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The U.S. Alliance With Turkey Is Worth Preserving

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Articles & Testimony

Ankara is a difficult friend, but that doesn't mean the United States should cut it loose.

If the United States didn't already face enough troubles in Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently threatened American troops with an "[Ottoman slap](#)" if they interfered with Turkey's military incursion into northwestern Syria. The threat, coming two days before a visit to Turkey by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, underscored just how contentious relations between Ankara and Washington have become, and how close this historic alliance is to crumbling altogether—to the detriment of both states.

The list of issues dividing the United States and Turkey is a long one. U.S. and other Western officials look with alarm on Erdogan's Putinesque consolidation of power and disregard for human rights, and have protested the arrest of U.S. citizens and Turks employed by American diplomatic missions. Turkish officials, for their part, accuse the United States of instigating a July 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan and harboring the man most Turks believe was its mastermind: the spiritual leader, erstwhile Erdogan ally, and Pennsylvania resident Fethullah Gulen.

Even more sharply dividing Washington and Ankara are the divergent paths they have trod in Syria for the better part of a decade. Erdogan was furious at the Obama administration for what Turks perceived as U.S. indifference to the threat the Syrian conflict posed to their country. When the United States finally did intercede, only to make allies of the Turks' mortal enemies—the People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, a Syrian offshoot of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—Ankara's anger mounted. For their part, U.S. officials were troubled by Ankara co-opting jihadis as allies in the Syrian fight, and more recently by its cooperation with Russia, which has extended to the purchase of a Russian air defense system that complicates Turkey's NATO commitments.

The temptation is strong in Washington to simply jettison the foundering alliance with Turkey—as was recently done with Pakistan—and even to impose sanctions on Ankara for its actions. And the feeling in Turkey, where 67 percent of the population harbors an [unfavorable view of Americans](#), is surely mutual.

Yet cutting Turkey loose would constitute a self-inflicted wound. Turkey is not just President Erdogan but a regional geographic and economic giant that stands as a buffer between Europe and the Middle East, and between the Middle East and Russia. Losing Turkey as a Western ally would mean bringing the Mideast to Europe's threshold, and the potential frontier of Russian influence into the heart of the Middle East. Turkey is also the state best positioned to balance against Iran, whose ambitions and influence are growing along with its partnership with Russia. The dependency is mutual; without the United States, Turkey would be left to Tehran and Moscow's tender mercies.

Preserving the Turkish-American alliance and the strategic value both sides derive from it will require refocusing on shared strategic threats, such as the growing Russia-Iran alliance, while compromising on the disagreements distracting from that focus. While there is little the United States can do to assuage Erdogan's more paranoid concerns, greater flexibility is possible when it comes to the Syrian Kurds.

Vital to reaching a compromise are commitments made during Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's recent visit to Ankara. According to Turkish officials, the United States has reportedly agreed to decrease the Kurdish militia presence west of the Euphrates River around the strategic town of Manbij, which Turks fear is aimed at creating a contiguous zone of Kurdish control along Turkey's southern border with Syria. Turkey, in turn, could tolerate a continued American and YPG presence in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria east of the Euphrates as the only way to keep the U.S. in Syria.

Some in the United States see any accommodation of Turkish concerns regarding the Syrian Kurds as a betrayal of a partner that proved doughty in the fight against the Islamic State. Yet the proposed arrangement holds advantages for all parties involved. For all its bluster, Turkey would be far worse off without the United States as an ally; what's more, U.S. influence is the best chance of convincing Syrian Kurds to break with the PKK and forge their own path, as Iraqi Kurds did.

As for the Kurds, the United States would not abandon them in their homeland east of the Euphrates, but simply turn Manbij over to local officials under U.S. and Turkish security guarantees. Kurdish aspirations may be grander, but the United States is not obligated to entertain its allies' every ambition here or elsewhere, especially when those aims threaten another ally or the stability of the region.

For the United States, it would make little strategic sense to alienate Turkey over the Kurdish issue. Turkey is the world's 17th largest economy and one of the Middle East's primary military powers. In Syria itself, the approximately 2,000 U.S. troops now in the country's northeast cannot be reliably supplied without air and land access through Turkey, given Iraq's susceptibility to Iranian influence. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the United States accomplishing much of anything in Syria militarily or diplomatically in the face of determined Iranian and Russian resistance if we cannot even manage to find common ground there with our putative ally.

More broadly, a U.S. effort to counter Iran in the Middle East, and to prevail in what the Trump administration has

described as a global strategic competition with Russia and China, will require allies. Whatever its tactical flirtations, Turkey remains opposed to Iranian expansionism and wary of Russia for reasons of history and geography. For China, Turkey is an attractive candidate for westward Belt and Road Initiative expansion toward Europe, yet Ankara and Beijing have their own thorny differences. If the United States and Turkey part ways, Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing will not be the culprits but will certainly be the beneficiaries.

Turkey is a difficult ally. But if the United States were to walk away from all of our difficult allies in the Middle East, we would have none at all. Given Erdogan's mercurial nature and the years of accumulated tensions in the U.S.-Turkey relationship, finding common ground with Ankara on Syria and other issues won't be easy. But in a world of strategic competition with increasingly rapacious powers, it is imperative.

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