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No Horse in The Race
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No Horse in this Race

By Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı | June 20, 2024

For Türkiye, each of the two main US presidential contenders offers advantages and disadvantages.

As the US presidential election approaches, an air of indifference prevails in Ankara. The US-Türkiye relationship has been deteriorating for at least a decade, and more than a few crises were averted in that time. Ankara expects no breakthrough in the relationship, regardless of the winner in November.

Bilateral Versus Personal Relations

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Donald Trump proved to be kindred spirits. They met nine times, including during a state visit to Washington, and regularly spoke by phone. But despite the regular contact, chaos characterized bilateral relations, and tensions regularly arose. Ankara continued to pivot toward Moscow and acquired Russian S-400 air-defense missile systems. Türkiye also used coercive diplomacy against Greece in the eastern Mediterranean and made military incursions into northern Syria despite US objections. For his part, Trump used [social media](#) to threaten the Turkish economy, causing the lira to plummet. He also imposed sanctions for the purchase of the S-400s.

Erdoğan's rapport with President Joe Biden stands in stark contrast. During the 2020 US presidential primaries, [Biden](#) declared his intention, if elected, to collaborate with the Turkish opposition to defeat Erdoğan. He returned the favor by deliberately postponing for several days a congratulatory call to the victorious Biden, who again reciprocated by being unavailable whenever the Turkish president sought a meeting. Biden, as president, has met Erdoğan only twice in person, each time on the sidelines of international summits.

Ironically, the fraught relationship between the two leaders has led to no major setbacks in recent years. Türkiye has refrained from further incursions into Syria, achieved détente with Greece, and started a normalization process with Israel that lasted until the war in Gaza. Although it did not join the sanctions against Russia, Ankara supported Ukraine in other ways, including with armed drones that were especially valuable in the early stages of the conflict. The Biden administration has taken no punitive actions against Türkiye and even authorized the sale of F-16 fighter jets and modernization kits to the country.

Relations may not have deteriorated under Biden's presidency, but neither have they improved. No major source of bilateral tension has been resolved. Ankara continues to hedge its bets through open channels to Moscow, and even Beijing, and it has retained possession of its S-400 missile systems. At the same time, the US continues to support the People's Defense Units (YPG), a Kurdish militant group in Syria. Washington also maintains the sanctions imposed following the S-400 acquisition.

A Wish List

Türkiye's main expectation from the next US president, whether Biden or Trump, will be an end to support of the YPG, which Türkiye also sees as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group Ankara and Washington (and Brussels) consider terrorists. Ankara also wants a lifting of the sanctions, pressure on Israel to end its campaign in Gaza, and a push for a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine. All this will come on top of hopes, shared with the rest of Europe, that the next US administration will not weaken the transatlantic alliance or its security commitments to it, or instigate trade wars.

A second Trump administration is more likely to meet Turkish expectations. The Heritage Foundation's [Mandate of Leadership](#) notes that the ex-president, if reelected, may need to lean toward accommodating Türkiye's position on the YPG. Trump, who unenthusiastically imposed sanctions on Türkiye, is also seen as more likely to work with Ankara on a creative solution that would enable lifting them. And he has repeatedly said that he would quickly end the war in Ukraine, which would extract Türkiye from a precarious need to balance its relations with its NATO partners and the Kremlin.

Still, Ankara would be troubled by a second Trump administration's questionable commitment to NATO, economic nationalism, and diplomatic stability. Trump's Middle East policies would be of particular concern as they could escalate tensions to the point of a full-blown regional conflict.

A Trump return may serve Türkiye's immediate security interests, but it could come at a broad geopolitical and geoeconomic cost. A second Biden administration would offer lower risk but, as is so often the case, less opportunity. Ankara has not indicated which it prefers.

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