Disappointed by Biden, Turkey Eyes Closer Ties with Russia

Amid the ongoing explicit shift in the US foreign policy away from its decades old focus on the Middle East to Southeast Asia to counter what it considers the biggest challenge to the US in the 21st century i.e., China, profound changes to the US ties with many states in the Middle East/Gulf, including its old allies, are taking place. The US withdrawal from the Middle East - which also led it to rip its alliance with Saudia as well - not only indicates a decreasing US interest in the region, but also reveals why the US no longer needs Turkey on its side. Even though Turkey is still a NATO ally, the ongoing rift between the US and EU is increasingly pushing the latter towards redefining its ties with Russia, as well as establishing a European military force, which leaves Turkey in a position to pursue its strategic ties with Russia even more openly and vigorously than has been the case in the past few years. Similarly, in the wake of Nord Dstream-2 redefining the EU-Russia ties and indicating American decline in the continent, there remains little room for Turkey to project itself as a ‘balancer’ between the West and the East. On the contrary, deepening ties with Russia makes proper sense.

It is due to the changing dynamics of the US’ engagement with the Middle East and how it is impacting upon its allies that relations between Ankara and Washington have failed to improve. Although there has been no major
crisis, the fact that Biden and Erdogan have not been able to resolve the old crisis shows why Erdogan, after his recent meeting with Biden, called US-Turkey ties as “unhealthy.” So, even though the Biden administration had earlier vowed to reset most of the policies and decisions of the Trump administration, it has specifically refused to remove sanctions the former had slashed on Turkey after it purchased Russian S-400 missile defence system.

US-Turkey bi-lateral ties, therefore, remain tense not only because of the Biden administration has not done anything to improve them, but also because of the US essentially lacking an overarching reason to reset these ties in the wake of its shift away from the Middle East. Turkey, therefore, must explore other options to materialise its interests.

After his recent meeting with Russia’s Vladimir Putin, Erdogan was quick to remark that he and his Russian counterpart used a “sincere and productive” meeting in the Black Sea resort of Sochi (September 29) to discuss possible joint defence and security projects, including building further Russian nuclear reactors in Turkey. While this announcement may have rung alarm bells in some Western quarters, it failed to generate the kind of strong reaction from the NATO that came in the wake of Turkey’s purchase of S-400 system. To a great extent, developing working, and even strategic, ties with Russia is becoming a new normal in the EU, thanks to Germany’s insistence on pursuing and finishing Nord Stream 2 to meet its needs without having to compromise its core interests.

The US, on the other hand, is preparing for a new round of sanctions should Ankara make any new defence deals with Russia. Senator Robert Menendez, who heads the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that sanctions were mandated by law for “any entity that does significant business with the Russian military or intelligence sectors.” “Any new purchases by Turkey must mean new sanctions,” Menendez said on Twitter.

“We continue to make clear to Turkey that any significant new Russian arms purchases would risk triggering CAATSA 231 sanctions separate from and in addition to those imposed in December 2020,” a State Department spokesperson said, referring to the 2017 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.

Notwithstanding the current state of tensions, it remains that, but for Ankara’s different world view, the US and Turkey could have continued to work closely as allies. Specifically, the rise of Asia and China’s ascendance as a global power – which is a major cause of concern for the US dominated system – is not seen as a ‘threat’ in Ankara. Turkey’s ruling elite does not see China as a country that must be countered or contained. On the other hand, the Erdogan regime – which has been seeking ways to position Turkey as a major regional player with global outlook – sees in the rise of China an inevitable global shift towards multipolarity - a kind of global system that suits Ankara’s own ambitions to project itself as a ‘neo-Ottoman’ power.

These ambitions are unlikely to be met if Ankara remain a steadfast and faithful NATO ally. While it does not aim to reject NATO, it is also obvious that its alliance with NATO did not prevent France from arming its European rival and a fellow NATO member, Greece. There is, thus, an additional imperative for Ankara to meet its defense needs from all available resources. In the wake of US sanctions and refusal to deliver F-35s, for which Ankara has already paid US$1.4 billion, Russia becomes the most suitable alternative source of defense procurement.

Therefore, as Erdogan remarked after his meeting with Putin, “there is no going back” from Turkey’s purchase of S-400 system, or its upcoming defense deals, including submarines and nuclear-powered energy plants. As it stands, its relations with the West - in particular, the US – would continue to deteriorate not only because Ankara is allying with Russia but also because the US, because of its focus shifting away from the Middle East, cannot give Turkey a leeway to pursue its regional ambitions. Even though Russia, too, is weary of Ankara’s ‘neo-Ottoman’ ambitions, it remains that these ambitions are unlikely to gain any support from NATO or the US. In the absence of this support, Ankara’s ‘neo-Ottoman’ dreams remain tied to Russia’s support in terms of crucial defense and military equipment, as well as the supply of gas, which continues to play a crucial role in meeting Turkey’s domestic and industrial needs.

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