

## Turkey-U.S. relations. What's next?

Here are some thoughts in response to the oft-repeated question whether there is a limit to the deterioration of Turkey-U.S. relations.

There are those who say that President Erdoğan's threats to cut ties with the United States should be dismissed as being rather hollow because in the final analysis Turkey does not really have any other alternatives.

I would say that when there is co-operation between two unequal countries, like Turkey and the United States, we should not be fooled into believing that the relationship is not seriously adversely affected by this inequality, even if the results may take a long time to fully show.

I would also add that in a paradoxical way the dynamics of co-operation between two unequal countries, often contribute to perpetuating the inequality. Thus they fan more reaction against it from the side that stands lower in the hierarchy ladder while there can be no safe way to measure this reaction in advance.

Some may argue that in the last twenty years as the international order has become relatively more inclusive and less culturally biased the relationship between Turkey and the United States is less unequal than it used to be.

I would say, however, that the present dynamics of the international order are still reflecting past status hierarchies. Turkey is only one of the countries which are particularly sensitive to this and is reacting while at the same time is trying to figure out not whether there are other possible alternatives but perhaps also how to help create alternatives.

I quote from President Erdogan's opinion piece of last August in the *New York Times*: 'The United States has repeatedly and consistently failed to understand and respect the Turkish people's concerns [...] Before it is too late, Washington must give up the misguided notion that our relationship can be asymmetrical [...] Must 'reverse this trend of unilateralism and disrespect'.<sup>1</sup>

Those familiar with the history of the bilateral relationship may say that this is a *leitmotiv* taken up by Turkish governments each time it seems necessary to put

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<sup>1</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 'Erdogan: How Turkey Sees the Crisis with the U.S.' *The New York Times*, 10 August 2018.

pressure on the United States to compel it to agree on certain items on Ankara's agenda and that one should not be tempted to take it too seriously.

Indeed in the world of global politics statements like this are often dismissed as not very serious because of their emotional content; in other words political actions are viewed as designed to meet rationally defined objectives.

I would argue, however, that it is irrational to think that powerful beliefs and emotions are not decisive in determining human actions. Turkish elites for a host of reasons are extremely sensitive (some even say they are obsessed) about Turkey's international recognition and status.

In brief, besides Ankara's grievances about U.S. support of the Kurds in Syria the Turkish elites' real concerns about Turkey's status in the new international system, also undermine the relationship and fuel rejection strategies. These may or may not be successful but are domestically very, very popular. U.S. power and influence ranked in 2017 as the top threat in only one country, Turkey. The proportion of the Turks who saw U.S. power as a major threat to their country grew from 44 per cent in 2013 to 72% in just four years. By the way, dismal ratings of the U.S. image have persisted in Turkey for over a decade.<sup>2</sup>

Turkish leaders have always worked hard to pursue policies that would integrate both Western and regional commitments and interests. However this has become less and less possible as the incentives and disincentives for Turkey have become reduced to a degree that the current Turkish leadership, in my view, will attempt more and more to pursue status enhancement while at the same time it will chose the flexibility of an *à la carte* menu.

When I read Mr Erdoğan's opinion piece in the *New York Times* I was reminded of what Orhan Pamuk said in his Nobel prize acceptance speech thirteen years earlier. I quote: 'We have often witnessed peoples, societies and nations outside the Western world - and I can identify with them easily – succumbing to fears that sometimes lead them to commit stupidities, all because of their fears of humiliation

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Manevich and Hanyu Chwe, 'Globally, more people see U.S. power and influence as a major threat, 1 August 2017, Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/01/u-s-power-and-influence-increasingly-seen-as-threat-in-other-countries/> accessed, 30 July 2018) ; Richard Wike, 'Negative Views of U.S. Unchanged in Turkey', 3 December 2009, Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2009/12/03/negative-views-of-us-unchanged-in-turkey/> (accessed, 21 January 2014).

and their sensitivities. I also know that in the West – a world with which I can identify with the same ease – nations and peoples taking an excessive pride in their wealth, and in their having brought us the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and Modernism, have, from time to time, succumbed to a self-satisfaction that is almost as stupid.’<sup>3</sup> When a post-modernist novelist who has been charged with ‘denigrating Turkishness’ and put to trial in Turkey and an authoritarian head of state with a conservative, Islamist background send the same message we better be listening.

So, is there a limit to the deterioration of Turkey-U.S. relations? Individual or state behaviour is not formed in a vacuum. Thinking that the downward spiral in the bilateral relationship may be halted without taking into consideration the sensitivities and the Turks’ psychological needs in my view, is misplaced optimism.

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<sup>3</sup> Orhan Pamuk, ‘My Father’s Suitcase’, 7 December 2006, Nobel Lecture, The Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2006/pamuk/25283-orhan-pamuk-nobel-lecture-2006> (accessed: 25 June 2010).