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The Case for a US Turkey Policy Reset

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

President Recep Tayip Erdogan's overhaul of Turkey's domestic and foreign affairs, coupled with changes in the international strategic environment, prompt a careful rethinking and restructuring of the long-standing policy towards a treaty ally with which U.S. foreign policy and national security interests are no longer aligned on many fronts. Turkey's new foreign policy course is reflective of the strong nationalist and imperialist tradition in the country's political and intellectual establishment, and Washington must reckon with it as America navigates the new reality of an increasingly unstable and multipolar world.

Turkey's political evolution under President Erdogan (who has held power and gradually consolidated his authoritarian grip over the country since 2003) has had a serious impact on the country's foreign policy, which has taken on increasingly militaristic, aggressive, and neo-imperialist features. Turkey has acted increasingly independent of de jure allies in the West and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance to pursue its agenda abroad, often at the expense of U.S. interests. The growing list of grievances between the U.S. and Turkish governments are not simple issues that can be resolved without affecting the fundamental nature of the relationship. These are rather the symptoms of the irreconcilable and foundational differences in the American and Turkish visions of the relationship and the world order in general.

This paper's findings demonstrate the need to reject the concept of strategic alliance or partnership with the Republic of Turkey when formulating official policy. The United States should instead adopt a balancing, tit-for-tat strategy of containing and engaging instead of overvaluing the relationship. The demilitarization of the bilateral relationship should be the first step in adjusting American policy towards Turkey. The United States must minimize its dependence on an unreliable ally for strategic needs and avoid unnecessary and costly defensive commitments. All security assistance programs that contribute to the Turkish government's offensive capabilities abroad must be halted. Sales of advanced weapons systems must end, and new arms contracts must come with a verifiable condition that American weaponry will not be used for aggressive actions abroad or against civilians at home. The Biden Administration should end once the sale of F-35 fighter jets to Turkey and deny new requests for more F-16 jets. A more assertive diplomatic approach, such as naming and shaming, is warranted to balance Erdogan's increasingly aggressive and belligerent rhetoric.

A 180 Degree Turn: Redefining Turkey and Its Role on the World Stage

To understand how the transformation of Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) affects American national security interests, it is important to understand Turkish grand strategy since Erdogan's rise to power in 2002. In this context, a careful review of domestic processes, the Turkish government's discourse on the country's role in the world, and the country's foreign policy outputs paints a grim picture from the perspective of vital American interests.

By restructuring the domestic political system and bringing most of the country's important institutions under his control, President Erdogan has ensured that his legacy will not be a temporary, episodic impact on the country's foreign policy, but that it will endure with the help of forces sympathetic to his vision of Turkish grand strategy.

Crushing Western Hopes: No to Liberal Democracy, Yes to Autocracy and One-Man Rule

The evolution of Erdogan's policies is somewhat analogous to Russian President Vladimir Putin's turn from his moderate and Western-oriented stance in his early years to a conservative, authoritarian rule characterized by decoupling from the West to pursue status, national glory, and imperial grandiose on the world stage. Both leaders have consolidated power at home by using state resources against opposition parties, jeopardizing the integrity of elections, and bending institutions to their will and vision.

Consolidating his personal power through various means, such as the crushing of dissent and opposition and mass political persecutions after the July 2016 coup attempt,¹ Erdogan has essentially abandoned the liberal democratic model altogether. Furthermore, the constitutional changes enacted by Erdogan's ruling regime in 2018 that turned Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one further removed checks and balances on the strongman's rule.² Today, the fate of the second largest party in Turkey (the

largest opposition party) hangs in the air as Erdogan-appointed judges contemplate suspending the activities of and disbanding the party altogether.³

The constitutional referendum of 2017 was a pivotal moment for Erdogan's presidency and for the Turkish political system. After the referendum, Turkey eliminated the office of the prime minister, and the president was allowed to serve as the head of the ruling party. The president received a range of new powers such as the right to issue decrees, appoint half of the judges of the nation's high courts, propose the state budget, and more.⁴ More importantly, the constitutional referendum reset the term limit count for the incumbent president, theoretically allowing Erdogan to rule up until 2029.⁵

Since 2016, the international community and the West have grown concerned with Turkey's drift towards authoritarian rule and its crackdown on civil and political liberties. The latest annual report by Freedom House classified Turkey as a "not free" society with limited freedom of expression, political and civil liberties, and limited public discourse.⁶ Right after the referendum, the *New York Times* editorial board published an op-ed entitled "Democracy Loses in Turkey," denouncing these constitutional changes given Erdogan's dictatorial instincts and affirming the Western disappointment with the course that President Erdogan had now formally charted for Turkey.⁷

Under Erdogan, the mass crackdown on civil liberties and political rights has accelerated to a gruesome degree. According to Amnesty International, in 2016, globally one-third of jailed journalists and media executives worldwide were imprisoned by Erdogan's regime.⁸ Authorities have curtailed freedom of speech and expression at unprecedented levels in Turkey as intellectuals, writers, academics, and journalists who criticize the government are at increased risk of criminal investigations, state-sponsored harassment, prosecution, and persecution. Gay pride parades have been banned in the country since 2015, while Wikipedia has been banned since 2017.⁹

As such, the hopes of Western governments in the early 2000s that Erdogan and his AKP would bring a much-needed model of a majority-Muslim, Western-oriented secular democracy to its completion fizzled out.¹⁰ After the end of the Cold War, not only has

Turkey's strategic role been overvalued and the American interests in relation to Turkey exaggerated, but the hopes pinned on Erdogan specifically were misplaced from the start. Ignoring Erdogan's authoritarian inclinations and openly Islamist ideology, Western governments hoped that Turkey would further strengthen its secular republic based on the Western liberal democratic model and would integrate fully into the Western bloc. At the same time, Erdogan himself was explicitly declaring early in his political career that he is no democrat, let alone a believer in the Western liberal model of democracy. In his words, "*Democracy is like a tram. You ride it until you arrive at your destination, then you step off.*"¹¹

Even as Turkey has almost completely departed the democracy "tram," the country has faced little to no backlash from the American or European governments. While the United States has been significantly more aggressive in its campaign of public naming and shaming towards other governments with similar track records, such as Putin's regime in Russia, the same has not been true for Turkey. Given the country's membership in NATO and the U.S.-Turkish military relationship based on the political calculus of the Cold War-era, American officials have largely kept silent. Even as the Russian invasion of Ukraine unfolded, Turkey's neutral stance and deepening relationship with Russia appear to have made no difference in this conventional wisdom.

No to Secularism, Yes to Islamism

As Jenny White of Stockholm University has written, "*The history of the modern Turkish Republic is shaped by the forces of secularism and Islamism.*"¹² It is impossible to contextualize the ideological redefinition of Turkish foreign policy without accounting for the rise of Islamism and decline of the secularist, republican forces in Turkey.

Under Erdogan's reign, Turkey has embraced Islamism and integrated core features of Turkish nationalism, neo-Ottomanism, and pan-Islamism into the official doctrine guiding both internal and foreign policy. Most prominently, Erdogan proudly announced the conversion of Hagia Sofia—an Orthodox Christian cathedral built 1500 years ago and a symbol of Eastern Christianity that was

turned into a museum in 1936 and recognized as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site—into a mosque in 2020.¹³

One of the pillars upon which the modern Republic of Turkey was founded by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923 was the principle of secularism. General Ataturk and his political allies, who built the modern Turkish republic on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire defeated by the Allies in WWI, blamed religion for the failure of the Ottoman project and the demise of the empire. They saw the path to modernization of the country within the West and thus embraced secularism, banning political Islam and eliminating religion from the public life and governance of the country.¹⁴

It is within this framework that Turkey received substantial American support based on the Truman Doctrine during the Cold War, joined NATO, and embarked on a path of Westernization and integration within Western and European institutions. While Erdogan did not actively steer away from this path early on, his populist Islamist ideology came into full display once he was able to establish effective control over the country's domestic institutions, remove checks and balances on his power, erode the rule of law, and erase any meaningful opposition to his rule.

President Erodgan has been an Islamist since his early entry into the political world, joining the youth wing of Necmettin Erbakan's National Salvation Party. The predecessor to this party was banned in 1971 for violating the secular values enshrined in the Turkish constitution.¹⁵ It is noteworthy that young Erdogan joined the party ranks after Erbakan, the first leading Islamist politician in modern Turkey, published his infamous manifesto in which he advocated for Turkey to sever ties with Europe and align with the rest of the Muslim world.¹⁶ Since then, Erdogan has positioned himself as the "man of the people," relying on Islam and its role in the Turkish national identity, using polarizing rhetoric and exclusionary politics, and casting himself as the "savior" fighting against the corrupt, Kemalist elite that has used secularism to repress Muslims.¹⁷

Erodgan's "New Turkey," which embraces pan-Islamism and has forfeited secularism, the foundational principle of Turkish democracy, can no

longer align with the United States and other Western allies in terms of values and principles. Erdogan's Islamist ideological inclinations are also a factor in his anti-American and anti-Western policies and rhetoric as he has brought back the discourse of civilizational confrontation between the Christian West and the Muslim world. Using a combination of populist strategies, he has appealed to a large portion of the Turkish public and framed America and the American-led West as "the enemy."¹⁸

Turkish Adventurism Abroad: Growing Ambitions, Shrinking Stability

While there exists speculation about Erdogan's use of foreign interventions to maintain popular support and generate the "rally around the flag" effect to explain the more assertive and militant foreign policy, the reality is that those interventions fit into a more cohesive strategy.¹⁹ Through policies independent of NATO and Western decision-making, unilateral military interventions abroad, and a strategy to maximize Turkish diplomatic power projection by leveraging its relationships with the West versus Russia, Erdogan has successfully brought Turkey to the center of global politics.

First, Erdogan has increased Turkish power projection abroad by intervening in different hot spots and conflicts in the region. Turkey supported the opposition to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, including Islamic jihadist groups.²⁰ Erdogan launched several military operations in Northern Syria where Turkish forces and Turkish-backed armed groups have engaged in serious human rights abuses.²¹ Erdogan's justification for the Turkish invasions has been the Syrian Kurdish forces which Turkey considers a national security threat.²²

In fact, one of the most contentious issues in the U.S.-Turkish relationship in recent years has been U.S. support for the Syrian Kurdish forces, which have played an important role in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS).²³ Erdogan, like other Turkish officials and politicians, has not been subtle in denouncing U.S. policy and support for forces whom he considers terrorists. Last year, Erdogan told journalists that, "It is the U.S. and coalition

forces that primarily feed terrorism in Syria, they did it ruthlessly and they still do it."²⁴ In 2019, after a fresh Turkish offensive in Syria against the U.S.-backed Kurdish forces, Congress swiftly passed a resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide of 1915 committed by Ottoman Turkey - a sour question for the Turkish government for decades and a move earlier administrations refused to take, fearing it would upset the relationship with the NATO ally.²⁵ Another resolution condemning Turkey sought to prevent U.S. arms sales to the country and imposed sanctions on Turkish officials. The United States also opposed the latest Turkish offensive and announced that the Turkish military operation poses a "direct threat" to American forces.²⁶

Towards Greater Geopolitical Power in the Eastern Mediterranean

The growing Turkish expansionism and belligerent rhetoric have also targeted another NATO ally: Greece. This has the effect of damaging the alliance's cohesion and forcing the United States into a difficult situation. Turkey and Greece have long been at odds with each other. The two countries share a painful history of ethnic conflict and have longstanding disputes over maritime boundaries.²⁷ Turkey and Greece also clash in the frozen conflict in Northern Cyprus, which Turkey invaded in 1974 and where it supports an ethnically Turkish separatist regime.

The tensions have risen to the point that the possibility of a military clash between the two NATO member states is now part of the expert conversation about the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean.²⁸ At the same time, President Erdogan has contributed significantly to the current instability in the region by escalating the belligerent rhetoric against Greece. Last year, via Twitter, Erdogan even referenced the mass massacres committed by Ottoman Turkey against minority Greek Christians, warning that Greece would "regret, as happened a century ago."²⁹

Erdogan's decision to intervene militarily in Libya and throw Turkey's military and economic support behind the Government of National Accord (GNA) in the proxy confrontation is largely explained by geostrategic and economic reasoning. In 2019, the deal signed with the GNA allowed Turkey to further its interests in the maritime disputes with Greece,

Egypt, and Cyprus in exchange for the military support and troops that helped the GNA retain the capital, Tripoli, and re-establish control over lost areas.³⁰ Despite U.S. and European calls to remove all foreign fighters from Libya, Turkey continues to maintain its military presence there.

Much of the justification for Turkish involvement in Libya has focused on the idea of Turkey's "Near Abroad," similar to the concept that Putin's regime has used to intervene in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Recent global events, such as the rise of China as a competitor to the United States and the war in Ukraine, have further reinforced the Turkish vision of world order in which the country seeks to re-establish itself as a successor to the Ottoman Empire and its great power status. Washington must reckon with the underlying objective behind Turkish interventions abroad as avenues to increase the country's geopolitical power, not for the benefit of the Western bloc or American interests, but often at their expense.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict and Central Asia: The Most Striking Example of Turkish Neo-Imperialism

While Turkish policy in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean points to a desire to increase Turkey's geopolitical leverage in the region, Turkey has pursued a more expansionist policy in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The case study of Erdogan's policy towards Armenia and Azerbaijan after the 2020 war over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian), is a striking example of the growing expansionist and imperialist elements of Turkish foreign policy.

Turkey has supported Azerbaijan in its conflict over the Armenian-inhabited region of Nagorno-Karabakh since the 1990s. Then, the Armenian forces won a decisive victory against Azerbaijan, establishing control over the region in its Soviet-era boundaries and surrounding regions and forcing Azerbaijan to negotiate within the framework of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group mediators—the United States, France, and Russia.³¹ In retaliation, Turkey unilaterally closed its border with Armenia and, along with Azerbaijan,

imposed a blockade on the landlocked country—a policy that still stands today.

While Turkey's diplomatic support for Azerbaijan was consistent throughout the three decades of negotiations surrounding the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Turkey decisively tilted the military balance of the conflict in recent years. Throwing full diplomatic, military, and economic support behind Azerbaijan and the dictatorial regime of President Ilham Aliyev, Turkey emerged as an important player in the South Caucasus. At the same time, Turkey did not coordinate its policy or actions with the United States or European partners, which had been mediating in the conflict for the past three decades, nor did it act as an unbiased mediator. Turkey had helped Azerbaijan's army-building efforts since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the unconditional support Azerbaijan received leading up to the 2020 war, in the form of drones, advanced weaponry, training, military advisors, and intelligence, was a decisive factor in pushing the country to seek a military solution to the conflict.³²

Despite Azerbaijan's hopes for a decisive military victory, the outcome of the war has further destabilized the region and made it the theater of geopolitical competition between different players. Azerbaijan was unable to achieve full control over the entire region and Russian peacekeeping forces were stationed in the Armenian-held areas.³³ The Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process gives little hope that comprehensive peace will be achieved, largely because of the maximalist stance of the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance and the border clashes through which the Azerbaijani military seeks to pressure Armenia and gain control over strategic heights.³⁴

While the United States has ramped up its diplomatic involvement in the peace process in recent months and has denounced the latest aggressions by Azerbaijan, U.S. policymakers have not significantly highlighted Turkey's role in the conflict. Turkey's increasingly expansionist policy is in full display in this case, with Erdogan openly claiming the victory in the 2020 war as a strategic victory for the new Turkish foreign policy.

In his visit to Azerbaijan right after the 2020 war, Erdogan declared what is a clear remnant of the

20th century pan-Turkic ideology, the concept of “one nation, two states,” referring to the relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan and reflecting the historical fears of Armenia and the Armenian nation.³⁵ Turkey’s increasing military and economic cooperation with oil-rich Azerbaijan is understandable, but the underlying objectives for the assertive policy in the South Caucasus also highlight larger themes and goals. Erdogan himself has described the unconditional support for Azerbaijan as a “quest for [Turkey’s] deserved place in the world.”³⁶

Within this “quest,” Azerbaijan, which has fully fallen into Turkey’s orbit, is an important connection to the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia. Turkey views Azerbaijan as a trade and logistical route to Central Asia, one of the reasons why Turkey has been keen on coercing Armenia to grant Azerbaijan an extraterritorial corridor through the southern region of Syunik. The so-called “Zangezur” or “Turkic” corridor would allow Azerbaijan free passage through sovereign Armenian territory to its exclave of Nakhichevan, thus connecting mainland Azerbaijan to Turkey, which Armenia vehemently opposes on national security grounds and as a violation of territorial integrity.³⁷

Those in Washington who see Azerbaijan’s victory and the collective Turko-Azerbaijani coercion campaign against Armenia as a geopolitical win for America should think twice. The Azerbaijani government has funneled significant financial resources to paint a specific narrative in Washington.³⁸ This narrative carefully omits Azerbaijan’s own deep cooperation and relationships with America’s adversaries, such as Russia and Iran and exaggerates Azerbaijan’s relatively modest energy reserves’ ability to replace Russian energy imports for Europe.

At the same time, days before Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine, Russia and Azerbaijan signed an agreement sealing an “alliance” between the countries and instituting a prohibition to take actions aimed against each other.³⁹ Unsurprisingly, Azerbaijan has neither condemned Russia’s unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, nor has it joined the Western sanctions against Putin’s regime. Yet, Aliyev’s propaganda regime is working tirelessly to stain the image of landlocked Armenia as a Russian proxy.

Turkish expansionism has also manifested itself in Central Asia where Turkey has pursued trade and defense agreements as well as ramped up activities within multilateral institutions to grow its geopolitical role in Central Asia. For example, in 2022, Erdogan visited Uzbekistan, a Turkic-speaking, former Soviet state with substantial Russian influence, to deepen cooperation with the country and sign agreements on trade and defense.⁴⁰

But in developing these relationships with Central Asian countries and expanding Turkish influence in the region, Erdogan has not only sought to reap economic benefits and expand trade, but also elevate his expansionist ambitions containing pan-Turkic elements to a new degree. As such, Turkey has sought its membership in the Organization of Turkic States (formerly known as Turkic Council) to project itself as the leader of the Turkic world and consolidate the Turkic states into a new geopolitical bloc with its own agenda. In 2019, in Azerbaijan’s capital, Baku, Erdogan advanced this idea by claiming that, “We will be most powerful as six states, one nation.”⁴¹ Turkey has also used soft power tools to consolidate the Turkic identity in the post-Soviet states, such as through scholarships and cultural exchanges and a common textbook of “General Turkic History” which the Organization adopted in 2017.⁴²

It is simply impossible in the current circumstances to accept the growing ambitions of Turkey in the South Caucasus and Central Asia as geopolitical wins for American interests. This is because Turkey is no longer a reliable partner of the United States that coordinates its actions with its allies. Turkey’s policies in regions where Russia has traditionally exercised influence boost Turkey’s own agenda as an independent center of power. Simultaneously, Turkey continues to deepen its relationship with Russia, sharing subtly core tenets of Russian revisionism against what it sees as a Western-dictated world order. Fundamentally, Turkey does not function as an agent of the West, nor will it under a different presidential administration.

Erdogan’s Global Game: Decoupling from the West, Rapprochement with Russia, and Engagement with China

Some experts have described Erdogan's foreign policy in the global game of power politics and the new era of great power competition as "opportunistic pragmatism."⁴³ In a way, this pragmatism has paid off. For example, by retaining its membership in the NATO alliance and maintaining the strong U.S.-Turkish military relationship, Turkey has been able to push American policymakers for many years to ignore or discount its consistent and gradual drifting away from the West. This pragmatism has also guided many to attach the same amount of strategic importance to Turkey as during the Cold War. At the same time, Erdogan has masterfully exploited the Turkish membership in Western institutions and leveraged it to maximize what he views as Turkish national interests.

As such, despite the longstanding perception of the Turkish-Russian relationship as that of two rivals trying to balance each other off, Erdogan and Putin, who have a close personal relationship with each other, have been gradually deepening their cooperation in spite of the growing rift between the NATO allies and Russia.⁴⁴ Despite the concerns of NATO allies, including the United States, over the increasing military and economic cooperation between Turkey and Russia, especially in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Turkey has maintained a neutrality policy in the conflict, refused to join the American-led sanctions regime against Russia, and has expanded its trade relationship with Moscow.⁴⁵ Only recently, Putin and Erdogan agreed to establish a gas hub in Turkey that contradicts Europe's push to punish Russia for its aggression against Ukraine and decouple itself from Russian energy exports.

The biggest concern for Washington over Turkey's rapprochement with Russia has been Erdogan's choice to engage in a significant military partnership with Russia - a country that NATO identifies as a threat to European security. In 2017, Turkey finalized a deal to buy Russian S-400 anti-missile systems, sparking the biggest crisis in the relationship between Turkey and the United States.⁴⁶ U.S. officials and Congress responded aggressively to this development, not only because the move compromised the standing of the NATO alliance and the U.S.-Turkish relationship, but also because of the possibility that Russia could gain valuable intelligence into the U.S.

F-35 fighter jet program. American officials worry that Russia's access to Turkish military bases for servicing of parts and training creates security risks, as these same bases may be operating American F-35s.⁴⁷ After Turkey received its first batch of S-400 deliveries, Washington removed Turkey from the F-35 program and imposed sanctions.⁴⁸

The rapprochement with Russia has accompanied the Turkish political establishment's bombastic speeches and rhetoric against the United States and the West in general. Erdogan baselessly blamed America for the 2016 failed coup d'état and has consistently blasted American officials for harboring one of his most ardent critics, Fetullah Gullen, who lives in Pennsylvania and whom the United States refuses to extradite to Turkey.⁴⁹ Erdogan's blatant anti-Western and anti-American sentiment is also reflected in the attitudes of the general population. According to a 2019 survey conducted by Istanbul's Kadir Has University, 81.9% of Turks consider the United States a "threat" to their country.⁵⁰

While Erdogan and his regime, along with his political allies, have deliberately escalated the anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric, publicly denouncing U.S. dominance in global affairs, the Turkish government has moved to engage with other powers and has embraced what U.S. rival states such as Russia and Iran consider a new "world order."⁵¹ The discussions of a multi-polar world order have especially accelerated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine as President Putin tries to frame the conflict as a response to American imperialism abroad.

Erdogan seems to largely agree with Putin that the Western-led model is dead. While some experts and officials view Erdogan's actions and policies as that of a more "independent" ally, Erdogan does not simply avoid sticking to the Western line, but is actively working alongside revisionist powers against the United States and the Western bloc.⁵² To the surprise of NATO members, Erdogan announced last year his intention to join the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).⁵³ Turkey still blocks NATO membership for Sweden and only recently allowed Finland to formally join the transatlantic alliance, after accusing both countries of harboring members of Kurdish parties Ankara considers terrorists.⁵⁴

Status and Expansion: The New Old Vision for Turkish Grand Strategy

While some in Washington struggle to move away from the Cold War bloc mentality and refuse to accept the tectonic shifts in the geopolitical landscape, Erdogan has been on the move for years, changing Turkey's domestic institutions and bending them to his will, as well as transforming Turkish foreign policy. U.S. policymakers would be naive to ignore the long-term course upon which Turkey has already embarked. In a bid to ensure that the United States and NATO will not "lose" Turkey, America has continued to court Ankara and make concession after concession, even as Turkey has clearly charted its own path, away from the West, to claim what Erdogan and much of the Turkish political establishment considers the rightful place for a great nation. The paranoia of losing a strategic partner or ally like Turkey has blinded many, leaving them in the dark about the fact that Turkey has been "lost" for years.

In 2012, the former Prime Minister of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu declared in the Congress of Erdogan's AKP that, "On the march of our holy nation the AK Party signals the birth of a global power and the mission for a new world order."⁵⁵ In the subsequent years, Erdogan has thrust Turkey into the global stage as an independent power center by intervening militarily in neighboring countries (very often destabilizing the situation further and acting against U.S. interests), elevating its relationship with other powers such as Russia, Iran, and China, and openly embracing anti-Americanism and anti-Western rhetoric and policies. Turning the once-hailed secular democracy of Turkey into an authoritarian state with no safeguards for political freedoms and rights, Erdogan has imposed his vision of the country's global role on the foreign policy agenda. The strong influence of nationalism in Turkish politics and the popularity of the different streams of Turkish nationalism in the public have only contributed to the advancement of this agenda.

The Cold War ended nearly three decades ago, and Turkey has been working to build its role in the new world effectively, acting based on a new grand strategy that will likely endure beyond Erdogan. U.S. policymakers have failed to account for Turkey's

new course. Turkey's values, goals, and policies no longer align with the fundamental tenets of American foreign policy, thus warranting a comprehensive evaluation of the relationship and a new policy response to Turkish grand strategy that will focus on military disengagement, diplomatic containment, and engagement on issues of common interest.

Come to Terms with Reality, Uncle Sam: Rethinking the U.S. Policy Towards Turkey

Turkey's trajectory under Erdogan (unlikely to change substantially in the current unstable international environment) and the vast evidence of the long-term transformation of Turkish grand strategy should bring U.S. policymakers and officials to some important conclusions.

First, while Turkey's unique geography and military capabilities make it an important member in NATO, the United States should no longer consider Turkey a strategic partner in its bilateral relationship. During the Cold War, the threat of Soviet aggression and the threat of communism generally justified the need to maintain a close relationship with Turkey. However, this reasoning is no longer justified, especially given increasing Russo-Turkish collaboration in defense and economic realms despite the ongoing war in Ukraine. This is especially important as Turkey's commitment to NATO, except for the operation in Afghanistan, has been ambiguous; in fact, Turkey, as already discussed in this paper, has continuously destabilized and jeopardized the very military-political alliance of which it is a member.⁵⁶ The focus of U.S. policymakers to continuously incentivize Erdogan's regime and avoid imposing costs for his policy choices has not yielded the desired results.⁵⁷

Second, Erdogan's pursuit of ideological foreign policy and militant expansionism abroad position Turkey as a long-term challenge to the United States, given the guiding principles of American foreign policy and national security interests. The exercise of Turkish military power abroad through unilateral intervention in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus has proven to be a destabilizing force. Furthermore, in some instances, these military operations have directly threatened U.S. forces.

Third, Turkey is not a reliable NATO ally. Aside from the Turkish assistance in carrying out operations in Afghanistan during the Global War on Terror, Turkey has not proven its commitment to the values, goals, and mission of the alliance. Erdogan has deliberately provoked an unnecessary conflict with neighboring Greece, has been a roadblock to the recent enlargement of the alliance, and has established concerning military ties with Russia, currently the main security threat to NATO. Lastly, Turkey's democratic backsliding and domestic drift towards Islamism raises some serious questions as NATO membership is contingent upon a country's adherence to democratic governance and respect for human rights.

Adjusting the Policy: Demilitarize the Relationship, Reduce Dependency on Turkey

As the United States grapples with the formation of a new world in which its uncontested dominance in military and economic terms no longer dictates global affairs, ensuring that America is not entangled in unnecessary commitments to countries which have long put themselves on the opposite side of the aisle should be a priority for U.S. policymakers. Turkey is one important instance where the United States has failed to properly make this adjustment.

While the United States should not engage in unnecessary provocative behavior against Turkey that can turn the country into an immediate threat, Washington should work to disengage from Turkey militarily, cut all U.S. security assistance, and reduce its dependence on Turkey for military and strategic needs by finding alternatives. The Turkish military's might is attributable to the decades of military support, training, and arms sales that the Americans have provided to the country. As global conditions and Turkish foreign policy have changed, the military ties cannot remain unaffected.

The risk that U.S. arms sales and security assistance to Turkey carry generally also calls for demilitarization of the U.S.-Turkey relationship. In the Arms Sales Risk Index created by the Cato Institute, Turkey has received an exceptionally high score of 78, one

of the highest of all the countries studied, indicating the exceptional level of risk that U.S. arms sales to Turkey entail.⁵⁸ According to the report, "These sales have a net negative impact on U.S. security and global human rights. U.S. weapons sales can lead to arms dispersion to cartels and terrorists, empower dictators, and help aid in serial violations of human rights."⁵⁹

Restraining risky arms sales should be a general guiding policy in Washington, and from this perspective, more restrictions on Turkey are warranted. According to the Cato Institute, between 2009 and 2020, Turkey bought almost \$5.5 billion worth of American military equipment and weaponry from the United States, double the amount that other key allies such as France, Germany, or Greece purchased.⁶⁰ The Biden Administration should immediately restrain its major arms sales to Turkey.

Most importantly, the U.S. government must end once and for all the F-35 fighter jet program with Turkey and decline any new requests for F-16 fighter jets or any other advanced offensive weapons and equipment (such as attack helicopters, missile systems etc.). Conventional arms sales should be severely restricted and any decision regarding such sales should consider the narrow American national security interests that would serve as justification. Such sales should also come with verifiable safeguards that the Turkish military will not use them to attack civilians or commit human rights abuses, whether at home or abroad.

Security assistance to Turkey is another policy area where the United States must change course. According to the Security Assistance Monitor, between 2000 and 2022, the U.S. government has provided \$319,487,434 in security assistance to Turkey.⁶¹ While the amount of assistance has decreased over the last few years (chart 1), Washington should immediately cut all assistance to Turkey. No American taxpayer funds should be used to boost the military capacity of an anti-American authoritarian ruler, especially that U.S. and Turkish interests no longer align on most issues.

Lastly, the U.S. government should review the status of the Incirlik military base and develop alternatives. Incirlik Air Base hosts U.S. forces, an anti-missile radar directed towards Iran, and American nuclear warheads, and it was an important deterrent against

the Soviet threat during the Cold War.⁶² Erdogan has already threatened to close the base because of the U.S. support for Syrian Kurdish forces and has already blocked U.S. access to the base in 2003 and again in 2004, proving the unpredictability and unreliability of Erdogan's regime.⁶³

These precedents, coupled with Erdogan's transformation of Turkish foreign policy and anti-American attitudes among Turkish officials and elites, should be a concern to American policymakers. It is not an overstatement to say that the use of Incirlik for U.S. interests is no longer guaranteed under Erdogan, and the U.S. government should seriously contemplate how to gradually and safely reduce the military's presence in Turkey, including the deployment of nuclear warheads.

Name and Shame: The Need to Apply Diplomatic and Political Pressure on Erdogan's Turkey

Erdogan's quest for status and prestige on the international stage and the desire to achieve a global role has often rested on his ability to leverage the country's relationship with the West and its standing in international organizations to maximize Turkish diplomatic power. While Washington's fears that any assertive policy response in the diplomatic field might create more problems than it would solve, the reality is that a significant part of the prestige and status that Erdogan seeks for Turkey rests on the country's relationship with the United States. American officials and policymakers should not be shy to leverage this standing themselves, as Erdogan has, to pressure Turkey whenever U.S. interests are at stake.

Notably, Erdogan is one of the few autocrats in the world who has been spared the aggressive U.S. political and diplomatic pressure for his domestic crackdown on civil liberties and political rights, as well as his expansionist military adventures abroad. For example, the U.S. president or officials, except for some Congress members, have not given any meaningful response to Erdogan's unacceptable and belligerent rhetoric against Greece, another NATO member and a key U.S. ally and partner. Nor has

the United States addressed the destabilizing role Turkey played in the Armenian-Azerbaijani war and the coercive diplomacy Erdogan's government has engaged in against Armenia.

Research has in fact shown that public statements and a strategy of naming and shaming, under circumstances, can produce favorable outcomes in international relations.⁵⁸ In the case of Turkey, this can be seen in Erdogan's adjustment of behavior and rhetoric after Russia applied significant public pressure and issued high-level public statements regarding the downing of a Russian bomber in Turkish air space in 2015.⁶⁴ Governments generally do care about their international reputation and increased diplomatic pressure and a stronger public stand denouncing Erdogan's actions and policies could have an impact on future decisions.

The Impact of the 2023 General Elections in Turkey

On Sunday, May 14th, Turkish voters headed to the polls to cast their votes in a general election that many, both abroad and in Turkey, agreed would be the most consequential election for the country in recent memory.⁶⁵ The election that many Turks saw as a choice between democracy against autocracy, secularism against political Islam, did not produce definite results. The election was closely watched around the world, including in Washington, where there are certain expectations tied to the possible victory of the opposition. Even if Kemal Kilicdaroglu wins the runoff election on May 28, an uncertain prospect given Erdogan's lead in the first round, the impact on Turkey's foreign policy trajectory will not likely be significant.

While Kilicdaroglu has indicated that he will pursue a more constructive approach vis-a-vis Western partners, such high expectations in Washington and other Western capitals account neither for the results of the parliamentary elections that were also held on May 14 and their implications, nor Kilicdaroglu's unstable political posture as the leader of six coalition forces.⁶⁶

While Erdogan did not meet the threshold for an outright victory, the People's Alliance (PEOPLE), led by his AKP and including the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), retained the majority in the

country's parliament.⁶⁷ Although Turkey switched to a presidential system of government under Erdogan, a move that has allowed Turkey's strongman to extend his rule and loosen the checks on his executive power, the victory of Erdogan's coalition in the latest parliamentary elections has important ramifications.

Some analysts predict that the victory of PEOPLE may prompt more voters to support Erdogan in order to avoid the political instability and fractured governance that Kilicdaroglu's possible win in the runoff would bring.⁶⁸ Second, if Kilicdaroglu were to be elected as a result of the runoff election, he would be facing a hostile parliamentary majority composed of pro-Erdogan and ultranationalist forces that can be expected to do everything in their power to hinder the newly elected president's domestic and foreign agenda.

Moreover, it is important to remember that Kilicdaroglu was nominated as the opposition's candidate after a long and complicated process between several parties united in the desire to unseat Erdogan.⁶⁹ While this unity may have brought Kilicdaroglu to the center of the stage in the race, it is unclear the extent and solidity of the political support he will have if elected. It is also unclear whether the very forces that backed Kilicdaroglu's candidacy and their ideological inclinations will not prove an equal hindrance to the presidential hopeful's change of foreign policy course. For example, Meral Aksener, the leader of the Good Party that backs Kilicdaroglu, was formerly a prominent member of the MHP and broke away to pursue her own political ambitions.⁷⁰

Conclusion

In reality, even with the presidential election still undecided at the time of the writing of this report, the known results of the election further reinforce this paper's findings that the transformation of Turkish grand strategy and foreign policy in the last two decades will not be reversed. In both pro-government and opposition camps, nationalism, which historically has been the guiding principle of modern Turkish politics, has prevailed and continues to gain traction.⁷¹ While the range of diverse streams of Turkish nationalism may sometimes represent the most ardent criticism of Erdogan and his regime, on most issues affecting national security and foreign policy, a strong consensus supports the current course of the Turkish Republic.

This is why the United States should take the first steps in re-evaluating its policy towards Turkey. Erdogan championed and has been leading a successful campaign to remake Turkey and redefine Turkish grand strategy, but it is naive to believe that his legacy will be erased and Turkey will seek to integrate into the Western bloc afterwards. Not only has Erdogan's and his supporters' takeover of the state apparatus sealed off these changes, but the ideological consensus that has been emerging in a significant part of the Turkish political elite highlights the need for a serious reckoning in Washington. This reckoning must come soon, unless the United States intends to sacrifice its national security interests for the sake of imaginary benefits that the continued appeasement of an irresponsible treaty ally promises.

Disclaimer

At the time of this paper's drafting and submission, the outcome of the 2023 Turkish presidential runoff election was not yet known.

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