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Trump's Security Strategy: Its Messages for Turkey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: US President Donald Trump's recently unveiled National Security Strategy paper does not specifically mention Turkey. Some Turks think this is good, as any mention would likely have been negative. But some think it is bad for Turkish interests because the absence of a mention highlights Turkey's diminishing political clout in its region. Regardless, the strategy paper has messages for Ankara on several wavelengths.

US President Donald Trump's National Security Strategy could not have come at a worse time for US-Turkey relations. Major policy and ideological divergences between the Trump administration and Turkey's increasingly Islamist strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have downgraded the once staunch alliance into a theoretical, transactional partnership.

Trump's whitepaper came against a tense background of US-Turkish disputes:

1. In May, supporters of Erdoğan, including his security detail and several armed individuals, violently charged a group of peaceful protesters outside the Turkish ambassador's residence in Washington, injuring 11, including a police officer, and prompting the State Department to condemn the attack as an assault on free speech. Washington warned Turkey that the action would not be tolerated. A group of Republican lawmakers called the episode an "affront to the United States."
2. In October, the US and Turkey suspended all non-immigrant visa services for travel between the two countries after the arrest of a US consulate employee in Istanbul.
3. In November, Reza Zarrab, a Turkish-Iranian gold trader who is cooperating with US prosecutors, told jurors in a New York federal court

that Erdoğan authorized a transaction in a scheme to help Iran evade US sanctions. Erdoğan called the court a “US plot against Turkey and [his] government.”

4. In early December, Turkish and Russian officials announced that they were only weeks away from penning a deal for the acquisition and deployment of Russian S-400 air and anti-missile systems on Turkish soil. This will make Turkey the only NATO member state deploying the S-400 system.
5. Press reports said on December 6 that an arrest warrant had been requested through the Ankara chief prosecutor’s office for Brett MacGurk, US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State. The petition accuses McGurk of attempting to overthrow the Turkish government and change the constitutional order of the Turkish Republic by “acting in concert with ... armed terrorist organizations.”
6. On December 13, US national security adviser HR McMaster condemned Qatar and Turkey for taking on a “new role” as the main sponsors and sources of funding for extremist Islamist ideology that targets western interests.
7. On December 14, Turkish police summoned an FBI official stationed in Turkey in connection with testimony in the Iran sanctions (Zarrab) case.
8. On December 17, Erdoğan slammed a US-backed Syrian Kurdish militant group and said he will clear his country’s border with Syria of “terrorists.” The “terrorists” he was referring to are the principal land warfare assets of the US military campaign against radical jihadists in Syria and Iraq. Erdoğan slams the US administration almost daily for “giving weapons to a terror organization” and has declared US policy to be in violation of the NATO treaty. Ironically, Erdoğan remains mute about Russian support for the same militant Kurdish group. Russia does not even categorize as terrorist the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which both Ankara and Washington view as terrorist. (PKK’s violent campaign since 1984 has claimed more than 40,000 lives in Turkey.)
9. On December 21, Erdoğan, spearheading an international campaign to condemn Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, said that the US cannot buy the people’s will, a reference to Trump’s threats to cut funding to countries that vote against Washington on a motion at the UN. “They call the US the cradle of democracy. The cradle of democracy is seeking to buy a nation’s will with dollars,” Erdoğan said. “Mr. Trump, you cannot buy our will. I am calling on the whole world: Do not sell your struggle for democracy for a few dollars.”

Trump’s National Security Strategy does not specifically mention Turkey, but it does contain messages for Ankara on several wavelengths.

The Trump paper says: “Russia aims to weaken US influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners. Russia views the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) as threats. Russia is investing in new military capabilities, including nuclear systems that remain the most significant existential threat to the United States, and in destabilizing cyber capabilities. Through modernized forms of subversive tactics, Russia interferes in the domestic political affairs of countries around the world. The combination of Russian ambition and growing military capabilities creates an unstable frontier in Eurasia, where the risk of conflict due to Russian miscalculation is growing. The scourge of the world today is a small group of rogue regimes that violate all principles of free and civilized states. The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism around the world. It is developing more capable ballistic missiles and has the potential to resume its work on nuclear weapons that could threaten the United States and our partners.”

Turkey is: Not only spending \$2 billion to deploy a standalone, Russian-made air defense architecture, but is also cultivating its alliance with Russia and Iran in Syria, fearing what it views as its biggest security threat: Syria’s Kurdish groups, which have allied with Washington.

The Trump paper says: “We will continue to champion American values and offer encouragement to those struggling for human dignity in their societies. There can be no moral equivalency between nations that uphold the rule of law, empower women, and respect individual rights and those that brutalize and suppress their people. Through our words and deeds, America demonstrates a positive alternative to political and religious despotism.”

Turkey is: A fine example of political and religious despotism, as evinced by all credible indices measuring democratic practice across the globe. For instance, Turkey ranks 155th on a global index of press freedoms. Turkey also ranks in the lowest brackets of gender equality indices, and opinion polls show only a third of Turks trust the rule of law in their country.

The Trump paper says: “Today, the threats from jihadist terrorist organizations and the threat from Iran are creating the realization that Israel is not the cause of the region’s problems. States have increasingly found common interests with Israel in confronting common threats.”

Turkey is: Championing the Palestinian cause, arguing that the only solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute is to push Israel back to its pre-1967 borders and recognize the Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Erdoğan often calls Israel a “state of terror” and Israeli soldiers “terrorists.” He is a staunch ideological supporter of violent Islamist groups like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Trump paper says: “We will work with partners to deny the Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear weapon and neutralize Iranian malign influence.”

Turkey is: Implicated, based on solid evidence, in a multibillion-dollar scheme to help Iran evade US sanctions.

The Trump paper says: “We will help partners procure interoperable missile defense and other capabilities to better defend against active missile threats.”

Turkey is: Buying Russian missile defense capabilities that are not interoperable with NATO and US assets stationed on its soil.

Turkey’s political goals, ambitions, and planned policy actions in the Middle East are too divergent from Trump’s security vision for the region. So is Erdoğan’s pro-Islamist, pro-Hamas, neo-Ottoman policy calculus. In many ways, Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign is flatly incompatible with Erdoğan’s “Make Turkey Great Again” campaign.

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