New US Ambassador to Turkey - Bad Marriage No More?

Proceeding with the discussion of a number of ambassadors appointed by the Trump administration to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan along with the discussion of the present state of US-Turkey relations, it’s about to time to take a closer look at the role the new US ambassador to Ankara is going to play in Washington’s attempts to force Ankara back into submission.

Last February, the Trump administration revealed that it was going to send the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, David Satterfield to take charge of the US diplomatic mission in Ankara and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was quick to advance his nomination.

Over the last couple of years one could observe Washington’s ever growing frustration with the policies of Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan, which resulted in major aggravation between US-Turkey bilateral relations. It’s clear that those preaching NATO solidarity in Washington would try to reverse this trend by claiming that Erdogan has been running “like a headless chicken” from one objective to another, sowing panic and frustrations along the way. Those hawks are convinced that today’s Turkey has failed its goal of strengthening its positions upon the international stage.

Other American politicians have been showing signs of fatigue amid this worsening relationship, as they claim it’s about time to stop pretending that Turkey and the United States can share mutual values or common interests. In their opinion, there’s no returning to the status quo of the Cold War days, when Turkey was enthusiastic about its partnership with Uncle Sam. They suggest that Washington should let go of Turkey which is bound to take its place among authoritarian eastern states. Among the most successful proponents of this notion is the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, who stated that Turkey may still be an ally of the United States, but it’s hardly a partner.
In this context, it’s pretty curious to recall upon taking office, Trump sent the former US ambassador to Turkey, John Bass to head the US diplomatic mission in Afghanistan, leaving his previous position vacant. There was a number of both overt and covert reasons for the White House to take this step, but Turkey’s imprisonment of American Pastor Andrew Brunson for nearly two years on charges of terrorist propaganda would be brought up often.

Moreover, there were speculations about John Bolton’s intention of designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group, a step that would have resulted in Ankara’s voicing vocal outrage, as Tayyip Erdogan is, in some sense, the informal leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region. According to a number of sources, Erdogan’s party is being referred to in Turkey as the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood.

Additionally, there’s an ongoing debacle between the two capitals over the sale of super expensive F-35 warplanes to Turkey along with Washington’s attempts to prevent its ally from purchasing Russia’s S-400 top of the line anti-aircraft systems.

Last year, the White House did not even issue a press statement about Trump’s phone call to congratulate Erdogan on his re-election. The US government wouldn’t even send a special delegation for Erdogan’s inauguration ceremony, settling on sending the chargé d’affaires from the US embassy in Ankara to attend instead.

Yet another factor annoying Washington was Ankara’s refusal to go in line with its anti-Iranian policies.

All of these factors have led to all sorts of factions within the US government pushing in different directions, rendering the White House incapable of appointing a new ambassador in Ankara for a total of eighteen months, as it couldn’t just send yet another “controlled chaos” proponent in place of a much needed political figure.

Therefore, the decision to pick Satterfield was not accidental, as he was nominated at a critical junction in US-Turkey relations, as disagreements over the fate of the Kurdish militia in northern Syria between Ankara and Washington have reached a boiling point. From the point of view of the White House, those Kurdish detachments are an ally of the United States in its imaginary fight against ISIS, while Turkey is convinced they are a terrorist force.

Upon studying Satterfield’s background we can learn that he has spent quite a number of years in Iraq in the aftermath of the US invasion of this country in 2003. Under President George W. Bush, he served as adviser to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and coordinated the policies that the US pursued in Iraq. Then, under Barack Obama, Satterfield took the position of head of the multinational observer force on the Sinai Peninsula. He has also been employed in the capacity of Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for Libya.

Some experts in Washington argue that Satterfield can be described as a “brilliant Arabist” who possesses a nearly perfect command of the Arabic language. At some point, Satterfield would play the role of interpreter during one-o-one meetings between the former commander of the Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq, David Petraeus and former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. However, unlike a great many of his predecessors, Satterfield does not speak Turkish.

By appointing David Satterfield US ambassador to Turkey, the White House wants to show that it still has diplomats capable of defusing complicated issues, as he is expects to resolve Washington’s ongoing dispute with Ankara over the disposition of forces in northeastern Syria. From the point of view of Tayyip Erdogan there’s nothing to discuss here, as Turkey has been steadily proceeding with the creation of a 15 mile deep buffer zone near its national borders to counter Kurdish People’s Protection Units designated as terrorists in Ankara. However, since Satterfield has previously addressed a number of critical threats to US interests in Beirut, Baghdad, and Tripoli through negotiations, it’s believed that he will be up to the task.

However, Satterfield’s ultimate goal is far more complicated as he is expected to derail Russia’s rapprochement with Turkey which is advancing at a steady pace. Even prior to Turkey’s accession to NATO in 1952, the US political establishment would describe this country as their “critical ally” as the military cooperation that Washington and Ankara enjoyed was considered a critical element of deterrence against the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington advertised Turkey as the representative of the interests of Turkish people across the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), while taking advantage of various ethnic groups to advance its own interests in the region.

In his testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Satterfield reaffirmed his readiness to uphold these positions.

Therefore, the decision to send a renowned Middle Eastern diplomat as ambassador to Turkey must serve as an
indication that the White House is confident in the possibility of restarting bilateral relations, as it needs Ankara back within the ranks of its obedient satellites.

But will today’s Ankara agree to silently obey Washington’s dictates and remain a mere puppet in its hands?

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