



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The US-Turkey Diplomatic Crisis

by Burak Bekdil

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 938, September 3, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The present Turkish-American diplomatic crisis is fundamentally different from other such crises in 1964 or 1975. Turkish public sentiment in the 1960s and 1970s was largely pro-American (and anti-Soviet). Today, 79% of Turks have an unfavorable opinion of the US. Also, the earlier Turkish-American crises were largely single-case issues whereas the current one is multi-dimensional – and more difficult to resolve.

Officially speaking, Turkey and the US are NATO allies and strategic partners. These days their relationship looks like anything but an alliance or a partnership. This has not happened overnight.

In 1964, US President Lyndon Johnson cautioned Turkey against rash military moves it might be planning in Cyprus. The famous “Johnson letter” prompted Turkish PM Ismet İnönü to convene his cabinet in emergency session. That was the first serious crack between America and its southeast European ally, a country that guarded one of the West’s Soviet frontiers. The Johnson letter was also the first incident to spark (largely left-wing) anti-Americanism in Turkey.

President Johnson’s warning may have played a role in keeping the Turkish military at its barracks while inter-communal strife on Cyprus worsened in the late 1960s. But in 1974, the Turkish army invaded the northern third of the island in response to a short-lived coup aimed at annexing Cyprus to Greece. In 1975, a Congressional arms embargo on Turkey was instituted – despite objections from the Ford administration – after Ankara refused to relinquish any of the territory it had seized the year before.

Forty-three years later, Congress took a step towards banning the delivery of the F-35 stealth fighter jet to Turkey after the House and Senate agreed on compromised text for a defense spending bill. The two chambers agreed to

prohibit delivery of any F-35s to Turkey until the Pentagon submits a plan that assesses the impact of expelling Turkey from the Joint Strike Fighter program in which it is a partner (the assessment should come within 90 days of the text becoming law).

Today is not 1964 or 1975. First of all, Turkish public sentiment in the 1960s and 1970s was largely pro-American (and anti-Soviet) and anti-Americanism was “a thing of the ultra-left.” In 2017, however, according to the Pew Research Center, 79% of Turks polled said they had an unfavorable opinion of the US, compared to the global median of 39%. Anti-Americanism in Turkey was stronger than in Venezuela, Lebanon, Tunisia, Indonesia, and even Russia.

Secondly, the previous Turkish-American crises were largely single-case issues whereas the current one is multi-dimensional, and therefore more difficult to resolve.

The issues plaguing the relationship now include the following:

1. The Turks have accused the Trump administration – as they did the Obama administration before it – of arming and supporting “Kurdish terrorists” in northern Syria. Turkey’s “terrorists” are the US military’s primary ground force in the global fight against Islamic State. Ankara and Washington compromised on a formula earlier this year about the Syrian Kurds and the administration of the key Syrian town of Manbij, but that deal looks fragile over the longer term.
2. Ankara faults the US administration for harboring Fethullah Gülen, an exiled cleric and the alleged mastermind behind the failed coup of July 2016.
3. Persistently ignoring western and NATO warnings, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appears determined to deploy the Russian-made S-400 air and anti-missile defense system on Turkish soil. Turkey will thus become the first NATO country to have deployed the S-400 system. As Washington continues to reiterate, the S-400s would expose NATO assets, in particular the F-35, to the risk of Russian surveillance. Ankara is privately discussing further Russian arms acquisitions.
4. A state-owned Turkish lender, Türkiye Halk Bankası AŞ (Halkbank), is under criminal investigation in New York’s southern district on charges of helping Iran evade sanctions. The bank’s deputy general manager, Hakan Atilla, was jailed by a US court in May on these charges. Observers see Halkbank as a likely target of penalties as a result of the investigation.

5. In May, President Trump announced that the US is pulling out of an international accord over Iran's nuclear program and would reimpose sanctions on Tehran. His administration also threatened other countries with sanctions if they do not halt oil imports from Iran [despite a 20% decrease, Iran remained Turkey's biggest crude oil supplier in the first quarter of 2018]. On July 24, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said Turkey will not implement the US sanctions on Iran. Earlier, Ankara had conveyed the same message to a visiting US Treasury delegation. And on July 25, Erdoğan called Iran "a neighbor and a strategic partner."
6. At the center of the US-Turkish diplomatic crisis is Pastor Andrew Brunson, a US citizen who had been living in Izmir, Turkey, for the past 23 years. Erdoğan's government arrested Brunson in 2016 and indicted him last year on charges of espionage and attempting to overthrow the state. Brunson's activities were linked by Turkish law enforcement authorities to both Gülen and Kurdish militants, an unusual dual mission. After a year and a half in jail Brunson was released to house arrest, but for Washington it was too little, too late. Pastor Brunson is the most visible example of what some call Turkey's "hostage diplomacy." Turkey has detained 20 American citizens including Brunson and three employees of American consulates in Turkey.

Diplomatic sniping has accelerated between the two countries. President Trump threatened "large sanctions" on Turkey, to which Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu replied, "We will never tolerate threats from anyone." The US sanctioned the Turkish interior and justice ministers by freezing their US bank accounts, something of an empty gesture as these accounts do not exist. On August 4, Erdoğan ordered reciprocal sanctions against the US interior and justice secretaries, escalating the diplomatic row. (The Americans did not have bank accounts in Turkey either.)

Erdoğan, who just emerged victorious from a crucial presidential election on June 24, keeps playing to generally xenophobic and specifically anti-American Turkish sentiment. "Those who think that they can make Turkey take a step back with ridiculous sanctions have never known this country or this nation," he said. "We have never bowed our heads to such pressure and will never do so."

Erdoğan, usually a master of confrontational politics, has so far carefully avoided a personal duel of words with Trump. He is trying instead to foment imagined divisions within the US administration. In a speech, Erdoğan said

Trump is being “deceived” and cast the US sanctions as an imperial plot. He used familiar rhetoric to make this point: “This is the manifestation of only an evangelist and Zionist approach.”

So far the only winner from the US-Turkish wrangle has been Moscow (and, to a lesser degree, Beijing). The row will not lead to war between NATO’s two biggest armies, but it will push Turkey further into the non-Western orbit. What to do?

There are ideological and geostrategic limits to Turkey’s appetite to go more non-NATO. Turkey is simply not welcome in the Eurasian bloc as an ally except for its occasional value as a tool to divide the Western alliance to which it theoretically belongs. The Western impulse to go soft on Turkey in order to stop it from pushing further into Eurasia is ill-advised.

The US administration should not repeat the mistakes the Western bloc has made about Erdoğan since he came to power in 2002. Going soft on Turkey has not anchored Turkey to the West. On the contrary: it has encouraged Erdoğan to abuse Turkey’s “nuisance value” and turned Ankara into a part-time partner with a strong taste for blackmail.

Burak Bekdil is an Ankara-based columnist. He regularly writes for the Gatestone Institute and Defense News and is a fellow at the Middle East Forum. He is also a founder of, and associate editor at, the Ankara-based think tank Sigma.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family