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**IN THE NEWS**

## **How a Thaw with Turkey Could Help Ukraine Win the War**

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Related Expert: Eric Edelman

At this week's NATO summit, President Biden met for the first time in a year with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, setting aside his long-standing issues with the Turkish leader. But Turkey continues to play both sides of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. If the United States is now willing to deal with Ankara, the next deal should center on persuading Erdogan to side with the West on Ukraine.

There's no love lost between Biden and Erdogan. As a senator, Biden was a regular critic of Turkey, owing in part to the strong Greek American constituency in his home state of Delaware. As vice president, Biden clashed with Erdogan over the Turkish leader's backsliding on democracy and human rights. But despite their mutual dislike, Erdogan has long sought Biden's validation. This week's phone call and bilateral meeting in Madrid with the U.S. president allowed Erdogan to project himself to his people as an important leader on the world stage.

The White House insists there was no quid pro quo. Yet officials privately acknowledge that the close timing of the Biden administration's newfound enthusiasm about selling F-16 fighter planes to Turkey and Erdogan's decision to allow NATO to move forward with membership for Sweden and Finland is no coincidence. This shows that the U.S. side is realistic about the transactional nature of the relationship. Erdogan has always been — and probably always will be — a problematic ally who demands concessions for doing the right thing.

This week's positive Biden-Erdogan interactions offer the chance for a significant upgrade of relations after years of mutual neglect and distrust. If both sides can muster the political will to keep going, the next step would be to bring Turkey on board with regard to the Ukraine crisis.

There are many ways Turkey could be more supportive of Ukraine — if the United States and the West can convince Erdogan that this is in his interest. Turkey not only has refused to join sanctions on Russia but also has become a key place for sanctions evaders. That has to stop. A Turkish firm linked to Erdogan's family is giving Ukraine advanced drones, which is good, but for months, Ukraine has sought more Turkish arms to include things such as anti-missile systems, missiles and electronic warfare capabilities.

Turkey could have the biggest impact by helping break the Russian naval blockade of Odessa. By preventing grain exports, the Russians are tanking the Ukrainian economy and fueling a global food crisis.

"The Biden administration's apparent support for new F-16s for Turkey may be just the beginning of a strategy to bring Ankara along and incentivize the Turkish government to move away from diplomacy with Russia in favor of participating in an international effort to secure Ukrainian agricultural exports," Steven Cook, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, told me.

Erdogan announced last week that his government will begin talks with Moscow about opening "corridors" for grain exports, but that's likely just a stall tactic by the Russians. When the futility of that effort plays out, Turkey will have to decide whether to join Ukraine's partners to facilitate the exports without Russia's permission.

"Cracking open those ports may require a more direct role for the United States and NATO," Cook said. "Turkey would be important in that effort as a Black Sea power and the country that controls the Bosphorus Strait."

To be sure, expectations that Erdogan will fully break with his friend, Russian President Vladimir Putin, should be set low. The Turkish leader, who faces political headwinds at home in advance of an election next year, also has an incentive to continue mobilizing his nationalist followers by demonizing the United States via his state-controlled media.

But Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has long argued for a more transactional approach in the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship. Sullivan laid out this argument in a 2018 commentary he co-wrote with Eric Edelman, a former U.S. ambassador to Turkey.

"You'll never have a full rapprochement with Turkey," Edelman told me. "What you will have is a series of one-off deals. And that's not necessarily bad."

There are good reasons to think Erdogan's long flirtation with Putin is no longer paying him dividends. Turkey must no longer see Russia as a reliable arms supplier. The war in Ukraine is helping push inflation in Turkey to unprecedented levels, devastating its already shaky economy. Turkey has also been confronting Russian forces in several places, including Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Sure, the United States could wait to see whether Erdogan falls from power. But there is no guarantee that whatever government comes next would be a better security partner in Ukraine. Erdogan is the problematic ally we know — and right now, he looks to be in a mood to make deals.

The Biden administration would be better off holding its nose and moving forward on improving relations with Turkey, rather than spending its limited diplomatic time and energy focusing on partners that have less ability or will to help, such as Saudi Arabia. Bringing Ankara on board could be the key to helping Ukraine break the stalemate and win the war.