

Incirlikization

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Articles & Testimony

Oftentimes, lecturing on Turkey to audiences across the United States, I find myself amiss, in need of a map to identify Turkey's geographic location. In such cases, I resort to a virtual map, using my fingers to sketch Turkey's surrounding regions: the Middle East, Europe, Black Sea, Mediterranean and Caucasus. However, this virtual map often further confuses my audience, leaving people wondering where Turkey really is.

Then, I utter the magic word: Incirlik. This base in southern Turkey, one of the U.S. military's most important airbases, often appears to be more important than Turkey.

People who do not know Turkey's location know where Incirlik is and it is hard to find anyone in the U.S. military who has not stopped at Incirlik en route to a post.

Incirlik is a blessing, endowing Turkey with importance in policymakers' eyes. But it is also a curse, reducing Turkey's strategic importance to the number of flights that can be flown through the base.

This phenomenon, Incirlikization, is a pitfall for U.S. President Barack Obama. If President Obama reduces his Turkey policy to Incirlik, he would be repeating the mistakes of the past administration, setting up a short-term transactional relationship with Turkey at the expense of long-term, multi-faceted, and strategic cooperation with Ankara.

To be fair, Incirlik is important to the United States and Turkey. Aviation experts say that, as far as airbases go, Incirlik is as good as it gets.

Thanks to a confluence of topography, runway architecture, and weather conditions, Incirlik is a rare base that can accommodate any plane at any time and also nearly as many planes as one can imagine.

Seventy percent of all cargo going to Iraq and Afghanistan passes through Incirlik, and the base sits only minutes-flight away from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Russia and Israel.

Incirlik is an asset for Turkey as well, providing Ankara with a tangible possession to flaunt in Washington when needed.

Not a year goes by that yet another "Armenian Genocide" bill in the U.S. Congress is thwarted thanks to the "Incirlik factor," Washington's fear that U.S. military access to Incirlik would be hampered if the United States offended Turkey.

All that is well and good, but Incirlikization focusing solely on the number of planes the United States can fly through Turkey to Iraq and Afghanistan miscalculates Turkey's strategic value to Washington. Turkey is militarily important for Washington, but that is a short-term and narrow vision. The country's strategic value far exceeds what Incirlik provides.

Since the Iraq War, despite the efforts of Turkey specialists in the U.S. government, Incirlikization has been the leitmotiv of bilateral ties. U.S.-Turkish relations have focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, with the chief concern being Washington's capacity to use Incirlik to fly planes to and from these countries. This development came at the expense of previous and vital U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the Caucasus, Black Sea, Central Asia, and within Europe and NATO.

President Obama has a grasp of this issue. In this regard, the new administration's early policy review on Turkey is a useful effort to expand the foundation of the countries' relationship beyond Incirlik and take full advantage of Turkey's strategic value to the United States. But with Iraq and Afghanistan remaining major concerns for the Obama administration, Washington always faces an Incirlikization trap.

Incirlikization reduces the U.S.-Turkish relationship to a transaction, preventing the alliance from gaining its full potential as a values and interests-based relationship. Incirlikization also presents long-term challenges. For the moment, Washington can fly planes as it wishes through Incirlik, but if President Obama does not convert the U.S.-Turkish relationship from a transactional one into a strategic one, Incirlik might not be securely available for United States disposal in the long-term.

In this regard, Washington's experience with Kyrgyzstan and the Manas base in that country ought to be telling.

After Sept. 11, U.S.-Kyrgyz ties were bolstered through U.S. access to Kyrgyzstan's Manas base for flights into Afghanistan.

In due course, Manas dominated the U.S.-Kyrgyz relationship.

Kyrgyzstan's recent threat to expel the U.S. from Manas, subsequent to Russian lobbying, serves as a warning that, when reduced to a transactional nature, ties between the United States and other countries will face serious pressures from third countries.

What is good for the U.S.-Turkish relationship is also good for Incirlik. Only a strategic, multi-faceted relationship, supported by the Turkish public, will provide the United States with unhindered and long-term access to Incirlik.

Accordingly, the U.S. administration should be interested in Turkey not just through the lens of its capacity to use Incirlik, but also with an eye to a broader and sustainable strategic relationship.

Ensuring that Turkey's European Union accession moves forward and that Turkey consolidates its liberal democratic political system, for instance, should be as important of goals as maintaining a steady flow of planes taking off and landing at Incirlik.

A non-European Turkey will be a half-hearted and irregular U.S. ally. President Obama would be better served in making sure that Turkey is not Incirlikized, yet again.

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