

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Author: [Salman Rafi Sheikh](#)

26.04.2024

## Can Biden reset US ties with Turkey?



US President Joe Biden is all set to host Turkey's Erdoğan in the White House on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May. This visit is being seen by many as Biden's attempt to woo an estranged NATO ally at a time when a) the US "war effort" against Russia in Ukraine has persistently failed to achieve desired results, i.e., a military defeat of Russia, and when Turkey is one leading country in the Middle East that has, unlike its counterparts in the Gulf, taken a consistently anti-Israel and pro-Palestine position. Earlier this month, Turkey announced a ban on certain exports to Israel. Last week, when the US attempted to issue a [joint statement](#) condemning Iran's "attack" on Israel, it became a diplomatic fiasco. One of the key reasons that turned this effort into a failure is Turkey's decision not to sign the joint statement. While many other

countries also refused to support the US, Turkey's decision specifically divided the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In fact, the fiasco at the UN showed that the US influence is now reduced to Europe, but even that influence is fractured due to Turkey's strong exercise of strategic autonomy, making it crucial for the US to push for a rapprochement.

Turkey-US ties experienced rapid deterioration when the Trump administration, due to Turkey's decision to buy Russian air defence systems, kicked Turkey out of the F-35 programme in 2019. The Pentagon said at the time that Turkey could always be welcomed back into the programme if it got rid of the Russian S-400 system. In classical terms, this was a typical US way of telling Turkey that exercising strategic autonomy and taking legitimate steps for self-defence cannot work in the US-led world. Turkey has not gotten rid of the Russian S-400 system, which means that it will be able to negotiate with the US from a relative position of strength rather than weakness. Essentially, it implies that Biden, even though he might be prepared to offer concessions, cannot expect any significant concessions from Turkey. What, however, Turkey will be prepared to accept is, among other things, enhanced opportunities for enhancing its profile as the key mediator in the region.

In fact, Turkey is eager to expand this role, as Turkey's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told Acting Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs John Bass on April 15. This offer is especially timely because Qatar recently disclosed that it was reassessing its role as a mediator between Israel and Hamas. It means that there is geopolitical space available for it to grab and centre-stage itself in regional conflicts. This is in addition to the role that Turkey is playing between Russia and Ukraine. This way, Turkey becomes a key NATO member. But, will Turkey necessarily play for NATO?

This question requires a more nuanced analysis of Ankara's geopolitical game in the region. First of all, if the US hopes that they can make Turkey follow their line vis-à-vis Russia, that's a wrong assessment. For Turkey, Russia is not simply a source of energy; Russia is also a very useful balancer vis-à-vis the US itself. Therefore, it is in Turkey's interest to maintain a balance between Russia and the US. In the recent past, Turkey has given a clear message to the US about its ties with Russia on multiple occasions, saying that better ties with the West cannot come at the expense of ties with Russia. More importantly, this was made clear even after Turkey approved Sweden's NATO membership and the US approved a US\$ 23 billion deal to sell 40 new F-16 fighter jets.

But, even as far as energy ties with Russia are concerned, it has only seen a major boost in the past year or so. In November 2023, Turkish imports of Russian oil reached an all-time

high of 400,000 barrels per day. In 2024, it is expected to increase further because of another deal between Russia's Lukoil and Turkey's STAR refinery to supply an additional 200,000 barrels of oil per day.

Besides it, Turkey's 'energy alliance' with Russia is benefitting it in other ways too. In fact, due to the ongoing Western sanctions on Russian energy exports to the EU, Turkey has positioned itself as a regional hub for exporting Russian oil and earning billions of dollars from it. This has been possible for Turkey because of its refusal to join the US sanctions regime on Russia. This has not changed.

For this position to undergo a radical change, i.e., a Turkish decision to actually join the US sanctions regime on Russia, Ankara needs, first and foremost, an alternative source of energy. Can the US offer this?

In the last meeting between Turkey's Foreign Minister and the acting US Under Secretary for Political Affairs, energy was not reported to be a major issue of concern, which means that Russia remains critical for Turkey's energy needs. This is an indirect way of reinforcing the idea that Russia remains critical for Turkey's economy. Although the US-Turkey officials did discuss energy cooperation in the future, its importance must be understood in relation to other outstanding issues, including Turkey's objections vis-à-vis the US support for Kurdish militant groups.

How wise it would be for Ankara to enhance its energy-related dependence on the US without first resolving the issue of US support for the PKK? Such a (bad) move would allow Washington to perpetuate the PKK. Therefore, Ankara is more likely to push for the elimination of the PKK before it can agree to take steps to reduce its dependence on Russian sources and increase its dependence on the US. Continuing to import from Russia, on the other hand, makes a lot more sense primarily because it is a mutual transaction: Russia needs the Turkish market, and Ankara needs access to cheap sources of energy. In 2023, Ankara saved US\$ 2 billion by importing Russian energy.

Similar constraints are in place when it comes to soliciting Turkish role in the Israel-Palestine issue. Turkey champions itself as the leader of the Muslim world. Can it afford to relinquish this position without necessarily pushing for a permanent solution to the conflict? Plus, opposing Israel's war on Gaza has assumed a central position in Erdoğan's domestic and regional politics. A Turkish-mediated solution to the crisis, however, will benefit Erdoğan a lot. Therefore, Ankara will be keen to see whether allying with the US will offer such an opportunity or not.

In short, there are no easy choices for Biden to make and there are no easy concessions for Erdoğan to just buy into. Ankara is also aware of the fact that Trump's return to the White House can radically change all calculations and possible concessions offered by Biden. This change includes how Trump might make NATO ineffective and useless. In that scenario, Ankara will have every reason to align more closely with Russia and China than its NATO allies.

25.04.2024

***Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan's foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook"***