

ПОЛИТИКА

U.S.-Turkey Strategic Approaches in the Greater Middle East Project

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ԱՄՆ-ի և Թուրքիայի ռազմավարական մոտեցումները «Մեծ Մերձավոր Արևելք» նախագծի շրջանակներում

Վարդազարյան Երեմ Մ.

ք.գ.թ., Միջազգային հարաբերությունների և դիվանագիտության ամբիոնի դոցենտ, Երևանի պետական համալսարան (Երևան, ՀՀ)

Ամիրջանյան Արամ Ս.

Բակալավրիատի ուսանող, Միջազգային հարաբերությունների ֆակուլտետ, Երևանի պետական համալսարան (Երևան, ՀՀ)

Անփոփագիր. Հոդվածում մանրամասն վերլուծվում են հարաբերությունները ԱՄՆ-ի և Թուրքիայի միջև 21-րդ դարում: Վերլուծվում են պետությունների միջև հարաբերությունները «Մեծ Մերձավոր Արևելք» նախագծի շրջանակներում, ԱՄՆ-ի ներխուժումը Աֆղանստան, Իրաք, ինչպես նաև պետությունների մասնակցությունը Սիրիական հակամարտությունում: Շոշափվել են նաև ԱՄՆ-ի և Թուրքիայի միջև բարդ հարաբերությունները, հատկապես ԱԶԿ-ի կառավարման տարիներին, և թե ինչպես է դա ազդում նրանք քաղաքականության և միջազգային դինամիկայի վրա:

Հանգուցաբառեր՝ ԱՄՆ, Թուրքիա, Մերձավոր Արևելք, Իրաք, Սիրիա, քրդեր, ռազմական, դիվանագիտական, հարաբերություններ

Стратегические подходы США и Турции в рамках проекта «Большой Ближний Восток»

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Аннотация: Статья представляет собой подробный анализ отношений между США и Турцией в 21 веке. Анализируются отношения стран в рамках проекта «Большой Ближний Восток» в контексте вторжения США в Афганистан, Ирак и также участие стран в сирийском конфликте. Также затронуты сложные отношения между США и Турцией, особенно во время правления "Партии справедливости и развития", и то, как это влияет на их политику и международную динамику.

Ключевые слова: США, Турция, Ближний Восток, Ирак, Сирия, курды, военная, дипломатические, отношения

The relationship between the United States and Turkey has always been multifaceted and characterized by instability. The relationship has taken on new shades, especially in the 21st century,

when the United States began fighting Islamic extremism, and nationalists seized power in Turkey at the beginning of the century. Turkey's favorable geographical location, economic potential, military

factor, and skillful diplomatic traditions make it an important player not only in the South Caucasus but also in world politics. The article is devoted to the strategic approaches of the US and Turkey within the Greater Middle East project, examining the contradictions that have existed with the US over the years, the reasons and aims of the aforementioned states, their policies towards each other, and what we may witness later. We consider the issues rose in the article as a priority because Turkey currently has a deep desire to gain a foothold in the Middle East and to become a major player in the South Caucasus, and the unstable geopolitical situation provides Turkey with an opportunity to achieve its long-standing purpose. The state that can counter this is the United States of America, which does not benefit from the presence of a powerful Turkey in the Middle East and its strengthening in the South Caucasus. In this context, both bilateral and multilateral relations between Turkey and the United States, assessing goals and resources, and considering current political priorities are important.

According to the Belovezha Accords in 1991, the USSR actually ceased to exist, while the United States of America remained the only superpower in the world after the collapse of the bipolar world order. We consider it necessary to state that, like the USSR, the United States of America is also an ideologically guided state. Its primary goal in the twentieth century was to neutralize the USSR by all possible means, a goal that was achieved. However, with the absence of the USSR, the USA needed a new ideology to strengthen its positions in different parts of the world. The spread of democracy became such an ideology, and a number of states, clearly opposed to democratic principles and led by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, appeared on the US watch list.

However, it is essential not to view the US policy of spreading democracy solely as an act of goodwill. It later became clear that the US goals and aspirations were much deeper and more radical than just spreading democracy; the aforementioned was merely a tool to justify further steps.

Regarding Turkey's role before and after the 2000s, Turkey was initially seen as a catalyst state for the U.S. to conduct foreign policy with other states, a role the U.S. aimed to reciprocate in the early 2000s. However, the Greater Middle East project would soon be promoted by the U.S., leading to conflicts with Turkey. The relationship would take on new colors, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

The US had many reasons to invade and entrench itself in the Middle East. The importance of energy resources, especially oil, was paramount. The Middle East, one of the most explosive and

complex regions in the world, is at the same time rich in oil. The US is one of the world's major oil consumers, if not the main one, so it was vital for the US to gain a foothold in the region and seize the reserves of this extremely important resource. At the same time, by being present there, the US would strengthen itself in the region and, becoming the main actor, would skillfully monitor all the processes taking place and exert the necessary influence on them. We also note that, although the United States did not openly express this, it was important for them to increase the number of states operating under their influence in order to establish themselves more firmly in the region.

Thus, the US needed a suitable opportunity to somehow penetrate the region and take possession of such an extremely important resource - oil. Such an occasion was created by the tragic events of September 11, 2001, when two planes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, killing 2,977 people (including 19 suicide bombers). There were a total of 246 passengers and crew members aboard the four planes. All died, and 125 people were killed in the Pentagon building [8]. The terrorist group al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, claimed responsibility for this crime and accused the United States and its allies of instigating conflicts in the Islamic world [8].

On October 7, 2001, the United States, with the support of Britain, launched Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. The official reason for the military action was the terrorist attacks that occurred in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. The operation was not coordinated by the UN, but allies of the USA and Great Britain were Australia and Canada, as well as the Afghan military-political organization Northern Alliance.

It should be noted that after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, many changes were made to the US National Security Doctrine related to the threat of terrorism. Thus, the US "Grand Strategy" formulated during the time of George Bush Jr. began to envision the role of the US as a global leader and the creation of a unipolar world [7]. The original goals were the destruction of Al Qaeda and the physical neutralization of Osama bin Laden. However, Bin Laden was found and killed only in 2011, not in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan [8]. These actions became a precursor to the realization of the "Greater Middle East" project.

The main authors of the Greater Middle East concept were H. Kissinger, D. Cheney, S. Rice, and other American political scientists and representatives of the executive branch. The authors of this concept precede the idea that Western democracy, as a universal remedy, provides

modernization, prosperity, justice, and dialogue between cultures. Therefore, rebuilding a Greater Middle East requires the creation of a community that would fully serve U.S. national interests in its ideas. By realizing the concept of a Greater Middle East, the US will create a suitable regime for itself in these states, which will facilitate its assertion in the region.

The US was not going to limit itself exclusively to the invasion of Afghanistan, as the entire Arab world in the Middle East was considered an extreme danger to the U.S. at that time. The focus was on Iraq under the regime of Saddam Hussein. There were doubts that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and there were concerns that these weapons might be used against the US. The fact that Saddam Hussein was a dictator and the need for democracy were also discussed. However, the main reason was once again the tragic events of September 11, as the US accused Hussein of supporting terrorist groups, presenting this as the best opportunity to carry out military expansion in the region.

Thus, the events of September 11, 2001, became a *casus belli* for the US to invade not only Afghanistan but also Iraq. A logical question arises: Did the US ruling circles suffer more from the September events, or did they come out of it with a better position and opportunities? It is noteworthy that a majority of Sunni Muslims, about 54%, believe that life was better under Saddam Hussein [10], and that Iraq as a state is still in an unenviable state. If we look at the Iraqi operation in terms of the official achievement of objectives, we consider it a failure because, for example, Saddam Hussein's connection with terrorists was never proven, and the WMDs were never found.

In the context of these operations, Turkey played a very important role as a regional ally of the United States, facing numerous challenges. Despite being predominantly Islamic, Turkey is primarily a secular state, allowing for flexibility in international relations. As the only Muslim state in the North Atlantic Alliance at the time, Turkey could essentially become a rogue state in the eyes of other Islamic nations.

The Turkish government at that time, led by Prime Minister R.T. Erdoğan, a nationalist and deeply religious man, expressed concern about the events in Iraq. However, Turkey had to pursue a more restrained policy due to its status as a US ally and NATO member. Thus, Turkey found itself between a rock and a hard place — on one hand, with the risk of becoming a rogue state in the Islamic world, and on the other hand, facing potential confrontation with the US and the North Atlantic Alliance.

The factor of the Kurds living in Iraq, with their separatist and independent tendencies, was also significant. This posed a potential threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and internal security in the future. If the Kurds in Iraq were to achieve independence, it would only be a matter of time before the same aspirations arose among the Kurds in Turkey. Hence, the Kurdish factor became a sword of Damocles hanging over Turkey's head. To be fair, the US continued to use the Kurdish factor against Turkey, which we consider as a contemporary variation of the Eastern Question.

The US attempted to leverage Turkey's NATO membership and open a second front against Iraq on Turkish territory. However, Turkey pursued a skillful policy, and both sides made higher demands on each other than originally planned. The US sought a significant military presence in Turkey to keep tension on Iraq's northern front, and Turkey made substantial financial demands, amounting to up to 92 billion US dollars [2].

Thus, it became clear to the U.S. that although Turkey was part of the North Atlantic Alliance and had a close relationship with the US, it was still attempting to pursue a more independent policy in all fields. Turkey's favorable geographical location and resources could give the US an advantage if there was an opportunity to exploit them, but this opportunity did not seem forthcoming. Consequently, the US started creating certain external problems for Turkey, including lobbying for Turkey's desire to join the EU.

It is essential to emphasize that Turkey expressed its desire to join the EU as early as the 1960s and officially applied for EU membership in 1987. However, this desire of Turkey has almost always faced lobbying efforts from both the US and the EU. Turkey's inclusion in the ranks of EU member states is neither in the interests of the US nor the EU, leading them to lobby for respect for human rights, democratic standards, domestic reforms, press freedom, and actions against activists. However, the most critical factors are Turkey's geopolitical realities, including its role in the Middle East region and its tense relations with neighboring states.

Therefore, a potential alternative for Turkey in such a case is to be a catalyst-mediating state in various processes and promote its interests when necessary. It should be noted that Turkey reacted rather firmly to this lobbying and even made efforts in 2009 to create the Organization of Turkic States [3], demonstrating the ability to unite Turkic-speaking peoples when necessary and to have its own, albeit less influential, organization.

These cases served as a trigger for the US, indicating that Turkey could pose significant

problems in the future. Turkey appeared unwilling to content itself with its status as a US representative in the region, aspiring to become a separate center of power, possibly even opposing the United States. It was evident to the U.S. that Turkey's political, diplomatic, and military influence would grow in the future, and preventing this growth would become increasingly challenging due to Turkey's diplomatic flexibility and periodic engagements with Russia.

During this intricate and multifaceted period, the so-called Arab Spring emerged. The Arab Spring was characterized by the belief that revolutions would spread across the region through the domino effect, but the actual wave primarily reached states where the U.S. had particular interests. It is not coincidental that China also incurred significant losses during the Arab Spring, instigated by its economic expansion.

As a result, U.S.-Turkey relations are expected to take on new dimensions in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, encompassing both military and diplomatic fronts. Bilateral relations, especially from this point forward, have consistently been complex and diverse, with the closest interactions between the 'allies' notably occurring in Syria.

Islamic extremist groups became active in Syria in 2014, notably the 'Islamic State,' which declared the establishment of a 'caliphate' spanning territories in Syria and Iraq. The fight against terrorism became a primary focus of the USA's regional policy, leading to the announcement of a 'comprehensive and sustainable counter-terrorism strategy' in 2014. The aim was to weaken and eliminate the Islamic State.

In the Syrian conflict, the battle against terrorism became a major point of contention between the US and Turkey. The conflict of interests became apparent in September 2014 after the U.S. administration initiated the establishment of an international coalition to counter the terrorist activities of the Islamic State [5]. It was clear that Turkey was not inclined to become a member of such a coalition, as it would involve allowing the US and its allies to use vital military facilities on its territory, particularly the Incirlik air base. For Turkey, the issue of creating a 'security zone' on Syrian territory remained unresolved, with a primary focus on strengthening its influence in the northern regions where Kurdish armed formations were concentrated.

The Turkish government did not share the US view on the need to support the Syrian Kurds. However, Ankara's stance on the Islamic State changed after the terrorist attacks in southern Turkey in the summer of 2015, which were attributed to this organization. The issue of national

security returned to the agenda, leading to airstrikes on PKK positions in northern Iraq following the attacks. Since the failed peace talks with the PKK in 2013, the Turkish government found itself fighting on two fronts: against the Kurdistan Workers' Party and its affiliates, the People's Self-Defense Forces, and the Islamic State. This inevitably complicated Turkish-American relations.

The Turkish government agreed to allow the US and the anti-ISIL coalition access to Incirlik Air Base to deploy personnel and drones [6]. However, US actions have once again introduced friction into Turkish-American relations. In October 2015, the Obama administration supported the creation of a coalition of armed opposition in northern Syria - the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which included the People's Self-Defense Forces, as well as various Arab groups. Turkey categorically refused to cooperate with the Democratic Self-Defense Forces [11]. Despite this, the US continued to use Incirlik Air Base and other strategic military facilities in Turkey.

After the attempted Turkish military coup on the night of July 15-16, 2016, the level of cooperation between Ankara and Washington decreased. Notably, the Turkish government accuses the Hizmet movement and its leader Fethullah Gülen of using their influence in the army and attempting to overthrow the government. Since 2013, a rift has emerged between Gülen and Erdoğan. Erdoğan closed Hizmet's educational institutions. The prosecutor's office launched an anti-corruption investigation against several officials, and Erdoğan blamed Hizmet for its idea of a 'parallel state' during the corruption scandal. However, the 'Big Bribery' case collapsed, and all those responsible were released. After a failed military coup attempt in 2016, Erdoğan blamed Gülen. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called on US President Barack Obama to extradite the Islamic opposition figure Fethullah Gülen, whom Ankara accuses of organizing a military coup attempt in the country, to Turkey [18].

After successfully foiling the attempted military coup, the Turkish leader promised to severely punish its organizers; regardless of the structures they represent [17]. During the opening of the extraordinary session of the parliament, its chairman Ismail Kahraman emphasized that all participants in the coup attempt in Turkey 'will be brought to justice as soon as possible' [14]. Prime Minister Yıldırım said regarding the United States that the country cannot be Turkey's friend as long as it harbors coup organizer Gülen [15].

These cases also document the tensions and the United States' search for an alternative candidate for Turkey's leadership. The Turkish government's

decision to temporarily stop using Incirlik Air Base came as a surprise to the United States. Along with deteriorating relations with the US, the Turkish government is becoming more active on the Syrian front. On August 24, 2016, with the support of the Free Syrian Army, Turkey launched a large-scale military operation, 'Euphrates Shield,' in Syria against the 'Islamic State' as well as against 'Syrian Kurdish terrorist groups.' On the same day, U.S. Vice President J. Biden said in Ankara that the U.S. supports the actions of the Turkish leadership [1]. The Turkish Armed Forces received assistance from the U.S. exclusively to fight ISIS. The parties agreed that Syrian Kurds should not cross the Euphrates. 'If they do not fulfill this condition, they will not be able to receive U.S. support,' Biden said [4]. Operation Euphrates Shield allowed Ankara to accomplish the minimum objective, i.e., Turkey established control over a border area about 100 km long and up to 50 km deep (over the towns of Jarabulus and Azaz).

In the context of the Syrian conflict, the same Kurdish issue, which found support in American circles but faced sharp condemnation from the Turkish side, began to develop with renewed vigor. The US also supported the Kurds by supplying ammunition to fight IS, [9] posing a threat of direct conflict for Turkey due to its multi-million Kurdish population and their separatist aspirations. It cannot be ruled out that this is also due to R. T. Erdoğan's son, businessman Bilal Erdoğan. Bilal's connection to the "Islamic State" began to circulate in the Russian press. In particular, it was mentioned that Bilal was buying oil from ISIS on the black market, and Russia strongly condemned this. Although Bilal later denied his ties to the terrorist organization, his connection to ISIS is no secret, even to Turks [13]. Although the US has tried to avoid expressing a position on this issue, the question arises: What kind of cooperation or alliance are we talking about if the United States is fighting the Islamic State in Syria, and the son of the Turkish president is doing business with the aforementioned terrorist organization?

Thus, with this fact, the Kurdish factor of the United States gets a new motive and shades to counter Turkey. Historical contradictions between the US and Turkey in the Syrian conflict clearly show that Turkey tries by all possible means to pursue a policy independent from the US and makes concessions only in deep crises. Meanwhile, the US, realizing the importance of Turkey and the simultaneous danger it poses, often tries to provoke internal turmoil in Turkey by skillfully using the Kurdish factor.

The above-mentioned is one of the main deterrents for Turkey because arming multi-million

Kurds to fight against IS (it is not excluded that these weapons and ammunition will be used against Turkey itself because of the separatist tendencies of the Kurds) and securing the political support of the US create a slow-action bomb on the territory of Turkey, which can explode at the most favorable moment for the US.

Turkey must pursue a restrained and rational policy with the U.S., considering the Kurdish factor, because, although Turkey has the resources to achieve its aims, they do not even come close to U.S. capabilities.

In the context of escalating relations, we also highlight the recent presidential election in Turkey. The outcome of the 2023 election will clarify whether Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will continue his nearly 20-year political hegemony with maximalist policies that are not in the interests of the US or whether his era is coming to an end.

The election was an unprecedented process with a runoff between two candidates: the ruling wing's representative, R.T. Erdoğan, and the single opposition candidate, K. Kilicdaroglu. While Erdogan was eventually re-elected, some analysts attribute U.S. attempts to influence the presidential election [16]. There is speculation that K. Kilicdaroglu may have received US funding, suggesting a potential pro-American policy if elected. However, Erdoğan retained power.

There is a possibility that compromises were reached between the United States and Erdoğan on certain issues, allowing him to stay in power. This, however, does not dismiss the potential for future U.S. support for K. Kilicdaroglu as a political figure. Even if compromises were made, the US may aim to neutralize Erdoğan in the political field and support a candidate who will pursue a more restrained and favorable policy for the United States.

A general picture emerges from the observations: Relations between the United States and Turkey have varied across different historical periods, displaying volatility rather than stability. Developments and contradictions have become particularly noticeable within government circles since Erdoğan's tenure began, leading Turkey down a path of Islamic domination, a departure from the secular stance established by Ataturk. This has caused a conflict of interest, as Islamic extremism is considered the main enemy of the US, while Erdoğan aims not only to be a link between the West and the East but also to be a leader of Islam, especially among the Turkic-speaking nations. Erdoğan's Turkey is markedly different state, refusing to be a mere enforcer of US political goals in the Middle East or a representative in the South Caucasus region. It is powerful and, so far,

relatively independent country from the US, creating problems for many major geopolitical players by pursuing a rational and pragmatic policy. In the current geopolitical maelstrom, an opportunity has arisen for Turkey to further strengthen its position in the South Caucasus and become a vital player in the Middle East. This scenario is particularly not favorable to the US, as Turkey, under Erdoğan, is likely to create obstacles for the US in various situations. Therefore, the US should adopt a pragmatic, rational, and somewhat restrained policy, using precise mechanisms with its ally. Erdoğan's Turkey has become a state on the geopolitical board, which aims and interests cannot be ignored. Although the US is a superpower with many deterrents against Turkey and its policies, they are short-lived. The US should pursue a vigilant policy towards a state and a nation that, at various stages of historical development, has emerged victoriously from seemingly hopeless situations, constantly strengthening its position, and creating trouble for its adversaries and, if necessary, for its allies themselves.

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