Is the U.S.-Turkey Relationship Crumbling?

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Feb 5, 2015

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Brief Analysis

Amid tensions, Ankara must decide how much U.S. leadership it can stomach and Washington must decide how much it values Turkey as a partner.

The crisis in Syria has placed tremendous strain on U.S.-Turkey relations, rooted in the countries' differing priorities. Ankara, for its part, wants to bring down the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, which it views as a threat on its border, while Washington has limited its objectives to fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State. Correspondingly, each country fears that by committing to the other's objectives, it will sideline its own primary objectives.

The tensions, as reported elsewhere, have been felt personally by the two countries' leaders. U.S. president Barack Obama and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, once amicable partners who held regular phone chats, now differ so starkly on the Syrian war that they avoid regular contact. On January 7, Erdogan vented his frustration with Washington's limited air war against ISIS: "If you are doing something, do it properly. If you are going to do it with us, you need to value what we say."

Given this uneasy situation, the question remains to what extent these opposing U.S. and Turkish goals could undermine bilateral ties.

A Relationship Spanning Six Decades

Indeed, the U.S.-Turkey relationship goes back many years. Ankara joined NATO in 1952, formally establishing the two countries as allies. In 1964, as Turkish-Greek relations were deteriorating over conflicting claims on Cyprus, President Lyndon Johnson sent a strongly worded letter to Turkish prime minister Ismet Inonu threatening to abandon Turkey should it use force on the island. When Turkey engaged Cyprus militarily in 1974 to protect the Turkish Cypriots, Washington imposed an arms embargo on Ankara. The two countries' relationship would enter a deep freeze until 1981, but it ultimately recovered. This recovery was aided by Turkey's 1980 military coup, after which the generals launched a policy of detente with the United States, to which Washington -- worried about the

Islamist takeover of Iran the year before -- responded positively. One sees in this case how Turkey's importance to the United States is enhanced by the messiness of Ankara's neighbors.

Common Interests, but Increasingly No Common Identity

According to the current Turkish leadership, Turkey and the United States may have common interests, but they do not share a common identity. In 2003, the newly elected Justice and Development Party (AKP) government signaled the changed era in U.S.-Turkey ties by refusing to grant U.S. troops passage through Turkish territory into Iraq. Whereas previous Turkish leaders followed the "go West" mantra of the country's modern founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, AKP elites believe Turkey should become a standalone Middle East power that works with Washington only when such cooperation serves their interests. Increasingly, strategic unity has become an "a la carte" choice for Turkey. In May 2010, Ankara voted against U.S.- and European-backed legislation at the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran aimed at stymying Tehran's nuclear ambitions. And in 2013, AKP elites decided to purchase Chinese air-defense systems, breaking from the country's traditional commitment to the NATO community.

Syrian War: A Challenge to Regional Leadership

Turkey has enjoyed remarkable economic success under the AKP, but the Syrian war has undermined the party's dream of transforming Turkey into a regional power. After the Syrian opposition first rose up in early 2011, Ankara initially reached out to the Assad regime, counseling reform and hoping to cash in on its newfound economic and other perceived influence over Damascus. Assad, however, not only failed to respond to this plea, but just hours after the Turkish foreign minister's Damascus visit he sent tanks into Syrian cities for the first time. In reaction to this snub, Ankara has supported the rebels against the Assad regime. But Assad has not only survived; he has become a major threat to Turkey. In May 2013, a bombing connected to his regime killed fifty-one people in the Turkish border town of Reyhanli, marking the worst terrorist attack on Turkish soil in modern history. Separately, nearly two million Syrian refugees have crossed into Turkey to flee Assad's slaughter. Most of these refugees are concentrated in southern Turkish provinces, constituting 20 percent of the population. They have badly stretched Turkey's resources, and economic, social, and ethnic tensions between the refugees and native Turks are simmering. Riots are a regular occurrence in these provinces.

At the same time, ISIS -- which runs a Taliban-style state along Turkey's nearly 900-mile border with Iraq and Syria -- represents perhaps the greatest existential threat to Turkey since Joseph Stalin demanded territory in 1946. In order to effectively counter both Assad and ISIS, Turkey needs the United States. Yet AKP elites are torn between their dream of transforming Turkey into a regional star that acts independent of Washington and reluctantly acknowledging U.S. leadership in the region. The latter could happen if Washington assured Ankara of its commitment to ousting Assad.

Conversely, should the United States come to a modus vivendi with Assad, Ankara might be forced to recognize this reality, acquiescing to a strong statement of U.S. toleration of Assad. Recently, when the United States dropped weapons for Democratic Union Party (PYD) fighters defending Kobani, Ankara at first objected vehemently. Turkey considers the PYD and its Turkey-based mother organization, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to be terrorist groups, even though Ankara is in official peace talks with the PKK. But when Washington overrode the Turkish veto against the weapons drop, Ankara grudgingly accepted U.S. support to the PKK and even allowed Iraqi Kurds to start supporting the PYD fighters in Kobani and to supply them with weapons.

An End to Convivial Personal Relations

In July 2010, following Turkey's no vote at the UN on Iran sanctions, Obama met Erdogan for a candid conversation about regional concerns. This exchange brought the two leaders into an empathetic relationship during which they

spoke frequently, exchanging views on the Middle East. In summer 2013, however, the White House took issue with the AKP's violent crackdown on the liberal Gezi Park rallies. This development and Washington's subsequent criticism of Turkey's record on liberties soured the relationship. But in the end, differences over Middle East policy, including Egypt -- where Erdogan has blamed the United States for Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's takeover -- broke the Obama-Erdogan connection.

An Imperfect, but Unique, Regional Ally

With Turkey as a partner, Washington would have an easier time fighting ISIS, stabilizing Iraq, and -- if the White House chooses this course -- ousting Assad. Although Washington has other allies in the Gulf and Europe, Turkey is the only NATO ally that borders Iraq and Syria. Its absence from U.S. war efforts complicates operational logistics and drives up the cost associated with air operations. While Ankara must decide how much U.S. leadership it can stomach, Washington, too, needs to decide how much it wants Turkey on its side.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of **The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty First-Century's First Muslim Power (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power)** *(Potomac Books).* ❖

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