

Turkey and the United States:

A Vital, Turbulent Relationship

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EL: Dilemmas of Global Basing

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Relationships are complicated, intensive affairs that require excellent communication and a willingness to compromise to achieve a higher bond.¹ Complications and compromise apply to individual human relationships as well as in a broader context as applied to international politics. Following World War II, the world chose the United States (U.S.) as the most benign option for hegemon. The result has been geopolitics ruling the day as the U.S. acts, at times, as the world police - establishing order and stability, as well as fighting for freedom and democracy around the world. With a global fight comes the need for bases with a U.S. presence to defend against antagonists as they arise. Author Kent Calder suggests that the U.S. does not like basing their military in countries that are transitioning to democracies.² The proposed adaptation to his hypothesis is that the U.S. does not like any instability in a regime, whether it be transitioning governments toward democracy or dictatorship/authoritarian regimes. The U.S. does not want instability because of the geopolitical implications at stake. Thus, geopolitics represents one of the most significant challenges facing communities hosting U.S. military bases.

Communities, in this paper, refers to countries that host U.S. bases. References to communities will be at the national level unless otherwise specified. The U.S. prefers stable countries, regardless of regime type, that will be able to facilitate military action to secure joint defense, order, and stability. This paper will elaborate on the history of Turkey-U.S. relations, government structure influencing basing and communities, highlight the overarching tie to many other issues when discussing U.S. basing, and evaluate what happens when the U.S. is pushed out of a country.

In the context of 12 wars over four centuries, a conflict between Russia and Turkey seemed inevitable. Following World War II, Turkey came to the United States for support against the threat of Russian aggression and claims of territory. With recent overtures toward

Russia as a friend, to include the purchase of S-400 Surface to Air Missile weapon systems, it is paradoxical that the relationship started because of the threat the Russians posed following World War II.³ Turkey was in at the start of the United Nations as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. They proved to be “Early Cold War Partners” with special aid incentives as they countered the Soviet threat.⁴ From 1963-1978, the relationship can be described as “Allies amid Challenges,”⁵ where Turkey clashed with Greece, dealt with governmental instability, and a U.S. sanction for invading Cyprus. Despite the ups and downs, Turkey remained in NATO and a host to U.S. forces performing NATO functions.

From 1980 to 1991, military cooperation was renewed, and Turkey signed a Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement with the U.S.⁶ A significant highlight of this era was the Gulf War and the use of Turkish airspace and bases for U.S. and Coalition aircraft. Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the aftermath of the Gulf War, Turkey took a backseat in U.S. eyes, to include a few ups and downs with aid withheld and aid provided for various internal operations. To call the relationship between the U.S. and Turkey turbulent may be an understatement.

From 2002 to present, the U.S. has adapted to a changing Turkey following the election of Tayyip Erdogan as Prime Minister and his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Blunders and conflicting views by both sides have caused the relationship to hit particularly low points to include the Turkish purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia and the halt of Turkey participating in the F-35 program. All this background points to the continually evolving nature of their relationship and implies that government type and choices may influence basing decisions and the community writ large.

Author Kent Calder points out that base politics, to include communities, determines the reach of military power.⁷ He points to geopolitics being the background or base variable and that

it is most important when it comes to where a base is placed. Regimes that are shifting towards democracies will prompt a U.S. withdrawal.⁸ Calder also posits that the U.S. prefers a dictatorship in his Dictatorship Hypothesis. While this may have been true for the 50 years following World War II, recent activities show that the government type needs to be stable rather than merely on one end of the spectrum between consolidated democracy and dictatorship. To that end, Author Alexander Cooley poses that the U.S. ultimately does not care about the government type, and they will work with whatever they have to in order to reach their geopolitical ends.⁹ Ultimately, we see that the people of the community are required to provide consent in order for the U.S. basing effort to be successful. Success requires relationship management as the most crucial aspect of basing.

Turkey proves to be a challenging partner because of the relative disdain of the United States within their community. Despite U.S. flexibility in respecting the wishes of the government and generally supporting the current leadership through a variety of issues, Turkey and Erdogan specifically attempt to leverage rhetoric and actions that attempt to cajole, persuade, convince or draw out a variety of aid or political gain. These all are indications of a “weak nation” using Cooley’s indications.¹⁰ The weak nation is in terms of stability and shows what a weak partner Turkey is turning into as their country struggles with geopolitical as well as economic woes.

The desires of Turkey in the long term are unclear - despite their membership in NATO, they have taken steps closer to Russia. This seems like a way to get more out of the U.S. and potentially hold the European Union (E.U.) hostage with a horde of refugees from recent conflicts at their borders. Turkey appears to want membership in the E.U. but has struggled to bring its economy, debt, and political structure to levels that the E.U. would accept.¹¹¹² Turkey

breaks the mold for what traditionally has improved the chances of a stable basing partner.

Typically, countries that the U.S. has an alliance with are more stable.¹³

Complicating factors in the relationship of Turkey and the U.S. is the fact Turkey is a member of NATO and hosts nuclear weapons for the defense of Europe. With a vested interest of E.U. members to their mutual security, it is interesting to see what stability is worth. Turkey is still hosting NATO missions and troops but is sliding away from democracy instead of toward it. This showcases how Calder's hypothesis needs to be updated to reflect instability rather than only democratizing nations. Ultimately the trust put in Turkey with nuclear weapons and a U.S. military presence both empowers and threatens the community on the world stage. If the U.S. and NATO withdraw, the country of Turkey could collapse - providing an opportunity for Russia or other Middle Eastern powers to capitalize on the chaos. The U.S. is there because of threats to global security, Turkish security, countering Russia, and the need for a jumping point into many Middle Eastern conflicts.

Historically, the U.S. has benefitted from dictatorships and the ease of entry for U.S. bases. Examples of this are the Philippines and Spain, as captured by Cooley.¹⁴ As they shifted away from a dictatorship, both of those countries would eventually push out the United States in no small degree, despite the geopolitical threats of the world. The U.S. has proven relatively resilient when national interests force a change in basing plans. The U.S. adjusts posture and basing locale. In some cases, they still offer protection to a lesser degree. Countries that straddle the line may not like the consequences (economic sanctions, lack of military protection) from their trying to cajole the U.S. into paying more or giving more.

The U.S. did not care about the type of government, but, as Cooley covers, authoritarian regimes can honor basing contracts directly because of the ruler's domestic political interests and

survival strategy.¹⁵ Unfortunately, this also means that rulers can demand revisions whenever they see fit. The real danger is that if the regime changes, the contracts agreed to may not be honored and carried over between leaders.

Geopolitics may seem too broad to be the real overarching priority for communities hosting U.S. bases. All of the branches of issues derived from the U.S. basing all trackback to why they are there in the first place. It is not to control a global empire, it is not to use and abuse the local environment, and it is not to purely derive gain for the U.S. These issues all link back to geopolitics and the need for order, a leader and stable environments for trade to thrive.

Despite the benefits Turkey would receive, to include security, economic aid and assistance, and intangibles such as prestige, legitimacy, and association with the hegemon, 11 security which allows money to be spent elsewhere to enhance chances of regime survival, recent developments show Turkey is still sliding toward an authoritarian regime.¹⁶ “Erdogan 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.”¹⁷ The U.S. can still salvage their relationship and coerce Erdogan to reconsider his path.¹⁸ Economic assistance with caveats may be a tool for success. A more antagonistic approach of supporting another leader or party may cause strife around the world for interfering with a sovereign country. Ultimately, despite showing the global reach of America’s armed forces, the need for bases and facilities within the region are still required.¹⁹

Turkey is an excellent example of the dynamics that go into basing decisions, maintenance, and fluctuations. Shown through Turkey is the example of partnership and discontent. Through the years, Turkey has proven itself to be a reliable partner in one day and age but, more recently, a weak nation and weak partner. Ultimately, the U.S. prefers stability

over almost anything when it comes to countering geopolitical interests around the world - allowing the geopolitics to be one of the most important issues to communities hosting U.S. bases.



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² Calder, Kent E. *Embattled Garrisons: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, p75-76.

³ Holmes, Amy Austin. *Social Unrest and American Military Bases in Turkey and Germany since 1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

⁴ Jim Zanotti, and Clayton Thomas. *Turkey-U.S. Relations: Timeline and Brief Historical Context*. Congressional Research Service, 2019. crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10487.

⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid*, 1.

⁷ Calder, 69-75.

⁸ *Ibid*, 75.

⁹ Cooley, Alexander. *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U.S. Military Overseas*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 13-24.

¹⁰ Cooley, 8

¹¹ Anonymous. "Conditions for Membership." *European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations - European Commission*, 6 Dec. 2016, ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en.

¹² Michael, Peter. "EU Council Issues Strong Message about Turkey's Obligations." *Cyprus Mail*, 26 June 2018, cyprus-mail.com/2018/06/26/eu-council-issues-strong-message-about-turkeys-obligations/.

¹³ Calder, 71.

¹⁴ Cooley, 56-94.

¹⁵ Cooley, 14.

¹⁶ Cooley, 12.

¹⁷ Stephen J. Flanagan, F. Stephen Larrabee, Anika Binnendijk, Katherine Costello, Shira Efron, James Hoobler, Magdalena Kirchner, Jeffrey Martini, Alireza Nader, and Peter A. Wilson, *Turkey's Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2589.html.

¹⁸ Ragip Soylu. "US Think Tank Report Ignites Concerns over New Military Coup in Turkey." *Middle East Eye*, 18 Feb. 2020, www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-think-tank-report-ignites-new-military-coup-concerns-turkey.

¹⁹ John. A. Gasner, et al. *Revising the U.S. Global Military Basing Policy : Is a Permanent U.S. Military Presence Still Required?* Naval Postgraduate School, 2004.