

### Turkey's Balancing Act between Russia and the United States Falters

By Ezgi Yazici

**Erdogan's failure to work effectively with the United States and its NATO allies undermines his position with Russia and enables Putin to take advantage of Turkey's strategic vulnerabilities.** Recent Russian-driven or tolerated Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) escalations will test Turkey's calculus in Syria and pressure Ankara into likely concessions to Russia across a wide range of issues in Syria and beyond. Meanwhile, President Erdogan will seek to out-pressure the United States by insinuating a Turkish military campaign in Syria ahead of his meeting with President Joe Biden in Rome October 30-31, 2021. As Ankara's bid to balance its outreach to Russia and the United States reaches its limits, the Biden administration will have a fragile opportunity to avoid a crisis in Syria and put US-Turkey relations on track for gradual normalization.

**Ankara's balancing act between the United States and Russia depends on maintaining Turkey's strategic importance and relevance for both states, leverage that Erdogan may be losing.** Erdogan's strategic maneuvering has been grounded in the idea that neither the United States nor Russia would want to sacrifice their security relations with Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Turkish diplomats often leverage relations with the United States or Russia to elevate Turkey's strategic position in negotiations with the other. However, the Biden administration's distant and at times critical treatment of the Turkish



government has likely weakened Turkey's position with both countries.<sup>2</sup>

**Erdogan's recent visits to the United States and Russia in September failed to produce Ankara's desired results.** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan participated in the United Nations General Assembly session in New York and had a one-on-one meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi in late September.<sup>3</sup> Neither visit produced significant breakthroughs that Ankara was aiming for—primarily on defense sales and improvement of bilateral ties with the Biden administration and escalations in Syria with the Kremlin.<sup>4</sup> Recent Turkish statements and meeting readouts suggest that Ankara may be struggling to maintain its relative points of leverage with the two states. Erdogan criticized the lack of progress between Turkey and the United States in a public statement from New York, likely strengthening Putin's negotiating position when he met the Turkish leader a few days later.<sup>5</sup>

**Putin is likely using Erdogan's inability to work with the United States and NATO to force Turkish concessions.** Erdogan and

Putin's meeting in September discussed developments in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, energy contracts, and likely S-400 surface-to-air missile system purchases.<sup>6</sup> Russia currently has the upper hand in nearly all of these areas critical to Turkey's security. Russia can dictate terms and control the pace of these negotiations and conflicts far more often than Turkey. Turkey likely consults with Russia even in areas where Turkish and US interests are aligned—such as the Caucasus and Afghanistan—allowing Russian influence over potential areas of US-Turkish cooperation.

**The Russian military escalation in Syria is the most recent example of Putin's pressure against Turkey.** Russia increased the tempo and range of its airstrikes against Turkish and Turkish-backed positions in southern Idlib Governorate and Turkish-controlled northern Syria in September and October.<sup>7</sup> Both Turkey and the Syrian regime sent troop and equipment reinforcements to Idlib frontlines along the M4 highway on September 26-27.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Russia conducted retaliatory airstrikes after Turkish forces targeted YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions near Marea, Aleppo Governorate on October 7.<sup>9</sup> Further YPG attacks on October 11-12 led Erdogan to threaten a Turkish military campaign against the SDF in northern Syria on October 11, roughly two years after the last Turkish incursion.<sup>10</sup> Russia's position—including tolerance or support to the SDF—toward these escalations may erode Erdogan's willingness to pursue such a military campaign.

**Russian airstrikes in Idlib do not necessarily mean a pro-regime offensive in Idlib is imminent, but escalations across northern Syria could push Turkey to adjust its strategy.** Erdogan's meeting with Putin failed to decrease the tempo of airstrikes in Idlib beyond a six-day pause.<sup>11</sup> Russia and the Syrian regime likely used the airstrikes to gauge Turkey's response to an eventual limited Idlib campaign rather than as the preamble to an imminent, full-scale offensive in Idlib. Alternatively, Russia and the

regime may combine the *threat* of an upcoming Idlib offensive and the ongoing escalations near Tal Rifat to ensure Turkey maintains its cooperation with Russian priorities in Syria. Key Russian demands from Turkey may include territorial concessions near the M4 highway in Idlib, requiring Turkey to curb its public support to Ukraine, or requiring Turkey to purchase and maintain Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles in Turkey that would further derail US-Turkey relations.

Turkey now also faces a growing number of Syrian Kurdish mortar attacks and shelling in northern Syria and Turkey. In the short term, Ankara's priority is to deter further Syrian Kurdish attacks through threats or military escalation. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu blamed both Russia and the United States for not limiting the YPG's influence near the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>12</sup> Following Cavusoglu's cue, Turkish officials will likely seek to engage their Russian and US counterparts on the subject. Recent statements by Erdogan and Cavusoglu that echo the Turkish rhetoric surrounding the 2019 incursion into Syria indicate that Ankara is willing to pursue the military campaign option if it assesses it as "necessary." Likely Turkish priorities include targeting the Tal Rifat pocket or expanding the Turkish-controlled strip from Ayn Issa to Tal Tamr.

**Erdogan likely views his upcoming October 30 meeting with US President Joe Biden as consequential for the Turkish position against Russia, potentially creating a window of opportunity for the United States.** Russia will likely maintain high pressure on Turkey in Syria through airstrikes, pro-regime reinforcements, and tolerance for Syrian Kurdish attacks until Erdogan's announced meeting with President Biden on the sidelines of the G20 summit October 30-31.<sup>13</sup> Erdogan's spokesperson described that meeting as an "opportunity to resolve differences" through dialogue and engagement.<sup>14</sup> Turkish officials are likely willing to pursue talks with their US counterparts to calm foreign investors amid a crash in the Turkish Lira's value and repair the

recent damage to Turkish-US relations that the Kremlin is exploiting. However, the Turkish-US divergences on Syria will likely pose an obstacle to more substantive Turkish-US talks in the near future.

Turkey's relationships with the United States and Russia are increasingly reliant on the personal dynamics among each state's leaders. Erdogan's overly personalized approach to foreign policy has supplanted typical inter-governmental communication that would help limit escalation in crises, minimize misperceptions in conflict zones, and sustain trust in diplomatic processes. The United States should carefully consider the effect that this high-risk environment will have on Erdogan's decision-making, especially in Syria. If Ankara is willing to avert a military campaign in northern Syria, the Biden administration may have a window of opportunity to make progress with an amenable Ankara in the short term. Ankara and Washington will need to gradually de-personalize diplomatic relations by reintroducing institutional-driven communication in order to return to a slow but steady path toward long-term normalization.

## Turkey's Activities Abroad

- 1. October 4-6: Turkey supports Azerbaijan with military drills near the Azerbaijani-Iranian border in response to Iranian exercises.** Turkish and Azerbaijani forces held military exercises in Nakhichevan, across the Azerbaijani-Iranian border, between October 4 and 6 after Iran announced military exercises near the Azerbaijani border on October 3. Iran's military drills were in response to the perceived military support Azerbaijan is receiving from foreign countries, namely Israel and Turkey. Iran is also likely concerned about the Azerbaijani plan to build a road between Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan exclave as part of the Russian-brokered November 2020 ceasefire, opening a land route from the Caspian Sea toward Turkey and Europe

that would bypass Iran.<sup>15</sup> Turkish officials did not make a public statement about Iranian-Azerbaijani tensions likely to avoid a diplomatic escalation with the former. The Turkish-Azerbaijani drills occurred at the same time as trilateral Turkish-Azerbaijani-Georgian drills in Georgia.

- 2. October 4-8: Turkey pushes for regional cooperation in the Caucasus by restarting Turkey-Armenia talks and defense cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia.** Turkey seeks further economic and political integration into the Caucasus by expanding its outreach efforts to Georgia and Armenia. Turkey signed a trilateral defense treaty with Georgia and Azerbaijan on October 5.<sup>16</sup> The three countries also held military exercises on security and protection scenarios for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline in Georgia on October 4.<sup>17</sup> Separately, Turkish, Armenian, and Azerbaijani leaders all indicated a willingness to start Turkish-Armenian and Azerbaijani-Armenian high-level talks.<sup>18</sup> Azerbaijan's opposition due to the Armenian control of Nagorno-Karabakh was a primary obstacle to the normalization talks between Armenia and Turkey and the efforts to reopen the Turkish-Armenian border as part of the 2009 Zurich Protocols.<sup>19</sup> Turkey and Armenia are seeking to restart talks between the two countries that would normalize diplomatic relations and reopen the Turkey-Armenia border that has been closed since 1993. However, Turkey is unlikely to advance those talks until Azerbaijan and Armenia make progress in their own bilateral talks following their November 2020 ceasefire.
- 3. September 30 – October 12: Turkey continues to offer limited recognition to the Taliban's interim government to pursue larger**

### **political influence in Central Asia.**

The Turkish Ambassador to Afghanistan met with the Taliban's acting prime minister, deputy prime minister, second deputy prime minister, and minister of commerce at the end of September to continue dialogues on potential Turkish support in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on October 12 that he plans to visit Afghanistan with other foreign ministers "soon."<sup>21</sup> Turkey will likely restrict its interaction with the Taliban government through limited diplomatic outreach and humanitarian aid programs while remaining cautious about recognizing the Taliban government. Ankara curbed its publicized political and security ambitions in Afghanistan—which included a security role at the Kabul International Airport—after the formation of the new Afghan government did not meet Ankara's requests of "inclusivity."<sup>22</sup> The Turkish Embassy in Kabul remains active, making it the only NATO country to keep its diplomatic representation after August 15. Turkey likely seeks to insert more pro-Turkey stakeholders into the Afghan government to moderate the Taliban influence and diversify its vectors of political influence in the country beyond the Taliban.

- 4. October 11: Turkey requests to buy 40 F-16 fighter jets and 80 modernization kits for its existing jets from the United States after its exclusion from the F-35 program.<sup>23</sup>** Turkey has been seeking alternative ways to modernize its aging air force fleet since the United States removed Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program after Turkey purchased Russian S-400 air defense systems in 2019.<sup>24</sup> Erdogan reaffirmed that Turkey will purchase a second batch of S-400s after he attended the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 24.<sup>25</sup> Turkey's request comes ahead of Erdogan's planned

meeting with US President Biden on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rome on October 29-30.<sup>26</sup> Erdogan and Biden will discuss Turkey's request to purchase new F-16 fighter jets and other significant issues in their first bilateral meeting since President Biden's inauguration.<sup>27</sup> The new F-16 Block 70 aircraft would potentially fulfill Turkish defense requirements for another decade. Turkey will need to explore alternative long-term options to maintain air capabilities despite its aging fleet if it remains excluded from the F-35 program, however. A potential US rejection may also push Turkey to pursue further defense sales from Russia.

- 5. October 1: More Syrian National Army factions join the likely Turkish-backed "Azm Unified Command Room."** At least seven Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, including Faylaq al-Sham, Ninth Division, and Muntasir Billah Division, joined the Azm Unified Command Room on October 1, bringing the room's participants to at least 15 SNA factions with close relations with Turkey.<sup>28</sup> Sultan Murad Brigade and Jabhat al-Shammiya formed the command room as a new security apparatus to crack down on the SDF and other perceived terror groups in Turkish-controlled Syria on July 11.<sup>29</sup> The Command Room added at least seven other SNA factions and participated in clashes with the SDF on the Tal Rifat frontlines in July.<sup>30</sup> Separately, the Command Room elected Sultan Murad Brigade Commander Fehim Isa as its commander on October 1.<sup>31</sup> Isa has a years-long relationship with the Turkish government.<sup>32</sup> The factions involved likely intend to use the command room as a stopgap measure to address the worsening security situation in northern Syria. The restructuring may also create a more integrated command structure among SNA factions to facilitate a

potential offensive or to decrease the SNA's dependency on Turkish command structures.

**6. September 24-29: Turkey and Ukraine advance defense cooperation ties despite Russian criticism.** Ukrainian engine manufacturer Motor Sich and Turkish defense company Baykar Makina signed a defense cooperation agreement during the Teknofest Aerospace and Technology Festival near Istanbul, Turkey, on September 24.<sup>33</sup> Baykar General Manager Haluk Bayraktar, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and Ukrainian Defense Minister Andriy Taran also signed an agreement to build a training, test, and maintenance center for Turkish Bayraktar TB2 combat drones in Kyiv, Ukraine during Erdogan

and Putin's meeting in Russia on September 29th.<sup>34</sup> Ahead of the Erdogan-Putin meeting, Russian Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov expressed concerns about Ukrainian forces using Turkish weapons against Russia in the Donbas Region of Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> Ankara's public support for Ukraine regarding the illegal Russian occupation of Crimea and its defense cooperation with Kyiv has drawn significant Russian criticism. Russia will likely seek to curb Turkey's support for Ukraine or limit its publicity in the long term.

### Contributors to this Report:

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<sup>1</sup> President Erdogan and other Justice and Development Party (AKP) officials openly state that they perceive the future of the international order as increasingly multipolar and reject the binary choice between NATO and non-NATO partners. Turkish officials often argue that Turkey can and should maintain relations with actors like Russia, China, and Iran as much they do with NATO allies without drawing criticism from the latter.  
<https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/07/04/multipolar-world-vision-central-to-turkish-diplomacy>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/07/notice-on-the-continuation-of-the-national-emergency-with-respect-to-the-situation-in-and-in-relation-to-syria/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-russia-syria-migration-627a1060e880704ea51c1745298842a2>

<https://www.dotaa.com.tr/en/world/peace-in-syria-depends-on-turkey-russia-ties-erdogan/2377964>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-23/erdogan-says-ties-with-u-s-strained-talks-up-russia-links>

<https://yetkinreport.com/en/2021/09/25/putin-eagerly-awaits-a-deeply-biden-disappointed-erdogan/>

<sup>5</sup> Erdogan said Turkey's relations with the US are "not healthy" in disappointment. He added that he is looking forward to strengthening ties with Russia as he was leaving New York on September 23. Erdogan's first meeting with Putin for the first time since March 2020 was only three hours long - a short session including translations between two leaders. The meeting did not result in a significant breakthrough on S-400 sales, Syria, or Turkey's expiring natural gas contracts with Russia.  
<https://www.ft.com/content/2f4527ef-83ec-4086-b935-9d0f509a046b>

<sup>6</sup> Turkey has two 23-year-old natural gas treaties with Russia that are set to expire at the end of 2021. Erdogan seeks to extend those agreements to maintain sufficient supplies for Turkey's growing demand.  
<https://tass.com/politics/1343547>

<https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/130728/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-rusya-devlet-baskani-putin-ile-bir-araya-geldi>

<sup>7</sup> Russian airstrikes targeted Turkish-backed Hamza Division positions in Afrin and Turkish positions in Tal Tamr on September 26—marking the first Russian airstrike since Turkey captured the area with its October 2019 military campaign, dubbed Operation Peace Spring. Russian, Syrian, and Turkish officials also made comments about better reinforcing the March 2020 ceasefire agreement for Idlib.  
<https://twitter.com/metesohtaoglu/status/1441390867550392324>

<https://www.syriahr.com/en/223672/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/war-on-terror/turkey-deploys-troops-to-syrias-idlib-for-potential-ground-op>

<https://twitter.com/raedsyrian002/status/1445368195989315590>

<https://twitter.com/smmsyria/status/1445371528116424704>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russia-escalates-strikes-northwest-syria-turkey-sends-reinforcements-ahead-2021-09-26/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/MMCSYR/status/1446076674882347008>

<https://twitter.com/ldlibPlus/status/1446087093759905796>

<https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1446134476300382226>

<sup>10</sup> Likely the YPG killed two Turkish police in an anti-tank guided missile attack against a Turkish convoy in Marea, Aleppo Governorate on October 11. Likely YPG fighters also shelled the Turkish border town Karkamis across Jarablus on October 11, and killed 4 with a VBIED attack in Afrin, Aleppo Province on October 12. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-12/lira-falls-to-record-low-as-erdogan-signals-new-syria-offensive>, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/war-on-terror/turkey-retaliates-against-ypg-shelling-from-northern-syria>, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/bakanlik-aci-haberi-duyurdu-1-polis-sehit-oldu-41914339>, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/11/car-bomb-kills-four-in-syrias-northern-afrin-local-media>, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/firat-kalkani-bolgesinde-terror-saldirisi-2-sehit-615766.html>

<sup>11</sup> Likely the YPG killed two Turkish police in an anti-tank guided missile attack against a Turkish convoy in in Marea, Aleppo Governorate on October 11, shelled the Turkish border town of Karkamis across from Jarablus on October 11, and killed 4 with a VBIED attack in Afrin, Aleppo Province on October 12.

<sup>12</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-mevlut-cavusoglu-ankara-united-states-turkey-5b40524b5f60a26eb5af91f219a4bedd>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-biden-ile-gorusecek-612325.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/serkan-demirtas/turkey-conveys-important-messages-to-us-168589>

<sup>15</sup> Iran also closed off its airspace to Azerbaijani military flights between Baku and Nakhichevan on October 5. Azerbaijan diverted its commercial and military flights to the Armenian airspace instead -- marking a first since Azerbaijan and Armenia's independence in 1991.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/5102021-14724>

<https://twitter.com/tcsavunma/status/1445379612050083841>

[https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijans\\_Defense\\_Ministry\\_Eternity\\_2021\\_q\\_uot\\_exercises\\_started\\_in\\_Georgia-1892563?\\_\\_cf\\_chl\\_jschl\\_tk\\_\\_=pmd\\_6CoY3IHIVyM4EiYSeUSxt\\_Uvslc9tlJkoVOSBcPdncs-1633545971-0-gqNtZGzNAmWjcnBszQel](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijans_Defense_Ministry_Eternity_2021_q_uot_exercises_started_in_Georgia-1892563?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_6CoY3IHIVyM4EiYSeUSxt_Uvslc9tlJkoVOSBcPdncs-1633545971-0-gqNtZGzNAmWjcnBszQel)  
<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2981>  
<https://mod.gov.ge/en/news/read/3206/international-training-%E2%80%9Ceternity-2014%E2%80%9D-completed>  
<sup>18</sup> <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/baku-wont-rule-out-possible-meeting-between-azerbaijan-armenia-3581766>  
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<https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/azerbaijani-armenian-leaders-ready-for-summit-to-discuss-karabakh>  
<sup>19</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/armenia-and-turkey-from-normalization-to-reconciliation/>  
<sup>20</sup> <https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff/status/1443547239402573828>  
<https://twitter.com/turkemb Kabul/status/1443153882213982213>  
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<https://twitter.com/BakhtarNA/status/1443513204697706496>  
<https://twitter.com/rtadari/status/1443149008604651523>  
<sup>21</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkish-fm-hints-kabul-visit-with-counterparts-from-friendly-countries/2389868>  
<sup>22</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/inclusive-afghan-govt-critical-for-kabul-airport-deal-erdogan-says>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-11/erdogan-seeks-biden-meeting-to-talk-6-billion-arms-deal-request>  
<https://defencereview.gr/toyrkiki-lor-gia-apoktisi-neon-f-16-kai-eksyg/>  
<sup>24</sup> <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2019/07/17/turkey-officially-kicked-out-of-f-35-program/>  
<sup>25</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-says-intends-buy-another-russian-s-400-defence-system-cbs-news-2021-09-26/>  
<sup>26</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-biden-to-meet-on-margin-of-g-20-summit-in-rome>  
<sup>27</sup> <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-biden-meeting-in-rome-an-opportunity-for-ties-chief-adviser-168581>  
<sup>28</sup> <https://twitter.com/UniLeadership/status/1443984543812395042>  
<sup>29</sup> <https://twitter.com/UniLeadership/status/1415534952104534019?s=20>  
<sup>30</sup> [https://youtu.be/QdwJLo07\\_dc](https://youtu.be/QdwJLo07_dc)  
<sup>31</sup> <https://twitter.com/fehimisa1/status/1443988373627195399>  
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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.kyivpost.com/business/ukrinform-motor-sich-sign-cooperation-agreement-with-turkish-baykar-makina.html>  
<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-economy/3322063-motor-sich-baykar-makina-sign-cooperation-agreement.html>  
<sup>34</sup> <https://twitter.com/gizliservis06/status/1443241577002983431>  
<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/uav-magnate-baykar-to-build-centers-for-turkish-drones-in-ukraine>  
<sup>35</sup> <https://t24.com.tr/haber/peskov-kremlin-kiev-in-turk-silahlarini-kendi-vatandaslarina-karsi-kullanmasindan-endise-duymakta,982084>