



Uncertainty, Power, and Rethinking Turkish-U.S. Relations after S-400 Debacle

By Şaban Kardaş

Turkey's determination to move ahead with the procurement of the Russian S-400 missile-defense system at the risk of sanctions by the United States has revived the debate on the future of its relations with its long-term ally. There has been a flourishing array of views on how things got to this point and where they might be heading. While much responsibility is put on Turkey's unyielding strategic choices, the United States is also complicit for its inability to handle the relationship. Moving beyond the blame game, Nicholas Danforth identifies [two broad narratives](#) to explain Turkish conduct: "frustration" with an insensitive ally and "fear" from the threatening actions of an adversarial power.

These two narratives correlate with the levels-of-analysis framework academics use to explain state behavior. In it, different factors at the individual, state, or systemic levels account for why states act the way they do, including forming alliances. Danforth's "frustration" narrative is grounded in a state or systemic level of analysis, whereas the "fear" one relates mainly to the individual level of analysis.

Until the recent delivery of components of the Russian weapons platform in Turkey, system- and state-level analyses prevailed in evaluations of the unfolding crisis. Many in Turkey and abroad had assumed that by opening new channels of communication the United States would convince, if not pressure, Turkish decision-makers to make a last-minute deal and change course. In addition to various mutual visits by official delegations, for

instance, Senator Lindsay Graham and other lawmakers met President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to discuss issues affecting the Turkish-U.S. relationship. But this did not suffice to affect the outcome. President Erdoğan, having emphasized on many occasions his promises to his Russian counterpart, showed his strong conviction to go ahead with a "done deal" despite pressure to change course. Moreover, he stressed his unease with Turkey's Western partners especially after failed coup attempt of 2016. In that respect, taking delivery of the S-400s turned out to be a counterintuitive move by Turkey, reflecting how individual-level considerations can shape state behavior and override systemic imperatives.

Perhaps what enabled the individual-level—or "fear"—factor to carry the day in Turkish decision-making is its coalescence with the system-level—or "frustration"—factor. Systemic transformations weakened the fundamentals of the Turkish-U.S. alliance and created an environment within which a new thinking came to dominate Turkey's external conduct.

Since the structural causes of divergence were already there, it is no surprise to see the "frustration" argument being widely embraced in Turkey to justify the S-400 decision. What is striking, however, is that it is not only adopted by the bureaucracy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by moderate commentators, as suggested by Danforth, but also by the major opposition parties. For instance, the leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, reacted to the pressure by the U.S. Congress on President Donald Trump to



impose sanctions by arguing that the risks posed by Turkey's geography justified the S-400 purchase.

What Went Wrong?

The root causes of the divergence between Turkey and the United States long predate the S-400 saga. They foreshadowed the fracturing of the relationship throughout the Syrian crisis, which many analysts mistakenly treated as the main trigger for the strategic decoupling by the two allies. At least for a decade now, the Turkish-U.S. relationship has required a proper redefinition, if not a new guiding framework. There was no scarcity of calls for this to happen either. For example, I argued in 2010 that “It might be time for the United States to abandon the search for redefining the relationship [with Turkey] on ‘partnership’ models.”

The sea change in the relationship is the product of various factors. Harboring a regionally driven understanding of international relations in the post-Cold War era, Turkey has opted to base its external conduct on the quest for strategic autonomy. Likewise, a desire to adjust to global power transitions has lurked in the background. In its strategic thinking, especially with the AK Party at the helm, Turkey already lives in a world of multipolarity and seeks flexibility when it comes to alliance choices. Moreover, a deliberate attempt to challenge the power asymmetry inherent in the relationship with the United States shapes the worldview of Turkey's current leadership. Consequently, every foreign policy issue has been framed as yet another battleground for correcting the “unequal” and “unfair” treatment by the United States and for breaking the dependence on Turkey's senior partner. Furthermore, the cycle of insecurity following the Arab Spring of 2011 overwhelmed Turkey's strategic thinking to such an extent that concerns for state and regime survival came to the forefront. The fragmentation of states and collapse of central authority in the region posed direct challenges to Turkey, and a concern to prevent spillover effects came to dominate its thinking.

Last but not the least, the reconfiguration of Turkey's domestic political scene—in terms of governance model and body politic—under the pressures of the post-Arab Spring regional turmoil brought about a new political culture, altering the normative fabric and personal dimensions of the relationship with the United States. In particular, the redesign of the domestic political system into a presidential one and the reconfiguration of the governing bloc with the alliance between the AK Party and the Nationalist Action Party to cater to the needs of the ruling elite precipitated a search for new external allies and weakened the traditional domestic pillars and constituencies of the alliance with the United States.

Uncertainty, Leadership, and Alliances in a Post-U.S. World

Largely ignored in the debate in the United States on “who lost Turkey” is the question of how the S-400 crisis relates to the wider debate on the role of

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alliances in today's international system. What has been fundamentally altered in the post-Cold War era is not just the foundations of the Turkish-U.S. relationship, but the very meaning and mechanics of alliance behavior. Amid the endless arguments about retrenchment, rebalancing, offshore balancing, the decline of U.S. primacy, liberal internationalism, and patriotism, what U.S. allies such as Turkey see is a deep structural uncertainty about the grand strategy of the United States and its inability to make credible commitments.

It is no secret that the United States had no easy ride in building or maintaining alliances in the unipolar era. Likewise, it has been far from perfect in exercising constructive and cooperative leadership that satisfies the needs of its allies. These two problems have been aggravated as the United States had to find ingenious ways to deal with allies that are less willing to abide a top-down partnership model. Perhaps equally problematic has been Washington's handling of adversaries. It has failed to exercise its power to change the behavior of these through a mix of rewards or punishment. As has been demonstrated repeatedly, U.S. power has not automatically yielded the outcomes desired. For example, the inability of the United States to counter Russia's assertiveness since the war in Georgia in 2008, despite threats and sanctions, and to build a coalition to contain it has been noted by its allies and adversaries alike.

Reacting to U.S Power

There have been at least two distinct reactions by second-tier powers like Turkey to the travails of U.S. preponderance.

First, uncertainty has bred frustration as many still expect the United States to exercise leadership of some sort. Its failure to offer a shared vision to allies, let alone signaling its strategic priorities in a post-U.S. world, forces many of them to look for ways to guard their interests through unilateral action or strategies of hedging.

Second, many countries still view the United States as too powerful despite the erosion of unipolarity. At least since the 2003 Iraq War, scholars like [Stephen Walt](#) have warned about the potential dangers involved in untamed exercise of U.S. power. Since then the United States' allies and adversaries alike have engaged in acts of "soft balancing"—that is, actions "[that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies](#)". The accumulation of such practices arguably precipitates counterbalancing behavior on the part of

second-tier powers, including building alliances with like-minded countries.

Turkey's S-400 decision has elements of both factors, which is nicely captured in the "fear and frustration" analogy. Its [developing strategic relationship with Russia serves as a hedge](#) against "the United States as an unreliable ally" and as a counterbalancing tool against "the United States as a threatening adversary." It further illustrates how alignment behavior is driven by leaders' attributes, including their worldviews and survival calculations as much as national strategic considerations. Turkey's decision to forge closer ties with Russia cannot be fully explained without taking into account how perceptions of threat at the individual level can come to dominate decision-making.

As for the United States, it has watched—if not allowed—the sea change in Turkey happen without undertaking preemptive steps to address the root causes of the flourishing Turkish-Russian relationship. Instead, in Washington's lexicon, Turkey has gone from being an "intrinsically strategically important ally" to "too strategically important to be lost to the other side." But even the latter view, which has kept many frictions from escalating, no longer holds as Turkey increasingly has become the subject of punitive language and sanctions. The country's slide further toward the status of "dispensable ally" raises intriguing questions. Going beyond the political turmoil surrounding the Trump administration in Washington, there probably is a systemic logic behind the ease with which the United States has downgraded Turkey's status. It may be part of a deliberate policy of rebalancing global U.S. commitments, rather than the mishandling of the relationship.

The Way Forward

There seems to be a deep belief in Turkey that the onus of mending ties lies with the United States. Just as the country's leadership has insistently advocated in the S-400 crisis, it expects the United States to understand Turkey's concerns and to act accordingly.

In moving beyond the crisis, the thinking in Ankara will continue to challenge the inequality inherent in the very nature of the transatlantic alliance and remain bent on reconfiguring the relationship on a new notion of alliance.

It is far from certain, however, the United States is ready to revise its cognitive map to accommodate Turkish concerns in a new structured partnership model. [As I have argued before](#), this would “connote long-term commitments and cooperative behavior on the part of Turkey that might prove impossible to sustain. Instead, both parties might consider letting the relationship evolve on an ad hoc basis involving

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different degrees of cooperation and competition as interests overlap or diverge.” Moreover, at this stage, the problem may not lie so much in the lack of dialogue as much as in the incompatibility of strategic visions.

Perhaps it would be better for both countries to brace themselves for a continued volatile period in their relations. Nonetheless, the United States still has to find ways to address the structural uncertainty about its grand strategy, which, if unattended, may breed more distrust in Turkey. It has to continue looking for ways to exercise its power more judiciously, as this remains a major prism for how others define their relations with it. Otherwise, the United States risks not only the decades-old alliance relationship with Turkey but also alliance solidarity in NATO.

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