



Turkey's Nationalist Course

Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army

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The United States has long maintained a strategic partnership with Turkey, a powerful NATO ally, as a central element of U.S. strategy in Eurasia and the Middle East. But Turkey's ties with its neighbors, the United States, and Europe have become strained in recent years. RAND researchers assess key challenges confronting the U.S.-Turkish partnership and advance recommendations to sustain it during what is likely to be a turbulent decade ahead.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What political, social, and economic trends are shaping Turkey's internal dynamics and its regional and global interests?
- In what areas are Turkey's evolving interests and the interests of its neighbors and partners convergent, divergent, or in conflict?
- What do these domestic and regional trends suggest about Turkey's future role in the international system?
- What are the implications of these trends for U.S. foreign policy and defense planning and the U.S. Army?
- What initiatives could the United States pursue to manage disruptive developments in the partnership with Turkey and restore its previous scope if and when there are favorable changes in Turkish policies?



KEY FINDINGS

Turkey remains a polarized country

- Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, democratic and civil rights in Turkey have declined. Constitutional and legal changes are transforming the government from a parliamentary system into an authoritarian state with a strong executive presidency.
- Erdoğan has played to nationalist, religious, and ethnic tensions to advance his political agenda, but many Turks have deep concerns about the erosion of democracy, economic uncertainty, and the failure to achieve a peace settlement with the Kurds.

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Turkey is balancing relations with traditional allies and Eurasian neighbors

- Turkish policy toward Iran and Iraq will often be at odds with U.S. interests.
- The differing priorities of Turkey and the Arab states and formidable obstacles to improved Israeli-Turkish relations will complicate advancement of U.S. regional initiatives.
- Russia and Turkey claim a strategic partnership and do have some convergent interests, but significant points of friction and the potential for conflict remain. Turkey's influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia is likely to remain limited.
- NATO still plays a central role in Turkey's national security, but domestic doubts about the Alliance's commitment and relevance have grown. Turkey will remain willing to work at cross purposes with allies when its shifting national interests dictate.
- Turkey's relations with the European Union have reached a low point. Progress on migration, travel, counterterrorism, and Cyprus will determine the longevity of the accession process and alternative futures for the relationship.

U.S.-Turkish relations will remain volatile, but a major breach can be avoided

- Turkey and the United States still have some convergent interests, including balancing Russia and Iran, countering terrorism, and promoting stability in the Middle East.
- Turkey still values defense cooperation with the United States. Its armed forces want to work effectively with U.S. counterparts and remain dependent on U.S.-origin military equipment.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- The United States needs a long-term strategy to buffer relations with Turkey against the kind of disruptive developments experienced in recent years. It also needs initiatives that could maintain cooperation on abiding shared interests over the next decade and help restore a reliable strategic partnership if a democratic opposition emerges to restore Turkey's role as a more cooperative ally and reliable regional and global partner.
- Defusing the differences over Syria will require agile U.S. diplomatic engagement with its Turkish allies and Kurdish partners and likely further policy adjustments.
- Continued U.S. and NATO military engagements with the Turkish Armed Forces can help counterbalance Russia's influence in Turkey.
- U.S. defense planners need be prepared to deal with the temporary or even permanent loss of access to İncirlik Air Base and other U.S. and NATO facilities in Turkey.
- Further efforts should be taken to deepen dialogues between U.S. military and Turkish General Staff leaders and to revitalize the U.S.-Turkish High-Level Defense Group, taking into account the increased importance of the Turkish minister of defense.
- The U.S. military could seek to help Turkey develop curricula at its new National Defense University, and Turkey could continue to send officers to schools in the United States. These steps could help improve civil-military relations in Turkey and influence the future course of Turkey's military in ways that could strengthen bilateral and NATO cooperation with Turkey over the long term.