



U.S.-Turkish Ties At A Tipping Point

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Next year is shaping up to be a crucial test for one of America's most enduring Middle Eastern alliances.

Ties between Washington and Ankara have been on the rocks for some time, as various issues – from U.S. worries over Turkey's purchase of advanced Russian air defenses to Turkish objections over America's arming of Kurdish militias in the fight against ISIS – have intruded on the previously robust bilateral relationship. But, as we enter the new year, relations between the two longtime NATO allies are poised to get much, much worse.

President Trump's controversial October decision to withdraw U.S. forces from northern Syria paved the way for a Turkish invasion of the territory, and succeeded in papering over the current problems in the bilateral alliance, at least temporarily. But it also crystallized a consensus on Capitol Hill that Turkey – now increasingly aggressive in its regional maneuvers and unbounded in its neo-Ottoman aspirations – needs to be sent a corrective message.

Congress has been quick to do so. In early December, both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate passed resolutions recognizing the Armenian genocide for the first time in more than half-a-century in what amounts to a very public rebuke to Ankara. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee subsequently advanced legislative language that could prohibit Turkey from purchasing the F-35 strike fighter while simultaneously permitting the nation of Cyprus, with whom Turkey maintains a long-running territorial dispute, to begin to procure U.S. weapons.

These Congressional steps mirror a growing consensus in the Beltway policy community that the United States – long tethered to Turkey via the NATO alliance – would be prudent to start making other military and political plans. Perhaps most prominently, Gen. Charles Wald, the former deputy commander of U.S. European Command, has argued that the United States should pull its troops out of Turkey, repositioning them to more trustworthy allies amid the country's growing anti-Americanism and its strategic tilt toward U.S. adversaries like Russia and Iran.

Turkey, for its part, is making ultimatums of its own. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has signaled that his government is seeking an independent nuclear capability – thereby implicitly rejecting the security umbrella provided by NATO, which was designed in part to mute the atomic urges of its members. He has threatened to bar U.S. forces from the Incirlik air base (which is currently home to as many as 50 U.S. nuclear weapons). And he has publicly signaled plans to become more deeply involved in the Libyan civil war in coordination with Russia – a move that many see as a prelude to the sort of Turkish-Russian condominium that now prevails in Syria.

President Trump has attempted to mitigate the damage to the best of his ability, including by publicly distancing himself from the Congressional depiction of the massacre of Armenians during World War I as genocide. But it's far from clear that the Administration can reverse the current political trends propelling the two countries away from one another – especially as Turkey continues to take steps that cast fundamental doubt on its continued alignment with the West. And it's even less certain that the White House is capable of dispelling the notion, now prevalent on both sides of the U.S. political aisle, that Turkey has transformed from a reliable ally into something quite different.

There are, of course, compelling reasons for Washington to seek to manage its relationship with Turkey through the current period of turbulence. Erdogan, after all, does not represent Turkey as a whole, and Erdogan's political tenure won't last forever. Having partnered with Ankara for more than half-a-century on a range of political and security issues, the United States would be prudent to try and manage bilateral ties until such time as Turkey has a change of heart (or, more likely, of leadership).

Fundamentally, however, salvaging the partnership between the two countries is not just up to America. It is also a Turkish decision, and Erdogan's actions increasingly suggest that his government has made its choice.