



Biden gives Turkey the cold shoulder in first weeks in office



Nicholas Morgan

Feb 08 2021 12:38 Gmt+3

Last Updated On: Feb 09 2021 01:55 Gmt+3

United States President Joe Biden and his administration have had sparingly few contacts with their counterparts in Turkey during their first weeks in office and the three months since his election.

On Wednesday, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan was the first high-level U.S official to hold contact with Turkey after speaking to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign policy aide Ibrahim Kalın. The two spoke about the litany of issues in U.S-Turkey relations, but there has been a conspicuous lack of similar conversations in other parts of the new administration.

Analysts have predicted that Biden would look to return relations with Turkey to functioning on the institutional level where diplomats and other officials would take the lead. This would be in contrast to the previous Trump era, when Erdoğan was reportedly among the leaders the former president spoke to most frequently. This leader-to-leader dialogue produced sharp policy decisions from Trump, including his attempts to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, that would catch his own government off-guard and incense Congress.

But as Biden officials settle into their new duties, Turkish officials have been conspicuously absent from the countries cabinet leaders have touched base with.

Both Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin have spoken with American partners in Europe, Latin America and Asia to discuss areas of mutual or ongoing cooperation. Neither Blinken or Austin has spoken yet with their respective counterparts in Turkey yet in addition to Biden.

To be certain, the U.S Senate is still working through confirming officials below the cabinet level at the State Department and the Pentagon, and regular contacts are still likely ongoing. However, this does not entirely explain why Turkey has been excluded from early contacts by U.S. administration officials or Biden himself, who has spoken even to U.S adversaries like Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Dr. Charlie Stevenson, an adjunct lecturer teaching American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University in Washington D.C, said that publicised conversations, or lack thereof, boil down to a question of "signals and priorities" particularly at the start of a new administration.

"Especially with a new U.S. president, the administration wants to send signals of friendship and cooperation," said Stevenson.

"Accordingly, there's a reluctance to engage with countries where the U.S. has pending disagreements, such as Turkey."

Another reason Stevenson suggests that President Biden and his cabinet heads may not have made their calls yet could be that they are still in the process of finalising an approach to Turkey.

The Biden team is known to view Turkey as a troublesome partner. Secretary Blinken may have captured this view during his confirmation hearing when he referred to Turkey as a "so-called strategic partner," and this already appears to be reflected subtly in some of the administration's early official statements. For example, in a readout of a phone call between Sullivan and Bjoern Seibert, Head of the Cabinet for the European Commission, Turkey was bunched in with China as an issue of "mutual concern".

Sullivan's call with Kalin and the litany of issues listed illustrates further why more deliberation may be necessary. Tension over U.S support for Syrian Kurdish militants, Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400, and disagreements over the backsliding of Turkish democracy are only some of the problems that piled up over the years between Ankara and Washington, and none have an easy solution both sides can accept.

This is not to say either that Turkey has been absent in their early considerations. Last week, the State Department expressed concern over the conduct of Turkish authorities against students, particularly those from the LGBT community, who are protesting at Boğazici University in Istanbul. The Turkish foreign ministry rejected U.S condemnations by imploring it to focus on its own domestic problems.

Another brief dispute took place when Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu accused the United States of involvement in the 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan, a claim which was quickly rejected by the State Department. This is not the first time Soylu accuses the U.S. of being behind the failed coup attempt, however, repeating these claims now appears to be much different than the Trump era; Soylu's attacks on Obama era officials directly hit the current Biden administration, many of whom were serving as senior officials during 2016 including now Secretary Blinken.

These words and lack of high-level attention are unlikely to be well-received in Ankara, but the enduring cold shoulder treatment risks undermining Erdoğan's attempt to show Turkey is escaping its current isolation diplomatically.

Dr. Aykan Erdemir, senior director of the Turkey Program at the Foundation for the Defence of Democracies (FDD) in Washington, believes that for this reason Erdoğan is very eager to gain something to at least give the appearance that his words go beyond just rhetoric.

"These days, Erdogan's foreign policy revolves around managing impressions at home by spinning various photo opportunities and phone contacts with heads of states to give the impression that Ankara is not as isolated as reported in global media outlets," explained Erdemir.

"Erdoğan, therefore, has a strong urge to arrange such an opportunity with Biden so that his mouthpiece media can sell the spin that U.S.-Turkish relations are back on track."

