

Erdogan's Victory Could Actually Improve U.S.-Turkish Relations

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Brief Analysis

Turkey's decisive election results and shaky geopolitical situation could make it more amenable to addressing U.S. concerns about Russian weapons sales, Iranian adventurism, and other key security issues.

At first glance, the June 24 electoral sweep by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's coalition did not go over well in the United States. In response to his renewed grasp on the executive branch and parliament, many observers expressed regrets that the West-leaning opposition did not garner more votes, along with suspicions of ballot-box stuffing and angst over what he might do with broader presidential powers under the amended constitution. Yet as Turkey moves on from its contentious election cycle in the coming weeks, the results may augur a better midterm future for Washington's stormy relationship with Ankara.

The most important plus for U.S. policymakers is that the decisive voting results will presumably spare Turkey a protracted period of post-election turmoil—an advantage that should not be underestimated given the imposing agenda of unresolved bilateral issues, the tumultuous state of Turkey's neighbors, and the increasing pressure Russia has been bringing to bear on Ankara. Dramatic scenarios such as presidential runoff elections and parliamentary coalition negotiations would likely have postponed any progress on crucial foreign policy initiatives and promoted political histrionics aimed at the United States, further fraying the bilateral relationship. A stable Turkish government is invariably a better U.S. partner, at least in terms of near-term strategic interests in a war-torn Middle East.

Furthermore, the political price that Erdogan had to pay to secure victory could make him more amenable to compromise on certain issues. His Justice and Development Party (AKP) was so threatened in the run-up to election day that it had to form a coalition with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) just to secure a majority, and his 52

percent presidential win was only marginally better than his performance in 2014. Meanwhile, one of his most bitter opponents—the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), seen by many Turks as the political wing of the insurgent Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—handily vaulted the 10 percent national vote hurdle required to enter parliament. This mixed result could compel him to work with more actors inside and outside Turkey, including the United States—though it should be noted that this “more moderate after elections” formula has not always applied to him.

Whatever Erdogan’s post-election tack, Washington is in good position to take advantage of a more stable Turkey, having played its cards well with Ankara of late. Earlier this month, officials reached an [agreement on the Manbij area of Syria \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-u.s.-turkish-progress-on-manbij-lead-to-wider-cooperation-in-syria\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-u.s.-turkish-progress-on-manbij-lead-to-wider-cooperation-in-syria) involving U.S.-Turkish military cooperation and withdrawal of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish group linked to the PKK. Erdogan has also made clear that he wants U.S. troops to remain in northeast Syria to help contain various perceived threats there, from the PYD and Islamic State remnants to Iranian elements and their Assad regime allies. In addition, Washington allowed the transfer of Turkey’s first F-35 fighter aircraft [despite congressional threats to halt such sales \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sanctions-on-turkey-reconciling-washingtons-diverging-views\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sanctions-on-turkey-reconciling-washingtons-diverging-views) due to Ankara’s purchase of Russian S-400 air defense systems. These accommodations indirectly supported Erdogan’s campaign pitch that only he could protect the homeland. And through all this, President Trump has maintained a seemingly good relationship with him.

No one knows where Erdogan might take Turkey now, and he is a difficult partner under any circumstances. But in economic and military terms, Turkey is one of the strongest, most stable states in the Middle East, and a partner that has cooperated with the West on issues ranging from Afghanistan and Ukraine to Syrian refugees and NATO defenses against Iranian missiles. Most Turks remain Western-oriented, and their government has largely acted as a status quo power that shares U.S. concerns over Russian and Iranian expansionism. If the Trump administration is serious about the [priorities expressed in the National Security Strategy \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-trump-national-security-strategy-return-to-the-nineteenth-century\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-trump-national-security-strategy-return-to-the-nineteenth-century) it released last December—namely, focusing on competition with hostile states—it needs strong allies like Turkey, even when they come with major domestic baggage on human rights and other issues.

Turkish contacts and media close to Erdogan appear open to a closer relationship, but Washington will reasonably expect him to take substantive steps toward resolving several problems, and sooner rather than later. These include the S-400 purchase—in addition to congressional ire about a NATO member buying weapons from Moscow, placing the S-400 in Turkish hands with Russian technical support may allow the Kremlin to soak up vital intelligence on Turkey’s F-35s, potentially compromising F-35 fleets and their supporting systems in other countries. Senior Turkish officials do not seem fully aware of these consequences, but they will have to work rapidly with the Trump administration to limit the damage from any congressional sanctions. Ankara should also reconsider its provocative legal action against individuals such as American pastor Andrew Brunson and Turkish employees of the U.S. diplomatic mission.

Even if Turkey takes these steps, its worrisome human rights record, administrative tilting of campaign processes in favor of Erdogan’s faction, and accused electoral irregularities will continue to roil the bilateral relationship. Although President Trump appears to have no qualms about engaging with illiberal leaders, much of his administration, Congress, public opinion, and U.S. allies expect Turkey to behave as a liberal democratic NATO ally, and they may decide to challenge bilateral cooperation if it does not.

Yet the elections made clear that Erdogan will remain Turkey’s leader for the foreseeable future, so Washington should reach out to him on those issues that require imminent action to avoid dire regional consequences. Given the turmoil to Turkey’s south (from Iraq and Syria to Yemen) and north (in the Caucasus and Ukraine), the two nations

need each other.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey. ❖

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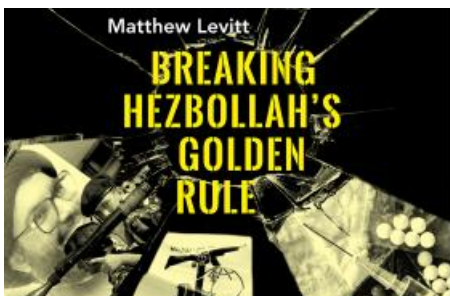
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