



**EDAM Foreign Policy and Security
Information Note**

Is Trump Good for the Turkey-US Relationship?

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Sinan Ulgen

Executive Chairman, EDAM

Doruk Ergun

Research Fellow, EDAM

1. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the reaction in many other NATO capitals, the surprise election of Donald Trump has been met with high spirits in Turkey's capital. Ankara's early assessment seems to reflect an understanding that democracy and rule of law issues in foreign lands will not be a high priority for the new US president. There may therefore be an expectation that the bilateral relationship will become more disconnected from Turkey's track record on human rights and rule of law issues. Secondly Ankara believes that a Trump presidency will be more amenable – compared to a Clinton administration – to Turkey's demands for the extradition of Fethullah Gulen and for bringing pressure on the movement's social, commercial and fund raising activities in the US. Finally, there is also an expectation that the incoming US administration will be more open to accepting a lead role for Turkey in the stabilization of a benighted Middle East. As justifiable as these expectations may be, the Turkey-US relationship may nonetheless end up to be under duress for other reasons. This paper sets out the critical areas that will impact the evolution of the Washington-Ankara ties in the next 4 years.

2. NATO AND THE TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY ORDER

What the Trump presidency may essentially entail is the strongest wave of isolationism in United States foreign policy since the early years of World War II. The effects of an isolationist Washington will be most profoundly felt in the Transatlantic security order that has been in place as the strongest military and political alliance for the last seven decades. In those seven decades, the US has served as the biggest contributor to NATO, and thus, to European security. While Trump has come short of calling for the United States to pull out of the alliance¹ he has increasingly brought into question the issue of burden sharing, which has been a source of heated discussion within the alliance in the past decade. As things stand today, only a few NATO members meet the self-imposed threshold of spending at least 2 percent of their respective GDP on defense.

In case the Trump administration decides to minimize or conditionalize its contribution to NATO, it may have significant repercussions for the alliance, especially if it jeopardizes Article V – the mutual defense clause that the alliance rests on. This would come at a critical intersection for NATO, which is witnessing an intensified competition with Russia in both its eastern and southern flank, the prospect of a revitalized nuclear rivalry, and heightened fears of its members in the Baltics and Eastern Europe of the military implications of a resurgent Russia that continues to destabilize and annex parts of Ukraine.

Especially after its intervention in Ukraine, Russia has increasingly tested the readiness and resolve of the NATO alliance both militarily and politically. The Trump presidency will likely create even more room for Russia to test and undermine the credibility of the alliance and its Article V commitments. The fear

¹ Factcheck.org (May, 2016) "What's Trump's Position on NATO?" Accessed on 9 November 2016 at: <http://www.factcheck.org/2016/05/whats-trumps-position-on-nato/>

that the US and other major allies of NATO may not come to their aid in case of a potential Russian aggression has been amongst one of the main concerns of NATO members that lay in the periphery, including those in Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and Turkey. The results of the election will exacerbate the demand for intra-alliance reassurance, which, judging from the remarks of President elect Trump so far, will be hardly met by the United States. As such, the existing tense and hostile security environment that European members of NATO are witnessing, is likely to worsen at the prospect of a Trump administration.

Overall, what this may amount to is the erosion of the geopolitical and security environment of Europe that has been gradually built up since the end of WWII. The potential erosion of NATO as both a military and political alliance, may severely weaken the ability of European members to maintain a transparent and healthy security dialogue. If Brexit and the Trump presidency have a knock-on effect on the elections in many European countries in the horizon, the two institutions that have characterized the Western order, NATO and the EU, may both witness severe erosion, the main beneficiary of which will undoubtedly be the resurgent Russia. While Ankara has recently mended its relationship with Moscow, the sides find themselves at opposing camps when it comes to the security order in Europe, the Black Sea, Caucasus and the Middle East. Furthermore, the enmity and rivalry between the two countries go back several centuries and exist on a much wider context than current NATO-Russia issues. Both the erosion of NATO, which Turkey has been a member for over six decades, and the ensuing emboldened Russia, would have major repercussions for Turkish security.

3. IRAN

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached with Iran over its nuclear program, has been paraded by the Obama administration as one of

its biggest foreign policy achievements. Trump has declared on numerous occasions that it would be one of his first priorities to pull out from the deal.² If he follows through with this scenario, Iran would be expected to revert to its nuclear program, and the prospect of a military intervention against the Iranian nuclear program, as propagated by hardliners in the United States, Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), may be back on the table. In addition to severely deteriorating the already toxic security environment in the Middle East, this would also serve to embolden the hardliners in Tehran, exacerbating the existing sectarian dynamics and proxy conflicts in the region. This Turkish government may see this environment as an opening for taking on the mantle of the leader of the Sunni axis to combat rising Shiite influence. It is debatable whether such a role would help to advance to Turkey's security interests let alone contribute to long term stability. On the contrary, Turkey's interest would be served by consolidating and securing the nuclear deal with Iran which could, also through a gradual shift in the power constellation in Iran, lead to assuage sectarian tensions.

4. ISRAEL

Another complicating factor for the region could arise from Trump's declared unconditional support to Israel. The President elect has promised to recognize Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and move the US embassy from Tel Aviv, and stop the US support for a two-state solution, thereby reversing a long-standing US policy. This could in turn fuel Palestinian disgruntlement and potentially cause a renewed cycle of violence between Hamas and Israel or between Hezbollah and Israel. Moreover, as mentioned above it could serve to embolden the hardliners in Israel and strengthen the prospect of a military confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program. A possible escalation of the Israeli-

² Reuters (2016, November 9) "Trump election puts Iran nuclear deal on shaky ground"

Palestinian conflict against the backdrop of an unmitigated support by the US administration to Israel, can create tensions with Turkey in light of the sensitivity demonstrated by the ruling AKP on the Palestinian issue.

5. THE ISLAMIC STATE

With regards to ISIS, which has been one of the main priorities of the Trump campaign, what awaits the region may be a simplistic US approach to the problem. A rash and militarized approach, that characterized the first term of the George W. Bush administration, provides evidence to the many complications that may arise from such purely hard power approaches. A first step in this direction would likely be a US decision to cooperate closer with Russia, and as an extension, with the Assad regime, and turn a blind eye on the Iran backed militia on the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields. A move in this direction may serve to exacerbate sectarian tensions on the ground, as well as enabling Assad to retain his seat – contrary to the interests of Ankara. This outlook is also inimical to Turkey's long standing claim that the emergence of ISIS is the symptom of the lack of inclusiveness and failures of governance of the Assad regime and that regime change would be needed to settle the problem of radicalization in Syria. It is unclear at this point how US policy on the Syrian Kurds will be affected. While the democratic nominee Hillary Clinton had clearly stated that she would favor cooperating and even arming the PYD in the fight against the Islamic State, the position of the president elect is ambivalent.

6. ISLAMOPHOBIA

In addition to these specific regional issues, one area of potential disagreement will be the overt Islamophobia of the US president elect. Indeed, it is rather unlikely that a leader like President Erdogan can remain totally aloof to such rhetoric by the incoming US president.

Such a possible escalation may quickly turn into a diplomatic challenge given the two presidents demonstrated proclivities for a confrontational style of leadership. Other complications may also emerge at the policy level in relation to the Turkish government's support to Islamist entities like the Muslim Brotherhood or several different opposition groups of the same ilk in Syria.

7. CONCLUSION

This is necessarily a preliminary assessment based on the rather vague and sometimes contradictory statements of Donald Trump during his election campaign. The direction of the relationship will be affected by the setup of the new US cabinet as well. Given the lack of foreign policy experience of the US president elect, the nominations to key positions such as the State Department and the National Security Council are likely to be more critical in determining the eventual shape of a Trump foreign policy than any other presidential transition in recent memory.



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