

Sanctions on Turkey: Reconciling Washington's Diverging Views

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Brief Analysis

Despite the deep-seated problems roiling the bilateral relationship, U.S. legislators need to understand the potentially dire geopolitical consequences of putting heavy pressure on a fellow NATO member.

On June 4, Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu will visit Washington to meet with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The trip comes at a critical time for the U.S.-Turkish relationship, with bilateral ties facing their deepest crisis since the Cyprus war of 1974. That conflict ended with a damaging American arms embargo against Ankara—the relationship suffered severely and did not fully normalize for nearly half a decade, setting the precedent for another breakdown if the two countries do not find a way to close their widening gaps on present-day issues.

UNBRIDGEABLE DIFFERENCES?

Currently, multiple factors are undermining the bilateral relationship, including:

- **Turkish demands for the extradition of Fethullah Gulen**, a U.S.-based cleric whose followers in the Turkish military seem to have played a significant role (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-and-the-failed-coup-one-year-later>) in the failed 2016 coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.
- **The U.S. tactical alliance with the People's Defense Units (YPG)**. This Syrian Kurdish group is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), recognized as a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States, and NATO. But with President Trump determined not to commit further ground troops to Syria, Washington will continue to rely on the YPG to contain the Islamic State.
- **Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 missile batteries**. Frustrated with Washington's refusal to provide

Patriot missile defense systems on favorable terms, Ankara is using the purchase of Russian air defense systems to get a better deal from Washington, including potential technology transfers. But the current anti-Turkish disposition in Congress will make such a deal difficult to achieve. Erdogan may also be aiming to deter any future plots against him. During the 2016 coup attempt, Turkish F-16s bombed his palace, so he may believe that a highly automated Russian-made system will better protect him from his own NATO-compatible air force.

- **The arrest of five U.S. citizens in Turkey**, most notably Pastor Andrew Brunson, whose release President Trump personally called for via Twitter. Erdogan has said he views these detainees as bargaining chips, hoping to trade them for Gulen.
- **Turkish violations of U.S. sanctions against Iran.** The Treasury Department is deciding whether to fine the Turkish state-owned Halkbank for such violations, and a severe punishment would almost surely exacerbate the issue's corrosive impact on bilateral ties. Ankara regards the case against Halkbank—including a U.S. judge's sentencing of executive Hakan Atilla to thirty-two months in jail—as being political in nature. Turkish authorities opposed that January verdict, claiming that U.S. courts have not brought similar action against other banks and executives for violating Iran sanctions (e.g., BNP Paribas). Accordingly, a massive fine against Halkbank would further convince Erdogan and many Turkish elites that Washington is out to get them.
- **Deep lack of trust among policy elites, especially on Middle East issues.** Since Erdogan's ascent to power in 2003, relations have been undermined by disagreements on major foreign policy issues, including the 2003 Iraq war, the 2010 Turkish-Israeli "flotilla" crisis, and Ankara's 2010 decision to vote against U.S.-backed Iran sanctions at the UN Security Council.

FISSURES AMONG U.S. POLICYMAKERS

In Washington, various camps have been debating how to handle these differences with Turkey for some time. None of the above issues will likely be resolved anytime soon, let alone to the benefit of bilateral ties; in fact, their current trajectory suggests further erosion. Even so, U.S. officials should work to bridge the major differences between the legislative and executive branches—and within the executive branch itself—on which policy approach is best for tackling these issues.

In Congress, many legislators want to adopt a strong-arm approach toward Erdogan, which they believe would echo Moscow's response when Turkey shot down a Russian plane that violated its airspace in November 2015. After the Kremlin instituted tough sanctions, Erdogan traveled to St. Petersburg in August 2016 and personally apologized to Vladimir Putin. Subsequently, Turkey and Russia began to de-escalate their tensions over Syria's civil war while agreeing on some ad hoc deals there. Congress seems to believe that only a similarly tough U.S. stance will convince Erdogan to adopt policies that are friendly toward American interests.

Legislation sponsored by senators such as Thom Tillis (R-NC), James Lankford (R-OK), and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) includes **sanctions targeting Turkish officials** (<https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/andrew-brunson-senators-letter.pdf>) responsible for the arrest of U.S. citizens, as well as measures to delay Turkish participation in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter project if Ankara completes its S-400 purchase from Russia. That same purchase could also subject Turkey to punitive measures via the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. Executive-branch waivers for this act are notoriously difficult to justify and would likely warrant testimony demonstrating the absence of any considerable strategic risk—a tall order given that the Russian system would be deployed in close proximity to Turkish and U.S. F-35s, raising serious security concerns that go beyond interoperability with NATO systems.

For their part, the White House and State Department do not support placing sanctions on Ankara—at least **not before Turkey's June 24 elections** (

wins). Rather, they want to take another shot at managing the various problems with Erdogan, believing that Turkey is still bigger than its longtime leader. The Defense Department likewise takes umbrage with a sanctions policy, though U.S. Central Command, whose area of responsibility covers Syria, does not favor pro-Erdogan policies.

Although Congressional anger with Erdogan should not be underestimated, those arguing for a tough “Putin-style” approach tend to get the Russia-Turkey relationship wrong on two levels. First, despite their intimate energy relations, Moscow and Ankara are still on opposite sides of most every regional issue, from Syria to Ukraine—hardly a surprise given their historical rivalry. In contrast, the U.S.-Turkey relationship remains grounded in the NATO alliance and decades of bilateral military cooperation, notwithstanding their disagreements. Washington’s treatment of this ally therefore has repercussions throughout the American-led security system, beyond the relationship with Ankara.

Second, Putin’s “tough” policy did not involve military threats or actions, nor did he pressure Turkey as he did Ukraine with a natural gas cutoff. Rather, he took action against Turkey’s tourism industry and vegetable exports, which cost the country billions of dollars but fell short of the dramatic, security-related pressure contemplated by some U.S. officials—a category of pressure that Erdogan has become particularly sensitive about since the attempted coup. In return, Putin asked for two relatively minor concessions from Ankara: an apology and, apparently, facilitation of the TurkStream pipeline, a gas conduit that Russia aims to run under the Black Sea to Turkey.

Furthermore, any American sanctions would likely serve Putin’s ultimate goal: to drive a wedge between Turkey and the United States. Having offered Ankara various deals in Syria, including the green light to go after the YPG, Putin seems to have the Turks exactly where he wants them: as an upset NATO ally often working with Russia. Sanctions would bring Turkey even closer to Moscow—perhaps permanently so. Alternatively, if Congress shelves the “Punish Turkey” theme, the Trump administration would have more time to resolve the technological and political problems with the S-400 purchase while avoiding a collapse of bilateral relations.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey (<https://www.newsultan.info/>).

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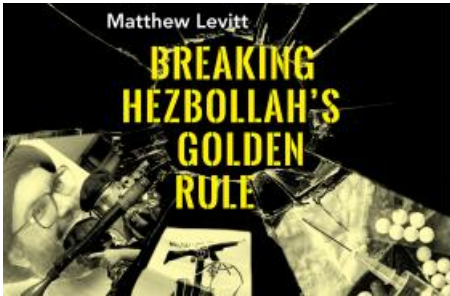
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