9th THESSALONIKI INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

**"Turkey: Where is it heading?"**

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Introduction

Erdogan’s Turkey has gone rogue. It has become confrontational, aggressive and lawless, defying US expectations and undermining international order. US-Turkey relations must be based on rules and standards of conduct. Multilateralism and international cooperation are core principles for the incoming Biden administration. Therefore, expect the US to emphasize Transatlantic cooperation in dealing with Turkey. If we don’t want to “lose” Turkey, Washington must make clear what’s needed to recover US-Turkey relations, as well as red lines that will elicit a punitive response. Repairing relations starts with a steely-eyed assessment of the problems.

NATO

Turkey uses its NATO membership to excuse bad behavior. NATO is more than a security alliance. It is a coalition of countries with shared values. Turkey under Erdogan’s dictatorship would not even be considered for NATO membership if it applied today because Turkey is anti-American, out of step with European values, Islamist and anti-democratic. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blasted Ankara for undermining NATO’s cohesion during a recent Foreign Ministers’ teleconference. He spoke about Ankara’s “provocative” activities in the eastern Mediterranean, Libya, Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh. Pompeo called Turkey’s acquisition of the S-400 missile system a “gift to Russia”.

Neo-Ottoman Ambitions

Turkey has manifest neo-Ottoman ambitions through military expansion in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa. It invaded and occupied Kurdish lands in northern Syria on October 9, 2019. Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu accused the U.S. of backing Kurdish “terrorist organizations”, the coalition’s strongest partner in the fight against ISIS. Turkey has also launched cross-border operations in Iraqi Kurdistan. It intervened against UAE-backed strongman Khalifa Haftar in Libya, backed Azerbaijan in its territorial dispute with Armenia, using drones and deploying jihadist mercenaries to turn the tide against Armenians. In a visit to Greece in 2017, the first by a Turkish head of state in 65 years, Erdogan disparaged the 1923 treaty of Lausanne that established Turkey's borders after World War One and called for a revision of Turkey’s boundaries.

Turkey-EU Relations

Erdogan has complained about an international conspiracy against Turkey, intended to frustrate the projection of Turkish power and influence abroad. In a veiled threat, he warned the EU against “explicit hostility” towards Turkey. European policy makers and opinion leaders are fed up with Erdogan’s antics. Marc Pierini, a former EU ambassador to Turkey, concludes: “Leniency is not an option anymore.” He was reacting to Erdogan’s disparaging comments toward France’s President Emanuel Macron. Erdogan said Macron should “have his head examined” and called on French voters to oust him in 2022. Erdogan insulted other European leaders, including Merkel, sating: “You are fascists in the true meaning of the world. You are veritably the link in the Nazi chain.”

Migration Issues

Tensions between Turkey and the EU spiked in 2015 when Turkey allowed hundreds of thousands of migrants to set sail for Greece, which precipitated a refugee crisis from the Balkans to Scandinavia. Erdogan used the refugee crisis to extort 6 billion euros from the EU in exchange for limiting the influx of refugees. Erdogan also demanded that the EU update its customs union with Turkey and authorize visa-free travel for Turkish citizens. Dissatisfied with the EU’s commitments, Turkey announced in February 2020 that it would stop policing the border, prompting thousands of refugees to storm the northeastern frontier with Greece. Erdogan warned, “Hey EU, wake up. I say it again: If you try to frame our operation as an invasion, our task is simple — we will open the doors and send 3.6 million migrants to you.”

Eastern Mediterranean

The eastern Mediterranean has become the flash-point for conflict escalation with Greece and Turkey over territorial claims. A clash between Greece and Turkey over the Greek island of Kastellorizo was averted by Chancellor Merkel’s diplomatic intervention. According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, “[NATO’s] de-confliction mechanism has helped to reduce the risk of incidents and accidents,” between the Greek and Turkish militaries, but “it is not solving the underlying main problem.”

Oil and Gas Exploration

Competition is propelled by Turkey’s Blue Homeland Doctrine, adopted in 2015, as the basis for claiming natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. Under pressure, Turkey withdrew its seismic research vessel, Oruç Reis, for “maintenance and supplies”, ahead of the EU summit in October 2020. Its withdrawal temporarily mollified criticism by the EU. But as soon as the EU postponed sanctions, the Oruç Reis returned with its naval escort and resumed drilling off the west coast of Cyprus. Ibrahim Kalin, Erdogan’s spokesman, dismissed European concerns. He called for European leaders to see Turkey-EU ties through a “strategic mindset” and not allow them to be taken hostage by “bilateral disputes” with Greece or Cyprus

European Council

In advance of the European Council summit, Erdogan postured: “We see ourselves as an inseparable part of Europe. However, this does not mean that we will bow down to overt attacks to our country and nation, veiled injustices and double standards.” The European Parliament passed a resolution with 631 votes calling for the Council to impose harsh sanctions on Turkey in response to its illegal actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and Varosha, a fenced-off suburb of Famagusta in Cyprus, which was seized after the Turkish occupation in 1974. The EP resolution calls for the suspension of accession talks with Turkey, enumerating a detailed account of Turkey’s backsliding on European values and standards. At last week’s meeting of the European Council, EU leaders agreed to impose sanctions on an unspecified number of Turkish officials and entities involved in gas drilling in Cypriot-claimed waters, but they deferred bigger decisions such as trade tariffs or an arms embargo until they consulted with the upcoming Biden administration. Proponents of sanctions complained that recently imposed sanctions do not go far enough. However, sanctions on Turkey will be more effective if they are coordinated with Washington.

Economy

Erdogan’s pursuit of regional conflict seeks to distract Turks from the country’s miserable economy. Erdogan frequently accuses invisible, malevolent foreign enemies of fomenting Turkey’s economic collapse. As of December 1, 1 USD was trading at 8.34 Turkish Lira, making debt service almost impossible. Erdogan blames Jewish bankers. However, Turkey’s economic woes are the result of Erdogan’s mishandling of the economy. Berat Albayrak, Erdogan’s son-in-law was sacked as finance minister, as was Central Bank Governor Murat Uysal.

Domestic Human Rights

As Turkey’s economy has deteriorated, Erdogan has ratcheted up pressure on domestic dissent. Turkey has become a giant gulag. About 200,000 civil servants were dismissed after the so-called coup in July 2015. Up to 100,000 were detained. 63,000 people have been prosecuted for insulting the president in the past 5 years. Purges also targeted independent media. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Turkey has detained more media representatives than any other country. Kurds are also targeted. Using a post-coup emergency law, more than 11,000 Kurdish teachers were detained, Kurdish mayors were dismissed and prominent politicians with the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) such as co-Chair Selahattin Demirtas, have been detained now for years. The crackdown continued when a new “anti-terror” law replaced the state of emergency in August 2018. Article 301 of the Penal Code and Article 8 of the Anti-Terror Act are used to silence criticism and curtail freedom of expression.

Conclusion

US and Turkish officials need a frank conversation. The objective should not be to push Turkey into a corner. A deeper economic collapse would further inflame the situation in Turkey. The Biden administration will emphasize trans-Atlantic cooperation. It will work with European allies to present a united front, while providing a pathway for Ankara to redeem itself. Cooperation can occur if Erdogan changes course. There are also negative consequences if he stays the course.

The U.S. Senate on Thursday approved a $750.5 billion version of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act. Language in the bill finds that Turkey’s purchase of the S-400 constitutes a “significant transaction” under Section 231 of the 2017 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), a law which offers a range of sanctions against any country procuring a major defense item from Russia. Penalties include prohibiting loans from the U.S. and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Turkey was blocked from acquiring the F-35 stealth bomber after it activated the S-400 system.

State-owned Halkbank is facing charges of fraud and money laundering in the United States over an Iranian-Turkish sanctions evasion scheme. The next hearing is scheduled for March, after Biden takes office. Turkey faces a huge financial penalty.

The Biden administration inherits a bilateral relationship with Turkey in deep decline. Redemption will require Erdogan to abide by norms and rules, which he currently disdains. Nothing in Erdogan’s character or recent behavior suggests compromise or accommodation.

The US should focus on Turkish civil society. The Turkish people elected Erdogan, but they must not be punished for his rogue behavior. A more active and democratically inclined civil society is a viable alternative to Erdogan’s dictatorship, which can compel a change in the regime’s behavior or a change in the regime itself.