



Toward a Serious Rupture in the U.S.–Turkey Alliance?

By Mehmet Yegin

With the U.S. Treasury's August decision to impose sanctions on two members of Turkey's cabinet in response to the detention of Pastor Andrew Brunson, Turkey and the United States have entered a new stage in an ongoing cycle of crisis. This is the third major issue between the two countries since the beginning of the Trump administration. Last year, they temporarily suspended issuing visas to each other's citizens following the arrest of a Turkish employee of the U.S. consulate general, Metin Topuz. In February, Turkish and U.S. troops stepped back from a potential clash in Syria over the city of Manbij, where the two allies differed over the presence of Kurdish elements and their links to terrorist organizations.

While in office, President Barack Obama initiated the idea of "model partnership," a project that aimed to go beyond the historical security-based relationship to create solid economic and cultural bonds. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Turkey's prime minister, was enthusiastic about the idea. But today, both parties are frustrated with their alliance despite its long-term mutual benefits. Efforts to deepen relations have been replaced by a search for ways to mitigate the impact of crises.

Big Deal and Small Deals

The cardinal concern about the relationship is whether such repeated confrontations will cause a serious rupture in the alliance. Some columnists in the United States already assert this idea with harsh words about "kicking Turkey out of NATO," though this is not

technically possible.¹ President Erdoğan himself has explored alternative alliances for Turkey,² having previously toyed with the acquisition of Chinese long-range missile systems instead of other options provided by allies. After the cancellation of that project, Turkey turned to the purchase of Russian S-400s, causing a major debate in relations with the United States and among NATO Allies.

Despite this, neither party has rushed to terminate the alliance so far. U.S. officials have restated its importance; in particular, high-level Pentagon officials have underlined continuing military-to-military cooperation on the ground despite the ongoing problems. On the other side of the aisle, just as Turkey's missile-system agreement with China was eventually cancelled, the same fate for its purchase of Russian S-400s cannot be ruled out. President Erdoğan's urge to write about the state of relations for an American audience in *The New York Times* shows the importance he attributes to it.

But at the same time, Turkey and the United States have started skirmishes on small deals and are collecting pawns against each other. Rather than negotiate by talks, both sides use these pawns for blackmailing. The process was triggered by the arrests and convictions in the United States of Reza Zarrab, a Turkish-Iranian

1 Alon Ben Meir, "Time to Kick Turkey Out of NATO," *Huffington Post*, November 8, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/time-to-kick-turkey-out-of-nato_us_5a0371a0e4b0204d0c1713db; Daniel Pipes, "Saving NATO from Turkey," *The Washington Times*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/oct/16/nato-must-be-saved-from-turkey/>.

2 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, "Erdogan: How Turkey Sees the Crisis with the U.S.," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/opinion/turkey-erdogan-trump-crisis-sanctions.html>.



gold trader, and Hakan Atilla, a top Turkish banker, for evading U.S. sanctions on Iran. President Erdoğan regarded the case as a pawn against his administration. After security forces arrested Metin Topuz and issued an arrest warrant for another employee of the U.S. consulate general, Mete Cantürk (who has been placed under house arrest), the Turkish president harshly criticized the U.S. government. He said: “you will arrest my bank’s deputy general manager for no reason, and will try another citizen of mine for two years, and want to use him as an informant.”³ The two countries then issued visa bans on each other that were lifted reciprocally after nearly three months.

The recent disagreement about the release of Pastor Brunson started another round of pawn collection. The Trump administration first declared its sanctions on members of Turkey’s cabinet and then tariffs — of 50 percent and 20 percent respectively — on imports of Turkish steel and aluminum. Additionally, if the Turkey International Financial Institutions Act that was introduced in the U.S. Senate in July is passed, this would block the country’s access to assistance in loans and technical support from these institutions. Considering the Turkish economy’s downward trajectory, this legislation may become an important factor.

In response, Turkey collected symbolic pawns against the United States. President Erdoğan declared identical sanctions on the U.S. cabinet, doubled the tariffs on U.S. cars and alcohol, and called on Turkish citizens to boycott cell phones produced by U.S. companies. Additionally, Turkish lawyers brought a lawsuit against U.S. personnel stationed in Incirlik Air Base — including commander of U.S. Central Command, General Joseph Votel — for their alleged involvement in the 2016 failed coup attempt.

Turkey and the United States are effectively playing a game of chicken. Whereas the former is seeking the release of Atilla and the lifting of charges against Turkish banks for evading the Iran sanctions, the latter aims to secure the release of its 15 citizens and 3 Turkish personnel without making concessions to Ankara.

³ Patrick Kingsley and Benjamin Weiser, “Why a New York Court Case Has Rattled Turkey’s President,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/world/europe/turkey-new-york-case.html>.

From this point on, there are two paths forward: Turkey and the United States either continue taking pawns and their game of chicken ends with a clash, or they could turn the steering wheel and try to reach a grand bargain.

Risk of Escalation and Grand Bargain

Turkish and U.S. authorities have so far made a serious effort to isolate each crisis from the wider relationship. But, despite their success in doing so, they have failed to resolve the issues at the core of the confrontation.

The two governments reached an understanding to lift the visa bans, but they were not able to actually solve the problem of the arrested U.S. personnel, none of whom were released. At the same time, the United States has not yet delivered on the agreement with Turkey on the situation in Manbij. Initially, the crisis was postponed with the announcement of the creation of a working group rather than a final agreement between leaders. Recently, U.S. military officials announced that they still needed to work on the details about joint patrolling inside Manbij, and the total withdrawal of Kurdish elements from the city has not yet been realized.

If they continue to go down this road, Turkey and the United States may end up with a growing collection of unresolved issues on their hands, which will at best mire relations in a state of crisis. Although it seems unlikely, we may not rule out an escalation which could lead to the break up of the longstanding alliance unless there is a grand bargain that resolves not only the current issues but also the upcoming ones.

Whether Turkey joins the U.S. sanctions on Iran or avoids doing so looms large, with a potential breaking point concerning oil sanctions in November. Currently, the ultimate strategic concern of the Trump administration in the region is Iran. The success of its sanctions, “maximum pressure,” and attempts to roll back Tehran’s influence in the region will be difficult to achieve without Turkey on board. In return, with regard to the sanctions on Iran, a waiver for gas and oil imports would be an important issue for Turkey.

Besides, following the negative impact of the U.S. sanctions on the economy, from now on in Turkey every downturn will be attributed partially to Washington.

But the United States can also have a positive impact on the economy by lifting sanctions as well as by providing financial assistance, either directly or indirectly. The Trump administration may provide a certain amount of credit or loans to reassure the financial markets or so might one of the international financial institutions, in which U.S. influence is crucial.

Wild Card: The Trump–Erdoğan Relationship

The approach of the two presidents to each other and their moves in the crisis constitutes a wild card. They could solve the crisis very fast or they could escalate it to breaking point. A strongly worded tweet from Trump on Erdoğan's personality or Erdoğan declaring sanctions on Trump Towers in Istanbul may cause a clash between them that pushes the countries' relations into uncharted waters.

There has been a specific effort to avoid the crisis building up to a Trump–Erdoğan confrontation, as this has a high risk of getting out of control. In all three flare-ups, there was a strong will from both parties to eschew such a personal clash. Trump never targeted Erdoğan personally in his speeches or tweets, and U.S. sanctions target cabinet members rather than Turkey's president. In return, neither the Turkish administration nor the Turkish media criticized Trump individually. They rather directed criticisms toward Vice President Mike Pence in the latest crisis, to Ambassador John Bass in the visa case, and U.S. Central Command in the differences over Manbij.

Continuity in this approach means that the two leaders still have the ability to make a fast-track deal. Otherwise, U.S.–Turkish relations will continue moving toward a state of crisis. The two countries' initial reactions indicate the continuity of common interests and willingness to maintain the alliance. Nonetheless, Turkey and the United States should not test the limits of relations under the delusion that their alliance is unbreakable.

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About the Author

Dr. Mehmet Yegin is a political analyst based in Ankara. His areas of interest are Turkish politics, Turkish–American relations, and security.

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1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
<http://www.gmfus.org/>