

# **Panorama Soruyor / Asks**

## **2024 U.S. Presidential Elections and Global Politics - Onur İşçi**



## **2024 U.S. Presidential Elections and Global Politics**

- 1) To what extent will partisan differences over U.S. foreign policy influence the 2024 U.S. Presidential elections?
- 2) Looking at the war in Ukraine, what are the limits of change in U.S. foreign policy towards Russia in case of either a Democrat or Republican victory after November 2024?
- 3) Bearing in mind the twists and turns in U.S.-Turkey relations over the past decade, what are the limits of change in U.S. foreign policy towards Turkey in case of a Democrat or a Republican victory after November 2024?



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2024 has been labelled as the “super election year,” when nearly 2 billion voters are expected to trudge to polling stations in more than 60 countries worldwide. For those hoping for change, some of these elections have the potential to become “watershed events,” while for sceptics, who find the pre-election enthusiasm overblown, the result will be business as usual. One election in particular is certain to draw much attention. As the U.S. presidential elections near, we see a polarized American constituency, concerned about the rematch between Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

In Washington D.C., we hear familiar questions from four years ago: If Trump wins the elections in November, would that mean the end of American democracy? If you are a republican, how worried would you be right now, given the direction the country has taken in global politics under Joe Biden? Looking at Trump’s sweeping victory in the Iowa caucus and the primaries in New

Hampshire and Nevada, it's very likely that he will win the Republican nomination, which means he will be the first candidate to win three consecutive primaries. Democrats, on the other hand, staved off a red wave in the 2022 midterm elections and Biden's economic track record looks sound with low unemployment figures. Biden has also shown considerable success in passing legislations, such as the Inflation Reduction Act.

But elections are about public perception and there is a gap between statistics and how voters perceive the U.S. economy. Contrary to optimists' belief in Biden's ability to run with an anti-MAGA (Make America Great Again) coalition, democrats are having a difficult time litigating issues related to the President's unusually old age. Many committed democrats worry about his ability to communicate the party's message properly and deliver his promises within the next four years if he gets reelected.

Unlike 2020, the global pandemic is over, but regional conflicts around the world have since multiplied and U.S. politics seem much more polarized. Given the role the U.S. continues to play in the global order, not just American constituents but citizens of the world, including Turks, are paying considerable attention to what currently looks like a coin toss between Trump and Biden. A lot is unclear at this moment, but, looking forward, we asked three questions to a group of regional experts potential ramifications of a Biden or Trump victory on global politics and regional crises.

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Currently, there is a widespread consensus, both within and outside of America, that domestic polarization over the past decade has emerged as the greatest threat to effective American foreign policy. However, I believe this view is incomplete and perhaps fundamentally flawed. Bipartisan support for American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been remarkably stable.

It is worth noting, for example, that Barack Obama was elected in part because he promised to pursue a foreign policy fundamentally different from that of his predecessor, George W. Bush. Yet, aside from some initial rhetorical changes, Obama not only continued the same basic policies as Bush but also intensified and expanded the use of some of Bush's signature tactics, such as drone strikes. Even Trump, despite the frantic alarm of his critics, failed to effect any real reorientation in American foreign policy. Trump's term in office did reveal, however, that the massive American national security establishment, which includes the foreign policy community, possesses a firm orientation, autonomy, and a powerful conviction in its right to determine policy. Therefore, the problem is not a foreign policy rendered irrational by partisan whipsawing. Instead, it is a foreign policy that has demonstrated its fundamental irrationality by generating serial failure and then stubbornly persisting in that failure.

The war in Ukraine is likely to be the most significant American foreign policy blunder since at least the end of the Cold War, surpassing even the debacle of the invasion of Iraq. From the early 1990s through the 2000s, numerous diplomats, intelligence officials, and scholars strongly cautioned against expanding NATO to Eastern Europe, particularly to Ukraine, as it was deemed deeply unwise due to the potential for provoking a Russian response in a region where American interests were peripheral. The current CIA Director and former ambassador to Russia, William Burns, warned that NATO membership for Ukraine represented a "red line" for Russians across the political spectrum. Similarly, Robert Gates, a former CIA Director and Secretary of Defense under both George W. Bush and Obama, wrote in 2014 that Washington had unwisely overextended itself by pursuing NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, describing Ukraine's candidacy as a "monumental provocation." Nevertheless, America persisted in

seeking influence within Ukraine through the Maidan protests and the toppling of Ukrainian President Yanukovich. In the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea, the United States, under both Obama and Trump administrations, further escalated the arming and training of the Ukrainian military and intelligence services pushing events to a showdown in which Russia enjoys critical advantages.

Since then, America has all but joined the war as a combatant. With its NATO allies it provides direct intelligence support to the Ukrainian armed forces and has surged tens of billions of dollars in military aid to Ukraine. Via sanctions and the seizure of Russian financial assets it has been waging a comprehensive campaign to cripple Russia economically. Yet in the third year of the war it is the Ukrainian army that is now stymied, outmanned, and outgunned. A year ago, US politicians and officials boastfully likened US military aid to a smart investment because Ukraine was killing Russians at a rate. Today, however, Russia remains unbowed and its armed forces substantially more effective. Ukraine is faltering militarily and economically. As the US contends with a potential regional war in the Middle East and a potential showdown with China over Taiwan, the Ukraine war saps limited American strength and attention. Although some voices in the Republican Party have voiced skepticism about this burgeoning calamity and the recklessness that led to it, these are minority voices. The bipartisan establishment in Washington remains committed to the war. In any event, Washington cannot abandon Ukraine as easily as it did Afghanistan because Russia is a far more capable foe than the Taliban. Thus, Washington, regardless of which party holds the presidency, will likely have to support Ukraine just enough to keep Russia preoccupied.

Regardless of which party wins, I see little reason to expect substantive improvement in U.S.-Turkey relations, barring a major shift in the geopolitics in the broader region or world. Turkey currently has no constituency inside the U.S. to influence either the Democrats or the Republicans. In fact, Turkey's traditional primary advocates in Washington, the Pentagon and the defense industry, have grown markedly cooler toward Turkey. The former is frustrated with what it sees as Turkey's refusal to play its proper role as an ally while the latter has less to gain from arms sale to Turkey as the Turkish defense industry has begun to

produce its own weapon systems. Ankara, for its part, has seen the U.S. metamorphosize from a stable and well-meaning if sometimes disappointing patron to an erratic, frustrated, and perhaps even abusive partner. Washington's disregard for Turkish security in its collaboration with the PKK offshoot in Syria, the YPG, and its hosting of Fethullah Gülen have alienated not only Turkey's powerful national security community but Turkish public opinion at large.

That is not to say that US-Turkey relations are condemned to deteriorate further. Turkey retains its geostrategic value, and at a time when American primacy is being challenged across multiple regions and dimensions from the Middle East to Eurasia, Washington will have incentives to seek Turkish cooperation and assistance on an issue-by-issue basis. For its part, Ankara in the near term has little incentive to pivot away from Washington. Instead, it can continue to extract benefits from relations with the US and NATO while expanding its autonomy. The real question is when will Washington forgo trying to prop up its global primacy and start consciously setting priorities and reallocating resources. At that time, Washington might recognize that Turkey is no longer a subordinate ally nor needed as one.

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Important as foreign policy *should* be to the upcoming Presidential election of 2024, I do not expect that it will play a big role in policy debates - at least, not if the Democrats are able to drag President Biden across the finish line as their candidate. Since they already cancelled all debates in the Democratic primaries, and have rigged the primary rules to make it impossible for anyone to challenge Biden, I expect that the Democrats will ensure that Biden will not have to debate a GOP opponent this fall, either. Clearly President Biden is no longer lucid enough to handle hostile questioning, much less a policy debate.



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That said, I do expect some voters to take these matters into consideration, simply because President Biden's foreign policy has been so disastrous across the board. Many Republicans, and some Democrats, are weary of the expensive proxy war the US has been supporting against Russia in Ukraine, a war it now seems increasingly clear Ukraine is losing. The expanding conflict in the Middle East, too, is a concern - and a political problem for the Democrats in particular, as the party's left wing, particularly its younger voters, are viscerally hostile to Israel - even as President Biden and the party establishment continues supporting Israel in its brutal war with Hamas. Arab-speaking voters in particular, especially in Michigan, a key swing state, may turn against Biden - or at least, be less likely to show up and vote for him.

I think that US financial support for Ukraine is already beginning to wind down, and will likely continue to decrease regardless of the outcome of the fall election. That said, I do think that if, say, Trump somehow survives the "lawfare" being waged by Democrat partisans to keep him off the ballot and is elected President, US support for Ukraine may wind down even more quickly. I am afraid that Ukraine faces fairly bleak prospects either way, even if a Biden victory (or a victory for whichever Democrat might replace him if he is deemed unfit to run) might buy a bit more time for Ukraine's floundering war effort.

I do not expect dramatic change in US-Turkish relations after the fall elections. Nonetheless, if Trump is somehow to win, I think he would make an effort to reach out to President Erdoğan, not perhaps as a first priority, but just in the course of trying to restore some pragmatism to US foreign policy. When the

Democrats control the White House, they tend to “moralize” US foreign relations, helped along by their allies in the State Department, CIA, and the media - which is basically redundant, as nearly everyone in the State Department, CIA, and the national media is a Democrat. Trump, unlike either the Democrats or more ideologically minded Republicans (eg “neoconservative” Senators such as Lindsey Graham or before him, John McCain), views foreign affairs more in terms of core US interests and personal relationships. He was friendly to King Mohammad bin Salman (“MBS”), for example, simply because he views Saudi Arabia as a traditional US ally and an important country because of its oil resources, whereas the Biden administration (and its press allies) have seriously ruptured US-Saudi relations through moralizing lectures about alleged human rights violations and by cozying up to Iran, despite Iran’s visceral hostility to the US, for ideological reasons unrelated to real US interests. Turkey, like Saudi Arabia, Trump seems to view as a NATO ally worth cultivating because of its strategic location and regional importance, whatever the currently fashionable view of the Washington press corps might be.

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Partisan differences have played a central role in every election in American history and became more polarized and polarizing after the end of the Cold War. Once the existential threat of communism disappeared, the American political body lost its cohesion and began to move in different directions. In most countries this would not be a problem, but the moralism and exceptionalism inherent in American political thinking has amplified this trend and resulted in the shrinking of the middle ground.



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So, the partisan differences in the 2024 election are only quantitatively stronger than they were in 2020 and 2016. The real determinant will be the current president's age and the scandal value of his Republican contender's statements. It is impossible to predict the outcome, but it is likely that Biden may hand over his delegates at the DNC Convention in the summer to a replacement candidate. The person to follow in terms of predictions is Dr. Alan Lichtman of AU who publishes his famous election outcome prediction column in the *Washington Post* during the summer before every presidential election. His book *The Keys to the White House* remains the single best guide to analyzing the most important factors affecting presidential elections.

Any Democrat who wins the election will continue Biden's policy towards Ukraine. Any Republican other than Trump would have done the same, but Trump is likely to re-evaluate the American policy, but if he decides to downgrade support or even insist on a negotiated settlement, the permanent bureaucracy in Washington will block its implementation at every turn. So, the war will go on until Ukraine decides to negotiate or the Russians completely exhaust or deal a lethal blow to the Ukrainian army.

I foresee no fundamental changes in U.S. policy towards Türkiye regardless of who wins the 2024 election because the chief determinant in that relationship is Ankara, not Washington. As long as Erdoğan remains in power, he will set the tempo and melody of this relationship.

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To the dismay of all of us in Washington, foreign policy traditionally only influences US elections around the margins. While this year the foreign policy differences between the two candidates are starker than ever before, the differences in their domestic visions are even starker, meaning that despite the much higher stakes, the relative influence may well remain the same. Ironically, one of the most talked about impacts is from the war in Gaza, where a small but potentially significant number of progressive and Arab-American voters might stay home precisely because they feel Biden's policy is not different enough from Trump's.

If Biden wins we are still likely to see a slow erosion of US support for Ukraine as an increasingly weak administration has to fight harder and harder with Congress for each new aid package. If Trump wins, the pivot will be much more dramatic. There's no reason why, under a Trump administration, the U.S. wouldn't cut any and all support to Ukraine. Trump could either wash his hands of the conflict entirely, try to play a high-profile role mediating a ceasefire with Putin, or, in some incoherent and unpredictable way, try to do both at the same time. Of course, how this ultimately plays out will depend on the way European countries, Russia and Ukraine all respond to Washington's revised position.

If Biden wins, the likelihood of change is minimal. Biden's team seems happy with its low key policy toward Ankara, working diligently to compel and cajole cooperation where necessary, seeking opportunities to improve ties where possible, but generally keeping expectations modest and focusing on other

pressing issues. If Trump wins, we're likely to be in for more of a roller coaster. A return to the personalized politics that marked the last Trump administration holds the potential of lots more highs and lows. That said, Congress would likely remain as a check on any serious deepening of the bilateral relationship. Democrats will be eager to push back on Trump's ties to fellow authoritarian leaders abroad and Republicans will likely remain opposed to Turkish policies regarding Greece, Cyprus, Armenia and Israel.

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As a general rule, very few voters in the United States count foreign policy among their top motivations in choosing a President. However, the closeness of the past two elections suggest that with thin margins, any given issue could end up deciding enough votes to swing a state one way or another. Added to this, both candidates have distinct, serious liabilities when it comes to foreign policy. Donald Trump is perceived to be much friendlier to Vladimir Putin, and many in the Democrat camp believe the relationship between the two to be rather corrupt.



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Joe Biden has faced intense pressure from his leftward base over his management of the relationship with Israel during its campaign against Hamas since October 7. This may end up costing Biden thousands of votes in Michigan, home to the largest Arab American population, and a state he must win to beat Trump. Given these weaknesses, I expect both candidates to downplay foreign policy on the

campaign trail absent any major unforeseen course corrections towards Israel, Russia, or China in the coming months.

A victory for Donald Trump would certainly result in a more pliable policy towards Russia, to put it mildly. If we are to take him at his word on the campaign trail, he would invite Russian threats against NATO members in Eastern Europe, and refuse assistance that the U.S. would otherwise be obligated to provide under Article V. However, as we have also seen recently, the effectiveness of any changes to U.S. policy towards Russia relies heavily on Congress as well. In Congress, while there is fairly wide bipartisan antipathy towards Mr. Putin, there is also considerable disagreement over whether and how much to support Ukrainians with further materials to fight the war. This disagreement also cuts across partisan lines - there are growing isolationist camps in both parties, and the American public is increasingly war weary overall. As we saw in the most recent failed attempt to pass funding for both Ukraine and Israel, the House GOP leadership has had difficulty counting votes given these realities. These factors add up to mounting uncertainty regarding how much American allies and partners can count on their support when the chips are down.

However much forestalled the vote to allow Sweden into NATO was, I believe the end result has modestly improved the Biden administration's view of Ankara. The removal of Senator Bob Menendez from the Foreign Relations Committee was also a positive sign for improved relations. This trendline may continue if Biden is re-elected, but Turkey's expansion of activity in Syria and Iraq could jeopardize that. I expect relations to center on security related matters under a second Biden administration, but there is potential for increased economic cooperation and investment if Ankara can stick to the more orthodox approach to the economy it has adopted lately, and make concessions in areas of concern like democracy and human rights. If Trump returns to office, I might expect President Erdoğan to once again find a very pliable interlocutor on the Syrian issue. I have my doubts that the relationship between Erdoğan and Trump would become robustly favorable to Turkey, but Trump's previous term suggests there is erratic potential across all policy areas. Erdoğan and Hakan Fidan may consider that an opportunistic possibility and prefer it to what has otherwise been a fairly cool relationship with Biden.

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The conversation about the 2024 US presidential elections often addresses three major foreign policy issues: the U.S. relationship with China; the Russia-Ukraine conflict; and the Israel-Hamas conflict. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that foreign policy will be less important in the upcoming election than economics. Currently, economic indicators suggest that the incumbent Democratic Party should be able to capitalize on the economy's performance under Biden. Polls, however, show that voter sentiment is less positive.

If unemployment and inflation remain at current levels, sentiment may improve by the fall. If this is not the case, domestic issues are likely to dominate the election campaigns. If polls show voters largely in approval of the Democrats' handling of the economy, then foreign policy might be an arena in which the two parties engage each more actively. Yet even in this case, it is difficult to see the two parties staking out diametrically opposed positions that might force the victor's hand post-election. To take, for example, the Israel-Hamas conflict, both parties will be cautious about alienating, on the one hand, youth voters who tend to be skeptical of US support for Israel, or, on the other hand, pro-Israeli donors and lobbying interests.

On the issue of US support for Ukraine, there are clearer differences between the two parties than on the other two major foreign policy issues. The Republican

Party, under Donald Trump's influence, has indicated concerns about the amount of aid devoted to Ukraine and has suggested that it might favor seeking compromise with Vladimir Putin and Russia. A Republican victory in the 2024, US presidential elections would carry risk of diminished U.S. aid to Ukraine. There are limits, however, to how far a Republican executive branch would be able to change current policy. Putin has thus far not demonstrated any willingness to compromise on Russia's stated maximalist aims. With European allies committing to long-term support for Ukraine, a Republican leadership would be reliant on Putin changing policy in such a way that would allow the US to portray any negotiations as a case of mutual concessions. So far, Putin's actions suggest that he sees long-term trends in favor of Russia's achievement of its current war aims. A Republican win in the presidential elections and reduced military aid to Ukraine would hardly encourage Putin to make concessions regarding current war aims.

Whoever wins the presidential elections in 2024 will deal with a significant check on the possibility of any improvement in bilateral relations with Turkey: congressional sentiment that has questioned the current Turkish government's political values and reliability as an ally. It might be possible to overcome this negative sentiment if Turkey came to be seen as a key partner in addressing one of the U.S.' other key foreign policy issues, either the Russia-Ukraine conflict or the Israel-Hamas conflict. This, however, seems unlikely. It is likely that US-Turkish relations will continue to play out in largely bilateral terms, and, without some external factor to bring the two countries together, the current ambivalence is likely to continue on both sides.