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Turkey: A Bridge or Break?

By Victoria Clement

On 13 November Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [visited](#) US President Donald Trump in Washington. Relations between the two countries have been on shaky ground for some time: Turkey engages Russia in ways that make its NATO allies uncomfortable, there is no settlement over how to handle the situation in Syria, and many Turks resent the US's refusal to extradite the cleric Fethullah Gulen, who they allege fomented a 2016 putsch in Turkey. The meeting took place just a little more than a month after the US president [tweeted](#) a threat to "totally destroy and obliterate" Turkey's economy if it dared to do anything President Trump considered to be "off limits." Despite tension on both sides, interpersonal channels remain open for communication. Interaction between these two leaders will set the tone for US-Turkey relations during the near term and, therefore, deserves close attention. One important question is whether Turkey represents a bridge or a break between the West and the rest of the world. Turkey is undergoing a major moment of self-reflection that could ultimately determine whether it decides to lean more toward the East than the West and the rest of the world or to become a fault line between the two.

Turkish Opinion

Turkey's military is the second largest in NATO, second only to the US force. It possesses a vital geostrate-

MES Notes

On 31 October 2019 Middle East Studies (MES) at the Marine Corps University (MCU) Brute Krulak Center hosted Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, Former US Ambassador to Afghanistan and Lieutenant General US Army (ret), with discussant Dr. Christopher Yung, Dean of the Marine Corps War College at MCU, for a lecture entitled "The Geopolitical Implications of China's One Belt, One Road Initiative". Amb. Eikenberry's lecture was the first in the AY20 MES Lecture Series "Revisionist Actors and the International Order: A Changing Middle East". A podcast interview with Amb. Eikenberry will also be available soon as part of the Eagles, Globes, and Anchors Podcast Series, accessible via the MCU website at www.usmcm.edu.

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: www.usmcm.edu/mes, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcm.edu.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

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gic location and hosts US military personnel at several military bases, most notably Incirlik Airbase, which the US has often used to access sites of strife in the region. Europe relies on Turkey to accommodate 3.6 million refugees from Syria and Iraq. Turkey is often referred to as the “bridge” between East and West. Nevertheless, its relationship with the United States has been rocky at several points over the past decades and is currently under a microscope, especially in Turkey.

At Istanbul’s Kadir Has University, the annual [survey](#) of public perceptions of Turkish foreign policy revealed that a high percentage of Turkish citizens are pessimistic about their country’s relationship with the United States. The great majority—81.3 percent—of Turks polled reported that the United States poses a threat to Turkey. There is no ambiguity here. Furthermore, a meager 5 percent of respondents believe that the United States is a friend of Turkey, while 20 percent said that Russia is a friend. As this survey illustrates, US relations with Turkey have been especially tense in recent months. However, this is not the first time that Turks have been disappointed by US policy, and it is unlikely to be the last. There are a multitude of issues on the table from questions about whether the US is providing asylum for the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, who many Turks believe instigated the July 2016 coup attempt against President Erdogan, to the United States’ relations with the Kurds and Turkey’s reliability as a NATO ally. Each is part of a larger issue that the US news media has examined closely. One issue that has not yet been addressed, but is vital for understanding longstanding Turkish perceptions of themselves in relation to the global community, is an anxiety experienced by many Turks known as the “Sevres Syndrome.”

Sevres Syndrome

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the 1920 Treaty of Sevres partitioned the Ottoman Empire and divided its lands among Western powers, reducing the Turkish holdings to the areas around today’s capital, Ankara. The signatories of the treaty were France, Britain, Italy, Japan, and the Ottomans.¹ Remaining lands were divided between the Kurds, Armenia, Greece, Britain, France, and Italy.² General Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and the Turkish people fought this situation, instigating the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923), and their victory led to the Treaty of Lausanne, which superseded the Treaty of Sevres. The new treaty allowed the Turks to create what became modern-day Turkey with large holdings in Anatolia. It established modern day Turkey’s sovereignty and territoriality. However, to this day, the term “Sevres” references the widely held suspicion among Turks that outside forces (especially the West) remain intent on pulling Turkey apart and reducing its holdings.

In the 29 October 2019 Independence Day message to the Turkish people, President Erdogan [remarked](#) on these issues without a specific reference to Sevres but raised the specter of external threats to Turkish borders. His words are worth quoting at length to illustrate why some analysts refer to this interpretation of Turkish relations with external powers as “siege paranoia.”³

As a nation and as a state, we have been in a historic struggle again in recent years in order to protect our existence and our future. All the events we have experienced such as the attacks of terrorist organizations, the treacherous coup attempt of July 15th [2016] and others are manifestations of this historical struggle. Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring, which we have conducted in Syria, are also parts of this struggle. We are conducting a struggle similar to our Independence War, which we started a century ago and crowned by establishing our new Republic, with different images and methods. All kinds of plots and mischief aimed at disrupting our national unity and solidarity are

displayed. The security of our borders, our economy and similar important issues are under multi-faceted attacks which target our sovereignty and continue uninterrupted.

In stating that Turkey is in a struggle similar to its War of Independence, when the country's territorial integrity was in question, Erdogan reveals that Turkey is concerned about its borders and national makeup as well as its sovereignty. Why in 2019, when it is just a few years away from celebrating one-hundred years of nationhood, does Turkey's leadership feel so threatened? As Erdogan remarked, the struggle Turkey is engaged in is a historic one. That is, it stretches back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the battles Turks fought to secure their place in the international community. They do not feel confident that the rest of the world supports them even as—in their view—they strive to be good global citizens, taking in immigrants, maintaining a democracy, and living in a tough neighborhood. This fear has contributed to a developing bond with Russia, and many Turks are deciding which way to lean.

Not only Turkey's government in Ankara but also the Turkish people are wary of their relationship with the United States and are questioning their international role. According to Professor Sener Akturk at Istanbul's Koc University, as the relationship between Turkey and the United States is increasingly strained by critical issues, Turks [perceive](#) the US as "an ally that has to be paradoxically kept at arm's length and even balanced against with Russian cooperation...the US has become even more threatening than Russia." The above-mentioned survey by Kadir Has University demonstrates that Turkish wariness is quantitatively observable.

'Progressive Interaction' with Russia

Turkey's relationship with Russia over the years has been more contentious than friendly. The Ottoman and Russian Empires competed directly over multiple lands and peoples, warring frequently. More recently, Turkey's leadership opposed Russia's 2014 incursion into Crimea, a region the two empires sparred over multiple times. In 2015, when a Russian jet encroached upon Turkish airspace as it approached the Turkish-Syrian border, the Turkish government shot it down, creating a major rift between the two countries. Russia accused Turkey of overreacting, while Turkey accused Russia of deliberately violating its airspace. This intense reaction was based in the Turkish fear of the inevitable intrusion of outsiders or the [Sevres Syndrome](#). Despite these points of friction, Ankara has alarmed its NATO allies with its mounting rapprochement with Moscow.

The US believes that the Turks' purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile system puts Ankara's interoperability with NATO allies at risk. In response, Washington excluded Turkey from its F-35 stealth fighter program and threatened to levy sanctions against Ankara under the Countering of America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA, which mandates sanctions on entities that conduct business with the Russian defense industry. Turkey insists that it will not allow the S-400 missile system to compromise NATO systems and did not back down from the deal. Meanwhile, cooperation with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Syria has placed it at odds with US policy there, contributing to questions over Turkey's commitment to the NATO alliance.

The November meeting with President Trump came on the heels of a conference between Presidents Erdogan and Putin held in Sochi, Russia, on 22 October. That encounter resulted in a ["Memorandum of Understanding Between Turkey and the Russian Federation"](#) in which they detailed how they would jointly support the national security of Turkey through collaboration in Syria. Not long before that, Erdogan was in Moscow where he had the opportunity to view Russian fighter jets and consider their purchase. A Russian official [reported](#) that the two

countries have not yet signed a contract but have had “progressive interaction” on the topic. This should alarm the US, which identified Russia as one of its “long-term strategic competitors” in its [2018 National Defense Strategy](#).

In one of the many examples of commentary on Turkey’s NATO membership, Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, [suggested](#) that it is long past when the US should “give up the fiction that Erdogan’s Turkey is an ally in practice. US should withdraw all nuclear weapons, reduce reliance on Turkey’s bases, and restrict intelligence sharing and arms sales.” Other analysts [suggest](#) that Turkey is a “frenemy” and that Washington should pull out of Incirlik Airbase, even though it was the US Army Corps of Engineers that built it. Some have gone so far as to [suggest](#) that Turkey’s NATO membership should be suspended. Such advice could be counterproductive in the long-run, and the US should instead proceed more cautiously. Just as Turkey needs to signal that it is committed to its membership in NATO, the West should look for ways to encourage Turkey to continue to see itself in its historic position as a bridge.

Conclusion

Turkey is trying to play both sides against the middle, and it is not in the interest of the US or NATO to play along. Erdogan believes that his efforts to balance Russian against US interests will serve him in the long run. He wants to meet and make agreements with both Washington and Moscow. However, Russia is not a proven Turkish ally; it is a port in the storm. It is pragmatic for Turkey to remain in NATO—for all those involved. Though Russia is not the answer for Ankara, Washington will need to consider its relationship with Turkey carefully if it intends to maintain a presence in the Middle East. The US needs to maintain a long-term perspective. Washington would gain more from helping Turkey and its citizens recognize that it is in Turkey’s interest, as well as the interests of the Middle East and the broader world, for Turkey to maintain its strategic position as a bridge and not become a fault line.

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Notes:

¹ Fatma Müge Göçek, *The Transformation of Turkey: Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 105.

² The signatories of the Treaty of Lausanne were France, Britain, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and Turkey.

³ Michelangelo Guida, “The Sèvres Syndrome and “Komplo” Theories in the Islamist and Secular Press,” *Turkish Studies*, 9 (1) 2008, 37-52.



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