



PERSPECTIVES

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Washington and Ankara: Sweet Words, Sour Deeds

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,350, November 20, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President Trump's "businessman's realism/optimism" over his newly found ally notwithstanding, acute policy differences and an eroding confidence threaten the future of U.S.-Turkish relations.

"Don't be a tough guy. Don't be a fool. I will call you later," U.S. President Donald Trump ended his undiplomatic letter to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a month ago. The Islamist autocrat must have heeded these words, for in their White House meeting (on November 13) the US president showered him with compliments. In what seems to be a parallel universe, Trump is now "a big fan of Erdoğan," who not only is doing "a fantastic job for the people of Turkey" but also has a "great relationship with the Kurds."

Not surprisingly, the Turkish media, largely controlled by Erdoğan's business cronies, has portrayed the visit as a triumph, allowing the Turkish president to send a strong message to his constituents that he is the country's best hope for global prominence. Most Turks tend to buy the propaganda message "Trump is good but America is bad."

After more than six decades of alliance, anti-American sentiment in Turkey has reached new heights. According to a survey by Istanbul's Kadir Has University early this year, 81.9% of Turks view the U.S. as a threat (compared to 39.1% who consider Russia a threat). There is evidence to suggest that anti-Americanism in Turkey has gone still higher in view of the House of Representatives' recent recognition of WWI mass killings of Ottoman

Armenians as genocide and the sanctioning of Turkey for its acquisition of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system.

Washington appears to lack a unified policy on how best to handle Ankara. On one side are those who believe that “losing Turkey as an ally is not something that's good for Europe or for the United States.” In their view, leaning too hard on Ankara might push it to go shopping elsewhere. In the words of Philip Gordon of the Council on Foreign Relations: “If the current trends continue - more sanctions or an absolute ban on weapons sales to Turkey - then Turkey pivots and buys all of its arms from Russia and other suppliers... And then the strategic relationship within NATO is really broken.”

It was probably for this “geostrategic” reason that Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) blocked congressional resolution H.Res.296 that would have recognized the Armenian genocide hours after he and Trump met with Erdoğan, telling senators not to “sugarcoat history or try to rewrite it.”

On the other hand, there is the view that Turkey’s increasingly dictatorial and anti-Western president does not deserve any favors. House Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Eliot Engel described Erdoğan as an “authoritarian thug,” while Senator Robert Menendez, who champions the sanctioning of Turkey for its purchase of the Russian air-defense system argued that “the administration is breaking the law by ignoring this provision [of CAATSA – Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act] and kowtowing to Ankara.” For his part Eric Edelman, U.S. ambassador to Turkey during the George W. Bush administration, said: “When I was ambassador to Turkey 15 years ago, there was a very deep well of public support for Turkey in the United States and particularly in the U.S. Congress, and that really doesn't exist very much anymore.”

Trump’s “businessman’s realism/optimism” over his newly found ally notwithstanding, acute policy differences and eroding confidence threaten the future of U.S.-Turkish relations. Specifically,

- The House is growing increasingly sensitive about reported atrocities by Ankara’s jihadist allies in Syria as well as the Turkish invasion itself, not least since Ankara views the Syrian Kurds - Washington’s staunchest allies in the Syrian war theater - as terrorists.
- Halkbank, a Turkish public lender, faces multi-billion dollar U.S. sanctions for evading sanctions on Iran.
- At the White House meeting, there was no mention of Erdoğan’s persistent demand for the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, a self-exiled Muslim cleric accused of orchestrating the failed putsch against Erdoğan in 2016; but tensions over Gülen’s non-extradition continue to fester.

- Turkey's partnership in the U.S.-led, multinational Joint Strike Fighter that builds the new generation fighter F-35 Lightning II has been suspended.
- Linked to that, the S-400 conflict stands like a slow-fuse time bomb: Washington insists Ankara should not "unpack" the system delivered in July with a price tag of \$2.5 billion. Erdoğan said the administration has no right to "infringe on Turkey's sovereign rights" by demanding that it dispose of the S-400 missiles, while Ismail Demir, Turkey's top defense procurement official, stated that the missiles were bought with a view to being used, not to be put aside. This state of affairs is highly problematic for both Washington and NATO. "There's no place in NATO for the S-400," said National Security Adviser O'Brien before the Trump-Erdoğan meeting. "There's no place in NATO for significant Russian military purchases. That's a message that the president will deliver to him very clearly when he's here in Washington."

Several US-Turkish delegations will likely try to find a magical solution to the S-400 dispute. This may appear like struggling to find a half-pregnancy formula as the system will either be activated (triggering US sanctions) or kept in storage (angering Putin), with Erdoğan squeezed between the two superpowers and their geostrategic interests. Moscow said it plans to get the S-400s up and running by spring 2020. One possible solution could be for Ankara to not activate the system without announcing it publicly - a neither deny nor admit formula - citing "national security deliberations." For that to work Turkey's American friends must convince Ankara's Russian friends to forego retaliation for keeping the S-400 batteries in storage.

What about \$2.5 billion taxpayers' money spent on a system that remains unpacked? Consider it a cost of Erdoğan's failed superpower acrobatics.

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