

## Why is Turkey Still in NATO?

**The U.S. and rest of NATO should stop catering to Turkey.**

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As war rages between Ukraine and Russia, NATO members in Europe's east fear they might be next in Moscow's gun sights. Finland and Sweden asked to join the transatlantic alliance. And Turkey, a member since 1952, treated the opportunity as a visit to the bazaar, demanding that Stockholm crack down on Ankara's Kurdish critics in return for its assent.

Why is Turkey still considered a U.S. ally?

President Joe Biden, who will soon visit Saudi Arabia to beg for increased oil production, is taking a similarly craven approach toward Turkey. Despite Ankara's obstruction of NATO expansion and previous purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system, the president advocates selling F-16s to and upgrading existing models for Turkey.

Biden, of course, insists that no quid pro quo is involved, but his proposal conveniently comes after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan dropped his objections to Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO. Nor is that all. Earlier this year, the Biden administration proposed selling missiles and radars to Turkey. The plan was said to face "stiff headwinds" in Congress, which had insisted during the Trump administration that Ankara be sanctioned for buying the S-400s.

When Turkey joined the transatlantic alliance, there was subdued desperation in Washington. The U.S. was defending a still-weak Western Europe from the Soviet Union. Overmatched in conventional arms, Washington relied on the threat of "massive retaliation" with nuclear weapons to defend the continent. Moreover, the Korean War continued to rage, ending only the following year after the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

No one was inclined to focus on Turkey's democratic infirmities, or its later military coups. Indeed, Portugal was a dictatorship when it was named a founding member in 1949. And Greece remained a member despite its infamous 1967 "colonels' coup."

However, after the Soviet collapse, NATO rushed past the European Union to welcome the detritus of the Soviet empire, proclaiming the alliance's determination to promote democratic reform. Even as NATO's lead member wandered the globe bombing, invading, and occupying nations at will—resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths along the way—alliance members proclaimed their democratic credentials: "NATO strives to secure a lasting peace in Europe,

based on common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.” If Ankara applied for membership today, it would be firmly and brusquely rejected.

Two decades ago, Turkey was a limited democracy, with its military setting boundaries to civilian rule. No prime minister was allowed to abandon the nationalism associated with the Republic of Turkey’s founding. Moreover, the military enforced rigid secularism, ready to defenestrate any politician or party that approached the third rail of Islamic politics.

However, over the last two decades, Erdogan, an adept politician who rebounded from a jail stint for publicly quoting a forbidden Islamic poem in his time as Istanbul’s mayor, broke the military’s power by means fair and foul. What little independence remained in the armed forces disappeared after the failed July 2016 coup.

At that point, he was already trending authoritarian, going from persecuted to persecutor. Uri Friedman wrote: “In the past year and a half, government prosecutors have opened almost 2,000 cases against Turks for insulting the Turkish president.... Since 2002, Turkey has dropped from 99th to 151st in Reporters Without Borders’ annual ranking of press freedom in different countries, largely because of the government’s intimidation of critical journalists and censorship of the Internet.”

Erdogan used the botched putsch like Adolf Hitler used the 1933 Reichstag fire: as an opportunity to punish political opponents and critics. Tens of thousands of Turks have been fired, barred from traveling, or imprisoned, most for little more than holding a critical view of Erdogan or having a distant relationship with Fethullah Gülen’s social movement, which Erdogan unconvincingly accused of orchestrating the coup. In the aftermath of the putsch, Erdogan transformed the government from parliamentary to presidential, enhancing his power. Years later, the regime continues to use Gülen to justify a continuing crackdown. In Turkey, belief that the U.S. was involved in the incident is widespread.

According to Freedom House, Turkey has fallen to just 32 out of a possible 100 points and is now rated “not free.” The organization explained that despite “initially passing some liberalizing reforms,” the Turkish president’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) “government showed growing contempt for political rights and civil liberties and has pursued a wide-ranging crackdown on critics and opponents since 2016. Constitutional changes in 2017 concentrated power in the hands of the president, removing key checks and balances.”

Alas, if anything, repression is likely to deepen as next year’s parliamentary and presidential elections approach. The economy, once Erdogan’s great political strength, is a wreck. The official annual inflation rate has hit a record 70 percent, and some economists believe the real rate is higher.

Moreover, as his popularity has declined and former political lieutenants have challenged him, Erdogan has turned to nationalists for support. It is unclear whether he will tolerate a free vote. For the first time in 2019, Erdogan refused to accept an election outcome, forcing a revote for Istanbul mayor, which his party lost disastrously. Next year he might simply fix the outcome from the start.

However, the bigger issue for Washington is Ankara's fidelity to NATO. Long ago the U.S. should have turned the transatlantic alliance over to the Europeans, who have demonstrated their determination to continue to cheap ride on Americans even after proclaiming their shock and outrage at Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As long as Washington relies on NATO, however, it is important that members remain committed to the Western alliance. And Turkey is not.

Ankara has long been essentially at war with European Union member Cyprus and fellow NATO member Greece. In 1974, Turkey invaded the former and carved out an ethnic Turkish state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Ankara. Of late, Erdogan's government has interfered with regional energy development, claiming those resources for the TRNC. Moreover, successive Turkish governments have refused to accept Greek sovereignty over contested islands and routinely invaded Greek airspace, triggering regular military confrontations. Athens devotes a larger share of its GDP to the military than even America, but does so mostly to confront Turkey, not Russia.

Erdogan has adopted an even more aggressive, independent foreign policy than did his predecessors; that foreign policy is often hostile to the West. He suggested revisiting the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which set the boundaries of modern Turkey. (There is much conspiracy talk about the agreement ending next year, but it has no expiration date.) He is pushing what has been called an Ottoman foreign policy, whose nationalist supporters dream of significantly expanding Ankara's reach. The maritime doctrine Blue Homeland, which looks to control Mediterranean waters claimed by Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel, is gaining support. Indeed, Erdogan's government has clashed with French and German vessels seeking to enforce an arms embargo on Libyan forces and U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish forces, which with American support defeated the Islamic State's "caliphate."

Of even greater significance is Ankara's close but complicated relationship with Russia. That makes sense for a neighbor of a great power with which it has had fought more than one war throughout history. However, playing Moscow's comrade and friend is inconsistent with being a member of NATO, whose only serious potential military adversary today is Russia. Turkey is buying Russian weapons, inhibiting allied naval operations in the Black Sea, and resisting allied sanctions against Moscow. Who in the alliance believes Ankara can be relied on if NATO ends up at war with Russia?

Naturally, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg resolutely defended Ankara, in March declaring "that Turkey's strong leadership and commitment to NATO's collective security is highly valued." However, that was in the past. Turkey began to shift away from the West after Erdogan took control. In 2003, the new Turkish government refused to allow Americans to operate against Iraq out of Turkey. Early in the Syrian conflict, Ankara worked with the Islamic State, allowing its fighters to travel in and out of Syria. Today Turkey wages war on U.S.-backed forces in Syria, exhibiting what Amnesty International described as "a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings and unlawful attacks."

After the coup attempt, Erdogan purged officers detailed to NATO and replaced them with those more inclined to an "Ottoman" worldview. They are positioned to act as a fifth column of sorts

in any conflict opposed by Erdogan or whoever follows him, refusing to aid or even acting to obstruct operations. American University's Mustafa Gurbuz quipped that some analysts may come to see Ankara as "Russia's trojan horse within NATO, rather than the other way around."

Outwaiting Erdogan is no answer. Some critics hope that his health will force him from office, but so far he has shown no signs of leaving. Moreover, there is no guarantee that his successor will be chosen democratically, or if so, that the successor will be a significant improvement. Possibilities include the interior and defense ministers, and intelligence head, who might prove even more nationalistic and authoritarian.

Indeed, there is little popular support in the country for cooperating with America. Favorable sentiment toward the U.S. ran at just 20 percent in 2019. Over the last two decades, that number has fallen as low as 9 percent. Last year, six of ten Turks named the U.S. as the greatest threat to Turkey, thrice the number who pointed to Russia. In March, a poll found that nearly half of Turks blamed the Russo-Turkish war on the U.S. or NATO; almost 8 percent said Ukraine, and only one-third pointed to Russia.

The U.S. and rest of NATO should stop catering to Turkey. If the alliance is serious, it should insist on members' loyalty to other members and their willingness to join collective action against a presumed antagonist. If a government's behavior significantly diverges from the alliance's objectives, other members should consider ousting that state—and forging more realistic cooperative arrangements for the future.

The U.S. should not be actively hostile to Turkey. And Europe should forge its own ties, which are likely to be even more complicated given the closer economic relationship and continuing fears of refugees flooding in through Turkey from the Middle East. Separation would also free the U.S. from any felt need to accommodate Ankara for Europe's sake. Adding Finland and Sweden to NATO does not help America. Rather, as doing so expands Washington's defense obligations.

For years, Washington has accumulated military allies like people add Facebook friends. The former have proved about as useful as the latter. With Turkey, the U.S. should move in reverse direction. NATO needs to have a serious conversation about what to do when a member can no longer be trusted. Ultimately, the Turks might be better friends if the U.S. does not expect them to be allies.

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