



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (17)

America's 'Turkey Dilemma' in the Mediterranean

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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Turkey represents a multi-layered challenge for the United States in the Eastern Mediterranean, where it is simultaneously an ally and an antagonist. Its status as a partly European and partly Middle Eastern state confounds a US policy process that has stark divisions between the two regions. Turkey's maritime activities stymie a policy process that is overwhelmingly terrestrial in its orientation. Turkey is also seeking to become more deeply involved in a region in which the United States has important stakes but where it is seeking to reduce its footprint. Most importantly, though, the United States lacks both a strategy and a policy towards the Eastern Mediterranean, providing opportunities for a proactive Turkey to act while the United States and its allies react. While a strategy would not by itself resolve growing US tensions with Turkey, it would provide opportunities for greater policy coordination across the US government, and with allies as well.

The US–Turkey alliance was a bulwark of US global strategy for decades, but tensions have been growing lately. Turkey's Kemalist heritage, its massive conventional army, and its wariness of the Soviet Union just to its north served US strategy in the half-century after World War II. However, in the last two decades, all three pillars of the relationship have been shaken. Turkey's simultaneous embrace of a muscular nationalism, politicians' marginalisation of the military, and the country exploring a new *modus vivendi* with Russia all render Turkey a troubling and confounding partner.

President Obama's White House staff used to say that the US President spoke with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan more than any other world leader, so intense was his courtship. When Obama travelled to Turkey on his first overseas trip as president in April 2009, his little-noticed speech to the Turkish Parliament foreshadowed many of the themes that would garner much more attention in his speech several months later in Cairo. One of the few priorities that carried over from the Obama to the Trump administration was an effort to court Turkey. Not only has President Trump spoken with President Erdogan many times, but Erdogan has managed to use these conversations to shift US policy in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere.

While there is agreement at the top levels in Washington DC that Turkey is important, there is not much of a US strategy towards Turkey. In part, the challenge is that Turkey and its actions span different parts of the US government. Most of the US government treats Turkey as a European power, but Turkey's rising tensions with Europe, combined with its much more active policy in the Middle East sphere (and especially Syria and Libya), leave most European-oriented diplomats in the US government stymied. Arguably, Turkey's own policy towards Middle Eastern states relies on a very thin cadre of Middle East experts in Turkey. However, widespread Turkish appreciation of the country's historical stakes in the Middle East, combined with a keen desire

among many Turkish politicians to recover the prestige of the imperial era, push the country towards active Middle East engagement.

Turkey has had a freer hand with the Trump administration in the Middle East than it has in Europe. Continued US reluctance to engage in Syria and Libya and a determination to limit engagement to counter-terrorism operations has created openings for a Turkish policy that is dynamic and entrepreneurial, and that has robust political and diplomatic components. President Trump's keen desire to leave Syria has constrained US policy significantly, and it has overwhelmed the desire of other voices in the US government to ensure that Syria does not advance the standing of Iran and Russia, two US adversaries with their own deep engagement in Syria and evolving relations with Turkey.

US policy on Libya has been even more fraught. While US policy officially favours the UN-led negotiating process, the US government (along with the White House) appears sympathetic to the eastern government, not least because of its intimate ties to close US partners such as the UAE and Egypt. In this regard, Turkish support for western forces is not only confounding, but it also pits two NATO allies against each other (with French support to the eastern-based Libyan National Army). The high-water mark of US involvement seems to have passed. Turkey's ties to the western-based government have a strategic element – extending Turkey's claims to a large swath of the Mediterranean – that does not appear to be fully appreciated in Washington. The Trump administration instead seems content to let the conflict find its own equilibrium.

Turkey has had a harder time winning US forbearance for its European activities. In particular, reports that it may have used its newly acquired S-400 anti-aircraft system to track Greek jets represent a serious defection in the eyes of many NATO members, who already harbour a certain distrust, and in some cases even dislike, of Turkey. Turkey's efforts over the years to accede to the European Union may have held little prospect of success, but its continued frustration served to deepen a sense of grievance between Turkey and several European countries (especially France). Confrontations between French and Turkish warships surrounding gas-drilling activities in the last year signify not only how serious conditions are becoming, but also how French–Turkish military tensions can create cracks in NATO and introduce frictions between NATO and EU efforts to enhance security in the Mediterranean. From a US and European perspective, the problem must be addressed.

Where US policy will go in January 2021 remains a matter of speculation. Foreign policy has received almost no attention in the presidential campaign. Still, we can assume that a Biden victory would represent a return to a more systematic foreign policy decision-making process in which the

United States coordinates better internally and externally. Allies may have greater notice of US actions and may be able to expect a reinvigorated process of consultations. That is not to say, however, that the Eastern Mediterranean would be an area of immediate focus, or that it would receive a higher priority in a Biden administration than it has in the Trump administration. Democratic voices have been arguing for more than a year that the United States has relied too much on military tools at the expense of diplomatic and other tools, and we can assume a desire to employ diplomacy more effectively. But that is not to say that diplomacy will necessarily be more effective. One challenge the United States has had persistently in the Middle East is that, despite its overwhelming strength, it has been battling antagonists who feel they have a greater stake in outcomes than the United States does. In such circumstances, US leverage erodes as countries and movements that fear they are facing an existential threat dig in against an often-sophisticated US effort. The United States has often taken its leverage for granted in negotiations and made insufficient efforts to enhance it. The result has been to cede a veto to others.

There has never been much of a *pax americana* in the Mediterranean, but if the US diminishes its footprint further, what is left? There is certainly a battle for positioning. Turkey seems to be engaged in a robust effort to expand its maritime primacy, while Russia appears to be looking more tactically for opportunities to expand its reach. France's ambitions are harder to read, as are the tools that France is willing to deploy to advance its interests. Now, it looks like France has a close eye on the United States, to see whether it can find opportunities to partner so as to establish an order in the region that serves both US and French interests. In the absence of a US partnership, France is left with harder choices of what it can do, what it can afford, and who it can bring along. France's difficulty in mobilising support for its efforts at political and economic reform in Lebanon is a sign of how hard it can be for it to lead.

While one might imagine a Turkish–French partnership, it is hard to see how it could be achieved without a great deal of US encouragement, hand-holding, and ongoing management. Even with a strong US hand, one could imagine significant differences over access to energy resources (manifested most obviously in a debate over the future of Libya), as well as naval operations in the Mediterranean. While both France and Turkey have an interest in constraining Russian power in the Mediterranean, Turkish grievances over its treatment by the European Union and France's courtship of several Gulf states that are increasingly hostile to Turkey would complicate diplomacy.

Whether France and Turkey can arrive at a *modus vivendi* will turn on whether Turkey will continue to pursue its “Blue Homeland” strategy, and whether France will decide to invest in its Mediterranean presence. The first is contingent on Turkey's economic and military position

sustaining such a commitment; the latter is a central security question for the government of France. France in particular will be watching the 2020 US election closely to make decisions about what it might do in partnership with the United States, and what possibilities may be created by a different sort of US presence in the Mediterranean. A worsening US–Turkish relationship, and a presumed renewed emphasis on US–Greek ties, may create opportunities for France to exploit.

While the United States does not control what will happen in the Eastern Mediterranean, its actions and intentions cast a long shadow over the plans of all the actors in the region. In particular, if a Biden administration comes in, how quickly it generates a strategy towards Turkey, how important Turkey looms in its calculations, and how Turkey responds to the incentives and disincentives presented will have a profound impact on the region for the next half-century.