

Testimony for the Hearing
“Bridging the Gap: Turkey Between East and West”
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
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March 5, 2025

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Keating, distinguished members of this committee – thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today on one of the most consequential bilateral geopolitical relationships that the United States enjoys with a key ally, the Republic of Türkiye. Türkiye is a strong ally across key global security priorities of the United States. However, too often Türkiye is at odds with U.S. policies and priorities. And at other times, the U.S. and Türkiye share strong common interests, but have differing approaches to resolving problems that threaten our common interests. As Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs until January 2025, I had the privilege of working to advance U.S. national security interests under all three of these contexts that together comprise this key relationship with Türkiye. I would like to use my time today to share with you my experience on many of those opportunities and challenges in the hope that I might inform your important work going forward on Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

The Good

Our productive relations lie at the heart of European security. For over 70 years, Türkiye has been a strong frontline member of the NATO alliance. Spanning the Bosphorus and holding one-third of the Black Sea Coast, Türkiye has been key to credible defense and deterrence against Soviet and now Russian threat in Europe. Türkiye’s location affords NATO allies key overflight access for defense and surveillance operations across southeast Europe. During the Cold War, Türkiye played this vital alliance role along with Greece – the two forward locations for NATO in southeast Europe. Today, they are joined by Bulgaria, Romania, and western Balkans allies to enable NATO air, sea, and ground defenses that force Russian military planners to contemplate defense from the Arctic to the

Caucasus, stretching Russia lines and resources and complicating offensive options for attack. With Türkiye a NATO ally, the Kremlin cannot afford to focus an attack on simply its ground forces across a manageable front, as it has demonstrated in Ukraine with devastating effect.

The United States military is better able to fulfill its missions for European and global security because of our alliance with Türkiye. The U.S. operates military bases in Incirlik and Izmir, along with other NATO allies. These bases support air, ground, and sea components of allied forces, and support a network of sensors that provide warning and surveillance capacity to the alliance deep in Europe's eastern areas. Hosting U.S. military forces at these bases has meant that Türkiye has enabled and supported U.S. operations and NATO deterrence for decades, as well as U.S. government planning for both combat and non-combat missions such as potential humanitarian and civilian evacuations in support of U.S. embassies in the Middle East.

Türkiye has a strong defense industrial base, including production of some of the most advanced and innovative capabilities crucial to modern warfare notably Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), military ships, electronic warfare systems, and advanced electronics. Türkiye has also invested in American built advanced weapons that advance NATO's strength and interoperability, notably its fleet of F-16 fighters. Turkish defense industry capacities were advanced to such a degree that it was a member of the F-35 program, with the opportunity to integrate multiple components for these advanced fighters (until it was removed from the program, more on this below).

This advanced defense capability is one of the forgotten stories in Ukraine's surprise success in the early months of Russia's invasion in 2022 when it drove Russian forces from Kyiv and some 50% of the territory Russia initially seized. Many factors contributed to Ukraine's success, but one of the signature headline capabilities the Ukrainians used for surveillance and attack that caught the Russian army by surprise was the Turkish Aerospace Industries produced Bayraktar UAV. In a war that changed our understanding of how conventional conflict can and must be fought, and that has led to a massive growth in production of UAVs for military use, the leading example was Türkiye's provision of security assistance from the conflict's early days.

The Turkish Ministry of National Defense participated in every meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group chaired by the United States from April 2022 to January 2025. There are numerous instances and untold stories of key Turkish security assistance support to Ukraine, including investment in Ukraine's indigenous UAV and artillery production. And in October 2022, I was privileged to meet the Ukrainian and Turkish teams preparing for a ceremony to of the new Ukrainian flagship the Hetman Ivan Mazepa, built in Turkish naval yards, during the annual U.S.-Türkiye bilateral defense consultations in Ankara. This anti-submarine corvette will be the foundation of Ukraine's NATO interoperable Navy.

Türkiye's role in Ukraine's early defenses should not come as a surprise, as it has held a strong principled stand against Russia's invasion and occupation from the first time Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. Türkiye has refused to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea, and has been a steady and vocal advocate for the rights and well-being Crimea's historic population of Crimean Tatars.

Türkiye also played a decisive role in Ukraine's defenses by invoking the Montreux Convention of 1936, declaring Russia's invasion of Ukraine a war and therefore denying the passage of all warships, including Russian navy vessels, through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles into the Black Sea. This denied Russia the ability to surge additional warships to support its invasion in 2022. It also prevented Russia from being able to replace naval vessels damaged or sunk by Ukraine since 2022, leaving the Russian Black Sea Fleet a crippled navy unable to support Russian ground forces in the northwestern Black Sea. This in turn enabled Ukraine to develop a lifeline for its economy by preventing the Russian navy from closing off Ukraine's commercial shipping, especially grain. Ukraine's lifeline was further strengthened when Türkiye lead negotiations to enable Ukrainian grain shipments from summer 2022 through July 2023, when Russia refused to extend the agreement.

In Africa, Türkiye has trained counter-terrorism forces, complementing the U.S. training and equipping of Somalia's Danab brigade with the training and equipping of Gorgor battalions, specialized in special forces operations. Türkiye's professional and extensive training has advanced Somalia's ability to degrade and defend against al-Shabab, an affiliate of al Qaeda, that U.S. officials assess is the only African terrorist organization at present with the intention and capability to

execute complex global operations, were it able to consistently and securely control territory in Somalia. By investing in Somalia's CT forces, Türkiye has supported global support to prevent Somali territory from becoming a safe haven for renewed global terrorist strikes, including against the U.S. homeland.

The Bad

At the same time, Türkiye has also taken actions that are contrary to American national security interests, and have undermined our efforts to advance peace and security. Türkiye's material and political support to Azerbaijan enabled President Aliyev to strike at Armenia to achieve his objectives by military force instead of through negotiations. The same defense industrial base that has contributed to NATO power and Ukrainian defenses enabled Azerbaijan over many years to build a military capability aimed at successive campaigns that resulted not only in the seizing of territory, but the displacement of tens of thousands of men, women, and children whose ancestors had lived in Nagorno-Karabakh long before the Soviet Union decreed the territory to be part of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. Armenians' experience and memory of genocide make the forced exodus all the more tragic. Although the international community – and the United States – had not recognized Armenia's claim to the territory it had occupied, the U.S. has been a strong and consistent leader in support of a negotiated solution. In enabling Azerbaijan to take decisive military action, Türkiye undermined a key U.S. commitment.

Türkiye has also taken negative steps against U.S. interests in NATO in the political and diplomatic realm. When Finland and Sweden applied for membership in NATO, reversing their decades long stance of neutrality in the face of Russia's threat to European security, Türkiye's delays and singular maneuvering for concessions and advantage risked the signal of unity and strength that NATO needed for strategic clarity to Moscow. Every NATO ally has the right to settle disagreements and address legitimate security concerns with alliance aspirants, but Türkiye's on-again-off-again evolving demands of Sweden (in particular) had the feel of opportunistic bargaining instead of historic statesmanship. In the end, Türkiye approved both countries as NATO allies (and thus the Turkish delegation will be seated next to the Swedish delegation for years to come, as the North

Atlantic Council is seated at an oval table in alphabetical order), but the alliance seemed diminished in the process.

In other cases, Türkiye's choices have undermined U.S. military security, not only political and diplomatic policies. In 2019, Türkiye chose to purchase the S-400 system from Russia. The S-400 air defense system is designed specifically to counter advanced U.S. military capabilities, notably the 5th generation fighter F-35. With its technological advances and ability to integrate multiple sensors and platforms while literally on the fly, the stealth F-35 is the core of U.S. fighter, strike, and air defense systems. Furthermore, with numerous NATO allies acquiring the F-35 for their air forces, and with the opportunity for highly integrated air operations as a result, it will be the backbone of a lethal NATO force for decades to come.

By purchasing, deploying, and operating the S-400, Türkiye not only turned away from the alliance in which it is integrated and which commits to its defense against attack (by the very Russia from which it purchased the S-400), Türkiye was also potentially putting at risk the entire F-35 arsenal. Türkiye had joined the joint F-35 development program, and was scheduled to receive delivery of 100 F-35 aircraft. Experts assess that in operating both platforms, Türkiye might put at risk the F-35 program by exposing its features to Russian intelligence. When Türkiye failed to be dissuaded from the Russian purchase, it was removed from the F-35 program, its aircraft were not delivered, and defense sector entities were sanctioned under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). The U.S. government could act to deliver F-35 jets to Türkiye, if Congress and the White House agreed that Türkiye had rendered the S-400 system verifiably inoperable and remove itself as a current or potential future customer of the program. However, as long as Türkiye continues to own and operate the S-400 system, it remains a deep challenge to U.S. and NATO military operations and security. And while Türkiye's F-35 program must remain suspended, Greece will field its first F-35s before the end of this decade.

The Complicated

The most tangled security challenge in U.S. relations with Türkiye is counterterrorism in northern Syria and Iraq. The tangle's origins lie in the history of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S. designated foreign terrorist

organization that is responsible for over 40 years of violence against Türkiye and thousands of casualties. Early in its history, the PKK established bases in both Syria and Iraq as safe havens to plan and execute operations within Türkiye, at times with support from Iran and Syria.

The cross-border nature of PKK presence and operations, and the development of localized political and military arms of the PKK in both neighboring countries, resulted in complicated and shifting U.S.-Turkish cooperation and clashes over Turkish counter-PKK operations throughout the region. Following the Gulf War in 1991, the United States cooperated with Türkiye to end Iraq's brutal suppression of Iraqi Kurdistan, with Turkish territory serving as base for relief and no-fly zone operations. At other times, U.S. concerns for Turkish disregard for human rights in its campaign resulted in political pressure and penalties including withholding military cooperation from the Turkish armed forces.

This fragile balance of cooperation and contestation was fundamentally upended with the collapse of Syrian state authority and the Iraqi security forces in the early 2010s, enabling the rise of the Islamic State in both regions. The expanding territorial control and freedom of operations by ISIS to terrorize and murder local populations, and to build the base for global terrorist operations, were the opportunity for PKK units in northern Iraq and affiliated units (primarily the YPG – the People's Defense Units, the military arm of the PKK's political operation) in Syria to expand their military capabilities as defenders against ISIS. These units quickly became elements of the broader coalition to fight ISIS, eventually receiving U.S. training, equipment, and financing to degrade and defeat ISIS.

Today in Iraq, America's partners in the enduring defeat of ISIS are the national armed forces of Iraq and the Peshmerga, the armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government, a government entity of the federal Republic of Iraq. U.S. and coalition armed forces are located in Iraq with the agreement of the Government of Iraq to train and assist both of the military organizations in their counterterrorism operations and national defense against ISIS. The PKK continued to violate Iraqi sovereignty and to operate from locations it holds in the mountains of northern Iraq, and the U.S. and Türkiye are in solid agreement that these forces

are illegal and terrorist units. However, there have been serious frictions and concerns when Turkish targeted operations against PKK units in northern Iraq have not been coordinated with U.S. and coalition forces, resulting in risks to U.S. military personnel supporting Peshmerga training.

The far more serious challenge to bilateral relations has been in Syria. The PKK-offshoot YPG is a component element of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the central U.S. partner in defeating, degrading, and containing ISIS in Syria since 2015. U.S. training and equipping of the SDF has been a friction point in the relationship since then. The U.S. views the SDF as a valued partner for its extraordinary military capabilities, role in effectively shattering ISIS, and protecting U.S. military forces in Syria. The SDF remains responsible for operations against remnants of ISIS in Syria, and secures prisons and detention facilities for ISIS fighters and supporters in northern Syria. Turkish operations against the SDF have risked counter-ISIS operations and the security of those facilities, and thus the safety and security of the rotational U.S. forces operating in Syria in the ongoing counter-ISIS security mission. Bilateral frictions arising from this tangle periodically led to tactical coordination and communication between the two allies over the years, but continued to risk miscalculation and to poison trust. The U.S. remained convinced that Turkish CT operations in Syria and Iraq disregarded U.S. mission priorities and risked not only U.S. casualties, but ISIS resurgence. Türkiye remained convinced that U.S. support for the SDF (and thus in Turkish views the PKK) prevented the Turkish armed forces from degrading and destroying a terrorist organization that continued to be very real daily threat to its nation.

In the summer of 2024, the U.S. and Türkiye met in the first of a series of discussions on this tangle. The first discussion, hosted by the Department of State in Washington, allowed for a very professional, frank, and extensive airing of the history and conflicting views of the origins and solutions to the tangle. The result of the initial discussion was a Turkish hosted meeting in October 2024 which yielded a productive step in communication and incident prevention: a direct channel between the leadership of the Turkish Armed Forces and U.S. military commanders responsible for U.S. training and support to partners in Syria and Iraq. While this military channel could not begin to disentangle the political dispute at

the heart of the challenge, it helped to prevent incidents that would risk disaster in the bilateral relationship, and took first steps in creating a measure of trust.

With the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, the new Syrian leadership has made clear its determination to unify its control of armed forces within Syrian territory, including the SDF. With the announcement by Abdullah Öcalan calling on the PKK to disband and disarm on February 27, 2025 the first knot in this tangle may have been loosened. If the Turkish leadership does not overplay the opportunity to achieve its national security objective of eliminating the terrorist threat to its country that the PKK poses, it may be able to work with the United States in ensuring that these tectonic shifts in the region secure the enduring defeat of ISIS, and enable the United States to end its presence once that mission objective is achieved. Thoughtful leadership could move this bilateral challenge from complicated tangle to positive partnership on global and national security.