



Time for a Complete Makeover in Turkish-U.S. Relations

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Turkish-U.S. relations have gone through multiple crises in the last two decades, culminating in a very broad deterioration in 2019. Turkey purchased the Russian S-400 missile system despite warnings from the United States about its incompatibility with U.S. and NATO weapons systems, and as a consequence was removed from the F-35 joint strike fighter project. Turkey intervened in northeastern Syria despite strong opposition from the United States, leading to intense anti-Turkey sentiment in the U.S. Congress, policy circles, and media. U.S. troops withdrawing from certain outposts in the area left them to Russian rather than Turkish forces.

While it is easy to blame mismanagement on either side, there is a deep and long-term mutual loss of trust between the two countries. The U.S. military and political establishment no longer trusts Turkey, and vice versa—in both cases for good reasons. Turkish-U.S. relations were built upon a very strong common interest after the Second World War, namely the security threat from the Soviet Union. But the relationship never went deeper to create broad ties between the two societies. As a result, the disappearance of that common interest caused a widespread deterioration of the relationship.

The relationship with the United States became the most important one for Turkey after 1945. Turkey had an intense perception of the Soviet Union as a threat and decided to align itself closely with the United States as its core defensive strategy. For five decades, their relations were driven by the military alliance. Grass-roots, people-to-people ties were always slight—unlike the ties between the United States and Ireland, Britain, Germany, or Israel. Economic ties have also been relatively weak—Turkey never built a deep trading relationship with the United States like Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan did. Finally, political ties are superficial, built around the military alliance rather than a common political philosophy or worldview. As a result, there have never been other axes in the relationship to complement the military alliance.

The military alliance rose and fell in line with the relative importance of security considerations in two regions. Turkey figured in U.S. strategic calculations in Europe and the Middle East. It had withdrawn from the Middle East almost completely after 1945, so the relationship was shaped on the European front. Turkey's top national security priority was the perceived threat from the Soviet Union, and the solution was to be part of NATO. Turkey started from a difficult place due to its neutrality in the Second World War, but it worked

very hard to develop a close relationship with the United States, its large deployment during the Korean War being a prime example of this. Turkey became a NATO member in 1953 and showed an unwavering commitment to the alliance throughout the second half of the twentieth century. It was not aligned with U.S. policy in the Middle East through this period, but this was hardly noticed due to its determination to stay away from the region's conflicts.

Post-Cold War Changes

The seeds of the current instability in Turkish-U.S. relations were sown at the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the communist bloc. On one hand, Turkey's perception of a threat from Russia declined considerably; in the 1990s Russia was no longer a giant compared to Turkey in terms of the size of its gross domestic product or its population, unlike in the 1950s. Newly independent Ukraine and the South Caucasus states formed a buffer between Turkey and Russia. On the other hand, the end of the Cold War led Turkey to play a more active role in Eurasia and the Middle East. It decided to play a geopolitical role in the Middle East beyond trade relations. It is at this moment that the misalignment between Turkish and U.S. interests in the Middle East started to become visible.

Since the 1980s, U.S. policy in the Middle East has revolved around containing Iran, protecting Israel, and supporting the regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Turkey shares none of these goals. It has been at best neutral towards them and at times openly at odds with them. This has been a quiet but intense divergence, slowly building pressure. It was inevitable that earthquakes, small and large, would eventually occur.

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Against this background, the long series of Turkish-U.S. disagreements since the late 1990s fall into place like pieces in a puzzle. There was always a line of thinking in Turkey's defense and foreign policy circles, inspired by the country's non-aligned stance in the 1920s and 1930s, which advocated leaving the U.S. orbit; but it was always suppressed due to the broadly accepted necessity of U.S. support in countering the Soviet threat. As that threat declined and Turkey rediscovered the Middle East, “pro-autonomy” and anti-U.S. instincts became more acceptable in military as well as political circles.

The AKP Era

In the newly founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his close advisors saw this divergence of military perspectives and invested heavily in U.S. ties to counterbalance the hostility of the Turkish military toward their party. Erdoğan was received at the White House by President George W. Bush after the AKP won the 2002 elections but he had been prevented from running for political office. U.S. support expedited the lifting of legal restrictions on him and enabled him to become prime minister in 2003.

The first major manifestation of the Turkish-U.S. fault line came during the Iraq War in 2003. Erdoğan wanted Turkey to join the U.S. invasion, but his efforts were blocked by the parliament despite the fact that the AKP enjoyed a large majority in it. The lack of support from the Turkish military during the surrounding political debate was noted in U.S. circles. After the invasion, an incident in which U.S. forces arrested Turkish military

personnel serving in Iraq, handcuffing and hooding them, was perceived as a serious insult. The “Hood Incident” increased the level of mistrust on the Turkish side.

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From 2003 to 2013, political and military ties were managed pragmatically on both sides, despite growing mutual mistrust. Turkey made a valuable contribution to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, which helped mend the military relationship. The difficulties encountered by the United States in Iraq and the resurgence of Russia led the U.S. military to constructively engage Turkey again. Turkey made an intense effort to be included in the F-35 program, which was successful. However, the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria created a new area of friction. Turkey and the United States were briefly aligned in trying to take down the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. However, the emergence of Islamist forces as the main opposition in the country led to the United States taking a more cautious approach, while Turkey pressed on without success. In the emerging regional landscape, Turkey treated Islamic State as the lesser of two evils compared to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The United States, on the other hand, chose to use of PKK-associated groups in Syria to fight Islamic State. Its support of the PKK was perceived very negatively in Turkey across the political spectrum.

The Gülenist Issue

The rise of the movement led by Fethullah Gülen as a leading security threat in Turkey led to an even bigger turning point in the relationship. Gülenists had developed a wide network in the United States over several decades, including strong political ties as well as a local presence. As Gülenists in the Turkish judiciary and police conspired to purge their opponents in the military in the Ergenekon and Balyoz cases in order to establish control over the armed forces, the fact that Gülen resides in the United States led to Turkish public opinion associating his movement with U.S. military and intelligence circles. Originally, Erdoğan did not object to these purges, as those purged were often also strongly opposed to him. However, when the Gülenists turned against Erdoğan and his close circle after 2013, he changed tack and reached out to new allies across the political spectrum to form a broad anti-Gülenist coalition. The coup attempt in 2016 justified the position of those who pointed out that Gülenists were a major national security threat. The lack of support from the U.S. government and political circles during and after the attempted coup solidified the broadly held view in Turkey that the Gülen movement was supported by the United States.

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After the coup attempt, Russia opportunistically entered the picture to take advantage of the deteriorating Turkish-U.S. security relationship. For the first time in over seventy years, Turkey turned to Russia for military procurement. The decision to purchase the Russian S-400 missiles became a new source of friction in relations with the United States, eventually resulting in the exclusion of Turkey from the F-35 project.

Today, the Turkish-U.S. relationship appears to be wounded from all the hits that it took over the past twenty years. The recent uproar over the Turkish military operations in northeastern Syria came against this back-

drop. Despite Erdoğan's relationship with President Donald Trump, the mood in Congress and among the U.S. military and foreign policy establishment appears to have become ever more anti-Turkey. Bilateral ties have been subordinated to short-term domestic political pressures in both countries.

Time for Makeover

It is time to accept that the Turkish-U.S. alliance needs a complete makeover. The model that was developed in the 1950s—complete military alignment of Turkey with the United States—is no longer feasible. Expectations need to be managed on both sides and brought down to realistic levels. A well-functioning relationship of a smaller scope is likely to be more effective and easier to manage going forward.

Such a new relationship should and can be built, but it must start from a point of mutual understanding. This can only be done by admitting that Turkey and the United States have divergent interests in the Middle East. This is the root cause of the problem, and any solutions will only be temporary until the root cause is addressed. Military cooperation remains very deep despite all the recent developments: U.S. nuclear weapons are stationed in Turkey, the U.S. Navy is supplied from there, the U.S. Air Force operates out of several bases on Turkish soil, and U.S. long-range radar stations are deployed in the country. Turkey has fulfilled its defense spending obligations in NATO, unlike many other allies. By reducing their expectations from each other in the Middle East, Turkey and the United States can salvage the rest of their relationship and put in on firmer footing.

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