

Lost In Translation: A System-Level Analysis of the Turkish-U.S. Alliance under the Obama and Trump Administrations

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Abstract

Through a system-level analysis, this study argues that the recent divergences between Ankara and Washington deserve a macro-level approach as they are actually a direct outcome of U.S. confusion over its future direction. Looking for a new grand strategy that will determine the U.S. position in world politics, Washington keeps sending Turkey mixed signals and the two allies are often lost in translation while trying to gain each other's support to fulfil their national priorities. Different than various other studies on Turkish-American relations, this article makes a unique contribution to the field by focusing mainly on systemic variables while analyzing U.S. relations with Ankara, which have followed a fluctuating course during the Obama and Trump administrations. It argues that the deteriorating relations are actually a result of the American retrenchment in the Middle East and its pivoting to Asia due to the world's shifting center of gravity from the West to the East with the rise of China.

Keywords

Turkish-American relations, Syria, PYD/YPG, offshore balancing, surrogate warfare, China.

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Introduction

Since 2014, Turkish-American relations have gone through one of their worst times ever. Trying to understand the main dynamics of this tiresome era, many researchers studying Turkish-American relations have made individual or state-level analyses, focusing on the two countries' recent foreign policy discourses and practices to determine their divergences and convergences. This article, however, considers the fluctuating Turkish-American relations as a direct outcome of *systemic* challenges and changes, which are often ignored but actually quite explanatory. The study proposes that the uncertainty and division among the American public and the ruling elite regarding the role that the U.S. should play on the world stage in the coming years is actually the main reason behind the country's fading foreign relations, which are not limited to Turkey, but cover other strategic alliances as well. Actually what we are talking about is a "foreign policy crisis" in the U.S., which has been exacerbated by the election of pro-isolationist and reactive Donald J. Trump to the presidency. For that reason, the problem is much wider than is often acknowledged, and requires a deeper look at Washington and its place in global politics.

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The U.S. has long been looking for a way out to overcome its problems provoked by "the rise of the rest,"¹ which has resulted in a power transition in the neo-liberal world order. For the first time in near history, the center of the world economy is moving towards the East and the U.S. is trying to stop, or at least slow this shift of axis mainly led by China.

Should the U.S. continue to lead the world? Does it have the necessary economic means to do so? Or as Paul Kennedy foresaw long ago, is it suffering from overstretch and has already begun to fall?² Answers to these questions are as divided as the American nation's future prospects for their country and consequently have a huge impact on American policy makers' indecisiveness about their country's current position in regions like the Middle East. U.S. President Barack H. Obama's years-long inaction in the Syrian civil war, and his administration's subsequent choice of the PYD (Democratic Union Party) and its armed wing the YPG (People's Protection

Units) as the most reliable and effective local partner there are certainly related to the idea of keeping the U.S. away from the costly problems of faraway lands, despite the risk of endangering the country's credibility in the eyes of its regional allies such as Turkey.

U.S. President Trump came to power in 2017 to “make America great again,” not by embroiling the country in excessive foreign engagements, but by politically and militarily isolating the U.S. from the outside world. To date, Trump has continued to follow the same path as his predecessor Obama, and has waged an indirect war in Syria. Despite the wider place Israel's security concerns occupy in the new American administration, Trump has continued

to refrain from a direct military involvement in the region and did not pursue the idea of a regime change in Syria until very recently. Similar to Obama, his primary agenda was to eradicate DAESH and for that, his administration has pursued

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“surrogate warfare” to decrease the possible losses of the U.S. This article argues that this policy preference cannot be evaluated without examining the economic and political bottleneck that the U.S. has been suffering from, especially since the 2008 financial crisis that has been exacerbated by China's rise and which has impoverished the Americans.

Through a system level analysis, this article will first focus on the current situation in the U.S. and assess how recent division among the American public about the future direction of their country affects U.S. foreign policy in general and its relations with Turkey specifically. This will automatically take us to the “American grand strategy” discussions during the Obama and Trump administrations, which require an in-depth analysis of both external and internal factors, while assessing the “leading from behind,” “offshore balancing” and “surrogate warfare” strategies of the American retrenchment. The article will then focus on the Syrian civil war and the PYD/YPG problem, the biggest crisis zone between Ankara and Washington as an extension of the Kurdish issue, one of the most sensitive topics in Turkish-American relations. After that, the paper will touch upon other contentious issues in mutual relations, some of which are still far from reaching a solution at the

time of this writing. These are the S-400 missile crisis, the Gülen issue, the disagreement regarding the F-35 jets, the Pastor Brunson case and the U.S. declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Finally in conclusion, the paper will examine the recent state of Turkish-American relations from a broader perspective and show how systemic influences limit Washington's range of motion and force it to shrink politically and economically, although this might eventually backlash and cause the loss of some traditional partners such as Turkey and the EU. In this way, the reader will have an opportunity to step back from populist daily arguments and see the current relations between Washington and Ankara from a broader perspective. Assessing the micro (state and individual-level) variables in Turkish-American relations together with the macro (systemic) ones will help the reader better understand that what the U.S. is actually going through is a "midlife crisis," in which its decreasing physical capabilities are consequently affecting its practices.

Lack of a U.S. Grand Strategy?

The future role of the U.S. on the world scene has long been a matter of dispute. What is being witnessed in this country in the 21st century is actually a "foreign policy crisis" in which the American public, and thus Washington, is unsure about how to move forward in an "increasingly complex, less safe and more unpredictable world."³ Recent American foreign policy signals a "navigation crisis" under the new circumstances of the 2000s. Questions about the grand strategies of Obama and Trump – if they had/have any, and to what extent they have shifted away from the general assumptions of the post-Cold War era strategy – have gained significant interest among intellectuals.

Here, it is necessary to explain what we mean by an "American grand strategy." Feaver defines American grand strategy as "the theory guiding the ruling cadre" and shaping "how they think about America's role in the world, what they think are the great challenges and opportunities confronting America, and how they're going to navigate them."⁴ By the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, American grand strategy assumed U.S. supremacy and defined the U.S. as the sole superpower; presidents George H. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush believed in the necessity of prolonging this superiority, which they saw as a must, both for the good of the world and

of the U.S.

However, as Feaver argues, Obama shifted from this belief and faltered to adjust the post-Cold War American grand strategy to the changing conditions of world politics. Obama is especially accused of being unable to deal with the increasing number of state-based and non-state-based actors threatening American national security.⁵ Believing that Obama actually shifted from “onshore balancing” in the Middle East to “offshore balancing,”⁶ Feaver finds this former U.S. president primarily responsible for the rise of threats like DAESH.⁷ The two leading neo-realists, Mearsheimer and Walt, however, epitomize the opposite camp. They see “offshore balancing” as a suitable grand strategy for the U.S. to practice in foreign crises such as the one in Syria.⁸ For them, staying as far away as possible from the local problems of the Middle East, as well as those of Europe and North Asia, the three “critical regions” for American national interests, would be the most appropriate option for Washington to preserve its global leadership. In their eyes, this strategy would require fewer human and financial resources, and allow Washington to focus on domestic problems. For them, this tactic was largely used by the U.S. during the 20th century, and, when abandoned, caused great failures such as Vietnam and Iraq. Although Mearsheimer and Walt argue that while Obama had actually returned to onshore balancing in his last presidential years to prevent the DAESH threat, he could not do enough to satisfy those who favoured a much more direct U.S. military involvement in regions like the Middle East in recent years.⁹

Political and intellectual circles both in and outside of Washington have long been discussing the same issue: To what extent should this superpower intervene in the outside world, and whether it should intervene at all. In fact, this has been the dilemma of the U.S. since its foundation. In his Farewell Address, America’s founding father George Washington called upon the nation to stay clear of entangling alliances which could endanger the survival of the new and fragile state. Although the economic and political rise of the U.S. to the world stage by the end of the 19th century allowed its rulers to intervene

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extensively in other lands, the question of whether the U.S. should directly get involved in outside problems remained before American decision-makers as their biggest challenge. This question formed the traditional tension between isolationists and interventionists.

Critiques about the Obama era are a part of this historical dilemma; certainly any presidential decisions taken on related issues are being shaped both by internal and external factors. In fact, Obama might be considered the first American president of the emerging post-American world, and subsequent American leaders might willy-nilly follow his path.¹⁰ But, is Obama the only one responsible for what is happening on the American side? What if the difficulties that the U.S. has recently faced are being caused by a macro reason, such as the U.S. being in an era of transition, prompted by both internal and external factors, within a rapidly changing atmosphere?

American Foreign Policy in Crisis

In his book *Divided America on the World Stage*, Wiarda points out that the problem of the U.S. might be deeper than what we see, and thinking that a certain president is the one who is responsible for the things that are going wrong might not be explanatory enough. Relying on some U.S. foreign policy observers, he writes:

As a nation, maybe we've lost our way, our can-do attitude; we are confused, uncertain, and deeply divided over the country's future direction, including over foreign policy... And if the voters and the general public are confused and divided, then why in a representative democracy would we expect our elected leaders to be any clearer in their policy decisions than the general public is?¹¹

The global environment is no longer the one that we faced right after the Cold War. The number of actors shaping the route of world politics is countless now. The rise of alternative powers, especially of China, is the main factor pushing the U.S. to reassess its long term strategy to remain the global hegemon. A resurgent Russia, a self-reliant European Union, an ascendant India and rival focal points such as Iran and North Korea are also on the radar of Washington, which is already suffering from an excessive number of new or re-emerging global problems such as terrorism, ethnic/religious conflicts, nuclear proliferation, energy demands, economic globalization and climate

change.¹² Similar to the changing external conditions, American political culture is in transition too.

The reason behind that transition might be the rising diversity and multiculturalism in the U.S. especially since the 1970s. Today, the American public is much more diverse and multicultural than ever. Its traditionally WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant) identity is fading; Hispanics and African-Americans are growing faster in population,¹³ and this changing social pattern might be one of the basic causes of having no central core of belief that can construct common U.S. foreign policy commitments.¹⁴ Yankelovich, for example, underlines how religious ideas and divisions had already begun to affect foreign policy preferences in the U.S. by the early 2000s.¹⁵ In fact, the U.S. is going through its highest level of polarization ever in the second decade of the 21st century. The priorities as well as the values and approaches of the Republicans and the Democrats are moving further apart every year.¹⁶ The ending of the Cold War and the loss of a common enemy like the Soviet Union or Communism, is another factor.¹⁷ “Global terrorism,” which the U.S. declared as a target after the 9/11 attacks, could not motivate and unite the American public as much as the Soviets did during the Cold War. This change is as influential as the rising religious/ethnic diversity among the American public. Since American political culture constitutes the context and parameter of the American foreign policy debate and the amount of support that can be received from the public,¹⁸ the transition era under the influence of the current polarization among the U.S. public and the lack of a uniting common enemy certainly cause confusion in the administrative circles of Washington, and consequently result in a loss of influence on the world stage. The more successfully the U.S. can adopt its political culture to the changing realities of the world, the better it will preserve its global hegemonic role.

Under these circumstances, can China turn into or be perceived as a strong common enemy that can re-unite America and stabilize its fluctuating foreign policy?

From Pax Americana to Pax Sinica?

Is Pax Americana, which was born after WWII, being replaced by Pax Sinica (Chinese Peace)? Is Trump using his famous “America First” motto just as a simple excuse to launch a global trade war against Beijing? Might that finally end the U.S.-led liberal international order? Will Washington continue to

isolate itself from the outside world to a great extent by disappointing its traditional allies in every single region?¹⁹ Answers to these questions cannot be evaluated without looking at the economic sphere first.

According to a PwC report, relying on the projected global gross domestic product of the countries by purchasing power parity, China will be the world's biggest and most powerful economy by the year 2050 (\$58.499 trillion), India will be second (\$44.128 trillion), while the U.S. will be 3rd (\$34.102 trillion).²⁰ For many, this significant shift in the world's economic centre of gravity, which Rachman calls "Easternisation,"²¹ actually signals the beginning of a "New Cold War" with the East's main actor, China, as Beijing's economic rise is expected to finally turn into a political and military threat.²² Here, it is worth remembering Henry Kissinger's monition about the hierarchical character of the Confucian belief that sees China [or the Chinese Empire] as the "centre of world order" and the "owner of everything lying beneath the sky." Kissinger claimed that whether American-Chinese relations will turn into a rivalry or a partnership will be the main determiner of the 21st Century world order.²³

The Trump administration is already on guard. It believes that China is seeking to advance its strategic interests across the world, while tipping the scales against the U.S.²⁴ For some, this might automatically cause a war, either hot or cold, between Washington and Beijing. Mearsheimer is among those who argue that the U.S.-Chinese power shift at the global level will soon bring a Cold-War like atmosphere:

It is clear from the historical record how American policy-makers will react if China attempts to dominate Asia. ... The U.S. can be expected to go to great lengths to contain China and ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer capable of ruling the roost in Asia.²⁵

Similarly, Buzan believes that China is at a turning point, and that some of the policies which have worked successfully for the last 30 years will not work for the next 30 and, as a result, the continuing "peaceful rise" of China will become much more difficult.²⁶

Washington is already aware of its economic shortcomings that might speed up China's rise. In the last 14 years, the U.S. GDP growth per year has not

passed 3%.²⁷ Despite the efforts of the Trump administration, which pushed the economic growth rate in the second quarter of 2018 to 4.1%, the U.S. still faces the risk of falling far behind the rising Chinese economy. Estimations that China will be the world's biggest economy in the near future push the U.S. to take some measures, such as Trump's rising tariffs for Chinese goods and pulling out of the TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership) trade deal to cut Asia's, but mainly China's, intimidating growth.²⁸ Although American society still feels more concerned about China's economic strength (poll results making a 6% increase from 2017 to 2018 and reaching a level of 58%) in comparison to its military capabilities,²⁹ the Trump administration has already begun to "securitize" China in order to persuade the American nation that the Chinese threat is not only economical but also political.³⁰

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In October 2018, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence presented China as a "national security" threat by accusing it of committing various anti-American acts, ranging from meddling in the politics of the Western Hemisphere to violating the "free trade" and "open seas" principles that Washington traditionally favours. According to Pence, previous U.S. administrations had ignored the Chinese actions and even abetted them; thus, as he claims, the Trump administration is "ready to show the Chinese the American strength."³¹ Having made the biggest increase in the national defence budget since the Reagan era, the remedy of the Trump administration to stop or slow down China's global rise seems to rely on military terms by carrying a bigger stick, if not using it. With his giant \$717 billion 2019 defence budget, Trump aims to strengthen the U.S. military "like never ever before"³² to counter rising China. Chinese officials believe that the giant U.S. defence budget will damage bilateral ties, as it also includes Washington's plans to establish closer ties with Taiwan to protect it from a possible Chinese invasion, and to limit China's activities in the South China Sea.³³

Retrenchment from Middle East Commitments

As a result of increasing tension in the Asia Pacific region and the fatigue the years-long Afghanistan and Iraq wars have caused, the Middle East is not arousing the attention of U.S. policy makers as much as its allies in this region desire. The Trump administration's decision to pull out of Syria is the latest

outcome of that “shift of interest” in Washington. Regarding the problems of the Middle East, namely Syria, the U.S. expects its regional and local allies/partners to take on the responsibility to solve their own problems, while backing U.S. interests as well. In this respect, withdrawing from Syria is not only a physical but also a psychological retreat.

Trump’s announcement in early February to pull out of Afghanistan is another sign of this fact. Afghanistan is the longest-running war in which the U.S. army has ever been engaged, while spending 50 billion dollars a year. For Trump, the U.S. should get out of these endless wars and bring its troops back home.³⁴ In his interview with CBS, it is easy to see Trump’s weariness regarding the active and costly role the U.S. has been playing worldwide. Claiming that going into the Middle East was one of the greatest mistakes that the U.S. has ever made, Trump noted regretfully, “We’re protecting the world. We’re spending more money than anybody’s ever spent in history...”³⁵

Since the end of the Cold War and despite those who dignify American hegemony all over the world, the U.S. is claimed to be losing both its capability and desire to be everywhere and to deal with all threats. There are

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deep discussions on whether the American retrenchment is something ephemeral or permanent. Dobbins, for example, reminds us that “isolationism is a recurring

temptation of American foreign policy” and, when tested with new challenges, Washington prefers returning to the world stage quite strongly so as not to lose its global leadership.³⁶ Still, the U.S. has long been aware of the fact that it is difficult and even unnecessary to be the policeman of the whole world. Bill Clinton’s “selective engagement” strategy in the 1990s was an early announcement of that trend, but 9/11 turned things upside down and brought back an excessive U.S. engagement in the Middle East during the G. W. Bush era. Then came Obama’s decision to withdraw from Iraq and decrease U.S. visibility in the region despite the heavy pressure of its allies. As then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s 2011 contribution to *Foreign Policy* underlined, the future of politics would be decided in Asia, not in Afghanistan or Iraq, and the U.S. would be right at the centre of the action, investing most of its time and energy in this geography.³⁷ But would that be easy?

Although Trump believes that 99% of DAESH has been knocked out, Washington still has some concerns regarding the Middle East. “We have to protect Israel,” said Trump for example, while adding that they want to watch over Iran as well.³⁸ Many believe that the heart of the current U.S. agenda is not actually DAESH but Iran. Tehran’s rising influence in the region by using the power vacuum in Syria as well as Iraq certainly gets on the Trump administration’s nerves, especially when the matter in question is Israel’s security. Nevertheless, the U.S. is fully aware of the changing centre of gravity in world politics and does not want to risk its position by getting excessively involved in the problems of the Middle East. Even the increasing American pressure on Iran is claimed to be a part of the American strategy to contain China and Russia in the long-run.³⁹

Given all of these factors, this article considers the deterioration of Turkish-American relations within this broader, system-level perspective and claims that the fading relations between Ankara and Washington cannot be properly examined without reference to the U.S. tilt towards the Asia-Pacific due to the giant threat perception felt from China. In fact, the American preference to “lead Syria from behind” through “off-shore balancing” or “surrogate warfare,” despite Turkey’s huge concerns, is a micro reflection of this macro reality.

With the aim of gathering the necessary amount of energy and resources to focus on China, the last two American administrations aimed to decrease the number of U.S. troops in the Middle East and rely mainly on American intelligence officers and Special Forces in Iraq while withdrawing from Syria. However, despite Trump’s decision to pull out of Syria, which has not yet fully materialized, Turkish-American relations are still suffering from a deep lack of trust. This is mainly caused by Turkey’s mounting security concerns, especially regarding the fate of Syria and the PYD/YPG/PKK’s future role in the region, which have fallen on deaf ears in Washington. The two capitals are often lost in translation, unable to understand each other’s vital security concerns and the possible outcomes of the changing regional and global atmosphere. Under these circumstances, Washington-Ankara relations have presented an alarming picture, especially since 2014, mainly because of Syria but also due to various other problems. The next part of the article will explore the details of the deteriorating Turkish-American relations, focusing widely on the Syria and PYD/YPG problems, while briefly summarizing the other disagreements as well.

Turkish-American Relations at a Crossroads: Breaking Off or Re-Uniting through Syria?

The Turkish-U.S. alliance goes back seven decades, but has never been deprived of controversies. Nonetheless, both Turkey and the U.S. have generally valued their convergences above their divergences, attaching a particular importance to their strategic cooperation.⁴⁰ Bilateral relations, which have been tested several times both during the Cold War and afterwards, faced one of their biggest crises during the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, when the Turkish Parliament debarred U.S. troops from using Turkish territories to reach the north of Iraq. The anger of the G. W. Bush administration and its Neoconservative circle against Turkey due to this act, widely known in Turkish-American relations as the “1 March motion crisis,” caused great tension between the two allies and increased anti-American sentiments among the Turkish population, which has long been sensitive about the U.S. rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds, and its alleged target of midwifing an independent Kurdish state in the Middle East.

Despite both sides’ subsequent efforts, such as putting into practice the Bush administration’s “Greater Middle East Project” to reform the region, mutual relations have never been fully repaired. For that reason, Obama’s attempts to regain the credit that Washington had lost in the Middle East during the G. W. Bush administration became a great source of hope for Ankara. The first years of Obama’s presidency reflected this positive atmosphere to a great extent. However, this mutually played “glad game” soon began to fade amid the rising challenges of the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian civil war.

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the security threats coming from its south. However, for a long time, the U.S. did not consider Syria or its neighbourhood a threat to its national security. At first the vital question for both Washington and Ankara was whether Assad should stay or go. Turkey was in favour of a real change in the governance of Syria that would strengthen the civilian power in this country and fulfil

the democratic demands of the people. However, as a middle-sized regional power, Ankara considered it important to receive the support of the U.S., a great power and a strategic partner that could shoulder an intervention in Syria and minimize Turkey's security concerns.

The U.S., however, had its own dilemmas. On the one hand the Obama administration was trying to detach itself from the problems of the Middle East (as well as Europe) and turn toward the Asia-Pacific region, where the new "Great Game" had already begun, with the above-mentioned rise of China and the continuing presence of Russia in the changing circumstances of the post-Cold War era. On the other hand, Washington was feeling the pressure of its allies, such as Israel and Turkey, asking it not to leave the Middle East. In addition, the increasing DAESH challenge in the region and in many Western capitals, where terrorist attacks were being committed one after the other especially by 2014, pushed the U.S. to declare DAESH a national security threat and start a fight against it.

Contrary to the Iraq War in 2003, Washington's strategy for dealing with the Syria crisis and DAESH was not to get involved in the region directly, but to "lead from behind" or "offshore balance" the threats by relying on partners and allies. This strategy would cost the U.S. less and decrease the number of American casualties, while keeping the superpower on track. However, leading from behind, offshore balancing, and proxy/surrogate warfare⁴¹ fell far short of satisfying the urgent expectations of America's traditional allies. As a result, the lack of sufficient U.S. support and decisiveness to topple the Assad regime, end the human tragedy in Syria and ease the refugee pressure that neighbouring countries had been suffering under since the beginning of the civil war increased the divergences between Ankara and Washington. The crack between the two deepened with the U.S. rapprochement with the PYD/YPG, the local partner of the U.S. in northern Syria, to eliminate the DAESH threat. Soon the U.S. surrogate warfare turned into a serious subject of dispute that revived the previous traumas and lack of confidence in Turkish-American relations.

Retrenching U.S., Offended Turkey

As the American public has been the major brake preventing a military intervention when an external problem is not a direct threat to U.S. security,

U.S. decision-makers often feel themselves obliged to persuade their public if they want to intervene abroad. Sending troops to faraway lands without any reasonable explanation is almost impossible for a country like the U.S. Experience has proven that interventions, especially military ones, which seem to bring positive outcomes in the short run, usually force the U.S. to deal with bigger and unexpected problems in the long run. However, the U.S. also has some commitments, and even if domestic circumstances make military intervention more difficult, decision-makers typically find a way to harmonize the “interests” of their country with its “values.” When the Arab Uprisings began by the end of 2010, the Obama administration preferred a “country by country” strategy, in which it had to make a choice between pushing for reforms and supporting repressive regimes. Public support for a military intervention in the problems of the Middle East was already low by the time the social unrest spread to Syria.

The strategy of “leading from behind,” which is attributed to famous South African leader Nelson Mandela and summed up as “putting others in front” while “shepherding them,”⁴² came into play under such an atmosphere. In this strategy, other actors, preferably regional ones, would act instead of the U.S. and decrease the reaction and the cost that would otherwise be incurred by Washington. Regional organizations and neighbouring countries, which feel the direct pressure of the uprisings, would come forward and take responsibility while the U.S., as the propulsive force, remained in the background. This strategy could also be called “offshore balancing,” whereby the U.S. pivoted away from Syria as much as it is possible and encouraged regional actors, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to solve the crisis.

This strategy seemed to be the perfect means with which to decrease the reaction against the American administration both from inside and outside, regarding American military interventions.⁴³ However, it was far from satisfying those who favoured a much stronger American presence in the Middle East. The hybrid strategy of “surrogate warfare” mentioned above was Obama’s means to muddle through this problem. On the one hand, this strategy aimed to prevent the U.S. from falling deeply into Iraq-like traps and stirring the anger of the American public. And on the other hand, it tried to make the U.S. continue to feel like a superpower, holding the remote controller in its

hand while offering relatively limited material and psychological support to its partners and allies in the crisis zones. In brief, it allowed the U.S. to detach itself from the problems of the Middle East with a small number of commitments that would not discomfort the American public at home and endanger the President's re-election potential.

While applying this "surrogate warfare," certain war functions would be outsourced to local partners who would help the U.S. achieve its strategic targets with smaller risks. In Syria, this has been the PYD/YPG whom, Washington thought, it could best rely on. By using the PYD/YPG as a surrogate in Syria, the U.S. aimed to achieve stronger international legitimacy, decrease the quantity of military equipment and personnel used, and provide certain military, linguistic, ethnic and cultural capabilities that it does not have as a foreign force in a completely unknown environment.⁴⁴

This tactical and temporary relationship, as Washington defines it, was not something totally new; it had been used by the U.S. military several times in the past, would also help Washington not leave Syria totally to Russia and Iran, two powers that indirectly strengthen China's global efficiency by targeting the U.S.' hegemonic role. However, this lucrative U.S. strategy brought about a serious handicap: namely ruining its relations with regional allies such as Turkey, where anti-American sentiments were already high.

Confidence Crisis Due to U.S. Support to the PYD/YPG

In 2014, Washington put into practice its idea of supporting the PYD and its armed wing the YPG as a surrogate force to fight against DAESH, which was finally declared as the "number one" threat against American security. Turkey, however, directly linked the PYD and YPG with the PKK, which it has been fighting against for more than three decades, and perceived the issue as a vitally important security threat to Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity. The disagreement between Ankara and Washington gradually turned the issue into a crisis and escalated the lack of confidence felt for the U.S. on the Turkish side.⁴⁵ The problem between the two allies on not being able to understand each other's national security concerns became obvious

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once again. The U.S. prioritized DAESH, and Turkey prioritized the PYD/YPG as well as the PKK in determining their security strategies regarding Syria.

The U.S. has long been a matter of discussion in Turkey's national security perception. Taking root from the famous "Sevres Syndrome," which often triggers Turkey's mistrust for the West, the U.S. is far from being a reliable ally in the eyes of the Turkish people, who often tend to accuse Washington of threatening Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity, especially by using the Kurdish card. A 2018 poll conducted by Kadir Has University revealed that the majority of the Turkish public perceive the U.S. as the number one foreign country threatening Turkey.⁴⁶ For Özel, what lies at the centre of the recent Turkish-American tension is the Kurds.⁴⁷ Relying on a 2018 public opinion poll, he points out that 3 of the 4 problem areas the Turkish public determines in Turkish-American relations involve the Kurdish issue. These include the fight against terror (60.4%); the U.S. support to the PYD (36.2%) and the Kurdish policies of the U.S. in the Middle East (32%).⁴⁸

Although the main criteria that shape the Turkish public's mistrust for Washington are related to the Kurdish issue, the U.S. seems not to have paid the necessary attention to that, most notably in choosing the PYD/YPG as its local partner in Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly announced that, for Turkey, "the PYD and YPG are equal to the PKK,"⁴⁹ which both Turkey and the U.S. see as a terrorist organization. Washington defended itself by underlining several times that this was a tactical and temporary relationship which would be abolished when the DAESH threat was eliminated. Despite that, Ankara continued to have huge concerns, especially as to how the heavy military equipment given by the U.S. to the PYD/YPG forces would be collected back without targeting Turkey's security.

The U.S. priorities as a global power do not always coincide with Turkey's, which is a medium-sized, regional power.

This controversy reflects the two countries' diverging threat and interest perceptions in the Syrian civil war. The U.S. priorities as a global power do not always coincide with Turkey's, which is a medium-sized, regional power. This

divergence has been a significant problem in mutual relations, especially since the end of the Cold War.⁵⁰ To overcome their differences, the two sides tend to

compartmentalize their relations so as to cooperate on some issues while being at odds on some others. In this way, Ankara and Washington could at least keep the communication channels open and refrain from playing a zero sum game. However, with its multi-dimensional and multi-actor character, the Syrian civil war has complicated the practice of this formula to a great extent. When the uprisings began to escalate, Turkey first tried to persuade the Assad regime to make reforms, but then decided to support the Syrian opponents as Damascus chose to violently suppress the reform demands. Ankara was aware of the fact that a regime change in Syria could not be managed without the help of international society, namely the leading great powers such as the U.S. However, receiving this support was not easy. What Ankara could receive from the American side was a limited “train and equip” support for the opposition forces in Syria.

What finally split Ankara and Washington in Syria was the rise of DAESH both in Syria and Iraq. The extremely violent practices of DAESH, which began to target Western capitals as well, enlarged the scope of the conflict and pushed the Obama administration to choose its side much more clearly. Soon Washington approached the secular PYD/YPG, and distanced itself from the other opposition forces, some of whom are accused of being the extensions of radical organizations such as Al Qaida. This was a turning point in the course of the civil war in Syria as, from then on, there has been a much clearer polarization between Ankara and Washington regarding the Syrian conflict. The means and ends of the two countries, the so-called strategic allies, were diverging once again. For Washington, the number one target was to eliminate DAESH and the method it chose to achieve that aim was to engage in surrogate warfare using the PYD/YPG. For Turkey, the number one threat was the PKK (and the PYD/YPG, which it sees as the Syrian extensions of the PKK), and the method it chose was to prevent these groups from establishing a Kurdish political/military entity in and outside of Turkey in order to prevent a threat against its national unity and territorial integrity. A change in the governance of Syria automatically became a secondary target for Ankara and Washington, as it became much more difficult to see the consequences of a post-Assad Syria.

Since 2014, Turkey has tried every means possible to persuade Washington to cease the support it has been giving to the PYD/YPG as surrogates in Syria, but it kept receiving mixed signals from its counterpart. To overcome that, Ankara

approached other players in the region, namely Russia and Iran, and gradually drifted apart from Washington which turned a deaf ear to Turkey's security concerns. By the end of 2018, U.S. President Trump announced his decision to immediately pull out the American forces in Syria, which have been giving support to the PYD/YPG there in their fight against DAESH. However, due to various disagreements on the U.S. side, American troops in Syria have not yet fully withdrawn from Syria. By February 2019, the U.S. President has updated his withdrawal plan and decided to leave around 400 U.S. troops in Syria so as to counter balance the Russian and Iranian military presence in the region and continue the American commitment to the PYD/YPG. As of June 2019, it is difficult to check how many American troops are still active in Syria; however Turkey continues its negotiations with the U.S. to finalize the U.S. support to the PYD/YPG and establish a "safe zone" in the north of Syria, where Ankara and Washington can cooperate closely to stabilize the region. As seen, the answer of "quo vadis the Turkish-American alliance?" is strongly related to the two countries' capability of solving the PYD/YPG crisis and agree on a common Syria strategy. While the rising U.S.-Iran tension is making the issue much more complicated as Washington might continue to rely on PYD/YPG, this time to eliminate the Iranian influence in Syria after the decline of the DAESH threat, Turkish-American relations are suffering from other crises as well, including Turkey's S-400 missile acquisition from Russia and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program. The next part of the article will briefly explain these additional problem areas in mutual relations.

Other Problem Areas in Turkish U.S.-Relations

The Acquisition of the S-400 Missile System from Russia

One of the recent divergences between Turkey and the U.S. is Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system from Russia. This problem, which seems to be a bilateral one at first sight, is in fact a multilateral problem that can be interpreted within the rising threat perception that the West, namely the U.S., feels for Russia (as well as China) as an alternative source of power that can speed up the "Easternization" on the world stage. As a matter of fact, the U.S. seems to perceive the S-400 issue as a "litmus test" to check whether the Cold War alliances and behaviour types are still valid and to determine which side Turkey is on.

Ankara has long been looking for alternative foreign sources to fulfil the technical requirements of its defence system. Dealing with various internal and external security threats and traumatized by the previous outside pressure, namely from Washington, in vitally important crises such as Cyprus,⁵¹ the country is aware of the fact that it should diversify its military equipment suppliers and gradually increase its domestic defence capacity.

As a country strategically located in a region where neighbouring states have ballistic missile capabilities, for years Ankara has desired to buy air defence weapons from NATO members with a condition that the agreement would provide the transfer of technology to build up its domestic defence industry. However no alliance members have been willing to transfer technology, as witnessed in the failed negotiations with Italy, France and the U.S.⁵² In the words of President Erdoğan, Ankara was “tired of waiting for another supplier.”⁵³ Therefore it had to search for partners from outside the alliance, such as China and Russia.⁵⁴ The recent S-400 crisis with the U.S. took place after Washington’s rejection of transferring technology to Turkey as part of a potential procurement of Patriot systems. Because of that, Ankara began seeking an alternative source for a high-technology anti-ballistic missile system. Its attempt to buy this system from China failed.⁵⁵ Looking for an alternative, Turkey signed an agreement with Russia to buy S-400s⁵⁶ and Russia is claimed to have promised Turkey joint production and technology transfer as part of the agreement.⁵⁷ This has made both the U.S. and other NATO members concerned.⁵⁸ U.S. officials have underlined the possibility of Russia’s receiving data about the F-35 program if Ankara uses both systems at the same time.⁵⁹ On these grounds, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that Washington was “seriously concerned over Turkey’s decision to buy the Russian S-400s.”⁶⁰

In response, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu underlined the importance of additional air defence coverage for Turkey by recalling the previous withdrawals of Patriot missiles by NATO members while Turkey was still under threat from Syria.⁶¹ He also reminded the U.S. that NATO protected only 30 percent of Turkish airspace, which shows the necessity of additional air defence systems for Ankara.⁶² In response to concerns that the “S-400 systems will detect NATO systems as a foe,” Çavuşoğlu stated that “Turkey is already sensitive about the issue and has set forth its conditions during the process of purchase.”⁶³ In addition, Turkey’s ambassador to

Washington, Serdar Kılıç, noted that Turkey's purchase of S-400s was not a threat to America, arguing that if the U.S. considered this system as a threat, it could work to alleviate concerns with a joint production of the Patriot system and technology transfers.⁶⁴

Ankara justifies its decision to buy S-400s on the basis of its own security needs and underlines that its decision to buy this system is based on technical and financial reasons.⁶⁵ Stating Turkey's urgent need to augment its national air defence, Çavuşoğlu once again underlined Turkey's commitment to NATO and various other European institutions.⁶⁶ Turkey's negotiations with the Franco-Italian EUROSAM consortium to develop a long-range air defence system simultaneously with the S-400 deal demonstrates Turkey's commitment to NATO.⁶⁷ However, all these efforts and statements did not change the U.S. stance on the issue. In its defence authorization bill for fiscal year 2019, the U.S. Senate proposed temporarily banning the supply of Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters (JSFs) to Turkey due to Ankara's S-400 deal with Russia. As of February 2019, S-400s are still a matter of discussion between Ankara and Washington and might further strain ties between the two capitals. Washington's latest offer to sell Turkey an advanced air-defence system seems not to have changed Ankara's decision to buy S-400s as well as American Patriots. The U.S. might choose to apply sanctions on Turkey if Turkey refuses to cancel the deal with Russia, a move which could further increase the fluctuations in Turkish-American relations as an extension of the global power struggle.

Clashes over the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program

Another point of divergence between Turkey and the U.S. involves the delivery of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets to Turkey, which is linked to Turkey's above-mentioned purchase plan of the Russian S-400 missiles. As noted above, the U.S. Senate is attempting to use the issue as a means to increase the political pressure on Turkey in order to persuade Ankara both on the cancellation of the S-400 purchase and various other issues. Turkey, however, is holding its ground against these traditional types of U.S. efforts, which are not yielding the same results as they had during Cold War times. It is worth noting Turkish Presidency Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın's words that "no progress can be made with blackmails and threats of sanctions targeting Turkey."⁶⁸

As the largest procurement program in the U.S. Department of Defense, the F-35 Lightning II is a strike fighter aircraft produced in different versions for the U.S. Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy, and which promises significant advances in military capability. Eight nations are cost-sharing partners in the program with the U.S.⁶⁹ Turkey, along with 13 other NATO allies, has been a program partner since its inception in 1999, and some of the significant parts of the F-35 jets are being produced in Eskişehir, Turkey. Ankara, which is aiming to buy around 100 F-35s, received the delivery of the first jet in the U.S. in June 2018.⁷⁰ The F-35 aircraft was set to remain in the U.S. until November 2019 for the training of Turkish pilots.⁷¹ After Ankara's decision to purchase Russian S-400 missile defence systems, however, U.S. senators opposed the aircraft's delivery and in the defence budget bill approved in July 2018, the Senate demanded that the transfer of the F-35s to Turkey be stopped if Ankara insists on the Russian purchase.⁷²

On 13 August 2018, President Trump signed this senate bill, which includes the possibility of “an amendment prohibiting sales to Turkey of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets until the Pentagon issues a report on Turkish-American relations in 90 days.”⁷³ The report was presented to the U.S. Congress on 9 November 2018 under confidentiality. Since then, Washington continues to signal practice of possible sanctions, mainly against the defence industry of Turkey, to persuade Ankara not to purchase S-400s. Despite the relatively constructive dialogue between Erdoğan and Trump at the G-20 Osaka Summit on 29 June 2019, the F-35 jets continue to be a point of divergence between the two capitals and similar to the S-400 crisis, the final decision of the U.S., though not yet clear, has the potential to affect Turkey's future relations not only with Washington but also with NATO. Further increase of tension with the Western alliance on these two issues could push Turkey further toward the East and strengthen its ties with Russia as well as China as alternative power circles.

Aftermath of the 2016 Failed Coup

The July 15, 2016 failed coup attempt by the Gülenist Terror Organization (FETÖ), which left 251 people dead and nearly 2,200 injured, and the developments in its aftermath significantly affected U.S.-Turkey relations. As Erhan and Siviş underline, the failed coup attempt affected the relationship in two ways. The first and the most important one has to do with the leader

Turkey has demanded Gülen's extradition as the mastermind of the failed coup; however, neither the Obama nor the Trump administrations have taken any step to fulfil this demand.

of FETÖ, Fetullah Gülen, who has been a resident in the U.S. since 1999.⁷⁴ Turkey has demanded Gülen's extradition as the mastermind of the failed coup; however, neither the Obama nor the Trump administrations have taken any step to fulfil this demand.

Turkey had already been asking for Gülen's extradition from the U.S. since the December 17-25, 2013 judicial coup attempt, implemented by FETÖ members both in the police and judiciary; however, it could not get any positive answer from the American side.⁷⁵ Ankara's call for Gülen's extradition intensified in the aftermath of the failed July 15, 2016 coup.⁷⁶ The U.S. State Department acknowledged in August 2016 that Turkey had formally requested Gülen's extradition for matters predating the coup attempt.⁷⁷ In addition to sending various files presenting evidence of Gülen's involvement in the latest coup attempt, Turkey continues its efforts to persuade the U.S. side for the extradition of Gülen to Turkey. Turkish Minister of Justice Abdulhamit Gül's recent visit to Washington on 12 June 2019, where he met his counterpart William Barr and discussed the Gülen case, was a part of these efforts. However, the Trump administration is still far from taking a rapid step on this issue.

The U.S. inaction on this issue and on various other problem areas further increases the anti-American sentiments in Turkey. Some Turkish officials and media organs accuse the U.S. of having prior knowledge of, or involvement in, the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. Former President Obama rejected such accusations during his term, calling them "unequivocally false" claims that threaten Turkish-American relations.⁷⁸ Despite such statements from Washington, however, a public survey conducted in the aftermath of July 2016 shows that the majority of Turks believe that the U.S. supported the failed coup attempt.⁷⁹ According to a poll conducted by Kadir Has University in 2018, the majority of the Turkish public consistently tends to view Turkish-American relations as problematic, with dissatisfaction reaching its highest level at 79.3 percent.⁸⁰ The case of Gülen's extradition has become another means to check the "level of trust" in Ankara-Washington relations.

The Pastor Brunson Case

Another recent incident which increased tension in Turkish-American relations was the arrest of American Evangelical pastor Andrew Brunson in Turkey on December 9, 2016. Brunson was accused of espionage and having ties with terror groups. Due to health reasons, he was moved to house arrest in July 2018. Asking for Pastor Brunson's release, Washington imposed sanctions in August 2018 on Turkey's Justice and Interior Ministers as a reaction to Brunson's continued detention. Turkey gave a similar response to the U.S.; during the case, the U.S. was far from acting in harmony with the necessities of the so-called "model" of "strategic" partnership.

The tone of U.S.-Turkish relations grew more severe when the Turkish Lira lost 40% of its value against American dollar after President Trump's call on Twitter to increase tariffs on steel and aluminium and apply further pressure to the Turkish economy. In October 2018, Brunson was released from prison and returned to the U.S. This move was welcomed by Washington, and the U.S. automatically softened its relations with Ankara, though it would not be an easy task for either side to fully repair the confidence crisis they had endured.

Washington's Declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's Capital

In December 2017, President Trump recognized Jerusalem (Al-Quds), the holly city of the three monotheistic religions – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – as the capital of Israel. As part of a global reaction to this move, 13 members of the UN Security Council voted in favour of a resolution calling for the rescinding of this decision, but the U.S., not surprisingly, vetoed this draft resolution. Nonetheless, the UN General Assembly condemned the decision, despite U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley's threat, that "the U.S. will think twice about funding the world body [the UN], if it voted to condemn Trump's decision."⁸¹ In May 2018, the Trump administration went further and transferred the American Embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem to put its previous decision into practice. This provocative action caused a great reaction both in Palestine and in the outside world. Considering it as a breach of international law, Turkey condemned the U.S. action and took side with the Palestinians, more than 50 of whom were killed and 2,700 injured by Israel in their protests against the Trump administration's transfer of its embassy to Jerusalem.⁸²

Condemning the U.S. provocations, Turkey organized emergency summits for the Organization of Islamic Conference both in December 2017 and May 2018. Turkish President Erdoğan underlined that they considered Trump's decision as null and void, while reiterating once again that "Jerusalem is Turkey's red line."⁸³ The status of the city continues to mark a point of divergence between Ankara and Washington, both on material and psychological bases, although the subject might sometimes lose ground in mutual relations, due to other sensitive issues, many of which are expressed above.

Conclusion

No one can deny that the 21st century is full of new challenges that might consequently change the existing status quo in world politics. In fact, this can be called a "transitory era," whose end might see a completely different world order, or at least a new power distribution. The U.S., considered to be the global hegemon of the post-Cold War world order, has long been feeling that its status might not be permanent. With the rapid rise of the

With the rapid rise of the BRIC countries in the last decade, American politicians are in an alert position, looking for various ways to stop or at least slow down the U.S. recession.

BRIC countries in the last decade, American politicians are in an alert position, looking for various ways to stop or at least slow down the U.S. recession. Although former President Obama and his successor Trump

seem to have completely different administrative skills, they still have one thing in common: both of them are aware that the U.S. cannot be the world's policeman anymore, and both have consequently chosen to stay distant from the problems of regions such as the Middle East. As a matter of fact, they relied on similar strategies like "leading from behind," "offshore balancing" or "surrogate warfare," all of which in the end serve the aim of letting others solve their own problems and limiting the risky and costly political and military engagements of the U.S. in these regions.

In light of these factors, this article argues that the deterioration of Turkish-American relations in recent years cannot be fully assessed without taking these macro circumstances into consideration. In fact, the tension between Ankara and Washington is not an exception to, but rather just one part of this general trend. The U.S. is facing the huge risk of losing its world-wide status;

together with many other countries, its traditional allies, such as Turkey, are suffering from Washington's "navigation crisis," which complicates its foreign policy planning and practices. This, however, has not been caused only by outside circumstances, but also by the changing social structure inside the U.S. It is a well-known fact that the American public in general no longer shares the typical WASP characteristics, and no longer holds more or less the same worldview, considering foreign policy as a moral mission. On the contrary, the American society today is very much polarized and far from being united on what the country's top priorities should be, either domestically or abroad.

This, of course, affects countries such as Turkey, which are geographically distant, full of internal and external threats to their security, and require the support of their allies to eliminate these threats. Mounting divergences between Ankara and Washington in the post-Cold War era show us that the two allies have difficulty in the absence of a common threat such as the Soviets to harmonize their security agenda. As a matter of fact, they are "lost in translation," i.e. they have difficulty understanding each other's national security requirements under the changing global, regional and local circumstances. Washington wrongfully thinks that Turkey is the same country of the Cold War years and expects from it the same degree of allegiance, which is not possible anymore given the gradually strengthening position of Ankara on the world stage. Turkey's intensifying integration into the world economic system has certainly boosted its self-esteem and increased the number of its partners.

Ankara, on the other hand, continues to consider Washington as the sole superpower and ignores its decreasing capability while expecting it to fulfil all of Turkey's expectations, especially in the Middle East. In fact, problems such as the Syria crisis and the PYD/YPG/PKK problem, the S-400 missile purchase or the banning of the F-35 jets delivery, so on and so forth, all relate to the dwindling of American status at the global level, and reflect Washington's efforts to gain ground against the rise of China as well as Russia. The U.S. pressure on Iran too is considered to be a part of its strategy to contain Beijing and Moscow in the long run. Both the Obama and Trump administrations became aware of the fact that the U.S. should soon turn its face toward the Asia Pacific and refrain from deeper involvement in the problems of the Middle East or of Europe. "Let the others do their own job" has long been the motto of the Washington circles, who have already begun looking for means of gaining sufficient energy to deal with China.

Here the problem is that the U.S. has not yet found a “grand strategy” that is as firm as the “Containment Strategy” of the previous century, conducted against the Soviets. Instead, it prefers to establish “transactional relationships” with other countries, including Turkey. As Turan underlines, there is not any long-term cooperation between Washington and Ankara within the framework of a political community that is based on perceived common interests, and both sides need to adjust their mind-sets and behaviours as well as their rhetoric and policies.⁸⁴ Decreasing the emotional approaches in both capitals while increasing the wisdom would be helpful to retain a strong partnership and carry Turkish-American relations forward in the future on a much more fruitful and healthier basis.⁸⁵

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