

# At Issue:

## *Is Turkey a reliable U.S. ally?*



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JANUARY 2016

**t**he United States can certainly rely on its NATO allies and their heads of states and governments, including Turkey and its leadership under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. NATO is a voluntary alliance of members who have pledged their mutual defense through its founding treaty of 1949 and allied agreements and commitments since then. The more precise point of the question is: For what purposes can the United States, or any NATO ally, rely on the other allies?

The United States can rely on its NATO allies to pursue their national security and political interests through that treaty and the continuously updated defense policy agreements resulting from the daily consultative processes of the alliance. NATO members are durable states of law. NATO states uphold their treaty commitments from one national political administration to another. In their political speech, behavior and decisions, NATO heads of state and government at any historical moment reflect their internal politics. And, especially in democracies, domestic politics both respond to global developments and influence national responses to them. Turkey and its political leaders are no exception.

With respect to the impact on relations with NATO of a member leader's political visions, former French President Charles de Gaulle is perhaps the most illuminating comparison with Erdogan. De Gaulle's 1966 withdrawal from French military participation in NATO while retaining its political membership was certainly the most dramatic move regarding the international alliance by a member head of state. His assertively nationalist decision, at the height of the Cold War, necessitated the withdrawal of U.S. forces and of Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) from France.

At least in historical retrospect, de Gaulle's decision, while consequential, precipitated no crisis within NATO, or in France's relations with other NATO members. The organization fully adjusted, quickly and smoothly. President Nicolas Sarkozy restored full French military participation in NATO 43 years later, long after the demise of the Soviet Union and subsequent advances in NATO-Russian relations.

The de Gaulle and Sarkozy decisions illustrate not only the impact that individual national leaders can have on their countries' relations with NATO, but also NATO's resilience in dealing with decisions by heads of member states regarding their status and collaboration within the alliance. This resilience continues to be crucial and ensures that the United States can rely on its NATO allies, including Erdogan and Turkey.



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JANUARY 2016

**a**fter decades as a key ally on NATO's southern flank, Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has proved a fickle friend to the United States, drawing closer in its times of need but going its own way whenever it felt the wind in its sails.

Turkey is now seeking to reinvigorate its relations with the United States, European Union and Israel. But this comes only after the self-styled Islamic State (ISIS) attacked Turkish targets and Russia imposed sanctions when Turkish planes rashly shot down a Russian aircraft in November that briefly entered Turkish airspace.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems, at last, to have realized that his country cannot stand alone as a regional power without friends in the West. Until recently, Turkey did little to oppose ISIS and the al-Nusra Front (the Syrian branch of al Qaeda), tolerating the transit and provisioning of militants on Turkish territory while attacking Washington-supported Kurdish factions in Syria and denying U.S. use of the Incirlik Air Base. Turkey's opportunistic alignment with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq has revived oil exports from the region through Turkey, to the discomfort of Baghdad and Washington. Over the years, Ankara has provided material support to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Turkey stood aside from U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia after its annexation of Crimea and "asymmetric" war in eastern Ukraine. While Washington and NATO urged diversification of energy supplies away from Russia, the Turkish government endorsed the notion of a new gas pipeline from Russia and awarded a contract to build a nuclear power plant on the Turkish coast, unsettling its Turkish Cypriot friends nearby. All of this gave Moscow a golden opportunity to teach Turkey a lesson, through economic sanctions, after the November aircraft incident.

Turkey's essentially transactional relations with its Western allies reflect deep ambiguities in its domestic politics. After a promising start, the AKP leadership's drift toward authoritarianism, Islamization and no-holds-barred confrontation with an alleged "parallel state" have undermined any claim that Ankara acts on the basis of values shared with Washington or NATO. Nonetheless, many Turkish citizens cling to libertarian values. If Turkey supports a Cyprus settlement, in which the United States is heavily invested, and delivers on promises to work with the EU to stem refugee flows, Ankara's rather despairing swing back to the West may start to carry conviction.