



Turkey and the US - Finding Each Other on the Other Side of the Fence Today but Tomorrow?

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Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's foreign policy today is widely debated and monitored as it is undergoing a major transition. President Erdogan who is known for his Islamist inclinations and sympathies with the Muslim Brotherhood, is restructuring Turkey's foreign policy orientation especially given the downturn in with its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) ally- the United States. Today, the erstwhile long term partners- Turkey and the US have found each other on opposing sides on many issues. The US is also restructuring its foreign policy orientations under President Donald Trump. With the call for 'America first' policy, and imposition of unilateral sanctions, some argue that the US is heading towards 'isolationism 2.0' that has led to a lowering of confidence among its allies including Turkey, which now seems ready to act alone in situations such as resolving the Syrian crisis. Turkey had traditionally pursued a Euro-Atlantic centric foreign policy interests and its role and contribution as the member state of NATO has been pivotal to its allies due to its strategic, economic and military capabilities. In recent years, Turkey under Erdogan is exploring the prospects of a diversified foreign policy that has led to a revamping of relations with Russia, a larger role in West Asian geopolitics, wider participation with non-Western countries and organisations such as BRICS and SCO. Recently, this approach has been marked by bouts of frictions with the US.

Turkey's current foreign policy is seemingly moving away from the long established 'Kemalist' Westernised foreign policy approach that was able to easily connect to the Western countries compared to the rest of the Muslim world due to its secularist ideological principles. The camaraderie between Turkey and the West was mainly because the latter gave utmost priority to Western interests. More importantly, Turkey did not view the existence of the West as a threat either to its national interests or to its national security and vice-versa and in many ways

perceived itself as part and parcel of the West. The inter-dependency between Turkey and the US in particular is the outcome of accommodation of each other's interests and mutual concerns such as containing the USSR in the past and rise of Russia in recent years.

Hence, given the growing uncertainty in current relations between Turkey and the US in particular, the question naturally arises whether this relationship is set to radically mutate.

US' support to the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) which is an affiliation with PKK and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Manjib and its stand on the Kurdish crisis has upset Ankara. Despite strong opposition from Turkey, the US has been supplying SDF with arms and defence equipment to fight against the Daesh.² Erdogan has strongly criticised the U.S. for supporting the 'YPG/PKK terror group' under the name of SDF, which is considered by Ankara as a Syrian offshoot of PKK.³ Turkey has also expressed disapproval of the US of annulling the Iran nuclear deal by Trump on May 09, 2018. Additionally, Ankara has displayed its displeasure with Washington in denying the extradition of Fetullah Gulen accused of being behind the 2016 attempted military coup. The US had demanded the release of the American pastor Andrew Brunson, who Turkish officials had accused of having links to the failed military coup.

The pastor's detention had severe impact on the strategic partnership between the two NATO allies. The US imposed sanctions on Turkey by doubling of tariffs on imports of Turkish steel and aluminium and had warned Turkey of further sanctions unless the pastor was released. The sanctions on Turkey have come at a time when Turkey is already struggling with the fall of Lira currency value and high inflation rates symptomatic of a deeper economic crisis. Pastor Brunson after being detained in Turkey for two years was released on 12 October 2018 and returned to the US although the Turkish court convicted him of aiding terrorism but sentenced him only to time served.

As the current President of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Turkey has criticised the US for shifting its Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. As a sign of protest, it expelled the Israeli ambassador in Ankara and also called back its envoys from Washington D.C. and Tel Aviv. Given these and related developments, there is a growing diplomatic rift and trade tensions as the relations between the two countries are at one of their lowest points ever.

Differences between the US and Turkey extend also to Syria and the convergence in Turkey-Russia and Iran relations. The US also holds displeasure towards Turkey's growing proximity with Russia and its efforts along with Iran and Syria to resolve the Syrian crisis. Alongside these countries, Turkey has been actively participating in efforts to curb the rise of terrorism especially the Islamic State in the region. The transition in Turkey's foreign policy behaviour suggests also the growing sense among Turkey's political elite that the country in following the US led NATO's foreign policy interests and actions its own national interests have been overlooked. It is argued that because Turkey pursued a 'one-dimensional' foreign policy that imported Western countries interests, it 'quarantined' itself from playing a larger role as an

influential regional player in the West Asian region which in turn antagonised many of the Muslim countries in the Arab world and other actors such as Russia. But one needs to bear in mind that although Turkey is focused to increase its profile as a crucial player in the geopolitics of West Asia, Arab nationalism is a re-emergent force to keep West Asia away from non-Arab countries such as Turkey. The Arab anchor will thus be a key challenge for Erdogan in establishing Turkey's leadership role in West Asia. Hence, president Erdogan has begun to pursue 'neo-Ottomanism'⁴ in order to increase its influence in regional and global outreach.

Concluding Remarks

With Erdogan emerging victorious in the 2018 presidential elections, Turkey's foreign policy priorities and interests are set to undergo major changes during his tenure. Turkey's foreign policy today appears directed towards multi-alignment that will enhance its role and influence as a regional player and also in the international arena. Erdogan's recent criticism of the US and its policies, its participation in non-Western multilateral organisations such as BRICS and SCO, are also indications that Turkey is moving closer to a multipolar world order- an alternative to the US led international concert it was traditionally a part of. Turkey and the US are today finding each other on the other side of the fence on many issues as their past arrangement of mutual interests are now being challenged and would perhaps continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

At the same time, Erdogan is also well aware that Turkey's international standing remains dependant also on the support of its Western allies. President Erdogan will continue to cautiously balance between the US and non Western partners such as Russia. On the medium term, the US too cannot ignore the relevance of Turkey in its foreign policy calculus. Turkey will remain a key player in NATO. Hence, both Turkey and the US could possibly address the complexities and challenges that have emerged in the partnership in recent times to reinstate the relevance of each other as they once were.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ Under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey during the Turkish nation-building process adopted a Westernised foreign policy interests and reforms. This led to Turkey emerging as a pivotal partner for the Western countries such as United States and the European countries. Islam was sidelined as the driving principle in Turkish foreign policy orientation while secularist and westernized ideological principles gained prominence.

² "‘Terror is out of Turkey's agenda': Turkish PM", Yeni Safak, 29 May 2018. <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/terror-is-out-of-turkeys-agenda-turkish-pm-3412537>

³ "Turkish president slams opposition's election promises", Anadolu Agency, 27 May 2018. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkish-president-slams-opposition-s-election-promises/1158214>

⁴ 'Neo-Ottomanism' is a proactive foreign policy that draws inspiration from Turkey's imperial heritage that focuses on geopolitical aspirations and resurgent ties especially with the Muslim World.