



Frustration, Fear, and the Fate of U.S.-Turkish Relations

By Nicholas Danforth

Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 air-defense missiles represents a dramatic and undeniable shift in its foreign policy. In explaining the decision, Turkey's policymakers and commentators have offered two distinct, if complementary, narratives: a softer version emphasizing frustration with the United States, and a harder version focused on reasons to feel threatened by it. Determining which narrative is more applicable has important implications for how the United States and Turkey can mitigate the current crisis.

The soft, "frustration" argument, voiced by more moderate commentators and Foreign Ministry officials, focuses on Turkey's disappointment with its traditional NATO allies. In this telling, the United States has repeatedly let Turkey down, failing to offer the government full support on the night of the 2016 coup, failing to back the country in Syria, and failing to sell it Patriot missiles. Thus, Ankara was forced to seek Russia's help to fulfill its long-standing security needs.

Lurking behind this account is a more antagonistic one. Perhaps President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan put it best on the third anniversary of the coup, when he told a group of journalists: "Despite our political and military pacts with the Western alliance, the fact is that once again the biggest threats we face are from them."¹

In this narrative, rather than disappoint Turkey, the United States actually set out to destroy it. Washington did not just fail to support the democratically elected

government in the aftermath of the coup, it actually supported the coup plotters. The United States did not just abandon Turkey in Syria, it joined forces with its enemy there, the People's Protection Units (YPG). From this perspective, Erdoğan did not buy the S-400s because he could not get Patriots but because he wanted a system that could shoot down U.S.-made planes like the ones that almost killed him on the night of the coup. In short, Turkey did not turn toward Russia out of frustration with the West but because it needed protection from an adversary it felt threatened by.

Historical Precedents

Each of these explanations invokes a different historical narrative. The soft version builds on Turkey's decades-long frustration with the terms of the NATO alliance, going back as far as its origins in the 1950s.² U.S. policymakers today sometimes romanticize the alliance's golden era, but Turkey pushed for a more equal and independent role within it from the outset. Shortly before he was ousted in 1960, even the enthusiastically pro-U.S. Prime Minister Adnan Menderes was planning a trip to Moscow, in the hope that a rapprochement with the Soviet Union might give him more leverage with the United States. The military government that toppled him was even more eager to pursue an independent policy and accused Menderes of compromising Turkey's sovereignty through his relations with the West.³ Developments over the following decades, particularly with regard to Cyprus,

¹ Gazete Duvar, "Erdoğan: S-400 tarihimizin en önemli anlaşması," July 14, 2019.

² William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*. Routledge, London, 2012.

³ Nurhan Ince-Robert Olson, "Turkish Foreign Policy 1960-1964: Continuity, Change and the Cyprus Crisis," *Oriente Moderno* Anno 57, Nr. 7/8 (Luglio-Agosto 1977), pp. 269-286.



only exacerbated this dynamic. The 1964 “Johnson letter”⁴ and the U.S. arms embargo of 1975 led Turkey to explore improved relations with the Soviet Union as a step toward better meeting its security needs.⁵

As long as the Cold War continued and the Soviet Union remained the overriding threat to Turkish security, there was a clear limit on how far this rapprochement could go. Then the end of the Cold War removed the cement holding the alliance together, even if the cracks would only begin to show under the impact of subsequent shocks. The 1990s and early 2000s saw Turkey still working to enhance its status within a Western-dominated global order, but the much-discussed rise of a more multipolar world over the past decade has made a more independent foreign policy appear all the more plausible.⁶

This narrative can help explain why Turkey might now be inclined to look to Russia for military support. It does not, however, fully explain why, unlike in previous instances, it would accept the risk of a lasting break with the United States in order to go through with the S-400s deal.

Here, the hard narrative, and the history it evokes, seem more relevant. For the past two centuries, Turkey has relied on Western support against the threat posed by Russia—except for the times when it felt more threatened by the West. In the 19th century, the Ottoman empire sought British military and diplomatic backing against the Russian empire, just as during the Cold War the Turkish republic looked to the United States for aid against the Soviet Union. The most notable exception, of course, was during the War of Independence, when nationalist forces, facing an invasion by Western powers, used weapons sent by Russia to fight them off.

4 When Turkey threatened to intervene in Cyprus in 1964 in response to inter-communal tensions there, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson wrote a tersely worded letter to the government, saying that if Turkey did so it would forfeit U.S. support in case of Soviet retaliation. When Turkey did intervene on the island in 1974, Congress responded by passing an arms embargo the following year. See Hale, *ibid.*

5 See, for example Onur Isci, “*Realpolitik’in Ötesinde*,” *Tarih Vakfı Konuşmaları*, March 14, 2019.

6 Jakub Grygiel And Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016.

If today’s situation does not appear analogous to outside observers, Erdoğan and his allies have been consistent in saying that it is. Since the failed coup of 2016, the government’s rhetoric has regularly invoked the War of Independence, while also referring to the coup attempt itself as a “foreign invasion.”⁷ Turkey views as evidence of hostile Western encirclement not only U.S. support for the YPG, but also regional developments such as the 2013 coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Saudi-U.A.E. blockade of Qatar, and the deepening cooperation between Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, and Israel in the eastern Mediterranean.⁸

Moving Forward

The future of the U.S.-Turkish relationship will inevitably be shaped by how these broad narratives shape, and are shaped by, decisions made in Ankara, Washington and Moscow.

First and foremost, it will hinge on whether Turkish decision-making is driven by frustration with the United States or a newfound feeling of threat. In practice, the two narratives often overlap, and both are present across the Turkish political spectrum.⁹ However, while frustration has been the dominant note struck publicly by opposition figures, a more deeply confrontational tone is ascendant within

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Erdogan’s party. To the extent that Turkey’s leaders believe they are engaged in an existential struggle against an implacably hostile West, sustaining any sort of functional relationship will be difficult. And

7 Ryan Gingeras, “The Dangerous Implications Behind Erdoğan’s “Second War of Independence,” *Muftah*, July 11, 2017.

8 Galip Dalay, “*Turkish-U.S. Strategic Decoupling Through the Prism of Syria*,” German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 21, 2019.

9 Specifically, many commentators argue the United States is implementing hostile policies toward Turkey in to prevent it from charting a more independent course or to punish it for trying.

yet, to the extent that Turkish policy is motivated by a desire to chart a more independent role in a more multipolar world, Ankara will eventually seek to rebuild a workable relationship with Washington. Such a relationship may not bring either party all the benefits of the traditional U.S.-Turkish alliance, but it could remain a valuable component of Turkish strategy.

Reaching this point, in turn, will hinge on whether the United States ultimately seeks to accommodate Turkey's new direction or takes a more purely punitive tack. To date, the incoherence of the Trump administration has made it difficult to predict which impulse will win out. At times, such as during the dispute over the detained U.S. pastor Andrew Brunson last summer, President Donald Trump has seemed almost gleeful in wielding the United States' economic might against Turkey. At other times, such as over the S-400s, he has seemed eager to accommodate Erdoğan—so much so that it has pushed Congress toward taking an even harder line against Turkey's government. Similarly, on Syria, the contrast between Trump's occasionally voiced desire for a quick withdrawal and the policies of his national security team has added to the confusion. As long as U.S. policy remains inconsistent, Turkey will be tempted to test Washington's red lines in the hope it will back down. If the United States can find a consistent course that is neither too aggressive nor too yielding, Turkey can calibrate its response accordingly. Tensions will remain, but there might be fewer crises created by miscalculation.

Finally, an under-discussed part of the equation is what kind of partner Russia will choose to be to Turkey. How much will it help advance Turkey's interests, and how much will it continue to threaten them? President Vladimir Putin won points in Ankara for the quick support he offered Erdoğan on the night of the coup and, crucially, signed off on Turkey's military operations in Syria. But beyond this Russia has often been adversarial, supporting the Syrian regime's recent campaign against Turkish-backed rebels in Idlib and even offering military and diplomatic cover for the YPG outside of Afrin. If Russia concludes it

has a chance to make the break between Turkey and NATO permanent, it might try to be more supportive of Turkey. If it continues to pursue other interests at Turkey's expense though, the latter will have further incentives to mend ties with the West.

Conclusion

Following the United States' decision to remove Turkey from the F-35 fighter program as a result of the S-400s purchase, several commentators have invoked yet another historical parallel: Great Britain's 1914 decision to refuse delivery of two warships ordered and paid for by the Ottoman government.¹⁰ Angry at Britain, the Young Turk government received two German ships instead and soon joined World War One on the German side.¹¹ The merits of Britain's initial decision, along with the reasons for the Ottomans' response, can be debated. But the results were clear: Britain suffered an embarrassing and costly setback and the Ottomans then suffered a devastating and destructive defeat. Hopefully policymakers in Turkey and the United States will have the wisdom to avoid a similar outcome today.

¹⁰ Murat Yetkin, "Turkey asks U.S. to revoke its F-35 removal decision to avoid 'irreparable damage' in ties," The Yetkin Report, 18 July 2019.

¹¹ Mustafa Aksakal, "The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War". Cambridge University Press, London, 2010.

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