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Why Talks with the Turks Matter More Than Ever

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U.S. and Turkish officials have four main security and legal disputes to work out, and the geopolitical stakes are immense.

While Washington focuses understandably on the North Korean and Iranian nuclear accounts, another strategic crisis involving Turkey threatens. While solutions to the various bilateral disputes feeding the crisis are possible, changes in attitudes in both Washington and Ankara, and better highest level communication, are needed to avert permanent damage impacting U.S. policy in a broad swath of Eurasia.

The set of seemingly intractable issues dividing the two will come to a head as Foreign Minister Cavusoglu meets with Secretary Pompeo, ostensibly to solve one of them—the status of Kurdish PYD allies of the U.S. around the Syrian city of Manbij, seen as threatening to Ankara. But the talks will be overshadowed by a bigger threat—Turkey's purchase of a Russian S-400 air defense system and its impact on Turkey's U.S. weapons purchases, specifically the F-35 fighter, of which Turkey is purchasing over 100 and participating in the whole production chain.

The bilateral disputes fall into four categories. First and most serious is Congress' sanctioning of the S-400 sale, as a response to Russia's nefarious activities. There are valid concerns that Russia could use the system to gather intelligence on F-35s flown by Turks and Americans.

Second is Syria, where Turkey sees existential threats from both Iran and Syrian President Bashar al Assad, and from the Syrian PYD wing of the PKK Turkish Kurdish insurgency. It's important to note that Turkey regards ISIS and al Qaeda there as seemingly less urgent tactical threats. The U.S. in contrast, is committed rhetorically to containing Iran's actions in Syria, but its priority has been fighting ISIS, requiring alliance with the very PYD that threatens Turkey. Washington and Ankara are working to move the PYD back from Manbij, close to Turkish positions, but the larger questions related to Syria await Trump Administration decisions.

A third area of friction is Turkey's request for the U.S. to extradite the leader of the Gulenist religious-cultural movement, Fethullah Gulen, for his movement's role in the 2016 Turkish military coup. Turks are suspicious of American involvement in the coup, given the lukewarm initial Washington response, and Gulen's U.S. residency; distrustful of any claim by President Erdogan, some in Washington are questioning the Gulenists' role. U.S. prestige among the Turkish population has fallen even further than the normal low over Gulen, as most Turks believe him to be behind the coup.

Other legal issues—including an American pastor and Turkish employees of the U.S. mission who have been charged by the Turks for political crimes, and a U.S. trial involving a Turkish state bank's undermining of Iran sanctions—churn the relationship further. And President Erdogan's moves toward more authoritarian rule fuel fears that he will end Turkey's democracy.

There are possible compromises on all these difficult issues, but their centrifugal tendencies are reinforced by each country's perception of the other. Turks, not just Erdogan, view foreign policy in 19th century, *realpolitik* terms, with "great power" Turkey's relations with others being largely transactional. The Turks have little sympathy for the idealistic aspirations of the U.S.-led global order, seeing it rather as a useful collective security tool. When the U.S. acts contrary to expected "great power" behavior, such as criticizing Turkey for its domestic policies, Turks sense some ulterior motive, or even veiled American support for internal enemies—citing Gulen's presence in Pennsylvania and the U.S. partnership with PKK offshoot PYD.

Turks also view various American actions as past "betrayals," from the withdrawal of missiles from Turkey during the Cuban Crisis, to the arms embargo put into effect after Turkey intervened in Cyprus, to Congressional resolutions over Armenian genocide, to President Obama's condemnation of Erdogan after he agreed to a nuclear deal with Teheran at Obama's request in 2010. (Turks conveniently forget U.S. support over the decades, from strategic pipeline projects to the capture of PKK leader Ocalan.)

The U.S., in turn, worries that Turkey is drifting out of the "Western" world toward Russia. Washington is focused on Erdogan's challenges to democratic pluralism and media freedom, increased "Islamization," and cozy relations with Moscow manifested in the S-400 sale.

But Turkey as a state, and most Turks, are fundamentally “status quo,” being major beneficiaries of both the global economic order, facilitating their phenomenal economic growth and customs union with the EU, and the NATO security order. They instinctively fear anti-status quo expansionist states such as Russia and Iran.

Turks see themselves as part of the West in a way that, for example, populations in Saudi Arabia, Iran or Egypt would not, and when Turks from Erdogan on down think of the outside world, their reference point is Berlin, London, or Washington, not Moscow or Riyadh. Erdogan harbored dreams of “neo-Ottoman” Turkish influence through allied Muslim Brother groups throughout the Arab world, but that died in the post-“Arab Spring” reaction from Egypt to Syria. States with rare exceptions such as China and Iran do not “flip” easily out of a global coalition. But assuming, as some in Washington do, that “we’ve lost Turkey” makes compromises to patch up relations difficult, why waste effort if it’s gone? The resulting “stickiness” in U.S. positions then generates Turkish fears that the U.S. is trying to harm it.

The stakes are immense. It is hard to see the U.S. containing Iran without Turkey. Turkey also hosts the NATO radar system essential for NATO’s missile defense against Iran. Over a huge region, in NATO’s Afghanistan and Balkan operations, in Ukraine, in the Caucasus, and along the Syrian border, where millions of refugees that would otherwise flood Europe are hosted, Turkey’s roles are significant. Nestled between hostile Russia, Syria and Iran, it enables U.S. land, air, and sea power projection into the northern Middle East, Black Sea, and Caucasus. While Turkey often demands a role in decisions involving U.S. operations, the reality is that from the fight against ISIS, to the Kosovo war, to the 2008 Georgian conflict and Afghanistan operations, it has decisively supported U.S. actions. And despite current financial difficulties, Turkey is one of the top 20 global economies, has the second largest military in NATO, and is by regional standards stable and democratic. It is not a partner one can easily ignore.

The one issue that could push Turkey out of the U.S. partnership is the issue of [sanctions on the purchase of Russian weapons](#). Fueled by Turkey’s refusal to reconsider the S-400 sale (technically not yet complete) as well as detention of American citizens and other sins, Congress now seeks to preemptively block F-35 transfers due to begin in June. This would be a huge and incredibly costly blow to Turkey, analogous to Congress blocking transfers of F-16s purchased by Pakistan. The breach of trust between Washington and Islamabad has never been fully repaired, and to this day, impacts U.S. operations with Pakistan and in Afghanistan. Reason enough to pay close attention to how these talks proceed.

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