

Newsweek

We're In Bed With Erdogan's Dictatorship

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The recent abortive military coup in Turkey has led not to a restoration of democracy and the rule of law in that country, but to an acceleration of already worrisome trends toward a dictatorship with Islamist overtones.

When the would-be junta made its play for power, the Obama administration quickly expressed support for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's beleaguered government, as did most of Turkey's NATO partners.

When the coup attempt collapsed, leaders of those governments breathed a sigh of relief that the alliance did not have to confront the embarrassment (or worse) of a member state governed by a military dictatorship.

That sense of relief was short lived. In a matter of days, Erdogan purged not only hundreds of high-ranking military officers, (a step for which there was at least reasonable justification), he went after other institutions that had long impeded his attempts at increasingly autocratic rule.

Nearly 3,000 judges were removed and arrested. He even fired 21,000 teachers from the country's school system. The extent and speed of the systematic purge confirms that Erdogan simply used the attempted coup as a pretext for a plan long in place. The United States now confronts the problem of a NATO ally that is a dictatorship in all but name.

The frustrations with Turkey should have been building for years, if not decades. After all, U.S. officials were under pressure to look the other way as Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974 and continued to illegally occupy the northern portion of that country ever since.

Washington offered no more than feeble protests when Ankara established the puppet Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the occupied territories and moved in tens of thousands of settlers from the Turkish mainland. Such indifference makes U.S. expressions of outrage over Russia's annexation of Crimea seem more than a little hypocritical.

More recently, Erdogan has systematically eroded the foundations of not only Turkey's democratic institutions, but even the secular orientation put in place by modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, after World War I.

The crackdown on a free press and the harassment of political opponents has grown steadily worse over the past two or three years. Even before the post-coup purges, those authoritarian trends had reached alarming levels. Today's Turkey more closely resembles Putin's Russia than it does a genuine Western democracy.

When the nation's vital security interests are truly imperiled, it is sometimes necessary to make common cause with even sleazy allies. Britain and the United States had to cooperate with Josef Stalin's murderous Soviet Union to counter Adolf Hitler. But such moral compromises need to be extraordinary exceptions, not done casually.

As Turkey sinks into blatantly authoritarian rule, the primary justification for retaining a close security relationship is Ankara's relevance in sustaining Washington's hyperinterventionist policy in the Middle East. Since the evidence is overwhelming that that policy is a disaster and should be rescinded, U.S. officials also ought to reconsider its ties to Turkey.

As part of that process, Washington should, as it applies to Turkey, immediately repudiate the provision in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty that considers an attack on one member as an attack on all and obligates the United States to render assistance.

It is bad enough for U.S. leaders to risk the lives of the American people to defend a liberal democratic ally that is not essential to the security of the republic. It is much worse to incur such a risk to defend a thinly disguised dictatorship that is not essential to America's security.

Yet that is the situation we now face with Turkey. We need to adopt a much more cautious relationship with an increasingly unsavory regime.

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