

Hedging Our Bets in Turkey:

Preparing for Both Dictatorship and Regime-Shift Hypotheses¹

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Dilemmas of Global Basing Elective

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Due to the geostrategic importance of military basing in Turkey, the United States (US) must prepare for the possibilities of either a regime-shift to a more consolidated democracy or the recent democratic backsliding resulting in a completely authoritarian regime. Half a century of struggling through the democratization process came to an abrupt halt in the early years of the twenty-first century. The lack of necessity for US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to protect Turkey from external threats has culminated in two decades of democratic backsliding and its rapprochement with Russia. These issues pose the most pressing basing-related challenge for the US and significantly harm the ability to achieve the necessary popular support required to maintain basing access in this geostrategic region. Recent chilling effects between America and its Turkish “protectorate” threaten US geostrategic national interests. As a result of increasingly complicated US-Turkey relations, future basing agreements will hinge on Turkish domestic politics and whether Turkey pivots back towards full democracy or continues its slide towards autocracy.

The following paper will first highlight the geostrategic importance of Turkish bases to US military operations since Turkey’s admittance to NATO at the onset of the Cold War. Second, a historical look at Turkey’s stuttering attempts at democratization throughout the second half of the twenty-first century. During the Cold War, Turkey epitomized the characteristics of a “democratizing regime,” which would foreshadow Turkey’s democratic backsliding challenges in the twenty-first century.² Next, a closer examination of Turkish domestic politics will highlight the contemporary issue of Turkey’s democratic backsliding corresponding to the rapid ascendance of President Recep Erdogan and his right-wing Justice and Development Party (AKP). Finally, increased instability of US basing rights has come to the forefront as a result of AKP policies, the lack of host-nation popular support of the US, and

recent Turkey-Russia rapprochement. Ironically, Turkey's warming relations with Russia contrasts with the original purpose of Turkey joining NATO against the Soviet Union in 1952.³

Basing issues in Turkey date back nearly 70 years but have again come to the forefront of international headlines with the rise of the AKP in 2003, led by current Turkish President Recep Erdogan. Erdogan's increasingly autocratic rule and Turkey's lack of a consolidated democracy undermines US national security interests in the region. Turkey and the US have endured a tumultuous political relationship since the 1950s due to Turkey's democratization challenges, but Incirlik Air Base (AB) has remained a strategic asset for the US for decades, except for a brief closure in the 1970s.⁴ According to Kent Calder, his first maxim on basing decisions posits, "Individual bases have multiple potential strategic functions, and the relative importance of given functions shifts over time."⁵ Incirlik AB follows Calder's maxim and has remained a critical geostrategic base since its inception in the Cold War. This base represented a vital front against the spread of Communism and the placement of nuclear missiles within range of the USSR. Post-Cold War, while still strategically situated near revisionist Russia, Incirlik AB remains a strategic staging location for the myriad conflicts in the Middle East in which the US perpetually engages.⁶

The stationing of US forces in Turkey dates to the early Cold War, with increased USSR pressure on Turkey for basing rights in order to gain access to the Mediterranean Sea via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits.⁷ The US promptly responded by supplying Turkey with significant financial aid of 17 billion dollars (adjusted for present-day inflation). After significant Turkish contributions during the Korean Conflict, NATO admitted Turkey as a member in 1952. This move led the way for US basing within Turkey for mutual defense against the Soviets and "deter the aggression of a common enemy."⁸ This agreement quickly led to the establishment of

US military bases, with Incirlik AB near Adana and a NATO fighter airbase in Izmir as the two most noteworthy. However, the challenge of democratization in Turkey over the next thirty years would prove problematic for the US international security strategy.

The “fits and starts” of the democratization process in Turkey was interrupted by three military coups d’états between 1960 and 1980.⁹ Various politicians and military juntas would use the US basing issue in Turkey as a political lightning rod to sway public opinion. Politicians during the 1950s used the US financial aid for basing rights and political backing towards their regime to stay in power. These unpopular actions eventually led to the first military coup in 1960. Several historical events preceding the coup highlighted the lack of sovereignty felt by the citizens, specifically Incirlik AB’s role in the 1958 USMC landings in Lebanon and the 1960 U-2 shootdown in the USSR. After the military stepped down and the reintroduction of democracy in 1961, multiple political parties and activists used US basing as a partisan issue to reassert Turkish sovereignty and gain public support. The events of the Cuban Missile Crisis and US President Johnson’s support of Greece in Cyprus led to more chilling effects between the administrations and US basing interests. The Turkish government’s lack of viability led to subsequent military coups in 1971 and 1980. Fortuitously, the government signed a revised 1980 Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement shortly before the third military coup.

The military-run government honored the previously approved 1980 basing arrangements as legitimate and included these US basing rights in the new democratic constitution signed in 1982. This new constitution adopted by the Turkish Parliament allowed for foreign forces based in Turkey, which in turn increased the basing contract’s legitimacy, as a *legislative* body codified the basing arrangement for the first time. However, this constitutional arrangement would eventually lead to unforeseen legislative voting outcomes in both 1991 and 2003 for the use of

Incirlik AB during military operations in Iraq. The Turkish Parliament unexpectedly voted to allow US forces to utilize Turkish bases to conduct Operation Desert Storm in 1991, but denied use of Incirlik AB as a large staging base in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003. This rejection came as a surprise to many military planners who had planned for significant troop levels and a northern front opened from Turkish territory. This situation highlighted the disconnect between US politicians and the Turkish popular opinion, as polling showed that over three-quarters of Turks disapproved of Turkey's involvement in another war in Iraq.¹⁰ Significant to current events, preceding the failed 2003 parliamentary vote for OIF access was the November 2002 elections, which witnessed the ascent of Erdogan and his newly founded right-wing AKP. This historic election would put in motion the democratic backsliding which exists today.

In a 2019 law journal, Gábor Attila Tóth posits that the emerging shifts towards authoritarianism from formerly democratic states have evolved out of what Tóth calls “autocratic legalism.”¹¹ Legalist autocrats in these examples create a *Frankenstate*, which “stitch together the worst practices from liberal democracies to create something illiberal and monstrous.”¹² One of the oft-used tactics involves using broad constitutional emergency powers to consolidate authority. In Turkey, Erdogan has used Kurdish terrorism, an attempted military coup d'état in 2016, and other so-called imminent dangers in order to amend the constitution and steadily consolidate power, while simultaneously restricting media and political opposition.¹³

In Nancy Bermeo's article on democratic backsliding, the author defines the term, “At its most basic, it denotes the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy.”¹⁴ Bermeo specifically calls out Erdogan after his election to premier (now president), when he quickly passed hundreds of laws to reduce the amount of

institutional accountability, harshly restrict the freedom of the media, appoint 14 of 17 federal justices, and remove over 3,000 lower court judges not considered loyal to the AKP.¹⁵ The democratic backsliding and increased autocratic tendencies lead to difficulties in how the US should proceed in terms of long-term basing negotiations with Turkey.

Erdogan's relentless consolidation of executive powers and the reduction of independent institutions over the previous two decades has reenergized the debate of military basing agreements with authoritarian versus democratic regimes. "The lack of independent domestic institutions, however, leaves authoritarian rules relatively free to arbitrarily demand revisions and adjustments to agreements according to their own political whims and interests."¹⁶ Based on Cooley's comparison of government style and basing factors, Turkey has steadily moved towards the "Authoritarian Regime" category, with Turkey's credibility of its commitment to base contracts as "Mixed; political interest and survival strategies will determine commitment."¹⁷ On the same topic, Kent Calder posits the "Regime-Shift Hypothesis," which focuses on autocratic governments shifting to democratization.¹⁸ However, Calder does not address situations where democratized regimes slide back towards autocracy. The recurring theme with its history of military coups and strongmen autocrats since its founding as a republic in 1923 calls the legitimacy of Turkish democratization into question.

Executive power consolidation by Erdogan highlights attributes of Calder's "Regime-Shift Hypothesis," but in a reverse manner in which he does not entirely address. As a result of Erdogan's actions, recent diplomatic tensions between the US and Turkey call into question the long-term stability of US basing rights at Incirlik AB. In the past two years, Turkey has drawn closer to Russia with its purchase of the S-400 air defense system, which subsequently required the US to remove Turkey from the multinational F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program.¹⁹

Additionally, Turkey continues to increase its reliance on Russian oil and gas imports and infrastructure projects. The US Legislature has recently named Turkey in various sanctions, such as the Counter Turkish Aggression Act and Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act.^{20,21} These bipartisan US actions primarily stem from Turkey's increasing ties to Russia and aggression towards US-allied Kurds in Syria, whom Turkey recognizes as the same entity as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an internationally designated terrorist organization.²² Wavering Turkey-US relations significantly undermine the long-term stability of Incirlik AB as a strategic basing location for current and future military operations.

Returning to the theory of a regime-shift hypothesis *reversal*, a backsliding democracy will have negative consequences for basing nations like the US due to the domestic politicization of basing rights. There exists a tendency for host nation political parties to use foreign troop presence as a sovereignty issue, particularly when no legitimate external threat exists to that state. Such an argument could currently resemble Turkish domestic politics. In contrast, if Turkey reaches full authoritarianism, Calder's dictatorship hypothesis may point to a relatively stable basing situation if those in power can leverage the basing issues to support their political survival, as has been accomplished by countless authoritarians hosting US troops.²³ In Turkey, the backsliding democratization since Erdogan has taken power has taken a significant toll on US support with the host nation. For example, in a poll conducted in 2015, Turkish citizens were asked whether they trusted the US or Russia more. The results indicate how little trust the Turkish protectorate has for the US, regardless of the political party; *no trust* for either country rated 50 percent, *Russia* garnered 40 percent, 6 percent rated both *equally trusted*, and only 3 percent trusted the *US* more than *Russia*!²⁴ These astronomically low levels of trust by the

protectorate for the US may show that a Turkish authoritarian regime is the preferred host nation government, as the US does not appeal to nearly 90 percent of the Turkish population.

After years of rapprochement with Russia, there exists the hope of bringing Turkey back toward the NATO alliance and European influence. Recent contentious events between Turkey and Russia have stemmed from the two states backing opposing regimes in both Libyan and Syrian civil wars, even causing military casualties for both sides.^{25,26} These pseudo-proxy wars could allow for the US to simultaneously gain support from the Turkish government and its population. Offering US support from Incirlik AB and providing substantial economic support to alleviate the heavy Turkish burden of caring for Syrian refugees could improve the public opinion of the US by the host-nation. Turkey's slumping economy, increased public resentment towards autocratic rule, and the introduction of many non-secular policies has weakened AKP's hold on power, as seen in recent election cycles at the sub-national level.²⁷ Thus, economic and military assistance could sway Erdogan and his majority party to agree on mutually beneficial basing contracts. Evidence consistently points to authoritarians utilizing popular support and monetary benefits to remain in power.

Conversely, through the portrayal of America as a legitimate ally against recent Russian aggression, a narrow window exists to appeal to the host-nation population and gain its support at the expense of Russian influence. This posturing will provide stronger basing negotiating power in the future if American actions garner more trust from the protectorate. By appealing to both the increasingly autocratic politicians and the popular opinion of the protectorate, the US will essentially hedge its bets to achieve a long-term favorable outcome in the event of re-democratization or further democratic backsliding towards autocracy. As consolidated democracies and authoritarian regimes tend to provide more stable basing situations than

democratizing regimes (or de-democratizing regimes in this example), the US must plan for both contingencies due to the geostrategic importance of Turkey as an ally.²⁸ After nearly one hundred years since the founding of the Republic of Turkey by Ataturk in 1923, the perpetual fits and starts of Turkish democratization remain unpredictable of the future. Thus, the prudent US decision is to hedge its bets and appeal to both possibilities. Applying Turkey as a cautionary example, the US must also reconsider long-term basing stability in other allied countries that recently began to backslide towards authoritarianism, specifically in Poland and Hungary, both of which currently house US troops on NATO bases in order to confront Russian aggression in eastern Europe.



Notes

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² Alexander Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U.S. Military Overseas*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 95.

³ Amy Austin Holmes, *Social Unrest and American Bases in Turkey and Germany Since 1945*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 86-88.

⁵ Kent E. Calder, *Embattled Garrisons: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 33.

⁶ Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, "Turkey: Background, U.S. Relations, and Sanctions in Brief," Congressional Research Service, 8 November 2019: 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44000>.

⁷ Cooley, *Base Politics*, 101.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰ Holmes, *Social Unrest and American Bases*, 182.

¹¹ Gábor Tóth, "Breaking the Equilibrium: From Distrust of Representative Government to an Authoritarian Executive," *Washington International Law Journal* 28, no. 2 (2019): 321, <http://aufric.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.aufric.idm.oclc.org/docview/2330761393?accountid=4332>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 321.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹⁴ Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 5, <http://aufric.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.aufric.idm.oclc.org/docview/1771758539?accountid=4332>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ Cooley, *Base Politics*, 14.

¹⁷ Cooley, *Base Politics*, 19.

¹⁸ Calder, *Embattled Garrisons*, 76.

¹⁹ Paul Iddon, "Turkey's Erdoğan Uses Airbase as Bargaining Chip Against United States," *Ahval News*, 20 December 2019, <https://ahvalnews.com/incirlik-base/turkeys-erdogan-uses-airbase-bargaining-chip-against-united-states>.

²⁰ United States Senate, "Senate Foreign Relations Committee Approves Comprehensive Syria-Turkey Legislation," 11 December 2019, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/chair/release/senate-foreign-relations-committee-approves-comprehensive-syria-turkey-legislation>.

²¹ Dimitri A. Simes, "The Rift Between Turkey and America Has Paved the Way for Russia's Rebound," *The National Interest*, 20 January 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/rift-between-turkey-and-america-has-paved-way-russias-rebound-114916>.

²² Gen Curtis M. Scaparotti, "USEUCOM 2019 Posture Statement," United States European Command, 5 March 2019: 7, <https://www.eucom.mil/media-library/Document/39544/>.

²³ David Vine, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017), 106.

²⁴ Max Hoffman, “A Snapshot of Turkish Public Opinion Toward the European Union,” Center for American Progress, 27 September 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/09/27/458537/snapshot-turkish-public-opinion-toward-european-union/>.

²⁵ Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok, “Trump Backs Erdogan as Turkey Rejects Russia’s Syria Offer,” *Bloomberg*, 19 February 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-19/trump-backs-erdogan-as-turkey-rejects-russia-s-proposal-on-syria>

²⁶ Frud Bezhan, “U.S. Vacuum: How Libya is Descending into a Russia-Turkey Proxy War,” *Radio Free Europe RadioLiberty*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-vacuum-how-libya-is-descending-into-a-russia-turkey-proxy-war-/30389900.html>

²⁷ William Hale, “Turkey’s Domestic Politics, Public Opinion and Middle East Policy,” *Palgrave Communications* 2, no. 1 (December 2016): 5, <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms201681>.

²⁸ Cooley, *Base Politics*: 19.

