



# Turkey's Strategic Choice: Flexible Alliances with an Enduring Transatlantic Anchor

By E. Fuat Keyman and Megan Gisclon

A precarious photograph emerged of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and Russian President Vladimir Putin jovially joining hands following the trilateral Sochi summit on November 22. In a similar view, this echoed the Ankara–Tehran–Baghdad alliance emerging out of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) referendum on September 24 as well as Turkey's recent deal to obtain the S-400 missile system from Moscow. Such partnerships mark a definite turn in Turkish foreign policy in the post-July 15 era: Turkey's relations with Russia as well as with Eurasia have deepened, while its relations with the West, in contrast, have been declining under a growing trust problem. In turn, we suggest that Ankara should see its improving ties with Russia and Iran solely as a tenant of Turkey's historic policy of flexible alliances while maintaining its historical, strategic anchor with the West.

In our rapidly globalizing and hyper-connected world, flexible alliances are a crucial component of foreign policy. Flexible alliances with an enduring transatlantic anchor have been a central tenant of Turkish foreign policy since the Republican Era. Fostering flexible alliances between East and West with its regional neighbors bolsters Turkey's strength and problem-solving capacity. In fact, when confronted with a series of grave international crises and regional and global challenges, early Republican Turkey attempted to secure itself by making flexible alliances with Russia and the rest of the world while seeing the West as its strategic anchor and partner, to which it had always turned. Today, almost 100 years after World War I, Turkey finds itself in a situation where its own security as well as its contribution to regional and global stability lies in the ability to establish a golden balance be-

tween flexible alliances with regional powers and its strategic transatlantic alliance. It is establishing this balance that should define Turkey's strategic choice in its foreign policy making.

## From Erbil to Sochi

The KRG's September 25 independence referendum was opposed not only by Turkey but every major regional and global player with the exception of Israel. In what, for any other issue, would prove impossible, Turkey, the United Nations, United States, U.K., Germany, Russia, and Iran stood concertedly against the referendum.

This multi-lateral consensus proved a unifying topic in President Erdogan's September 21 meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, just four days before the KRG vote.<sup>1</sup> However, while Erdogan and his party have threatened economic sanctions against the KRG — including closing oil valves between Kirkuk and the Turkish port city of Ceyhan<sup>2</sup> — the United States and United Nations have yet to (and unlikely will) seriously discuss specific economic or security repercussions for the KRG. While Turkey and Iran will continue to disavow the KRG's vote due to the fear of their own restive Kurdish populations within their borders, the

1 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Readout of President Donald J. Trump's Meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey," September 22, 2017.

2 Onur Ant and Khalid Al Ansary, "Turkey Warns Iraq Kurds It Can, 'Close the Valves' on Oil Exports," Bloomberg, updated September 26, 2017.



United States' opposition may only be temporary as Washington declared opposition to the timing of the referendum rather than the principle of it.<sup>3</sup>

In its response to the KRG referendum, Ankara has effectively boxed itself into the Tehran–Baghdad axis. Since the referendum, the Turkish army has conducted joint military exercises with the Iraqi army on its borders with the KRG as well as revitalized ties with Baghdad.<sup>4</sup> Ankara actively encouraged the peaceful handover of the Habur border gate from the Kurdish peshmerga to the Iraqi military. Iran has shown its smart-power response by performing its own military exercises near its border with the KRG and becoming increasingly involved in Iraqi politics.<sup>5</sup> Iraq has reclaimed the disputed province of Kirkuk from the peshmerga forces through military pressure, as well as a number of other territories.<sup>6</sup>

The Ankara–Tehran–Baghdad alliance was reflected onto the latest development in Turkey's regional relations surrounding the November 22 Sochi meeting. As it was decided between Turkey, Russia, and Iran that the Syria conflict must be resolved through political means, Turkey has similarly boxed itself into an anti-Western, pro-Assad clique. However, unlike Turkey's alliance against the KRG, this alliance will likely prove complicated for Ankara. In an episode similar to the underlying disagreements between Turkey and the United States, Ankara and Moscow have come to loggerheads recently over Moscow's proposition to invite the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) to peace talks, despite Turkey's categorization of the PYD as a terrorist organization related to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). With approximately one-fifth of Syria under the control of the YPG/PYD,<sup>7</sup> combined with Turkey and Iran's fear of a separate

Kurdish state, the trio will likely continue to disagree on this issue, limiting Turkey's flexibility to combat what it deems as enemy Kurdish groups.

## Turkey and NATO: What's in a Missile?

Turkey's decision to purchase a Russian-made S-400 missile system has been seen as Ankara's greatest show of discontent with the Western security bloc of which it has been a member since 1952. Within Turkey, several domestic debates<sup>8</sup> about the country's actual need for NATO have been ongoing for years amid growing Eurasianist influence in the upper echelons of the Turkish military — the pro-Russian bloc allegedly controlling many influential facets of the Turkish military, and to a certain extent, that may influence Ankara's strategic preferences.<sup>9</sup> Ankara has been increasingly upset with the Western security bloc and Western states' response to the failed July 15 coup attempt and their silence over the PYD issue in the north of Syria, as well as complaining that Western states will not sell Turkey weapons. In turn, Turkey's purchase at the present time is viewed by Western actors as a political step more so than a military tactic and has become representative of the West's "loss" of Turkey and Turkey's increasing alignment with authoritarian powers.

While the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) has recently hosted successful NATO training missions — Dynamic Monarch in September and Nusret on November 24 — the bloc must continue to look for ways to sideline Russia in order to wrangle Turkey back toward the Alliance. Since Ankara announced that the final stages of putting together the S-400 deal are in the works, a peculiar twist in U.S. law threatens the political ties binding the U.S.–Turkey security cooperation. As Trump signed the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act in August, Turkey may soon be required to succumb to U.S. sanctions due to the S-400 purchase.<sup>10</sup> The Trump administration has pledged to sanction any actors who engage with the Russian defense and intelligence sectors in any significant

3 While the U.S. State Department has supported the integrity of the Iraqi state, several notable American politicians are pushing for increased alignment with the Iraqi Kurds including ranking members of the U.S. Senator John McCain and Chuck Schumber; see John McCain, "John McCain: We Need a Strategy for the Middle East," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2017.

4 "Iraqi Soldiers Join Turkish Exercises Near Shared Border," *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 26, 2017.

5 Iraq Closes Border with KRG in Response to Referendum," *Daily Sabah*, September 25, 2017.

6 "Iraqi Kurds: Army Claims Full Control of Kirkuk Province," BBC, October 20, 2017.

7 Amberin Zaman, "Turkish Army Chief in Sochi as 'Missile Impossible' Kicks Off," *AI Monitor*, November 21, 2017.

8 Metin Gurcan, "Is Turkey Abandoning NATO or Vice Versa?" *AI Monitor*, August 18, 2016.

9 Aaron Stein, "Turkey: Managing Tensions and Options to Engage," Issue Brief, Atlantic Council, November 2017.

10 Josh Rogin, "Trump May Have to Sanction His Turkish President Best Buddy," *Washington Post*, September 22, 2017.

transactions: thus, Turkey. After the idea was brought to the floor in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on September 6, ranking U.S. Senator Ben Cardin wrote a letter to President Trump suggesting that sanctions need apply to Turkey.<sup>11</sup> Although whether or not the Trump administration will go forth with issuing sanctions to Turkey, such a prospect ought to alarm Ankara that other NATO Allies may grow tougher on Russia and therefore also Turkey.

To improve Turkey's Western anchor in defense, the West should seize upon Turkey's expressed interests<sup>12</sup> in developing its indigenous long-range air defense systems by promoting strategic cooperation between the Turkish defense industry and the EUROSAM consortium for the technology transfer of the SAMP/T missile system to Turkey. Ankara should emphasize, in turn, that it is simply using the S-400 missile system as a stand-alone system to satisfy its short-term defense needs rather than sending the signal that it is moving away from NATO interoperability.

## Creating Incentives for Transatlantic Cooperation

While Turkey thinks it can play all sides of the diplomatic game like a fiddle, Ankara's foreign policy is rather out of tune. While on the one hand, Turkey flirts with Russia and Iran in order to seemingly isolate itself against the West, on the other, Turkey simultaneously continues to develop communication with U.S. President Donald Trump on regional issues — which was evident in the post-Sochi Trump–Erdogan phone call.<sup>13</sup> Although Trump may not be the most “Western” or liberal actor, any increased cooperation between Turkey and the United States as a result of this will in the end strengthen Turkey's Western anchor.

In drafting a solution to Turkey–transatlantic tension, Turkey should think first of the regional and global turmoil plaguing international affairs, especially in

the Middle East, and strive for a strategic golden balance between working with its regional allies and anchoring itself in the West. Getting caught up in regional problems amid the ever-growing Saudi–Iran dispute — no matter in what context — and failing to cooperate with the West could weaken its position across other geographies. In Iraq, Turkey should further deter its rhetoric against the KRG and work not only with Baghdad but together with NATO member states, which also have high stakes in the security of the region, to promote a peaceful resolution to the problem. After a total upheaval of the Turkish Armed Forces following July 15, NATO should engage Turkey and could conduct more frequent, transparent joint military exercises with the aim of refreshing interdependency and increase interoperability between Turkey and the Alliance. The Alliance should also be more active to tailor public diplomacy strategies so as to first fix and then to boost its already tarnished reputation among Turkish society in the post-July 15 setting. Although a much lengthier process and perhaps fundamental reset will need to be implemented to steer Turkey back toward the West, these small steps could provide some initial impetus and strengthen the Turkey–West security anchor.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Hanna, “Cardin: Turkey's Purchase of Russian Missile System Say Trigger Sanctions,” Politico, September 14, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> “Turkey, France and Italy to Strengthen Cooperation on Missile Defense: Sources,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 9, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, “Phone Call with U.S. President Trump,” November 24, 2017.

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