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Start Small and Think Big to Rebuild the U.S.-Turkey Relationship

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ABSTRACT *The U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship has been key to the success of NATO and the transatlantic community. However, due to various policy disagreements U.S.-Turkey relations are at a new low. As with all relationships in life, the U.S.-Turkey relationship ebbs and flows and requires hard work, patience, and understanding. This is why policymakers from both sides should not be ready to throw away seven decades of close cooperation for seven or so challenging years in the bilateral relationship. Instead of looking for the silver bullet to solve the major problems, policymakers need to focus more on smaller confidence building measures to rebuild the relationship.*

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After more than seven decades of a strong bilateral relationship, the U.S.-Turkey relationship seems to be at a new low. The relationship between the U.S. and Turkey has been defined by many ups and downs over the years. Some of the 'ups' include Turkey's entry into North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Ankara's gallant participation in the Korean War, and Turkey's outsized contribution to the mission in Afghanistan. Some of the lows include the U.S. arms embargo applied after Turkey's entry into Northern Cyprus in 1974 and the rift over the 2003 invasion of Iraq when the Turkish parliament blocked U.S. forces from using Turkish territory to launch the invasion.

Today there are a number of issues plaguing the relationship. The Turkish purchase of the Russian built S-400 air defense system gives a perception among U.S. policymakers that Ankara is cozying up to Moscow. Equally, the subsequent removal of Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program by the U.S. has made Turkish policymakers question America's commitment to the relationship.

Another issue straining relations surrounds the extradition of the alleged mastermind of the July 2016 attempted coup in Turkey, Fetullah Gülen, who is currently residing in rural Pennsylvania. Turkish authorities have requested extradition.¹ After years, the U.S. still have not made a decision one way or the other.

The situation in Northern Syria has also soured the relationship. In 2015,

the Obama Administration made the decision to arm the PKK-linked neo-Marxist YPG terrorist group and rebrand them as the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces in order to fight the so-called Islamic State. During this time, the U.S. made promises it simply could not keep and that the YPG routinely ignored. For example, promises like the YPG would remain east of the Euphrates River² (it did not) or that weapons given to the YPG by the U.S. would be collected after the fighting (they have not been).³ When President Trump entered office, he continued with his predecessor's policy. U.S. policymakers underestimated how arming the YPG would negatively impact relations with Turkey and are now dealing with the fallout from this decision.

As with all relationships in life, the U.S.-Turkey relationship ebbs and flows and requires hard work, patience and understanding. This is why policymakers from both sides should not be ready to throw away seven decades of close cooperation for seven or so challenging years in the bilateral relationship.

This is not an article to dwell on all the problems in the relationship. No doubt, the details of these problems are already well known to the reader. Nor will this article offer solutions that directly address these major issues. Instead of looking for the silver bullet to solve the problems in the relationship, policy makers both in Washington D.C. and Ankara need to focus more on smaller confidence

building measures. These confidence building measures must be modest, realistic, and reasonable.

The U.S.-Turkey relationship is too important, for both sides, to just let it wither away. This article will serve as a reminder of why Turkey is vital to the United States but also why the United States is crucial to Turkey. It will then offer some concrete, in realistic, confidence building measures to slowly get the bilateral relationship back on track.

Why Turkey Matters to the U.S.

Throughout the Cold War the importance of Turkey was well known and understood by America's policy-makers. However, since the fall of the Berlin Wall there has been less focus on the importance of the bilateral relationship and Turkey's role in transatlantic security.

There are three reasons why the relationship with Turkey matters to the United States.

The first reason is Turkey's important role inside the NATO. Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and since then the country has served as the southeastern most frontier of the alliance's area of responsibility. During the Cold War, Turkey was one of only two countries that actually bordered the Soviet Union (the other one being Norway). After the United States, Turkey has the largest armed forces of any NATO country and the largest military in Europe.

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Secondly, Turkey's military has been tried and tested in combat over the years. Turkey has proven itself to be a reliable partner for the United States. Not only does it have a very professional and capable armed forces, Turkey has the political will to use its military when necessary. This is not a recent phenomenon. During the Korean War (1950-1953) almost 15,000 Turkish soldiers served in the conflict. Turkey has also played a significant role in European security in recent years. For example, Turkey deployed troops to the Balkans to ensure peace and stability in that region in the 1990's. Even today Turkey has troops serving as part of the European Union's (EU) Operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina⁴ and as part of NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo.⁵ Turkey is one of the few countries in NATO that has commanded the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan twice. Today Turkey maintains 600 soldiers in Afghanistan as part of NATO's Resolute Support mission.⁶

Even beyond Turkey's commitments to NATO, the Turkish government and the Turkish people have shown a willingness to tolerate and accept

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the use military force to protect its national interests. This was seen in recent years over the defense of Turkish airspace in Hatay province when a Russian fighter jet was shot down after straying into Turkey's airspace.⁷ Turkey has repeatedly acted militarily to secure its southern border with Syria by conducting multiple large-scale military operations (such as Operations Shah Euphrates, Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Spring Shield) which have shown the effectiveness and professionalism of the Turkish armed forces.

The third reason why Turkey is important to the United States is because of its geostrategic location. Spanning two continents, Turkey is located on some of the most prime real-estate in the world. Under the terms of the 1936 Montreux Convention, Turkey has sovereignty over the entry and exit paths into and out of the Black Sea. As this region becomes increasingly influential, due to Russia's actions in Ukraine and Georgia, the role of Turkey will also become prominent. Turkey is home to a major NATO air base at İncirlik that is primarily used by the United States. The location of the X Band radar at Kürecik Radar Station in south-cen-

tral Turkey is a crucial component of Europe's missile defense system. Due to geometry and geography there is no better location for this radar in NATO than in Turkey.

Turkey is also a substantial player in Europe's energy security, and this indirectly impacts U.S. policy in NATO. Obviously, the more alternatives Europe has to oil and gas that bypass Russia, the safer and more stable the region will be. Furthermore, NATO will benefit and by extension, the United States. Turkey already serves as a vital hub for regional oil and gas pipelines that bring energy resources to Europe or to the global market and there are many more projects in the future that will make Turkey even more influential in this regard.

Why the U.S. Matters to Turkey

Throughout the decades long U.S.-Turkey relationship, the United States has been a strong supporter of Turkey's independence and sovereignty. While the question of Turkish 'independence' and 'sovereignty' might seem unusual in the 21st century, in the aftermath of World War II and during the early days of the Cold War, these matters were not so certain. The Soviet Union had designs on Turkey and the Turkish Strait crisis during the years after World War II is a stark reminder of this.

Turkey needed a friendly and strong United States, especially during the Cold War. The geo-political circumstances of the Cold War made



Turkish army stand to attention during the International Security Assistance Force command handover ceremony in Kabul, June 20, 2002.

PHILIPPE LOPEZ /
AFP via Getty Images

many of the Turkish political elites ‘pro-American.’ Although this pro-American tendency was not always overt, it certainly existed behind the scenes. During the Cold War the nationalists in Turkey shared a common foe with the U.S. which was the spread of communism. After the 1979 Islamist Revolution in Iran, and Tehran’s subsequent subversive activity in Turkey, the secularists among the Turkish elite also shared a common adversary with the U.S.: the Islamic Republic of Iran. For several decades these two issues bonded the U.S. and Turkish policymakers. Even after the end of the Cold War the U.S. and Turkey had many overlapping interests and concerns that kept the relationship solid: i.e. the situation in the western Balkans in the 1990s or the war in Afghanistan after 2001.

In recent years the U.S.-Turkey relationship helped to facilitate Turkey’s

national desire to align with the West on the global stage. Turkey’s westward path of modernization dates back to the late 19th century and was accelerated in the aftermath of World War I. Throughout its recent history, Turkey has shown a desire to get closer to the West and its institutions. In the post-World War II era, during a time when communism was on the march, the United States came to represent that institutional image on the global stage with which Turkey wanted to align. After all, in the post-war global environment, the U.S. was often the main driver, leader, and in some cases the founder, of many of these institutions. This still matters to Turkey today.

America’s sole superpower status is also important for Turkey. As a former major power during the Ottoman times, Turks understand how substantial the influence and power

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of the United States is on the global stage. Turkish policymakers know that for better or for worse, if Turkey wants to be an actor in places like the Middle East, it is better to be more in than out of alignment with the U.S.

The Way Forward

In order to get U.S.-Turkey relations back on track it is time for genuine and modest confidence building measures between both sides. Instead of focusing on the major sticking points in the bilateral relationship like the situation in Northern Syria, the S-400 purchase, or the extradition of Fetullah Gülen, both sides should focus on smaller and more achievable areas of cooperation. These issues are NATO enlargement, cooperation in Central Asia and Afghanistan, deeper economic cooperation and raising awareness of the Crimea Tatars.

This more modest approach towards restoring U.S.-Turkey relations is good for three reasons. First, it takes the high-level politics and theatrics out of the cooperation. Secondly, working on secondary, albeit still important, issues will help build much needed trust between officials on

both sides. Finally, cooperation on these issues could offer some quick victories in the relationship and can improve the image of the relationship in the eyes of the public.

NATO enlargement

NATO's open-door policy for qualified countries has contributed greatly to transatlantic security since the first round of enlargement in 1952, which included Turkey. Enlargement helps to ensure the Alliance's central place as the prime guarantor of security in Europe.

The North Atlantic Treaty's Article 10 states that any European state that is "in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area"⁸ can be invited to join the Alliance.

There is a lot of agreement between Washington D.C. and Ankara on the importance of NATO enlargement at a time when many others in Europe are wavering on this issue. The NATO membership aspiration of the Republic of Georgia is a great example.

Georgia's track record as a dependable NATO partner and its geostrategic importance make a convincing case for the country's membership to the Alliance. Since the Bucharest Summit in 2008, when NATO declared that Georgia will someday join the Alliance,⁹ the U.S. has been one of Tbilisi's most outspoken supporters. For years in the U.S. there has been bipartisan support spanning multiple presidential administrations supporting Georgia's desire to join NATO.

Recently, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, called for the enlargement of NATO. Specifically, he mentioned the addition of Georgia into the Alliance. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos he said: "I don't understand why we have not invited Georgia, or we haven't activated the action plan for Georgia to become a member."¹⁰ He went on to say:

We [Turkey] are criticized for having relatively better relations with Russia as a neighbor, but our western friends are not agreeing to invite Georgia because they don't want to provoke Russia. But Georgia needs us and we need an ally like Georgia. So, we need enlargement and Georgia should be made a member.¹¹

The U.S. and Turkey want to keep NATO's door open to new members. Both have been staunch supporters of Georgia's membership aspirations. The two sides should work more closely together on this issue.

Cooperation in Central Asia and Afghanistan

Central Asia and Afghanistan is a region where the U.S. and Turkey have common and overlapping interests. Both are suspicious of growing Russian and Chinese involvement in the region. The U.S. wants European countries to tap into the region's energy resources to reduce dependency on Russia and Turkey aims to be the energy hub that makes this possible. Turkey has major economic and trade ties to the region. According to its recently published Central Asia

strategy, the U.S. wants to expand its economic relationship with the region too. Both have an interest in keeping extremism and transnational terrorism out of the region.

The U.S. was among the first countries in the world to recognize the independence of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in the early 1990s. Since then the U.S. has built its relationships in the region on mutual issues of energy development, security (especially as it pertains to Afghanistan) and countering Russia and China.

Turkey's influence in the region derives primarily from its cultural, linguistic, and economic links with the four ethnically Turkic Central Asian states of, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, as well as Azerbaijan which serves as an important economic, energy and transit link between Europe and Central Asia. Turkey was the first country in the world to recognize the independence of the Central Asian countries after the fall of the Soviet Union. Billions of dollars are invested annually in the region by Turkey.¹² Turkey has also "institutionalized intra-Turkic cooperation"¹³ by creating the Turkic-Council in 2010 whose membership includes five members: Turkey, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

The Trump Administration launched its Central Asia strategy in February 2020 –the first of its kind for the United States since 2015. In the unclassified and publicly available ver-



NATO leaders pose for a family photo during NATO Summit, London, December 4, 2019. MUSTAFA KAMACI / AA Photo

sion of the document, the Administration states that:

We will help the countries strengthen their economic and political sovereignty, develop deeper resilience, and improve their willingness and ability to cooperate with each other in areas of mutual interest. Successful U.S. engagement in Central Asia will also advance our own national security interests and contribute to the defense of our homeland, citizens, and interests abroad. Close relations and cooperation with all five countries will promote U.S. values and provide counterbalance to the influence of regional neighbors. Finally, expanding opportunities for U.S. business will enhance economic prosperity in the region, as well as support employment and industry in the United States.¹⁴

The United States knows that the more independent Europe is in terms of its energy sources the more stable and

secure the continent is, and by default, NATO benefits. Europe is actively seeking alternatives to Russian energy resources. Turkey is trying to cement its position as the region's key energy hub. Central Asian countries are currently weathering a severe economic crisis and are desperate for new and dependable markets for their energy. The U.S. and Turkey should work together on projects like a Trans-Caspian Pipeline to bring gas from Central Asia to European markets.

Another issue connected to Central Asia that would benefit both the U.S. and Turkey is stability and peace in Afghanistan. U.S. policy makers see Afghanistan closely connected to Central Asia. The U.S. Central Asia strategy devotes a fair amount to how Central Asia can help Afghanistan. On the other hand, Turkey has had close relations with Afghanistan dating back to 1921. In the post-Taliban era, Turkey has deployed tens of thousands of troops to help stabi-

lize the country and fight terrorism. It has also provided millions of dollars in aid since 2001.¹⁵

Washington D.C. and Ankara should work together on pushing all sides in Afghanistan to find a peaceful solution and start intra-Afghan talks. Turkey has also played an important role in the peace process. Back in 2011 it hosted the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, which was one of the earlier efforts to bring a new focus on a diplomatic solution to the conflict. Oğuzhan Ertuğrul, Turkey's envoy to Kabul, has also publicly stated that his country is ready to mediate intra-Afghan talks if asked.¹⁶

Boosting Free Trade

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned that the world faces its worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic impact of the pandemic for Turkey's main trading partners will be severe. The IMF's Spring 2020 Economic forecast predicts the Eurozone's economy shrinking by 7.5 percent and the Middle East and Central Asian economies by 2.8 percent. Emerging markets and developing economies in Europe could see their economies shrink by 5.2 percent.¹⁷ Turkey's expected GDP decline for 2020 is 5 percent. For the U.S. the figure is slightly higher at 5.8 percent.

Now more than ever both sides need to remove pointless tariffs and pursue policies that promote free trade and economic freedom between the two countries. Free trade is an essen-

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tial component of a free economy, involving the exchange of goods or services by two or more parties who view the exchange as to their benefit. Economic freedom spurs innovation, prosperity, and respect for the rule of law.

Both Presidents Trump and Erdoğan have expressed a desire to boost U.S.-Turkish economic activity. Last year it was announced that the goal is to boost bilateral trade to \$100 billion per year (from the current \$20 billion) in just a few years.¹⁸ Economic cooperation and increasing free trade is a win-win for American and Turkish consumers. It would also help build greater confidence in the bilateral relationship.

Crimean Tatars

The Crimean Tatars, a Sunni-Muslim and ethnically Turkic minority group indigenous to the Crimean Peninsula, have faced mounting persecution since Russia's illegal annexation and occupation in 2014. Given the religious and political persecution taking place around the world, it is easy to overlook what is taking place in Crimea. As policymakers focus on

During a visit to Ukraine in January 2020, President Erdoğan announced that Turkey will fund the construction of 500 homes for Crimean Tatars who fled Crimea during Russia's 2014 takeover

Russia's destabilizing role in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, they should not ignore the plight of the Crimean Tatars. More than 20,000 Crimean Tatars have fled the Crimean Peninsula and settled elsewhere in Ukraine since the Russian invasion.¹⁹

Those Tatars who remain in Crimea are subject to repression and discrimination on account of their perceived opposition to Russia. Since 2014 Russian occupation forces have subjected Crimean Tatars to abductions, forced psychiatric hospitalizations, and imprisonment according to human rights and international organizations. Mosques are monitored and cultural and language teaching has been greatly restricted.

With the exception of Turkey, the Muslim world has been virtually silent on the Tatars' situation. Turkey has done more than any other country in the Muslim world to raise awareness of their plight. During a visit to Ukraine in January 2020, President Erdoğan announced that Turkey will

fund the construction of 500 homes for Crimean Tatars who fled Crimea during Russia's 2014 takeover.²⁰

In 2018 the U.S. State Department hosted the first ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom meeting in Washington D.C. the turnout was impressive. More than 350 government officials, religious freedom advocates, and officials from more than 80 nations attended. At this time senior U.S. officials met with the Ukrainian president's envoy for Crimean Tatar affairs Mustafa Dzhe-milev.²¹ In the past, the U.S. has also raised the plight of the Tatars at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.²²

The U.S. and Turkey should champion the Tatar cause as another way to apply pressure on Moscow to end its occupation of Crimea. Both countries should work together to publicly highlight the persecution of the Tatars and encourage countries not to recognize Crimea as part of Russia.

Conclusion

Since Turkey joined NATO in 1952, the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship has helped keep the transatlantic community safe and secure. Not only is it in Washington D.C. and Ankara's interest to get the relationship back on track, but also for the European Union, NATO and their partners in the region.

While the four issues of NATO enlargement, Central Asia and Afghan-

istan, economic cooperation, and the Crimean Tatars might not seem like major policy issues for Washington D.C. and Ankara to focus on, these issues have enough overlap for both sides to build confidence. This could then allow both sides to approach some of the more complicated issues with more trust and sincerity.

Instead of all the focus being on issues like Gülen or F-35, the two sides should work towards common yet achievable issues. Other than economic cooperation, the other four issues discussed in the article, (NATO enlargement, Central Asia and Afghanistan, economic cooperation, and the Crimean Tatars) can be even ring-fenced away from these bigger issues stalling progress in the relationship.

All that is needed is the political will by both sides. The relationship needs to get back on track before it is too late. ■

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