The Uneasy Balance of the US-Turkey Relations is getting Tilted

The relations between Ankara and Washington have for many years now been characterized as a “fragile equilibrium.” Back when Erdogan just came to power, the US supported his Justice and Development Party, which, however, over time stopped being an American project and gained independence. Barack Obama, for instance, hoped that Turkey would become an exemplary democratic country populated mostly by Muslims, a kind of bridge between Europe, the Middle East, and the Islamic world. The former US leader considered Erdogan to be a moderate Muslim leader, and named him one of only five colleagues, with whom he managed to build the most friendly and trusting relationships. But gradually both leaders became disillusioned with each other.

Relations between the countries were equally ambiguous during the “Trump era”, especially against the backdrop of Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, and also after Washington’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the consequent transfer of the American embassy there from Tel Aviv. Erdogan would sharply criticize those steps. The United States, in turn, acknowledged that its ally, previously considered a Western mediator in the Middle East, now seeks to pursue an independent policy.

Of course, the United States needs Turkey as an outpost on the southern flank of NATO, as a security partner. None of the countries want to burn their bridges. In the last decade alone, Ankara spent about $33.5 million promoting its interests in the US, according to documents released by the US Department of Justice under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). These funds were enough for the Turkish authorities to build a stable network designed for the promotion of their interests, which operates at several levels of government: in the White House, in Congress,
and in the media. Among Ankara’s political contractors, one can find influential parliamentarians and consultants who take part in the discussion of national security issues, foreign relations, and military affairs. A number of them act as legislative assistants, and some are included in commissions and committees responsible for writing and approving certain drafts. Ankara pays special attention to departments whose competence is international relations, the army and intelligence, as well as appropriations and finances.

Ankara is very active in cooperating with the media, and media control is given special attention by the Turkish Embassy in the United States. In mid-2014, the Ankara diplomatic department hired for such purposes Alpaytac, which coordinated work with the media and organized the publication of articles by Turkish officials on information platforms. Alpaytac reportedly spent $1.4 million on the media campaign in just one year.

Nonetheless, periodic waves of cooling in relations between Washington and Ankara continue to arise.

Thus, recently the United States announced the creation of a forward headquarters of American special operations forces in Albania, which, according to Washington’s calculations, will allow countering the influence of not only Moscow, but also Turkey in the Balkans, and will keep the Albanians “from a too close rapprochement with Ankara.” According to The Insider, Turkey has invested heavily in Albania, as both countries are members of NATO and profess Islam. However, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey is steadily moving away from the transatlantic alliance, and there are fears that Ankara will drag other NATO members with it.

Wherever Turkey sees prospects for its expansion, it collides with US plans. In the Transcaucasia and Central Asia, in Russia and Ukraine, in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea basin, in Central Asia and the Middle East, in Africa and the Balkans, in China - everywhere Turkey competes with the United States, seeking to reduce the latter's influence and increase its own. In military terms, Turkey continues to strengthen its ability to solve foreign policy problems by force. A segment of Turkish air defense not controlled by the United States has been created through the acquisition of Russian S-400 systems, reconnaissance and sabotage forces that have lost many valuable specialists after personnel purges in 2016 are being restored, new destroyers and submarines are being built, and military presence abroad is increasing. In January 2020, the Turkish parliament approved the deployment of Turkish armed forces in 12 states: Azerbaijan, Albania, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Qatar, Kosovo, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Somalia and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Britain encourages Turkey in every possible way, maneuvering in its actions between pushing it away at the right moment for London or colliding with a suitable European country, after which it seeks to enter the space cleared by Turkey, be it Africa, the Middle East, Russia, Central Asia, Transcaucasia or the Balkans.

As a result, the United States is increasingly inclined to believe that Turkey is turning from an ally of the United States into its rival, which is why the strategic plans of these two states clash. This is despite the fact that Turkey retains economic, political and military dependence on the United States and NATO, and Biden’s entourage has already given a command to the allies to do everything possible to keep Turkey in the sphere of influence. However, the vortex of conflict between the US and Turkey continues from incident to incident, with each side accusing the other of provocative behavior.

Erdogan not only saw the gaps formed in the once monolithic system of the Pax Americana world, but also realized that in the new changing world, where tectonic shifts in geopolitical platforms either form new continents or crush those who are between them, Turkey in its former state can just disappear. Therefore, more and more often in the speeches of Turkish politicians one can hear Ankara’s obvious criticism of the United States and the policy pursued by the White House.

One example of this is the statement of the Turkish political scientist Mehmet Perincek in an interview with the Sputnik Azerbaijan news agency on February 7, that, after the shameful defeat of the United States in Afghanistan and the unsuccessful attempt at a color revolution in Kazakhstan, Washington’s plans in Central Asia are completely destroyed. However, according to him, Ankara’s actions can serve as a positive example against this background, in particular, in building up post-war processes in the South Caucasus, rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also began to actively support criticism of the United States and the West, emphasizing, in particular, that Western bogeyman stories about Russia allegedly intending to invade Ukraine only lead to increased panic and a worsening economic situation in the country. In an interview with TRT, Çavuşoğlu said that “unnecessary statements” that Russia would allegedly “invade” Ukraine should be avoided, as this would cause unrest in the country and economic damage to it.

On February 8, Secretary General of the Turkish Vatan (Motherland) party, Dogu Perincek, spoke out against the
position of the United States and NATO, predicting the “death” of NATO in the event of the expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance to the east. He also urged to prevent the arrival of NATO forces in the Black Sea, pointing out that such a move by Brussels would have complex consequences for the region. “Greece and Ukraine are under the nose of Turkey, the US is stuffing both countries with weapons, aircraft to carry out provocations. We understand that Ukraine, like Greece, serves the interests of Washington. Inviting the US to the Black Sea will have very complicated consequences. It is necessary to prevent outside forces from entering the Black Sea,” Dogu Perincek said.

The Americans do not need a strong Turkey having good relations with Russia, Yeni Şafak points out. This leading Turkish publication recalls that when the war in Syria began, the United States had already tried to push Ankara and Moscow, but they did not succeed, despite a number of provocations.

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