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*THE WORLD AND TURKEY  
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**THE UNITED STATES AND TURKEY:  
FROM ESTRANGEMENT TO  
PARTNERSHIP?**

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**THE UNITED STATES AND TURKEY: FROM ESTRANGEMENT TO PARTNERSHIP?**

The relationship between the United States and Turkey, which is already strained by discord and uncertainty, evolves against the backdrop of a global landscape that is itself suffering from growing discord and uncertainty. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has ensured the return of militarized great-power competition. A two-bloc world appears to be emerging, pitting a democratic bloc anchored by the United States against an autocratic bloc anchored by Russia and China. Much of the rest of the world is unwilling to choose sides, meaning that the emerging global system may well be more multipolar than bipolar in character and practice. In the meantime, tack-

ling global challenges, such as arresting climate change, managing economic interdependence, and promoting global health require sustained international cooperation. Yet multipolarity, geopolitical competition, and ideological division may make such cooperation very hard to come by, clearing the way for a perilous gap between the demand for and the supply of global governance.

An uncertain and divided global landscape makes efforts to repair relations between the United States and Turkey all the more urgent. Simply put, the United States and Turkey need each other.

Turkey's neighborhood will be unstable for the foreseeable future; Turkey will be more secure and prosperous if it has a reliable relationship with the United States and is anchored in the West. As Washington increasingly focuses its attention and resources on dealing with Russia and China and scales back its engagement in the Middle East, the United States will be far better off if it can rely on partnership with Turkey to address a host of challenges in the region and beyond.

### **Legitimate Grievances**

After a prolonged period of tension and mutual distrust between Ankara and Washington, repairing the U.S.-Turkey relationship confronts formidable obstacles. Both parties harbor legitimate grievances. Washington is fully justified in criticizing the autocratic turn in Turkish politics that has taken place under President Erdogan. The recently passed disinformation law is a step in the wrong direction, suggesting that Erdogan is tightening his grip as he ramps up his bid for reelection. Control over domestic debate not only impinges on basic freedoms, but also amplifies the anti-American narrative propagated by the government. The irresponsible and inflammatory rhetoric not only irks the U.S. government, but also nurtures a domestic political environment that could make cooperation with the United States politically costly. Erdogan risks entrapment in his own myths.

Alongside Erdogan's illiberal proclivities, Washington also has good reason to take issue with multiple elements of Turkish foreign policy. Erdogan is [right](#) that "the world is bigger than five" (referring to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council), that power is becoming more widely distributed across the international systems, and that Turkey can potentially help ease great-power rivalry and contribute to regional stability. But Erdogan's efforts to enable Turkey to punch above its weight risk leading to overreach and geopolitical drift. In particular, Ankara's flirtation with aligning itself with

Russia, including by purchasing the S-400 air defense systems, is an unwise gambit and a breach in the norms and spirit of NATO membership. And although Ankara has usefully served as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine and helped broker the deal that permitted Ukraine to export its grain, Turkey's lack of readiness to more resolutely stand up to Russia's bald act of aggression against Ukraine is a mistake. Washington has also taken justifiable exception to Turkey's unilateral actions in northern Syria, including the recent military campaign against Kurdish targets. Ankara understandably felt the need to retaliate for the terrorist attack in Istanbul on November 13, but it appears to have held the Syrian Kurds responsible despite a lack of evidence. The United States has also objected to Turkey's provocative policies in the eastern Mediterranean and Ankara's initial blockage of the bids of Finland and Sweden to join NATO.

Turkey has its own set of valid grievances. Due to the connections between the PYD/YPG and the PKK, Ankara was understandably upset with the U.S. decision to pursue strategic cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish group. In order to defeat the Islamic State, Washington had compelling reasons to encourage the formation of the SDF and work with the YPG; the SDF offered U.S. forces the most capable partner when it came to bringing down the caliphate. Yet the Pentagon's continued cooperation with the PYD/YPG since the fall of the Islamic State is unnecessary and fuels Ankara's distrust of Washington. Turkey's removal from the F-35 program, continuing delays in the sale of F-16's, and Washington's deepening alignment and strategic cooperation with Greece add to Ankara's disgruntlement.

Just as Washington is upset by the prevalence of anti-American sentiment in Turkey's public discourse, Ankara is rankled by frequent talk in the United States disparaging Turkey and questioning its membership in NATO. Senator Bob Menendez has [asserted](#) that "Turkey under Erdogan should not and cannot be seen as an ally," and has suggested amending the NATO

Charter to establish a procedure for the expulsion of member states. In addition, Ankara is justified in feeling that its policy initiatives and exertions are often underappreciated by the United States and other NATO allies. Turkey's role in preserving an uneasy peace in Syria, its hosting of some 4 million refugees, its constructive interventions in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, its provision of armed drones to Ukraine to help the country defend itself against Russia, its diplomatic efforts to secure grain exports from Ukraine and keep channels of communication open with Moscow – these substantial Turkish contributions to the public good do indeed at times get short shrift from Washington and other NATO governments.

#### **Long-Term Interests Versus Short-Term Grievances**

Washington and Ankara thus both bring to the table legitimate grievances that have been festering for several years. Furthermore, these grievances do indeed stem from diverging interests. The United States and Turkey find themselves at odds in part because a changing geopolitical landscape has led to shifting national interests. In Syria, for example, the United States partnered with the YPG because it was in the U.S. national interest to do so. Turkey vehemently objected because of its own national interests. American and Turkish interests diverged and inevitably came into conflict.

Nonetheless, even as U.S. and Turkish interests have parted ways on a number of discrete issues, the two countries still share common interests over the longer term. The United States and Turkey need to play the long game and work to ensure that the current divergence of short-term interests is not allowed to “poison the well” and damage the broader relationship past the point of recovery. Put differently, both countries need to keep their long-term common interests front and center, effectively managing ongoing short-term disputes while seeking in the long run to restore the spirit and practice of partnership.

For Ankara, playing the long game means confronting the reality that Turkey will reside in a troubled neighborhood for the foreseeable future. Barring regime change, Iran is poised to continue to be a regional revisionist. Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are all facing prolonged political instability and domestic cleavages along sectarian and communal lines. The U.S. pullback from the broader Middle East, Russia's regional ambitions, and China's growing reach are poised to increase great-power rivalry in the region.

As Turkey heads into this more uncertain regional and global landscape, its best bet for the long term is to remain anchored in the West both geopolitically and economically. Ankara has been playing the Russia card, tilting toward Moscow to increase its global leverage. But alignment with the Kremlin, which never held much promise of paying off for Turkey, has effectively been foreclosed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Absent regime change in Moscow, Russia faces diplomatic and economic isolation for years to come. To be sure, Turkey has economic and geopolitical incentives for maintaining a working relationship with Russia. Indeed, constructive dialogue between Ankara and Moscow has proven its value – including its value to NATO allies – amid the war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, Turkey's channel to Russia will be most effective as a complement, not an alternative, to steady alignment with Western allies.

China may be increasing its role in the region and ramping up investment. But China is a largely mercantilist player in Turkey's neighborhood and is not likely to play a prominent role in shaping the region's security for quite some time. Assuming that rivalry between the United States and China continues to mount, which appears likely, straddling between the West and China is poised to become more difficult. Furthermore, alignment with Russia and/or China would be for Turkey to attach its geopolitical trajectory to two states that are extinguishing the last vestiges of political liberty and civil society – a move that would further set back Turkey's own

ailing democracy. That outcome would constitute a setback not just for Turks, but also for Western democracies still struggling to turn back the tide of illiberal populism.

Erdogan has articulated a potential path in which Turkey aligns with neither West nor East, but instead wields global influence by serving as a bridge between East and West. When Erdogan insists that “the world is bigger than five,” he is of course right that the composition of the UN Security Council is obsolete and needs updating. But Erdogan is overreaching to envisage Turkey as a global power broker.

To be sure, Turkey is a major regional power and has been successful of late in flexing its muscles regionally. Turkey has a quite capable military establishment; it has used both to further its interests in Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine, and beyond. Amid the war in Ukraine, Ankara has succeeded in keeping open a useful channel of communication with the Kremlin.

But Turkey’s GDP is less than 1% of global GDP, or roughly 3.5% of the GDP of the United States. Turkey is a very capable and ambitious middle power, but not one of the world’s major powers. Seeking to locate itself in between West and East would diminish, not enhance, Ankara’s leverage. It would burn bridges, not build them, leaving Turkey in a strategic no-man’s-land with reduced influence in both the West and the East. Turkey certainly can and should help the West deal with a disruptive Russia, a rising China, and a more unruly multipolar world. But if it is to play that role, it must regain the trust and confidence of its Atlantic partners, which requires repairing and restoring its bridge to the West. Only if Turkey refurbishes its credentials as a country committed to the shared interests and values of the West will it be able to carry weight in Washington and other Western capitals, in turn providing Ankara the leverage it needs in both the West and East to help deal with a world that is headed toward greater ideological and geopolitical rivalry.

For the United States, playing the long game leads to a similar conclusion. Washington needs to ensure that the enduring strategic value of a strong partnership with Turkey prevails over the shorter-term grievances that continue to trouble the relationship. As rivalry heats up between the West and an opposing bloc led by China and Russia, the United States needs Turkey on its side – especially since much of the world is sitting on the fence despite Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. As the United States retrenches from the broader Middle East, it needs allies to help fill the vacuum – a role that Turkey can ably play. As China, and potentially Russia, increase their engagement in the region, Turkey’s role as a U.S. ally looms larger. Managing great power rivalry in the Middle East, ensuring U.S. strategic access, countering terrorism, managing migration, stabilizing Syria, advancing the prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians and between Israel and its neighbors, checking Iranian influence, resolving maritime disputes in the Mediterranean, helping ensure adequate supplies of natural gas to Europe – these are among the common interests that provide the United States a compelling reason to rebuild strategic partnership with Turkey.

### **The Way Forward**

The legitimate grievances that separate Washington and Ankara cannot be swept under the rug. But their impact can be muted if both the United States and Turkey play the long game and generate a shared vision aimed at refurbishing their strategic partnership. Embarking down that path requires an initial plan for replacing the current sense of estrangement with positive momentum and concrete steps to put the relationship back on a more solid foundation. That plan has three main planks.

First, Washington and Ankara need to call a political truce – one that succeeds in damping down the rhetoric and ending the cycle of mutual recrimination. Implementing that truce will require restraint on the part of both

parties – restraint that will be harder to come by in Ankara than in Washington. Erdogan is in election mode and thus more prone to resorting to anti-American sentiment for instrumentalist political purposes. Turkey's economic difficulties make even more tempting than usual the ploy of distracting from domestic woes by pursuing a confrontational foreign policy. Nonetheless, Erdogan needs to be mindful of the damage his overheated rhetoric does in Washington – and in Turkey, where disparaging rhetoric toward the United States and the West could stir up popular sentiments that Ankara comes to regret. Recent [polls](#) indicate that 58% of Turks have an unfavorable view of the United States and 54% see the United States as posing a threat to Turkey's national security.

A rhetorical ceasefire will be easier to come by in Washington; Turkey looms far less large in American politics than America does in Turkish politics. But critics of Turkey are much easier to find in Washington these days than are advocates. The short-term focus of electoral politics creates incentives to air immediate grievances rather than talk up the long-term advantages of partnership with Turkey. To push the conversation in a constructive direction, top U.S. officials should begin making a self-conscious pivot and propagating a positive narrative of relations with Turkey.

Second, Washington and Ankara need to exchange gestures of good will, demonstrating their mutual intent and readiness to try to repair their relationship. For example, the United States could step back from its continuing strategic partnership with the YPG/PYD and press the group to reduce its presence in strategic towns in northern Syria. Washington could also move forward with the sale of new F-16s and modernization packages for Turkey's existing F-16s. In return, Ankara could shelve the prospect of further purchases of the S-400 from Russia and agree to keep its current S-400 batteries indefinitely inactive (or transfer them to Ukraine – a quite unlikely option). Erdogan would also

be wise to take steps to salvage his democratic credentials – such as releasing political prisoners and easing off on the suppression of dissent – a move that would earn Ankara credit in Washington and make it easier to generate a more positive narrative towards Turkey. These initial gestures, if pursued in a reciprocal manner, could then set the stage for further steps toward rebuilding good will and mutual trust.

Third, the United States and Turkey, as the atmospherics of their relationship improve, should seek to capitalize on and exploit areas of overlapping interest. Such areas are readily available. The United States and Turkey have overlapping objectives in Syria, including preventing the emergence of a failed state, delivering humanitarian assistance and forestalling the further outflows of refugees, and curbing Iranian influence. If Ankara and Washington can put behind them their rift over U.S. cooperation with the YPG, those common objectives should come to the surface. So, too, do Washington and Ankara have overlapping interests in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. The United States may want Turkey to take a harder line toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but Ankara's ties to Moscow may well prove to be quite valuable as a diplomatic endgame to the war begins to materialize. Once they have cleared away the underbrush of estrangement, such common interests will come into clearer focus.

Moving down this pathway will take time – but it should be pursued with a certain measure of urgency. The United States and Turkey both face political uncertainties at home – especially amid high inflation, economic discontent, and polarized electorates. Both countries are operating in an equally uncertain international landscape as ideological and geopolitical rivalry mounts. The United States and Turkey can ill afford to head into the precarious era that lies ahead facing the prospect of continued estrangement. On the contrary, it is the interests of Americans and Turks alike to prepare for this uncertain future by putting their common interests front and center and repairing their strategic partnership.