



## Turkey Is No Longer Much of an Ally: US Should Say Goodbye and Set Both Nations Free

Doug Bindow

July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020

U.S. policymakers long have viewed the Republic of Turkey as a critical ally. However, Ankara has been racing away from America. Today the former is more likely to impede than advance Washington's policy objectives. Instead of desperately attempting to preserve the alliance, the US should set both nations free to act without any pretense of official friendship.

As the major successor state to the polyglot Ottoman Empire, which collapsed shortly after World War I concluded, Turkey enjoyed a unique geographic position. The country controlled the Bosphorus Strait, allowing Ankara to block Black Sea access to the Mediterranean. That made Turkey a valuable partner as the Cold War deepened.

Moreover, the West saw Turkey as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. The country was cited as a model for the Arab world: a democratic Islamic state allied with the West. In fact, the republic's founder and first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, constructed an authoritarian system and suppressed religious faith. After his death a multi-party system eventually emerged, but the military routinely interfered in politics, even staging a coup in 1960 and executing the elected prime minister.

Nevertheless, Washington never let such imperfections get in the way of a not-so beautiful friendship. Ankara was in NATO's second membership class, entering the transatlantic alliance in 1952, alongside Greece. For decades the Pentagon was Turkey's biggest booster in Washington. Ankara's significant human rights violations, including a bloody campaign waged with U.S.-supplied weapons to suppress Kurdish separatism, were carefully ignored.

The end of the Cold War dramatically diminished Turkey's military worth. Russia was a badly shrunken version of the Soviet Union. Even after Moscow's modest revival, no one imagined a Russian military offensive to the south into the Mideast. Nor did the Bosphorus much matter: Moscow always was primarily a land power, so the Soviet/Russian navy naturally withered after the U.S.S.R.'s demise. Given US and European naval superiority, even unhindered passage for Moscow into the Mediterranean would not much bother the West today.

Moreover, Turkey increasingly detached itself from the US and NATO. Today Ankara barely maintains a pretense of respecting liberal and democratic norms, long thought to be an important aspect of alliance membership. Of course, it wasn't supposed to be that way. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, co-founder of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, gained power in the 2002

election (though he didn't become prime minister until the following year). He originally won substantial support from Turkish liberals, European governments, and American analysts attracted by his promise to force the military out of politics, dismantle state controls over religious expression, reform repressive policies, and enter the European Union.

He largely followed that approach throughout the 2000s. In 2011 an activist against domestic violence told me that the AKP was better on the issue of sexual equality than the old nationalists displaced by Erdogan's party. However, that liberalish orientation was too good to last. Before running for parliament Erdogan told a newspaper interviewer: "Democracy is like a train: when you reach your destination, you get off." He eventually did so.

As he moved into the 2010s he steadily sacrificed individual liberties and democratic procedures. His government turned enforcement powers on critics, ruining unfriendly businessmen and seizing media companies. The authorities also leveled fantastic allegations of vast conspiracies against opponents, including journalists and military leaders.

He and other AKP paladins turned government into a source of wealth. Implicated in extensive corruption, he purged thousands of policemen, prosecutors, and judges. After the attempted 2016 coup, which included enough anomalies to cause critics to wonder if it was an AKP production, Erdogan, who had become president in 2014, turned the full force of the state on cleric and scholar Muhammed Fethullah Gulen and his movement.

The regime treated virtually every critic as a Gulenist who had been involved in the plot. The government investigated some 600,000 people, many of whom were detained indefinitely. Roughly 150,000 people were fired, many from private jobs by companies under government pressure. About 100,000 ended up in prison. Many were denied permission to leave Turkey. Academics were dismissed and sometimes jailed. Ankara competed with China for jailing the most journalists. Even school children were prosecuted for criticizing Erdogan.

On top of political repression Erdogan pushed an Islamist agenda. With the professed goal of creating a "religious generation," he turned the state toward soulcraft. Reported the *Guardian*: "The president has trebled the number of religious Imam Hatip high schools in the country, steadily increased funding for Turkey's religious affairs directorate and increased the powers of local *muktars*, or community leaders, who are usually pious men."

Yet these efforts largely came to naught. Although his campaign is supported by more socially conservative Turks, it has had little effect on younger people of all persuasions. As a result, the secular apostle, Ataturk, who Erdogan desperately wants to transcend, is making a comeback. Observed the *Guardian*, despite more than a decade of attempts "to mold a generation of pious Turks, the country's youth appears to be turning away from religion."

Freedom House rates the country as "Not Free." The group explained: "After initially passing some liberalizing reforms, the AKP government showed growing contempt for political rights and civil liberties, and its authoritarian nature was fully consolidated following a 2016 coup attempt that triggered a dramatic crackdown on perceived opponents of the leadership."

President Donald Trump said little about Erdogan's misbehavior, other than to demand the release of Andrew Brunson. The latter was not the only American improperly jailed by Erdogan's government, but as an evangelical pastor he was of intense interest to a key political constituency. Once Brunson was released, Trump promptly dropped the human rights issue.

Nevertheless, the State Department continues to evaluate Turkey's behavior:

*"Significant human rights issues included: reports of arbitrary killings; suspicious deaths of persons in custody; forced disappearances; torture; arbitrary arrest and detention of tens of thousands of persons, including former opposition members of parliament, lawyers, journalists, foreign citizens, and employees of the US Mission, for purported ties to 'terrorist' groups or peaceful legitimate speech; the existence of political prisoners, including elected officials and academics; significant problems with judicial independence; severe restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, and the internet, including violence and threats of violence against journalists, closure of media outlets, and unjustified arrests or criminal prosecution of journalists and others for criticizing government policies or officials, censorship, site blocking and the existence of criminal libel laws; severe restriction of freedoms of assembly, association, and movement; some cases of refoulement of refugees; and violence against women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons and members of other minorities."*

Although elections continue to be held, Erdogan's government made the process increasingly unfair, with the media under government control, opposition leaders and officials jailed on trumped up terrorism allegations, and aggressive military actions used to inflame nationalistic sentiments. Thus, the AKP won a series of sometimes close elections. Last year the opposition coalesced and won several local elections, including the mayoralty of the country's largest cities, including Istanbul, where Erdogan had been mayor, and Ankara, the nation's capital.

For the first time Erdogan refused to accept an election result and forced a revote in Istanbul, which resulted in a much larger loss for the AKP candidate. No one knows what lesson Erdogan learned from the experience – critics worry that next time he will ensure the outcome that he desires.

Of course, Washington long has worked with thuggish regimes. Most dramatic was America's alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. During the Cold War the US fought wars on behalf of authoritarian regimes, backed brutal insurgencies, and staged coups to install friendly dictators throughout the Third World. NATO tolerated both Greece and Turkey while ruled by military juntas.

Today the Trump administration doesn't even make a pretense of caring about human rights. The president turned Middle East policy over to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both repressive, undemocratic regimes. He treated as friends some of the region's worst oppressors, such as Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

The expressed justification for working with foreign tyrannies always was protecting America's national interest. The alternatives in the country or consequences in the region supposedly allowed no other choice. However, it no longer is possible to make that case for Turkey. While doing little to aid US policies and promote US strategic aims, Ankara is charting an independent, Islamist, and hostile course.

Turkey long has been at violent odds with Cyprus and fellow NATO member Greece. In 1974 Ankara invaded the former, partitioning the island and setting up an ethnic Turkish enclave in the north recognized only by Ankara: the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. That act nearly resulted in war with Greece. Moreover, Turkey never accepted Athens' control over islands near the Turkish coast and the territorial boundaries that accompany them.

Ankara also has been pushing to develop Mediterranean energy resources irrespective of international law and practice. This is one reason Erdogan intervened in Libya, to win Tripoli's support for Turkish energy development off that nation's coast and Ankara's aggressive claims elsewhere. However, lack of official approval has not stopped the Erdogan government from using its navy to halt Cypriot development activities and advance Turkish exploration and drilling in areas widely considered to be within Cypriot and Greek exclusive economic zones. In the latter endeavor, Ankara finds itself at odds with not only Cyprus and Greece, but the European Union, Egypt, and UAE, a group which Turkey denounced as an "alliance of evil."

Despite the historically close working relationship between the Ankara and Washington, the Turkish people long have been hostile toward the US And Erdogan has rarely allowed American interests to impede his policies. For instance, in 2003 the Turkish parliament rejected the George W. Bush administration's request to open a second front against Saddam Hussein's government in the north. Yet the Pentagon always pointed to American use of Incirlik airbase, where the US continues to store nuclear weapons, as an important justification for the alliance with Ankara. After Turkey's adverse decision, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz made an astonishing, barely veiled call for the military to pressure or oust Erdogan.

When Syria dissolved into civil war Erdogan saw the opportunity for personal financial and Turkish geopolitical benefit. He insisted on the overthrow of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad and facilitated the movement of insurgents through Turkey. The Islamic State, America's beta noire, was one of the groups with largely unfettered border transit. In fact, members of Erdogan's government and family reportedly profited from the sale of Syrian oil by ISIS.

Ankara backed supposedly moderate Free Syrian Army forces which cooperated with radical jihadists against Damascus. Largely defeated in its effort to overthrow Assad, the Erdogan government continues to support insurgent control of territory around the city of Idlib, dominated by Islamist radicals, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as the al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria.

Moreover, Turkey saw US support for ethnic Kurds, which included arming and training militias operating in the autonomous zone of Rojava in Syria's north, as a mortal threat. Erdogan threatened to invade despite America's troop presence, causing Trump to move US forces. Turkey then deployed its FSA proxies against the Kurds, ravaging their communities and engaging in a mix of religious and ethnic cleansing. More recently Ankara treated its Syrian allies as mercenaries, sending them to Libya.

Turkey also operates with impunity against Kurdish forces in Iraq. Like in Syria, Ankara claims to be attacking insurgents and terrorists, yet civilians often are killed, including defenseless religious minorities in refugee camps. Ankara established bases in Iraq, which could be used to enforce Turkish claims that Iraqi territory, derived from the old Ottoman Empire, properly belongs to Ankara.

Erdogan also has maintained ties with Tehran, the Trump administration's primary fixation. Ankara continues to purchase Iranian natural gas and oil, to Washington's great frustration. At the same time, Turkey is at odds with the Persian Gulf states, most notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, upon which Washington has showered weapons and other favors.

Nine years after the U.S.-backed overthrow of Muammar Khadafy Libya remains mired in civil war. The mildly Islamist and internationally recognized Government of National Accord is fighting the Libyan National Army commanded by former Khadafy officer, US citizen, and CIA asset Khalifa Haftar and backed by the elected House of Representatives. Washington seems to be on both sides, as are America's allies. Turkey joined Italy and Qatar with the GNA against France, Syria, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, and Russia, which back the LNA. Ankara evidently is breaking the United Nations arms embargo on Libya, which resulted in a naval standoff between Greek and French ships operating as part of an EU interdiction operation and a freighter escorted by three Turkish vessels. France then withdrew from NATO's Operation Sea Guardian, in which Turkey also participated, which operates Mediterranean patrols. After being caught smuggling, Ankara demanded an apology from Paris.

Perhaps most ominous for the U.S.-Turkey relationship is Erdogan's close ties with Vladimir Putin. In 2015 Ankara downed a Russian fighter in Syria after it briefly passed through Turkish airspace. This was a reckless act for which Erdogan sought NATO backing. The allies refused to commit themselves to war against Moscow since Turkey was at fault.

Denied allied support, an angry Erdogan made up with Putin, later arresting the pilots who shot down the Russian plane for allegedly being Gulenists acting against Turkey's interest. Moscow and Ankara began cooperating in Syria. Moreover, Turkey decided to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense system, causing the US to end Ankara's participation in production of F-35 aircraft. Members of Congress are pressing the administration to apply economic sanctions on the Erdogan government for purchasing Russian weapons.

Relying on his supposed friendship with Trump, Erdogan has tried to play all sides. However, that plan could explode in November. Chatham House's Fadi Hakura observed: "Turkey's ties with the US are very good at the leadership level but very poor at the institutional level." If Trump loses to Biden, Erdogan may find himself in deep freeze at all levels.

Washington should drop the pretense of a grand alliance with Turkey. There is nothing surprising in Ankara's decision to adopt policies which benefit the serious independent power which Erdogan wants his country to become. Turkey's interests are substantially different from America's. Even after he leaves the political scene Ankara is unlikely to return to its position as Washington's compliant international factotum.

Indeed, the US should prepare for tougher times. Emmanuel Karagiannis of King's College in London warned: "There should be no illusions. The West has diminishing influence over Turkey and must prepare for a worst-case scenario in which Turkey joins an anti-West alliance in the not-so-distant future."

The best way for Washington to prepare is to exit conflicts that don't concern it in any serious way. After all, Turkey does not threaten America. Rather, the complaint is that Ankara undermines American interests – which vary in genuineness and seriousness. For instance, the Middle East matters ever less to America on every measure: the US has become the world's greatest energy producer; Israel is a nuclear-armed regional superpower which needs no support from America; Washington has no place in the midst of a Shia-Sunni struggle, especially on the side of Riyadh, the region's most oppressive and destabilizing power.

What of NATO? Turkey should be out. It cannot be trusted if conflict breaks out with Russia. It would not be in Ankara's interest to go to war with Moscow over Estonia or Poland. Erdogan could frustrate alliance decision-making and compromise military plans.

More important, whatever Turkey's status, the US should leave NATO. Why should America be threatening war against Moscow? Relations between the two nations may never be warm, given important differences in domestic systems and international interests. But there is no essential, existential conflict between the two countries. By acting as if there was Washington has inadvertently pushed China and Russia together, a strategic blunder of extraordinary proportions. The US should seek a modus vivendi with Russia, ending today's unproductive confrontation over issues that do not significantly implicate American security, such as in Georgia, Ukraine, the Black Sea, and Syria.

In any case, the likelihood of a Russian attack on Europe is vanishingly small. And if the continent fears Moscow it is time for Europeans to step up. Even without Turkey's (unlikely) assistance, European countries vastly outrange Russia on economic strength, population, and military outlays. Washington has no reason to keep the Europeans on an expensive defense dole.

Turkey, through its Ottoman forebear, has a long and storied history. However, geopolitically Washington and Ankara have fallen out of love. Neither our values nor our interests are well-matched any longer. America should do the foreign policy equivalent of unfriending the Erdogan government.

More than two centuries ago George Washington gave Americans good advice for dealing with Turkey: "The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible." Cooperate when advantageous, avoid confrontation when possible. Then the US could stop desperately attempting to hold the failing relationship together.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*