




## OPINION PAPER


# The West, China, and Russia: Who Doesn't Really Prefer Change of Power in Turkey in 2023?

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EUROPE

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## Despite All, President Erdogan is Still the Favourite Presidential Candidate

Turkey will go to the elections somewhere between May and June 2023. However, it is not possible to say that the elections would be held in a democratic environment. The 20-year Erdogan Administration has done a lot of damage to democratic institutions and the freedom of press which have ensured the elections to be held under fair conditions. According to the World Freedom Report<sup>1</sup> published by Freedom House; Turkey ranks 144th among 195 countries. According to the world press freedom index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF)<sup>2</sup>, Turkey ranks 149th among 180 countries. According to the assessment made in the report, Presidential government system caused a massive decline in press freedom in Turkey.

The backsliding of democratic values in Turkey has also disrupted economic growth. The country is going through a serious economic crisis. According to the report "Livelihood and Solidarity in Istanbul in the Clamp of the Economic Crisis" prepared by the Istanbul Planning Agency<sup>3</sup>, the middle class, which constitutes the backbone of the society, is becoming increasingly poor and even has difficulty procuring basic foodstuffs. Income distribution inequality continues to worsen. Inflation is higher in Turkey than in Russia and Ukraine, which are at war. The Turkish lira (TRY) is rapidly depreciating against other currencies. As a matter of fact, TRY has lost 75% value against the US dollar in the last 18 months. Border provinces such as Edirne and Artvin are full of Bulgarian and Georgian citizens coming to Turkey for shopping cheaper. Although Turkey has the second largest army in NATO, Turkey's eastern and southern borders are easily crossed by refugees who want to travel to Europe. Due to the rapidly increasing refugee population, the demographic structure of Turkish society is also changing. The fact that a part of the society considers refugees as the reason of the ongoing economic crisis causes an increase in the feeling of hatred in the society.

However, despite all these negative developments, President Erdogan is still the favourite candidate in the polls for the 2023 Presidential elections. According to the public opinion survey conducted by Metropoll Research Company in October 2022; 46.3% of the society supports the People's Alliance consisting of the ruling AKP and its nationalist partner MHP, while the support given to the Nation Alliance representing the opposition front is 36.9%<sup>4</sup>. These figures point out that a considerable part of Turkish society will prefer President Erdogan and the People's Alliance to the opposition front by hoping that the current problems will be solved if President Erdogan can once again be elected as president.

There are multiple reasons behind this political picture. First of all, Erdogan Administration controls the conventional media outlets that can shape the public perception and uses social media platforms intensively for political propaganda. Opposition block on the other hand, cannot make effective opposition and cannot devise policies to convince the electorate that they can solve the current problems facing the entire country. In addition, latest foreign policy developments have helped create the conditions that President Erdogan can use to increase his political support.

## Great Power Struggle is Noteful for the Erdogan Administration to Remain in Power

Lately, the UK published **the Integrated Review**, EU released **Strategic Compass** and NATO announced its **Strategic Concept** documents. The common point that stands out in these documents

<sup>1</sup> <https://freedom.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

<sup>2</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/index>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ipa.istanbul/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Ekonomik-Krizin-Krizin-Kiskacinda-Istanbulda-Gecim-Ve-Dayanisma-Arastirmasi.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/metropoll/status/1586001009574289408>

is that the world has now evolved from a unipolar system to a multipolar system and the great power struggle has begun. The United States, the hegemonic power of the world order established after World War II, entered into a great power struggle with China, the rising power. The power struggle, which started between great powers, also provided more room for manoeuvre in international politics to medium and small-scale powers such as Turkey.

For this reason, in order to understand the future of Turkey and the Erdogan Administration and to position Turkey in the right place, it is necessary to understand the great power struggle and the room for manoeuvre that this struggle provides to Turkey. Although the US categorizes the ongoing process as a struggle between democracies and autocracies, at the end of the day, realism dominates the international system due to the great power struggle. Therefore, countries determine the nature and future of their relations based on realistic policies. In other words, they are forced to adopt an interest-based foreign policy.

An international system where the interests of the US, EU, Russia, and China are more prominent makes it easier for Turkey to establish an interest-based relationship with these powers. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022, Iran's growing influence on Iraq and Syria, the armed conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the danger of the world facing a grain and energy shortage crisis, create opportunities for Erdogan Administration to come to the fore diplomatically.

The world order established after World War II pushed Turkey to the NATO ranks and as a result, the rapprochement in Turkish-American relations changed the political dynamics of the country and made relations with the US and Europe an important political parameter. In 2002, the AKP came to power with a clear majority. AKP's political discourse that it would work in harmony with the US and the EU was effective in that election victory. On the one hand, the US military aid and the financial and technical support provided for the modernization of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) shaped the nature of the relations with US, and on the other hand, the process of full membership in the EU and the regulations to be made were the driving force behind the democratization process in Turkey between 2003-2010.

It is clearer today that priority of the governments in Turkey within the domain of foreign policy was the harmonious relations with US and the EU until 15 July 2016. However, due to the political climate that emerged after 15 July 2016 and the tensions between Turkey and the West, Erdogan Administration developed intense ties with Russia rapidly. For this reason, while analysing the presidential elections in Turkey to be held in 2023, one needs to consider not only internal dynamics but also the external dynamics.

## **Is Change of Power in Turkey in 2023 in Line with the US Interests?**

The conditions that emerged after the military coup attempt on 15 July 2016 helped President Erdogan to strengthen his control and dominance over key state institutions. In that respect, President Erdogan formed a coalition that included nationalists and neo-nationalists. With the Decree Laws, he made radical changes within the Turkish Armed Forces and affiliated the Force Commands and the General Staff to the Ministry of National Defense. Furthermore, he retired Hulusi Akar, who was the Chief of General Staff during the 15 July 2016 coup attempt and appointed him as the Minister of National Defense in 2018. Afterwards, Hulusi Akar was appointed as the Minister of Defense and he established a new balance of power in TAF against the nationalist, neo-nationalist and Kemalist generals he cooperated with after 15 July 2016 coup attempt. President Erdogan is deeply convinced that keeping TAF under his control is vital for maintaining his political power. Accordingly, Hulusi Akar has promoted military personnel close to him within the TAF since 2018. He also retired many influential nationalists and Kemalist military personnel and ensured full control at the TAF.

Turkish-American relations have mostly progressed through the Turkish General Staff - Pentagon and foreign ministries of both countries. However Turkish Armed Forces lost its influence on a certain extent both in domestic and foreign policy issues and Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs lost control of the Turkish foreign policy massively. Therefore, the nature of Turkish-American relations changed in institutional sense. Turkey's purchase of the S-400 Air Defense System from Russia on 12 July 2019 and the military operations conducted against the Syrian Democratic Forces - PYD (Operation Olive Branch in 2018, Operation Peace Spring in 2019 and the Operation Spring Shield in 2020), which the US cooperated in the fight against ISIS, caused a mistrust against Turkey in the Pentagon since 2018.

Turkey's latest attempt to determine maritime jurisdiction in line with Blue Homeland Doctrine through "coercive diplomacy" by using its military power in the Eastern Mediterranean brought Turkey and Greece to the brink of war. In the Eastern Mediterranean, an anti-Turkey coalition supported by the US has been established between Greece-Israel and Southern Cyprus since 2016. The US has upgraded its military ties with Greece to a strategic level, and the Suda Base in the Island of Crete and the Port of Alexandroupolis have become the ports used by the US. Although the US develops options that can be an alternative to Turkey in terms of military strategy, it is more important for the US that Turkey under President Erdogan, which is geopolitically in the position of "axis country", has a predictable structure and does not completely shift to the China-Russia-Iran axis in the great power struggle.

The biggest problem for the US Administration is that the opposition in Turkey is still not able to create a strong alternative against President Erdogan and they are not consolidated. The opposition is currently not creating a predictable image for the US. The stance by the Nation Alliance on Ukraine and Libya, its foreign policy preferences towards Iran and its relations with the United States/NATO are not yet clear. Especially the anti-imperialist and anti-Western rhetoric of the Kemalist nationalist groups within the CHP and the IYI Party does not give confidence to the US about the future of the Nation Alliance. For the United States, President Erdogan is an autocratic leader, but not an unpredictable one. There are political *devices* as Sezgin Baran Korkmaz case and Halk Bank case that can make President Erdogan change his stance on any given issue at any time.

Furthermore, the latest steps taken by the Erdogan Administration to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and Egypt can be interpreted as signs that it will normalize relations with the United States after the elections in 2023. Three Sea Initiatives including Black Sea, Baltic and Adriatic Sea developed by the US to connect Central and Eastern European Countries and Baltic and Balkan Countries economically can become a stronger initiative too with the participation of Turkey. On the other hand, the normalization of relations between Israel and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean can facilitate the establishment of the commercial and logistical network that the US is trying to establish between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. For this reason, Turkey's normalization of its relations with Israel, UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which are the key countries in the regional integration projects that the US intends to establish, can also be read as indirect rapprochement efforts with the US.

Thus, President Erdogan offers a more predictable future for Turkey to the United States. Multiple relevant institutions in the United States are convinced that President Erdogan will win the upcoming presidential elections and act accordingly. For instance, the National Defence and Authorisation Act came to Congress recently and statements linking the sale of F-16s to Turkey to conditions such as the non-infringement of Greek airspace were removed. In fact, the pro-Turkey attitude of the Biden Administration was effective in removing these statements. As a result, Turkey is a country that can be cooperated against the expansionist movements of Russia and Iran towards the Caucasus, the

Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, Syria and Iraq. President Erdogan is a utilitarian leader, and, in this respect, the United States is determined to benefit from Erdogan Administration in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, Central Asia, Libya and the Balkans.

## **Does the EU Really Want Erdogan Administration to Lose the 2023 Elections?**

There are several aspects of the issue for the EU. More precisely, the EU is currently the actor with the highest foreign investment in Turkey. For this reason, Turkey's relative stability is a situation preferred by the EU. Second, Turkey is currently holding millions of irregular migrants from the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan, preventing them from crossing into the EU. This prevents the far right from finding more ground in the EU, as well as contributing to the preservation of the demographic structure in Europe.

This being said multiple EU member states plan to shift their economic ties with China to a new domain where the EU will no longer depend on China, which is why they are trying to secure supply chains for critical products such as rare metals, lithium-ion batteries and chips. Turkey can now become an alternative production centre thanks to its cheap labour force and proximity to the EU. A possible social movement or political instability in Turkey will affect the EU member states the most due to the proximity of the borders. For this reason, the EU, like the US, will prefer Turkey to have a predictable political structure.

Moreover, due to the war between Russia and Ukraine, the EU has turned to alternative sources of gas supplies. In that respect, Azerbaijan plans to increase the gas transported by the TANAP pipeline by another 10 billion cubic meters. Under normal circumstances, the additional gas to be supplied by Azerbaijan according to the TANAP treaty should remain in Turkey. While in a parliamentary system in Turkey, the EU would need to convince the Council of Ministers and the Turkish Parliament to receive additional gas, it will however be sufficient for the EU under the current circumstance in Turkey to reach a compromise with President Erdogan unilaterally, who controls all power centers in the Presidential Government model.

Similarly, it was Erdogan Administration that blocked the seismic research and drilling activities of Total and ENI companies in the Eastern Mediterranean between 2018-2020 with naval warships. However, President Erdogan took a step back as a result of the EU threatening Turkey with economic sanctions at the EU Heads of State and Government Summit<sup>5</sup> held in Brussels on 25 March 2021. The EU knows President Erdogan well enough. For the EU, President Erdogan is currently the most predictable leader in Turkey, and the EU has the necessary experience and knowledge on how to get President Erdogan to do what it wants. President Erdogan will also be a preferred leader for the EU, as long as he does not cross the red lines such as blocking the activities of ships carrying out seismic research and drilling activities on behalf of the EU, trying to delay the EuroAsia Interconnector project that will connect Israel, South Cyprus and the EU power lines in a world where the great power struggle will intensify and realism will come to the fore more.

## **Silence by Erdogan Administration on Uighur Turks is a Priority for China**

Turkey is an important economic market and a hub of direct investment for China. However, the most important issue in relations with Turkey for China is the issue of Uighur Turks. The Erdogan Administration prefers to remain silent against the genocide applied by China to the Uighur Turks. An interesting example pointing out China's approach towards Turkish opposition is about an exchange of undiplomatic words between Chinese Embassy in Ankara and multiple opposition

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ab.gov.tr/siteimages/birimler/kpb/council\\_conclusions/zirve\\_karari-24-25\\_mart\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ab.gov.tr/siteimages/birimler/kpb/council_conclusions/zirve_karari-24-25_mart_2021.pdf)

leaders in Turkey. More precisely, in a tweet posted by the official Twitter account<sup>6</sup> of the IYI Party on 6 April 2021, it was stated that China committed genocide against Uighur Turks. Thereupon, the Chinese Embassy in Ankara issued a harsh statement directly targeting IYI Party Leader Meral Akşener and Ankara Metropolitan Mayor Mansur Yavaş on its official Twitter account. From the perspective of China, the possibility of a leader other than President Erdogan coming to power in Turkey and the policy of ignoring the Uighur Turks being changed is not a preferable scenario. Therefore, President Erdogan is the leader that China can best get along with in Turkey.

## Russia Needs Turkey under President Erdogan

The situation is quite clear for Russia. Turkey is now Russia's gateway to the world. There is a relationship between President Erdogan and President Putin that only the two of them know exactly what it is. Russia is violating the Western sanctions through Turkey. Russian grain and oil are and will be marketed more to the world through Turkey in the near future. The Erdogan Administration interprets and implements the Montreux Straits Convention in a way that serves the security of Russia in the Black Sea. Sunflower, wheat and barley obtained from the territory of the occupied Ukraine are sold to Middle East and African countries through Turkey. President Putin plans to sell gas to Europe through parallel pipelines to the TurkStream Pipeline.

Furthermore, Russia obtained a commercial port in the Eastern Mediterranean using the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant Treaty. What is more concerning is that Russia plans to deploy an air radar and air defense missiles in the area to protect the nuclear power plant. President Erdogan needs to be re-elected in order for Russia to sustain these gains. For that reason, Russia decided that the payments to be made by Turkey's BOTAS due to its debts to Gazprom were postponed until 2024. By transferring 15.2 billion USD in two parts to Turkey for the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant via Gazprom Bank, Russia helped Central Bank of Turkey to increase its foreign exchange reserves and Turkey survived a possible payment crisis. In addition, Russia provides support to President Erdogan before the upcoming elections by carrying out activities such as not increasing natural gas prices, selling Russian oil at discounted prices, and providing loans through Gazprom Bank.

## Instead of Conclusion

For the EU and the United States, it is important that Turkey has a politically predictable and stable government. Despite all the negative conditions, the fact that the Nation Alliance did not increase its vote and that the popular support behind the AKP continued to be around 40% shows that the opposition in Turkey could so far not be very effective. For this reason, the EU and the US consider President Erdogan as a more stable option for Turkey's stability. Since President Erdogan knows with whom, under what conditions and how to negotiate, he also benefits from the conjuncture created by the great power struggle and continues his influence in Syria, Libya, Ukraine and the Eastern Mediterranean without crossing the red lines drawn by the US and the EU.

However, there is something that the EU, the United States and NATO in particular should take into account. Thanks to the single-man regime established by President Erdogan, the middle class that support democratic development in Turkey is diminishing, and institutions such as TAF and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which play a leading role in the democratization of Turkey, are losing their influence. Today, the West is somehow postponing the problems by managing the process with President Erdogan, but this situation also creates the ground within itself that will cause bigger problems between Turkey and the West in the near future. In order for Turkey to enter the path of

<sup>6</sup>[https://twitter.com/iyiparti/status/1379447585971314688?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Cwterm%5E1379447585971314688%7Ctwgr%5E9843107693fd721799cd6d9e8876a81ed4ef6d6a%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Furonews.com%2F2021%2F04%2F06%2Fcin-in-ankara-buyukciligi-nden-aksener-ve-yavas-a-dogu-turkistan-tehdidi](https://twitter.com/iyiparti/status/1379447585971314688?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Cwterm%5E1379447585971314688%7Ctwgr%5E9843107693fd721799cd6d9e8876a81ed4ef6d6a%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Furonews.com%2F2021%2F04%2F06%2Fcin-in-ankara-buyukciligi-nden-aksener-ve-yavas-a-dogu-turkistan-tehdidi)

democratization with its own internal dynamics, the EU and the United States must first force President Erdogan on democratization and press freedom and convince him that they will not remain silent against anti-democratic regulations and actions. Otherwise, it is impossible for Turkey to escape from this vicious cycle of authoritarianism.

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