

# RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

## **Eight reasons why the U.S. should ditch Turkey as a military partner**

If Washington intervened in the Mideast less often, the bases and strategic alliance would matter less.

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has transformed his country and its relationship with America — but not for the better. President Donald Trump’s personal ties to Erdogan may have disguised the widening divergence in interests, but a chasm has now truly opened between the two governments, requiring a much tougher approach toward Ankara than in the past.

The Republic of Turkey grew out of the ramshackle Ottoman Empire, which collapsed at the end of World War I. Ankara joined NATO in 1952, controlling access to the Black Sea and serving as the alliance’s southeast foundation.

The Pentagon was always Ankara’s strongest booster, since Incirlik and Izmir Air Bases extended Washington’s military reach in the Middle East. Turkey also was presented as a model of Islamic democracy, despite the military’s ruthless intervention in the illiberal political system, staging soft and hard coups, and invading the Republic of Cyprus in 1974. For America, the Cold War was more important than human rights.

Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the 2002 election and began to transform Turkey. After a decade of modest reform and good press, Erdogan turned Turkey in an authoritarian, corrupt, and Islamist direction. Repression accelerated after a failed coup in July 2016, months before Trump was elected, provided Erdogan with a Turkish version of the Reichstag fire.

Freedom House rates Turkey as not free, reporting that the government “has pursued a dramatic and wide-ranging crackdown on perceived opponents” since that attempted coup event. Based on scant evidence, Erdogan accused the Hizmet movement’s Fethullah Gulen of being behind the putsch. He has tried, but so far unsuccessfully, to have Gulen extradited from his exile in Pennsylvania.

Erdogan then turned his country into a prison state. Even the slightest connection — teaching at a Hizmet school, or using a bank owned by a Hizmet member — resulted in dismissal, arrest, and/or imprisonment. Journalists and opposition politicians remain frequent targets, especially when Erdogan’s poll ratings dip. Reported Freedom House: Opposition gains and economic troubles “have given the government new incentives to suppress dissent and limit public discourse.”

Moreover, Turkish foreign policy is increasingly at odds with U.S. policy. The challenge is not that Erdogan is taking independent positions, but rather is actively undermining U.S. policies. Among the problem areas:

One: Treating another NATO ally, Greece, and a European Union member, Cyprus, as adversaries. Unhappy over Greece’s possession of islands near Turkey’s coast, Ankara refuses to recognize Greek airspace and territorial waters, leading to dangerous military confrontations. The Erdogan government continues to resist efforts to end the partition of Cyprus and interfere with efforts by the internationally recognized government of Cyprus to develop nearby hydrocarbons. Some observers fear a Turkish-Greco war.

Two: Forging a military relationship with Russia. Ankara purchased Moscow’s S-400 air defense system, resulting in Turkey’s ouster from the F-35 program. The Erdogan government plans to buy additional S-400 missiles. Turkey also has reached accommodations with Moscow involving Syria and other regional issues, though the two governments’ alignment is not perfect. Erdogan has negatively contrasted his relationship with President Joe Biden to that with Putin. Ozgur Unluhisarcikli of the German Marshall Fund opined that Erdogan seeks “a counterbalancing alliance with Russia against the US.” If Ankara was forced to choose between NATO and Russia in a conflict, the allies could not be confident that Turkey would fulfill its alliance commitments.

Three: Adopting an expansive, neo-Ottoman maritime doctrine known as Blue Homeland, which seeks to dominate the Mediterranean. Once stuck at the policymaking fringe, this strategy envisions controlling waters claimed by Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel. Clashes over

contending territorial claims have increased chances of violent confrontation. Ankara's desire to strengthen its maritime position spurred its intervention in Libya's civil war.

Four: Arming Azerbaijan and encouraging it to restart hostilities with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The result was a bitter fight and abundant war crimes. There were unverified claims that Ankara shot down an Armenian aircraft and deployed Syrian mercenaries on Azerbaijan's behalf. A side impact was to deepen Russia's role.

Five: Intervening in Libya's civil war. Ankara backed the Islamist Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, violating the United Nations weapons embargo. Turkish vessels confronted French and German ships tasked with preventing arms smuggling. In return the Tripoli authorities accepted a maritime boundary agreement privileging Ankara in waters also claimed by Greece and Cyprus.

Six: Treating the Islamic State and other radical groups operating in Syria as co-belligerents if not allies. Ankara brazenly facilitated ISIS border crossings and oil sales; charges of corruption tainted Erdogan's family. Even Vice President Joe Biden inconveniently acknowledged Ankara's role.

Seven: Targeting the Kurdish-dominated People's Defense Units, or YPG, in Syria. The Erdogan government twice invaded Syrian Kurdish territory, utilizing U.S.-supplied weapons and employing jihadist forces previously active elsewhere in Syria. Amnesty International cited "a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians, during the offensive into northeast Syria." The YPG was Washington's main ally fighting ISIS on the ground, yet Ankara is threatening to invade again.

Eight: Using Syrian fighters as mercenaries via private military companies, in particular, the SADAT International Defense Consultancy, to meddle in conflicts abroad, including Libya and the Caucasus. These forces are essentially accountable to no one.

Despite this terrible record, Ankara's ambassador to the US, Hasan Murat Mercan, recently argued that "Turkey stands as a reliable ally that can deliver at the moment of crisis — a friend in need." However, policy differences have been exacerbated by Erdogan's personal hostility. He recently went before the Turkish National Assembly to denounce "those who ignored our

country in the region for years — and confronted us with maps and demands that would imprison us into our coasts — first tried the language of threat and blackmail after the steps we took.”

Moreover, Erdogan’s ambitions have grown increasingly radical. As he told the National Assembly: “There is no chance left for this distorted order, in which the entire globe is encumbered by a handful of greedy people, to continue to exist the way it currently does.” There was little doubt about who he meant. The greater his domestic political problems, the more aggressive his foreign policy is likely to become. Which is dangerous to the US.

In 2015 the Erdogan government recklessly downed a Russian warplane that briefly entered Turkish airspace. Had Russia’s Vladimir Putin responded with force America and Europe could have ended up at war. Today Moscow’s and Ankara’s respective proxies, the Syrian government and Idlib-area insurgents, also could spark a conflict. So could Ankara’s increasingly aggressive activities elsewhere — North Africa, Mediterranean, Mideast, and Central Asia — which often are at variance with NATO’s interest.

Turkey’s band of American friends is diminishing. Some are stuck in the past, remembering the ally Ankara once was. Other analysts prefer to wait for Erdogan’s passage across the River Styx, given rumors about his health. However, in two decades he would still be younger than Joe Biden.

The political waters at home have grown rougher, but so far he has surmounted every challenge with increasing force. Nor would a new president and parliamentary majority necessarily transform Ankara’s policies. Turkish public opinion is nationalistic, conspiracy-minded, and ever more hostile toward the U.S. Indeed, a recent poll found that six of ten Turks viewed America as the greatest threat to Turkey, compared to just 19 percent who fingered Russia.

Today Ankara could not enter the transatlantic alliance. Washington should minimize its reliance on Turkey and the latter’s threat to U.S. interests. The U.S. should remove its nuclear weapons stored at Incirlik Air Base, and downgrade use of the facility, access to which remains under Erdogan’s erratic control. If Washington intervened in the Mideast less often, the base would matter less. In any case, there are alternatives: In response to Ankara’s policies U.S.-Greek military ties have recently expanded.

The Pentagon should limit arm sales, building on the F-35 sales ban. Finally, the Biden administration should begin NATO discussions on options ranging from limiting Turkey's role in decision-making to ousting Ankara from the transatlantic alliance.

Two months ago Erdogan admitted: "I cannot say that a healthy process is running in Turkish-American ties." Yet Washington's policy reflects the continuing illusion that Turkey remains a loyal and reliable U.S. ally, European partner, and NATO member. None of these are true. A change in policy is long overdue.

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