

US-Turkish Relations in Crisis

Eugene Kogan

In recent years, Turkish President Erdogan has turned his country towards the East. In so doing, he is risking a break with his NATO allies in the West.

To understand the extent of the crisis in US and Turkish relations, the author focuses on the period between 15 July 2016 and October 2018 and presents a multi-dimensional analysis of bilateral relations. The failed coup in Turkey on 15 July 2016 was a turning point in bilateral relations. The coup has left many questions from US officials about the nature of the coup unanswered by their Turkish counterparts. In addition, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's request for the extradition of US-born Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Erdogan called the head behind the coup, was repeatedly rejected by the US Department of Justice because of insufficient evidence. This point is disputed by Turkish officials who claim that they have provided sufficient evidence of Gulen's complicity in the coup to obtain his extradition.

A New Generation of Officers

In addition to the already tense relations, there is the question of Turkish military service at NATO headquarters in Brussels and in various NATO member states, including the USA. Several high-ranking officers asked for political asylum in the USA and elsewhere after the failed coup. According to undisclosed sources, the number of asylum seekers in the US varies between several dozen and one hundred / one hundred fifty and all are senior officers. For recently re-elected President Erdogan, these officers remain a thorn in the side, and he would be more than happy to have the officers arrested. But his request is not being granted so quickly. In this context, it must also be remembered that Erdogan has eliminated thousands of NATO-trained

officers of the Turkish armed forces and promoted a new generation of military officers loyal to him as commanders-in-chief. This new officer generation has a Muslim identity and mistrusts NATO in general and the United States in particular.

air defence system is not compatible with NATO standards and cannot be integrated into NATO's air defence system.

Turkey must therefore limit itself to its own architecture. In addition, the S-400 could jeopardise F-35 operations, as Russia and its

allies receive valuable electronic and signal intelligence data not only about Turkey, but also about all members of the F-35 Club. That was and is the reason for the Senate to temporarily suspend the delivery of the aircraft to Turkey. There were also tensions with Washington

over US support for Kurdish militants in Syria (known as People's Protection Units or YPG) in the fight against the Islamic state militia (ISIS). Turkey regards the Kurds as militant terrorists, while the USA sees them differently, and this question remains a point of contention between the two countries, despite the agreement reached between Turkey and the USA on 4 June 2018.

The agreement stipulates that Kurdish militants can withdraw from the Syrian city of Manbij until September 4. Erdogan declared on 3rd September that "the United States is delaying the implementation of an important bilateral agreement providing



Photo: mawibo media

To the military issues mentioned above, we must add Erdogan's decision to procure the S-400 air defence system manufactured in Russia, a decision taken at a time when relations between NATO allies and Russia are at a very low level. Erdogan's decision to buy the system from Russia and his steadfast attitude not to give up this procurement is vehemently condemned by angry US senators. In return, these senators blocked the delivery of the F-35A to Turkey, although Turkey had already signed a contract with the US company Lockheed Martin in 2002 for the purchase of 100 F-35As. It should be noted that the S-400



Photo: mawibo media

Incirlik Air Base in Turkey has a US Air Force complement of about 5,000 airmen. The US Air Force and the Turkish Air Force are the primary users of the air base.

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for the withdrawal of the YPG from the Syrian city of Manbij". Eric Pahon, defense ministry spokesman, said on 11 September that "it is not that easy. We want to make sure that we do this for the security of all, for us, for the Turkish soldiers and for the people of Manbij," and he went on to say that technical preparations had been made for a joint patrol with the Turkish Army, which finally began on 1 November 2018. In addition to tensions in the security sector, economic relations between the two countries have also intensified. Finally, the inappropriate behaviour of President Erdogan's personal security forces during Erdogan's visit to the UN General Assembly in New York in May 2017 and the unlawful detention of some 15 to 20 Americans have intensified relations between the US and Turkey. Although the release of Pastor Andrew Brunson on 12 October 2018 improved relations between the US and Turkey, relations remain cool. Moreover, public opinion in Turkey about the US is very negative. As a result, the improvement of bilateral relations is not in sight. It must be stressed that the crisis in relations between the US and Turkey is affecting the cohesion of the NATO alliance, as both countries are members of the alliance. The US remains the main actor, while Turkey has been turning away from the alliance for some time, which is denied by Turkish officials. The current difficulties in bilateral relations will not improve in the foreseeable future. The last section of the article describes what the US should do in the present context, and the conclusion illustrates the severity of the US-Turkey crisis, which NATO allies tend to underestimate or perhaps consider temporary.

Military Relations

No US companies bid for a Turkish attack helicopter contract back in 2006 after Turkey insisted on full access to specific software codes, which the US refused to share, considering it a security risk. As a result, the Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI), in collaboration with the Italian AgustaWestland, has produced 50 T129 helicopters for the army. At the moment, T129 may not be exported to Pakistan.

On August 13, 2018, President Trump signed the National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) for 2019, approving a military budget of US\$716Bn and including a temporary ban on the supply of Lockheed Martin F-35A stealth jets to Turkey due to diplomatic tensions with Ankara. The NDAA 2019 requires a written review of the operational and defensive threats to the F-35 within 90 days resulting from Tur-

key's procurement of the Russian S-400, as well as a review of Turkey's participation in the F-35 programme and the nature of US military relations with respect to the use of the Incirlik Air Force Base by US forces and major weapon systems such as the PATRIOT SAM, F-16 FIGHTING FALCON and CH-47 CHINOOK, AH-64 APACHE and UH-60 BLACK HAWK helicopters. The ban on F-35 deliveries can only be lifted after these risks have been analysed, conclusions drawn and political recommendations presented on 11 November.



President Trump and President Erdoğan give a joint statement at the White House, 16 May 2017.

The diplomatic crisis between the USA and Turkey not only affects the F-35 programme, but also jeopardises the sale of 30 TAI T129 attack helicopters to Pakistan. The USD1.5Bn export contract signed in July 2018 is Turkey's largest single defence sale to date. However, the sale is not taking place, because the US has vetoed the export of the LHTEC CTS800-4A turbines that power the T129. LHTEC is a joint venture between Honeywell and Rolls-Royce. No decision has yet been taken.

Economic Relations

Erdogan has protested against the prosecution of Hakan Atilla, Halkbank's Deputy Director General, in a New York trial for violating US sanctions against Iran. As Halkbank is one of the largest state-owned banks in Turkey, Ankara fears that a US Treasury fine against the institution could have a domino effect on the Turkish financial system at a time when the economy is in serious crisis. The Erdogan government wants to obtain the release of Deputy General Manager Hakan Atilla from a US prison for violating sanctions against Iran and sentenced to 32 months in May 2018. However, it is unlikely that Hakan Atilla will be released in the foreseeable future. As in the case of Fethullah Gulen, Erdogan does not understand that

the US Department of Justice is an independent institution and President Donald Trump has no influence on its decisions. The convicted Hakan Atilla will have to serve his sentence in the USA. No decision has yet been made regarding the US Treasury's fine on Halkbank.

In May 2018, Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the international agreement on Iran's nuclear programme and reintroduce sanctions against Tehran. Trump's government also threatened other countries with sanctions if they did

not stop oil imports from Iran. According to data published in May 2018 by the Turkish Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EMRA), Iran remained Turkey's largest crude oil supplier despite a 20% decline in the first quarter of 2018. On 24 July, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said: "Turkey will not implement US sanctions against Iran". Previously, Ankara had sent the same message to a visiting delegation from the US Treasury Department. And on 25 July, Erdogan called Iran "a neighbour and strategic partner", which further strained relations between the US and Turkey.

President Trump further intensified his controversy with Turkey on 10 August 2018 by imposing higher tariffs on metal imports, exerting unprecedented economic pressure on a NATO ally and exacerbating the turmoil in Turkish financial markets. Trump said tariffs on "aluminium will now be 20% and steel 50%. Our relations with Turkey are not good at the moment" and may not improve in the foreseeable future.

Social Relations

A US grand jury has indicted 19 people, including 15 members of Erdogan's personal security forces, for the attack on demonstrators against his regime outside the Turkish

embassy in Washington, DC, in May 2017. The incident outraged American lawmakers, especially after a video appeared showing Erdogan watching the beatings until local law enforcement intervened.

John McCain, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Armed Forces, said after the attack: "This is the United States of America. We don't do that here. There's no excuse for this kind of thuggish behaviour."

The release of Andrew Brunson led to the US Treasury Department's lifting of sanctions against Turkish Justice Secretary Abdulhamit Guel and Home Secretary Suleyman Soylu on 1 August, 2018. In return, Erdogan also lifted sanctions against US Home and Justice Ministers. Despite the lifting of the sanctions, further points of contention burden relations between the two countries. As Senate Armed Forces Committee member Ben Sasse said after Brunson's release, "There is still work to be done and President Erdogan has a long way to go before acting like the NATO ally we expect him to be." Pastor Brunson was imprisoned for about two years.

Also unpleasant is the fact that in 2017, according to the Pew Research Centre, 72 percent of Turks surveyed said they had a negative opinion of the US, compared with 44 percent in 2013. Anti-Americanism in Turkey is stronger than in Venezuela, Lebanon, Tunisia, Indonesia and even Russia. It can be said that anti-Americanism in Turkey is not a temporary phenomenon, but a deeply rooted feeling that will not disappear any time soon.

What Needs to be Done?

In order not to be vulnerable to potential Turkish blackmail, Americans should withdraw unneeded weapons and personnel from Incirlik Air Base and generally reduce the American profile in Turkey and prepare for a time when the United States will be forced to leave the Incirlik base. At the moment, this may sound like a far-fetched idea, but the current deterioration in relations recommends such a move. And the sooner such a step is taken, the better it would be for the US, as Turkey can no longer be considered a trusted ally of the US – a point denied by both American and Turkish officials. Whether or not Greece can replace Turkey as a major air base facility for operations in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean remains to be seen. The visit to Greece in September 2018 by General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Chiefs of General Staff, opened up such an opportunity. Erdogan and his government are watching the developing relationship between the US and Greece with great concern, but they have to blame themselves. The US Department of



Photo: US Army

Kurdish activists wave Kurdish and American flags during the Kurdish regional government's New Year celebrations in Dahuk, Iraq. US officers participated in the celebration. The Turkish authorities are deeply suspicious of American support for Kurdish separatism.

Defence is also providing financial support for the modernisation of a strategic airbase in Jordan. The Muwaffaq Salti Air Base near the Jordanian border with Syria and Iraq has played a key role for the US in the fight against ISIS. The US has already taken precautions if relations deteriorate and Turkey prevents the US from using Incirlik Air Base. It should be remembered that in May 2017 Turkey refused to allow members of the German Bundestag's Defence Committee to visit German staff working on Incirlik Air Base as part of a NATO mission. As a result, the German contingent was transferred from there to Jordan. This set a precedent that can be repeated.

The Western impulse to neglect Turkey is unwise, as it continues to drift into the hands of President Vladimir Putin and towards Eurasia, partly because Erdogan is constantly moving Turkey in this direction by disregarding the advice of its NATO allies. Every reprimand from the West is ignored by Erdogan; Western politicians should remember this and not keep repeating blunders from the past.

Therefore the warning of Matthew Bryza of the Atlantic Council in Washington is very vague. Bryza had warned in the Washington Post on 15 August 2018 that "Turkey is now weakening NATO, damaging the influence of the US in the Middle East and in the coalition, whose fight against ISIS is far from over". All three problems are already occurring today, even if Washington continues bilateral relations despite Turkish misconduct. Unfortunately, Turkish President Erdogan needs pressure to understand the implications of his misconduct. That is why the US Government should speak out loud and clear against Erdogan and not be too timid.

For example, the US should take the initiative to update the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty (also known as the Washington Treaty) and insert a new article on the right of suspension and eventually expulsion and penalties

for misconduct of a NATO member. In addition, NATO veto power should be lifted, so Turkey could no longer block the proposed changes. And NATO's decision-making process should be by qualified majority rather than consensus; it simply takes too long. We must remember that we are no longer living in 1949, but in 2018, and much has changed.

Turkey currently enjoys NATO protection as a NATO member, but Turkey is harming the Alliance by joining forces with unfriendly NATO countries such as Iran and Russia. Alignment is no longer a temporary phenomenon, but a trend that is likely to continue. Turkey's strategic value as a loyal NATO ally has declined over the years, but the myth of Turkey's strategic value remains and many US officials continue to believe in the myth. It is obvious that words alone will not stop Erdogan's turning away from the US and NATO towards Russia and Eurasia. Erdogan's folly will cost Turkey dearly and may destroy the image of Turkey as a bridge between West and East.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as long as Erdogan remains president, bilateral relations are unlikely to improve. But even if Erdogan is no longer president, it would take a while to repair the damaged relations, as much damage has already been done. Erdogan's assertion that Turkey would "start looking for new friends and allies" should be taken with a grain of salt, as finding real friends and allies takes many years.

It should be remembered that the good things that the US has done for Turkey in the past are usually forgotten, while the bad things are remembered. Therefore, the severity of the crisis between the US and Turkey is not a temporary phenomenon, as some NATO allies may wish, but a long-lasting process with profound consequences. ■