



U.S.-Turkish Relations in a Time of Shocks

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Not long ago, relations between Turkey and the United States were front-page news. Today, the coronavirus pandemic, the global economic collapse, and U.S. domestic turmoil have pushed aside foreign policy questions of all kinds. To be sure, bilateral issues continue to be addressed away from the political spotlight. This might bring modest benefits for a relationship that has traditionally been dealt with by professionals, but it is unlikely to resolve the many serious underlying disputes. For the moment, U.S.-Turkish differences have been deferred but not resolved, with some new flashpoints on the horizon.

Mounting Turmoil, Declining Credibility

Domestic developments in both countries continue to be important drivers of the relationship. On the Turkish side, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been successful in harnessing public opinion to a series of nationalist causes. The U.S. factor has been at the center of Turkey's policy vis-à-vis the Kurds in Syria, and in the context of Turkish mistrust of allies in general. Dismal public attitudes toward the United States are now widely shared across the Turkish political spectrum. Whatever the uncertainties regarding the durability of Erdoğan's position in the face of more concerted and diverse political opposition, his skill at playing the nationalist card appears undiminished. This is most evident in the Turkish operations in Syria and the increasingly contentious disputes in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. It may soon find other outlets. The deepening global economic crisis could be especially dangerous for emerging economies, including Turkey. As in past financial crises, there will be a strong political incentive to blame foreign actors and Western—above all, U.S.—lobbies for the country's misfortunes. None of this bodes well for the underlying climate of mutual mistrust in relations.

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On the U.S. side, the scene is also deeply troubled. The relationship with Turkey has never had much public visibility or excited much interest outside foreign and security policy circles. Now, the extraordinary protests and social unrest sweeping the country in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, alongside deep health and economic crises, will be overwhelming distractions. With a critical presidential election looming, and to the extent that the protests reflect a range of accumulated grievances, the current turmoil

could have durable consequences. Is this United States' "Gezi Park" moment? For all the evident differences, it is not an unreasonable comparison in terms of mass public dissent.

Domestic distractions could well mean less scrutiny of the state of democracy, media freedom, and the rule of law in Turkey and elsewhere. In the near term, the callous and militarized response to public protests by President Donald Trump's administration will surely weaken the United States' standing to press these concerns abroad. For its part, Congress will have other concerns and may be less inclined to press for implementation of measures under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. The administration, at least at the level of the White House, has never been enthusiastic about pressing Turkey on these fronts.

Even the vexing issue of Ankara's S-400 purchase has gone out of the news for the moment. But on this front, as well as regarding Turkey's increasingly assertive policies in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, the gap between Turkish and U.S. perspectives will remain wide. To the extent that U.S.-Russian relations continue to worsen, it is likely that Congress and key policymakers will return to the S-400 issue. If the system is made fully operational, this will almost certainly cross a red line for Washington and trigger the implementation of new sanctions against Ankara. Turkey has so far managed to go right up to this point, although it is arguable whether the system is not already operational in a limited sense. Turkey's repeated offer to convene a bilateral working group aimed at the technical concerns of NATO allies is unlikely to satisfy U.S. critics. The idea that the United States might actually buy the system from Turkey to prevent its deployment, while clever, is probably legally and politically impractical. In short, the S-400 issue threatens to come back on the bilateral agenda with a vengeance in the near future. Turkey's argument that the purchase is a technical and commercial choice obscures the highly political nature of the procurement decision in the eyes of its Western partners. The issue is not Turkey's sovereignty, or the longstanding failure to agree on an alternative U.S. or European system. The issue is Russia and the degree to which the S-400 deal compromises NATO security interests.

Toward November 2020

Much will turn on the November 2020 presidential election in the United States. Trump's apparently durable personal rapport with Erdoğan has been one of the factors standing in the way of an even more assertive and critical U.S. approach to Turkey. A Democratic administration would probably be a much tougher interlocutor for Ankara on domestic and foreign policy questions. For all his evident mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis and instinctive resort to inflammatory rhetoric and actions, President Trump could yet benefit from the apparent strength of his political base in a highly polarized environment. Certainly, he seems bent on fueling a sense of domestic threat. Polls show former Vice President Joe Biden with a significant lead, but the outcome is far from certain.

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A Democratic administration would surely return U.S. foreign policy to a more predictable course. It could draw on a wealth of foreign-policy expertise, including many individuals knowledgeable about Turkey. This would make for a more informed policy, but not necessarily a more congenial one from a Turkish point of view. In Congress, the gloves would be off on the S-400 question as well as on Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean. Only a Turkish commitment to keep the S-400s in deep freeze, perhaps in exchange for a deployment,

if not sale of U.S. Patriots missiles could give both sides enough political cover to take sanctions off the table. Ultimately, though, whatever the election result in November, no administration is likely to have much time to devote to big new initiatives in the relationship.

An Uncertain Strategic Logic

It would take a great deal to restore bilateral confidence in the Turkish-U.S. relationship. The nationalistic and sovereignty-conscious climate on both sides has made it more difficult to overlook specific policy differences in the interest of broader strategic stakes. The debate in Turkey often assumes that the country is simply too important to be ignored by the United States and the EU. For Europe, this may be an uncomfortable truth. Turkey is a factor across multiple critical issues facing the EU, not least on migration and security. For the United States, Turkey is simply a very difficult ally adjacent to regions of variable interest. Despite many efforts at diversification, Washington sees the relationship almost solely through a security lens. And with the rise of China and steadily growing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, Turkey's strategic relevance may be declining. By almost any measure, the U.S. constituency for the bilateral relationship has been poised at the brink of collapse for some time. Anti-American rhetoric, negative perceptions of its Middle East policy, an apparently burgeoning relationship with Russia, and above all the S-400 purchase have left Turkey with few if any friends in Washington.

Icebergs in the Mediterranean

The United States has other sensitivities impeding a return to more normal conditions in the relationship with Turkey. The list includes differences over Iran, the fate of the Kurds, Ankara's policy toward jihadists and ex-jihadists in Syria, and the general deterioration of media freedom and the rule of law in the country. These concerns are not new. Potentially more serious risks for relations flow from the increasingly fraught situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Until the late 1990s, the tense relationship between Greece and Turkey over demarcation issues in the Aegean, Balkan crises, and alleged Greek support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were all standing threats to stability. Cyprus, too, was a leading flashpoint. Protracted brinksmanship in the Eastern Mediterranean used to be a fixture of relations between Athens and Ankara, and a leading obstacle to U.S. diplomacy and NATO operations in the region. All of this had been left behind in the *détente* that has prevailed between the two countries since the late 1990s.

Unfortunately, a mood of brinksmanship has returned to the Eastern Mediterranean, with threats over energy exploration in the waters off Cyprus and more frequent incidents in Aegean airspace. The fraying of the EU-Turkish refugee agreement and migration-related incidents on the land and sea borders this year have further fueled concerns about potential conflict in the region. In the prevailing U.S. perception, this dangerous situation has been fueled by the nationalist climate in Turkey—and elsewhere—and a more assertive Turkish posture, especially vis-à-vis Cyprus and broader maritime disputes in the region. Congress has a long tradition of engagement on these questions and has recently opted to overturn a longstanding prohibition on arms sales to the Republic of Cyprus. At the same time, U.S.-Greek security relations have grown increasingly close—an unstated hedge against a deteriorating strategic relationship with Turkey. Without careful management and attention to the risks of brinksmanship, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean could well prove a new flashpoint in U.S.-Turkish relations. If Erdoğan's government decides to turn Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, currently a museum, into a mosque, this will surely be an additional flashpoint for criticism of Ankara in Congress and elsewhere.

Economic Exposure

The United States' off and on threat and use of financial and trade sanctions against Turkey have taken a toll on the latter's economy. Under conditions of global economic collapse in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, this facet of the relationship takes on new and potentially much more serious meaning. Emerging economies are likely to be particularly affected by an economic depression. Even in the absence of further U.S. economic pressure, Turkey's looming balance of payments crisis could compel it to seek relief from the International Monetary Fund. If it does, the United States' attitude toward this request could be critical in determining the fund's response. That said, if Washington and Ankara are looking for political trade-offs in the service of stabilizing the relationship, finance and trade could be key elements. A Biden administration more inclined to be critical of Turkey over foreign and security policy might, however, be less inclined to use economic sticks against a NATO ally.

Alliance and Society as Anchors

The Turkey debate in the United States is now far more critical and uncompromising than the one in Europe. European politicians and observers, some highly critical of Turkey, now find themselves in the strange position of arguing for tolerance in U.S. policy toward Ankara. For all the talk of the transactional diplomacy emanating from Washington, key EU states are now the leading advocates for a practical quid pro quo posture in relations with Turkey. Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers and experts are no longer willing to give Ankara the traditional benefit of the doubt. The consequences are visible, from the cancellation of Turkey's participation in the F-35 program to the congressional resolution on the Armenian genocide.

Under these very troubled conditions, and beyond some political developments of purely tactical value, are there any positive openings ahead? Two very different prospects are worth noting. First, Turkey is likely to face a chaotic and crisis-prone security environment for some time. Its Western ties, however fraught, will be of critical importance for deterrence, reassurance, and crisis management. Partnership with the United States will retain its importance under these conditions. If NATO comes to play a more important political role, as many favor on both sides of the Atlantic, this could benefit Turkey, as a key member with an enduring seat at the table. NATO could also be a more palatable vehicle for much security cooperation currently conducted with some friction on a bilateral basis with Washington. This could be an opportunity for both countries. Needless to say, some compromise resolution of the S-400 dispute would give this approach a tremendous boost. So too could more strains in relations between Turkey and Russia as result of developments in Syria or Libya. Here, there will be a delicate balance between estrangement that could serve Western interests and outright confrontation, which might entangle NATO, and which allies will surely wish to avoid. A more NATO-centric approach might bring advantages, but will not be easy to manage as Ankara's overall relationship with Western allies has deteriorated. Recent tensions with France over Libya underscore the fraught nature of Turkey's alliance relationships.

Second, on a very different front, many in the United States (and in Europe) are now more focused on building ties with civil society inside Turkey. This is unlikely to revolutionize a relationship that has always been relatively formal and focused on high political and security concerns. But it could help to diversify a notoriously single-track partnership and provide a useful "fly wheel" for relations in difficult times when both countries will face stark public policy challenges. These could well encourage alternative geometries in the relationship; for example, involving cities and other less traditional players. Stabilizing and rebuilding the strategic rela-

tionship between Turkey and the United States will depend, above all, on the behavior of political leadership on both sides. Other actors have a role to play too, and the prevailing crisis conditions could inspire greater creativity on this score. It will not be easy, but it may be necessary.

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