

What to Expect When Biden, Erdogan Meet

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Expectations are soaring in Ankara over the forthcoming meeting between US President Joe Biden and his Turkish counterpart Recep Erdogan on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Brussels on June 14. Erdogan said recently, “I believe that our meeting with Mr. Biden at the NATO summit will be the harbinger of a new era.”

Without doubt, the US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s remarks at a White House briefing on Monday on Biden’s first presidential tour abroad carried positive vibes — that Biden is looking forward to reviewing the “full breadth” of Ankara-Washington ties and discuss Eastern Mediterranean, Syria, Afghanistan and other regional issues as part of an “expansive agenda” next week, while acknowledging that the two leaders will also look at the “significant differences” between the two NATO allies.

Most important, Sullivan transmitted a “presidential message” to Erdogan personally:

“President Biden knows Erdogan very well. The two men have spent a good amount of time together and they’re both, I think, looking forward to the opportunity to really have a business-like opportunity to review the full breadth of the relationship.”

The conventional wisdom amongst analysts is that the US and Turkey are hopelessly entangled in a messy relationship. But then, the two countries also have a long history of sequestering their alliance from deep differences. At the present moment, what lends enchantment to the Turkish American alliance is that Washington consistently regarded Turkey as a “swing” state which can tilt the West’s relations with Russia.

Add to that now a further dimension, with an eye on Turkey’s unique geography, as regards the US’ prioritisation of China’s exclusion from the western world. There’s no gainsaying that the upcoming meeting in Brussels will be a high-stakes affair.

With a touch of exaggeration, perhaps, one can even say that Biden’s meetings with Erdogan (June 14) and Putin (June 16) are joined at the hips. In almost all the “talking points” that Sullivan singled out — Eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Afghanistan — Russia is a sleeping partner.

And more so, if we recognise that an “expansive agenda” cannot but include the entire

swathe of the region where Europe and Eurasia overlap, which is turning into a theatre of contestation between the US (NATO) and Russia — from Central Asia to the Caspian and Caucasus; and, from the Black Sea northward across Ukraine.

To be sure, the Biden administration is preparing well for the upcoming meeting with Erdogan. To borrow an expression that Sullivan used to graphically thumb sketch Vladimir Putin, Erdogan too is a “a singular kind of personalised leader, and having the opportunity to come together in a summit will allow us to manage this relationship and stand up and defend American values most effectively.”

Much preparatory work has been undertaken. Two top US diplomats travelled to Ankara in recent weeks for consultations — Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman and the US ambassador to the United Nations (who carries cabinet rank), Linda Thomas-Greenfield. The State Department announced that Sherman would “underscore the importance of the US-Turkey relationship as we work together with our NATO ally to confront mutual challenges, and discuss areas of concern.”

The US Mission to the UN at New York said in an announcement last week that Thomas-Greenfield would discuss “opportunities to strengthen the US- Turkey relationship, work with our NATO ally to address global challenges (and) improve cooperation on Syria.” A senior US diplomat at the New York mission called this “a moment of intense engagement” with senior Turkish officials ahead of the Biden-Erdogan meeting.

The US diplomat added that Turkey is “a critical NATO ally, and we have a strategic relationship that spans an enormous breadth of issues and concerns, including global and regional security issues, obviously, economic issues related to democracy and human rights.”

The Turkish side too began preparing for the Biden-Erdogan meeting through past several weeks since Biden pronounced on April 24 the taboo “Armenian genocide” — after the 1915 wartime massacres under the Ottoman Rule. It was a red line for Turkey and Ankara should have reacted harshly — ranging from a closure of the Incirlik are base to the US or even stopping the operations of the ABM radar base in Malatya-Kurecik in eastern Turkey, a strategic asset of the western alliance system in encircling Russia.

But Biden’s profound experience in international diplomacy was on display when he put a call through to Erdogan prior to making the announcement on the Armenian genocide and offered to meet in Brussels in June.

Interestingly, prior to that phone conversation, Sullivan made a call (April 23) with Erdogan’s top aide İbrahim Kalın where they reached a “consensus” on the exact wording that Biden would use in his announcement the next day whereby the blame for the Armenian genocide would be placed at the doorsteps of the dying Ottoman Empire and ensure Ankara wouldn’t be wrestling with compensation lawsuits in American courts by the heirs of Armenians who fled to the US in 1915 or after.

Sullivan’s tactful diplomacy and Biden’s gracious gesture had a magical effect on Erdogan. By the way, a third call also came from Washington to Ankara to follow up on Biden’s conversation with Erdogan: this time around, State Secretary Antony Blinken called his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.

Indeed, three top-level calls from Washington to Ankara within two hours on April 23! They ensured that Biden's announcement on April 24 all but became a non-event. Suffice to say, Biden's highly inflammatory announcement has since become a damp squib. The highly excitable Turks have since moved on.

The episode testifies to the inherent strength and resilience of Turkish-American alliance. This is the touchstone to apply to reassess Turkey's current "Islamist" ruling elite. The point is, amidst the cacophony over "Neo-Ottomanism", Turkey's apparent obsession with "strategic autonomy" or Erdogan's mercurial personality traits, the Turkish elite cannot afford a rupture in the umbilical chord that ties them to the western world.

Turkey's Islamist elite are as much the inheritors of Ataturk's legacy that their country's destiny lies with the West. The Americans — Biden, in particular — would know that home truth. Therefore, the leitmotif of the Biden-Erdogan summit is going to be the tango at a personal level between the two presidents whose genius for dealmaking is a legion.

Having said that, the differences, concerns and interests that keep Washington and Ankara apart are not to be underestimated. That needs a separate analysis. But make no mistake, a process of reconciliation is due to commence.

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Featured image: US Vice President Joe Biden (L) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at their last meeting at Yildiz Mabeyn Palace, Istanbul, Jan. 23, 2016 (File photo)

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