



TEXAS NATIONAL SECURITY REVIEW

POLICY ROUNDTABLE:

THE FUTURE OF TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY

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1. Security and Politics at the Center of the World: The Future of U.S.-Turkish-Russian Relations

by Doyle Hodges

In the third century, in what would become known as Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), the Roman emperor Septimius Severus designated the Milion marker as the milestone from which all distances in the empire would be measured.¹ For more than 1,500 years, under both Roman and Ottoman rule, Istanbul was the center of the world for many in Europe and the modern Middle East. Since the fall of the Ottoman empire, Turkey has not played a central role in world affairs. Yet, recent tensions between the country and many of its powerful neighbors serve as a reminder that the security and politics of Turkey remain profoundly important to the rest of the world.

In early October 2019, American President Donald Trump announced that U.S. forces would not oppose or interfere with a Turkish military incursion into northeastern Syria. The goal of the Turkish operation is to battle Kurdish forces — erstwhile partners of the United States in the fight against the Islamic State — seen by Ankara as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has fought a decades-long insurgency against Ankara. The blowback from the American foreign policy community in response to the Turkish incursion was swift and vociferous, including speculation that Turkey should be removed or suspended from the NATO alliance.² The crisis in U.S.-Turkish relations precipitated by Turkish military operations in Syria has returned Turkey to the center of foreign policy news coverage in America. But the ingredients for a breakdown in U.S.-Turkish relations, including tension over the increasingly close relationship between Turkey and Russia, were present long before the current crisis emerged and are likely to persist well after it is resolved.

¹ Peter Stothard, "Istanbul by Bettany Hughes — Stories from the Centre of the World," *Financial Times*, Jan. 13, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/ocba37de-d7fe-11e6-944b-e7eb37a6aa8e>.

² See, for example, Devan Cole, "Lindsey Graham Rips into Trump for Removing Troops from Syria," Oct. 7, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/07/politics/lindsey-graham-donald-trump-syria-troops/index.html>.

In this roundtable, four eminent scholars of Turkish security and politics look beyond the current crisis and evaluate the future of the tumultuous three-way relationship between the United States, Turkey, and Russia. In addition to Turkey's military operations in Syria, the recent choice by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to accept delivery of the Russian-made S-400 air-defense missile system, despite explicit warnings from the United States that such action would result in Turkey's expulsion from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program, has highlighted tensions in this relationship. Our authors explore how these tensions came into being, and evaluate how they may influence relations between Turkey, the United States, and Russia in the future. They argue that the erosion of U.S.-Turkish relations reflects fundamental issues in Turkish, Russian, and American politics that transcend the defense or security sectors.

Turkey's role as a geographic, political, and cultural nexus makes these tensions all the more important. Geographically, Turkey controls access to the Black Sea through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, and borders both Iraq, where U.S. forces have been fighting for over 15 years, and Syria, where American forces have led a coalition against the Islamic State for the past five years. Politically, Turkey is the only Muslim-majority member of the NATO alliance, and, along with Greece, is the only NATO member to have fought a war against another member of the alliance. Turkey is also now the only NATO member engaged in an active defense procurement arrangement with Russia. Although Turkey's bid for membership in the European Union has met with a seemingly endless series of obstacles since 1987, giving rise to suspicions that the real objection has more to do with European perceptions of Turkish immigrants than with any structural conditions,³ Turkey has become an indispensable partner to the European Union in dealing with the unprecedented flow of migrants and refugees from Libya and Syria. Culturally, Turkey, under Erdogan's leadership, has restored the symbols and language of Islam to public prominence in strong contrast to the secular tradition of the nation's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

³ See, for example, R. Azrout, J. H. P. van Spanje, and C. H. de Vreese, "Focusing on Differences? Contextual Conditions and Anti-Immigrant Attitudes' Effects on Support for Turkey's EU Membership," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 480-501, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edto16>.

In this roundtable, Lisel Hintz points to domestic causes in both the United States and Turkey as being responsible for the strained relationship between the two countries. As she argues in the opening of her essay, the question often posed in Washington — “Who lost Turkey?” — supposes that Turkey was ever someone’s to lose. By pursuing policies unilaterally without apparent regard for Turkish desires, and, more recently, by implementing policies inconsistently with unclear messaging, American policymakers play into a latent anti-Americanism in Turkish domestic politics. The recently improved relations between Turkey and several E.U. states suggest that if the United States were to approach Turkey more as an equal partner, Russia would have fewer chances to score easy wins in the competition for influence. Although Turkish-Russian relations appear to have improved markedly since their nadir in late 2015 when Turkish fighter jets shot down a Russian aircraft that had strayed into Turkish airspace, Hintz points out that the improvement came only after substantial Russian coercion, suggesting that the new closeness between Russia and Turkey may be more pragmatic than ideological.

Michael Reynolds explores the historical roots of Turkish-Russian cooperation, as well as the contemporary origins of U.S.-Turkish tensions. He argues that the S-400 crisis and the crisis over current military operations are best understood not as a unique product of Erdogan’s populist politics, but as the culmination of longstanding currents in domestic Turkish politics and U.S.-Turkish relations. Much as the history of U.S.-Turkish relations is not as amicable as many in American policy circles would like it to be, the history of Turkish-Russian relations is not as conflicted. Indeed, the Soviets provided substantial assistance to the young Turkish republic. Moreover, relations between Turkey and the Soviets were often less chilly than those between the Soviets and other NATO partners, even during the Cold War. After the Cold War ended, a prominent Turkish general suggested that Turkey’s future interests lay more with Moscow and Tehran than with Washington. Reynolds argues that the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia following the November 2015 shoot-down was a tour de force of successful Russian and Turkish diplomacy. At the same time, the United States achieved its own tour de force of unsuccessful diplomacy by offering protection to and denying requests for the extradition of Turkish cleric Fetullah Gülen, who has been designated a terrorist by the Turkish government and is blamed for a July 2016 coup attempt. The United States has also

supported and partnered with Kurdish forces in Syria that are viewed by Ankara (and designated by some U.S. policymakers) as extensions of domestic Kurdish terrorist groups, seen as implacable enemies of the Turkish state. Reynolds argues that the Turkish-Russian relationship has been strengthened by such missteps on the part of the United States.

Paul T. Levin argues that Turkey's growing isolation from Western powers can be understood as the product of rational calculations made by Erdogan as to what is in his own best interests, not necessarily what is good for the Turkish state. Heightening rather than easing tensions between the United States and Turkey serves to strengthen Erdogan's support among his political base, and plays to a particular type of Turkish nationalism, which has a long history and increasing domestic support in Turkey. Although Turkey has a history of rivalry with Russia, Levin agrees with Reynolds that there are also historic ties between the countries and increasing levels of economic interdependence. He also points out that, in addition to the strength of Erdogan's personalistic authoritarian regime, increased tensions between the United States and Turkey are consistent with a strong ideological desire within Turkey for greater independence and autonomy, rather than being instruments of a larger Western power. As a consequence, Levin predicts that the U.S.-Turkish relationship will continue to grow strained, while the Russian-Turkish relationship will likely deepen.

In his contribution to this roundtable, Burak Kadercan contends that crises in U.S.-Turkish relations are more the rule than the exception. He argues that what brought the United States and Turkey together to begin with was, "convenience, not a sense of shared values or historical connections." In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that relations between the two countries should fray when they are beset by inconvenience, as they are now. Kadercan highlights the central role that the "Kurdish question" has played in Turkish domestic politics since the founding of the Turkish republic, and points out several ways in which U.S. combat operations in Syria and Iraq have exacerbated the tensions associated with this issue, perhaps leading predictably to the present crisis over Turkish military operations in Syria. He suggests that the current tensions between America and Turkey, and the attendant Turkish turn toward Russia for economic and security assistance, may be a product of "self-fulfilling misperceptions" in which each side misunderstands the

importance that the other attaches to the issues involved, and perceives a lack of cooperation as intransigence, if not outright opposition.

American Congressman Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill is credited with saying that “all politics are local.” The wisdom of this observation is borne out by the analyses in this roundtable. While the roundtable is about foreign policy, all four authors agree that the explanations for Turkish foreign policy choices are to be found largely in Turkish domestic politics. While each author highlights a different cause for concern, the clear takeaway is that the turbulent relationship between the United States, Turkey, and Russia is unlikely to become less dynamic any time soon.

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2. No One Lost Turkey:

Erdogan’s Foreign Policy Quest for Agency with Russia and Beyond

By Lisel Hintz

A recent and impressively comprehensive assessment of the challenges in U.S.-Turkish relations asked the question: “Who Lost Turkey?”⁴ That question has been posed many times by various news outlets and think tanks over the past several years, going back as far

⁴ Keith Johnson and Robbie Gramer, “Who Lost Turkey?” *Foreign Policy*, July 19, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/19/who-lost-turkey-middle-east-s-400-missile-deal-russia-syria-iraq-kurdish-united-states-nato-alliance-partners-allies-adversaries/>.

as 2006, when the European Union froze accession talks with Turkey.⁵ More recent concerns about Turkey drifting toward Russia and Iran are prompting U.S. analysts to reassess the reliability of a country that was meant to be both buffer against and bridge to a difficult set of neighbors. The October 22 agreement signed following talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sochi regarding joint Turkish-Russian efforts to expel Syrian forces from a safe zone originally negotiated with the United States seems to provide further evidence that Turkey's cooperation with Russia is undercutting, if not contravening, U.S. interests in the Middle East.⁶ While many American citizens no doubt support President Trump's (badly bungled) decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria – although many seem positioned to move to Iraq rather than coming home – the Sochi deal gives Russia considerable leverage in determining the outcome of Syria's civil war.⁷

To understand how we got to the point where some are proclaiming the United States has “lost” Turkey to Russia and other non-Western allies, we need to take a step back. Following Turkey's decision to complete its purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia in July,⁸ observers employed a range of apocalyptic terms to capture what they foresaw as the impending rupture in ties between NATO allies Turkey and the United States. Hardliners at Washington, D.C., think tank talks I attended in June warned of a “rough summer ahead,” arguing that while Turkey is a valuable ally it is not an irreplaceable one. Others pragmatically cautioned that Turkey was too big to fail, and reminded those

⁵ Owen Matthews, “Who Lost Turkey,” *Newsweek*, Dec. 10, 2006, <https://www.newsweek.com/who-lost-turkey-105633>.

⁶ Kareen Fahim and Sarah Dadouch, “Russia, Turkey Agree to Jointly Remove Kurdish Fighter's Along Turkey's Border in Northern Syria,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 22, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkeys-erdogan-meets-with-putin-in-russia-to-discuss-syrian-operation/2019/10/22/764abcea-f43f-11e9-b2d2-1f37c9d82dbb_story.html.

⁷ Sune Engel Rasmussen and Isabel Coles, “U.S. Troops Withdrawing from Syria Draw Scorn,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 21, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-troops-cross-into-iraq-as-they-withdraw-from-syria-11571649101>.

⁸ “US Sets Turkey Deadline to Give Up Russian Missile Deal,” *Deutsche Welle*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-sets-turkey-deadline-to-give-up-russian-missile-deal/a-49108079>.

concerned about losing access to Incirlik airbase that America had sanctioned Turkey in the past over Cyprus without substantial fallout.

In fact, the summer of 2019 proved to be much less tumultuous for U.S.-Turkish relations than decision-makers and analysts in Washington predicted. As President Donald Trump stalled on imposing sanctions on Turkey through the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, relying instead on his ability to negotiate with fellow populist strongman Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, attention became focused on the progress being made in negotiations between the two countries over Syria.⁹ Despite repeated threats to launch a unilateral military offensive if the United States did not adhere to agreed conditions on the establishment and patrol of the security mechanism on Syria's northern border east of the Euphrates, as well as Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar's obliquely menacing references to plans B and C,¹⁰ the agreement on what was known as the "safe zone" seemed to be holding. Moreover, America had committed to address Turkey's very real security concerns about the presence of the Kurdish People's Protection Units forces on its southern border. The group, which the United States supported as part of the larger Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against the Islamic State, has organic links to Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party, which both Turkey and the United States consider a terrorist organization. This tenuous arrangement forestalled any previously imminent attack on a U.S. ally (i.e., the People's Protection Units) by a U.S. ally (i.e., Turkey). That is, until October 9.

The implosion of the agreement was as bewildering as it was fraught with serious implications for U.S.-Turkish relations. A sudden declaration via a White House statement on October 6 that Turkey would be moving into northern Syria and that U.S. forces "would

⁹ Metin Gürcan, "Cryptic Safe-Zone Deal Between Turkey, US," *Al Monitor*, Aug. 13, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/turkey-united-states-syria-safe-zone-deal-divided-public.html>.

¹⁰ "Turkey Has Plan B if US Fails to Keep Promises for Syria Safe Zone: Defense Minister," *Hürriyet Daily News*, Sept. 3, 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-has-plan-b-if-us-fails-to-keep-promises-for-syria-safe-zone-defense-minister-146257>.

not support or be involved in the operation”¹¹ followed a phone call between presidents Trump and Erdogan in which one leader apparently convinced the other that Turkish forces could handle the problem of remaining Islamic State fighters and that the United States’ work in Syria was done. The question of who was doing the convincing and whether one or both were attempting to bluff remains unclear,¹² but the dynamic recalls a similar exchange and declaration of U.S. troop withdrawal in December 2018 that led Secretary of Defense James Mattis to resign.¹³

The sudden policy shift — including the abandonment of U.S.-allied Kurdish forces and a lack of planning for the detained Islamic State fighters that the People’s Protection Units had been guarding — happened immediately during the October 6 call. Taking advantage of this shift, Turkey launched its incongruously named “Fountain of Peace” operation in northern Syria three days later. In addressing the now-abandoned allies that had done the majority of the fighting against the Islamic State at the United States’ behest, Trump waffled in his position toward what he referred to as “the Kurds” — a homogenizing objectification that does damage to the many national, linguistic, political, and other differences among Kurds. A stream of Trump’s tweets in the 24 hours following the incursion variously stated that the Kurds were Turkey’s “natural enemies,” but also “special people and wonderful fighters.” Similarly perplexing, he reminded his followers that the United States was still helping the Kurds “financially/[with] weapons!” but then erroneously suggested they betrayed U.S. forces in World War II because they “didn’t help us with Normandy.”¹⁴ Meanwhile, the United Nations warned that Turkey may be

¹¹ Statement from the White House Press Secretary, Oct. 6, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/>.

¹² Jonathan Swan “Behind the Scenes of the Trump Bluff That Kicked Off Turkey’s Invasion,” *Axios*, Oct. 13, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/trump-erdogan-turkey-syria-invasion-bluff-fc761d8f-e33b-473b-8ece-d0b8b3a51f26.html>.

¹³ Jack Detsch, “Mattis Exits Over Mideast Policy Split with Trump,” *Al Monitor*, Dec. 21, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/mattis-exit-trump-mideast-policy-split-syria.html>.

¹⁴ Aaron Blake, “‘They Didn’t Help Us with Normandy’: Trump Abandons the Kurds – Rhetorically if Not Literally,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/09/trump-has-abandoned-kurds-least-rhetorically/>.

responsible for war crimes against Kurdish civilians committed by its jihadist militia allies loosely organized under the new Syrian National Army.¹⁵ As for U.S.-Turkish relations, although Trump appeared to give Erdogan a green light for the incursion by saying the United States would not get involved, the U.S. president, facing immense domestic blowback, later declared in another series of surreal tweets that, in his “great and unmatched wisdom,” he could “totally destroy and obliterate” the Turkish economy if Turkey crossed some as-yet-undefined line.¹⁶

From the U.S. perspective, policymaking on Turkey has been, in a word, chaotic. It thus might seem to make sense to pose the question, “Who lost Turkey?” and place the blame on some aspect of the U.S. foreign policy-making establishment. Yet, it is worth examining the underlying attitudes that prompted this much-discussed question, as “Who lost X?” is a relatively common trope employed by U.S. foreign policy critics. Important to recognize, however, is that this form of analysis is based on the disturbing assumption that X was someone’s to lose in the first place. The question reveals a pervasive belief that X is simply a passive object — whether referring to Iran, Pakistan, Hungary, or another former ally. This logic implies that, had America just done something differently, Turkey, in this case, would have remained quiescently within the fold. This denial of Turkey’s agency is pure hubris.

Recognizing Turkish Agency

What U.S. foreign policymakers continually refuse to recognize is that the maintenance of partnerships and alliances is a two-way street. Any reasonably informed discussion of Turkey’s turn away from the European Union, for example, must include the major missteps made by Europe, such as the decision to allow Cyprus to gain E.U. membership as

¹⁵ Ayla Jean Yackley, “Erdogan Defies International Outcry Over Syrian Incursion,” *Al Monitor*, Oct. 15, 2019: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/erdogan-defies-international-outcry-syria-incursion.html>.

¹⁶ Felicia Sonmez, “Trump Hails His Own ‘Great and Unmatched Wisdom’ in Warning to Turkey,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 7, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-hails-his-own-great-and-unmatched-wisdom-in-warning-to-turkey/2019/10/07/13c65990-e935-11e9-9306-47cbo324fd44_story.html.

a partitioned state,¹⁷ and the use of highly discriminatory language by top E.U. officials. As for Turkey, the regime and society look much different today than they did when Ankara lobbied so fervently to join NATO after initially being denied membership along with Greece in 1950. In its formative decades, Turkey by no means had a starry-eyed, pro-Western orientation. Founding father and first president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk used weapons from Russia in his fight against Allied occupation in Turkey's War of Liberation. Later, Atatürk viewed entrenchment in transatlantic relationships as the surest way to protect Turkey's hard-won borders and affirm its natural, if warily defensive, place in the West.

Today's Turkey, under the consolidated rule of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, does not share the same belief in Western identity and Western values as the United States does. Arguably, it does not even share the same interests. Erdogan's vision for a "New Turkey,"¹⁸ as he calls it, depicts a country that has thrown off the shackles of its previous power asymmetries and is no longer beholden to the West. In line with what my recent book terms an "Ottoman Islamist" understanding of Turkish national identity,¹⁹ Turkey's foreign policy under the 17-year-rule of Erdogan's party has sought not only to take advantage of religious and cultural ties with neighbors in the Middle East and the Balkans, as prescribed by now-sidelined Justice and Development Party foreign policy guru Ahmet Davutoğlu,²⁰ but to reclaim its role as the leading (Sunni) Muslim power in the region. This activist, and even aggressive, foreign policy contrasts sharply with the previously dominant "Republican Nationalist" vision for the country, which saw Turkey's natural and most secure place as being in the West, but remained wary of foreign entanglements that could jeopardize its territorial integrity. Justice and Development Party-led initiatives meant to establish Turkey's legitimacy in its new activist role include attempts to resolve the

¹⁷ Doğa Ulaş Eralp and Nimet Beriker, "Assessing the Conflict Resolution Potential of the EU: The Cyprus Conflict and Accession Negotiations," *Security Dialogue* 36, no. 2 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0967010605054647>.

¹⁸ Umut Uras, "Erdogan Promises a 'New Turkey,'" *Al Jazeera*, July 12, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/erdogan-promises-new-turkey-20147127316609347.html>.

¹⁹ Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁰ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001).

international community's concerns over a nuclear Iran by brokering a deal, to support a Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, and to first moderate and later oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.²¹

Notably, each of those initiatives failed. Erdogan's estimation of his ability to use culturally-based soft power to bolster Turkey's leadership in regional politics appear as miscalculated as his formula for low inflation through low interest rates.²² Just as new Turkic states such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were skeptical of a Turkish "big brother" intervening in their affairs following decades of Soviet control,²³ states occupying former Ottoman territory reject the notion that Istanbul's legacy as home of the sultanate and caliphate endows Ankara with any special influence.

Where the Justice and Development Party government has been more successful is in being confrontational, not negotiating and mediating. Erdogan became, even if only briefly, a hero of the Arab street when he walked off the World Economic Forum stage after lambasting Israeli President Shimon Peres for Israel's attacks on Gaza.²⁴ Equally fiery and at times anti-Semitic rhetoric following a deadly Israeli Defense Forces raid on a Turkish flotilla attempting to break the Gaza blockade generated nationalist support at home as well as Muslim solidarity abroad.²⁵ Accusing others of the same kind of divisive identity politics in which he himself engages has also served Erdogan well. Shaming Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for stirring up sectarian tensions won him temporary favor among Sunni

²¹ Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out*, 111–18.

²² Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 2 (2008); Onur Ant, "Behind Erdogan's Strange Ideas about Interest Rates," *Bloomberg*, Aug. 2, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-02/behind-erdogan-s-strange-ideas-about-interest-rates-quicktake>.

²³ Bayram Balcı and Thomas Liles "What Remains from Turkish Soft Power in the Caucasus," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, April 24, 2019, <http://turkishpolicy.com/blog/31/what-remains-from-turkish-soft-power-in-the-caucasus>.

²⁴ Jamal Dajani, "Arabs Find a Hero," *Huffington Post*, Feb. 3, 2009, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/arabs-find-a-hero_b_162497.

²⁵ Raphael Ahren, "Turkish MP: Erdogan's Anti-Semitism Is Hard to Reverse," *Times of Israel*, Feb. 5, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/arabs-find-a-hero_b_162497.

Arab leaders.²⁶ Standing up to some of those same leaders by asserting that the Gulf Cooperation Council's blockade of Qatar violated Islamic values and stepping in with aid earned Erdogan much-needed Qatari support from Turkey's one remaining close ally as the lira plunged last summer.²⁷

The confrontational reputation Erdogan has cultivated through these interactions helps him communicate to domestic audiences a narrative that nefarious foreign elements are attempting to thwart Turkey's rise. For his supporters, "New Turkey" is independent and should take orders from no one, especially not its former patrons in the West. From this perspective, when supposedly refused the option to purchase a Patriot missile system from the United States that included technology transfer and co-production provisions,²⁸ why shouldn't Turkey purchase an S-400 system from the Russians? When the United States cooperates militarily with a group the Turkish government defines as a terrorist organization threatening its national security,²⁹ why shouldn't it take steps to defend itself? Why should Turkey agree to adhere to fresh, unilateral sanctions against Iran because the United States says it should? Answers abound as to why Turkey should understand U.S. frustrations, including the S-400's NATO-incompatible and intelligence-compromising

²⁶ Fehim Taştekin, "Turkey's Sunni Identity Test," *Al Monitor*, June 21, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/turkey-sunnism-sectarian-rhetoric.html>.

²⁷ Ercan Gürses and Aziz el Yaakoubi, "Turkish President Says Qatar Isolation Violates Islamic Values," *Reuters*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar/turkish-president-says-qatar-isolation-violates-islamic-values-idUSKBN1931YW>; Onur Ant and Aslı Kandemir, "Qatar Comes to Rescue as Turkey Moves to Avert Financial Crisis," *Bloomberg*, Aug. 15, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-15/qatar-comes-to-rescue-as-turkey-moves-to-avert-financial-crisis>.

²⁸ Dorian Jones, "Allure of Domestic Arms Drives Turkey toward Russian Missiles," *VOANews*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/allure-domestic-arms-drives-turkey-toward-russian-missiles>.

²⁹ Anne Barnard and Ben Hubbard, "Allies or Terrorists: Who Are the Kurdish Fighters in Syria?" *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/world/middleeast/turkey-kurds-syria.html>; "Turkey Says U.S. Support for YPG Kurds Was a 'Big Mistake,'" *Reuters*, Nov. 18, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-usa/turkey-says-u-s-support-for-syrian-kurdish-ypg-a-big-mistake-idUSKCN1NN09I>.

technology,³⁰ Turkey's initial hesitation in fighting the Islamic State,³¹ and an unprecedented oil-for-gold sanctions-busting scheme implicating Turkish officials at the highest level.³² But these do not fit neatly into a story in which the West does its best but cannot succeed in cowing a powerful and independent New Turkey into submission.

Evaluating Turkey's "Russia Turn"

This is not to say that Turkey, or even Erdogan, does not still need the West. As persuasively as some analysts have argued that Turkey's behavior augurs a precarious warming of relations with Russia,³³ NATO membership remains the best form of defense against Moscow's aggression in the region and is a collective security guarantee decision-makers in Ankara will likely be unwilling to sacrifice — even as they repeatedly test the boundaries of that membership.³⁴ Turkey's relationship with Russia today hinges upon the economic, energy, and security interests the latter can help the former meet, but Moscow expects to get something in return. Thus, far from any notion of partnership, bilateral ties between the two countries might best be characterized as a distinctly asymmetrical form of transactionalism. That is, each country gains something out of the relationship but Moscow stands to benefit much more. As much as Turkey needed Russia's acquiescence, at the very

³⁰ "US to Turkey: S-400s Aren't Compatible with NATO Tech," *Military.com*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.military.com/defensetech/2017/07/17/us-to-turkey-russian-s-400s-arent-compatible-with-nato-tech>.

³¹ Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, "In Turkey, a Late Crackdown on Islamist Fighters," *Washington Post*, Aug. 12, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-turkey-became-the-shopping-mall-for-the-islamic-state/2014/08/12/5eff70bf-a38a-4334-9aa9-ae3fc1714c4b_story.html.

³² Benjamin Weiser, "Erdogan Helped Turks Evade Iran Sanctions, Reza Zarrab Says," *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-iran-sanctions.html>.

³³ See, for example, Aaron Stein, "Ankara's Look East: How Turkey's Warming Ties with Russia Threaten Its Place in the Transatlantic Community," *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 27, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/ankaras-look-east-how-turkeys-warming-ties-with-russia-threaten-its-place-in-the-transatlantic-community/>.

³⁴ Oya Dursun-Özkanca, "Turkish Soft Balancing against the EU? An Analysis of the Prospects for Improved Transatlantic Relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 13, no. 4 (October 2017): 894–912, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orw004>.

least, for its forays into Syria, the Soviet aspirations of greater control in the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles) that motivated Turkey to seek security in the NATO alliance in the first place loom just as powerfully in modern Russia. From an identity perspective, thinking of Turkey's geostrategic position in Ottoman Islamist terms, Turkish decision-makers would be remiss in not recalling the number of wars lost to the Russians between the 16th and 20th centuries, the amount of territory lost, and the lives of millions of Turkic Muslims who were deported or massacred as a result of Russian campaigns.³⁵

Indeed, it was precisely the memory of these conflicts — or, perhaps more accurately, the memory of them among Turkish voters — that has spurred Erdogan's open criticism of Russia. While selective in his rhetorical critique — likely also a function of voter preferences, specifically among ethnic or "Pan-Turkic Nationalist" voters whose support Erdogan has counted on to achieve the majority his presidency requires³⁶ — when he takes on Russia for its abuses against ethnically Turkic Crimean Tatars, for example, he is forceful. The Turkish president repeatedly criticized Moscow's actions in Crimea as an "illegal annexation" of the peninsula,³⁷ stating in November 2018 that "we do not and will not recognize" Russian sovereignty over the territory.³⁸

Assessing Turkey's Position

Remarkably, all of this criticism has come after a so-called rapprochement between the two countries in 2016 — one which notably followed the deft use of sanctions by Russia to

³⁵ See, for example, Suat Kınıklıoğlu and Valeriy Morkva, "An Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 7, no. 4 (2007): 533-53,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850701726013>.

³⁶ Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out*, 37-41.

³⁷ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdogan: Kırım'ın Yasa Dışı İlhakını Tanımadık Tanımayacağız," *Akşam Gazetesi*, Oct. 9, 2017, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ukraynada-konusuyor/haber-667769>.

³⁸ "Erdogan: Kırım'ın Yasa Dışı İlhakını Tanımayacağımızı Tekraren Vurguladık," *Yeni Asya Gazetesi*, Nov. 3, 2018, http://www.yeniasya.com.tr/gundem/erdogan-kirim-in-yasa-disi-ilhakini-tanimayacagimizi-tekraren-vurguladik_477328.

squeeze Turkey's economy through bans on Turkish imports, tourism packages, and construction projects, while also suspending work on the TurkStream pipeline.³⁹ The sanctions came as swift and severe punishment after the downing of a Russian warplane by two Turkish F-16s in November 2015.⁴⁰ Feeling the bite of economic pressure, Erdogan demonstrated his renowned pragmatic capacity to execute sudden 180-degree shifts in foreign policy when necessary, while at the same time spinning the account of what happened in his favor. Erdogan's June 2016 letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin expressing his personal condolences for the death of the Russian pilot was sent shortly before a coup attempt that the Turkish government blames on its ally-turned-foe, the Gülen movement.

In the same way that the July 2016 coup attempt provided the justification for firing and arresting over 100,000 individuals supposedly linked to the movement,⁴¹ it also allowed Turkey to blame a member of the Gülen movement for the rift in Russia-Turkey relations. Just a few days after the failed putsch, two officers with alleged links to the Gülen movement were detained in connection with the downing of the jet, and Ankara's mayor, Melih Gökçek, a member of the Justice and Development Party, declared the incident part of a plot to disrupt Russia-Turkey relations.⁴² Putin himself gave credence to this explanation,⁴³ which removed any reason for hard feelings among the two countries' leaders. Remarkably, this reduction in tension even survived the assassination of the

³⁹ Selin Girit, "Turkey Faces Big Losses as Russian Sanctions Bite," *BBC News*, Jan. 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>.

⁴⁰ Mehmet Çetingüleç, "Will Russia's Economic Restrictions on Turkey Backfire?" *Al Monitor*, Dec. 13, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2015/12/turkey-russia-steep-costs-of-downing-of-russian-jet.html>.

⁴¹ Lisel Hintz, "Turkey's Post-Putsch-Purge," *Boston Globe*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2016/07/28/turkey-post-putsch-purge/FojXxjTkNvuMKQVyQn7BuJ/story.html>.

⁴² "Turkish Pilots Who Downed Russian Jet Detained," *Al-Jazeera*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/turkish-pilots-downed-russian-jet-detained-160719132950496.html>.

⁴³ "Ex-Turkish PM: I Was Told Pilot Who Shot Down Russian Jet Was not Linked to Gülen Network," *Hürriyet Daily News*, Jan. 12, 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ex-turkish-pm-i-was-told-pilot-who-shot-down-russian-jet-was-not-linked-to-gulen-network-108436>.

Russian ambassador to Turkey while at an art exhibition in Ankara. Again, the assassin was accused of being a member of the Gülen movement, as well as having jihadist links.⁴⁴

This serves as a reminder that Turkey's bilateral relationships can, at times, be quite volatile, and are often infused with rhetoric that casts Turkey as the victor. Another example is Turkey's supposed rapprochement with Israel following Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's apology for the Mavi Marmara deaths: Pro-government media outlets emphasized the concessions Israel would be forced to make, including making financial reparations and allowing Turkey to provide humanitarian aid to Gaza. A *Yeni Şafak* headline expressed this view well: "Israel's Press: We Surrendered, Hamas and Turkey Won."⁴⁵ Two other journalists posed the question of whether Turkey's negotiated achievement should be deemed a "victory" (*zafer*) or a "thrashing" (*hezimet*).⁴⁶

European leaders' experiences dealing with Erdogan can also be instructive to U.S. foreign policymakers attempting to identify trends in the Turkish ruler's behavior in the international arena. E.U. heads of state are cautious about assuming that steps such as Turkey's normalization of relations with the Netherlands and its release of Greek soldiers⁴⁷ — taken at a time of heightened tensions with the United States and Turkey's own economic crisis — constitute any substantive or lasting form of rapprochement. A more cooperative Turkey is certainly desirable, particularly for German Chancellor Angela Merkel and others concerned about a potential influx of Syrian refugees from Idlib, but cannot be

⁴⁴ "Erdogan Resmen Açıkladı: Suikastçı FETÖ Mensubu," *Milliyet Haber*, Dec. 21, 2016, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/erdogan-resmen-acikladi-suikastci-feto-mensubu-2365707>.

⁴⁵ "İsrail Basını: Teslim Olduk, Hamas ve Türkiye Kazandı," *Yeni Şafak Gazetesi*, June 27, 2016, <http://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/israil-basini-teslim-olduk-hamas-ve-turkiye-kazandi-2487428>.

⁴⁶ Yasın Altıntaş and Berrin Naz Önsiper, "Türkiye-İsrail Anlaşması: Zafer mi Hezimet mi?," *Tesnim Haber Ajansı*, Aug. 22, 2016, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/tr/news/2016/08/22/1164807/t%C3%BCrkiye-israil-anla%C5%9Fmas%C4%B1-zafer-mi-hezimet-mi>.

⁴⁷ "Turkey, Netherlands Agree to Normalize Ties," *Reuters*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-netherlands/turkey-netherlands-agree-to-normalize-ties-idUSKBN1KA1Lo>; "Turkey Releases Two Greek Soldiers," *Hürriyet Daily News*, Aug. 14, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-court-releases-two-greek-soldiers-135803>.

assured. Indeed, Erdogan has threatened in the past to open Turkey's borders when he did not receive the concessions he believed were due to him.⁴⁸ The Dutch and Germans, whom Erdogan has called fascists and Nazis,⁴⁹ would also do well to remember his less than conciliatory stance during so-called reconciliation with Israel discussed above.⁵⁰

These examples help to demonstrate Turkey's tendency to shift its stance and recalibrate its relationships under Erdogan's leadership. Thus, not despite but because of its Ottoman Islamist vision, Erdogan's "New Turkey" is built on the premise that it is beholden to no one and need not choose between the West or the East. The lesson for the United States is that what U.S. policymakers view as reasonable expectations — don't attack U.S. Kurdish allies in the fight against the Islamic State — is viewed by Turkey as hypocritical imperialist demands — leave this particular terrorist group alone because its fighting presence reduced the need for U.S. boots on the ground. Expecting Turkey to fall in line will only continue to disappoint Washington.

The Effects of Sanctions

Furthermore, despite the efficacy of sanctions in the Russian case, the U.S. threat of sanctions may actually help Erdogan garner domestic support.⁵¹ Indeed, he can channel his citizens' frustrations with what they perceive as the United States throwing its weight around by standing up to a would-be bully with a defiant "*ey Amerika!*" ("Now see here,

⁴⁸ Lisel Hintz and Caroline Feehan, "Burden or Boon? Erdogan's Tactical Treatment of the Syrian Refugee Crisis," *Middle East Institute*, Jan. 10, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/burden-or-boon-turkeys-tactical-treatment-syrian-refugee-crisis>.

⁴⁹ Turkey's Erdogan Calls Dutch Authorities 'Nazi' Remnants," *BBC News*, Mar. 11, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39242707>.

⁵⁰ Shashank Joshi and Aaron Stein, "The Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement," *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/03/the-turkey-israel-rapprochement/>.

⁵¹ Lisel Hintz and Blaise Misztal, "Hitting Erdogan Where It Hurts, Not Where It Helps," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 3, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/hitting-erdogan-where-it-hurts-not-where-it-helps/>.

America!”)⁵² The wide-ranging spectrum of anti-American protests in which Turkish citizens engaged after the United States imposed sanctions against Turkey in August 2018, for example, was impressive. From smashed iPhones to canceled cowboy Westerns to a man named Ferhat Dolar applying to change his now much-maligned last name,⁵³ those who blame U.S. meddling for Turkey’s currency crisis found a variety of non-traditional outlets for venting their frustration.

Of course that frustration did not appear in a vacuum. Erdogan, whose multiple speeches per day are broadcast live on nearly every Turkish television station, was the one who called for a boycott on U.S. products, including electronic goods. As part of a broader “rally ‘round the flag” strategy of stoking nationalist pride and placing responsibility for his country’s intensifying economic woes on anyone but himself, Erdogan has declared repeatedly that Turkey will defy all foreign attempts to bring its people “to their knees.”⁵⁴ While not specifying exactly whom he blames other than “them,” Erdogan casts the United States in the role of saboteur seeking to halt Turkey’s rise through “economic war.”⁵⁵

By tweeting that he was doubling tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminum imports at the exact moment Turkish Treasury and Finance Minister (and Erdogan’s son-in-law) Berat Albayrak was trying to assert control over the economy last summer,⁵⁶ Trump unwittingly stepped neatly into the role the Turkish president scripted for him. Erdogan and his various

⁵² “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Ey Amerika, Ey Trump Sen Bunları Görmedin mi Ondan Sonra ‘Dünyanın En Güçlü”” *Haberler.com*, Dec. 17, 2017, <https://www.haberler.com/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ey-amerika-ey-trump-sen-10358274-haberi/>.

⁵³ “ABD’ye Tepki için Soyadını Değiştirmek İstiyor,” *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi*, Aug. 29, 2018, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/video_haber/1067762/ABD_ye_tepki_icin_soyadini_degistirmek_istiyor.html?platform=hootsuite.

⁵⁴ Daren Butler, “Erdogan Invokes Patriotism, Islam as Lira Remains under Pressure,” *Reuters*, Aug. 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-currency-erdogan/erdogan-invokes-patriotism-islam-as-lira-remains-under-pressure-idUSKCN1L50OA>.

⁵⁵ Hümeysra Pamuk, “Turkey Is a ‘Target of Economic War,’” *Reuters*, Aug. 11, 2018, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUKKBN1KWo8S>.

⁵⁶ “Trump Doubles Metal Tariffs on Turkey,” *Ahval News*, Aug. 10, 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/donald-trump/trump-doubles-metal-tariffs-turkey>.

media mouthpieces have been conspiratorially accusing the West of scheming to disrupt the Turkish president's consolidation of executive and personal power for the past five years — in the 2013 Gezi Park protests, and the 2016 coup attempt, for example. The fact that Trump helped prove Erdogan right in the case of the lira crisis only bolsters pre-existing anti-American sentiment that has served to shore up pro-government support and legitimize a foreign policy re-orientation. Tensions between Washington and Ankara have not pushed the latter to turn elsewhere, but they provide a nice justification for doing so.

Trump's tempestuous tweets aside, the sanctions whose direct and indirect effects on the Turkish people U.S. policy-makers are willing to stomach are unlikely to produce the desired movement on any of the issues mentioned. First, as sanctions expert Richard Haass argues, in order to increase the likelihood that sanctions will compel or deter particular actions, they should adhere to several general criteria.⁵⁷ These include multilateral participation, narrow and tough targeting of the individual(s) responsible, clear standards for compliance, and relatively low stakes issue for target state. None of the coercive steps the United States has implemented as it continues to weigh its options regarding the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act meet any of these criteria fully, much less all of them. The decision to sanction two of Turkey's defense and energy ministries and freeze the assets of three ministers in the wake of Turkey's October operation in Syria appears relatively toothless, given that Erdogan's invitation to the White House still stands as of this writing.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Vice President Mike Pence's trip to Ankara along with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and special envoy on Syria and the Islamic State James Jeffrey produced an outcome favorable to Turkey in which the United States agreed to lift the minor sanctions that had been imposed. The deal achieved there, including a temporary halt to the conflict to allow Kurdish troops to withdraw from a region in northern Syria specifically designated by Ankara, seemed distinctly more of a "gift" to

⁵⁷ Richard Haass, "Economic Sanctions: Too Much of a Bad Thing," *Brookings Policy Brief Series*, June 1, 1998, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/economic-sanctions-too-much-of-a-bad-thing/>.

⁵⁸ Tal Axelrod, "GOP Senators Say Erdogan White House Invitation Should Be Revoked," *The Hill*, Oct. 16, 2019, <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/466075-gop-senators-says-erdogan-invitation-to-white-house-should-be-revoked>.

Erdogan than a punishment.⁵⁹ In brief, Turkey received much of what it initially wanted in Syria without having to wage a protracted war that could risk waning domestic support were Turkish troop and civilian casualties to rise.

The problem of Washington's unclear and inconsistent messaging through various channels and delegations is arguably the biggest obstacle — other than Turkish recalcitrance — to successfully deterring Turkey through credible threats. Namely, Trump actively undermines his own bureaucratic organizations' efforts to convince Turkey that the threat of penalty will be forthcoming and unsustainably severe. Before threatening to inflict obliterating punishment on the Turkish economy, Trump repeatedly bragged to Erdogan that he could temper his legislative branch's push for sanctions and has boasted to his own staff about his ability to get the Turkish leader on his good side.⁶⁰ The penalties from the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act are yet to be specified much less applied. The confirmation of U.S. Ambassador David Satterfield will hopefully clear up some of the mixed messaging that took place after the post was vacated in October 2017. Yet, even the most talented envoy cannot correct for a president sabotaging — whether unwittingly or deliberately — efforts to deter a state's behavior through threat of sanctions. Failure to uphold best practices of deterrent coercion through sanctions aside, what the U.S. foreign policy establishment failed to grasp sufficiently was that the United States cannot persuade Turkey whenever it wishes. The identity of Erdogan's Turkey demands that it resist.

Conclusion

Given the widespread (and by no means Justice and Development Party-specific) anti-Americanism that has proven so politically useful, why should Erdogan adhere to U.S.

⁵⁹ Ishaan Tharoor, "Trump's Enormous Gift to Erdogan," *Washington Post*, Oct. 18, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/18/trumps-enormous-gift-erdogan/>.

⁶⁰ Pinar Tremblay, "Erdogan's Friendship with Trump Has Extra Benefits," *Al-Monitor*, Oct. 9, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/turkey-united-states-why-akp-supporters-pray-for-trump.html>.

demands, particularly when they are so haphazardly made? Why should he act in ways that are contrary to his vision for Turkey's foreign policy role in the region? Why wouldn't he remind voters that the United States refused to hand over the man whom much of Turkey blames for the July 2016 coup attempt that cost over 260 Turkish citizens their lives?

Admittedly the underlying logic of the argument made here does not help advance the debate of how to persuade Turkey to comply with U.S. suggestions, demands, or threats. Indeed, I argue that even taking such an approach toward Turkey's current recalcitrance sets U.S. foreign policymakers up for disappointment. Even mired in an economic crisis and facing impending sanctions, Turkey pursued an aggressive course in the Eastern Mediterranean over the summer of 2019, demonstrating that Erdogan's Turkey will not be deterred from seeking its own path to energy independence. In one sense, the United States could see this as a positive development: What Greece and the Republic of Cyprus deem to be Turkey's "illegal" drilling may indicate a desire to avoid becoming too dependent on Russia and Iran for energy. This is the same dependence U.S. policymakers and analysts are worried about when they ask "Who lost Turkey?" However, framing the question in this way displays precisely the attitudes that help bolster Erdogan's quest, however foolhardy it may be, for agency, independence, and even leadership in a region that has been dominated by larger powers since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

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increasing authoritarianism, civil society struggles, foreign policy shifts, and Kurdish and Alevi issues.



3. A Remarkable Rapprochement

By Michael A. Reynolds

Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia has arrived amidst the most significant crisis in the history of U.S.-Turkish relations. The purchase has not only spurred a further deterioration of these relations but has also changed the fundamental structural dynamics of the crisis so as to make impossible a return to the status quo ante. Despite the fact that the S-400 deal had been in the works for two years, the delivery of the weapon system this past July appears to have caught American policymakers genuinely by surprise, but it should not have. Moments of close and even enthusiastic cooperation between Ankara and Washington over the past decade and a half have acted as so much dust in the eyes, obscuring the reality that, since the end of the Cold War, U.S.-Turkish relations have been on an overall downward slope. Yet, today, incredulous American policymakers cling to the notion that Turkey is akin to a wayward child who, after throwing an emotionally gratifying tantrum, will have no choice but to come to his senses and resume behaving properly, in this case supporting the American-led global order. The inability of those in Washington to grasp the causes of the crisis has prevented them from comprehending its potential consequences for American foreign policy.

The current crisis is not rooted in the whims of an autocratic, anti-Western, and Islamist Recep Tayyip Erdogan. To the contrary, the purchase of the S-400s reflects the fulfillment and manifestation of long-standing Turkish foreign policy aspirations and, what is more

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troubling for Washington, a marked decline in U.S. authority and power around the globe. In 2003, the United States embarked on a project to transform the greater Middle East in its favor. That project has not only failed to secure a more liberal, prosperous, and stable Middle East, it has also alienated Turkey, a lynchpin of America's Middle East, Eastern European, and Eurasian policies. The larger meaning of the S-400 crisis is that Washington has to reconsider all these policies, not just its relationship with Ankara.

Turkey's Relationship with Russia

A source of American disbelief about Turkey's readiness to buy arms from Russia has been the assumption that Turkey and Russia are fated by geography, history, and culture to be adversaries. The idea that the two countries could be partners or even allies seemed unthinkable. It is true that a long-running and bloody rivalry between the Ottoman and Russian empires — the two have fought some 12 wars with each other — left indelible marks on the cultural and historical memories of both. Yet, there have been significant episodes of cooperation. Russia backed Istanbul in 1832–33, when Mehmed Ali of Egypt began advancing on Anatolia. Acting at the behest of the sultan, the tsar deployed Russian soldiers near Istanbul to deter any attack on the Ottoman capital, and thereby helped preserve the empire. The tsar subsequently converted that deployment into a treaty alliance that lasted almost a decade.⁶¹ Even on the eve of the most epic Ottoman-Russian conflict, World War I, the Ottomans established a Turkish-Russian Friendship Committee in March 1914, and in May 1914 pitched the idea of an alliance to the Russians.⁶² Historical grievances did not define Ottoman foreign policy toward Russia.

The most relevant instance of Russian-Turkish collaboration came during the Turkish War of National Independence (1919–22), when the Russians provided essential financial and military aid to the Turks. Even before he emerged to claim the mantle of the Turkish

⁶¹ M.S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), 80–87; Virginia H. Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2007), 363–75.

⁶² Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 41–45.

National Forces (*Kuva-yi Milliye*) in May, 1919, Mustafa Kemal engaged representatives of the Bolsheviks to discuss a possible alliance. Upon taking command of the nationalist movement, he promptly followed through to form an alliance with Vladimir Lenin and Bolshevik Russia.⁶³ Soviet Russia subsequently delivered to Kemal and his forces both arms and funds. Kemal's outreach to Lenin was a geopolitical masterstroke, but hardly a Machiavellian or even particularly clever one. It was neither a betrayal nor compromise of the Turkish Nationalist program, nor even controversial. Indeed, Kemal's rivals either made their own overtures to the Bolsheviks or backed his.⁶⁴

The Turkish alliance with Soviet Russia against Britain, France, and the other imperial powers reflected Kemal's insistence on uncompromised sovereignty and "total independence." These were the fundamental principles of the nationalists who were determined to erect a self-standing nation-state out of the rubble of an empire. The gold and guns that Soviet Russia supplied enabled the Turks to prevail militarily in Anatolia and defy the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, by which the victors of World War I agreed to partition Anatolia between Britain, France, Italy, Greece, and Armenia and leave a rump Turkish sultanate in the north of Anatolia and a potential Kurdish state in the southeast.

Kemal's crowning success was the military victories that rendered the Treaty of Sèvres null and void and made the founding of the Turkish Republic possible.⁶⁵ The Turkish Republic would likely not exist had the Soviets not backed him. Kemal had no interest in Bolshevism as a form of social organization, and indeed suppressed the nascent Turkish Communist Party. But he did grasp the Soviets' potential as geopolitical allies.⁶⁶ Soviet aid in the form of

⁶³ Kâmuran Gürün, *Türk-Sovyet İlişkileri, 1920-1953* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1991); Mehmet Perinçek, *Atatürk'ün Sovyetler'le Görüşmeleri* (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2005), 28-49.

⁶⁴ Saime Yüceer, *Milli Mücadele Yıllarında Ankara-Moskova İlişkileri* (Bursa: Motif Matbaası, 1997); Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın, *İttihatçı Liderlerin Gizli Mektupları*, ed. Osman Selim Kocahanoğlu (Istanbul: Temel Yayınları, 2002).

⁶⁵ Celâl Erikan, *Kurtuluş Savaşı Tarihi* (Istanbul: Kültür Yayınları, 2008).

⁶⁶ For overviews of Turkish-Russian relations in this period, see, Bülent Gökay, *A Clash of Empires: Turkey Between Russian Bolshevism and British Imperialism, 1918-1923* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997); Gürün, *Türk-Sovyet İlişkileri, 1920-1953*.

money, arms, and ammunition was critical to his success in the War of Independence. Indeed, so important was that aid that, in 1928, Kemal personally ordered that the monument to commemorate the victory of his forces also depict the first Soviet ambassador to Turkey, Sergei Aralov. Known as the Republic Monument, it stands today in Istanbul's Taksim Square.⁶⁷ The new Turkish Republic and the Soviet Union would enjoy sympathetic relations into the 1930s.⁶⁸

Stalin's territorial and other demands on Turkey at the end of World War II pushed the Turks decisively toward the West and into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which it joined in 1952.⁶⁹ For the next five decades, Turkey would maintain a pro-Western orientation. Yet, even during the Cold War, Turkey found a sometimes sympathetic audience in Moscow. A thaw in relations between Turkey and the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, for example, facilitated the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Greece, in response, withdrew from NATO military command. The prospect of NATO members Greece and Turkey coming to blows undoubtedly thrilled the Politburo.

The End of the Cold War and Turkey's Reorientation

The collapse of the Soviet Union fundamentally transformed Turkey's geopolitical situation. The greatest threat to Turkey's security had dissolved and for the first time in centuries Turkey no longer shared a border with Russia — a number of buffer states now separated the two. In addition, the Russian Federation was one half the size and less capable than its Soviet predecessor.

⁶⁷ Murat Bardakçı, "Taksim'deki Anıt ve Rusya Gerçeği," *Habertürk*, Dec. 12, 2016,

<https://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/murat-bardakci/1339023-taksimdeki-anit-ve-rusya-gercegi>.

⁶⁸ Samuel J. Hirst, "Anti-Westernism on the European Periphery: The Meaning of Soviet-Turkish Convergence in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 1 (2013): 32-53, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.72.1.0032>.

⁶⁹ Bruce Robellet Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Vladimir Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 36-40.

Ironically, it was the Turks who initially worried that the end of the Cold War would imperil their relationship with the United States. There was a real fear in Ankara in the early 1990s that Washington would abandon Turkey now that it no longer needed a guard on NATO's southern flank. Gradually, however, the Turks began to recognize that the end of bipolarity offered more, not less, room for diplomatic maneuvering. The deeper currents of Kemalism, namely the suspicion of *all* great powers and the aspiration for total independence, began to reassert themselves in the shaping of Turkish foreign policy.

One of the more striking examples of this reorientation came in March, 2002, when Gen. Tuncer Kılınç, secretary-general of the Turkish National Security Council, voiced his belief that Turkey should turn from the West and seek allies in Russia and Iran.⁷⁰ Kılınç was not speaking as a private citizen, nor was he a loner. A significant portion of Turkey's officer corps, then the self-appointed guardians of Kemalism,⁷¹ shared his distrust of the West, his belief that Turkey was overly dependent on the West, and his desire to diversify Turkey's relations beyond the West.

The Kemalist worldview presents contemporary Turkey much like its late Ottoman predecessor — beset by predatory Great Powers intent on weakening it from within and without and ultimately partitioning it. This worldview has been inculcated in Turkish citizens through school, military service, and the media for over seven decades. It is very much hard-wired into Turkish memory. In its cruder manifestations, it is known as “Sèvres Syndrome,” a reference to the abortive Treaty of Sèvres of 1920.

Kemal blocked the Great Powers' design for Anatolia and preserved Turkish sovereignty by working with Moscow. Ankara's contemporary pivot to Moscow must be seen in a similar fashion. There is nothing mysterious or inscrutable about it. Sentiments of authoritarian solidarity, the default explanation for many American observers, have no more to do with it

⁷⁰ “Türkiye, Rusya ve İran’la ittifak arayışında olmalı” *Sabah*, Mar. 8, 2002,

<http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2002/03/08/p01.html>.

⁷¹ On the ideological orientation and self-conception of the Turkish officer corps, see, Mehmet Ali Birand, *Shirts of Steel: An Anatomy of the Turkish Armed Forces*, trans. Saliha Parker and Ruth Christie (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991).

than they did with Kemal's outreach to Lenin. American policies, and the Turkish sensitivities and fears that they arouse, are the primary drivers.

The future of Russo-Turkish ties will depend to a great deal, perhaps decisively, on the future of U.S.-Turkish relations. If the United States and Turkey remain allies — even troubled ones — Ankara is unlikely to deepen its ties with Russia beyond what it is doing now. The same aspirations for independence and uncontested sovereignty that push Turkey to distance itself from the United States will, especially when coupled with a historically informed wariness of Russia, work against Turkey becoming a close and enthusiastic partner of Russia. If, however, U.S.-Turkish relations grow still more confrontational, Ankara may deepen its relationship to Moscow. Moscow will seek to widen and exploit the rift between Washington and, ideally, exploit it so as to disrupt the internal dynamics of NATO.

A Remarkable Rapprochement

The Turco-Russian rapprochement is all the more remarkable for having occurred in the wake of the most severe standoff between the two countries since the Cold War. In November 2015, the Turkish Air Force downed a Russian SU-24 attack aircraft that had violated Turkish airspace while it was flying combat missions against Turkish-supported militias in Syria fighting to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Earlier that year, Moscow had deployed air and ground assets to Syria to bolster Assad's wobbling regime, which was battling an array of opposition groups, including the Islamic State. The Syrian Civil War was of intense interest to Ankara. Not simply because it drove over two and a half million refugees into Turkey, but even more so because it opened the questions of Syria's — and by extension Turkey's — borders and territorial integrity. Like Turkey, Syria became a state after World War I — its borders are hardly time-honored. Indeed, Damascus has never recognized Ankara's sovereignty over the region of Hatay, ceded by France to Turkey in 1939. Most alarming to Ankara, however, was the prospect that the Kurdistan Worker's Party, in the form of its Syrian subsidiary, the Democratic Union Party, and its militia, the People's Protection Units, would consolidate itself on Syrian territory. The Kurdistan

Worker's Party is far and away the Turkish Republic's number one security threat.⁷² It has been battling the Turkish state for close to four decades. During the 1990s, it used Syria as a sanctuary from which to wage insurgency inside Turkey. That insurgency is ongoing and has claimed some 40,000 lives. When the besieged Syrian government withdrew its forces from northeast Syria, Syrian Kurds led by the Democratic Union Party established a *de facto* autonomous government there. The achievement of autonomy, and perhaps eventually independence in the event of Syria's break-up, would boost the Kurdistan Worker's Party by allowing it to demonstrate a capacity to administer territory.

Ankara's preferred solution to the Syrian Civil War was the overthrow of Assad. When President Barack Obama loudly declared in August 2011 that Assad must step aside, Ankara, like the rest of the world, interpreted this as an American commitment to seeing Assad toppled. Thereupon, Turkey, both in cooperation with, and parallel to, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, began backing Syrian opposition groups in a bid to bring down the Assad regime.⁷³

Assad, however, proved tenacious. Obama remained unwilling to intervene directly, even after declaring ominously in 2012 that Damascus had crossed a "red line" when it employed chemical weapons, and after the extensive American covert effort to train and arm Assad opponents proved stillborn. The impotence raised doubts among the Turks about the commitment and staying power of the United States.⁷⁴ The metastasis of the so-called Islamic State inside Syria further complicated matters. In 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin moved to bolster the Syrian government by deploying air elements and supporting ground units to Syria, and in September of that year, those forces commenced military operations. Predictions from Washington of Russian overextension and folly proved badly mistaken. Russian air support, coupled with the presence of ground forces from Iran and

⁷² For an English-language overview of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, see, Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁷³ Christopher Phillips, "Eyes Bigger than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 36-47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12250>; Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 77-82.

⁷⁴ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 168-72.

Hezbollah, turned the tide decisively in favor of the Syrian government. The Russian air force attacked Turkish-backed militias with special gusto and Turkey and Russia thus found themselves engaged in a proxy war.

That proxy war could have flared into a real one when the Turkish F-16 intercepted and shot down the Russian SU-24. The Turks unquestionably acted boldly, and, as it turned out, recklessly. If the Turks' calculation was that the threat of an armed clash with a NATO member would cause the Russians to pull the throttle back on their operations inside Syria, they misfired entirely. Putin refrained from military escalation but vowed sternly that Turkey would pay a price for what he angrily termed "a stab in the back" from "the accomplices of terrorists."⁷⁵ Turkey's economic dependence on Russia, particularly in the spheres of energy, tourism, and agriculture, represented a vulnerability. Russia accordingly imposed a range of retaliatory economic measures.⁷⁶

However foolhardy the downing of the Russian jet may have been, Washington's cool attitude toward Ankara in its wake signaled that Turkey would be on its own in managing Russia. Similarly, the Obama's administration's incoherent diffidence in Syria — blending noisy rhetoric against Assad, massive albeit ineffective covert support for the armed opposition, and an abashed but firm refusal to intervene directly — left Turkey in a lurch. Ankara's support for anti-Assad rebels, including a motley assortment of jihadists, had been no more successful than Washington's. And with Russia having demonstrated that it was in the driver's seat in Syria, Ankara calculated that it had better work with Moscow or face a severe and chronic threat from Syria. Less than a year later, in a stunning turnaround, Erdogan formally apologized for shooting down the jet, and even offered compensation to the family of the Russian pilot who died.⁷⁷ Turkey endorsed and began participating in the

⁷⁵ "Putin nazval deistviia Turtsii "udarom v spinu" ot "posobnikov terroristov,"" *RBC.RU*, Nov. 24, 2015, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/11/2015/56545de69a7947d6787491fi>.

⁷⁶ Michael A. Reynolds, "Turkey, Russia, and NATO Enter the Danger Zone," *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note*, Dec. 12, 2015, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/12/turkey-russia-and-nato-enter-the-danger-zone/>.

⁷⁷ "Turtsiia nazvala uslovie vyplaty kompensatsii sem'e pilota sbitogo Su-24[Turkey specified the conditions for payment of compensation to family of the pilot of the downed Su-24]," *Lenta.ru*, June 28, 2016, <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/06/28/compensate/>.

Russian-sponsored negotiations on Syria in Astana, Kazakhstan.⁷⁸ The story of how Putin bent Erdogan to his will is remarkable and would make an excellent case study in coercive diplomacy.⁷⁹

Erdogan's 180-degree turn from being Putin's defiant opponent to his supplicant did not come without blowback. Just as the Astana talks were to begin in December 2016, an off-duty Turkish police officer gunned down the Russian ambassador to Turkey in a macabre assassination in an art exhibit in Ankara.⁸⁰ The provocation, however, failed to shake either Ankara's or Moscow's determination to put aside their past differences.

America and the Kurds

If American irresolution in Syria and the failure of its own misadventures there left Turkey feeling exposed and vulnerable to Russian power, America's collaboration with the People's Protection Units caused Ankara to conclude that it had been betrayed and thus might now even need Russian power. The 2014 decision of the Obama administration to train and arm the Kurdish militia in Syria created, in the words of then-deputy assistant secretary of state for Southern European and Eastern Mediterranean Affairs, a "ticking time bomb" in U.S.-Turkish relations. The "strategic contradiction" of arming the greatest enemy of a treaty

⁷⁸ "Peregovory v Astane po uregulirovaniu konflikta v Sirii [The Talks in Astana on the Settlement of the Conflict in Syria]," *RIA Novosti*, May 3, 2017; Dmitry Solovyov and Tom Miles, "U.N. to Join Syria talks in Astana, with Humanitarian Hopes," *Reuters*, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-talks-un-idUSKBN1EF1RP>.

⁷⁹ I explore the way Russia brought Turkey around through applying retaliatory measures and reaching out through personal networks of Russian Muslims and pro-Russian Muslims. Michael A. Reynolds, "Outfoxed by the Bear? America's Losing Game against Russian in the Near East," *Foreign Policy Research Institute Russia Foreign Policy Papers*, April 2018, 12-14, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Reynolds2018.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Michael A. Reynolds, "What the Assassination of the Russian Ambassador May Be Telling Us About Erdogan's Turkey," *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note*, December 2016, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/12/assassination-russian-ambassador-may-telling-us-erdogans-turkey/>.

ally created “foreseeable consequences that are now on painful display.”⁸¹ Foremost among those foreseeable consequences was the alienation of Turkey from the United States and the former’s rapprochement with Russia.

Adding insult to injury was the coyness of American officials, who knew that the People’s Protection Units was a subsidiary of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party but attempted to obfuscate this fact by pushing the Syrian Kurdish group to change its name. The commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command, Gen. Raymond Thomas, acknowledged in public that U.S. officials had asked the group to “rebrand” itself for the sake of camouflaging its status as a Kurdistan Workers’ Party militia. In response, the People’s Protection Units adopted the name, “Syrian Democratic Forces.”⁸² The change in name fooled no one, least of all the Turks. Then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter testified in 2016 before the Senate that the People’s Protection Units was tied to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party.⁸³ The Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats openly affirmed in the 2018 *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* that the People’s Protection Units is the “Syrian militia of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).”⁸⁴

Aside from an overt invasion, there is nothing that could be more inflammatory to the Turkish national security establishment and public alike than collaboration with the Kurdish separatist group and its subsidiaries. It triggers the Sèvres Syndrome. The fundamental goal of the Kemalists in founding the Republic of Turkey was to forge out of

⁸¹ Amanda Sloat, “The US Played Down Turkey’s Concerns About Syrian Kurdish Forces. That Couldn’t Last,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/10/09/us-downplayed-turkeys-concerns-about-syrian-kurdish-fighters-that-couldnt-last/>.

⁸² Shawn Snow, “SOCOM Commander: U.S. asked YPG to Re-brand Because of Alleged Terrorist Link,” *Military Times*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.militarytimes.com/2017/07/22/socom-commander-us-asked-ypg-to-re-brand-because-of-alleged-terrorist-link/>.

⁸³ “US Defense Chief Admits Links Among PYD, YPG, PKK,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, Apr. 29, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-defense-chief-admits-links-among-pyd-ypg-pkk--98499>.

⁸⁴ Director of National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, Feb. 13, 2018, 21, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/2018-ATA---Unclassified-SSCI.pdf>.

the disparate Muslim communities of Anatolia an indivisible nation, unified as a single whole and loyal to the state, and thereby impervious to the fracture and partition that brought down the Ottoman empire. The belief that outside powers are intent on using Kurdish nationalism to subvert and break up Turkey from within has haunted the Turkish Republic from its very beginning. Experience, not delusion, instilled that belief in Kemal and the other founders of the republic. Imperial Russia had been fostering Kurdish revolts inside Ottoman Anatolia in the years directly preceding World War I, and in the years after the war, British officials explored ways to use the Kurds to undermine Kemal and the republic.⁸⁵ The Soviet Union supported Kurdish separatism in various ways throughout the Cold War, and Russia did the same in the 1990s. Indeed, such support was a major factor cementing U.S.-Turkish relations during those years. The vast majority of Turks hold the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the People's Protection Units responsible for countless suicide bombings and terror campaigns inside Turkey. Once America began collaborating with Kurdish separatists, Turkish alienation from America was inevitable.

The recent withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria and the cessation of American support for the People's Protection Units has removed a major point of contention between Washington and Ankara. Yet, the precipitous nature of the withdrawal and Washington's harsh criticism of the ensuing Turkish operation and its threats of economic warfare and sanctions have generated their own problems. Although President Donald Trump had repeatedly declared his intent to withdraw from Syria, his own staff stubbornly refused to prepare for it. As one analyst warned in April of 2018, "It is time for his [Trump's] national security staff to listen to him and to devise a sequential drawdown policy that fits with the spirit of the president's demands, but takes deliberate and uncomfortable steps to protect

⁸⁵ On Imperial Russia and the Kurds, see, Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. 56-81; Michael A. Reynolds, "Abdürrrezzak Bedirhan: Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 411-50, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/kri.2011.0026>. On Britain, see, Robert Olson, "The Second Time around: British Policy toward the Kurds (1921-22)," *Die Welt des Islams* 1, no. 55 (1987): 91-102, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006087X00088>.

U.S. interests.”⁸⁶ As predicted, the failure to do that has led to a debacle. Although U.S. forces were not overrun or formally humiliated, the evident lack of planning in their withdrawal has revealed disorder and disorientation in American policy. Trump’s subsequent declaration that he is “fully prepared to swiftly destroy Turkey’s economy if Turkish leaders continue down this dangerous and destructive path,”⁸⁷ has reinforced the appearance of confusion while simultaneously offending Turks across the board and lending Erdogan cover against criticism that he has mismanaged the struggling Turkish economy.

The American pullout was surely a disappointment to the People’s Protection Units, but it should not have been a surprise. Predictably, the Kurdish militia responded to the Turkish invasion by choosing to turn to the Syrian government, which, with Russian backing, can now easily deter the Turkish army. The status of the Syrian Kurdish group and the question of Kurdish autonomy inside Syria remains to be negotiated. Although not a disaster for the People’s Protection Units, this turn of events has certainly disrupted the goal of laying the groundwork for a sovereign state. While Turkey’s operation in northern Syria has likely fulfilled its primary objective, the damage it has done to relations with the United States leaves Ankara vulnerable to pressure from Moscow, given Russia’s position inside Syria and its other sources of leverage over Turkey.

American Support for Fethullah Gülen

Although it is virtually impossible to think of a more inflammatory act than working with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, America’s curious sympathy for the guru-like Turkish religious figure, Fethullah Gülen, would make an excellent candidate. Gülen, who has a long and demonstrated track record of attempting to subvert the Turkish Republic by helping his followers infiltrate Turkish bureaucracies, in particular, the armed services and police,

⁸⁶ Aaron Stein, “The ‘Adults in the Room’ Need to Take Trump Seriously on Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, Apr. 10, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/the-adults-in-the-room-need-to-take-trump-seriously-on-syria/>.

⁸⁷ Robert Burns, “Trump threatens to ‘destroy’ Turkey’s economy with sanctions,” *Associated Press*, Oct. 15, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/767054f1f99f40199a80bfea8e16ccdf>.

has been residing in the United States since fleeing arrest in Turkey in 1999. Although in 2008 the Department of Homeland Security rejected Gülen's application for residence as duplicitous, an appeal on Gülen's behalf led by American diplomatic and intelligence officials resulted in Gülen being permitted to reside in the United States. Despite the fact that Gülen's followers in America were subsequently revealed to be engaged in systematic fraud of American taxpayers in multiple states, as well as in a number of far more serious illegal efforts inside Turkey, as attested by credible government critics and supporters alike, Gülen continued not just to reside in the country, but even to retain access to prime media outlets like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.⁸⁸

There is a great deal that is unknown about the failed coup of July 2016. Turkey's own government could have done — and could still do — a better job providing a recounting of events. But there can be no doubt that the putschists were deadly serious about overthrowing Erdogan and his government. The violence, which resulted in the deaths of over 300 people, vastly exceeded that of earlier coups and attempted coups in Turkey. Although the precise role that Gülen played is unknown, the contention that he was not involved is implausible. Incontrovertible evidence exists that demonstrates that some of Gülen's longest serving and closest disciples played leading operational roles in the coup.⁸⁹ American and European support for the target of the coup, the Turkish government, was noticeably tepid. Former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt lamented the lack of support, and then warned that it would be “a disgrace for Europe” if Putin became the first leader to meet with Erdogan after the coup. This is exactly what happened when Putin received Erdogan in St. Petersburg on Aug. 9, 2016, underscoring the message that Russia was more reliable than the United States or any Western European state.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Michael A. Reynolds, “Woe to Him, for How He Schemed’: Fethullah Gülen, the U.S., and the Damaging of Turkish Democracy,” in *Turkey's July 15th Coup: What Happened and Why*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and Bayram Balci (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018), 98–129. See also Dexter Filkins, “Turkey's Thirty Year Coup,” *New Yorker*, Oct. 16, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/turkeys-thirty-year-coup>.

⁸⁹ Mujeeb R. Khan, “The July 15th Coup: A Critical Institutional Framework for Analysis,” in Yavuz and Balci, *Turkey's July 15th Coup*, 51–53.

⁹⁰ Mustafa Akyol, “Here's How to Stop Turkey's Anti-American Turn,” *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 23, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/23/heres-how-to-stop-turkeys-anti-american-turn-erdogan-gulen-coup/>.

Providing residency to Gülen is deeply provocative to the Turkish public as a whole, not just to Erdogan's government. Gülen is one of the most reviled men in Turkey. Opposition to him spans the spectrum of Turkish opinion. Indeed, criticism of Gülen and U.S. support for him is more deeply rooted in Erdogan's secularist critics than his followers. As is the case with its relationship with the People's Protection Units, America's dalliance with Gülen has increased Turkish wariness of the United States in all corners of the country. As Ambassador James Jeffrey has remarked, Gülen's presence in America is "embarrassing."⁹¹ Given the facts above, it is no surprise that over 80 percent of Turks view the United States as a threat.⁹²

Conclusion

The first shipment of S-400 missiles arrived in Turkey this July, on the three-year anniversary of the failed coup. The timing was deliberate, and celebratory media coverage further reinforced the symbolic importance. Erdogan declared the purchase "the most significant agreement in our history," a hyperbolic statement to be sure, but not a meaningless one.⁹³ In fact, the meaning is quite clear: The Republic of Turkey, which for decades had been a steadfast, if sometimes disgruntled, ally of the United States and the West more generally, now prefers to distance itself from the West for the sake of its own security. Although bold and risky, the purchase of the S-400 and the broader turn to Russia cannot be ascribed primarily to Erdogan's supposed erraticism, still less to his Islamist orientation or any ideology aside from mainstream Turkish nationalism. The turn to Russia is in keeping with fundamental tenets of the foreign policy laid down by Mustafa Kemal, and, as argued above, in fact has its precedent in Kemal's personal diplomacy.

⁹¹ Safvan Allahverdi, "Gülen's Presence on US Soil 'Embarrassing'," *Anadolu Agency*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/gulens-presence-on-us-soil-embarrassing/858716>.

⁹² Ragıp Soylu, "Anti-US Sentiment in Turkey Reaches a New High, Poll Shows," *Middle East Eye*, Feb. 1, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/anti-us-sentiment-turkey-reaches-new-high-poll-shows>.

⁹³ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: S-400'ler tarihimizin en önemli anlaşmasıdır," *Yeni Şafak*, July 14, 2019, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-s-400ler-tarihimizin-en-onemli-anlasmasidir-3498470>.

And just as Kemal turned to Russia to seek support against Western, particularly British, threats, so today the dangers that Ankara perceives coming from the United States drive what is, on the one hand, a stunning rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow and, on the other, a rebuke to Washington. That the Turks have done their share of damage to the U.S.-Turkish relationship goes without saying, and the dangers that they perceive from America are exaggerated. Moreover, Erdogan's chronic rancor toward Europe has left Turkey further isolated, and thus vulnerable to Russian power. But the inability, or unwillingness, of American policymakers to craft policies that take into account the fundamental security concerns and sensitivities of a country that has, for decades, been a key partner of the United States in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and Eurasia must be central to any explanation of the current turn in Turkish-Russian relations. The mutual willingness of Washington and Ankara to rebuild their ties will be the key determinant of the future of the Turkish-Russian relationship. Turkey, Russia, and even the United States in the coming years will all be vulnerable to domestic turbulence and each inevitably will encounter crises in their foreign relations. Many things can change. As this piece goes to press and U.S.-Turkish relations continue to deteriorate, however, one can only expect that the trajectory of Turkish-Russian relations will continue in a positive direction.

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4. What's Driving Turkey's Foreign Policy?

By Paul T. Levin

It is difficult to say which direction relations between the United States, Turkey, and Russia will take over the next five to 10 years.⁹⁴ The outsized importance of the personalities of the three authoritarian — or, in President Donald Trump's case, proto-authoritarian — leaders adds an extra element of unpredictability to the already-difficult task of prediction. However, that should not discourage reflecting on what the future may hold. In this essay, I attempt to identify the main drivers of Turkish foreign policy and examine the constraints under which Turkey operates, including features of the current world order and the relationships between Turkey, Russia, and the United States. I argue that there is good reason to believe that the growing U.S.-Turkish rift is here to stay.

Sources of Turkish Conduct

There is a split among Turkey analysts between those who emphasize rationality and pragmatism in Turkish foreign policy decision-making and those who stress the ideological dimension.⁹⁵ Where one lands on this question affects how one understands the nature of the transformation that has occurred in Turkish foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). If the change is a result of an underlying ideological transformation of Turkish society, odds are it is likely permanent. If it is a mere pragmatic

⁹⁴ I would like to thank Nicholas Danforth, Cengiz Çandar, Doyle Hodges, and Megan Oprea for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

⁹⁵ Even though much has changed since his 2008 *Turkish Policy Quarterly* article, Nicholas Danforth there spelled out a strong case for a more pragmatic interpretation. See, Nicholas Danforth, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Turkish Foreign Policy: From Atatürk to the AKP," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (Dec. 2008), <http://turkishpolicy.com/Files/ArticlePDF/ideology-and-pragmatism-in-turkish-foreign-policy-from-aturk-to-the-akp-fall-2008-en.pdf>. A more recent report by Toni Alaranta stresses the ideational dimension. See, Toni Alaranta, "The 'New Turkey' as a Nato Member: Domestic State Transformation and Competing Strategic Cultures," *Finish Institute of International Affairs*, no. 103 (May 2018), <https://www.fii.fi/en/publication/the-new-turkey-as-a-nato-member>.

adaptation to current circumstances, it could more easily be reversed. A sound analysis should consider both the ideological and the rational-pragmatic drivers.

The Role of Interests: The Elites vs. the State

If rationality is behaving in ways that aim to serve one's interests, we may well ask if Turkish foreign policy today is rational. Turkey has become isolated on the international stage, alienating traditional allies by provoking a series of unnecessary and severe diplomatic crises. Due to poor economic policy choices, the country has suffered a severe recession that has further weakened its hand in the international arena. To a significant extent, this behavior is a result of the consolidation of an authoritarian regime in Turkey.⁹⁶ Turkish foreign policy today has partially become a vehicle for the ruling circles that surround President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to promote his (and their own) interests. This effort is often focused on defeating internal enemies and enriching themselves and their clients in the patron-client system in which they operate. To the extent that Turkish foreign policy is rational, then, it is rational from the point of view of these sub-state actors and not necessarily the state.

The new Turkish political regime has much in common with competitive authoritarian regimes in Eurasia and elsewhere. As in Russia, Hungary, and Poland, pro-government oligarchs play important roles. Clientelism and state capture, the use of public tenders, the privatization of public assets, and the sale of public lands are all used not merely to enrich the ruling elite but also to secure a stronghold on power. Oligarchs are encouraged or pressured to purchase significant entities like media organizations, while critical voices in the media and the academy are systematically silenced by imprisonment or through indirect means, such as pressures on corporate owners. The Turkish construction industry and fixed investments have served as engines of growth, development, and the enrichment

⁹⁶ See, for example, Gumuscu and Esen for accounts of competitive authoritarianism in Turkey. Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (February 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1135732>. See also Jenny White, "Spindle Autocracy in the New Turkey," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, no. 1 (December 2017): 23, <http://bjwa.brown.edu/24-1/spindle-autocracy-in-the-new-turkey/>.

of the regime and its clients, quite literally fueled by the import of energy from likeminded regimes. The extensive personal and economic ties with other authoritarian leaders and oligarchical systems challenges the long-standing trend of predominantly secular Turkish foreign policy elites identifying with NATO and the West. These authoritarian leaders all share an interest in pushing back against Western actors and international organizations promoting the rule of law and anti-corruption policies, and more generally share an interest in seeking to establish a world order that emphasizes sovereignty over rights-based discourse and norms.

This has contributed to a departure from the norm in Turkish foreign policy. After Ankara joined NATO in 1952, membership in the Western alliance came to serve as a nearly unquestionable cornerstone of Turkey's foreign and security policies. In recent years, however, anti-American and anti-NATO rhetoric has risen dramatically in the pro-government press and among very senior members of the AKP leadership. Turkish foreign policy was historically prudent and isolated from the vicissitudes of domestic politics, in part as a result of the protecting presence of the powerful military. The military's power to interfere has been substantially reduced, thus, the more recent trend could be seen as a result of a "democratization" of foreign policy and of an increasingly populist mode of politics.

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss this rhetoric as being merely for domestic consumption. First of all, the change is reflected not only in rhetoric but also in policy: There has been a continual series of diplomatic crises between Turkey and its Western allies. Second, the rhetoric reflects deep-seated sentiments held by large segments of the Turkish population, Erdogan's base in particular.

At some point between 2010 and 2015, Erdogan decided that his political fortunes no longer lay in an alliance with centrists ("liberals") and ethnic minorities that had brought his party of moderate "neo-Islamist" conservatives to power.⁹⁷ Instead, he joined forces with the far-

⁹⁷ I am including Kurds in this category even though, since the establishment of the republic following the Treaty of Lausanne, they have not formally been considered a "minority."

right nationalists. In the November 2015 elections to parliament, he entered into a formal alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party. Erdogan’s growing anti-American rhetoric and the extraordinary spread of anti-Western and conspiratorial narratives in the pro-government press in recent years have played well both to nationalists as well as his conservative base.

There are strong undercurrents of anti-Americanism on the right as well as the left in Turkey. A 2018 poll found strikingly high degrees of antipathy toward the United States among Turks in general: 83 percent of respondents held unfavorable views toward the United States, while only 10 percent held favorable views.⁹⁸ This compared to 63 percent who held unfavorable views toward Russia, and 28 percent who held favorable views.⁹⁹ Pew’s 2017 spring poll also found Turks to be much less supportive of NATO than the average for the organization’s member states. The median favorable vs. unfavorable ratings in member states were 61 percent to 24 percent, whereas in Turkey the numbers were almost the reverse — 23 percent to 58 percent.¹⁰⁰

While anti-Western sentiments are prevalent throughout society, they are perhaps nowhere as strong as within the AKP’s Islamist base, with its roots in the Milli Görüş tradition of Turkish nationalist Islamism.¹⁰¹ As for the far right, the tendencies toward anti-Americanism among Nationalist Movement Party supporters were arguably strengthened by parallel developments in Syria. By 2015, the Democratic Union Party, the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party — the militant party leading the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey since the 1980s, which Turkey and America have long branded a terrorist organization — controlled a vast swathe of territory in a deep corridor along the Syrian-

⁹⁸ Metropoll survey cited in John Halpin, Michael Werz, Alan Makovsky, and Max Hoffman, “Is Turkey Experiencing a New Nationalism? An Examination of Public Attitudes on Turkish Self-Perception,” Center for American Progress and Istanbul Policy Center, Feb., 11 2018, <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2018/02/07081704/TurkishNationalismPolling-report.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Halpin et al., “Is Turkey Experiencing a New Nationalism?” 21.

¹⁰⁰ Halpin et al., “Is Turkey Experiencing a New Nationalism?” 21.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, S. Erdem Aytac and Ezgi Elçi, “Populism in Turkey,” in *Populism Around the World*, ed. Daniel Stockemer (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 93.

Turkish border. The fact that the United States had by then thrown its lot in with the Democratic Union Party further primed the right-wing nationalist base for Erdogan's anti-American rhetoric.

Hence, viewed from the point of view of domestic politics, it may be in Erdogan's interest to muster the support of the nationalist and conservative electorate by provoking consecutive crises with the leader of the Western alliance of which Turkey is a long-standing member. Of course, while this might be rational for Erdogan personally, it does not necessarily represent a rational policy from the perspective of the state.

The Force of Ideas: A New Turkish Nationalism

A second explanation for the growth in anti-American rhetoric and the deterioration in Turkey's relations with its Western partners and allies is that a fundamental shift has taken place in the ideological outlook of the current Turkish leadership. To understand this better, we need to briefly consider the role of ideas in Turkish foreign policy.

There has always been a simplistic and Orientalist streak in many of the more popular accounts of Turkey and its politics. Turkey is a magnet for loaded metaphors, from being a "bridge between East and West" to a country "torn" between Western and Islamic civilizations.¹⁰² Many Turkey specialists argue that metaphors, simple dichotomies, and references to Oriental tropes do not best explain Turkish politics and society, opting instead for references to pragmatic and rational calculations, much how analysts typically explain foreign policy in the West.¹⁰³ There is much to say for this view, but it has the unfortunate consequence of downplaying the role of ideas and culture in Turkish politics. When it comes to the question of ideas versus interest, ideological factors play a

¹⁰² Cf. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," in *Culture and Politics*, ed. Lane Crothers and Charles Lockhart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 99–118, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62397-6_6, for the metaphor of Turkey as a "torn" country. Alan M. Greaves, "Trans-Anatolia: Examining Turkey as a Bridge between East and West," *Anatolian Studies* 57, (2007): 1–15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20455388> examines and critiques the use of the bridge metaphor.

¹⁰³ Danforth, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Turkish Foreign Policy."

considerable role in Turkish policymaking, just as they do in the West, but a complete picture of foreign policymaking includes both interest and ideas.

In the past five years, a coalition of conservative Islamists and nationalists have formed the electoral base of the AKP. This has had significant consequences for the ideas that influence both domestic and foreign policy, and it is therefore worthwhile to consider the nature of right-wing nationalism in Turkey today. The above-cited 2018 report by the Center for American Progress describes the current nationalist “wave” as follows:

Compared with the more secular nationalism seen under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s presidency and earlier governments, this new nationalism is assertively Muslim; fiercely independent; distrusting of outsiders; and skeptical of other nations and global elites, which it perceives to hold Turkey back. [...] This nationalist wave is further characterized by deep, cross-party skepticism and distrust toward Syrian refugees, the United States, and Europe.¹⁰⁴

This new wave of nationalism has predictable foreign policy consequences, three of which are particularly relevant to the country’s relationship to the United States and Russia.

First, the nationalist resurgence in Turkish society and politics in recent years has served to enable a more activist and expansionist foreign policy, compared to the generally prudent policies of the republican era.¹⁰⁵ Imperial nostalgia in both popular culture and political rhetoric has played up and played upon revanchist feelings and portrayed “New Turkey” as a proud and strong country under a tough leader that will not bend to foreign adversaries. This Turkey — so the narrative goes — has taken action in northern Syria to defeat the terrorists allied with the Kurdistan Workers Party there, and it will fight for the rights of its

¹⁰⁴ Halpin et al., “Is Turkey Experiencing a New Nationalism?” For a richer account, see Jenny B. White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks: Updated Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁵ See Toni Alaranta’s 2018 account of the two strategic cultures in Turkey. In his parlance, the republican tradition has given way to an imperial version.

Turkish brothers and sisters in Cyprus. Rhetorically, at least, it even stands up to the “crusaders” in the West who want Turkey weakened or worse.¹⁰⁶

The most generous interpretation of the rise in nationalism and increasing prominence of Islamist thinking within the Turkish foreign policy establishment is that Turkey seeks a more active and well-rounded foreign policy.¹⁰⁷ Op-eds in pro-government newspapers and think tank reports have been replete with declarations of assertiveness, autonomy, and diversification over the past few years.¹⁰⁸ Where the dominant forces in the Turkish national security and foreign policy establishments used to identify primarily with NATO, the most influential forces today appear to see the alliance as merely one dimension of the multidimensional foreign policy of a more assertive and independent nation.

Some Turkish observers long argued that Ankara did not wish to abandon the Western alliance in favor of Russia or seek to prioritize relations with Beijing and Moscow over those with Brussels and Washington.¹⁰⁹ At this point, however, the many diplomatic crises with the United States and E.U. member states is inconsistent with these observers’ attempts to

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, the writings of pro-government columnist Ibrahim Karagül for a taste of this narrative. Ibrahim Karagül, “So What, Are You Going to Launch a Crusade in Istanbul? Imamoğlu is a Ploy, They’re Making Plans to Take Over Istanbul...There’s a Great Attack from Abroad, A Great Betrayal from Within. This Time Certain Conservative Politicians Have also Been Activated,” *Yenişafak*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/columns/ibrahimkaragul/so-what-are-you-going-to-launch-a-crusade-in-istanbul-imamoglu-is-a-ploy-theyre-making-plans-to-take-over-istanbul-theres-a-great-attack-from-abroad-a-great-betrayal-from-within-this-time-certain-conservative-politicians-have-also-been-activated-2047038>.

¹⁰⁷ This was common in earlier accounts of the transformation of Turkish foreign policy. See, for example, Alper Kaliber, “Europeanization in Turkey: In Search of a New Paradigm of Modernization,” *Journal of Balkan & Near Eastern Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2013.864182>. If they were accurate then, they are arguably less so today.

¹⁰⁸ Burhanettin Duran, “The World of Alternatives,” *Daily Sabah*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2018/08/01/the-world-of-alternatives>.

¹⁰⁹ For example, Kiliç Bugra Kanat, “AK Party’s Foreign Policy: Is Turkey Turning Away from the West?” *Insight Turkey* 12, no. 1 (2010): 205–225, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26331151?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

tone down the rift. A desire for a more multidimensional foreign policy is only one component of the ongoing transformation of Turkish foreign policy. Many in the new foreign policy elite hold actively anti-American and anti-Western views.

Second, this growth in nationalism and anti-Americanism places strains on relations with the United States, and will continue to do so, even if acute crises, such as the recent Turkish purchase of the Russian S-400 system, were to end up being successfully managed. That's because anti-Americanism was already present in several of the nationalist strains that have become more powerful in recent years: Leftist nationalists during the Cold War years were influenced by Soviet propaganda and thus had an anti-imperialist and anti-American dimension. Today, the small but influential "leftist" nationalist movement under Doğu Perinçek, and his Eurasianist *ulusalcılar* — secular leftist-turned-far-right nationalists — gravitate toward Russia. It appears that "Perinçekist" Eurasianists have secured greater influence within the military in the wake of the massive internal military purges following the July 15, 2016, coup attempt. This suggests that simultaneous strains on U.S.-Turkish relations and a rapprochement between Turkey and Russia may not be entirely coincidental.

More generally, the attempted coup dramatically fueled already strong anti-American sentiments: Leading AKP politicians explicitly accused the United States of not merely sheltering the alleged mastermind behind the coup — Fetullah Gülen — but also of actually organizing and supporting it. Even if such allegations have been occasionally walked back, they feature regularly in pro-AKP discourse and their impact on U.S.-Turkey relations should not be underestimated.

Even if Erdogan is playing a deliberate game in fuelling anti-American sentiments and may well choose to moderate his tone when it suits him, the effects of years of stoking resentment against the United States may be difficult to rein in. The anti-Americanism in Turkish politics today has deep roots in both the nationalist and the Islamist traditions, and is likely to persist. Regardless of whatever interests Erdogan might have in pursuing this line of rhetoric, he would only do so as long as it matched the cultural and ideological preferences of his base.

The third foreign policy consequence of the rise of Turkish nationalism pertains to the Kurds. There is, and always has been, fierce animosity in Turkey toward any Kurdish separatist impulses or activities. The AKP's "Kurdish Opening" and negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which fell through in 2015, were deeply unpopular with certain segments of the population, including elite factions across the political spectrum. Likewise, the strength of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party, quickly came to be perceived as a growing and existential security threat among many in the Turkish national security establishment. Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war may be seen almost exclusively in terms of the Kurdish issue. Thus, U.S. support for the Kurdish-led Syrian militias has been a major source of tension with Turkey. Rising nationalism heightens these tensions and ensures that the Kurdish issue will remain paramount to Turkish foreign policy.

Turkey has never been a fully consolidated democracy of the liberal variety, but the authoritarian turn over the past decade represents a significant qualitative change. Similar illiberal ideas, populist politics, nationalist rhetoric, and highly majoritarian interpretations of democracy have appeared in Turkey as are found in many other authoritarian regimes in Europe and elsewhere. The Jewish philanthropist George Soros is vilified in Turkey just as in Hungary. A conflict-oriented and conspiratorial worldview in which Western powers are rarely portrayed as allies but more often as threats and enemies is as evident in Ankara as in Moscow. And just as in other authoritarian contexts, Turkish authorities draw dubious links between internal opposition groups and foreign powers allegedly using the former to subvert the motherland. This means that there is a diminishing ideological affinity between Turkey and Western liberal democracies and a growing identification with autocracies and autocrats around the world, not the least with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

External Constraints: Russia, the United States, and a New Cold War?

Throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, Turkish foreign policy was, to a great extent, shaped by a desire and serious effort to join the European Union. Domestic policy was also characterized by "Europeanization." This came to a halt

sometime during the first decade of the 21st century. By 2009, the AKP's foreign policy had changed from strong Europeanization toward what Ziya Öniş and Şahnaz Yılmaz then called "soft Euro-Asianism."¹¹⁰ The tendency toward Eurasianism has intensified since then and the AKP's relations with the European Union have stagnated to the point that it no longer makes any sense to speak of Europeanization. The strong trading ties to the European Union and the refugee deal — which was fiscally and diplomatically beneficial for Turkey — impose constraints on Ankara's freedom to disassociate itself from Europe, which the current leadership otherwise would likely do. But a pragmatic recognition of the need to maintain certain ties is a far cry from active Europeanization.

In a post-Cold War era in which superpower conflict no longer provides an overarching narrative and many non-Western thinkers have latched onto the idea that the West is in decline and "the Rest" are on the rise, NATO has lost much of its appeal for Ankara. In many respects, the new Turkish foreign policy and its emphasis on autonomy from any one pole or alliance fits right in with this non-Western thinking.

At the risk of oversimplification, it may be useful to talk of an emerging global struggle between two forms of governance: liberal democracy and oligarchical authoritarianism. There are still meaningful differences between the West on the one side, and Russia and other oligarchical authoritarian states on the other — despite the emergence of Trump and other conservative-nationalist populists in power in countries like Hungary. Thus, while it may be misleading to speak of a new Cold War, there does appear to be a new ideological divide emerging between Russia and the West that has a clear national security dimension. If this continues over the coming decade, Turkey will face the same question as during the Cold War: Which side is it on?

In light of the transformations that have occurred in the Turkish foreign policy elite, it seems much more likely for Turkey to side with Russia this time around. There are strong affinities between the Russian and Turkish models of governance today, and leaders in both

¹¹⁰ Ziya Öniş and Şahnaz Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey During the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies* 10, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683840802648562>.

countries share a desire to be liberated from the interference of Western governments, non-governmental organizations, and international institutions concerned with internal matters such as human rights and freedoms. They both have ambitions to be more than leaders of mere subservient states on the periphery of Western institutions. Russia wants respect as a world power,¹¹¹ Turkey as a formidable regional power. And there are also significant push factors in Turkey's relations with the West. Unless there is a regime transformation in Turkey, it is likely to continue to diverge from its traditional Western allies.

That said, Russia and Turkey also have a long history as rival powers as well as a long list of competing interests in the region. Russia and Turkey back different camps in the conflicts in Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and — until recently — Cyprus.¹¹² However, Moscow and Ankara have been surprisingly good at containing the fallout from these disagreements. The Astana and Sochi processes — for all their limitations — have enabled the troika of Iran, Turkey, and Russia to manage their conflicts of interests in Syria and to reduce the obvious risk of clashes between them. Turkey has courted Russia partly out of a position of weakness and vulnerability and has been willing to bow to the stronger party, but Russia has had an interest in not humiliating Turkey and in sowing division within NATO by courting Ankara.

The Turkish downing of the Russian jet in November of 2015 revealed the competing interests and potential for conflict between the two countries, as well as the ties that mitigate these tensions. The incident followed a period of Russian military buildup in Syria along the Turkish border and frequent Russian violations of Turkish airspace. The forceful Russian response to the downing of the jet and the subsequent killing of the Russian pilot included imposing expansive sanctions on Turkish exports of agricultural products and a travel embargo that further injured an already frail Turkish economy. In response, Turkey produced an apology and the leaders of the two countries not only backed away from

¹¹¹ See Andrey Tsygankov's forthcoming book, *Russia and America: the Asymmetric Rivalry* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), especially chapters 1 and 5 for a good account of the Russian perspective.

¹¹² The two empires fought 12 wars and Russian designs on certain regions in the Turkish northwest and the Bosphorus in the young Turkish republic are still a fresh wound in Turkey.

outright conflict but also initiated a period of deepening ties that has culminated in the S-400 purchase.

One reason for these good relations is the increasingly important economic ties between the two countries, the sanctions notwithstanding. While Turkey remains firmly rooted in the European Union due to the customs union, extensive trade ties, and foreign direct investment, Russia's importance should not be underestimated. Turkey lacks its own natural sources of energy and has long been reliant on the import of Russian natural gas for its industry. Long-term fixed investment projects, like the Russian-owned and -operated nuclear power plants in Akkuyu (and the S-400 missile system), also signal the desire to further entrench and deepen relations. Problems exist and will remain in Turkish-Russian relations, but the intent and direction are clear. And the conflicts of interests described here apply mainly to the state level, whereas at the level of individual policymakers, there are significant convergences.

In contrast, U.S.-Turkish relations are based on an old alliance that is under increasing strain and is becoming less, not more, relevant to the leadership in Ankara. Just a brief look at the topics on which the two allies now clash is illustrative. These include: the February 2018 standoff over U.S. troops in Manbij and Turkish threats to invade the town; the detention of pastor Brunson and resulting U.S. sanctions against key Turkish individuals connected to the case; the two separate instances when members of the Turkish president's security detail were involved in brawls during his visits to Washington D.C.; the court case against Turkish-Iranian national Reza Zarrab and the sanctions against Halkbank (which have still not been enforced) and the detention of bank executive Hakan Atilla (who was recently released); U.S. support for the Syrian People's Protection Units; Turkish accusations that U.S. officials masterminded the 2016 coup attempt; Turkish anger over America's refusal to extradite Fetullah Gülen; and the extraordinary levels of anti-American public rhetoric emanating from Turkish officials more or less continuously.

Until recently, the seemingly good personal rapport between Erdogan and Trump appeared to be the only thing standing in the way of the harsher measures that Congress and U.S. courts have sought to impose on Turkey. As this article is about to go into press, however,

the standoff in Syria briefly erupted into a full-blown crisis with additional U.S. sanctions and repeated threats by the U.S. president to “destroy” the Turkish economy. This public spat between Erdogan and Trump suggests that their personal rapport is a shaky and unpredictable foundation upon which to rebuild the relationship between the two countries.

Conclusion

There is a tendency in current reporting to focus on the crisis of the moment and ask whether it will lead to the breakup of the U.S.-Turkish alliance. This is the wrong way to approach the issue. The reason these crises keep popping up is that there is an underlying and growing divergence of worldviews between Ankara and the mainstream foreign policy establishment in Washington.

There are both pragmatic and ideological drivers behind the radical transformation of Turkey’s foreign policy over the past 10 years. If Erdogan’s electoral calculations change, it remains possible that Ankara will recalibrate its foreign policy again, but this does not appear likely. The change reflects a broader ideological transformation of the ruling elite in Turkey. So long as that elite remains, so too will the direction of Turkey’s foreign policy. The U.S.-Turkish alliance is an old one that is increasingly strained and decreasingly relevant from Ankara’s perspective. The Turkish-Russian strategic partnership is riddled with problems, but there are reasons to believe that Ankara wants to see it continue to grow stronger.

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5. The Role of Perception and Misperception in U.S.-Turkish Relations

By Burak Kadercan

The future of U.S.-Turkish relations exemplifies what former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called a “known unknown”: All interested parties know that the future will most certainly be fraught with problems, but it is nearly impossible to accurately predict where the relationship will end up.

The best way to identify potential future scenarios is to examine how two long-time allies have arrived at a crossroads. Such an examination reveals that one major contributing factor to the present crisis between Turkey and the United States is what can be called a “self-fulfilling misperception.” Over the course of the last five years, both Washington and Ankara failed to correctly assess the priorities and sensitivities of their counterpart, while also either ignoring or misreading the ways in which their actions were perceived by the other side. This resulted in a series of actions and reactions that eventually empowered overly-suspicious and combative narratives in both countries. In Washington D.C., many are convinced that Turkey long ago decided to break up with NATO and the United States and is now taking the final steps to formalize the divorce and develop much cozier relations

with Russia, and perhaps even Iran and China.¹¹³ Conversely, a common — and rarely-contested — opinion in Turkey is that the United States is an enemy with malign intentions, that is trying to undermine Turkish sovereignty, and even territorial integrity.¹¹⁴ This cycle of mistrust then eventually confirms the suspicions of the skeptics.

The U.S.-Turkish relationship has never been perfect and has a history of numerous crises.¹¹⁵ However, none of the past crises were as complicated and intractable as the current one the two countries face. Three factors collectively separate the current crisis from the previous ones. First, unlike previous crises, the present-day crisis is marked by multiple intertwined issues. Second, the “glue” that binds Turkey and the United States is much weaker now, especially when compared to the Cold War era. Third, while anti-Americanism in Turkey is not a new phenomenon, its scope and depth has exploded in the last couple of years, making it quite feasible, and perhaps expedient, for the Turkish government to accept the costs of degrading — or even terminating — its alliance with the United States. Not surprisingly, the voices of those in the United States cheering for a complete break-up with Turkey are also getting more reception.

¹¹³ On a potential rapprochement between Turkey, Russia, and Iran, see, Scott B. MacDonald, “The Unlikely Convergence of Russia, Iran, and Turkey,” *National Interest*, Feb. 18, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/unlikely-convergence-russia-iran-and-turkey-44617>. China is also becoming an increasingly important actor for Turkey, especially regarding economic matters. For example, according to *Bloomberg*, China flushed Turkish markets with up to \$1 billion during a critical election month in June 2019, assisting the government in preventing the depreciation of Turkish lira. See, Kerim Karakaya and Asli Kandemir, “Turkey Got a \$1 Billion Foreign Cash Boost from China in June,” *Bloomberg*, Aug. 9, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-09/turkey-got-1-billion-from-china-swap-in-june-boost-to-reserves>.

¹¹⁴ The idea that the United States has “imperialistic” ambitions over Turkey is widely shared and is especially popular among pro-government Islamists and leftists. Out of numerous examples, see, Arslan Bulut, “From where Do Threats to turkey Emanate?” *Yenicag*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/turkiyeye-tehdit-nereden-geliyor-51726yy.htm>.

¹¹⁵ Most notable crises are associated with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the so-called “Johnson Letter” in 1964, the “opium crisis” of 1974, the tensions over Cyprus during mid-1970s, and Turkey’s refusal to allow the United States to use Turkish territory to open a northern front for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Öykü Altuntaş, “US-Turkey Relations: Crises Since the 1960s,” *BBC Turkish*, Aug. 2, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-41553003>.

Make no mistake, the only party to truly benefit from the meltdown of the seven-decades-long alliance would be Russia, while both the United States and Turkey would pay — or are already paying — a steep price. If for no other reason, the escalation of the tensions would eventually trigger a “retaliation race” akin to an arms race but conducted with reciprocal sanctions on both sides. The United States, for example, could easily hurt the already fragile Turkish economy through a wide variety of sanctions and embargoes. Turkey, in turn, could deny the United States access to key military bases, most notably Incirlik air base in southern Turkey. In the near future, the two countries may also find themselves at odds in the East Mediterranean, where Turkey seeks to emerge as a major share-holder in the promising, if not-yet-proven, gas reserves. Turkey faces numerous rivals in the region, ranging from Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, all of which seem to have good relations with the United States.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, pressure on Turkey — most notably, sanctions — would almost certainly accelerate the Turkish-Russian rapprochement, making it difficult for the United States to pursue a coherent policy toward Turkey’s neighbor to the east, Iran. Closer relations with Russia would not necessarily benefit Turkey. Turkey is already dependent on Russia across multiple dimensions, in particular energy. Further dependence on Russia — not only over matters of energy or economy, but also defense — would help Russian President Vladimir Putin shape Turkey’s foreign policy according to his will. If Turkey were to leave NATO, it would inevitably be pushed into not merely warm relations, but a close strategic

¹¹⁶ For a primer on the opportunities and geopolitical risks associated with the gas reserves in the region, see, Sohbət Karbuz and Luca Baccarini, “East Mediterranean Gas: Regional Cooperation or Source of Tensions?,” *Barcelona Center for International Affairs*, no. 173, (May 2017), https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_173/east_mediterranean_gas_regional_cooperation_or_source_of_tensions. So far, only Israel and Egypt have gas producing fields, and the actual potential of the reserves remains relatively unknown. In any case, the costs associated with exploration, drilling, transportation, and liquefaction will likely be high, leading to prices that would not be competitive enough to sell the final product to Europe. Still, countries in the region estimate that it would be cheaper to produce the gas for themselves at a cost that is more competitive than exporting from other countries, such as Russia.

partnership with Moscow, and could even pave the way for Ankara to initiate a nuclear program of its own. In sum, the deterioration of America's relationship with Turkey would be a "lose-lose" for both sides, and a clear "win" for Russia.

While there are many reasons to be pessimistic about the prospects of U.S.-Turkish relations, all is not lost — at least not yet. Repairing the alliance would not be easy, smooth, or fast. Any attempt to try to manage the relationship on a day-to-day basis with the hope that all may be well down the road is unlikely to work. In fact, such an approach only guarantees that the existing fracture will pave the way for an actual break-up. There are two requirements in order for the U.S.-Turkish alliance to heal: First, both sides need to fully grapple with the potential risks and costs of further deterioration in relations, and show a concentrated effort to address the challenges involved. Second, both Washington D.C. and Ankara need to engage in serious soul-searching and come to terms with the notion of "self-fulfilling misperception." In the best-case scenario, the alliance will eventually devolve into a "cold partnership," in which it is considerably downgraded by both actors, but Turkey remains a reluctant member of NATO. In the worst-case scenario, Turkey and the United States become rivals, with broader repercussions for the region as well as NATO. Again, Russia would be the sole benefactor.

To understand where the future of the two countries' relationship is headed requires two things. The first is to put the present crisis in historical context. The alliance between Turkey and the United States has gone through some serious challenges in the past. By examining how the two allies managed their differences previously and how this crisis differs from past crises, we might glean useful information for how to manage the current crisis. Second, policymakers and spectators should more fully acknowledge the role that the cycle of "self-fulfilling misperception" played in the evolution of the current crisis, and clearly identify as well as acknowledge their own mistakes and the ways in which their words and deeds might have frustrated the other party. Without such engagement, the relevant analyses are bound to devolve into simplistic narratives that implicitly empower discourses about Turkey turning away from the West or the United States undermining Turkey's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

A History of Inconvenience

The history of U.S.-Turkish relations is best defined in terms of dynamism. The two allies have had their share of differences, sometimes with considerable consequences. Dismissing or downplaying this dynamism can lead to misunderstandings about the current crisis, including the belief in some fictional “good old days” that were disrupted by a sudden sea change in relations. It may also prompt spectators to focus on the present developments at the expense of the complicated past, paving the way for “snapshot” analyses that do little in the way of making sense of the bigger picture.

Historically speaking, the beginning of the relationship between Turkey and the United States can be traced to the end of World War II. Convenience, not a sense of shared values or historical connections, brought the two countries together. Turkey had remained neutral until the last months of the war and stood alone against Stalin’s Soviet Union, which had ambitions for a number of Turkish provinces and the strategically important Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits that connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The United States was concerned with losing the Near East to Soviet control or influence.¹¹⁷ The turning point came with the Truman Doctrine’s plan to provide economic support to both Greece and Turkey. Turkey, like Greece, eventually joined NATO.

The First Cyprus Crisis and the “Johnson Letter”

The most notable early crisis involved Cyprus. After the Republic of Cyprus gained independence from British rule in 1960, Turkey became one of its guarantor states, along with the United Kingdom and Greece. In 1964, faced with the prospects of intercommunal violence against the Turkish Cypriots, Prime Minister Ismet Inonu informed the U.S. embassy of his intentions to launch a military operation on the island. It remains a mystery why he informed the United States *prior* to the military operation: Turkey did not have the

¹¹⁷ For a detailed examination of this period in the context of U.S.-Turkish relations, see, Bruce Robellet Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

amphibious capabilities at the time to carry out such an operation, which could have led to massive Turkish casualties, or even a catastrophic defeat. One dominant explanation is that Inonu never really intended to launch the operation in the first place but aimed to suck the United States into the negotiations, while also relieving domestic pressures regarding the Cyprus issue. Regardless, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent Inonu a letter in which he openly implied that a Turkish military intervention in Cyprus would lead to a harsh U.S. response, which would potentially involve Turkey being left alone to face the Soviet threat. Inonu backed down, and the letter was not immediately made public. In fact, Inonu visited Johnson in the United States and the media promoted the narrative that Turkish-American relations were going strong. The letter became public only in 1965, instantly triggering a public uproar in Turkey and accelerating the rise of anti-Americanism.¹¹⁸

What lessons can be drawn from this episode? First, diplomatic messaging between the two countries can sometimes have a lot to do with domestic politics and “strategic signaling.” Leaders, especially in Turkey, may not always mean what they say. Failing to correctly assess the context in which diplomatic messages are delivered can lead to tensions and crises that could have been avoided or managed more effectively. Second, failing to understand the sensitivities and priorities of an ally can prompt one party to send a message that backfires. For example, Inonu might have intended merely to have the United States get involved in the Cyprus negotiations by informing his counterpart of a military intervention that he did not mean to launch. However, he failed to comprehend Johnson’s worries about the risk of two NATO allies — Turkey and Greece — fighting each other at a time when the Cold War was raging across the globe.

The Second Cyprus Crisis

Beyond smaller crises — such as the “opium question” of the late-1960s and early 1970s, in which the U.S. Congress pushed for sanctions against Turkey due to production of opium in the country — relations remained relatively stable, until 1974. In 1974, now better equipped

¹¹⁸ Özgür Özdamar and Okhan Erçiyas. “Turkey and Cyprus: A Poliheuristic Analysis of Decisions during the Crises of 1964, 1967, and 1974,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* (August 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orz016>.

with appropriate military capabilities and facing even more dire prospects of violence against Turkish Cypriots, Ankara authorized a full-scale operation in Cyprus. Turkey took over the northern half of the island and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized by no state other than Turkey to this day, was eventually established in 1983. The U.S. response was swift: It imposed an embargo on military equipment and Turkey suffered economically. Ankara retaliated, most notably by denying access to Incirlik air base, until the embargo was finally lifted in 1978.

There are two primary insights from this crisis that can help clarify the crisis the two countries face today. First, once one country defines a certain issue as a core component of its vital national interests, it will most likely act accordingly. Words alone — or, the alliance itself — will not be sufficient to deter relevant actions. By 1974, Ankara had defined Cyprus as a component of its national security interests and decided to act accordingly, regardless of the cost. An analog for the present-day crisis may help drive home the point: Turkey's anti-Assad policy in Syria between 2011 and 2016 can hardly be defined in terms of core vital security interests. However, beginning in 2016, Ankara's incursions into Syria, which aimed to arrest the rise of the Syrian Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units, followed from what Turkey considered to be a central threat to its national security. Words alone, or the existence of the U.S.-Turkish alliance, would not have prevented Turkey from intervening in northern Syria.

One tendency among the spectators, or "Turkey watchers," is to attribute Turkey's stance toward the People's Protection Units to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his personal preferences.¹¹⁹ However, as will be highlighted below, while Turkey's anti-Assad posture can be explained in terms of the preferences of Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party, Ankara's policies toward the People's Protection Units are almost universally accepted as a necessity dictated by vital, even existential, national security interests in Turkey, even among Erdogan's staunchest critics.

¹¹⁹ Burak Kadercan, "The Unbearable Lightness of Blaming Erdogan: What Turkey Experts Are Not Telling You," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 8, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/the-unbearable-lightness-of-blaming-erdogan-or-what-turkey-experts-are-not-telling-you/>.

Turkey's "Kurdish Question" has a century-long history.¹²⁰ The country was founded as a unitary nation-state in 1923, and the Kurdish minority was long denied linguistic and cultural rights. This dynamic eventually led to the rise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party during the 1980s as the single most important and persistent threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. In the first half of the 2010s, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party spearheaded what was dubbed a "peace process" between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which eventually imploded in 2015. The result was the re-emergence of violent clashes between the Turkish security forces and the Kurdish group, which even spread to the urban centers.¹²¹ Currently, the Turkish military is fighting the Kurdistan Workers' Party not only in Turkey, but also in Iraq, and an overwhelming majority of the public perceives the People's Protection Units not merely as an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, but as a synonym for it. In this context, U.S. decision-makers either ignored Turkish sensitivities, or convinced themselves that such sensitivities could be easily managed.

Correctly assessing what counts as a vital interest or not on behalf of one's ally may not make the associated problems go away, but it can help both parties to alleviate and manage the challenges more effectively.

The second lesson to draw is more straightforward: During the U.S. embargo between 1974 and 1978, both allies paid a price for the disagreement, but eventually the relationship was "fixed." One somewhat optimistic conclusion to draw from this episode is that even when the alliance is damaged to the extent that Turkey denies access to Incirlik air base — which is a current concern for the United States — it is possible to eventually manage and move beyond the crisis. Of course, it is important for both parties to recognize and address mutual misperceptions about the other side's intentions and priorities.

¹²⁰ Burak Kadercan, "This Is What ISIS' Rise Means for the 'Kurd Question,'" *National Interest*, Sept. 9, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-isis-rise-means-the-kurdish-question>-13798.

¹²¹ Margarita Konaev and Burak Kadercan, "Old Dogs, New Tricks: Urban Warfare in Turkey's War With the PKK," *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 3, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/old-dogs-new-tricks-urban-warfare-turkeys-war-pkk/>.

The Hood Incident

Another important crisis that affected the trajectory of the U.S.-Turkish alliance is the so-called “hood incident” of 2003. Paradoxically, while this incident has become a part of Turkish national consciousness, very few in the United States — beyond specialists — are even aware of it. In 2003, just after the invasion of Iraq, U.S. forces captured a small contingent of Turkish military personnel, presumably special operation forces, and questioned them, releasing them after about 60 hours. During the process, the Turkish military personnel were essentially under arrest. Photographs of the Turkish soldiers with their hands tied behind their backs and their heads covered in hoods eventually reached the media, triggering nation-wide outrage in Turkey. The Turkish government protested the incident, but there were no immediate substantial impacts at the diplomatic level. In the long term, however, the incident left a scar on Turkey’s collective consciousness, paving the way for an explosion of anti-Americanism down the road.¹²²

The hood incident reveals two interrelated insights about the role of perception and misperception in U.S.-Turkish relations. First, a development that might be seen as a “non-issue” by one party may be perceived as an inexcusable offense by the other. To this day, the hood incident is perceived in Turkey as clear evidence of American hypocrisy, aggression, and betrayal. Second, ignoring or failing to understand what matters for the other party can lead to long-term negative consequences. More specifically, like many countries across the globe, Turkish people tend to consider the Turkish military as a sacred component of their national identity. Humiliation of Turkish soldiers at the hands of a foreign power is unanimously perceived as an attack on the nation. When these actions come from an ally, the narrative that there are “ulterior malign intentions” gains the upper hand, setting the stage for robust anti-Americanism. Put simply, the detention of Turkish military personnel might or might not have made tactical or operational sense at the time,

¹²² “[Former Chief of Staff] Ilker Basbug Disclosed all the Details of the Incident where Turkish Soldiers Were Hooded in Iraq,” *Haberler*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.haberler.com/ilker-basbug-irak-ta-turk-askerinin-basina-cuval-12212082-haberi/>.

but the act itself, not to mention how it was carried out, has had disproportionate long-term consequences for the strategic partnership between the two allies.

So, what does this brief overview of some past crises tell us about the future? First, crises between the two countries are not an anomaly, and more often than not are triggered, or at least exacerbated, by mutual misperception on behalf of both actors. Second, U.S.-Turkish relations survived in the face of these challenges, but each crisis left a mark on the relationship, more so on the part of Turkey than the United States, a factor that can partially explain widespread anti-Americanism in the country. Third, it is hard to pin down a point of rupture in the alliance, that is, until around 2014. Some analysts may argue that the end of the Cold War sealed the deal for Turkish-American relations and that a break-up was inevitable ever since. While the end of the Cold War most certainly rendered the deterioration of the alliance more likely, it did not make it inevitable. A key turning point, instead, was the Syrian civil war, where both Ankara and Washington, D.C. failed to consider fully the sensitivities and priorities of the other, triggering what can be called “self-fulfilling misperception.”

Self-Fulfilling Misperception in Syria

The present-day crisis between Turkey and the United States is similar to past crises in one dimension: Tensions are exacerbated, if not entirely triggered, by mutually shared and self-fulfilling misperception. The current situation, however, is unique in a number of ways. First, U.S.-Turkish relations are troubled not by a single issue, but by multiple issues. Syria is the most crucial of these, but tensions are further exacerbated by the failed coup attempt of 2016 and Turkey’s recent purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia. Second, the tensions between Turkey and the United States are additive. For example, while the S-400 purchase and Turkey’s northern Syria posture may be seen as independent issues, together they accelerate the looming rupture between Turkey and the United States. Third is the unprecedented rise of anti-Americanism in Turkey. Anti-Americanism in Turkey is neither new nor easily attributable to Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party. Since at least the 1960’s, anti-Americanism has been a sentiment shared by almost all segments of

Turkish society.¹²³ What is different today is that anti-Americanism is not merely a sentiment, but has come to occupy a central place in domestic political discourse, to the extent that anyone who disagrees with it is instantly branded as “Americanist,” a term that has come to be used as a synonym for traitor to the nation.¹²⁴

The self-fulfilling misperception framework can easily explain how the two allies ended up at odds in Syria. The Syrian debacle began with the eruption of the civil war in 2011. Initially, both Turkey and the United States shared the goal of toppling Bashar al-Assad, albeit for different reasons. The Obama administration mistakenly assumed that the Arab Spring doomed the fate of dictatorships in the Middle East and that it would be easy to bring down the Assad regime. Turkey, in turn, shared the same belief and was also driven by a kind of neo-Ottomanism, believing that Ankara could emerge as a king-maker in Syria and a regional leader once more. What the Turkish government failed to assess was the reluctance of the United States: The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had already worn down America’s taste for further adventures in the Middle East, and the chaos that ensued in Libya after Muammar Gaddafi’s fall ensured that Washington would not be willing to go to great lengths in order to take down Assad. In this context, Turkey hoped for the best, while also preparing for the best. When the United States began to disengage from Syria beginning in 2013, Ankara kept on pushing for Assad’s removal, most notably through its local proxy, the Free Syrian Army, and likely interpreted America’s disengagement as a betrayal of some sort.

The main turning point for the alliance in Syria was the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The group’s meteoric rise in both Iraq and Syria, which became most visible during the summer of 2014, triggered a state of panic, even mania, in the Western world, especially in the United States. Turkey was not equally alarmed by the group’s rise for three reasons. First, ISIL did not pose a direct threat to Turkey. Second, Ankara likely

¹²³ Burak Kadercan, “Turkey’s Anti-Americanism Isn’t New,” *National Interest*, Aug. 23, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/turkeys-anti-americanism-isnt-new-17448>.

¹²⁴ Out of many examples, see, Osman Diyadin, “Becoming an Americanist Jurist Just to Bring Down Erdogan,” *Yenia Akit*, June 3, 2019, <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/erdogani-devirmek-icin-amerikanci-olmak-784364.html>.

perceived ISIL and similar groups as a direct threat to its arch-nemesis in Syria at the time, the Assad regime. Third, and most importantly, the Turkish government failed to comprehend the extent of the panic in the United States over ISIL, which led Ankara to remain focused on Assad and not on the would-be caliphate.

Turkey's initial indifference toward ISIL caused the United States to seek another local partner to fight the group. The People's Protection Units, one of the weakest paramilitary actors in Syria at the time, became the chief local partner for the United States. The Kurdish militia was highly motivated to fight ISIL, both to ensure its own survival and, later, to increase its political power and territorial reach in Syria. Backed by U.S. air power and substantial material support, they proved to be a potent fighting force against ISIL, which elicited further U.S. support. The militia ended up controlling large swaths of territory, coming very close to taking over the entire Turkish-Syrian border. Such an outcome would have posed a direct threat to Turkish national security interests. That the United States has been the single most important patron of the People's Protection Units fuels the narrative that Washington has long intended to create a Kurdish state in the region at the expense of Turkey and was collaborating with the Kurdish militia in order to accomplish this goal.

In 2016, Ankara finally came to terms with the extent of the threat emanating from the People's Protection Units and shifted its strategic focus from Assad to the Kurdish group. Turkey first launched Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIL to isolate the Afrin province in northeastern Syria, and later took over control of the province with Operation Olive Branch in 2018. Armed with a stunning victory in Afrin, Ankara then turned its attention to the strategic town of Manbij in central-northern Syria and has made it clear ever since that it intends to rid northern Syria of the Kurdish militia's presence. This put the United States in an impossible situation. On the one hand, its NATO ally could opt to push for a military operation in northeastern Syria, where a limited number of U.S. military operators were stationed, against its chief local partner against ISIL. On the other hand, abandoning the Kurdish militia would hurt U.S. credibility in the region and, much more importantly, might undermine efforts to prevent the resurgence of ISIL.

Note that the U.S. decision to support the People’s Protection Units also followed from a misperception, which fueled the tendency to privilege short-term gains in Syria against ISIL at the expense of long-term strategic priorities in the greater region vis-à-vis Turkey. In so many ways, the prospects of a U.S.-Turkish crisis in the aftermath of America’s support for the Kurdish group was a foregone conclusion from day one. Short of a reconciliation between Turkey and not only the People’s Protection Unit in Syria, but also the Kurdistan Worker’s Party in Turkey — which is possible but not probable as things stand — Ankara and Washington were bound for a serious crisis over Syria.

It is difficult to believe that top decision-makers in the United States were unaware of the fact that Turkey considers the two groups to be essentially the same organization. More likely, U.S. decision-makers convinced themselves that supporting the Kurdish militia in Syria would not trigger a harsh reaction from Turkey, or that, at the very least, they could somehow manage the Turkish reaction. In fact, the U.S. failure to correctly perceive the Turkish sensitivities and priorities is evident in the “management” phase. Faced with protests from Ankara, the United States helped the People’s Protection Units “rebrand” itself as the Syrian Democratic Forces, an act that decision-makers likely thought would alleviate Turkish concerns. For Turkey, the problem was the same: While the Syrian Democratic Forces re-organized itself by introducing many Arab fighters to its ranks, the People’s Protection Units remained in charge. Therefore, for Turks, the rebranding only added insult to injury. Not only was Turkey’s ally directly supporting and empowering a group Turks considered their enemy, but it was also assuming that a new “name” could easily fool the Turkish people and government. Not surprisingly, such a posture only contributed to the dominant Turkish narrative that the United States was not to be trusted and that it harbored ulterior motives with regard to Turkey’s core — and even existential — national security interests.

More recently, President Donald Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria, which paved the way for Turkish incursions into areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Trump also implicitly acknowledged Turkey’s claims about the relationship between the Kurdistan Workers’ Party and the Syrian Democratic Forces, while also warning Turkey about potential sanctions that could destroy the Turkish

economy. The Turkish incursions into northern Syria also turned public opinion in the United States against Turkey, placing significant pressure on the Trump administration to actually impose sanctions on Ankara. Arguably, these “mixed messages” — that is, adopting a position that favors Turkey’s position vis-à-vis northern Syria while also threatening Ankara with economic sanctions — will only contribute to the perception-misperception cycle between Washington, D.C. and Ankara down the road.

Syria is only one, if not the single most important and intractable, dimension of the current U.S.-Turkish crisis. The cycle of mutual misperception extends to other dimensions, such as the S-400 crisis and Turkey’s suspicions about America’s involvement in the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Given this background, what does the future hold for U.S.-Turkish relations? Simply put, it is almost impossible to predict if the relationship will get “warmer” or “colder” down the road. Only one thing is for sure: Unless both parties decide to unpack — or deconstruct — the cycle of self-fulfilling misperception that eventually brought the two allies into the current crisis, any attempts at repairing the alliance are bound to fail.

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