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# Turkey and America: what next?

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It was not long ago — say the 1990s — that Turkey was a good news story on several dimensions. As a key member of NATO, Turkey guarded the eastern border between Europe and Russia. Turkey had the largest military in NATO except for the United States and ties between the Turkish and American armed forces were very close. Turkey's economy was growing and modernizing and, most remarkably of all, Turkey had become a functioning parliamentary democracy. Culturally, Turkey's elites were secular, Westernized and aspired to be accepted in Europe as Europeans. What made this all noteworthy was the fact that Turkey's population was/is over 80 percent Muslim. As a consequence, Turkey stood out as a kind of beacon demonstrating that an Islamic country could be modern, democratic and prosperous. From an American standpoint, Turkey's example became hugely important after the 9/11 attacks. It became a critical goal of U.S. policy to establish that Islam and democracy could not only coexist; they could thrive together.

Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish republic, was fiercely secular and the Turkish armed forces saw themselves as the guardians of that legacy. However, in 2003 the leader of an avowedly Muslim political party became prime minister. Recep Tayyip Erdogan's emergence so soon after 9/11 caused alarm both in and outside Turkey. But others saw a silver lining; an Islamist politician with deep roots in Turkey's Muslim heartland had come to power through a democratic process — reinforcing the point that Islam and democracy were compatible. Initially, Erdogan did nothing to challenge the geopolitical status quo. He reaffirmed Turkey's commitment to NATO and doubled down on Turkey's long standing effort to join the EU.

However, over the last decade an all too familiar pattern has emerged. The democratically elected leader proves adept at manipulating popular opinion and demonstrates increasingly autocratic inclinations. Democratic elections are welcome as a means to gain political power, but not so welcome after that. Erdogan commented revealingly that, "Democracy is like a trolley; useful to get to your destination but once you have gotten there, you get off." As prime minister he demonized his political opponents, undercut the independence of the judiciary, intimidated and coerced the press, steered state funds to his family and cronies — all while using appeals to Islam and nationalism to build a mass following. He used that support to force

through constitutional changes that would allow him to assume the presidency with enhanced powers.

In 2016, a small number of military officers mounted an attempted coup calling for the restoration of secular government in Turkey. The putsch failed; Erdogan emerged triumphant — and fiercely vindictive. He has purged the military and civil service — as well as schools — and thousands have been imprisoned for alleged complicity. In short, Erdogan exploited the coup to greatly tighten his grip on power.


In the same period, U.S.-Turkey relations began to deteriorate. Erdogan suspects, and probably believes, that the United States was sympathetic to the coup attempt. American officials were slow to act in the hours following the event, whereas Vladimir Putin offered immediate support — including an invitation to visit Russia, where Erdogan was feted in a lavish Czarist palace in St. Petersburg. Relations with the United States were also strained by American support for Kurdish militias assisting in the fight against ISIS in Syria. Erdogan views the Kurds as enemies — allies of a large Kurdish minority that comprises perhaps 20 percent of the population of Turkey and is suspected of disloyalty to the Turkish state.

All this laid the groundwork for a critical decision on Erdogan's part. He decided that Turkey would purchase a sophisticated air defense system from Russia. He did so despite repeated warnings from NATO leaders that such a purchase would be incompatible with NATO membership. The Pentagon had urgent, specific concerns. Turkey has been part of an elaborate multinational production process to build America's most advanced fighter aircraft, the F-35. Turkey had agreed to buy 100 of the aircraft. Pentagon officials publicly and privately declared that the F-35 could not be provided to a country that installed Russian defense technology along with Russian technicians. Erdogan responded by phoning President Trump and obtaining what he thought were assurances that the White House would overrule the Pentagon. Erdogan probably heard correctly; Trump has repeatedly expressed his disdain for NATO and his affection for Russia. In his mind, the Russian sale to Turkey was just fine. Besides, cancelling the F-35 deliveries to Turkey would forego billions of dollars in sales. Unfortunately, for both Mr. Trump and Mr. Erdogan, the requirement that the F-35 sale be cancelled was embedded in law — beyond the reach of the White House.

For the United States, the stakes in this dispute are high. Without Turkey's full participation, NATO will be greatly weakened. The beneficiary is Putin, who has long sought to dismember the alliance. Politically, as Erdogan becomes more autocratic, the vision of Turkey as an example of the union of democracy and Islam falls away. The U.S. military role in Syria is threatened, as are the Kurds, perhaps America's most reliable allies in the Muslim world. But Erdogan also faces perils. Like most autocrats (think Vladimir Putin or Hugo Chavez), he is preoccupied with power and knows and cares little about economics. Consequently, he has adopted a number of policies that were politically cunning and economically stupid. Now the consequences are becoming evident with a sharp slowdown in the Turkish economy, skyrocketing debt, accelerating inflation and declining foreign investment. The population is

feeling the pain and Erdogan’s popularity and political support are eroding. Two critical mayoral elections went against him in recent weeks.

Where is all this headed? The simple fact is that no one knows.

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