

CATS Network Roundup



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the CATS Network Roundup of news, developments, and assessments on relevant issues of Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy.

The election of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States will mark a significant shift in its foreign policy. We look at **how Ankara is likely to approach Trump's presidency**, assess the **situation in the Middle East**, and shed some light on **issues in US-Turkish relations**.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please e-mail us at cats@swp-berlin.org.

On the Spot



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With Donald Trump's election victory, the **Turkish government is preparing for a new chapter in its relations with Washington**. Turkey, a NATO ally with a history of both cooperation and tensions with Washington, will likely approach Trump's presidency with cautious optimism, recognising that his unpredictability could offer both diplomatic opportunities and potential challenges.

Ankara, known for preferring personal diplomacy, may view Trump's relationship-oriented approach as a strategic advantage. During his first term, **Trump provided Tayyip Erdoğan with a direct line of communication** – a personal phone number – highlighting the importance he placed on their rapport and bypassing bureaucratic channels. Erdoğan's congratulatory call to Trump upon his election and their immediate post-election [discussion of key issues on the phone](#) signal the likelihood of this personal dynamic continuing.

A major point of contention between the United States and Turkey remains Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defence system, which led to its exclusion from the F-35 programme and the imposition of US sanctions under the first Trump administration. Rejoining this programme during Trump's second term is unlikely, as the F-35 programme has continued with other participants filling Turkey's former role. Nonetheless, **Erdoğan recently signalled Turkey's willingness to address the S-400 issue**, possibly seeing Trump as a more receptive counterpart for a resolution than the Biden administration. However, even with Trump's support, selling F-35 jets to Turkey remains challenging.

NATO continues to be Turkey's most significant institutional tie to the Western alliance. Trump's [scepticism towards NATO](#) introduces uncertainty for Turkey's strategic calculus. **If NATO's role in European security weakens, Turkey will seek greater autonomy in its defence and security posture**. Ankara might simultaneously deepen ties with non-Western allies while exploring European security partnerships.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, Trump has expressed a desire [to resolve the conflict swiftly](#), **advocating for a reassessment of America's role and encouraging Europe to take on greater responsibility**. Ankara appears supportive of Trump's approach. [In recent statements](#), Erdoğan emphasised the importance of a solution-oriented approach from a potential Trump administration. Given Turkey's delicate ties with Russia, a resolution to the Black Sea conflict that avoids [granting either Ukraine or Russia clear dominance aligns with Turkey's interests](#).

The Gaza conflict is another point of contention between Ankara and Washington. **Trump's unwavering support for Israel**, exemplified by the Abraham Accords and the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, **stands in stark contrast to Turkey's advocacy for Palestinian rights and a two-state solution**. While Ankara may struggle to reconcile these differences, it sees a ceasefire as an opportunity [to reclaim its role as a regional mediator](#), a position that was diminished under the Biden administration.

Turkey's security concerns in Syria, particularly regarding Kurdish forces, will be influenced by Trump's stance on the US military presence in the region. Although Trump has previously advocated for reducing US involvement, such decisions require careful consideration. A rapid withdrawal could alter the power dynamics. Yet, Ankara hopes that a mutual agreement in Syria can be reached under a renewed Trump administration. Such an agreement would ideally involve **the United States scaling back its support for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and promoting a resolution that curtails Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria**, aligning with Turkey's security interests.

The extent to which Trump's second term might address longstanding issues in Turkey-US relations will largely depend on his foreign policy team, regional developments, and the evolving rapport between the two leaders. A notable shift has already occurred, however: **Trust in the United States has eroded across the region**. Turkey and other countries increasingly view regional issues as instruments of US domestic politics, a trend that is likely to have lasting consequences. This erosion of trust is prompting regional capitals to seek greater independence in defence matters, reduce reliance on US support, and diversify their alliances – [a pattern of strategic autonomy that has been steadily unfolding](#).

When Trump was first elected in 2016, Ankara welcomed a US administration that downplayed democratic pressures, which aligned well with its domestic priorities. **Over the past eight years, democratic concerns have continued to fade from the US foreign policy agenda, including under the Biden administration**. Now, in Trump's second term, Ankara's focus has shifted from domestic alignment to strategic calculations, examining how shifts in US leadership might advance its strategic interests and create new opportunities for bargaining and influence. (Evren Balta)

Three Questions for...

Alan Makovsky is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, a Washington, DC-based think tank. He has previously worked at the US State Department and the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives.

Whereas Joe Biden strengthened the transatlantic commitment against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, Trump's strong transactional approach raises concerns and uncertainty among foes and allies. How will the new administration's policy in the Black Sea region change?

Predicting Trump is treacherous. He cultivates unpredictability, has few known principles, and will not run for re-election again, so he will face few, if any, political constraints. But he has made it clear he would like the Ukraine war to end quickly – which necessarily would mean on terms that favour Russia. US leverage over Ukraine is significant; the latter cannot hold out long without American assistance. Once the war is over, US Black Sea policy is likely to revert to the inconsistency of the past, with Turkey's preference for regional ownership carrying the day. There is no Trump policy per se for the Black Sea.

What does the US political transition mean for the Middle East?

On the Middle East, many assume that Trump will support Israel without qualification. This impression is reinforced by the first batch of relevant Trump appointees: Mike Waltz, Marco Rubio, and Mike Huckabee. Trump's mercurial nature and personalisation of policy should not be ignored, however. Trump did not speak to Netanyahu for years because the latter congratulated Biden while Trump was still trying to overturn the 2020 election. In 2024, Trump had surprising electoral success with Arab-Americans, while American Jews, as usual, voted roughly 80 per cent for the Democrat. During the campaign, Trump indicated he considers Jews' opposition to him as ingratitude in light of his first-term pro-Israel policies. Trump has pledged to end the Gaza war and reportedly told Netanyahu to "finish the job" before the inauguration. Meanwhile, Vice President-elect J. D. Vance has said the United States does not want war with Iran, and Trump himself is known to be generally war-averse. Most likely, Trump will remain strongly pro-Israel, but a "blank check" for Israel is far from certain.

How will these changes affect Turkey?

Although Trump imposed sanctions on Turkey three different times, Erdoğan welcomed the return of a president to which he had such ready access. Turkey could benefit in at least one respect under Trump II. Erdoğan joins Trump in favouring a quick end to the Ukraine war, and Ankara may get a visible role in peace-making and more Western acceptance of its close ties with Moscow. The Rubio and Waltz appointments are bad news for Turkey in most respects, however. For those who thought Trump might support a generous solution to the S-400 problem or US withdrawal from Syria, the choices of Rubio and Waltz suggest otherwise. Both men have been strong critics of Turkey for everything from human rights and Erdoğan's relations with Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro to Turkey's support of Hamas and its invasion of Syria. Trump may step in at times to help his friend Erdoğan, but if Erdoğan crosses a line (however Trump defines it), Trump will cut him down to size, as he has in the past. Trump admires "strongmen" as long as they recognise that Trump is the strongest. And Trump's promised across-the-board tariffs would hurt Turkey – the United States is Turkey's number-two export market.

Interview by Michael Westrich

Recommendations

In this Turkey Book Talk episode, [Salim Çevik](#) discusses his recent SWP research paper titled ["Turkey's Reconciliation Efforts in the Middle East"](#). In conversation with William Armstrong, he discusses the successes and failures of Erdoğan's regional initiatives, such as rapprochement with the ruling regimes in Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Syria and others, the impacts of the war in Gaza, as well as the consequences of the US presidential election.

[Jens Bastian, Yaşar Aydın, and Maximiliane Schneider](#) illustrate, analyse, and visualise the dynamics and potential of German-Turkish economic relations, opportunities for trade and investment, and the strong growth potential for bilateral relations in a deep dive utilising text, graphs, tables, and interactive charts.

This series of short essays by a variety of [scholars](#) seeks to inform the Turkey debate in Washington and provide perspectives for the new administration in January 2025. The series includes a commentary by [Evren Balta](#) entitled "Trust, Power, and the Path Forward in US-Turkish Relations" as well as one by [Alan Makovsky](#) titled "Turkey: Dealing with an Unfriendly Ally".

In this Istanbul analysis, [Ömer Taşpınar](#) considers the impact of the US election on Turkish-US relations and argues that they are unlikely to deviate substantially from the current dynamic of diverging national security priorities and interests. Yet, the article provides a closer look at two key issues at stake: the Russian missile defence system in Turkey and US support for the Syrian Kurds.

A number of [Atlantic Council experts](#) analyse what the outcome of the US election means for the role of the United States and the global implications. The article answers 24 of the most pressing policy questions facing the next administration, including US-Turkey relations, global trade, the war in Ukraine, NATO, competition with China, relations with the EU, and more.

This year has been an incredible journey. We hope you've found value in our updates and stories, we're taking a short break but we'll be back in 2025.

Kind regards,

The CATS Team