



What Turkey's Political Changes Mean for U.S.-Turkish Relations

By Max Hoffman, Alan Makovsky, and Michael Werz July 31, 2018

The July 9 swearing-in of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for his second term as Turkey's president—and his subsequent decree¹ thoroughly restructuring the Turkish government—have inaugurated a new phase in the country's political history. Erdoğan will preside over a new system in which power is even more centralized in the office of the presidency than it was previously. Of course, this structure represents the institutionalization of what had been a de facto reality: Erdoğan was already the unassailable top decision-maker, and he will remain so.

This continuity means that there may be little visible change in many areas of government. But the shift is emblematic of Turkey's transformation over the last decade from an institutional, bureaucratic state into a highly personalized one. This personalization will affect Turkey's foreign policy management, which may become even more unpredictable than it was before, with ramifications for U.S. and EU policy. As just one element of this change, Western diplomats may find that long-time Turkish diplomatic or military contacts have diminished authority and responsibility as foreign and security policy development is centralized in the presidential palace.²

Given his complete personal control, it is time to take seriously President Erdoğan's apparent desire for Turkey to chart a more independent course, one that shows less deference to the ties that have long bound Turkey to the Western security architecture. During the swearing-in ceremony in Ankara, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro hailed his Turkish counterpart as the "leader of the new multi-polar world."³ Erdoğan and his advisers certainly share this view: They believe that the United States is in decline, that the world is fundamentally multipolar, and that Turkey deserves to be a center of gravity in its own right.⁴ They further feel that the West is hypocritical in its espousal of democratic values and human rights. Therefore, they have concluded that Turkey's traditional, Western-oriented foreign policy is obsolete.⁵ This worldview has led Erdoğan to adopt a transactional approach toward the United States and Europe and cultivate ties with Iran, China, and—especially—Russia.⁶

Alongside this understanding of a changing world, President Erdoğan has built his domestic political legitimacy on an aggressive nationalism that includes at its core deeply anti-Western and anti-American rhetoric.⁷ This was on full display in Erdoğan's recent electoral campaign, which relied heavily on anti-Western resentment, conspiratorial thinking, and the cultivation of a sense of national threat—all staples of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) politics in recent years. Meanwhile, the election empowered the extreme nationalists of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). This will only reinforce the negative trends in the government's political orientation, given the MHP's deep suspicion toward the United States and hostility toward any reopening of dialogue with Kurdish populations in eastern Turkey and northern Syria.

This issue brief considers the ramifications of these changes for U.S. policy, providing recommendations for how the U.S. government should approach bilateral relations with Turkey in the months ahead. It is a policy designed to maintain the viability of U.S.-Turkish relations while seeking to restore Turkish respect for U.S. interests.

The effects of Turkish nationalism on U.S. policy

Previously, U.S. policy sought to weather turbulent periods in U.S.-Turkish relations by investing in institutional ties between the two governments. President Erdoğan's complete control over the Turkish state means that once-authoritative institutions have been vastly weakened, while Erdoğan himself is the source of much of the bilateral tension. In the absence of strong institutions, Erdoğan's worldview and perceived domestic political imperatives are decisive; these instincts and pressures, along with the well-documented policy disagreements of the last five years,⁸ have led him toward confrontation with the United States and Europe.

The main stresses on relations between the United States and Turkey are well-known. Washington is angered by Turkey's planned purchase of the Russian-made S-400 air defense system; its drift toward authoritarianism; and the arbitrary arrests of American citizens and local employees of U.S. consulates in Turkey. Meanwhile, Ankara is angered by ongoing U.S. support for the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia and the presence in the United States of Fethullah Gülen, a religious leader and former Erdoğan ally now accused of orchestrating the 2016 military coup attempt. Even if Turkey were to release its most prominent political prisoner, American citizen Andrew Brunson—as some continue to believe is a near-term possibility—there is little reason for optimism on the other subjects.⁹

American policymakers have long sought to adjudicate these issues through traditional government contacts, with some feeling that limited concessions will placate Turkey. This approach is increasingly outdated, because the problems are rooted in Turkey's domestic political transformation rather than in the discrete bilateral issues outlined

above. The aggressive nationalist strain that has emerged—assiduously cultivated by Erdoğan—is pushing the Turkish government toward confrontation rather than toward conciliation. The AKP’s political interests are served by rhetorical attacks on the United States; geopolitical hedging with Russia and other non-Western powers; and an aggressively anti-Kurdish security policy both at home and in Syria.¹⁰ This structural dynamic is unlikely to change in the midterm. The recent election results are likely to strengthen these tendencies, having affirmed to Erdoğan the nationalist mood of the electorate. Even if Erdoğan were inclined toward greater pragmatism on Kurdish issues, the MHP—and the nationalist right, more broadly—would likely have enough political leverage to sink any such initiative. These domestic political imperatives leave little room for rapprochement.

Recommendations for the U.S. administration and Congress

On a basic level, it remains clear that U.S.-Turkish relations are not likely to improve significantly unless the latter halts and reverses its drift toward authoritarianism, however unlikely that may be. The functional end of competitive politics in Turkey has transformed Western perceptions of that country as a fellow democracy. Still, the United States has very limited ability to shape Turkey’s domestic course, and the Trump administration is unlikely to prioritize human rights and democracy in Turkey. Nevertheless, this section offers recommendations as to how the U.S. government can realistically approach bilateral ties in President Erdoğan’s second term. This approach focuses on rebalancing bilateral relations and beginning to insulate the Western security architecture from a potential worst-case scenario; it would be imprudent not to prepare for a potential rupture in relations with Turkey.

Re-establish balance in bilateral security ties

It is time for Washington to try a new approach in U.S.-Turkish relations. For several years, Turkey has pursued a more independent and, increasingly, militarily aggressive foreign policy at odds with the interests of its Western allies—while continuing to enjoy the benefits of NATO membership in terms of know-how, technology, protection, and prestige. The centerpiece of this more independent line has been the cultivation of closer ties with Moscow.¹¹ The military aggressiveness, meanwhile, has been in evidence along Turkey’s volatile southern border, with multiple large-scale, long-term ground incursions into Syria and Iraq and a violent crackdown on Kurdish insurgents in southeastern Turkey.¹²

Indeed, the longevity of Turkey’s military presence in both its southern neighbors—as well as the nonmilitary government infrastructure it is building in Syria—could be flashpoints for future conflict. Turkey might even request NATO support were Syria, Iran,

or Russia to attack its forces in Syria or Iraq, though it could have little hope of receiving such support for unilateral operations taken outside its borders. For the sake of long-term bilateral ties, NATO cohesion, and regional security, the United States should try to halt this trend toward military and foreign policy assertiveness. Attempts at conciliation and concession are not working, so the United States should determinedly pursue its interests and hedge against continued Turkish drift.

Continue the U.S.-SDF partnership in northern Syria

The U.S. military relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—including the Kurdish-dominated YPG—in northeastern Syria should continue for the foreseeable future. This relationship is essential to preventing the return of the Islamic State group (IS) in the region, as well as to allowing for the rebuilding of basic infrastructure and for the provision of essential services locally. These steps are necessary to help alleviate humanitarian suffering and stabilize one of the most volatile regions on the planet. In addition, continuing U.S. support should aim to deter the reconquest of SDF-controlled areas by the Assad regime and its Iranian and pro-Iranian allies, which would trigger a new phase in the Syrian war, with concomitant humanitarian suffering and displacement. American protection for SDF-controlled areas would serve Turkey's interests by preventing further refugee flows into the country, which is already struggling to integrate more than 3.5 million Syrians.¹³

The United States-led coalition should make explicit its guarantee to protect SDF-liberated areas from the Assad regime, as well as continue the existing military relationship with the SDF to include political support for autonomy for representative local governments within any negotiated postwar Syrian settlement. The first step should encompass U.S. advocacy for the inclusion of Syrian Kurdish representatives in the Geneva process, alongside moderate Arab militias and minority groups operating under the SDF umbrella. More broadly, the United States-led coalition should provide material support to the efforts of Kurds, Arabs, and local minorities in liberated areas of eastern Syria to establish inclusive local government in extremely trying circumstances. The United States should protect these reliable partners for moral and strategic reasons; walking away from them would further damage Washington's credibility abroad.

Continue to take Turkish security concerns into consideration

At the same time, the United States should continue to discuss security arrangements with Turkey, as it has done thus far, to protect the integrity of the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkey's security was dramatically improved by the United States-led coalition's intense effort, in cooperation with the YPG and SDF, to rid the border region of the IS.¹⁴ Furthermore, American intelligence has helped Turkey protect itself against both attacks

by the IS and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The recent outline roadmap agreement has also shown that the United States is open to security modifications, consistent with its regional interests.

The United States is well aware of Turkish concerns about YPG-PKK links and has been a moderating influence on more radical Kurdish elements in Syria. But the United States built its relationship with the YPG only after Turkey presented no viable alternative to defeating the IS and at a time when Ankara itself was engaged in negotiations with both the PKK and the Democratic Union Party (PYD).¹⁵ Ankara should return to a good faith negotiating posture. It should abandon what amounts to insistence that there be no PYD/YPG—or allied groups'—presence in the Syrian-Turkish border region, as this is completely divorced from the demographic, political, and military realities of the situation. Only through a massive military intervention and ensuing mass displacement could Ankara achieve this dubious goal.

Indeed, the situation is more complex than Ankara allows; there is a difference between Syrian Kurds who, supported by the United States, joined the YPG in order to fight the IS, and hardened PKK operatives targeting Turkish security forces within Turkey. The Turkish government's position—and the drumbeat from the AKP-controlled press—has long since ceased to be about securing stability on the country's southern border and is instead focused on mobilizing nationalist sentiment against the United States for domestic political purposes.

This must end if there is to be a meaningful U.S.-Turkish partnership in northern Syria, as neither party is served by a zero-sum, adversarial approach. Indeed, Turkey's interests would be critically undermined were the United States to conclude that it lacks viable partners in Syria and therefore must pull out of its active role. It seems clear that Ankara recognizes this, though it does not acknowledge it publicly. For example, the United States continues to fly missions in support of YPG operations from Inçirlik Air Base with Turkey's acquiescence.¹⁶

[Address Turkey's relationship with Russia](#)

The United States should understand Turkey's need to maintain strong economic and diplomatic relations with Russia. Russia is an important market for Turkish goods, and Russian tourists are crucial to the Turkish economy. Turkey is also reliant on Russian energy. The United States has for decades sought to help Turkey reduce this reliance by, for example, supporting projects to secure access to non-Russian energy, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline.¹⁷ Despite these efforts, Ankara has recently taken steps that could deepen its energy dependence on Russia, pursuing the TurkStream pipeline to import Russian gas and awarding a key nuclear power plant contract to Russian state entity ROSATOM.¹⁸

As Turkey has demonstrated for much of this century, it is possible to pursue positive exchanges with Russia without building deep strategic ties with Moscow or inviting Russian influence into crucial aspects of the Turkish economy, such as nuclear energy, or into the overall Western security architecture. Indeed, for Turkey to be considered a trusted NATO ally and enjoy the benefits thereof, it cannot regard Russia as a strategic partner. Turkey must accommodate itself to those facts or else risk the benefits of NATO membership. For its part, the alliance should begin to prepare itself against the risks posed by Turkey's cozy relations with Russia.

Impose consequences if Turkey buys Russian S-400s

In light of this reality, there should be consequences if Turkey in fact buys Russian S-400s, and the United States should make clear to the Turks exactly what those consequences will be. It is unthinkable to deliver the F-35—NATO's premier fifth-generation fighter aircraft—to a country with such intimate ties with Moscow. Beyond the political message such a purchase would send, NATO must not allow Russia to build a comprehensive radar profile for the aircraft through the S-400's radar system. Therefore, if Turkey assembles and operationalizes S-400s on its territory, the United States should completely suspend American sophisticated arms sales to Turkey. It should also unwind Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter program. These steps would be in keeping with the intent of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, passed by Congress to sanction any entities conducting significant business with the Russian defense sector.¹⁹ If Turkey, as a partner in the F-35 program, chooses to use international legal mechanisms for redress, the United States should be willing to engage in that process, even at the risk of being held in breach of contract. Any compensation owed should be paid.

Moreover, if Turkey takes delivery of the S-400, the United States should lobby NATO members to suspend Turkey from participation in alliance exercises geared toward Russia, and Turkey should be banned from access to classified information normally shared with NATO partners. Furthermore, NATO members should begin to reassess Turkey's involvement in other sensitive projects that are meant to counter Russian aggression, such as the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. Additional shared security investments—such as the new land command headquarters—should not be made in Turkey until its alignment is in less doubt.

The United States should also begin a policy-planning process to assess how it would respond to a formal rupture in relations with Turkey—for example by developing contingency plans to adapt to a loss of access to the Inçirlik and Konya air bases, to the early warning radar system in Malatya, and to other Turkey-based facilities. While Congress' displeasure is clear,²⁰ it is critical that the U.S. administration make clear to Ankara the serious consequences of taking delivery of the S-400, so as to avert that undesirable

development. A nimble diplomatic effort on the part of the executive branch should accurately present these consequences as required by congressional action, thereby minimizing personal recriminations between U.S. and Turkish officials.

Address Turkish hostage-taking and anti-American media rhetoric

The United States should also address what amounts to a policy of hostage-taking by the Turkish government. Turkey should expeditiously release Andrew Brunson, now under house arrest²¹, and other Americans held in Turkish jails for alleged crimes. This should also be the case for Turkish nationals working for the U.S. consulates in Adana and Istanbul. Although Brunson has been charged with aiding the PKK and “FETO”—the name Turkish authorities have given to the Gülenists they accuse of orchestrating the July 15, 2016, coup attempt—the Turkish government has not presented any credible evidence of his guilt. In fact, much of what the indictment asserts as evidence, such as Brunson’s possession of a recipe for an Arab dish supposedly favored by Gülenists, is laughable.²² The Trump administration should convey to the Turkish government that should these violations continue, the United States will use the tools offered by the Global Magnitsky Act²³ to sanction those Turkish officials responsible for the unwarranted detention of U.S. citizens.

Indeed, President Erdoğan essentially acknowledged Brunson was being used as a pawn when he said, “You have another pastor in your hands. Give us that pastor and we will do what we can in the judiciary to give you this one,” referring to Fethullah Gülen.²⁴ Yet the United States should continue to make clear to the Turkish public that it is not protecting Gülen beyond the requirements of due process given to all American citizens and permanent residents. Lawyers for the U.S. government will argue the case for Gülen’s imprisonment and extradition, provided Turkey can present a solid case based on evidence collected in accordance with U.S. legal standards. So far, that has not happened. The Gülen issue may well be another where the Turkish government seems less interested in achieving a resolution with the United States and more interested in scoring political points at home.

Ankara’s hostile rhetoric toward the United States inevitably affects bilateral ties. Directly and indirectly, Erdoğan controls nearly all of the Turkish media. He chooses to elevate negative, often inaccurate stories about the United States on a daily basis while downplaying negative coverage of Russia.²⁵ More than any other single factor, the venomous tone of the media is responsible for the intense anti-Americanism of the Turkish public. A recent Center for American Progress survey found that 83 percent of Turks have unfavorable views of the United States.²⁶ A second CAP survey similarly found that Turks found Russia more trustworthy than they did the United States—by a rate of 40 percent-to-3 percent, with the rest either undecided or equally untrusting of both nations.²⁷ Erdoğan’s choice to consistently and publicly lash out at America while protecting Russia has given rise to understandable doubts about the Turkish government’s intentions.

Washington's single-minded focus on its use of the Inçirlik Air Base and other military facilities has long caused the United States to look past some of Turkey's unfriendly policies and anti-American rhetoric. This has created the sense among Turkish decision-makers—and the Turkish public, reflected in CAP polling—that the United States needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the United States.²⁸ By pushing back on issues such as the S-400s and the arbitrary arrest of Americans, the United States may begin to erode Turkey's perception that it enjoys leverage, thereby beginning to modify Erdoğan's apparent belief that he can pursue with impunity policies that undermine U.S. interests.

Support the Turkish economy

Assuming that Turkey remains a member in good standing of the Western alliance, American interests are served by Turkey's success. The biggest risk to Turkey's stability and prosperity is its current economic difficulties. The lira has lost almost half its value in the last two years, and official inflation is more than 15 percent, the highest level in 14 years.²⁹ Meanwhile, official unemployment is above 11 percent;³⁰ youth unemployment has hovered above 20 percent;³¹ and foreign direct investment has dried up as a result of economic uncertainty, political chaos, and the erosion of judicial and Central Bank independence.³²

Many economists believe that given Turkey's persistent current account deficit, the country will in the midterm need an International Monetary Fund (IMF) standby agreement in order to navigate its difficult economic terrain.³³ This would be a bitter pill for Erdoğan to swallow. Turkey has had 19 IMF agreements over its history,³⁴ the last of which ended a decade ago. One of Erdoğan's greatest achievements is paying off all of Turkey's debts to the IMF. Indeed, he has boasted that Turkey now contributes to the IMF, rather than borrowing from it.

As the source of 17.5 percent of IMF funds,³⁵ the United States should try to pre-empt this eventuality by making it clear to Turkey that its current trajectory is unsustainable. Washington should candidly convey its displeasure at likely having to bail out Turkey within the next few years, after the government avoided pursuing the necessary economic reforms. Instead, Turkey has opted for a populist approach aimed at winning elections—all the while knowing that the United States-backed international system would come to its rescue. Nevertheless, should Ankara reach the point of needing an IMF program, the United States should be positively inclined to support that on the condition that Turkey commit to paying the fine that the U.S. Department of the Treasury is likely to level on Halkbank—and possibly other Turkish banks—in connection with the Iran sanctions-circumvention case.³⁶

Offer unqualified support for Turkish civil society

Despite taking a harder-line approach to Turkish government policies, it is important for the United States to demonstrate that it wants good relations with Turkish society writ large. To that end, civil society remains a way through which the West can productively engage Turkey at a time when high-level political relations are at a nadir. Broadening engagement to include issues that are both normative and pertinent to Turkey's economic situation—such as rule of law, educational reform, and women's participation—could be productive and help minimize public controversy in Turkey over U.S. support. Obviously, the more political the Turkish nongovernmental organization, the more problematic it might be for its members to work with U.S. partners.³⁷

Support for civil society is also the best remaining avenue to supporting democratization in Turkey. One possibility is a congressionally mandated program to support engagement with Turkish nongovernmental organizations, along the lines of the Near East Regional Democracy program established to work primarily with Iranian nongovernmental organizations.³⁸ Of course, the establishment of such a program for a NATO ally would be unprecedented, and any congressional action regarding Turkey is bound to be politically fraught. Yet, Turkey is not likely to be a reliable partner over the long term, absent renewed democratic progress or, at a minimum, an easing of political, ethnic, and social tension. While support for civil society will not change Turkey's political trajectory on its own, it could help preserve the connective tissue that binds Turkey to the West as Turkey weathers its current period of democratic backsliding.

Yet another way to informally address the current estrangement in bilateral ties is for the U.S. government to discreetly encourage Track II encounters between American and Turkish nonofficials who are intimately familiar with bilateral issues. Such encounters would help both sides understand the policy imperatives that may currently be lost in official miscommunication and public recrimination.

Conclusion

It may be time for American policymakers to start thinking differently about Turkey. As an aggressive and highly centralized state that is nonetheless important to U.S. security interests, modern-day Turkey has begun to bear more resemblance to Saudi Arabia than it does to a democratic NATO partner. The United States could certainly do more to cajole Turkey onto a more democratic path by investing in civil society and bringing political pressure to bear, but its influence on the fundamental dynamics of Turkish society are likely to remain peripheral. Thus, Washington may have no choice but to accept the new reality. Still, such a change in perspective—from viewing Turkey as a democratic ally to viewing it as an authoritarian state important to U.S. foreign policy—inevitably will have consequences in terms of the quality and durability of bilateral ties;

fundamentally, the United States should no longer be shy about bringing leverage to bear on Turkey. Furthermore, it is difficult to predict how far Turkey's autocratic drift and anti-Western nationalism will go, how long it will endure, or how close Ankara's relations with Moscow will become. It would be prudent for the United States and its fully democratic NATO allies to begin insulating their shared security architecture from the potential worst-case scenario. This effort should be both iterative and reversible, responding to Turkey's actions, but it should begin now.

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Endnotes

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