Washington and Ankara are Parting Ways with One Another

These days one can come across all sorts of articles trying to predict the direction US-Turkish relations take, as we witness a major shift on the geopolitical stage and both of these states play no small part in it. As it’s been noted by American analysts, unlike in previous eras, Washington and Ankara no longer share overarching threats or interests that bind them together, while their bilateral ties are riddled with distrust.

Although relations between Turkey and the United States have always been strained, they were still sustained under the pretext of a threat the USSR allegedly presented to both states. Therefore, disputes and other differences would typically be ignored. However, since the 1950s each successive US president has devoted his time to publicly recognizing Turkey as playing a pivotal role in Washington’s designs. Then in the 1990s, US officials and analysts would claim that Turkey was poised to lead the economic and democratic development of Central Asia, while influencing Russia in a way favorable to the US. Moreover, back then the rapidly developing ties between Turkey and Israel resulted in Washington believing Washington, Tel-Aviv and Ankara would become natural partners in ensuring Western dominance across the Middle-East.

Throughout the Cold War, the nature of Turkish-American security cooperation played an important role in containing the USSR, this fact resulted in mutually irritating incidents being ignored by both sides. However, today,
Almost three decades after the end of the Cold War, Turkey and the United States have found themselves on opposite sides of the political spectrum on many major international issues.

Over this period of time the world has undergone drastic changes, and one would be a fool to ignore that fact. Even though some of the difficulties Washington faces in managing bilateral relations with Turkey can be attributed to Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan and his AKP party, still most difficulties have politically natural causes. After all, even those Turkish politicians who are in opposition to Tayyip Erdogan still support the government of Bashar Assad, on top of being outright hostile to Kurdish nationalism and the figure of the runaway radical cleric Fethullah Gulen, who found refuge in the United States.

Moreover, Tayyip Erdogan would openly demonstrate Ankara’s negative attitude towards Washington’s desperate attempt to cling to its hegemony aspirations, as Turks support the notion of redrawing the global political landscape to make it truly multipolar. On top of that, there’s a long list of unresolved contradictions that have accumulated between Turkey and the US over the years. Specifically, Washington has taken a harsh stance on Ankara’s intention of acquiring Russia’s state-of-the-art S-400 air defense systems, while Ankara is targeting Washington’s Kurdish allies in Syria, as those represent a major threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity. In addition, Ankara makes attempts to help Iran bypass Western sanctions, while becoming increasingly repressive in its domestic policies. Those steps are guided by fears that pro-Western Kurdish militant formations in Syria may eventually try to demand the formation of a separate Kurdish state, which would be a nightmarish scenario for Turkey, as it will lose a chunk of its territory in the process. However, Washington is all too willing to ignore such fears, as there’s a strengthening conviction that Ankara is happy to ignore Washington’s strategic goals of containing Russia and China in the Middle East and Central Asia.

It’s likely that the list of mutual contradictions and grievances between the two is going to multiply, making reaching a mutual understanding even harder. Due to numerous complication in its dealings with the United States, Ankara may try to seek new geopolitical avenues by seeking closer ties with Moscow and Tehran, while also trying to improve its standing with the EU.

These difficult times in American-Turkish relations leave little place for optimism in public statements made by the representatives of both states. It’s true there is no shortage of bilateral contacts, but the United States and Turkey are actively working on advancing their own agendas while ignoring the grievances of the other side. There’s been reports about phone conversations between Donald Trump and Tayyip Erdogan, negotiations between representatives of the Pentagon and Turkey’s defense ministry, but still no progress in resolving the above mentioned issues can be seen.

The main talking point for Ankara these days is the ongoing intrigue around the so-called “security zone” in northern Syria. Turkish propaganda sources have kicked off efforts to promote this topic. Following the media, official government bodies are also hard at work creating slogans out of the speeches of Tayyip Erdogan, stressing that: “It’s impossible to act in Syria without Turkey,” “The United States must create a security zone together with Turkey,” “Only Turkey should control the security zone,” etc. Considerable effort has been wasted on the promotion of all these points, they are being repeatedly stressed by both the representatives of the Turkish elite and local political scientists. At the same time, Turkish media sources would underline the unacceptability of anyone else deploying its forces in the “security zones”, except for Turkey. Moreover, they would also insist that: “The US cannot lose Turkey, which has been a faithful ally for 70 years”.

In the comments of Turkish officials, sometimes there are signs of real annoyance over the fact that Washington wouldn’t share with Ankara in its troop withdrawal in Syria. As can be understood, the uncertainty of the American position holds back Ankara from drawing its own plans in the region. There is a clear desire to somehow “push” Washington into some sort of action, that’s how Erdogan’s repeated statements can be interpreted, as he implies that if Washington cannot decide what to do, then Turkey will act on its own in the regions east of the Euphrates.

On the issue of purchasing Russian S-400s, Turkey refused the deal recently proposed by Washington to supply American Patriot air defence systems at the end of 2019 in exchange for burying the contract with Moscow. No matter how the US tries to sweeten the deal, Turkey is well aware of the fact that the Patriot is inferior in most every aspect to the Russia's S-400. And there should be no surprise over this fact, as even Foreign Policy would go on about the inefficiency of American anti-aircraft systems. It’s precisely this reason that the United States has tried to adopt the Israeli Iron Dome for its own defence needs, while advertising its own outdated hardware to its “faithful allies.”

On Capitol Hill, the overall attitude towards Turkey is also getting increasingly tough. Congressmen are beginning to
doubt whether “Turkey is worthy of NATO membership”, as Russian-Turkish military cooperation is interpreted as a “threat” to the security of the alliance. There’s plans of imposing sanctions on Ankara under CAATSA, while maintaining the moratorium on the delivery of F-35 Lighting aircraft.

As a result, the current political elite in Washington lead US policy toward the idea that in the future, American decisions should be guided by the fact that Turkey is not a friend of the United States, although it is not yet an enemy. Washington will still work with Ankara when it is able to reap benefits from this cooperation, but it will be equally happy to play against it.

However, whether the US will benefit from such a position or whether it will cause even more damage to Washington or not – only time can tell.

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