



Biden in Ankara enticing Erdogan to weigh his options

By Joe Macaron

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Vice President Joe Biden visited Ankara on August 24 to salvage the remnants of US interests in Turkey. The July 15 military coup attempt left President Recep Tayyip Erdogan raging against what he claimed was a US role in trying to overthrow him militarily. As Turkey turns to Russia and Iran, the White House made a calculated decision to make minimal concessions that entice Erdogan to weigh his options and alliances moving forward.

In the early morning hours of August 24, as Biden was arriving to Ankara, Turkish forces began a cross-border operation called “Euphrates Shield” with US support in the air and free Syrian army fighters on the ground. Twenty-two minutes before Erdogan’s scheduled meeting with Biden, this coalition reached downtown Jarablus, hence defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and allowing Ankara to claim the prevention of a Kurdish corridor along the Turkish border. After restoring the military balance in the Aleppo battle and now intervening militarily on the border, Ankara now reemerged as a powerful player in Syria yet with no room to maneuver or to further push back Kurdish fighters.

Indeed, Biden came to Ankara carrying a partial concession on Erdogan’s two main demands. The public message on the extradition of the preacher Fethullah Gullen, who is accused by Ankara of orchestrating the coup, was as Biden said to *CNN Turk* he wishes Gullen “weren’t in the US”. However, the private message was that the White House cannot politicize a legal procedure and there is no Turkish evidence yet that links Gullen to the coup. While the US air support to Syrian Kurdish forces will continue, the second concession was reaffirming a US promise to Ankara that these Kurdish forces will lose American support if they do not stay east of Euphrates. Furthermore, Biden showed empathy to Turkey after surviving the coup attempt and refrained from publicly criticizing Turkish authorities’ domestic response to it.

However, Biden’s visit did not obviously address the declining trend in US-Turkish relations since 2003 when Ankara refused to allow US forces to cross its territories to invade Iraq. Recent developments reinforced this growing mistrust. When the coup plotters closed the Bosphorus bridge on July 15, a chapter in US-Turkish relations was perhaps also culminating. What infuriated Turkish officials was the wee hours between Secretary of State John Kerry’s impromptu statement from Moscow hoping for “continuity within Turkey” and the White House’s unusual readout of Obama’s call to Kerry in support of the “democratically-elected Government”. Furthermore, the coup plotters launched and refueled their F-16 fighters from Incirlik base, apparently without the knowledge of the 2,500 US forces present at the base.

Erdogan has used all his elements of power to project a hostile environment for US interests in Turkey, a tactic often used by authoritarian regimes in order to compel Washington to concede or engage. The Turkish leader lashed out on General Joseph Votel, head of the US Central Command who expressed on July 28 concerns about the impact the Turkish government’s military purges might

have on US-Turkish relations. Votel issued a statement noting that the reporting about his statement at the Aspen Security Forum was “completely inaccurate”. Yet, in the same forum and on the same day, the director of national intelligence James Clapper said that “many of our interlocutors have been purged or arrested. There is no question this is going to set back our cooperation with the Turks”.

The amateurish mistake that followed was the US sending a military officer to Ankara, knowing Erdogan’s current skepticism of the US military. While the Pentagon tried to paint an [upbeat](#) picture of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joe Dunford’s visit to Turkey on July 31-August 1, the Turkish side was on the offensive. As Dunford was holding meetings at Incirlik base on August 2, Turkish prosecutors accepted a criminal complaint against him as well as Votel and Clapper for their alleged coup involvement or rather for their recent statements at Aspen. Ankara continued its campaign in the following days with no indication coming out of Washington on delivering Gullen. “Aksam”, a Turkish newspaper owned by businessman Ethem Sancak who has close ties to Erdogan, ran a series of articles beginning on [August 5](#) linking the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to the coup attempt, as the Washington-based think tank was organizing a conference on the same day in Buyukada island in Istanbul.

However, while Turkey appears to be in confrontation mode, on things that matter for US national security, Ankara did not come up short yet. Turkish authorities cut power from the Incirlik base for a week after the coup yet air operations led by the US resumed from the base as of July 17. In the past two weeks leading to Biden’s visit, Turkish officials have lowered their tone, citing some positive signals they are getting from Washington.

In return, the White House is [talking](#) about Biden’s ability to deliver both “reassuring and tough messages” as the most trusted surrogate of President Barack Obama. Yet back in 2014, Erdogan compelled Biden to apologize after telling Harvard University students that the Turkish leader has admitted allowing a large number of foreign fighters into Syria. The US leverage in Ankara has been significantly diminishing in recent years, hence the only measure of success for Biden’s visit in the coming days and weeks is whether he was able to calm the Turkish distress that is clouting Ankara’s judgement. The next US administration will have to take up the baton.

With Biden making it clear that the fate of Gullen will not be decided anytime soon, the Turkish options to respond are limited as Erdogan is weaker at home. While the US was rightfully able to absorb Turkish backlash following the coup attempt without giving any immediate concessions, the right policy debate in Washington should be where Turkey fits in a viable new US strategy in the Middle East. Losing Turkey as an ally, in result of the coup attempt’s unintended consequences, will not only impact US access to the Incirlik base but will further weaken the Turkish military, in particular those who are sympathetic to the US. Beyond the priority of fighting ISIL, Washington has to contemplate on how it can balance supporting Syrian Kurds and maintaining a friendly relation with Ankara in any political future of Syria.

The fact is Turkey remains a crucial ally for Washington though not indispensable. The US can replace the Incirlik with military bases available elsewhere in the region even if flying to the battlefield in Syria might become a bit longer. For Ankara, to prevent US air forces from using Incirlik means losing

whatever remains of Turkish leverage on US policy in Syria. In return, Washington will lose access to Syrian rebels on the Turkish border as well as the ability of the US military and intelligence to operate inside Syria.

Erdogan remains haunted by the coup attempt that is motivating his domestic and foreign policies. After Biden's visit, he will face a tough choice between fully aligning his interests with Russia or continuing to manage his partnership with the US. Erdogan will likely not make any decision until a new US President is sworn in. Whether Gullen is extradited or not, the problems in US-Turkish relations are not going away anytime soon and whether Erdogan aligns with Russia or not he cannot afford making the US his enemy. Biden's partial concessions in Ankara reinforced this Turkish dilemma.