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## What sort of relationship will the West have with Turkey in 2024?



**Sir Dominick Chilcott KCMG** served as Britain's ambassador to Turkey from 2018-22, Ireland 2012-16 and (briefly) Iran 2011. He was the UK's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and The Maldives in 2006-7 and deputy head of mission at the British embassy in Washington (2008-11). His previous postings were to the UK's Permanent Representation to the EU, Lisbon and Ankara. Sir Dominick now works as an independent consultant and member of the Ambassador Partnership, making use of his network of commercial, administration and other contacts in Turkey, Ireland and Sri Lanka. He is also the President of the British Institute of Archeology in Ankara.



**Ünal Çeviköz** is a retired Turkish Ambassador and a former Member of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. He served as Turkey's Ambassador to Azerbaijan (2001-2004), Iraq (2004-2006) and the United Kingdom (2010-2014). From 2007 to 2010, he was the Deputy Undersecretary for bilateral Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from 2013 to 2015 he was President of the 28th General Assembly of the International Maritime Organization. Retired from diplomatic service in 2014, Çeviköz has been a consultant, a member of several think-tanks as well as foreign policy columnist for various Turkish newspapers. In 2018, Çeviköz joined the Republican People's Party (CHP) and was elected an MP from Istanbul. He was also elected Vice President of Socialist International 2022 and maintains this position. He retired from active politics after the Turkish elections in 2023.

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In Mr Erdogan's first term as Turkey's executive president (2018-23), relations with the West became distant and cool. Many privately hoped that Turkey's elections in May 2023 would usher in a different government, more aligned with western values and easier to do business with.

As we know, such hopes were thwarted when President Erdogan retained power for another five years. He turns 70 next month and shows no sign of stepping down. So, should we expect the trend for the West to disengage from Turkey to continue? Or is 2024 the year when relations between them are reset?

There are reasons to believe that a reset is beginning to happen.

Mr Putin's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has made western countries reconsider their approach to the security of Europe. The 7 October Hamas attacks against Israel and Israel's retaliatory operations in Gaza risk becoming an even more serious regional war.

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Both these conflicts are happening in Turkey's neighbourhood and Ankara has a role to play in the international community's response to them. Leaders in Western capitals seem to appreciate Turkey's diplomatic clout. The West's collective strategic interest in upholding a rules-based international system and the promotion of peace and stability, which Turkey shares, are of a different order of importance and urgency than differences between western capitals and Ankara.

Against that background and with the prospect of four years of political stability in Turkey, it is no surprise to see the West and Turkey making renewed efforts to put the tensions and disputes, characteristic of Mr Erdogan's first presidential term, behind them and place relations onto a more productive footing.

Soon after last May's elections, at the NATO summit in Vilnius (11-12 July), President Erdogan indicated that he would be in favour of the Turkish parliament ratifying Sweden's membership of NATO, which had been pending for a year. The parliament duly approved Swedish accession on 23 January.

Turkey's backing for Sweden's NATO status will be widely welcomed in the alliance. (Hungary is now the only NATO ally not to have ratified it.) Washington had been waiting for Ankara to give the green light to Sweden's NATO bid before moving on Turkey's request to upgrade its fleet of F-16 fighter aircraft. One of the (major) obstacles to US Congressional approval for the modernisation of the Turkish air force has been removed.

The US Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, began his most recent round of shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East in Istanbul on 6 January where he saw President Erdogan and Hakan Fidan, Turkey's foreign minister.

Mr Blinken sought Turkey's diplomatic support for preventing the conflict from spreading across the region. After the fighting stops, he wanted Turkey to be involved in creating a new dispensation for the Palestinians. In Mr Blinken's words: 'We also talked about the role that Turkey can play, both in the day after for Gaza, in terms of the challenging questions of Palestinian-led governance, security, rebuilding, as well as the work that it can do to try to produce more lasting durable peace and security in the region.'

This sort of respectful, serious engagement on the most important international issues of the day between Ankara and Washington feels very different from the early years of the Biden administration when the White House wouldn't answer President Erdogan's phone calls and seemed reluctant to do business with Ankara.

The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has similarly been trying to steer the EU's relations with Turkey into a more productive channel.

Last November he published a report on the state of play of relations with Turkey, which emphasised Turkey's importance to the EU despite the 'difficulties of the past', namely tension in the Eastern Mediterranean, bilateral problems with some EU countries and trade irritants.

At the report's launch, Mr Borrell argued that the increasingly complex and challenging geopolitical context and the need for the EU to strengthen its security had had a profound impact on EU-Turkey relations. The EU, he added, had a strategic interest in developing a mutually

beneficial partnership with Turkey – ‘an important neighbour, a key partner and an EU candidate country’ – as well as maintaining a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Mr Borrell suggested the EU should re-engage with Turkey on areas of mutual interest – trade, investment, migration, connectivity, the green and digital transformation of the economy, energy and visa facilitation. A number of formal ‘High Level Dialogues’ and the EU/Turkey Association Council, which had been suspended since 2019, should be resumed.

Most significantly, he suggested that the EU should take the first steps towards negotiations with Turkey on modernising their customs union.

For its part, Turkey’s foreign policy since last May’s election has become more pragmatic and less confrontational with an emphasis on promoting regional stability through diplomatic engagement.

President Erdogan’s visit to Greece on 7 December is a case in point. The visit and its list of follow-up actions (the ‘Athens Declaration’) could open a new page in relations between Turkey and Greece. The two sides agreed to by-pass the most controversial issues and move forward on matters - such as education, tourism, sport, SMEs – where the common ground was easier to identify, which should help build mutual trust and confidence.

The leaders also promised to avoid inflammatory rhetoric against each other, which would be a major achievement if adhered to.

The Turkish economy’s need for foreign exchange underpins the appeal of a more emollient foreign policy. Geopolitical volatility has had a chilling effect on inward investment in recent years.

Moreover, the appointments of Mehmet Simsek and Hafize Gaye Erkan as finance minister and central bank governor respectively have led to the return of rational economic policy making, which has reassured the markets somewhat. Although inflation remains very high, the Turkish economy has great strengths – a broad-based industrial sector, a well-developed tourism sector and massive agricultural production - and has shown enormous resilience to withstand previous crises.

Emphasising the positive should not, however, blind us to the risks, which could reverse progress in Turkey’s relations with the West.

Ankara’s big problems with the US remain unresolved. Any one of them has the potential to drag relations backwards. Turks bristle at US military support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (whose biggest contingent are members of the PKK, a terrorist organisation fighting the Turkish state) and Washington’s unwavering backing of Israel.

In Washington, Ankara’s purchase of S400s missiles from Russia, Mr Erdogan’s pro-Hamas rhetoric and Turkey’s unwillingness to impose economic sanctions on Russia are all sore points. Even though the prospects are greatly improved following Turkey’s ratification of Sweden’s NATO accession, it is not a foregone conclusion that the US Congress will agree to the F-16s deal.

Likewise, although Mr Borrell's report charts a route for taking forward the EU's relations with Turkey, there are plenty of issues that could undo progress. Cyprus is implacably opposed to anything that appears to be a concession to Turkey and will wield its veto accordingly.

Mr Borrell's report admits that the positive steps it outlines are 'phased, proportionate and reversible' – hardly an enthusiastic endorsement - and are conditional on Turkey's addressing trade irritants, preventing the circumvention of sanctions against Russia and creating a climate conducive to the resumption of Cyprus settlement talks.

This last point is not only in Ankara's gift, of course. It has been the Greek Cypriots, not their Turkish Cypriot counterparts, that have veered away from a settlement in recent years.

Lastly, the EU remains an organisation of shared democratic and liberal values. It expects countries that seek membership, however far off in the future that seems, to work towards the same values. Turkey was making progress in that direction in the first years of Mr Erdogan's administration. But most recently and, especially after the failed coup, the trend of developments inside the country has been towards authoritarianism.

High profile human rights cases will probably create turbulence in Turkey's relations with Europe. Despite rulings by the European Court of Human Rights that they should be released, both the philanthropist, Osman Kavala, and the former leader of the Kurdish HDP party, Selahattin Demirtas, are in prison. Can Atalay, an MP whose immunity from prison has been upheld by Turkey's constitutional court, also remains incarcerated.

The EU will need to find some Kissinger-esque realpolitik to compartmentalise its democracy-related concerns if it is not going to allow them to disrupt cooperation with Turkey for wider regional peace and stability. The EU will also need to find a way to stop Cyprus sabotaging any significant improvements in relations with Turkey.

None of this will be easy. Despite the clear benefits, which an improvement in Turkey's relations with the West would bring to both sides in their efforts to rebuff Russia's invasion of Ukraine and bring an end to the conflict in Gaza, the road ahead will contain plenty of potholes.

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**Tracey Stewart**

Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

[tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com](mailto:tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com)

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