First” and “strategic autonomy” and underlining the importance of U.S.-EU coordination on and, where possible, with Turkey.

About the author

Max Hoffman is the director for National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress, where his policy work focuses on Turkey, Europe, and the Middle East.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for the cooperation of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Washington, D.C., in this project, as well as for the expertise and feedback of Alan Makovsky, Max Bergmann, Katrina Mulligan, Michael Werz, and others who wish to remain anonymous.

Endnotes

- 1 Trading Economics, "Turkey Exports By Country," available at <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/exports-by-country> (last accessed January 2021).
- 2 See, for example, the following op-ed coauthored by President-elect Biden's choice for national security adviser: Eric Edelman and Jake Sullivan, "Turkey Is Out of Control. Time for the U.S. to Say So.," *Politico*, February 13, 2018, available at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/13/turkey-us-trump-policy-syria-216972>.
- 3 Max Hoffman, "Turkey's President Erdoğan Is Losing Ground at Home" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/08/24/489727/turkeys-president-erdogan-losing-ground-home/>.
- 4 In fact, American forces remain, though significant leverage was squandered. See Ben Hubbard and others, "Syrian Arab Fighters Backed by Turkey Kill Two Kurdish Prisoners," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/12/world/middleeast/turkey-invasion-syria-kurds.html>. See also, Max Hoffman, "Trump's Syria Shambles" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/10/24/476414/trumps-syria-shambles/>.
- 5 Alexander Mallin, "Bolton suggests possible 'obstruction' by Trump in SDNY Turkey investigation," ABC News, June 20, 2020, available at <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/bolton-suggests-obstruction-trump-sdny-turkey-investigation/story?id=71362785>.
- 6 David D. Kirkpatrick and Eric Lipton, "Behind Trump's Dealings With Turkey: Sons-in-Law Married to Power," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/politics/trump-erdogan-family-turkey.html>.
- 7 Leonid Bershidsky, "Drones Have Raised the Odds and Risks of Small Wars," Bloomberg, November 30, 2020, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-11-30/drones-have-raised-the-odds-and-risks-of-small-wars>.
- 8 Jonathan Spicer, "Turkey slams Biden's past call for U.S. to back Erdogan opponents," Reuters, August 15, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-election-biden-turkey-idINKN25C04D?edition=redirect=in>.
- 9 Natasha Bertrand, "The inexorable rise of Jake Sullivan," *Politico*, November 27, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/27/jake-sullivan-biden-national-security-440814>.
- 10 Dion Nissenbaum and Carol E. Lee, "Turkish President Faces a Cool Reception in U.S. Visit," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2017, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-president-faces-a-cool-reception-in-u-s-visit-1459114068>.
- 11 Michael Werz and Max Hoffman, "The Process Behind Turkey's Proposed Extradition of Fethullah Gülen" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2016), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2016/09/07/143587/the-process-behind-turkeys-proposed-extradition-of-fethullah-gulen/>.
- 12 Carlotta Gall, "Turkey Frees American NASA Scientist Imprisoned for 2 Years," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/middleeast/turkey-serkan-golge-release.html>.
- 13 Carlotta Gall, "NASA Scientist Jailed in Turkey for 3 Years Recounts His Ordeal," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/09/world/europe/turkey-erdogan-nasa-scientist-golge.html>.
- 14 *The New York Times*, "Turkey Sentences U.S. Consulate Employee to Over 5 Years in Jail," October 27, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/27/world/europe/turkey-sentences-consulate-employee.html>.
- 15 Matthew Lee, "Obama again avoids calling 1915 Armenian killings 'genocide,'" Associated Press, April 21, 2015, available at <https://apnews.com/article/1e05515862874067bede2ccb2bf8f667>.
- 16 Deirdre Walsh, Elise Labott, and Joe Sterling, "Turkey recalls ambassador over genocide resolution," CNN, October 11, 2007, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/10/11/us.turkey.armenians/index.html>.
- 17 Daren Butler, "Turkey recalls ambassador to Germany over Armenian genocide vote: PM," Reuters, June 2, 2016, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-turkey-armenia-yildirim/turkey-recalls-ambassador-to-germany-over-armenian-genocide-vote-pm-idUSKCN0YO1GV>.
- 18 Ramsen Shamon, "Biden pledges to recognize 1915 Armenian genocide," *Politico*, April 24, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/24/biden-armenian-genocide-207587>.
- 19 Matthew Lee, "State Department: Bill noting Armenian genocide isn't policy," Associated Press, December 17, 2019, available at <https://apnews.com/article/803509278038efefdbf018431161e6de>.
- 20 Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.
- 21 Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2020: Turkey" (Washington: 2019), available at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/turkey>.
- 22 Andrew O'Donohue, Max Hoffman, and Alan Makovsky, "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/06/10/485976/turkeys-changing-media-landscape/>.
- 23 Deniz Yuksel, "Turkey's Government Wants Silicon Valley to Do Its Dirty Work," *Lawfare*, December 9, 2020, available at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/turkeys-government-wants-silicon-valley-do-its-dirty-work>.
- 24 Adam Klasfeld, "Bygone US Sentence of Turkish Banker Hakan Atilla Affirmed," *Courthouse News Service*, July 20, 2020, available at <https://www.courthousenews.com/bygone-us-sentence-of-turkish-banker-hakan-atilla-affirmed/>.
- 25 U.S. Department of Justice, "BNP Paribas Sentenced for Conspiring to Violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act and the Trading with the Enemy Act," Press release, May 1, 2015, available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/bnp-paribas-sentenced-conspiring-violate-international-emergency-economic-powers-act-and>.
- 26 Nate Raymond, "BNP Paribas sentenced in \$8.9 billion accord over sanctions violations," Reuters, May 1, 2015, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bnp-paribas-settlement-sentencing/bnp-paribas-sentenced-in-8-9-billion-accord-over-sanctions-violations-idUSKBNONM41K20150501>.

- 27 Eric Lipton and Benjamin Weiser, "Turkish Bank Case Showed Erdogan's Influence With Trump," *The New York Times*, October 29, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/us/politics/trump-erdogan-halkbank.html>.
- 28 Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok, "Erdogan Downplays Rifts With U.S., Dismisses EU Threat," Bloomberg, December 9, 2020, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-09/erdogan-downplays-rifts-with-u-s-dismisses-eu-sanctions-threat?sref=EWwigcvl>.
- 29 Jacopo Barigazzi, "Erdogan insists Turkey is part of Europe, but won't tolerate 'attacks'," *Politico Europe*, November 22, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/erdogan-insists-turkey-part-europe-wont-tolerate-attacks/>.
- 30 James F. Jeffrey, "Erdogan's Victory Could Actually Improve U.S.-Turkish Relations," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2018, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/erdogans-victory-could-actually-improve-u-s-turkish-relations>.
- 31 Hoffman, "Turkey's President Erdogan Is Losing Ground at Home."
- 32 Max Hoffman, "The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/08/12/473508/state-turkish-kurdish-conflict/>.
- 33 Tuvan Gumrukcu, Ece Toksabai, and Daren Butler, "Erdogan believes Turkish reforms will not protect jailed Kurdish leader," Reuters, December 9, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-judiciary-erdogan/erdogan-believes-turkish-reforms-will-not-protect-jailed-kurdish-leader-idUSKBN281J8R>.
- 34 See, for example, European Court of Human Rights, "Case of Selahattin Demirtaş v. Turkey (No. 2)," available at <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/spa#%22itemid%22%3A%2F001-187961%22>] (last accessed January 2021).
- 35 Center for American Progress, Istanbul Policy Center, and Istituto Affari Internazionali, "Trends in Turkish Civil Society" (Washington: 2017), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/07/10/435475/trends-turkish-civil-society/>.
- 36 Max Hoffman, "Responding to Turkey's Purchase of Russia's S-400 Missile System" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/03/21/467518/responding-turkeys-purchase-russias-s-400-missile-system/>.
- 37 Gordon Lubold and Doug Cameron, "U.S. Ejects Turkey From F-35 Fighter Program," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2019, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-says-turkeys-purchase-of-russian-air-defense-system-undermines-nato-11563390166>.
- 38 Ece Toksabai and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkish defense firms set to lose billions after F-35 removal," Reuters, July 18, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa-defense/turkish-defense-firms-set-to-lose-billions-after-f-35-removal-idUSKCN1UD1LZ>.
- 39 Joe Gould, "US could buy Turkey's Russian-made S-400 under Senate proposal," Defense News, June 29, 2020, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/06/29/us-could-buy-turkeys-russia-made-s-400-under-senate-proposal/>.
- 40 Suzan Fraser and Lolita C. Baldor, "Reports: Turkey tests Russian-made S-400 defense system," Associate Press, October 16, 2020, available at <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-black-sea-ankara-military-and-defense-russia-a4b0d8149908bf5ea976204518866c3>.
- 41 Dorian Jones, "Erdogan Threatens Deepening Russian Ties Unless US Unfreezes Jet Sale," Voice of America, November 7, 2019, available at <https://www.voanews.com/europe/erdogan-threatens-deepening-russian-ties-unless-us-unfreezes-jet-sale>; Joseph Trevithick, "We're Buying This One? Turkey's Erdogan Asks Putin In Front Of Su-57 Fighter At Air Show," The Drive, August 27, 2019, available at <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/29592/were-buying-this-one-turkeys-erdogan-asks-putin-in-front-of-su-57-fighter-at-air-show>.
- 42 Senior State Department Officials, "Special Briefing: Previewing Sanctions Under Section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017 (CAATSA)," U.S. Department of State, September 20, 2018, available at <https://www.state.gov/previewing-sanctions-under-section-231-of-the-countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-of-2017-caatsa/>.
- 43 The 2018 NDAA amended the provisions of this waiver (Section 1294). See John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, Public Law 232, 115th Cong., 2nd sess. (August 13, 2018), available at <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ232/PLAW-115publ232.pdf>.
- 44 See Section 231 of Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, Public Law 44, 115th Cong., 1st sess. (August 2, 2017), available at <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ44/PLAW-115publ44.pdf>.
- 45 Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, "Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief," Congressional Research Service, November 9, 2020, available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44000>.
- 46 Michael R. Pompeo, "Press Statement: The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231," Press release, U.S. Department of State, December 14, 2020, available at <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231/>.
- 47 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Introduction of the Non-SDN Menu-Based Sanctions (NS-MBS) List; CAATSA - Russia-related Designations," December 14, 2020, available at https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20201214_33.
- 48 Metin Gürkan, "Turkish defense industry risks big damage from US sanctions," Al-Monitor, December 16, 2020, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/12/turkey-united-states-russia-s400-sanctions-risk-big-damage.html#ixzz6jAs0YeVt>.
- 49 Ali Murat Alhas, "US sanctions 'blatant attack' on Turkey: President," Anadolu Agency, December 16, 2020, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-sanctions-blatant-attack-on-turkey-president/2078940>.
- 50 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "No: 321, 14 December 2020, Press Release Regarding the U.S. Decision to Impose Sanctions Against Turkey," Press release, December 14, 2020, available at http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_321_abd-nin-ulkemize-karsi-acikladigi-yaptirim-kararlari-hk.en.mfa.
- 51 Daren Butler and Dominic Evans, "Sanctioned Turkish defence industry chief expects U.S. ties to survive," Reuters, December 15, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN28P1HW>.
- 52 Edelman and Sullivan, "Turkey Is Out of Control. Time for the U.S. to Say So."
- 53 Michael Hirsh, "In Memoir, Obama Calls Putin a 'Ward Boss, Except With Nukes,'" *Foreign Policy*, November 18, 2020, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/18/obama-book-memoir-promised-land-foreign-leaders-putin/>.

- 54 Sascha Lohmann, "Extraterritorial U.S. Sanctions: Only Domestic Courts Could Effectively Curb the Enforcement of U.S. Law Abroad," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, February 2019, available at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019C05/>.
- 55 Institute for Strategic and International Studies, "The Military Balance" (Washington: 2020), pp. 64–165, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0459722.2.2020.1707964>.
- 56 Metropoli Strategic and Social Research Center, "Turkey's Pulse: December 2020," on file with author.
- 57 Jim Townsend and Rachel Ellehuus, "The Tale of Turkey and the Patriots," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2019, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/the-tale-of-turkey-and-the-patriots/>.
- 58 Joe Gould, "Sanctioning Turkey over the S-400 would be mandatory in new defense bill," *Defense News*, December 3, 2020, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/12/03/turkey-sanctions-over-s-400-made-mandatory-in-defense-bill/>.
- 59 Stars and Stripes, "Turkey to buy more Russian missile systems despite US sanctions threat, report says," August 24, 2020, available at <https://www.stripes.com/news/turkey-to-buy-more-russian-missile-systems-despite-us-sanctions-threat-report-says-1.642384>.
- 60 Andrew Osborn and Ezgi Erkoyun, "Russia to supply Turkey with four S-400 missile batteries for \$2.5 billion: Kommersant," *Reuters*, December 27, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles/russia-to-supply-turkey-with-four-s-400-missile-batteries-for-2-5-billion-kommersant-idUSKBN1EL0H6>.
- 61 Zanoliti and Thomas, "Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief."
- 62 Stephen Bryen, "Russia knocking Turkish drones from Armenian skies," *Asia Times*, October 26, 2020, available at <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/russia-knocking-turkish-drones-from-armenian-skies/>.
- 63 Institute for Strategic and International Studies, "The Military Balance."
- 64 Robin Emmott, "Exclusive: Turkey holds up NATO military plans over Syria dispute – sources," *Reuters*, November 26, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-turkey-exclusive/exclusive-turkey-holds-up-nato-military-plans-over-syria-dispute-sources-idUSKBN1Y01W0>.
- 65 Tom Körkemeier and Shadia Nasralla, "Turkey blocks some cooperation with NATO partners as EU row escalates," *Reuters*, March 15, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-referendum-nato/turkey-blocks-some-cooperation-with-nato-partners-as-eu-row-escalates-idUSKBN16M2OR>.
- 66 John Irish and Robin Emmott, "France-Turkey tensions mount after NATO naval incident," *Reuters*, July 7, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-france-turkey-analysis/france-turkey-tensions-mount-after-nato-naval-incident-idUSKBN2481K5>.
- 67 David M. Herszenhorn, Nektaria Stamouli, and Rym Momtaz, "US and Turkey target each other in NATO meeting," *Politico Europe*, December 1, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-turkey-target-each-other-nato-meeting/>.
- 68 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Poland takes charge of NATO high readiness force," December 30, 2019, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_172334.htm.
- 69 Alan Makovsky, "Turkey's Growing Energy Ties with Moscow" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2015/05/06/112511/turkeys-growing-energy-ties-with-moscow/>.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Orhan Coskun, "UPDATE 1-Russia halts Turkey nuclear work, Ankara looks elsewhere," *Reuters*, December 9, 2015, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-turkey-russia-nuclear-idUSL8N13Y31G20151209>.
- 73 Nuclear Engineering International, "Construction licence issued for Akkuyu 3 nuclear power plant," November 19, 2020, available at <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newsconstruction-licence-issued-for-akkuyu-3-nuclear-power-plant-8368962>.
- 74 Olesya Astakhova and Can Sezer, "Turkey, Russia launch TurkStream pipeline carrying gas to Europe," *Reuters*, January 8, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-russia-pipeline/turkey-russia-launch-turkstream-pipeline-carrying-gas-to-europe-idUSKBN1Z71WP>.
- 75 Murat Temizer, "TurkStream marks 4th anniversary of first sign-off," *Anadolu Agency*, October 11, 2020, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/natural-gas/turkstream-marks-4th-anniversary-of-first-sign-off-/30762>.
- 76 John V. Bowlus, "Pulling Back the Curtain on Turkey's Natural Gas Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, August 26, 2020, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/pulling-back-the-curtain-on-turkeys-natural-gas-strategy/>.
- 77 Bureau of Energy Resources, "CAATSA/CRIEEA Section 232 Public Guidance," July 15, 2020, available at <https://www.state.gov/caatsa-crieaa-section-232-public-guidance/>.
- 78 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.
- 79 National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Public Law 92, 116th Congress, 1st sess. (December 20, 2019), available at <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ92/PLAW-116publ92.pdf>.
- 80 Vladimir Soldatkin, Ece Toksabai, and Maria Grabar, "Russia's Blue Stream gas pipeline to Turkey idle since May: sources," *Reuters*, July 10, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-gas/russias-blue-stream-gas-pipeline-to-turkey-idle-since-may-sources-idUSKBN24B1R1>.
- 81 David Gauthier-Villars, "As Turkey Shunned Russian Gas, Its Companies Amassed Debt," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2020, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-turkey-shunned-russian-gas-its-companies-amassed-debt-11592216429>.
- 82 Al-Jazeera, "Turkey raises Black Sea gas field estimate after new discovery," October 17, 2020, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/17/turkey-raises-black-sea-gas-field-estimate-after-new-discovery>.
- 83 David O'Byrne, "FEATURE: Turkey's rising Sakarya reserves could shake up regional gas market," *S&P Global*, October 22, 2020, available at <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/natural-gas/102220-feature-turkeys-rising-sakarya-reserves-could-shake-up-regional-gas-market>.
- 84 Bowlus, "Pulling Back the Curtain on Turkey's Natural Gas Strategy."
- 85 Ibid.

- 86 Daily Sabah, "Black Sea gas field to be operated by Turkish Petroleum, minister says," August 25, 2020, available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/black-sea-gas-field-to-be-operated-by-turkish-petroleum-minister-says>.
- 87 Ariel Cohen, "Turkey Finds Enormous Gas Field In The Black Sea — But Tricky Process Ahead," *Forbes*, September 18, 2020, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2020/09/18/turkeys-new-natural-gas-find-in-the-black-sea-exciting-but-tricky-process-ahead/?sh=27abf5665a86>.
- 88 Bowlus, "Pulling Back the Curtain on Turkey's Natural Gas Strategy."
- 89 Hugh Pope and Nigar Goksel, "Turkey does its own thing," Chatham House, December 1, 2020, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2020-12/turkey-does-its-own-thing>.
- 90 Ahmed Ismail, Ari Rabinovitch, and Aidan Lewis, "East Mediterranean states formally establish Egypt-based gas forum," Reuters, September 22, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-energy/east-mediterranean-states-formally-establish-egypt-based-gas-forum-idUSKCN26D14D>.
- 91 Michaël Tanchum, "How Did the Eastern Mediterranean Become the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm?," *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2020, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/18/eastern-mediterranean-greece-turkey-warship-geopolitical-showdown/>.
- 92 Sinem Adar and others, "Visualizing Turkey's Foreign Policy Activism," Centre for Applied Turkey Studies, available at <https://www.cats-network.eu/topics/visualizing-turkeys-foreign-policy-activism/> (last accessed December 2020).
- 93 See video of Ryan Gingeras speaking at an online public discussion: EliamepOfficial, "New President, Old Problems: The Biden Administration and the Eastern Mediterranean," YouTube, December 15, 2020, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aU98ZoCa0zU&feature=emb_logo.
- 94 Michele Kambas and Sabina Zawadzki, "Exxon's Cyprus gas discovery adds another giant to East Med collection," Reuters, February 28, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-exxon-mobil-cyprus/exxons-cyprus-gas-discovery-adds-another-giant-to-east-med-collection-idUSKCN1QH1O3>.
- 95 Morgan Ortugas, "Press Statement: Turkish Drilling in Cypriot Claimed Waters," Press release, U.S. Department of State, July 9, 2019, available at <https://www.state.gov/turkish-drilling-in-cypriot-claimed-waters-2/>.
- 96 Tanchum, "How Did the Eastern Mediterranean Become the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm?."
- 97 U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Greece, "Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt: Delphi Economic Forum," June 10, 2020, available at <https://gr.usembassy.gov/ambassador-geoffrey-pyatt-delphi-economic-forum/>.
- 98 Jonathan Gorvett, "Biden Faces Troubled Eastern Mediterranean Waters," *Foreign Policy*, December 2, 2020, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/02/biden-greece-cyprus-turkey-erdogan-eastern-mediterranean/>.
- 99 Turkish MFA, @MFATurkey, December 5, 2020, 10:37 a.m. ET, Twitter, available at <https://twitter.com/MFATurkey/status/1335246816355495940?s=20>.
- 100 Robin Emmott, "EU to consider making good on sanctions threat against Turkey," Reuters, December 6, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-eu/eu-to-consider-making-good-on-sanctions-threat-against-turkey-idINL8N2IM0DB>.
- 101 Michael Daventry, "Turkey withdraws contentious research ship to port ahead of key EU summit," EuroNews, November 30, 2020, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2020/11/30/turkey-withdraws-contentious-research-ship-to-port-ahead-of-key-eu-summit>.
- 102 Nektaria Stamouli, "Greece, Turkey to restart talks this month," Politico, January 11, 2021, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/greece-turkey-restart-talks-eastern-mediterranean/>.
- 103 Sarantis Michalopoulos, "Merkel and Borissov blocked EU sanctions against Turkey at summit: sources," Euractiv, December 11, 2020, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/merkel-and-borissov-blocked-eu-sanctions-against-turkey-at-summit-sources/>.
- 104 Max Hoffman, Alan Makovsky, and Michael Werz, "The Turkish Diaspora in Europe" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/12/10/491951/turkish-diaspora-europe/>.
- 105 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "No: 319, 11 December 2020, Press Release Regarding the Conclusions of the EU Council Meeting of 10-11 December 2020," Press release, December 11, 2020, available at http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-319_-10-11-aralik-ab-devlet-ve-hukumet-baskanlari-lirivesi-sonuclari-hk.en.mfa.
- 106 Achilles Skordas, "The Twenty-Day Greek-Turkish Border Crisis and Beyond: Geopolitics of Migration and Asylum Law (Part I)," Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy, May 5, 2020, available at <http://eumigrationlawblog.eu/the-twenty-day-greek-turkish-border-crisis-and-beyond-geopolitics-of-migration-and-asylum-law-part-i/>.
- 107 Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Patrick Kingsley, "Turkey Steps Back From Confrontation at Greek Border," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/world/europe/turkey-greece-border-migrants.html>.
- 108 Human Rights Watch, "Greece: Investigate Pushbacks, Violence at Borders," October 6, 2020, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/06/greece-investigate-pushbacks-violence-borders>.
- 109 Max Hoffman and Michael Werz, "The effects of a suspension of Turkey's EU accession process" (Essen: Stiftung Mercator, 2019), available at <https://www.stiftung-mercator.de/de/publikation/the-effects-of-a-suspension-of-turkeys-eu-accession-process/>.
- 110 European Commission, "Turkey: Extension of EU humanitarian programmes supporting 1.7 million refugees receives green light," Press release, July 10, 2020, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1324.
- 111 U.S. Embassy in Cyprus, "Joint Declaration Between Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and the United States After the Sixth Trilateral Summit," Press release, March 21, 2019, available at <https://cy.usembassy.gov/joint-declaration-between-cyprus-greece-israel-and-the-united-states-after-the-sixth-trilateral-summit/>.
- 112 Nick Wadhams and Selcan Hacaoglu, "Pompeo Stirs Turkey Furor Over Trip Without a Visit to Erdogan," Bloomberg, November 13, 2020, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-13/pompeo-won-t-meet-erdogan-or-other-officials-on-istanbul-visit?sref=EWvigcvl>.
- 113 Michele Kambas, "U.S. VP Biden visits divided Cyprus, urges a peace deal," Reuters, May 21, 2014, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-usa-biden/u-s-vp-biden-visits-divided-cyprus-urges-a-peace-deal-idUSBREA4K10Z20140521>.

- 114 Joseph Trevithick, "Docs Show US To Massively Expand Footprint At Jordanian Air Base Amid Spats With Turkey, Iraq," *The Drive*, January 14, 2019, available at <http://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/25955/docs-show-us-to-massively-expand-footprint-at-jordanian-air-base-amid-spat-with-turkey-iraq>.
- 115 Zanotti and Thomas, "Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief."
- 116 Lara Jakes, "U.S. Will Base Mammoth Ship in Greece, Near Disputed Territory," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/politics/greece-turkey-us-navy.html>.
- 117 Galip Dalay, "Is there a new window of opportunity in the Eastern Mediterranean crisis?," Brookings Institution, December 9, 2020, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/09/is-there-a-new-window-of-opportunity-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-crisis/>.
- 118 Ishaan Tharoor, "Macron vs. Erdogan is a fight both leaders want," *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2020, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/10/27/macron-erdogan-clash-islam/>.
- 119 Peter Rough and Michael Doran, "Macron's Turkish Gambit," Hudson Institute, November 30, 2020, available at <https://www.hudson.org/research/16534-macron-s-turkish-gambit>.
- 120 Agence France Presse, "Erdogan hopes France will 'get rid of Macron' as soon as possible," April 12, 2020, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201204-erdogan-hopes-france-will-get-rid-of-macron-as-soon-as-possible>.
- 121 Rough and Doran, "Macron's Turkish Gambit."
- 122 Emadeddin Badi, "Russia Isn't the Only One Getting Its Hands Dirty in Libya," *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2020, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/21/libyan-civil-war-france-uae-khalifa-haftar/>.
- 123 Agence France Presse, "Macron gave Sisi France's highest award on Paris visit: official," December 10, 2020, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201210-macron-gave-sisi-france-s-highest-award-on-paris-visit-official>.
- 124 U.N. Support Mission in Libya, "Report of the Secretary-General" (New York: U.N. Security Council, 2020), available at https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_to_sc_15_january_2020_eng.pdf.
- 125 Ceyda Caglayan, "Turkey aims to sign deal with Libya over Gaddafi-era compensation," Reuters, January 10, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-turkey/turkey-aims-to-sign-deal-with-libya-over-gaddafi-era-compensation-idUSKBN1Z913A>.
- 126 Daily Sabah, "Erdogan rejects joining Trump's table for lunch over presence of Egypt's Sisi," December 24, 2019, available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/09/24/erdogan-rejects-joining-trumps-table-for-lunch-over-presence-of-egypts-sisi>.
- 127 Al-Arabiya, "Erdogan repeats: Sisi is a 'tyrant'; Egypt responds," July 26, 2014, available at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/26/Egypt-to-summon-Turkish-envoy-over-Erdogan-comments>.
- 128 Declan Walsh, "In Stunning Reversal, Turkey Emerges as Libya Kingmaker," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/world/middleeast/libya-turkey-russia-hifter.html>.
- 129 International Crisis Group, "Fleshing Out the Libya Cease-fire Agreement," November 4, 2020, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/b80-fleshing-out-libya-ceasefire-agreement>. Fehim Tastekin, "Why is Sirte everyone's 'red line' in Libya?" *Al Monitor*, June 20, 2020, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/turkey-libya-russia-egypt-why-sirte-everyones-red-line.html>.
- 130 Ibid.
- 131 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Russia Backs UN Security Council Call For Withdrawal Of Foreign Fighters From Libya," December 16, 2020, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/un-security-council-libya-russia-foreign-fighters/31003211.html>.
- 132 Edith M. Lederer, "UN chief recommends Libya cease-fire monitors based in Sirte," Associated Press, January 4, 2021, available at <https://apnews.com/article/libya-middle-east-tripoli-antonio-guterres-united-nations-36bdd3649f98c0c2e510cc1de80447fd>.
- 133 Noha Elhennawy, "Commander threatens to target Turkish forces in Libya," Associated Press, December 24, 2020, available at <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-africa-ankara-libya-tripoli-892ee1f475aa79a846f1065fd2e16214>.
- 134 Jalel Harchaoui, "Why Turkey Intervened in Libya" (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), available at <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/why-turkey-intervened-in-libya.pdf>.
- 135 Deutsche Welle, "Turkey: MPs approval of Libya military deal provokes US unease," December 21, 2019, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-mps-approval-of-libya-military-deal-provokes-us-unease/a-51766167>.
- 136 Jonathan M. Winer, "Libya's Civil War: US Abdication Providing a Playground for Foreign Intervention," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, April 27, 2020, available at <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/04/27/libyas-civil-war-us-abdication-providing-a-playground-for-foreign-intervention/>.
- 137 Vivian Salama, Jared Malsin, and Summer Said, "Trump Backed Libyan Warlord After Saudi Arabia and Egypt Lobbied Him," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 12, 2019, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-backed-libyan-warlord-after-saudi-arabia-and-egypt-lobbied-him-11557668581>.
- 138 Hoffman, "Trump's Syria Shambles."
- 139 International Crisis Group, "The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria," November 25, 2020, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/sdf-seeks-path-toward-durable-stability-north-east-syria>.
- 140 Charles Lister, "Is Idlib set for internal strife?," Middle East Institute, May 1, 2020, available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/idlib-set-internal-strife>.
- 141 Carlotta Gall, "Airstrike Hits Turkish Forces in Syria, Raising Fears of Escalation," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-war-strikes.html>.
- 142 Max Hoffman, Michael Werz, and John Halpin, "Turkey's 'New Nationalism' Amid Shifting Politics: Further Analysis of Polling Results" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/02/11/446164/turkeys-new-nationalism-amid-shifting-politics/>.

- 143 Hoffman, "The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict"; International Crisis Group, "The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria."
- 144 Hoffman, "Turkey's President Erdoğan Is Losing Ground at Home."
- 145 Hoffman, Werz, and Halpin, "Turkey's 'New Nationalism' Amid Shifting Politics: Further Analysis of Polling Results."
- 146 Laurie Mylroie, "US calls on Turkey to respect ceasefire with SDF," Kurdistan 24, October 30, 2020, available at <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/26bd4261-346b-46e6-9bd1-cb4f855d89b9>.
- 147 Fehim Tastekin, "Syrian Kurds squeezed between Turkish threat, Russian pressure in Ain Issa," Al-Monitor, December 15, 2020, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/12/turkey-syria-russia-kurds-under-moscow-pressure-ain-issa.html>.
- 148 Turkey analyst Asli Aydintaşbaş outlined a similar policy of engagement for the European Union last year. The details of further U.S. engagement will be examined in another forthcoming CAP report. See Asli Aydintaşbaş, "A new Gaza: Turkey's border policy in northern Syria," European Council on Foreign Relations, May 28, 2020, available at https://ecfr.eu/publication/a_new_gaza_turkeys_border_policy_in_northern_syria/.
- 149 International Crisis Group, "Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib," May 14, 2020, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/213-silencing-guns-syrias-idlib>.
- 150 Fabrice Balanche, "Idlib May Become the Next Gaza Strip," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 26, 2020, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/idlib-may-become-the-next-gaza-strip>.

Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

