THE END OF AN ENDURING ALLIANCE? TURKEY AND THE WEST

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Turkey is a member of the Western Alliance. Today this membership and the country’s strategic orientation are being questioned more persistently than at any other time both among her allies and within the country. Polls indicate a growing disenchantment with the West and lack of trust in the goodwill of the allies. Ankara’s quest to look for alternative alliances gained strength in the wake of the botched coup of June 15, 2016. This is happening while Turkey is more deeply engaged with NATO than ever before. There are many outstanding issues between Ankara and Washington as well as Brussels and other European capitals. Once the symbol of Turkey’s determination to become a bona fide Western country, EU membership, is no longer on the top of the agenda of the parties in any serious way. Yet mutual dependencies from economic relations to the need for cooperation on the refugee issue keep the lines of communication open.

Previously, when there were problems or conflicts between Ankara and other capitals the question of whether or not Turkey was strategically a Western country would not be raised. The Turkish-American relations weathered many storms during their long partnership. Yet recent developments brought precisely this question to the center of the debate about Turkey. The United States and Turkey ran afoul of one another because of conflicting interests and policies in Syria. The American alliance with PYD/YPG, Kurdish organizations that are the Syrian extension of Turkey’s nemesis PKK and that the US recognizes as a terrorist organization, poisons relations. The inability of the two sides to agree on even the definition of what a “safe zone” in northeastern Syria would mean highlights the scope of the difficulties while offering opportunities for the renewal of bilateral relations.

Ankara developed warm relations through the Astana partnership with Russia and Iran. Angered by the perceived lack of solidarity on the part of Western allies during the coup attempt, Ankara also moved its partnership with Moscow close to a strategic level, however uneven the relation might be in favor of the latter capital. In defiance of the US Congress and despite warnings from NATO it went ahead with the purchase and delivery of Russian S-400 air defense systems.

For the first time in over 70 years Turkey’s choice for strategic identity is being questioned. Ankara is now squeezed between Moscow and Washington. President Putin is elated because he could drive a wedge between Ankara and Washington and the levers of control in the strategic enclave of Idlib, as the air space over Syria are in his hands. Moscow has also shown in the wake of the downing of its fighter plane SU-24 by Turkish F-16s how it could hurt Turkey economically. Washington, too has the ability to harm Turkey economically but at least for the moment President Trump is unwilling to lose Ankara as a strategic asset/partner.

The fact that Turkey’s relations with the West and particularly with its most important security partner, the United States reached this stage of dysfunction is unprecedented. That Ankara would even contemplate aligning with Moscow, its historical geopolitical rival and source of threat, as an almost dependent country is partially a result of the transformations in the international system. It is also a consequence of the priorities and ideological preferences of Turkey’s current rulers.
THE CHALLENGES TO THE LIBERAL ORDER

Ours is an age of “anger” and “uneasiness”\(^1\), sentiments that reflect the conditions of the international system that is in a state of crisis. Whether this state of crisis is permanent or a result of the transitional period from one political economic model to a yet undefined other or the passing of the torch of world hegemony from the West to a more collective power structure remains to be seen. What is generally agreed upon is that the hegemonic power of the West is in decline. The imperial power of the United States, whose transatlantic commitment is gradually receding in favor of a deeper commitment to Asia, is challenged by a resurgent China as well as by what the late former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski called the “global political awakening”\(^2\) of the ex-colonial countries in world politics.

The institutional setup of the post-World War II order is challenged by these two rising forces and, curiously enough, by the current President of the United States, Donald Trump. The post-national, liberal and “imperial” project of European integration\(^3\) is in a profound crisis as some member states openly challenge the values and principles of the EU\(^4\). In many of the Union’s other member states, insurgent populist movements that have little patience for the liberal model challenge the established parties and gain ground among disenchanted segments of the population. The deeper crisis therefore is that of liberal internationalism, the political model that dominated the globe from the second half of the last century. This model was based on three principles: adherence to free trade as the most important component of international integration; a commitment to loosely rules-based set of relations and international institutions that sustain those rules; and finally, a form of security cooperation that at least partially enabled the creation and sustainability of a peaceful Western security space/order.\(^5\)

The main pillar of this order whose tenets are being undermined by none other than its founder the United States, was the transatlantic alliance that institutionalized these principles and common interests that brought together Western Europe and the US. Since the US was the uncontested leader its prevalence could paper over differences whenever they arose. Even in the best of times there were conflicts aplenty between Washington and its European allies. The presence of an alternative system of political and economic order as well as a security alliance helped maintain the collective commitment to the liberal order and its principles. That order has constantly evolved towards further cooperation taking varying forms. After the end of the Cold War, it further deepened both geographically and qualitatively, integrating countries in East Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America and expanded the scope and membership of its governance institutions.\(^6\)

Developments in the post-Cold War period gradually loosened the ties between Europe and the United States. Allies took very different positions prior to the Iraq War even if eventually they all fell in line on the “global war against terrorism”. That Europe was generating resentment in

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\(^1\) Mishra, Pankaj. Age of Anger: A History of the Present, (London: Allen Lane, 2017); Balta, Evren. Tedirginlik Çağ (Age of Uneasiness), (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2019)


\(^3\) Zielonka, Jan, Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.


\(^6\) Ibid, p. 7
the United States and was losing its primacy as a strategic theater was obvious even prior to the advent of Donald Trump. During the Cold War as Alina Polyakova and Benjamin Haddad note, “Europe remained submissive in exchange for a spot underneath the U.S. defense umbrella. For all their current hectoring about ‘burden sharing,’ American leaders have long preferred European free-riding to European chaos. But the end of the Cold War, 9/11, and the rise of China eventually shifted Washington’s security priorities elsewhere, leaving Europe alone and mortal.... Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has shown itself willing to dismiss Europeans' concerns and reticent to dispense blood and treasure on European soil.”

What is novel under the Trump administration is the abdication by the US of its historical role to be the custodian of the liberal order even if only in jest. Today’s Washington is not just unilateralist but deliberately prefers bilateral arrangements and negotiations to multilateral ones while holding all the institutions of the liberal order in contempt. Combined with the gradual but steady retreat from geopolitical/strategic commitment to Europe that started earlier and will likely continue after the abrasive Trump administration’s term is over, the transatlantic interest and value axis has been severely damaged.

In the words of Constanze Stelzenmüller, “the truly singular distinction of the Trump presidency compared to all its postwar forerunners... resides in the realm of ideology. No previous U.S. administration has seen its most senior figures from the President on downwards, so openly affirm disregard for the notion of a rules-based international order that is anchored by shared beliefs in fundamental values of liberal constitutionalism practiced at home: democracy, the separation of powers, rule of law, and the protection of minorities... their notion of a shared "West" is not so much based on values and rules as on a common 'civilization' rooted in Judeo-Christian religion – with an emphasis on the Old Testament. This alternative vision of the West is no longer the magnetic pole or transformational model of liberal internationalism, but a culture engaged in a secular battle for survival.”

When the West’s cohesion eroded and the US engaged in relentless “transactionalism”; as the quest for middle powers for recognition and power in the world system accelerated, an aspir ing regional power such as Turkey was bound to run into problems with her allies. Recently these problems surfaced in full force and put the issue of Turkey’s strategic identity to the forefront of transatlantic relations. At the same time the American retrenchment and the imperative for Europe to provide for its own security created a new space for cooperation between Europe and Turkey, and for Turkey to beef up her strategic credentials vis-à-vis Russia.

‘WE WANT TO LIVE FOREVER’:
AN ENDURING ALLIANCE?

Turkey’s relations with the liberal order have frequently been problematic even in the golden days. Ankara’s deep desire to be included as an equal member of the Western world has always been accompanied with a profound anxiety about the Western-dictated international order. The fear of the West infiltrating the nation to exploit internal divisions had its roots in the trauma of the collapse of the multi-national Ottoman Empire. Despite inclusion in the security institutions of the Atlantic alliance, this deeply-held fear and anxiety over the possible betrayal and annihilation of the Turkish state by internal treason have exerted a strong influence in
Turkey’s mainstream political culture. Like all other Western partners, however, Turkey depended on the United States for its own security as its economy was gradually integrated with that of Europe, particularly the EEC/EC/EU following the signing of an association agreement with the latter in 1963.

Turkey’s Western partners, in turn, while deeply appreciative of its geopolitical importance and its contribution to the security of the Alliance gave the country a “bon pour l’Orient” kind of treatment when it came to responding to its democratic deficiencies during the Cold War. In the post-Cold War period when a new geopolitical reality actually upgraded Turkey’s strategic importance, this deficiency in democratic governance proved to be an impediment to Ankara’s desire to be admitted to the European Union. Once that hurdle was tackled though the EU collectively, and some of its leading members individually, proved not to be so keen on admitting Turkey into their club despite the Union’s formal commitment to such a goal. In short, Turkey was in the Western Alliance, belonged to its institutions but never truly felt herself to be of it. Although these fears in certain periods vied and waned, they recently began to resurface due to domestic, regional and global developments.

With membership in the EU at best a very distant goal and the political estrangement from an idealized Western identity in place, there now remains the question of what will happen to Turkey’s strategic Westernness. Recent developments in Turkish foreign policy – most tellingly, the rapprochement and collaboration with Russia and Iran in Syria, the purchase and delivery of S-400 air-defense missiles from Russia in defiance of American warnings and the ongoing disagreements with Washington on matters relating to Syria raise questions about Turkey’s commitment to the Western Alliance. On the other hand, the US’ seeming disregard for Turkey’s concerns in Syria and the sense of abandonment by allies during the botched coup of July 2016, in striking contrast with Russian solidarity and help, have caused the Turks to question the reliability of their NATO partners.

THE SEEDS OF THE CRISIS

The transformation of the international order after 1989 had fundamentally altered the context within which Turkish foreign policy was conducted, giving way to multiple waves of foreign policy activism. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Cold War practically came to an end Turkey was left for dead strategically, at least as a member in good standing of the Western Alliance. Not only did an important figure such as the then Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger tell his Turkish interviewer on TV that “perhaps Turkey should concentrate more on the Middle East because after all it was not really a European country” but within Turkey there was concern that with the security axis disappearing there was not much that tied Turkey to Europe.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 put Turkey back on the strategic map but not without a serious crisis of intra-alliance confidence. Some NATO members, notably Germany, refused to assume their responsibilities under Article 5 in case Turkey was attacked by Iraq and were unwilling to send Patriot missiles for the country’s defense. Then with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 a whole new strategic and cultural geography opened up as Central Asian Turkic republics as well as the countries of the Caucasus gained their independence. This led to the first allusion to the “Turkish model” whereby

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the central Asian republics would be expected to emulate the secular, democratic Turkish political system and Turkey would in turn play a role in the integration of these new states into the Western political order.

During this decade a number of developments such as the Yugoslav wars, Turkish military’s increasingly useful participation in various peacekeeping operations and finally the strategic alignment with Israel helped reestablish Turkey’s importance in American strategic thinking. This happened just when the United States was reconfirmed as both a needed and an unreliable, if not dangerous, ally for many Turks due to developments in Iraq, notably the de facto creation of an autonomous Kurdish political entity in the north of that country.

The attacks against the United States on September 11 resurrected the talk of a Turkish model. Against the Jihadist dystopia of al-Qaeda, “market-oriented, secular, democratic, Muslim” Turkey that is a member of the Atlantic Alliance, with warts and all, looked much more attractive. The advent to power of the AKP gave more ‘pizzazz’ to the model since the party rooted in Turkey’s Islamist movement undertook a relentless program of reformation, demilitarization/civilianization of the Turkish polity with the help of the EU accession process that was supported by the overwhelming majority of the Turkish public. There was at last, with a decade’s delay, harmony between Turkish foreign policy, the values of its security community and the country’s domestic political arrangements.

Despite the hiccups Turkey’s foreign policy remained predominantly Western-oriented until the mid-2000s. But the seeds of the troubles ahead were already planted as the Bush administration took its Global War on Terror (GWOT) to Iraq in an ill-defined and ultimately botched military adventure that arguably sank the Middle East into a decades long period of internecine warfare and instability. Turkey opposed the American military intervention but felt compelled to consider being part of it because of intense pressure by Washington. Ultimately the Turkish Parliament, reflecting overwhelming anti-war sentiment of the public, refused to let American troops be deployed on Turkish soil to open a northern front. Just as was the case during Operation Desert Storm over a decade earlier, both the officialdom and the public feared that the United States wanted to establish an autonomous Kurdistan in the north of Iraq. That fear, almost a universal conviction, further eroded trust between the allies but America’s failures in Iraq also provided Turkey with a lot of opportunities to expand its reach towards the Middle East, turn old rivals into partners and exert a previously unknown degree of influence in the region. In due time as the Kurdistan Regional Government turned into a major trade partner for Turkey the perennial fears of an irredentist independent Kurdistan in Iraq subsided but Turkey’s concerns over transnational Kurdish activism had not.

The multiple failures of the American misadventure in Iraq that Turkey objected to from the beginning and ultimately refused to be a part of, shook the regional balance of power. The Arab state system remained paralyzed, Iran gained enormous strategic advantages. As the American invasion empowered Iraqi Shia and the Kurds, it also broke the centuries old strategic balance between Shi’a Iran and the Sunni world. In this environment Turkey formulated a policy of engagement with all its neighbors by accepting the existing status quo as given. Ian Lesser identified these conditions as a “benign environment” whereby none of the major actors would be able to counter Turkey’s designs and policy moves. In fact Ankara consistently

pursued policies towards Iran and Syria that were objected to by Washington. So, the war on terror and the policy choices of the US in pursuit of her goals along with Turkey’s increasing propensity to act autonomously as a regional power were major factors in the ever-increasing problems between Turkey and its senior transatlantic partner.

The failure of the EU to find ways to include Turkey was another source of estrangement from the Western alliance. Even though the EU formally initiated accession negotiations with Ankara in 2005, Turkish Europhilia began to sour because of the admission of Cyprus into the EU despite the Greek Cypriot rejection of the Annan plan to end the Cyprus conflict in 2004. What made matters worse was the fact that European politicians began to take a firmer stance against Turkey’s full membership during the EU constitution referenda in the Netherlands and France. As the EU enlargement went forward in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Western Balkans, Turkish political elites felt further alienated. They believed that the EU was employing double standards. Indeed, ‘the EU would not accept Turkey whatever Turkey would do’ rhetoric soon surfaced as the hegemonic discourse both among the governing political elites and the opposition. Turkey’s drift, during that time, away from her commitment to the “Copenhagen criteria”, the steady deterioration of its democratic practices, the erosion of the rule of law and the dissolution of the independence of the judiciary provided the anti-Turkey camp within the EU with ample ammunition as well.

This was in fact not just a crisis between Turkey and the EU. It was a crisis of identity for the EU and its institutions that also took a huge hit first because of the declining liberal spirit in the world due to the ‘war on terror’ and then the evaporating internal and external solidarity due to the financial crisis of the 2008. The economic and financial calamity that befell Western economies in 2008-2010 made the non-Western world conclude it had little to learn from the West. Furthermore, the crisis of 2008 presented a major political and economic challenge to the American- or Western-dominated globalization, reviving national initiatives and making small/middle powers less concerned about their engagement with multilateral institutions. It transformed the perceptions of the Atlantic alliance and convinced the non-western periphery that the Atlantic alliance won’t endure and that it would not be as powerful in the future.

As the late Immanuel Wallerstein once famously observed the crisis at the center of world order is almost always followed by an opening that enables challengers to alter the global economic hierarchy and allows certain countries to move upward. Turkey was one of the countries that managed to stave off the impact of the 2008 crisis, as the tightening of the markets in the developed economies made the Turkish market quite attractive for investors. What followed was an economic success story, propelled by speculative real estate developments and infrastructure investment that relied on cheap money, which success in turn became crucial in the consolidation of the AKP rule in Turkey.

In a period in which neither the EU nor the US had the political will or motivation to intervene in the Middle East, regional powers concluded that they could defy the western international order and carve zones of influence for them.

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14 Öniş. Multiple Faces of the “New” Turkish Foreign Policy.
selves. A distracted United States and a troubled European Union had then played an undeniable causal role in the emerging conflicts among regional incumbents in the Middle East. In fact, the Obama Administration was less committed than its predecessor to the security issues in the Middle East and was driven by the maxim of multilateral retrenchment, a principle designed to curtail US overseas commitments. The relative withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East as a major power created a vacuum that gave rise to competition among regional players and reshaped the patterns of alliance-building and the contours of Turkish foreign policy.

These global, regional and domestic developments provided an opportunity for Turkish leaders to further question the enhanced role of the West in Turkish foreign policy and opened a long-sought out path for a proactive and revisionist direction to replace it. This revisionist policy known as the Davutoğlu Doctrine, outlined a vision of Turkey as an independent global power that asserts its influence in its neighborhood especially in the long neglected Middle East. Davutoğlu’s successive tenures as foreign minister (2009 to 2014) and prime minister (2014–2016) as well as his part in policy making as a foreign policy advisor to both the PM and the Foreign Minister prior to 2009 were characterized not only by an increasingly assertive foreign policy but also by a pan-Islamist vision that was somewhat erroneously dubbed around the world as “neo-Ottoman”. As Foreign Minister, Davutoğlu massively increased Turkey’s regional initiatives, tried to damp down its conflicts with its neighbors and dramatically expanded its trade linkages with the Middle East and Africa.

At the same time the government deployed a populist anti-Western rhetoric with rising frequency for domestic political purposes. The government’s policies channeled the exploding economic energy of the nascent provincial entrepreneurial classes towards trade and market creation all around, thereby transforming Turkey from a national security state to what Professor Kemal Kıvanc would call a trading state. Both at this economic and the political level though the government pursued its own goals with great intensity trying to transform the environment within which it operated. It inserted itself as a party in all the unresolved problems of the surrounding regions. Developments such as the Iranian swap deal that was brokered with Brazil in 2009, the then PM Erdoğan’s confrontation with the Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos had appealed both to the nationalistic and religious sentiments of the Turkish electorate, as well as the proverbial “Arab street”. While maintaining the close relations with Israel that came to fruition in the mid-1990s, the government pursued policies towards the Palestinians that generated friction and irritations in the relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv. These culminated in the tragedy of Mavi Marmara, when the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) killed nine Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American when it raided the ship that was leading a convoy to break the Israeli quarantine of Gaza. The Israeli government refused to apologize for the horrific deed until President Obama’s intervention in 2013. Such a defiant posturing in a multitude of issues was also seen as the key to become a central and independent regional power in the Middle East. Not limiting itself to governmental relations, the AKP admin-

istration has also strengthened its transnational links with organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.20

Put another way, by 2010, Turkish leadership thought that their international and regional bargaining power has increased vis-à-vis the West. They frequently referred to the negative consequences of the Western interventions in the region and the importance of local actors in reconfiguring regional power politics. Underappreciated by them perhaps, was the fact that Turkey could be so active and autonomous mainly as a function of its ability to simultaneously pursue EU accession, strengthen its economy and engage in a careful policy of creating a zone of interest in the vicinity. The precondition for the success of the policy was the existing status quo particularly in the Middle East that came to an end with the Arab uprisings.

IDEOLOGY TAKES PRECEDENCE

When the Arab revolts broke out, Turkey was regarded as a potential “model” for the transformation of Arab countries. The political turbulence of that period, the ascent to power of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in various countries with which the AKP had historically close relations, the changing strategic configuration in the region while Syria descended into a horrendous civil war encouraged Ankara to pursue a policy of regional hegemony. The European Union’s influence over Ankara’s political path was so impaired that Turkey’s minister of EU Affairs at the time could throw the Commission’s Progress Report for 2012 in the waste basket on live TV.

This new situation in the Middle East, as authoritarian regimes crumbled, further enhanced Turkey’s tendency to act more autonomously from the US; this trend had first become evident in the post-Cold War period but had remained subdued. The relative decline in the power of the US, the passing of the unipolar moment and the gradual shaping of a more multipolar international system provided the conditions for Turkey to pursue its national interests—at times in defiance of its major ally, the United States—although the importance of Washington in Ankara’s calculus remained steady.

By the end of 2014 though Turkey’s ambitions have actually been thwarted. The wave of counterrevolution in the Arab world that pit pro-status quo regimes against those that supported the Muslim Brotherhood generally succeeded. With Saudi support General Sisi staged a coup in Egypt, Libya was in total disarray, Bahrain’s movement was crushed early on. Only Tunisia managed to remain on course. Syria’s civil rebellion soon transformed into a hellish, brutal, merciless civil war with strong sectarian overtones. The country has also become the theater of a regional geopolitical power play between the Sunni powers of the Gulf and Turkey on one side and Iran, aided by Russia, on the other to sustain the Assad regime in place.

After an early effort to convince Bashar al-Assad to open up his system Turkey, initially with the help of the CIA, supported and armed the opposition which soon was taken over almost entirely by various Jihadi groups. These groups’ movements across Turkey’s borders were tolerated and often facilitated. Once the expectation that the US would intervene militarily in Syria proved to be the pipe dream that it was, Turkey doubled down on her engagement. The rise of ISIS had the effect of turning the goal of unseating the Assad regime a secondary issue for the Western world. In the meantime, Turkey’s attention was steadily turned to the emerging Kurdish political entity in Syria, Rojava. Despite ongoing talks with the leadership of the PYD,

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the shaping of a nebulous Kurdish state was deemed a vital threat to national security. Partially as a function of this concern Turkey’s own fight against ISIS would remain inconsequential and until after the coup attempt Turkey would not engage the terrorist organization militarily in any meaningful way.

Throughout this time though Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan responded to the rapidly changing strategic environment with a simple slogan: “The world is greater than five”. He thus questioned the legitimacy of the global multilateral arrangements that had been dominated by the UN Security Council and its five permanent members – the US, China, Russia, France and the UK. He was challenging the institutional arrangements that had formalized the distribution of global power as things stood at the end of World War II. Not only was he rejecting the West’s dominant position in that world order, even though Turkey was a member of the transatlantic security system, but he was also demanding that emerging powers such as Turkey be acknowledged as rightful participants in the premier league of power games.

Feeling scorned by the EU, Erdoğan on several occasions asked Vladimir Putin of Russia to admit Turkey into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, expressing a willingness to drop the quest for EU membership. The deterioration in the country’s relations with its Western partners continued apace and received a nearly fatal blow when official and unofficial Turkey alike found the European posture and reaction to the attempted coup of 15 July 2016 wanting. The Europeans still fared better than the US though, as the general public blamed Washington for actively supporting the coup – both because of historical precedent and because, the assumed mastermind of the uprising Fethullah Gülen, resided in the United States.

The aftermath of the coup only made things worse vis-à-vis Europe. The emergency rule, which suspended most democratic and legal rights; the persecution of tens of thousands of people; and the attack on academia and the media reinforced the view in Europe that the coup was being used as a pretext to further Turkey’s descent into authoritarianism. Ankara complained that its Western partners were not sensitive to the existential security concerns that Turkey faced. In turn, the government was totally oblivious to the way in which domestic developments under emergency rule were seen and judged in western European countries, particularly by their publics.

It is under such circumstances that Turkey signed an agreement with Russia to buy two batteries of Russian S-400 air-defense missiles in the wake of the coup attempt. The United States at first did not take the matter seriously and by the time Washington started threatening Ankara with penalties if the deal went ahead, it was arguably too late. Turkey’s search for a defensive missile system goes back to the Gulf War of 1991, when the country’s security establishment recognized the seriousness of its vulnerability. As Sıtkı Egeli points out, Turkey’s security problems and its vulnerability to possible missile attacks are all too real:

Turkey’s geographic environment abounds in airborne threats. These threats involve the classical elements of air power in the form of fixed- and rotary-winged aircraft, as well as the more problematic ballistic and cruise missiles. [...] This is an environment under a serious air and missile threat; the complexity of this threat is likely to increase due to recent setbacks in efforts to contain the proliferation of chemical and nuclear weapons in the region. Aircraft, especially ballistic missiles, are ideal delivery platforms for such weapons of mass destruction.21

In the heat of the discussion over the S-400s, the fact that Turkey signed an agreement on 8 November 2017 with fellow NATO members France and Italy to develop its national air- and missile-defense systems should not be overlooked. It is also a fact that Turkey participated “in nine out of thirty EU-led operations [and] has so far been the biggest contributor to European operations after France, Germany, and Britain”. Therefore, the newly launched Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a mechanism that will strengthen defense cooperation between EU countries and partners, “could provide a novel way to foster mutual trust between the EU and Turkey and possibly contribute to breaking the vicious cycle of blockage with NATO”.22

The delivery of S-400s started on the symbolic date of 15 July on the third anniversary of the failed coup. The United States responded by excluding Turkey from the F-35 program and declared that the aircraft Turkey already purchased would not be delivered. However, President Trump so far did not let the so-called CAAT-SA (Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions be activated despite congressional furor over the deal. In fact, the American position softened after the delivery of the S-400 parts that arrived while an offer by the United States to sell Patriot missiles to Turkey was on the table. Initially, just the purchasing of the missiles was to be penalized; then it was their delivery, then their unpacking and finally the American position was that so long as the missiles were not deployed things would be fine.

However important the S-400 episode is, the truly harmful issue between the US and Turkey is the American alliance with the PYD/YPG in the northeast of Syria. For Turkey the formation of even a nebulous PKK-affiliated state to the south of its border is considered an existential threat and thus unacceptable. The fact that the Russians also do not treat PYD/YPG as terrorist organizations and speak out at times in their favor does not get the same kind of reaction from Ankara. Turkey threatened to start a military offensive against the region controlled by the PYD/YPG where there is a small contingent of American Special Operations forces as well. At the very least it has demanded the establishment of a safe zone in the region where it could deploy its troops. After a long period of gestation an agreement was finally reached and joint patrols have begun. Yet any rapprochement between Ankara and Washington receives a warning shot from Moscow which upon the announcement of the Safe Zone agreement gave air cover to the Syrian forces that attacked the Idlib region where tens of thousands of Jihadis operate in the midst of nearly 3 million civilians. As part of the Astana process and based on a deal made in Sochi Turkey also has control posts in the region and over 2000 soldiers who are now vulnerable to attacks by Syrian regime forces and for now are being protected by Russian troops.

With the Moscow talks and the ongoing Astana process in which they are partners regional actors Turkey, Russia and Iran had taken the initiative to solve the region’s problems at the expense of Washington. As a matter of fact, the most important factor that united all three countries was their anti-US attitude and common emphasis on a search for a solution in Syria without seeking a major input from Washington. However, what unites these three countries took a blow with the recent rapprochement of not only Turkey and the US, but also with the apparent US-Russian cooperation that is developing.

23 Ibid
THE WAY FORWARD: WHICH ROAD TO TAKE?

In the last decade, Turkey has moved away from being presented as a good role model to a model for authoritarianism; from Westernism to anti-Westernism; from a policy “zero-problems with neighbors” to a crisis-prone foreign policy. Many analysts explained these radical changes as the consequence of a paradigm shift in Turkey’s foreign policy. However, rather than being a symbol or even consequence of such a structural shift, the new picture reflects the reactive nature of Turkish foreign policy making. The current reactive foreign policy of Turkey is not even based on a calculated long-term strategic interest. It is highly pragmatic and flexible, and based on short-term expediency. In fact, reflecting broader trends towards transactionalism, Turkey engages with multilateral institutions when she sees immediate material benefits, and becomes pro-Western when and if good relations with Europe favors short-term interests.

Two major threat perceptions, however, shape foreign policy attitude of Turkey: Kurdish transnationalism and regime security. The transnational Kurdish movement that gained strength and political momentum during the Syrian civil war prompted the return of anti-Western narratives. Turkey’s deeply rooted fears of being dismantled by Western powers through the formation of a Kurdish state, this time in northern Syria, with Western support were resurrected. The close cooperation of Western powers, specifically the US, with the PYD/YPG exacerbated these fears. The recent rapprochement of Turkey and Russia is partially related to this anxiety. The second fear and major threat perception is related to regime security. In the second decade of the 2010s, Turkey’s political elite increasingly felt excluded and disrespected by western allies and they believed that the West was using democracy promotion as a cover to advance its strategic objectives. Thus, rising concerns over the security and durability of the regime brought Turkey closer to Russia—as the political leaders in both countries began to believe that their fates were converging vis-à-vis the West. In that sense, one of the powerful determinants of recent preferences for alignment on the part of Turkey is the calculation over which outside power would be most likely to do what is necessary to keep the current regime in power.

Furthermore, Turkey’s foreign policy has also been responding to a changing security environment with insufficient expertise and a heavy ideological/cultural baggage. As Michel Duclos suggests, major political decisions are not made on the basis of strategic considerations, but rather on the basis of contextual elements, and sometimes even moods. Indeed, Turkey has put in motion a system that assigns a more dominant role for the executive and leads to the personalization of foreign policy. This, indeed opened more room for the pressure of contextual elements and day-to-day decision making. For most of Turkey’s modern history its foreign policy has largely drawn its inspiration and guidance from the perspective and dogmas of the armed forces and career professionals in the foreign ministry. However, the rising influence of the President in foreign policy without putting the appropriate mechanisms of oversight in place is the major reason for the ascendance of the reactive nature of Turkey’s moves. In fact, personal relationships between leaders have begun to play a crucial role in determining the course of foreign policy and also set the tone of bilateral relations.

The fact that the foreign policy shifts of Turkey are not structural but reactive is both bad news and good news for the Transatlantic alliance. This is bad news because it is happening in the context of the gradual but steady retreat of the US from the same degree of geopolitical/strategic commitment to Europe as during the Cold War. The good news is that reactive foreign policy is subject to change depending on contextual
circumstances. American retrenchment and the imperative for Europe to provide for its own security creates the requisite space for cooperation between Europe and Turkey.

The softer-than-expected American reaction to the delivery of S-400s suggest that either at the presidential or security-bureaucratic level Washington deciphered the causes for the hectic and often self-contradictory character of Turkish foreign policy. It remains to be seen whether this tactful approach, without relenting on protecting the PYD/YPG would result in drawing Turkey back to the transatlantic or pro-American fold and freeing it from Russia’s tight grip. The same challenge of finding the appropriate mix of policies and approaches as well as incentives and penalties presents itself to Europe as well. It is fairly evident that a Europe without the blanket American security protection and that needs to beef up its defense and security architecture, preferably within the NATO alliance would have ample need for Turkey’s cooperation. For Turkey, the costs of stepping off a trajectory that was chosen over two centuries ago are formidable particularly given the fact that either economically or security/strategically there is no better option for the relevant future. Turkey’s resources proved wanting for a “lone wolf” option. Although it is absolutely in the interest of Turkey to maintain good economic, diplomatic and political relations with Russia, overdependence on and having Ankara’s policy options curtailed by Moscow are detrimental to the country’s security calculus. Thus, a “reset” with Europe would be a necessary step for recalibrating Turkey’s strategic stance.

It is also incumbent upon Europe to decide whether it is willing to expand and rebuild a wider coalition of states to cooperate within a reformed liberal global order that is both geopolitically and institutionally more inclusive. To that end Turkey, whose population demonstrated their commitment to democratic norms and their determination to defy adverse conditions in the recent municipal elections, remains an indispensable ally.
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