

# The Future of U.S.-Turkish Ties: A New Relationship, Not a Reset

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Brief Analysis

**Despite the welcome news on Sweden, the old Turkey is not coming back, but Erdogan's apparent shift to legacy-building mode will give Washington opportunities to leverage his influence abroad.**

**O**n January 23, Turkey's parliament ratified Sweden's accession to NATO, opening the path for Stockholm's eventual membership in the alliance. The Biden administration attaches great importance to NATO expansion amid Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and while the Swedish membership bid must still await a vote by Hungary's parliament, Turkey's decision is a major step forward.

Previously, Ankara had held off greenlighting Stockholm's application for nearly two years after it was submitted in May 2022, and the issue became symbolic of deeper dysfunction in U.S.-Turkish ties. This week's parliamentary vote promises to end that epoch, giving both Washington and Ankara an opportunity to chart a new course even as other differences persist.

## Erdogan's New Turkey as a Middle Power

**O**ver the past two decades, Turkey has experienced the equivalent of a political revolution under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The president has forged a "new Turkey" informed by his strong leadership and a publicly popular quest for regional great power status.

This shift has been evident in the foreign policy realm as well. Whereas the country's modern founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and his twentieth-century followers promoted an exclusively European and somewhat inward-looking identity, Erdogan has sought a more outward-looking role, embracing Turkey's multiple identities—European, Middle Eastern, and Eurasian, among others. In practical terms, this has meant promoting Turkey as a standalone power that openly prioritizes its own interests over its alliances, formal or informal.

The Swedish issue is a case in point. When Turkish officials explained why they were holding up the country's NATO

application, they frequently cited Stockholm's permissive attitude toward the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Ankara's long-time nemesis and a designated terrorist group under NATO and U.S. authorities. Meanwhile, Erdogan maintained a close political rapport with Vladimir Putin and deepened Turkey's economic ties with Russia, which has categorically opposed NATO expansion. Yet Erdogan did not translate these moves into a broader strategic pivot toward Russia, instead preferring to balance (sometimes precariously) between Moscow and Washington. Turkish forces and proxies even registered various military successes against Russian-aligned actors in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus, lending credence to the country's emergence as a credible middle power capable of punching above its weight—including in the centuries-long strategic competition with Russia.

To be sure, the new Turkey still sees itself as part of the West. Yet unlike in the twentieth century, this identity is no longer exclusive or binary. Ankara now freely engages with Washington, NATO, Russia, Europe, Iran, wealthy Gulf monarchies, and other regional and global actors without feeling it has to choose a favorite partner. While twentieth-century Turkey had a deeply emotional attachment to Europe, Erdogan's Turkey is more in love with itself.

## Using Sweden's Accession as Leverage

**W**hen Stockholm applied to join NATO in 2022, Turkey played hardball, forcing the Swedish government to legislate and implement new counterterrorism measures targeting the PKK and other Kurdish entities, especially their local fundraising networks. The Biden administration agreed with some of these Turkish concerns but did not want them to delay Sweden's accession amid the mounting Ukraine crisis. Washington therefore encouraged Turkish and Swedish officials to work together on addressing these issues expeditiously.

In Ankara, however, security elites were sure that the United States would make concessions if they continued delaying on Sweden. Specifically, they wanted to end the de facto U.S. embargo on weapons sales to Turkey that had been in place ever since Ankara purchased Russian S-400 missile defense systems in 2017. They also hoped to end the cold-shoulder treatment from Biden, the only U.S. president who has not invited Erdogan to the White House in the two decades the Turkish leader has held power.

So far, developments have proven these elites correct. After Turkey speedily ratified NATO accession for Finland, which had applied alongside Sweden, Washington realized that Stockholm could be left out in the cold indefinitely and devised a strategy to court Ankara. Most notably, the administration signaled that if Turkey ratified Sweden's bid, the White House would work to lift the congressional hold on Ankara's longstanding request to purchase forty F-16 fighter jets and modernize seventy-nine aircraft in its existing fleet. U.S. officials also hinted that an Erdogan visit to Washington would be considered.

## The Path Ahead for Swedish Accession

**T**he parliamentary vote indicates that Sweden's bid is now on autopilot as far as Ankara is concerned (though Hungary may try to [extract concessions \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-feels-no-urgency-regarding-swedens-nato-accession-parliament-speaker-2024-01-25/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-feels-no-urgency-regarding-swedens-nato-accession-parliament-speaker-2024-01-25/) of its own before approving accession). The government published the outcome in Turkey's Official Gazette on January 25, signaling a desire to secure a White House visit for Erdogan soon, ideally before the country's nationwide local elections on March 31. Formalizing the process in this manner was likely Ankara's way of avoiding a scenario in which U.S. outreach to Erdogan is seen as interference in Turkey's local polls.

Next, Ankara will need to deposit the necessary documents (i.e., the "Instrument of Accession") at the U.S. State Department verifying Turkish approval of Sweden's accession, per NATO's charter. The department would then notify Congress of the administration's intention to sell new F-16s and modernization kits to Turkey—in fact, this may reportedly happen [as early as next week \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/state-department-notify-congress-turkeys-f-16-sale-sources\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/state-department-notify-congress-turkeys-f-16-sale-sources). Erdogan could then conceivably receive a formal White

## Status of the SDF Issue

A recent news story (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/pentagon-floats-plan-its-syrian-kurd-allies-partner-assad-against-isis>) suggested that the U.S. government might also revise its policy toward the Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG). Since 2014, Washington has relied on the YPG, the main group within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), to fight the Islamic State. Yet the YPG is an offshoot of the PKK, so Ankara has objected to the partnership from the start.

From Ankara's perspective, this issue has hollowed out the bilateral relationship for years. Hence, even a suggestion that Washington might revisit its YPG policy could give Turkey sufficient reason to embrace a new era of ties with the United States.

## Contours of a New Relationship?

Despite the prospects for positive change, improving bilateral ties does not mean the U.S.-Turkey relationship is returning to its factory settings, nor that Ankara is coming back to the U.S. fold. The best way for U.S. officials to approach the new Turkey is to acknowledge that it is neither leaving nor embracing the West. Rather, Erdogan's Turkey is a multi-aligned country that sits comfortably where it wishes on any given geopolitical issue, whether the Ukraine war, conflict in the South Caucasus, or instability in the Middle East. This posture enables Ankara to remain in the limelight and hedge against almost any actor even as it remains part of the NATO alliance. In Ukraine, for instance, it has supported Kyiv militarily during the war while maintaining economic ties with Russia.

After winning the 2023 presidential election, Erdogan no longer faces (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogans-russian-victory>) any significant domestic challenges, so he is entering the legacy-building phase of his career. Having revolutionized the country's politics and reshaped its geopolitical identity, he now wants to leave behind a positive legacy for both Turkey (as a nation with good international standing) and himself (as a statesman rather than a polarizing politician).

Erdogan's apparent shift presents the White House with an opportunity to engage with his new Turkey and leverage his regional and global influence in today's era of growing great power competition. Either way, Washington should come to terms with the fact that the old Turkey is not coming back.

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