



Avoiding a Transactional Framework for U.S.–Turkey Relations

By İlter Turan

After a recent meeting between presidents Trump and Erdoğan, the American president proclaimed that they were the best of friends. Shortly after, during a visit to Washington, DC, the Turkish Prime minister agreed with Vice President Pence to pursue more effective communications. But while political leaders have expressed a determination keep relations from deteriorating, new problems continue to pop up that mar relations.

The security cooperation and mutual trust that has characterized Turkey's postwar relations with the United States has been replaced by suspicion and distrust. Efforts on both sides to improve the relationship have been quickly overtaken by unfavorable developments. Are we faced with an unfortunate set of incidents or is there a more fundamental problem? While some unfortunate incidents may contribute to the deterioration of the relationship, a fundamental change has occurred in the policy environment to which both sides need to adjust.

Cold War to Post-Cold War Framework

The prevalent source of discord in the Turkish–American relationship appears to be the different frames of mind with which the two countries approach their relations. The Turkey–U.S. relationship developed after World War II, when Western Europe and Turkey were exposed to a Soviet threat that could not be deterred without U.S. support. Turkey, a much poorer country at the time, relied on U.S. military assistance to modernize its army. The entire alliance, on the other hand, relied on the U.S. commitment to defend

the continent against a Soviet attack. It was thought that NATO conventional forces might be insufficient to stop a Soviet advance into Europe and U.S. nuclear forces might have to be used as a means of last resort to ensure defense. Within this context, since U.S. soldiers would be facing Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces from the beginning of an attack, their presence on the continent was a guarantee that the United States would be involved automatically in European defense.

NATO's European partners' dependency on the U.S. security guarantee allowed the United States to plan the defense of the Alliance on its own, expecting others to comply. The tradeoff was not perfect. Some members failed to comply with U.S. expectations. The general rule was that the more threatened a country felt, the more it was likely to accept American leadership without challenging it. Turkey, with its double dependence on the United States for modernizing its armed forces and its defense capabilities, was more accommodating than many others. The end of the Cold War combined with the increasing economic prosperity that allowed Turkey to manufacture some of its own weapons and to buy others, transformed the relationship. Turkey now expected its NATO Ally to treat it more as an equal partner. The United States maintained more of the frame of mind that had evolved during the Cold War, making plans, developing strategies, and expecting Turkey to follow suit. The mismatch of expectations has been problematic. In relations, the Turkish side often feels that the Americans do not treat them as



partners but more as clients; the American side, on the other hand, feels that Turks are not behaving like an ally. The policy differences between the two countries have become more pronounced in the Middle East but are not confined to it. Nevertheless, a look at the policy differences in Syria and Iran may be the most effective way illustrating the problems of different mindsets.

Actions in Syria

The success of the Global Coalition in clearing the self-proclaimed Islamic State group from Raqqa was overshadowed by evidence that U.S. backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), primarily a Kurdish force from Northern Syria, gave ISIS and their families' safe passage out of the city while U.S. forces abstained from military action. This raises concerns that the United States may see some benefit in the continuation of ISIS as a resource to check the full return of the Assad regime to rule Syria with Russian support. Though the Pentagon denies direct involvement in the deal and states that the priority of local forces was to protect civilian lives, Turkey's leaders are particularly sensitive about what appears to have been a tacit bargain between ISIS and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and People's Protection Units (YPG) — that is, the two branches of the Marxist Kurdish political movement that constitutes the backbone of the SDF. Turkey has argued with substantive evidence that the PYD-YPG is the Syrian extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist group that has long challenged the country's territorial integrity, and views U.S. support as a direct affront to Turkish security.

Shying away from committing its own troops to a civil war in Syria, the United States relies on the YPG as a proxy to advance its own interests in the region. While the United States has also declared the PKK a terrorist organization, it argues that the two organizations are different and the YPG is not an extension of the PKK. The United States maintains that their cooperation with the YPG is tactical, intended to drive ISIS out of Syria. Turkish authorities have shown that some of the weapons given to the YPG are already in the hands of the PKK, but to no avail. Such insensitivity to Turkish concerns has generated fears that the U.S. intention is to eventually give birth to a Kurdish state in the region that would likely have border problems with all its neighbors,

including Turkey. While that prognosis may or may not be true, Turkey's fears are real. The recent support the U.S. extended to the Baghdad government against a referendum of the Kurdish Regional Government to declare independence and the promise of President Trump to the Turkish president that the United States will stop providing the YPG with armaments has assuaged Turkey's fears, but the U.S. military has caused confusion by saying that cooperation with the YPG will continue.

Relations with Iran

Currently, the United States wants to annul the nuclear agreement with Iran, showing a pattern of U.S. policy to exert its own relations with Iran onto Allies. While Turkey shares the concern that Iran should not build nuclear weapons, it considers — along with the European Union and a majority of the members of the international community — that the agreement is a reasonable one and judges that Iran has been complying with its terms. It is difficult for Turkey to accept the idea of imposing unilateral sanctions on Iran. And even more difficult to accept that those who do not go along with those sanctions — which were not created by consensus — should be penalized.¹

U.S. plans to contain Iran by enhancing the military preparedness of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States is expanding the disagreement. Turkey's prefers diplomatic means and the avoiding any armed conflict, whereas U.S. interests and presence could easily lead to outbreak of armed conflict that would devastate the region and cause severe drops in the global supply of oil. The consistent U.S. approach to go it alone without building consensus among allies is not unique to Turkey, but causes greater concern. Iran is a neighbor to Turkey, meaning that there are many areas where cooperation is not a choice but a

¹ A current case in the New York Federal Court involves some Turks who are accused of violating earlier sanctions that the U.S. had imposed on trade with Iran. The Reza Zarrab case has attracted the most attention, not for the violation of rules but the allegedly corrupt practices that may have been involved. The Turkish government has requested extradition of its citizen, but it seems that the defendant has a plea bargain for reduced sentence to describe the mechanisms through which U.S. rules were flouted. This constitutes another sore point in the Turkey-U.S. relationship. The Turkish prime minister stated that Turkey has not violated any sanctions that were introduced by the United Nations, which they considered to be only rightful authority to impose them.

necessity. This mismatch of expectations translates into conflicting behaviors, and will likely stand in the way of a more comprehensive cooperation.

Avoiding Further Deterioration

Apart from the failure to reshape the relationship framework in the face of changed conditions, including the emergence of policy difference relating to the Middle East, there is yet another aspect of the relationship that involves undisciplined rhetoric, and inconsequential — and occasional improper — actions that exacerbate the already difficult relationship. Turkish leaders sometimes employ confrontational language that is less than typical in international relations, even less typical in relations among countries that are in an Alliance relationship. Not surprisingly, this upsets the United States and erodes the friendly feelings even among those in the U.S. policy circles who are favorably disposed toward Turkey. Similarly, President Erdoğan's overzealous security detail's action against demonstrators in Washington, DC produced an understandable negative emotional and legal response in the United States. Some of the comments rendered by American Congressmen following the event, however, are no less inflammatory than those emanating from the Turkish side. Inconsequential actions by the U.S. Congress such as banning the sale of Sig Sauer hand guns to Turkish police, a weapon for which substitutes can be secured without much difficulty and surrogates produced domestically, remain symbolic but serve to undermine further the confidence in the reliability of the relationship.

The problems between Turkey and the United States undermine the sense of shared community that both countries have held since the end of the World War II. If it continues, the nature of the relationship will turn to being fully transactional, meaning limited term cooperation on matters that are of common interest rather than long-term cooperation within the framework of a political community that is based on perceived common interests. Both Turks and Americans need to ask themselves what kind of a relationship they want. If they value being a part of the same community, then this calls for an adjustment of mindsets, behaviors, rhetoric, and policies. Current signs do not sufficiently point in that direction.

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