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Trump's Dangerous Diplomacy with Erdoğan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: America's reputation as a credible actor is an essential matter for US foreign policy, but it has weakened significantly throughout this century. George Bush's war on the "axis of evil" failed, and Barack Obama's "red line" speech proved empty. Today, Donald Trump is abandoning allies and conducting dangerous diplomacy with anti-democratic tyrants.

Former US president Barack Obama promised that if evidence emerged proving that Bashar Assad had used chemical weapons on the Syrian people, the US would put together a coalition and attack Assad as retribution. America's allies, its enemies, Arab governments, and Muslim citizens all looked to Obama to see if he would follow through on this warning.

In August 2013, a year after Obama's promise, Assad did indeed unleash chemical weapons on his people, killing more than 1,500 men, women, and children. Obama did nothing in response—no coalition, no attack. He failed to keep his word, handing the US a serious diplomatic failure and severely damaging its credibility.

The American War on Terror doctrine (2001-2020), which has continued from Bush through Trump, has had some notable successes, including the killings of Osama bin Laden, Abu Bakr Baghdadi, and Qassem Soleimani. For a short time, ISIS, the last potent global terror threat, was defeated, with many of its troops killed or captured.

But in December 2019, President Trump decided to hand Syria to the Turks. During a phone conversation with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Trump said, "You know what? It's yours." He also reportedly said regarding Syria, "I'm leaving."

Later, an official White House spokesperson said that "Turkey will soon move on with its long-planned action in northern Syria," adding that the US, which had succeeded in defeating ISIS, "will no longer be in the immediate area."

Criticism of the decision was swift and harsh. Brett McGurk, a special envoy for the coalition to defeat ISIS, resigned, saying: “Bottom line: Trump tonight after one call with a foreign leader provided a gift to Russia, Iran, and ISIS.”

Trump’s decision brought the Syrian War into a new phase: Turkey and Russia are now dominant in Syria while America is almost completely absent. This shift works in Ankara’s favor and against Syria’s Kurds, who had been supported by the US Army in northern Syria and had successfully helped the US fight ISIS.

Erdoğan’s priority is preventing the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish area in Syria on Turkey’s borders. There is deep-seated hostility between the Turkish state and the Kurds, who constitute 15% to 20% of the Turkish population. The Kurds have suffered terrible treatment at the hands of the Turkish authorities for generations, starting in the 1920s. Many Kurds were killed, the Kurdish legacy and Kurdish last names were banned, and the use of the Kurdish language was restricted.

In one phone call, Trump handed Syria to Ankara and abandoned the Kurds, who had fought alongside the Americans to defeat ISIS. This gravely undermined the credibility of the US. He abandoned an ally to cozy up to Erdoğan, a dictator who openly mocks Western values, buys Russian military equipment, jails journalists, intimidates political opponents, and supports Hamas, giving its leaders safe haven within Turkey’s borders. Some say Erdoğan is allowing his Syrian proxies to commit war crimes, and he has alluded to nuclear aspirations.

The absurd part is that Turkey wants to be seen as a strategic partner of NATO and “a real ally to the United States around the world,” as Trump put it when he thanked Erdoğan for his efforts “to uphold a cease-fire in northeastern Syria” (though the fighting hadn’t stopped). On another occasion, Trump said Turkey has made “vital contributions” to operations in Afghanistan, a claim without any substantiation. Despite ample evidence indicating that Erdoğan is no friend to the US, Trump declared, “I am a big fan of the president (Erdoğan).”

Erdoğan keeps threatening to veto NATO’s defense plan for the Baltics, which runs directly contrary to Trump’s foreign policy in Syria. Erdoğan’s position has pushed the European leadership (led by the president of France) to clash with Turkey—and now, Trump as well—over NATO agreements. Even more distance is being created between the US and Europe, distance that had already reached unprecedented heights during Trump’s presidency.

Russia, the only superpower remaining in Syria, might try to build a stronghold there and retain control on the ground. At the same time, ISIS is trying to get back on its feet and has carried out attacks on Syrian Army positions. These occurred in towns near the Syria-Iraq border and at army bases around southeastern Syria.

ISIS is thus taking advantage of the chaos following the American withdrawal. It had been reduced to a few cells in abandoned mountainous and desert villages, but is now regenerating itself. By using communications apps like Telegram, ISIS supporters are donating and helping to rebuild the network of terror. Secret chatrooms continue to spread the cause of jihad.

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