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TURKEY-U.S. RELATIONS IN THE CHANGING TRANSATLANTIC CONTEXT

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Introduction

As Joe Biden became the 46th President of the United States, the country entered a new era of restoration both at home and abroad. U.S. foreign policy is not immune to this period of change. America's re-joining of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris Climate Accord immediately after Biden's inauguration as well as the reactions of top officials in the Biden administration to Alexei Navalny's arrest in Russia are early testaments to the emerging characteristics of the new U.S. foreign policy under Biden. We argue in this paper that these characteristics will have a defining impact on the shape and nature of transatlantic relations as well as on U.S. relations with Turkey.

U.S. Foreign Policy under the Biden Administration: Tracing the Main Contours of Change

At the most general and paradigmatic level, one can discern five key areas where the Biden presidency will radically differ from, as well as break with, the Trump presidency.

The first area where change is expected concerns the establishment of a **new realist-liberal modus vivendi to strengthen American leadership** (or hegemony) in world politics. This new framework will fundamentally prioritize security through enhancing America's political and institutional relations with key global organizations (NATO, EU, UN, WHO, WTO). The realist establishment, which was disturbed by Trump's incoherent, leader-based, and ineffective foreign policy, now aims at re-establishing American leadership not only at the state level but also at the nexus of the state and institutions. The past four years of the Trump administration have heightened the anxiety of the realist establishment to the extent that they now want to draw lessons from this era and empower global institutions alongside security concerns. The liberal establishment, on the other hand, thinks that the Biden presidency's multilateral and transatlantic approach can be successfully implemented through closer dialogue with realists in devising policies along the security-democracy nexus.

The second area where change will most likely be observed is the promotion of **active and assertive diplomacy in foreign policy implementation**, where hard and soft power will be combined. Different from the Obama administration and breaking with the Trump administration, assertive diplomacy with a transformative power will be brought to the fore in order to leverage U.S. foreign policy in both practice and perception, ranging from the regional to the global scale.

The third fundamental change that is expected relates to the inclusiveness of U.S. foreign policy-making. The new administration is expected to follow an **inclusive approach to foreign policy-making** by strengthening institutional links with government institutions, think tanks, media, and universities, activating a deliberative process of decision-making and returning the White House back to the strong and respected institution it once was. This would revitalize American leadership on a global-regional scale and increase its leverage.

The fourth, related change will be the new administration's approach to **strengthening its global engagement with democracy at home and abroad**. Biden has made clear on a number of occasions that the new administration will radically depart from the Trump administration in the way in which it will react to fundamental breaches of democracy and human rights worldwide. In this vein, it has even declared its ambition to host a global democracy summit once in power.

The final, fifth area of change concerns the state of transatlantic relations. This point is particularly related to the expected change in the approach to strengthening America's global leadership in close cooperation with like-minded international organizations and partners, most notably in Europe. The new administration is thus expected to undertake policies that aim to **enhance multilateralism in a transatlantic context**. The choice of multilateralism entails not only an attempt to break with Trump's unilateral, state/leader-centric approach and revitalizing rules-based (as well as institutions-based) multilateralism as a main modus operandi of American foreign policy, but also, in relation to the fourth point, using multilateralism as "a conditionality" for engagement in America's relations with

its allies. This conditionality will be applied in cases where authoritarian leaders have developed flexible alliances with regional hegemony competing with the West, such as Russia, Iran, and China, to gain regional and global effectiveness in the areas of security, energy, and economy. It is within this context that the future of transatlantic relations should be assessed.

The Changing Transatlantic Context

Transatlantic relations were under considerable strain during the Trump presidency, which focused on “America First” narratives and policies. This was reflected in the U.S. retreat from its multilateral orientation and its turn toward protectionism and unilateral policies, which caused major frictions with the EU and other multilateral institutions such as NATO. This came on top of the challenges posed to multilateralism by unilateral and illiberal actors such as Russia and China. Coupled with the global proliferation of populist/authoritarian movements, the rising multipolar system led to the global escalation of unilateralism. The COVID-19 crisis reinforced these trends in the international system. Hence, during the Trump administration, the EU was largely left alone in its multilateral orientation, facing increasing challenges from within the bloc including the rise of populist/authoritarian political movements in countries like Hungary and Poland and weakening ties of solidarity as demonstrated in the migration crisis and, later, the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the Biden administration in office, we are now seeing a reset of transatlantic relations through the revitalization of multilateralism. The EU is also undergoing a process of rethinking its multilateral orientation in light of past mistakes and developing an approach toward redefining multilateralism in a more inclusionary manner. So far, both sides have shown their interest in reforming multilateralism and cooperating on a common agenda. To that end, the European Commission published a proposal for “a new transatlantic agenda for global change” on December 2, 2020. The Commission aimed to seize the opportunity for reengagement with the United States in pursuit of common aims that emerged in the wake of Biden’s electoral victory. The proposal

provides a detailed list of areas of global cooperation that are based on common principles, interests, and values: working for a healthier world, protecting the planet and prosperity, technology, trade and standards, safety, and creating a more prosperous and democratic world. There is also a need to rethink the political economy of the new multilateralism, particularly the neoliberal policies that have led to social and economic inequalities on both sides of the Atlantic. This redefined multilateral orientation also needs to foster other multilateral institutions and platforms such as the WHO, WTO, G7, and G20 as well as forge partnerships with other allies to create an inclusionary and sustainable multilateral order.

Key Areas of Transatlantic Cooperation: Security, Climate Change, Economy and Democracy

In this context, we would like to draw attention to four areas where transatlantic relations urgently require closer cooperation. These areas also hold implications for Turkey’s relations with its transatlantic partners. The first one concerns **cooperation in managing the turbulent wider European neighborhood and, in particular, the Eastern Mediterranean**. The changing multilateral orientation of transatlantic allies needs to focus not only on creating more inclusionary mechanisms among themselves but also on building partnerships in turbulent neighborhoods, such as the Mediterranean and the wider Eastern neighborhood. In the past year, we have witnessed the rise of unilateral tendencies and escalation of tensions in both regions.

In the more specific case of the Eastern Mediterranean, a multitude of issues such as energy, migration, climate change, and foreign and security matters have all contributed to the escalation of tensions between both regional and European actors. Recently, the EU has been calling for a revitalized multilateral orientation in the region and, in that vein, has expressed its wish to convene an East Mediterranean Multilateral Conference in order to create a platform for dialogue among stakeholders. However, it is not yet clear how and when this conference will gather. Since both the EU and

the Biden administration have declared that they will encourage cooperation on Eastern Mediterranean issues, the Biden administration could help the EU convene such a conference as a fresh signal of its support for a renewed transatlantic relationship. Such a conference could facilitate in de-escalating tensions in the region, which otherwise bear the potential to spill over across the transatlantic alliance, strengthen unilateral tendencies, and foster alternative geopolitical orientations in the turbulent Mediterranean neighborhood. The de-escalation of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean is crucial to the revitalization of multilateralism and the lessening of the use of military means in the region, which has so far resulted in unilateral policies.

The second area where urgent cooperation is needed is that of **climate change**. While the incoming European Commission adopted the goal of transitioning to a climate-neutral economy by 2050 and identified the Green Deal as the main priority of its five-year program, its transatlantic partners during the Trump administration diverged from this position to the point of withdrawing from the major global agreement (Paris Climate Agreement) on climate change. As Biden emerged as the winner of the elections, one of his first acts was to announce that he would immediately take action to return to the Paris Climate Agreement and appoint John Kerry as his special envoy on climate. The former U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry is an experienced figure in climate diplomacy, having taken part in the negotiations of the Kyoto Protocol and signing the Paris Climate Agreement on behalf of the United States during the Obama administration. Another important action Biden took in this regard was suspending the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, a project intended to carry oil from Alberta, Canada, down to Texas, due to its environmental impact.

Moreover, climate change was among the “four overlapping and compounding crises” that were to be the subject of President Biden’s executive actions during his first ten days in office, as expressed by his Chief of Staff Ron Klain.¹ The new administration aims to adopt the goal of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, the same target as the EU, including plans for USD 2 trillion worth of green investment over the next four years.

President Biden also promised to convene a summit on climate change and expressed his conviction that the United States should assume a leadership position in the fight against this phenomenon.

With the U.S. return to the global climate regime, the European Union and the United States are now able to coordinate their policies on this issue within the framework of the Paris climate goals. Assuming the target of achieving climate neutrality will be met by 2050, and 2060 in the case of China, the three largest emitters of greenhouse gases have now converged in setting clear targets for mitigating climate change. With the Biden administration strongly supporting the goal of climate neutrality and the global regime to fight against climate change, the EU’s Green Deal also becomes increasingly viable and credible. Coordination and alignment of climate-related policies between the two transatlantic partners will foster further efforts in this regard.

A third and related area of immediate cooperation concerns **building stronger economic ties, particularly through trade**. The EU’s goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 is closely related with the desire to maintain global competitiveness and continue its leadership role in the global economy by setting green standards and trade rules for a level playing field. Hence, the coordination in the fight against climate change could easily spill over into the transatlantic trade agenda by fostering closer dialogue and coordination in devising trade rules and revitalizing multilateral trade within the framework of the WTO. Taking into account the initiation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership involving China and 14 Asia-Pacific partners on November 15, 2020, transatlantic partners now have a stronger interest in reigniting the transatlantic trade agenda. Although it will require extensive effort to revoke the negative legacy of the Trump-era tariff wars, cooperation in trade seems to be one of the foremost items on the transatlantic agenda in addition to climate change.

The EU recently concluded a Comprehensive Investment Agreement with China in the wake of President Biden’s election victory. Although this step seemed to contradict the positive expectations regarding a renewed transatlantic partner-

ship, it also reflected the lessons that Europe drew from the Trump era. President Trump's aversion to the transatlantic partnership and his frequent criticism of EU and European leaders brought attention to the need for greater European autonomy and the development of EU-only policies on many global issues. This lesson was also reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted, as noted by High Representative Josep Borrell, the EU's need to achieve strategic autonomy.² With this goal in mind, after seven years the EU felt the urge to conclude these negotiations with China and signed a bilateral deal that would better protect European investments in China. Trump's "America first" approach had also taught the EU to assume a "Europe first" policy. While the Biden era promises to lead to much more convivial relations between the two sides, it should also be kept in mind that retrenchment increasingly seems to be an EU priority and that there is considerable mistrust, even in Germany, in how sustainable a revamped transatlantic partnership will be in the long run.

The fourth area where we see the need for urgent transatlantic cooperation is in the field of **supporting global democracy**. As we have indicated above, the Biden administration, even before assuming office, has already signaled a renewed U.S. commitment to international democracy and proposed a U.S.-led summit on global democracy. The Trump administration's efforts to roll back American democracy as well as the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol have led many to believe that the decline of democracy is increasingly becoming a national security issue for democratic states. Such moves come at a time in which the EU is struggling with its own democratic backsliding in member states like Hungary and Poland. Coordinated responses to democratic violations and active support for democratic movements in Europe and beyond could help reinvigorate international support for democracy.

Implications for Turkey

Closer coordination and leadership between the European Union and the United States in these areas and beyond present new challenges for Turkey in the coming period. It is no secret that the Biden

administration will also try to play an assertive role in setting the EU's relations with Turkey. A renewed transatlantic agenda on common values including democracy and human rights necessitates a renewed emphasis and urgency on improving Turkey's relations with the West, both with regard to strategic calculations and standards of democracy and human rights.

Taking into account the Turkish government's insistence on its regional actor status and autonomy vis-à-vis the West, the pressure resulting from a stronger transatlantic partnership in the wider European neighborhood, including the Eastern Mediterranean, may pressure the Turkish government to recalibrate its unilateralist foreign policy toward seeking greater presence in multilateral fora and initiatives such as the Eastern Mediterranean conference proposed by the EU. The EU, in its Council conclusions of December 10 on the Eastern Mediterranean, has already noted that its policy toward Turkey would be coordinated with the new U.S. administration.³ Although there had been earlier ad-hoc coordination between the United States and the European Union in their respective policies toward Turkey—with the exception of the Trump administration—this had never been made explicit in an official EU document as the United States had traditionally influenced the European Union through back-door channels in order to keep its relations with Turkey somehow intact. On the part of the United States, the new administration's key foreign policy figures, such as Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, National Security Council coordinator for Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk, and newly appointed CIA Director William Burns, as well as even Biden himself, are individuals who have good knowledge of Turkey and are known to hold skeptical, if not outright hostile, views on Turkey's leader-based presidential system and its foreign policy-making. Together with the EU, they could further narrow Turkey's room for maneuver in the Eastern Mediterranean. More optimistically, the Biden administration, together with German leadership in the EU, could help to bring and sustain Turkey's and Greece's involvement in diplomatic platforms. They could also facilitate a new outlook on the long-lasting Cyprus problem, which endangers dialogue mechanisms in the region.

Closer coordination and partnership between the European Union and the United States may also pressure Turkey to make serious choices regarding its geopolitical identity and adherence to its status as a NATO member and EU candidate country. It can be argued that the EU statement testifies to closer U.S.-EU coordination regarding the joint effort to firmly anchor Turkey into the Western camp through further engagement and facilitating mechanisms such as the proposed positive agenda with the EU or sanctions, if need be. This also implies that both parties, in particular the United States, may push Turkey to engage in reforms in the area of democracy, rule of law, and human rights in the coming years. While the Trump administration often turned a blind eye to the rapid deterioration of Turkish democracy over the last four years, Biden has already implied that this would not be the case after he assumes power. Although the EU seems to have given up on the Copenhagen political criteria regarding Turkey, given the little leverage it has left, weakened EU criticism may become emboldened with strong U.S. backing. Moreover, taking into account that the European Council is scheduled to debate relations with Turkey in its summit meeting in March, a turning point in relations that necessitates abandoning the accession process and moving toward a new kind of relationship may be inevitable. This could increase the pressure for political and legal reforms on a Turkish government that is anxious to avoid the loss of its EU perspective.

The Biden administration's emphasis on economic security as well as the promotion of democratic governance can also compel the administration to support closer economic relations between Turkey and the EU. The United States has always supported close economic cooperation between Turkey and the EU, especially at times in which relations between the two parties have soured and instability in their common neighborhood has risen. Back in the early 1990s, during the first Gulf War, when Turkey's application for membership to the EU was rejected and a new form of relations could not be found, the United States lobbied for the initiation of the negotiations between the two sides leading to the completion of the Customs Union. The Customs Union, which was completed in 1996, has not only been beneficial for Turkey in terms of increasing trade and competitiveness as well

as transforming Turkish industries via increased investments in technology, but it has also provided the legal and institutional infrastructure of a rules-based free market economy. However, over time, there has been serious backsliding in these reforms. The institutions of rules-based economic governance have been considerably weakened, and the independence and competence of regulatory institutions have been legally and effectively undermined. Instead of rules-based governance, the exercise of discretionary power has become the norm in Turkey's economic sphere. As the Biden administration turns toward this multilateral venue in economic governance, it will most likely support EU-initiated negotiations for a modernized Customs Union with Turkey. Given that certain signs of democratic progress do follow in Turkey, this process is currently regarded as the only panacea for renewing relations between the parties.

It is likely that the Biden administration, along with a significant segment of Turkish society, will wish to see a revised set of good governance conditions attached to all cooperation packages with Turkey. It will likely expect that the revamping of the Customs Union will to some extent contribute to the improvement of good governance conditions and rule of law in the country. This could also provide a push toward Turkey's adjustment to the European Green Deal, which is expected to have major influence on the Turkish economy due to its high level of economic interconnectedness with the EU.

Finally, as this new period is expected to be defined less by interpersonal relations between leaders and more by established institutional relationships between the United States and its allies, this will pose a further challenge to Turkey's relations with the United States. This will require Turkey to adopt more consistent foreign policy rhetoric and actions in dealing with transatlantic partners. Ankara will face stronger pressure from both sides to maintain consistency between its words and its actions. The Biden administration has put forward a clear foreign policy vision and strategy toward its implementation, shifting the focus of U.S. foreign policy from the country's leader to its institutions. Much of how this will impact Turkey will depend on Turkey itself and the strategic choices that it will make.

Endnotes

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