



Turkey's Eastern Pivot: A Challenge for NATO and a Threat to US National Security



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**CERL Report on
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The recent guilty plea by Former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, and the indictment of Trump campaign officials Paul Manafort and Rick Gates, should highlight the fact that violators of the Foreign Agents Registration Act have reached the highest levels of government.¹ Flynn's long delay in registering as a foreign agent is particularly problematic in view of his lobbying efforts on behalf of the Turkish government.² As detailed below, Turkey is no longer reliably aligned with US and NATO interests, despite being a military partner of the US as well as a member of NATO. Indeed, Turkey now appears to be more firmly aligned with Russia than with the US or NATO. Turkey's penetration into our political system is therefore of significant concern from the standpoint of national security. This paper will argue that Turkey has become a threat to US and NATO security, and that this fact has not resulted in the policy shift it merits. Notably, US strategy regarding Turkey is nowhere to be found within the White House National Security Strategy document, suggesting that the current Administration is insufficiently attuned to the risks of our present alliance with Turkey.³ This paper will propose several policy adjustments warranted by Turkey's shifting orientation towards Russian interests.

I. Introduction

On December 2, 2017, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis told reporters that as the war against ISIS enters its final stages, US strategy would move towards holding territory instead of arming Syrian Kurdish fighters.⁴ This statement came a week after US President Donald Trump informed Turkish President Recep Erdoğan in a phone call of "pending adjustments to the military support provided to our partners on the ground in Syria," a reference to Kurdish fighters that have been working in tandem with the US military in Syria.⁵ This abrupt about-face in American policy, which includes the recouping of weapons and vehicles from Kurdish militias, is an imprudent attempt at détente by the Trump administration towards the Turkish government.⁶ Erdoğan is a vociferous critic of American support for the Kurds in Syria. This issue, among others, has strained US-Turkish relations.

For the US, the diplomatic crisis with Turkey is a matter of critical national security, given our intelligence and military collaboration with Turkish forces. In July 2017, the Turkish state-run news organization, Anadolu, revealed the location of 10 US bases and outposts in northern Syria.⁷ In late August 2017, US troops stationed in northern Syria came under direct fire from Turkish-

backed forces.⁸ In December 2017, Turkey finalized the purchase of the S-400 surface-to-air missile defense system from Russia, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (hereinafter "NATO" or the "Alliance") historical adversary.⁹ These are but a few recent examples of increasingly *overtly hostile acts* taken by Turkey against NATO and the United States, actions that suggest a growing alliance between Turkey and the Kremlin, and a lack of commitment to democratic ideals. Erdoğan once revealed his attitude towards democracy by remarking, "Democracy is like a bus, when you arrive at your destination, you step off."¹⁰

Turkey possesses a formidable military and a robust economy. NATO's only Muslim-majority state, Turkey serves as NATO's bridge to the Middle East, sharing as it does a border with Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Turkey also helps to stem the tide of migration into Europe. It is in Russia's interest to drive a wedge between NATO and Turkey, both to diminish NATO and to bring Turkey increasingly within Russia's sphere of influence. Turkish recalcitrance towards contributing forces and capacities to NATO operations may reflect an enhanced Turkish-Russian relationship. Strengthening bilateral relationships with other NATO nations as well as pursuing a multilateral NATO approach towards Turkey, in a judicious combination of "carrots and sticks," appears to be the optimal path moving forward for the US.

II. Turkey's Syria Policy at Odds with NATO

A. Turkey's Alleged Connection to ISIS and al-Qaeda Affiliates

In May 2017, NATO formally joined the US-led international coalition battling the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). For years, accusations were made that Turkey aided ISIS and other global jihadist and Islamist groups such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, a former branch of al-Qaeda).¹¹ At the initial stages of the Syrian civil war, Erdoğan reportedly allowed ISIS fighters to enter Syria through Turkey's long and porous border, in effect, providing them with a strategically invaluable supply route.¹² As recently as December 2017, National Security Advisor (NSA) General H.R. McMaster criticized Turkey for sponsoring "radical Islamist ideology," a comment he revised after receiving a rebuke from the Turkish government.¹³ The Turkish Foreign Ministry fired back at McMaster's, calling his initial claim "astonishing, baseless, and unacceptable."¹⁴

At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Erdoğan's policy was to remove embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at any cost, even by partnering with enemies of NATO countries, countries that had been individually helping in the fight against ISIS since the initial stages of the war.¹⁵ Due to external pressure, Turkey has since recalibrated its Syria policy, taking efforts to monitor its border more closely and backing more mainstream groups, i.e. the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, the FSA is not without its problems. Under the Obama administration, the FSA was the beneficiary of CIA funding to overthrow Assad.¹⁶ However, this support declined as much of the Syrian military opposition became infiltrated by Islamist and jihadist factions.¹⁷ FSA fighters engaged in daily fighting in Aleppo with the US-led coalition's main local ally, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).¹⁸ The FSA is now fighting alongside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a coalition of jihadi forces that includes Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, in Idlib province. Erdoğan recently provided armored vehicles and advanced weapons systems to the FSA in Idlib, notwithstanding

the area's domination by jihadists and the FSA's tactical alliance with HTS in battling regime forces.¹⁹ This support reinforces claims that Turkey is backing terrorists in Syria.

B. Turkey's Misguided Belligerence towards Syrian Kurdish Militias

The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and the Free Syria Army (FSA) conducted a campaign in northern Syria in August 2016 entitled Operation Euphrates Shield, an effort to fight ISIS and to engage Syrian Kurdish fighting forces such as the SDF and the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG partially comprises the SDF and is now also armed by the US in the fight against ISIS.²⁰ Turkey has attacked YPG forces in the past, and according to Erdoğan himself, the TSK is preparing for an imminent attack on the SDF in both Afrin and Manjib.²¹ Turkey is also opposed to the possibility of the YPG's political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), participating in the Russian-sponsored Syrian National Dialogue Congress, planned for early 2018.²²

Turkey's opposition towards Kurdish groups operating in the Syrian theater stems from its belief that these groups are Syrian affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey considers a terrorist organization. The PKK has waged a brutal war for autonomy in southeastern Turkey since 1984. This belief carries over to Iraq, a country in which Turkey also has troop deployments, initially with the consent of the Saddam Hussein Ba'ath Party government but without the consent of the current al-Abadi Islamic Dawa Party government.²³ Turkey conducts air strikes, in part, to keep the PKK and its "affiliates," which does not include the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces, at bay.²⁴ Peshmerga, which means "those who face death," is the military of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁵

Turkey's Syria and Iraq policy are more focused on anti-Kurdish operations than on the defeat of global jihadist and Islamist Sunni groups. It is now cooperating with Iran, a traditional competitor in the region and a self-proclaimed enemy of the US, to prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in Iraq.²⁶ The focus on defeating the Kurds stands in stark contrast with priorities of the US-led coalition and NATO, which sees the defeat of ISIS and similar organizations as the main objective in both theaters of war and the alliance with Kurdish groups such as the SDF/YPG as a vital means in obtaining this goal. These Kurdish militias have acted as the main ground force for the US-led coalition in Syria with great effectiveness.²⁷

Erdoğan does not keep this policy distinction a secret. In June 2017, he stated with respect to the US arming of Kurdish groups:

At one side we will be together in NATO but on the other side you will act together with terror organizations... Those so-called friends don't see any issue walking along with terror organizations who want to divide Turkey... All of these moves are against NATO... In this case, the NATO treaty should be revised.²⁸

One Turkish official went further, implying that American forces would be targeted by Turkish air strikes should they be stationed near the YPG at the Syrian-Turkish border.²⁹ The official eventually walked back this statement. However, in addition to Anadolu's revelation of the

location of US bases and outposts in northern Syria,³⁰ US troops stationed in northern Syria came under direct fire from Turkish-backed forces.³¹

In January 2018, the US-led coalition announced it was working with the SDF to create a 30,000-strong force to be deployed at the borders with Turkey and Iraq.³² Erdoğan was quick to condemn this venture, pledging to “choke this terrorist army before it is born.”³³ Threats such as this undercut the US and NATO’s anti-ISIS strategy and embolden Russia, which is quick to exploit any perceived fractures within the Alliance.

C. NATO Access to Bases Challenged

One of the main assets Turkey provides NATO and the US is use of its Incirlik airbase, which houses approximately 90 US tactical nuclear weapons.³⁴ Turkey currently allows the US-led coalition to use Incirlik for air operations in Syria and Iraq.³⁵ However, there have been calls within Turkey to close the air base to NATO and the US,³⁶ compounded by security concerns about US troops stationed there. In 2015, US commanders at Incirlik decided it was unsafe for troops and their families to leave the base, and in 2016, all family members of US troops were ordered to leave.³⁷ Fellow NATO member Germany has had worse problems with Turkey regarding Incirlik. Turkey refused to let German government officials visit German soldiers stationed there, which in turn, led to Germany pulling its troops out of the base entirely.³⁸

A repeat circumstance nearly happened at the NATO base in Konya, Turkey, where Germany’s armed forces conduct AWACS surveillance operations pursuant to a NATO agreement.³⁹ Turkey once again would not allow German officials to visit.⁴⁰ However, due to the intervention of NATO Chief Jens Stoltenberg, another crisis was averted.⁴¹ The diplomatic row with Turkey, coupled with Erdoğan’s increasingly totalitarian tendencies at home, has led Germany, as well as France, the Netherlands, and Denmark, to attempt to halt next year’s NATO leaders’ summit in Turkey.⁴²

Germany relocated its formerly Incirlik-based troops to Muwaffaq Salti airbase in Jordan, and there are signs the US may end up following its lead.⁴³ The new Department of Defense budget, approved by Congress in November 2017, allocates \$143 million into upgrades at Muwaffaq Salti, more than any other operational site abroad.⁴⁴ As Steven Cook of the Council for Foreign Relations recently noted in his prepared statement to Congress, it may be time for the “Department of Defense to study the costs and modalities of leaving Incirlik airbase or shifting some of its operations to other facilities in the area, and making the results of this study public.”⁴⁵

III. Turkey’s Eastward Pivot Undermines NATO

A. Russian-Turkish Détente and Military Cooperation

On December 29, 2017, Turkey signed an accord for the purchase of the S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia.⁴⁶ NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defense Investment Camille Grand has called interoperability “the critical element” of the alliance’s ballistic missile defense focus.⁴⁷ The S-400 missile system is not technologically compatible with, and thus must be used independently of, NATO hardware.⁴⁸ As one commenter noted, instead of NATO operators,

advisors and trainers, “at the top of the Turkish air force defense architecture, you're going to have Russians.”⁴⁹ The S-400’s non-integrative component could potentially reduce NATO operational synergy or cause battlefield confusion with Alliance allies.⁵⁰ It could also reduce information sharing with Turkey regarding how to evade or electronically disrupt the S-400 system.⁵¹ Finally, Turkey is scheduled to purchase more than 100 F-35 fighter jets from the US, a plane used by the US military. Equipped with the S-400, Turkey would be able to determine how best to track and lock-on to the F-35, information that could then be shared with NATO enemies.⁵²

While NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has downplayed the impact of the transaction, recent statements from other NATO officials have been more antagonistic.⁵³ Gen. Petr Pavel, chairman of NATO’s Military Committee, echoed the concerns over the F-35, and talked of “necessary consequences” for Turkey, stating that considering the purchase, Ankara would be precluded from being part of any integrated air-defense system with NATO allies, and may suffer from other technical restrictions.⁵⁴

The S-400 purchase signifies the latest and perhaps the most dramatic shift in Turkey’s strategy with respect to NATO and its relations with Russia. In a September 2017 letter to President Trump, Senators John McCain and Ben Cardin pointed to the transaction as a potential violation of section 231 of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (P.L. 115-44), which relates to business dealings with the Russian defense sector.⁵⁵

In 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft, which briefly chilled relations between the two countries. This diplomatic rift ended quickly, however, and a reconciliation took place. Russia took a quick and firm position supporting Erdoğan after the attempted coup in 2016, which helped to solidify relations.⁵⁶ By contrast, Turkish officials, pro-government media, and much of the general populace believe the coup was a US-backed plot.⁵⁷ Referring to the West and NATO’s perceived tepid response to the coup, Erdoğan said: “Those we considered friends are siding with coup plotters and terrorists.”⁵⁸ Erdoğan’s criticism of the American response in particular relates to the continued US hosting of his rival-in-exile, Fethullah Gülen, whom Erdoğan thinks was the mastermind behind the coup.⁵⁹ Erdoğan has repeatedly demanded Gülen’s extradition to Turkey, a request that has yet to be met. With the above in mind, Erdoğan’s post-coup purge targeted Turkey’s entire staff of NATO representatives, nearly 400 military officials.⁶⁰

As the prospect of becoming a member of the EU dwindles due to Erdoğan’s illiberalism and anti-democratic policies at home, he is pivoting eastward toward Russia. This is an explicit slight to NATO and Western “allies,” many of whom Erdoğan now refers to as Nazis and fascists, e.g. Germany and the Netherlands.⁶¹ Russia and Turkey have conducted joint military drills in the Black Sea region and rumors persist that Russia will establish a naval base in Mersin, Turkey.⁶² Russia and Turkey are also cooperating in Syria as evidenced by joint military operations and Turkey’s invitation to join both Russia and Iran at the Astana talks regarding the creation of de-escalation zones in the war-torn country.

Joint operations between Russia and Turkey in Syria against ISIS began in early 2017.⁶³ This marks “the first Russian cooperation with a NATO member in recent history - now, of all times, when NATO is expanding its presence throughout Eastern Europe to keep Russia out.”⁶⁴ While

the Astana meetings between Russia, Iran, and Turkey center on Syria, there are worries this trilateral relationship could grow into a more traditional alliance that would be a bulwark to NATO and US interests in the Middle East.⁶⁵ Some experts view the Russian courtship of Turkey as an effort to drive a wedge within NATO.⁶⁶ Others have gone further, arguing that Russia is luring Turkey away from NATO to form a Russo-Islamic pact that includes Iran, part of a grander Russian strategy of “unwinding the US-led global order.”⁶⁷

B. Undermining Democracy in the West

A similar mole allegation is being made within the context of US-Turkish relations. Just days before President Donald Trump took office, former NSA Michael Flynn rejected a proposal by the Obama administration for a military operation in Raqqa, Syria that was also opposed by Turkey.⁶⁸ No reason for his decision is on the record. Flynn, through his lobbying firm Flynn Intel Group, was paid over \$500,000 to advocate on behalf of Turkey based on a contract that did not end until November 15, 2016, a week after Trump was elected president.⁶⁹ Ekim Alptekin, the Turkish businessman whose company paid Flynn Intel Group, has business ties to Russia.⁷⁰ Notably, Flynn’s termination was based upon him misleading Vice President Mike Pence about his conversations with Russia’s ambassador to the U.S.⁷¹ The Trump transition team was aware of Flynn’s Turkish lobbying and that he would likely have to register his firm as a foreign agent pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) before officially being named National Security Advisor.⁷² However, Flynn didn’t register his firm as a foreign agent with the Justice Department until March 2017, a retroactive filing made well after the conduct in question.⁷³

Former CIA Director and fellow Trump transition team advisor James Woolsey accused Flynn of discussing with Turkish officials the prospect of extrajudicially returning Gülen to Turkey.⁷⁴ In a somewhat ironic twist, Woolsey himself is now being accused of competing against Flynn for the lucrative deal with Alptekin, allegedly pitching a multi-million dollar contract to Alptekin in late 2016 for the purpose of discrediting Gülen.⁷⁵ Woolsey wasn’t awarded the contract.

Federal investigators for Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s probe into Russia’s interference in the last US election are now examining whether Flynn was to be paid over \$15 million if he could have either kidnapped or used his influence as NSA to effectuate the extradition of Gülen to Turkey and freed Turkish-Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab.⁷⁶ Zarrab is currently imprisoned in the US, facing federal charges that he assisted Iran in eluding US sanctions.⁷⁷ As part of Flynn’s plea deal for lying to federal investigators regarding his contacts with Russia’s ambassador to the US, he is cooperating with Mueller on the issue of whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Kremlin.⁷⁸ The Flynn and Woolsey cases add to the concern that the Trump administration is sympathetic to Turkey as part of its sympathy to Russia. It furthermore lends credence to the argument that Turkey may be a threat, with or without Russian assistance, to democratic institutions outside its own borders, in clear violation of NATO principles.

C. Turkey's Troubling Ties to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Another rift between Turkey and NATO stems from Turkey's continued interest in strengthening ties with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).⁷⁹ The SCO is an intergovernmental organization that focuses on promoting cooperation in areas of trade, culture, energy, and other benign spaces.⁸⁰ Having said that, there is a military component as it "serves China, Russia, and Central and South Asian member states as a forum for security cooperation, especially related to border management and counterterrorism, with training and exchanges on the latter being coordinated within the framework of an SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure."⁸¹ SCO members also "regularly conduct joint military exercises, and they cooperate on cybersecurity matters."⁸²

Turkey has had the lowest level of membership, i.e. dialogue partner, with the SCO since 2012.⁸³ In November 2016, Erdoğan expressed his wish for Turkey to be a full member.⁸⁴ While it is an overstatement to describe the SCO as an inherent antagonist of NATO, it is apt to state it is an emerging "Eastern counterweight" to NATO.⁸⁵ Notably, Iran is also engaged in the SCO membership process.⁸⁶ Turkey's wish to be a full member of the SCO should be a cause of concern for NATO as Turkey is privy to classified information disseminated to NATO members, information that could then be transferred to the SCO. Turkey has a choice to make if the time comes that it is offered membership to the SCO: either it accepts SCO membership and foregoes its NATO membership, or vice versa. It seems implausible that Turkey could be a member of both organizations given their incongruent missions and operational frameworks. That is not to say that Turkey, were it to leave NATO for the SCO, could not still maintain strong military relations with the US. Both Pakistan and India are formal members of the SCO and both have close ties to the American military. Notably, there is little domestic support in Turkey for continued NATO membership.⁸⁷ By contrast, there is a strong Eurasianist lobby in Turkey, a lobby that sees Turkey as part of a Russia-China-Iran axis, and that wants to cut formal ties to the Western world.⁸⁸

IV. Erdoğan's Domestic Policies Contradict NATO's Values

A. Erdoğan's Anti-Democratic Purge of Non-Loyalists

In 2016, Secretary General Stoltenberg discussed NATO's values before an audience in Georgia. In relevant part, he declared: "Democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of the media, independence of the judiciary (and) protection of minorities: these are the values that unite us. They are the values NATO has defended since its foundation in 1949."⁸⁹ NATO's Membership Action Plan, an advisory document created in 1999 for new applicants to NATO, states in relevant part: "Aspirants would also be expected... to demonstrate commitment to the rule of law and human rights."⁹⁰

Under the leadership of Erdoğan, it is clear Turkey no longer represents these values in any serious manner, especially since the attempted coup of 2016. Since that time, Erdoğan's government has declared a state of emergency and purged approximately 130,000 people from the public and private sectors, the primary accusation being that they are Gülen loyalists.⁹¹ According to the NY Times: "More than 8,000 army officers, 8,000 police officers, 5,000 academics and 4,000 judges and prosecutors have been forced out..."⁹² In most cases, those dismissed or arrested are being replaced by underqualified loyalists to Erdoğan.⁹³

B. The Purge Depletes NATO Capabilities in Turkey and the Region

Erdoğan's purge gutted the Turkish military, which is a concern for NATO as Turkey has the second largest armed forces in the organization.⁹⁴ Dismissing thousands of officers, pilots, and other critical and knowledgeable members of the Turkish military is a loss for NATO, especially because they are being replaced with individuals with far less experience. NATO's top commander in Europe, Joseph Scaparrotti, underscored this point when he spoke of the Turkish military's "degradation."⁹⁵ Scaparrotti stated: "Those are ones that have spent a career now and have a great deal of experience... I think it will take some time for them to overcome that."⁹⁶ One exiled officer echoed Scaparrotti's sentiment when he told CNN: "To be very blunt over here, (the) Turkish military... have lost their war-fighting capability to a great extent."⁹⁷

C. Erdoğan's Illiberal Broadening of Presidential Powers

Erdoğan's autocratic tendencies don't end with the purge. In April 2017, Turkey held a constitution-altering referendum that resulted in Erdoğan being granted sweeping powers that are against the democratic principles of NATO. In effect, the referendum renders Turkey a presidential as opposed to a parliamentary republic. Critics of the referendum claim it reduces the independence of the judiciary, weakens the checks and balances within the Turkish government, and gives too much power to the president. These charges are vehemently denied by Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP).⁹⁸

While Erdoğan initiated democratic reforms during the initial stages of his leadership in Turkey, these were seemingly made only to make progress with the EU, progress that has stalled indefinitely. Though his role model is the Westernized Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who founded modern Turkey in 1923, Erdoğan often evokes images and symbols of the Ottoman Caliphate and adorns his language with a religiosity not seen since the country's birth. He is seen by many as an Islamist who is attempting to de-secularize Turkey.⁹⁹ He has, *inter alia*, lifted the ban on the veil, instituted educational laws that make religious classes compulsory and that increased the number of religious schools relative to secular ones, and restricted the sale of alcohol.¹⁰⁰ Erdoğan also lent his support to Islamist movements during the Arab Spring and said "he wants to see the growth of a religious generation."¹⁰¹ This chipping away at the secular nature of state institutions has carried over to society-at-large. Some religious Sunnis, feeling empowered by the sectarian rhetoric of Erdoğan, have instilled fear in, and have attacked, both secular Turks and religious minorities such as the Alevites.¹⁰²

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Turkey's foreign policy realignment to the East, its domestic shift towards despotism, and its open antagonism towards NATO and key NATO member states present challenges for NATO.¹⁰³ Moreover, NATO must somehow counter Russia's charm offensive now taking place within Turkey. Putin is winning the hearts and minds of the Turkish public through a shrewd, yet probably unethical, public relations campaign that likely includes fake news.¹⁰⁴ Putin is using a sympathetic Turkish media to paint a picture of Russia as a stable ally to Turkey, one conscious of its needs and fears, whereas the US and Europe are depicted as hypocrites.¹⁰⁵ The "venomous anti-American

discourse” in government-run media in Turkey includes “blood-curdling rhetoric that place[s] blame for the coup on, among others, U.S. Central Command’s General Joseph Votel, the CIA, American officers serving at İncirlik, a professor at Lehigh University named Henri J. Barkey, and Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY).”¹⁰⁶ Polls clearly show that anti-Americanism and a pro-Russian sentiment in Turkey are on the rise. In 2017, 66.5% of Turks said the United States is the worst threat to Turkey, up from 44.1% a year before.¹⁰⁷ In 2016, only 14.8% thought that strategic cooperation with Russia could be an alternative to EU membership. In 2017, that number rose to 27.6%.¹⁰⁸

Notwithstanding the above, it is not too late to salvage the erstwhile strategic relationship between Turkey and NATO. There are signs Erdoğan is noticing he may have overplayed his hand in 2017 with respect to his dealings with the West. During the last month of 2017, Erdoğan resolved a visa dispute with the US that began when a Turkish employee at the US consulate was detained for having alleged links to Gülen.¹⁰⁹ He also offered conciliatory remarks towards Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands.¹¹⁰ Finally, Erdoğan iterated his intention to meet with French President Emmanuel Macron, and to travel to the Vatican to meet with Pope Francis.¹¹¹ This sudden reversal not only demonstrates Erdoğan’s mercurial leadership style, one highly attuned to the whims of domestic politics, but an acknowledgement that he does not want to be isolated from the West. Erdoğan’s overreach of 2017 thus presents the West with an opportunity in 2018.

NATO commitments are not pure bilateral relations, and an optimal approach to Turkey should be NATO speaking with one voice and acting as one body. Appeasing Turkey, i.e. a carrot-only policy, will only embolden Erdoğan’s wayward policies. So far during his administration, President Trump has been carrot-heavy. One case in point is President Trump’s September 2017 meeting with Erdoğan at the sidelines of the UN where he “praised Erdoğan as a friend who gets ‘high marks’ for ‘running a very difficult part of the world.’”¹¹² In response to this unwarranted commendation, 14 Senators pressed Trump to inform Erdoğan “that recent Turkish actions will not be tolerated ‘and that any cooperation must be based on a shared commitment to human rights and rule of law.’”¹¹³

Turkey and Russia back different sides in Syria, a source of tension between the two countries notwithstanding, Turkey’s inclusion in the Astana talks. In January 2018, Erdoğan summoned the Russian ambassador regarding a Syrian regime military offensive in Idlib, one backed by Russian airpower.¹¹⁴ Erdoğan accused Assad’s forces of attacking moderate rebels backed by Turkey under the pretext of fighting terrorism.¹¹⁵ Turkey wishes to maximize the position of the Syrian opposition as the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue approaches in Sochi, Russia later this month.¹¹⁶ This stands in contrast to Russian policy, which is to back the Assad regime and to protect Russian military installations in Syria. This ongoing fissure in the Turkish-Russian relationship could present an opportunity for the US and NATO down the line.

The US has leverage over Turkey, especially with respect to the Kurdish issue, as Russia is so far ignoring Erdoğan’s demand to shut out the Kurds from the Russia-led Syrian peace process.¹¹⁷ As with President Obama and the Iran deal, President Trump can simultaneously alleviate Turkish concerns while securing American interests. Any future US flexibility with respect to arming allied Kurdish ground forces in Syria, or reassessing its decision to deploy a Kurdish-heavy force along

Turkey's border, should only be implemented if Turkey meets certain conditions as outlined below:

1. Turkey must halt delivery of its \$2.5 billion purchase from Russia of the S-400 surface-to-air missile defense system. As Pentagon spokesman Johnny Michael noted: "A NATO interoperable missile defense system remains the best option to defend Turkey from the full range of threats in the region."¹¹⁸ There are missile defense systems available to Turkey from NATO countries, including the US. While the S-400 deal is finalized on paper, delivery of the system isn't scheduled until 2020.¹¹⁹
2. Turkey must stop coordinating military drills with Russia now that the conventional war against ISIS is in its final stage. Such drills raise questions about Turkey's commitment to NATO, and undermine the Alliance as a unified military coalition. If military coordination with Russia is an absolute necessity to defeat the remnants of ISIS or to avoid inadvertent clashes, it should be conducted at the behest, and with the participation, of the US or NATO.
3. Turkey must cooperate fully with NATO and the US-led coalition with respect to access and use of bases located in Turkey for military operations against ISIS and jihadist groups operating in Syria and Iraq. Bases such as Incirlik are critical to defeating such groups, and generally, are a core component of NATO's hard power projection in the Middle East.

In addition, we recommend the following measures for US policymakers:

4. The Senate Armed Services Committee should initiate hearings to explore whether Flynn's relationship with the Turkish government, directly or through its affiliates, was a national security breach and in violation of US law. This goes beyond the scope of the Mueller investigation, which is limited to criminal liability, and is necessary to ensure optimal policies are in place to prevent foreign penetration at the highest levels of our national security apparatus.
5. The Department of Justice (DOJ) needs to more aggressively enforce FARA, and Congress needs to strengthen DOJ's authority under FARA. As is evident from the Flynn case, the DOJ is currently focused more on encouraging FARA disclosures than on deterring FARA evasion. Disclosures and the transparency they afford are crucial: There are 14 active U.S. firms and individuals acting as agents on behalf of Turkey.¹²⁰ DOJ disclosures demonstrate that many of the agents have ties to powerful former politicians.¹²¹

Given Turkey's unique location at the crossroads of two civilizations, Erdogan is constantly recalibrating his Eurasianist and Western ties to optimize Turkey's position, sometimes affiliating with one camp at the expense of the other. This balancing act is perhaps best evinced by Turkey's

measured opposition to Russian operations in Idlib and its fierce hostility to the US' decision to create an SDF-heavy border force. The US and NATO must show resolve and prove to Erdoğan that there are limits to this Janus-faced foreign policy. It is essential that NATO rein in its most errant member for the sake of international security and stability, but also to set precedent and establish normative behavior within the Alliance. The US is not leaving the Middle East anytime soon. In fact, the US has a much larger military presence in Syria than previously thought, and may be on a collision course with Russia and/or its allies in the Syrian theater. In a post-ISIS world, power vacuums have created new opportunities for regional and global hegemonies to expand their spheres of influence. As available territory dwindles, the prospect of a conflagration increases.

Turkey is NATO's conduit to the region and will remain of vital importance. The US and NATO should take Turkey to task for any actions that are detrimental to NATO's mutual defense goals. At the same time, Turkey should be lured away from Russia. The delicate carrot-and-stick balance that must be struck with Turkey to reintegrate it into NATO interests requires nuanced diplomacy. The Alliance must be careful to couple its justified concerns with incentives that will entice Erdoğan to restore Turkey as a pillar of NATO.

¹ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4163363-Manafort-Gates-Indictment.html>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/us/politics/michael-flynn-turkey.html>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-mattis-syria/mattis-eyes-moving-away-from-arming-syrian-kurdish-fighters-idUSKBN1DV65A>

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-24/turkey-says-trump-promised-to-halt-u-s-arming-of-syrian-kurds>

⁶ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-11-29/us-faces-uphill-battle-recouping-arms-from-syrian-kurds>

⁷ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/turkey-leaks-secret-locations-of-us-troops-in-syria>

⁸ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/29/politics/us-troops-exchange-fire-turkish-rebels-syria/index.html>

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles/russia-to-supply-turkey-with-four-s-400-missile-batteries-for-2-5-billion-kommersant-idUSKBN1EL0H6>

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<http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/28/middleeast/assad-erdogan-terrorist-intl/index.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.newsweek.com/us-military-battles-syria-rebels-supported-cia-backed-turkey-656617>

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¹⁸ http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/syria-north-aleppo-turkey-shelling-sdf-backlash-daily-fire.html?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20170910&bt_ee=g7L53FbuHNHRD2de3up3v5qTWQ6vegDhNPnTzeJHNT7x7/aoeTkYvGqXL/LcCyd&bt_ts=1505122465662

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- ²³ <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/news-middle-east/iraq-fierce-electoral-struggle-islamic-dawa-party>
- ²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/24/world/middleeast/turkeys-push-to-join-battle-for-mosul-inflames-tension-with-iraq.html?mcubz=3>
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¹⁰³ Regarding US-Turkish diplomatic row: The US suspended non-immigrant visa services within Turkey after a Turkish employee at the US embassy was arrested for allegedly having ties to Gülen. Erdoğan didn't acknowledge the authority of the US Ambassador: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/10/politics/turkey-us-erdogan-us-ambassador/index.html>.

Erdoğan reciprocated in-kind regarding the suspension of the issuance of visas. Visas are now being issued by both countries: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-turkey-visa/u-s-turkey-mutually-lift-visa-restrictions-ending-months-long-row-idUSKBN1EM1AX>. There is also a new freedom of the press issue that concerns America: A Wall Street Journal reporter was tried and convicted in absentia in Turkey - for her reporting of the PKK in an arguably positive light. There are more than a few Americans physically imprisoned in Turkey - some claim they are being used as bargaining chips, so Erdoğan can force Trump to extradite Gülen and other Turkish prisoners in a swap:

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<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/michael-j-totten/turkey-behaving-enemy-now>. Erdoğan's bodyguards

attacked protestors on US soil in April 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/world/europe/erdogan-turkey.html>

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