Erdogan Works Up a Plan to Mend Ties with the US/EU

Even though the Biden administration did not invite Erdogan to the “democracy summit”, changing geo-political circumstances – in particular, the West (EU and the US) vs. Russia tensions around the former’s bid to expand NATO to Ukraine – seem to have changed, at least in Turkey’s eyes, Ankara’s importance for the West. From being a NATO pariah for past few years, Ankara seems to be crawling its way back as a key player that can mediate between the West and Russia. Although it remains to be seen whether both Russia and the West would want Turkey’s mediation, for Ankara the on-going situation does present a hitherto unavailable opportunity to reset it ties with the West on the whole. The plan was put into action in a recent meeting between Erdogan and EU ambassadors on January 13 in Ankara when Erdogan reiterated Turkey’s dream to join the EU bloc, calling it a “strategic priority” and a necessary step towards acting “with a long term strategic perspective rather than prejudices or fears.”

This push for a strategic reset has its roots in Ankara’s calculation that the US wants Turkey on its side in the emerging tensions with Russia. With Turkey being the second biggest military power within NATO, its support for Russia in any future conflict would weaken NATO from within. As a pro-Erdogan Turkish newspaper recently noted, in any possible conflict with Russia, the US would mobilise NATO rather than using its own military alone. This gives Ankara a chance to reset its troubled ties with the US. As the report further noted, “

“After all, at this very moment, the position that Turkey will take in the confrontation between Russia, the NATO alliance and the United States is more vital than ever. As a proven and indispensable member..."
Ankara’s projections seem to have a valid ground. As reports in the western media have highlighted, the Biden administration is already weighing a Turkish proposal to buy a fleet of F-16 jets – a deal that many in Turkey’s policy making circles think could be vital for rescuing the US-Turkey ties from the state of dysfunction caused by the US support for Kurdish militias and Ankara’s decision to buy the Russian S-400 system.

It was with this in mind that Erdoğan’s key aide Ibrahim Kalın met Biden’s National Security Advisor in the second week of January. As the statement issued after the meeting shows, Ankara was particularly keen to project its role as a regional mediator – a strategic balancer – for the US. Ibrahim stressed that the “Ukraine crisis should be resolved through dialogue” and that Turkey is “determined to continue its role in ensuring peace and stability in the Balkans, Caucasus, Middle East, Central Asia and Africa.”

To a significant extent, the broad range of issues discussed in this meeting indicate Ankara’s willingness to calibrate its foreign policy in ways to bring it more in line with the US than has been the case during past few years.

Turkey’s emphatic projections of its foreign policy recalibration has also led to the re-opening of US-Ankara talks over F-35 fighter jets. In the 2nd week of January, Turkey’s defence minister, Hulusi Akar, confirmed that Turkish and the US officials will meet soon to discuss F-35.

It is again in keeping with its overall policy of rapprochement with the West that Ankara has taken steps to reset its ties with Israel as well. On January 18, Erdoğan confirmed that his Israeli counterpart may visit Ankara soon to chart a way to develop a mode of cooperation based upon mutual “win-win.” This rapprochement involves Turkey’s push to bring Mediterranean gas to Europe via Turkey instead of via disputed territories claimed by both Turkey and Greece.

Roots of this rapprochement again have roots in how the US is itself cosying up to Ankara in the wake of Washington’s tensions with Russia. As US officials recently confirmed, the US no longer supports the project because it is creating regional tensions with Turkey.

Turkey has logically seen in the US decision a signal for itself to step up. As Erdoğan said, “[If Israeli gas] would be brought to Europe, it could only be done through Turkey. Is there any hope for now? We can sit and talk about the conditions.”

While it is generally believed that Turkey’s politics of maintaining ties with the West and Russia makes it walk a tight rope, the fact of the matter is that Turkey sees walking this rope as a potential gateway to playing a big power role. Policy makers in Ankara think that maintaining good ties with both the West and Russia and offering to play a mediating role in conflict scenario has the potential to bring major geo-political dividends insofar as it allows Turkey to exploit global tensions to secure its vital interests, such as meeting its military needs by buying weapon systems from both sides.

Playing on both sides of global geo-political spectrum also allows Turkey a strategic leverage vis-à-vis its rivals within the wider Muslim world, in particular the UAE and Saudi Arabia, both of which are having troubled ties with the US within the current scenario.

While Erdoğan sees in this scenario a real potential for realising Turkey’s goal to reposition itself as a key global player, it is obvious that the very foundation of this policy is highly unstable. The fact that it crucially depends on the state of West-Russia ties means that any meaningful improvement in their ties, or a long-term absence of any crisis situation, could erode the importance of Turkey for both the West and Russia within a changed scenario. Therefore, while Ankara thinks it needs to cultivate ties with both sides, it is yet to find a foundation that is both durable and not subject to the state of affairs between Russia and the West.

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of NATO, Turkey is an important strategic partner for both sides.”