

## Where is the Anchor? Explaining the Endurance of the American-Turkish Partnership, 1927-2024

Onur Erpul  
Bilkent University

Kemal Kirişçi  
Brookings Institution

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### Abstract

*Once considered a model partnership, the American-Turkish relationship now elicits ambivalence among scholars and policymakers, calling into question the fundamental interests and assumptions that once undergirded the relationship. Critics attribute the negative trends in the relationship to geostrategic and value-based incompatibilities, but relatively few have examined both factors longitudinally across the entire relationship. This paper does not aim to provide a grand theory of American-Turkish relations. Instead, its goal is to develop a framework illustrating the vital role that strategic, ideational, and domestic political factors have played in shaping macro-level outcomes in the partnership's cohesion at various junctures. Overall, our paper identifies the positive role of foreign policy bureaucratic elites on both sides acting as an "invisible hand" providing an anchor for the relationship even in the absence of other commonalities. Yet, we also observe the weakening of this hand in recent times as both countries become domestically transformed.*


**Keywords:** Turkish-US Relations, Foreign Policy, Alliance Politics, Elites

### 1. Introduction

Forged in the early years of the Cold War, the American-Turkish relationship remains an enduring one that has weathered many challenges. There is, however, a growing sense of frustration shared among their respective policymakers and scholars, who now increasingly call into question the entire premise of the relationship. Inquiries like "Who lost Turkey?" proliferated as early as the mid-2000s in the wake of Turkey's growing divergence with the US regarding Iraq and the enervating pace of its EU accession efforts.<sup>1</sup>

The negative trajectory of the relationship prompted discussions over an axis shift in Turkey's fundamental orientation, including a perceived decline in Turkey's commitment to the Western alliance and closer relations with Russia. Western ambivalence towards Turkey is fueled by its perceived gravity in world politics as a "swing state" that can help to make

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Onur Erpul, Instructor, Department of International Relations, Bilkent University.  0000-0003-3848-3848. Email: erpul@bilkent.edu.tr.

Kemal Kirişçi, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution.  0009-0003-0632-1630. Email: kkirisci@brookings.edu

<sup>1</sup> Phillip H. Gordon, Ömer Taşpınar, and Soli Özel, "Introduction: Who Lost Turkey?" in *Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey Can Revive a Fading Partnership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 1–6.

or break the liberal international order.<sup>2</sup> Even the most charitable interpretations express concerns that a strategically autonomous Turkey may be a challenge for the international order.<sup>3</sup> There have even been advocates of Turkey's expulsion from NATO.<sup>4</sup>

Turkish gravamen against the US, meanwhile, underscores that the US has often let Turkey down by ignoring its concerns over its security, territorial integrity, and relations with third parties.<sup>5</sup> Turkish disenchantment with the US peaked with the July 15th coup attempt, after which Turkish decision-makers, such as the Minister of Interior Affairs, Süleyman Soylu, decried the US as a terrorist state due to its alleged support of the putsch.<sup>6</sup> Since then, Turkey purchased S-400 missiles from Russia, cooperated with Russia across numerous geopolitical theaters, and even considered the possibility of becoming a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. More strikingly, in 2024, Erdoğan attended in person the BRIC summit in Russia while expressing an aspiration to become a member.<sup>7</sup>

Given its contradictions and vicissitudes, the American-Turkish relationship, therefore, appears to have no singular determinant, making any satisfactory and holistic attempt at theorizing the vicissitudes of the relationship a difficult task. To wit, we undertake this task in the present article, offering a stylized longitudinal examination of American-Turkish relations from 1927 to 2024, inquiring into the combination of factors that influence the “partnership cohesion” of the American-Turkish relationship across different periods. Instead of relying on a specific theoretical tradition, we offer a framework of analysis, contending that a combination of i) geostrategic interests, ii) ideational convergence/divergence among elites, and iii) domestic decision-making environments are responsible for the quality of the partnership in any given period.

Firstly, geostrategic alignment is a crucial factor since common threat perceptions and military goals beget coordination. Secondly, the presence of ideational bonds appear to be a crucial factor influencing the level of cooperation between the two states over time, especially the feelings of solidarity between elites.<sup>8</sup> Finally, decision-making contexts are capable in shaping the incentive structure around foreign policy decisions through imposing various political costs on incumbent leaders, undermining legislative processes or simply forcing issues on the foreign policy agenda.<sup>9</sup> We argue that it is the variation or fluctuations in these three factors across time that shapes/determines the quality or cohesion of the partnership

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Kliman and Richard Fontaine, “Global Swing States: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey, and The Future of International Order,” *The German Marshall Fund Policy Paper*, November 1, 2012, accessed date October 10, 2024. <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/global-swing-states-brazil-india-indonesia-turkey-and-future-international-order>.

<sup>3</sup> See, Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, “Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?” *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (2021): 1085–1104.

<sup>4</sup> See, Aurel Sari, “Can Turkey be Expelled from NATO? It's Legally Possible, Whether or Not Politically Prudent,” *Just Security*, October 15, 2019, accessed date December 11, 2024. <https://www.justsecurity.org/66574/can-turkey-be-expelled-from-nato/>

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of Turkish discourses about its disappointment with the US, see Nicholas Danforth, “Frustration, Fear, and the Fate of U.S.-Turkish Relations,” *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, no. 11 (2019): 1-4; Richard Outzen, “Costly Incrementalism: U.S. PKK Policy and Relations with Türkiye,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-22.

<sup>6</sup> “Turkish minister says U.S. behind 2016 failed coup – Hürriyet,” *Reuters*, February 5, 2021, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/middle-east/turkish-minister-says-us-behind-2016-failed-coup-hurriyet-idUSKBN2A41NE/>

<sup>7</sup> “President Erdoğan attends BRICS summit amid outreach,” *Daily Sabah*, October 23, 2024, November 11, 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/president-erdogan-attends-brics-summit-amid-outreach>

<sup>8</sup> See, Didem Buhari Gülmez, “The Resilience of the US–Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 475–492; William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy Since 1774* (New York: Routledge, 2014): 107-108; Tarık Oğuzlu, “Testing the Strength of the Turkish–American Strategic Relationship through NATO: Convergence or Divergence within the Alliance?” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 15, no. 2 (2013): 207–222.

<sup>9</sup> See, Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427–460.

between the two sides. We also identify the role of bureaucratic elites in the foreign policy realm on both sides acting as an “invisible hand” providing an anchor for the relationship and shielding the cohesion of the partnership from collapsing. We see this cohesion as “the ability of member states to agree on goals, strategy, and tactics and coordinate activity directed toward those ends.”<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Framework

Each of these components has received extensive individual attention in the literature, but holistic theoretical approaches are rarer by comparison and have generally appeared in the guise of Neoclassical Realist models, which ascribe ultimate causal heft to geostrategic factors.<sup>11</sup> We think, however, that such a model would have considerably less explanatory power in our case as we believe the relationship is also predicated on fluctuating ideational affinities and domestic political developments. Furthermore, our takeaway from the application of the above three factors is that there exists a bureaucratic inertia within the foreign policy and security establishments of the two states shielding the partnership. Even when national interests diverged because of geostrategic, ideational, or domestic political reasons, this bureaucratic inertia acts like an “invisible hand” steadying the relationship.

Our conceptual framework combines ideational and domestic elements alongside geostrategic ones without analytically privileging any variable. When applied to the history of the partnership, the framework posits that common ideological affinities among American and Turkish decision-makers are important for the survival of the relationship. The favorability of domestic decision-making environments and the congruency of American and Turkish national interests are also a necessary condition for the advancement of a more fulfilling alliance relationship featuring higher degrees of cooperation.

We identify three degrees of partnership cohesion, corresponding to five macro-periods across the history of the relationship. These cover a spectrum of a “deep partnership,” observable in the early years of the Cold War and from 1980 to 2012; a “limited partnership” to define periods of discursive coordination without practical policy coordination; and a “transactional partnership” at a bare minimum. We note that the concepts we employ to explain the degree of partnership cohesion exist on an ordinal scale to help achieve the analytical goals of the study. The specific terminology was selected to evoke imaginings of American-Turkish relations on a continuum.

The American-Turkish relationship prior to the formalization of the countries’ alliance relations encapsulates the logic of a limited partnership because one can point to a generally positive relationship that did not necessarily translate into any meaningful institutional collaboration. The ideational commonalities among American and Turkish elites in the interwar period offered the way to a more positive relationship, but one that did not initially contain the prerequisite of strategic exigency to facilitate a military alliance.

American-Turkish relations experienced two periods of a deep partnership. The first of

<sup>10</sup> Ole Holsti, Terrance Hopmann, and John D. Sullivan, *Unity, and Disintegration in International Alliances: Comparative Studies* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Recent examples include, Ali Şevket Ovalı and İlkin Özdikmenli, “Ideologies and the Western Question in Turkish Foreign Policy: A Neo-classical Realist Perspective,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 9, no. 1 (2020): 105-126; Oya Dursun-Özkanca, *Turkey–West Relations: The Politics of Intra-Alliance Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Lenore Martin, “Constructing a Realistic Explanation of Turkish–US Relations,” *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 4 (2022): 765-783; Tanrı Oğuzlu and Ahmet Kasım Han, “Making Sense of Turkey’s Foreign Policy from the Perspective of Neorealism,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 20, no. 78 (2023): 59-77.

these, strategic partnership, captures the period in which Turkey and the US became formal allies. American and Turkish elites converged in their ideational preferences, and elites found themselves being able to pursue constructive relations due to favorable decision-making environments. Far more importantly, however, geostrategic priorities ensured cooperative and functional relations across a variety of foreign policy challenges, as well as a willingness to work in tandem on key strategic issues even in instances when national interests diverged. The strategic partnership label applies to much of the American-Turkish relationship during the early Cold War.

The second pinnacle in the Turkish-US partnership took the form of a model partnership. We purposefully borrow this term, which was coined by the Obama administration in 2009 to signal the growing cooperation between Turkey and the US at a time when both sought to project commonly held values to the Middle East and beyond.<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that a model partnership should be construed as a paragon of perfect cooperation and harmony—it was not—but simply to convey that the alliance featured strategic commonalities and relatively fewer domestic obstacles, as well as a strong ontological component in which Turkey's democracy was promoted as an exemplar for the Middle East. Finally, lacking obvious ideational or material commonalities, American-Turkish relations have at times exhibited a "transactional" character marked by a proclivity towards *quid pro quo* arrangements due to the absence of any facilitating factors in the relations.

We divided the breadth of the relationship by assigning an intuitive value to partnership cohesion in each period depending on the observable presence of favorable or negative conditions on both sides. For our purposes, the presence of an overall positive factor is coded as "1," negative ones are coded as "-1," while the absence of any decisive factor either way receives a neutral "0." Values from every category in each period are then added to determine a final value along the range of -3 to 3 (most positive) to indicate the nature of the partnership. Using this scale, we can offer a general assessment about the robustness of the partnership in each period as presented in Table 1 below.

We limit ourselves to several discreet points in time and illustrate our argument by way of drawing examples, analogies, and statements from influential members of the foreign policy elites in both countries from a variety of primary and secondary sources. We have selected five periods: the period from the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations and its aftermath (1927-1945); the first decade following the end of WWII to the military intervention of 1960 in Turkey; the ensuing period up to the resolution of the Arms Embargo following Turkey's intervention in Cyprus (1961-1979); a long era (1980-2012) encompassing the duration of the 1980 military coup in Turkey and its decision to allow for the return of Greece to NATO until the decline of the American-Turkish partnership subsequent to the Gezi Park protests; and the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey covering the final period from 2013 to 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Namik Tan, "Turkish – U.S. Strategic Partnership," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2010): 15.

Table 1. Partnership types and cohesion values in selected years, 1927-2024

Partnership Type	Time Period	Convergence of Geostrategic Interests	Elites' Shared Ideational Bonds	Favorability of Domestic Decision-Making Environment	Overall Value
Limited Partnership	1927-1945	0	1	0	N/A pre-alliance
Strategic Partnership	1946-1960	1	1	1	3
Transactional Partnership	1961-1979	0	0	-1	-1
Model Partnership	1980-2012	1	1	1	3
Transactional Partnership	2013-2024	0	-1	-1	-2

Our framework is distinct in several ways. First, it values the agency of individual actors and decision-makers in shaping the outcomes of the relationship. Secondly, the framework helps to situate changes in Turkish-US relations within the broader global transformations that link foreign policy to changes in state-society relations. Finally, and most importantly, the framework helps to explain why the relationship can simultaneously endure while often being overshadowed by incompatibilities. Differences over geostrategic issues, meanwhile, result in short-term periods of fluctuation in which we can observe a weaker partnership. While our framework broadly identifies partnership outcomes across five relatively long periods, we recognize that it is possible to conceive of additional partnership types and cohesion scores within distinct micro-periods.

#### 4. “Limited Partnership” (1927-1945)

The trajectory of the relationship in this seminal period lends support to our argument that the ideational affinities between the elites of both sides appear to have facilitated a mutually positive outlook and established a basis for substantial commercial and cultural relations. Yet, as we argue below, relations failed to take off due to the absence of a shared geostrategic vision between the two states and the presence of domestic decision-making constraints on elites—in this case, the US Congress.

##### 4.1. Ideational Bonds

This period is exemplary of many of the regularities and continuities that mark American-Turkish relations, suggesting a decisive role for the perceptions and evaluations of prominent foreign policy elites on both sides. While Turkey’s founding elite enthusiastically supported a close relationship with the US, the efforts of figures like Mark Bristol and Joseph Grew, who came to admire many aspects of Turkey and its leadership, developed an appreciation of the vision promised by the nascent republic, highlighting the importance of shared values albeit with some reservations.<sup>13</sup>

Three principles stand out: the new Turkish Republic’s dynamic efforts towards achieving modernization and Westernization, its anti-Communism, and favorable disposition towards eventual democratic governance. The impressions of US diplomats were crucial because they

<sup>13</sup> Waldo C. Heinrichs, *American Ambassador: Joseph C. Grew and the Development of the US Diplomatic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): 384. Grew is an important figure because he had arrived in Lausanne with a lukewarm attitude towards Turks (oriental trope) but was gradually won over, with his time in Turkey being an evident success.

were cognizant of the image of “The Terrible Turk” in the popular Western imagination and sought to disabuse the public of such views. American civil society actors, like Asa Jennings, for instance, noted that “Turkish leaders are most sincere in their efforts to modernize and develop their country.” He observed that because Turkish leaders have failed to advertise their successes, it must fall on their mission to cultivate in the United States a “better understanding ... of the accomplishments of the Turkish Republic.”<sup>14</sup> Ambassador Grew, meanwhile, devoted considerable attention to the breadth and pace of modernization efforts in Turkey. Some American observers were generous in drawing parallels between the American and Turkish Revolutions.<sup>15</sup> Turkey’s relentless drive for modernization and state-building along European lines cultivated a strong appreciation for Atatürk. For instance, Grew would go on to compare the American and Turkish revolutions and even likened Atatürk to George Washington as a courageous leader working tirelessly towards progress.<sup>16</sup> As part of Fox Film’s Movietone, Atatürk addressed American audiences and had nothing but praise for the US as a progressive nation devoted to scientific advancement, highlighting Turkey’s desire to foster friendly relations.<sup>17</sup> The Turkish leadership also found a common cause with the US with respect to upholding the international *status quo* and reinforcing Turkey’s Western character, underscoring Turkey’s inevitable linkages with Europe and the West.<sup>18</sup> Ideational convergence also manifested itself when Turkey became the second country after the US to ratify the Kellogg-Briand Pact.<sup>19</sup>

Grew’s impressions of Turkey’s domestic and foreign policies also indicate a strong convergence of ideas with respect to political organization. One area where these sentiments are expressed relates to anti-communism. While Turkish-Soviet relations were undeniably friendly in the early years of the Republic, and Turkey owed much to the aid transferred by the Bolsheviks, Turkey behaved pragmatically.<sup>20</sup> Grew speculated that Atatürk entertained closer relations with the Soviet Union out of expediency rather than genuine sympathy. As Grew succinctly stated, “Turkey knows on which side her bread is buttered,” and it was natural for Turkey to seek friendly relations with the Bolshevik regime despite abhorring communism at home.<sup>21</sup>

As far as the trajectory of the Turkish regime was concerned, despite Atatürk’s aspirations for a multi-party parliamentary democracy, the Turkish regime failed to achieve such a transition. There was a fundamental tension between these aspirations and realities on the ground. Grew thought the pace of reforms was too fast and too top-down rather than being a result of a natural and grassroots process.<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising that Grew was skeptical of whether Atatürk’s reforms would be embraced by the people of rural Anatolia. His final assessment, nevertheless, expresses both sympathy for the trajectory and the ultimate purpose of the Turkish Revolution.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See, Barış Ornarlı, *The Diary of Ambassador Joseph Grew and the Groundwork for the US-Turkey Relationship* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars and Publishing, 2023), 77-79.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-223, 290-293.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78, 144-145, 229.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-204.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>19</sup> Yücel Güçlü, “The Basic Principles and Practices of the Turkish Foreign Policy Under Atatürk,” *Belleten – Türk Tarih Kurumu* 54, no. 241 (2000): 963.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-168

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-236.

<sup>23</sup> See, Ornarlı, *The Diary*, 247.

In view of the favorable sentiments expressed in the US about Turkey, and particularly its decision-makers, and likewise Turkey's overall positive sentiments towards the US, the relationship showcased ideational affinities. This leads us to identify a positive point in favor of the relationship.

#### 4.2. Geostrategic Interests

While American diplomats seem to have developed unambiguous ideational convictions about Turkey, their assessment of Turkey's foreign policy reveals a general ambivalence largely stemming from Turkey's anomalous position as a state with grievances towards the prevailing international order, but one that unmistakably shifted towards an alignment with the West.<sup>24</sup>

Consistent with Grew's findings, Turkish decision-makers also saw the Soviet Union as a helpful partner that was similarly shunned by European powers.<sup>25</sup> Grew attributed Turkey's signing of the Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union in 1925 as an alignment of expediency. Unlike the Soviet Union, however, the Turkish Republic did not behave like a revisionist power, focusing instead on using diplomacy and working within the boundaries of international law.<sup>26</sup> Turkey primarily dedicated its energies to securing itself against revisionist powers like Italy, restoring its sovereign control over the Turkish Straits, and exploring alliance options.<sup>27</sup> These policies largely coincided with American interests, too. Yet, geographic remoteness, US absence from the League of Nations, and isolationist foreign policy did not facilitate a deeper partnership, leading us to assign a score of "0" on the geostrategic dimension of the partnership.

#### 4.3. Decision-making Context

Early American-Turkish relations were somewhat stunted by domestic politics and civil society dynamics. From the Turkish purview, the one-party government led by the Republican People's Party (CHP), founded by Atatürk, was largely insulated from the rest of society. There was also a great deal of consensus around fulfilling Turkey's immediate foreign policy goals and establishing close ties with the US. It is, therefore, more pertinent to examine the issues from the US perspective. Special interest groups in the US, such as the Committee Opposed to the Ratification of the Treaty of Lausanne (a precursor to the Armenian National Committee of America, or ANCA) and other lobbies, were primarily opposed to a normalization of ties between the US and Turkey. Armenian groups were notably influential in attempting to keep the relations disengaged and blocking attempts to ratify the Treaty of Lausanne.<sup>28</sup>

The US failure to ratify Lausanne remains a sore spot for the relationship even today but was not regarded as such contemporarily as the two countries were able to reach a *modus vivendi* by signing a lucrative trade deal.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, obstructionism in the US was to

<sup>24</sup> See, Seckin Baris Gülmez, "Turkish Foreign Policy as an Anomaly: Revisionism and Irredentism through Diplomacy in the 1930s," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 30–47.

<sup>25</sup> See, Samuel J. Hirst, "Anti-Westernism on the European Periphery: The Meaning of Soviet-Turkish Convergence in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 1 (2013): 32–53.

<sup>26</sup> See, Gülmez, "Turkish Foreign Policy as an Anomaly, 30–47.

<sup>27</sup> Selim Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War: An 'Active' Neutrality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 71–89.

<sup>28</sup> Şuhnaz Yılmaz, *Turkish-American Relations, 1800-1952* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 114.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

such a degree that Congress delayed the appointment of Grew as ambassador to Turkey by a year. Yet, neither the legislature nor societal impulses negatively impacted the inception of the relationship, as the US government often reminded their Turkish counterparts.

In formulating their ultimate national interests, elites from both countries seemed to have lacked the geostrategic expediency but also a sufficiently receptive domestic legislature (US) conducive to a strong partnership in this period. This largely stemmed from the US's relative distance from, and reluctance to engage in, distant conflicts, and its foreign policy elites were primarily constrained by a domestic political context adverse to an activist US foreign policy. Meanwhile, Turkey's elites enjoyed greater flexibility in terms of domestic politics, but fear of revisionist great powers pushed Turkey to prioritize regional friendship agreements such as the Balkan Pact (1934) and Saadabad Pact (1937) signed between a collection of Balkan and Middle Eastern states respectively, none of which alleviated Turkey's security concerns.

Overall, a domestic-institutional convergence score of 0 is once again appropriate. The overall tally in the pre-alliance phase of the relationship suggests a limited partnership with a cohesion score of 1.

## 5. Strategic Partnership at the Inception of the Cold War, 1946-1960

Despite its wartime neutrality, the Turkish leadership gradually aligned with the Western allies, obtaining modest amounts of military equipment during WWII, and finally declared war on the Axis in February 1945 to become one of the founding members of the UN.<sup>30</sup> While geostrategic concerns largely dominated this era, the ideological dimension of the Cold War served to strengthen the ideational bonds between Turkey and the US, especially with Turkey's transition to parliamentary democracy. Yet, this was also a period when nascent anti-Americanism appeared for the first time.<sup>31</sup> Though, these sentiments were hardly influential given the foreign policy preferences of the Democrat Party (DP) government. It would, however, be a mistake to reduce the relationship to a purely military and strategic arrangement, or to attribute Turkish democratization to a fulfilment of American expectations, since democracy was not a *sine qua non* for US cooperation, and Turkey's democratization lay primarily with domestic and leadership factors.<sup>32</sup>

### 5.1. Ideational Bonds

In the immediate aftermath of WWII, the US was yet to share Turkey's concerns *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union. After an initial hesitation at the end of WWII, in 1946, the mood in the US Department of State and the Joint Chiefs of Staff seemed to indicate a growing concern over communist expansionism in Turkey's neighborhood.<sup>33</sup> Since Turkey was the sole country governed by a friendly regime in the region, its loss would have been problematic. Moreover, it would have meant the end of the Westernizing influences and trajectory of Turkey. The death of the Turkish ambassador to Washington, DC, Münir Ertegün, presented the US with

<sup>30</sup> See, Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, 178-179.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Eray Alim, "Turkey's Post-Colonial Predicament and the Perils of Its Western-Centric Foreign Policy (1955-1959)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 58, no. 6 (2022): 972-988; Tuba Ünlü Bilgiç, "The Roots of Anti-Americanism in Turkey 1945-1960," *Bilig*, no. 72 (2015): 251-280.

<sup>32</sup> Nicholas L. Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican Turkey. Memory and Modernity since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 14-18; See, also Hakan Yılmaz, "Democratization from Above in Response to the International Context," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 17, (1997): 1-38; Paul Kubicek, "Turkey's Inclusion in the Atlantic Community: Looking Back, Looking Forward," *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008): 21-35.

<sup>33</sup> George McGhee, "Turkey Joins the West," *Foreign Affairs* 32, no. 4 (1954): 617-630; George Harris, *Troubled Alliance: Turkish-American Problems in Historical Perspective, 1945-71* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public, 1972).



an opportunity to communicate a symbolic show of support for Turkey and other states in the region opposed to the Soviet Union. The deceased ambassador was brought to Istanbul in April 1946 aboard the USS Missouri, the very warship on which Japan had accepted defeat, receiving significant attention and approval from the Turkish public, much to the chagrin of the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> Seeing the developments in Greece and the possible risk that a communist takeover could pose for Turkey and the broader region, President Truman elected to extend a military-economic assistance program to support democracies against authoritarian threats—in this case, Greece and Turkey.

In other words, Turkey's perception as an emerging democracy mattered, and the "American government was smiling broadly on this phenomenon of a freely and democratically elected government in the Middle East."<sup>35</sup> Not only did Turkey transition to a multiparty democracy, as Grew had anticipated, but the Turkish foreign policy elite was also able to communicate its intentions to be a respectable international actor sharing the same values as the US. Writing for *Foreign Affairs* in 1949, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Necmettin Sadak, highlighted the common pacific vocations of both nations, underscoring the urgency of Turkish admission to NATO in view of Stalin's designs on Turkish territories.<sup>36</sup>

The Truman Doctrine was also crucial as it served as a template for the Marshall Plan, which Turkey would also join. Both instruments were readily and enthusiastically endorsed by Turkey's now opposition party, CHP, which was a proponent of Western values and supported an alliance with the US and the newly emerging elites of the DP. The DP's leadership, representing an agrarian elite, sympathized not only with the US as a democratic and anti-communist power, but also with the knowledge that their cooperation would be essential for Turkey to jumpstart large-scale investments as well as infrastructure projects. Adnan Menderes, Turkey's prime minister then, summed up Turkey's position on the US: "Whatever America does by us is all right."<sup>37</sup> Celal Bayar as president echoed the sentiments by expressing his desire to transform Turkey into "a little America."<sup>38</sup>

Turkey's image as a democracy was not recognized without qualification, but this did not work against an ideational convergence among elites. The US appeared skeptical of the democratic credentials of the DP leadership, noting Turkey's stagnant economy and Menderes' rising authoritarianism by the late 1950s. Nevertheless, for example, Ambassador Fletcher Warren enthusiastically endorsed Menderes as a necessary ally and argued that large-scale change would require some degree of authoritarianism.<sup>39</sup> Ironically, opposition members in Turkey and journalists across the political spectrum harangued both the DP government over its perceived monopoly on Turkey's relationship with the US and the US for not being committed to democracy in Turkey, nor in the world at large—a sentiment driven by American support for dictatorships in the third world.<sup>40</sup> The future CHP leader and Prime Minister, Bülent Ecevit, not only pointed to American hypocrisy towards the

<sup>34</sup> Süleyman Seydi, "Making a Cold War in the Near East: Turkey and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945–1947," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 17, no. 1 (2006): 123.

<sup>35</sup> "Interview with Daniel Oliver Newberry, Economic/Commercial Officer, Istanbul Consulate (1952-1956)," in *American Diplomats in Turkey: Oral History Transcripts (1928-1997.) – Vol. I*, ed. Rifat N. Bali, *American Diplomats in Turkey: Oral History Transcripts (1928-1997.) – Vol. I* (Istanbul: Libra Kitap, 2011.).

<sup>36</sup> Necmeddin Sadak, "Turkey Faces the Soviets," *Foreign Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1949): 449–561.

<sup>37</sup> Adnan Menderes quoted in Norman Stone, *The Atlantic and its Enemies: A History of the Cold War* (London: Penguin, 2011), 457.

<sup>38</sup> Malik Müftü, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture: Republic at Sea* (London: Palgrave, 2009), 30.

<sup>39</sup> Bali, *American Diplomats*, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Ünlü Bilgiç, "Anti-Americanism," 272-273.

third world but also drew attention to the democratic deficits within the US, such as the ongoing policies of segregation in the US.<sup>41</sup> These reservations are not surprising considering the US's reluctance to let the 1960 military intervention in Turkey sour bilateral relations, especially when the military offered assurances to the US that there would be a transition back to democratic rule.<sup>42</sup> With or without a full commitment to genuine democratic virtues then, a shared commitment to democratic governance and opposition to communism leads us to assign a one-point positive score in favor of the partnership's cohesion.

## 5.2. Geostrategic Interests

From Turkey's point of view, NATO successfully contained Soviet expansionism in Europe, ensuring a degree of stability. However, the situation in the Middle East was less stable as Britain and France withdrew from the region and pro-Soviet Arab nationalist regimes emerged. Hence, Turkey looked favorably on greater US involvement in the region and energetically pursued a foreign policy designed to bring containment to the region. Turkey was also encouraged by the US to attend the meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement, whose members Turkish leaders thought were naïve due to their decision to promote a third way at a time of intense bipolar competition. In fact, Turkey's close relations with the West and its unwavering support for the US and other NATO allies, including colonial powers like Britain and France, tended to undermine Turkish diplomacy in the then emerging third world.

Turkey's geostrategic importance was not immediately appreciated by US decision-makers in the aftermath of WWII. However, Soviet expansionism in Europe, especially its support for the communist side in the Greek civil war, the blockade of Berlin, its intervention in Czechoslovakia, and Turkey's decision to send troops halfway around the world to defend South Korea against the aggression from the North helped overcome the initial skepticism towards Turkey joining NATO in 1952. For Turkey, an alliance with the US was a panacea to the threat posed by the Soviets and could provide aid to build up its economy, infrastructure, and military.<sup>43</sup> In the words of a longtime observer of Turkey, joining NATO was indeed "Turkey's most important foreign policy change since the 1920s"<sup>44</sup> and came to be considered as a strategic step in anchoring Turkey in the West.

From the US perspective, Turkey, as a friendly status-quo-oriented country threatened by the Soviet Union and occupying an important geostrategic real estate, came to be considered as the most critical country after Israel<sup>45</sup> and a "bulwark" against the Soviet Union.<sup>46</sup> Turkey, moreover, was considered as being essential in consolidating containment by denying the Soviet Union access to the Mediterranean (thanks to its control over the Turkish Straits) as well as limiting its reach in the Middle East.

Yet, despite the apparent convergence of their geostrategic interests concerning the international security order and the Cold War in Europe, both countries had different priorities with respect to developments in the Middle East. Prime Minister Menderes was wary of Arab socialism in the Middle East, which he saw as an instrument that would facilitate the expansion of communism. He spoke against the nationalization of the Suez Canal and supported NATO-

<sup>41</sup> Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican*, 66-68.

<sup>42</sup> Glenn W. LaFantasie, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1958-1960. Eastern Europe; Finland; Greece; Turkey Volume X, Part 2 1958/1960* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1993), 858-859.

<sup>43</sup> Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, 89-90.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>45</sup> Bali, *American Diplomats*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Harris, *Troubled Alliance*, 56.

like alliances, such as the Baghdad Pact and CENTO, for the defense of the Middle East against Soviet intrusion.<sup>47</sup> He followed policies supportive of France with respect to Algeria and voted against Algerian self-determination at the UN in 1954.<sup>48</sup> In Egypt, meanwhile, the Turkish ambassador was declared *persona non grata* in 1954 on account of Turkey's seeming anti-regime attitudes. These were policies that diverged from those of the US that were more lenient towards Nasser's Egypt. Furthermore, the US had worked closely with the Soviet Union to compel Britain, France, and Israel to withdraw from Egypt.

Despite this lack of American-Turkish convergence on the specifics of the containment of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, broader geostrategic commonalities symbolized in Turkey's inclusion into NATO leads us to assign a one-point positive cohesion score for this period. Not surprisingly, this is also the period that often has been referred to as a honeymoon in the partnership.

### 5.3. Domestic Constraints

The subsequent development in the relationship, namely Turkey's close alignment with the US and its inclusion in NATO, occurred under more favorable decision-making circumstances in both countries. The role of ethnic lobbies in the US was subdued compared to before WWII. Meanwhile, Harry Truman's initiative to extend aid to Greece and Turkey, largely expressed in the language of democracy and resistance to communism, was readily approved by Congress.<sup>49</sup> Arguably, Turkey's reputation had also improved considerably. For instance, President Bayar's trip to the US early in his tenure as president was well received by not only the American public but also by members of the Armenian and Greek communities in the US as they helped in preparations for a ticker-tape parade in New York for Bayar.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the newly elected DP and the now-in-opposition CHP displayed remarkable consistency on foreign policy issues, including their Western orientation and preference for an alliance with the US.<sup>51</sup>

Since domestic institutions and political processes favored a fertile ground for continued cooperation in both countries, we ascribe a one-point positive cohesion score on the domestic institutional dimension in this period as well, culminating in an overall partnership cohesion of three points. We, hence, label this period as a strategic partnership.

## 6. Transactional Partnership During Détente, 1960-1979

American-Turkish relations arguably reached their nadir in the 1960s-70s. None of the dimensions under analysis favored a deepening of the relationship. Arguably, Cold War dynamics and NATO barely served as the institutional adhesive for the relationship since American attitudes towards Turkey's security and interests in Cyprus called into question the robustness of the alliance. This was also a period when Turkey's relations with the Soviet Union improved, especially with respect to Soviet-supported developmental projects. Turkey's domestic politics and society also grew into a distinctly anti-American and defiant

<sup>47</sup> Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, 91–95.

<sup>48</sup> Eyüp Ersoy, "Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62)," *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012), 683–695.

<sup>49</sup> See, Dennis Merrill, "The Truman Doctrine: Containing Communism and Modernity," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): 27–37.

<sup>50</sup> Personal correspondence with Seyfi Taşhan, then a member of the Turkish Press Corps and part of Bayar's entourage during his visit to the United States.

<sup>51</sup> See, Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, 88.

stance.<sup>52</sup> Across the political spectrum, the “Western Question” took hold of Turkey.<sup>53</sup>

### 6.1. Ideational Bonds

In this period, US and Turkish policy elites came to view one another with suspicion as fundamental strategic divergences and domestic political factors played a significant part in downgrading the value of the alliance. In Turkey’s case, undercurrents of anti-imperialism and pro-decolonization contributed to anti-American sentiments. Meanwhile, US attitudes were shaped by Turkey’s perceived undermining of Western unity due to the Cyprus issue. These sentiments were further aggravated by the growing sensitivity in the US, especially during the Carter administration, towards human rights and quality of democracy at a time when Turkey was facing domestic instability.

Widespread anti-American sentiments during the late 1960s were driven by opposition to the war in Vietnam around the world and were echoed in Turkey among the left and university activists.<sup>54</sup> Left-wing journalism and student activists expressed a general concern for Turkey’s national sovereignty and sought to undermine what they saw as pro-American right-wing governments of the 1960s and ‘70s in Turkey.<sup>55</sup> Americans were thus depicted as warmongering imperialists who treated Turkey like a client state undermining Turkish sovereignty and interests. Yet, it would be difficult to say that the governing elite was a committed anti-imperialist and anti-American actor. On the other hand, once a suitable international conjuncture appeared, specifically during Détente, in which East-West relations warmed, this elite did not hesitate to promote relations with the Soviet Union and the Non-Aligned Movement, also calling for a reduction of Turkey’s dependence on the US by advocating economic and military industrial self-sufficiency. One striking ideational divergence in this period was Turkey’s decision in 1964 to adopt five yearly economic development plans and import substitution industrialization policies, inspired by Soviet notions of economic management.

The US elites’ ideational disposition, meanwhile, did not seem to directly clash with Turkey. American decision-makers were cognizant of the fact that despite immense pressure from domestic political actors, Turkey was not likely to abandon its NATO relationship. However, American diplomats in Turkey noted concerns about its democracy suffering due to the 1960 military coup, although the perpetrators were adamant about their commitment to NATO as well as their willingness to swiftly restore parliamentary democracy.<sup>56</sup> The unstable period that followed showcased anti-Americanism among student activists and clashes between left- and right-wing groups and Turkish security forces. American diplomats noted that despite its commendable anti-Communist efforts, repressive measures to this end might serve to galvanize pro-communist and anti-American sentiments.<sup>57</sup>

According to our framework, American-Turkish relations in this period exhibited conspicuous divergences concerning ideational matters, hence the cohesion score of 0. American failure to support Turkey’s legitimate security concerns in Cyprus encouraged

<sup>52</sup> Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*; 108.

<sup>53</sup> See, Ovalt and Özdikmenli, “Western Question,” 105-126.

<sup>54</sup> Nur Bilge Criss, “A Short History of Anti-Americanism and Terrorism: The Turkish Case,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 477.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 473-474, 478.

<sup>56</sup> Çağrı Erhan, “ABD ve NATO ile İlişkiler [Relations with USA and NATO],” in *Türk Dış Politikası 1. Cilt* [Turkish Foreign Policy, Volume 1], ed. Baskın Oran (Ankara: İletişim, 2001), 681-715.

<sup>57</sup> Bali, *American Diplomats*, 128-129.

Turkish decision-makers to pursue foreign policy autonomy and improve relations with the Soviet Union. Likewise, anti-American sentiments otherwise, generally limited to various societal groups reached Turkey's foreign policy agenda. From the American standpoint, meanwhile, Turkey's domestic instabilities elicited concerns. Moreover, the US was adamant about signaling opposition to any disunity in NATO as a result of a Greek-Turkish conflict over Cyprus.

## 6.2. Geostrategic Factors

Fears about the Soviet Union ironically undermined American-Turkish relations by creating disunity over security priorities, leading to Turkish interests seeming to be brushed aside in the eyes of the Turkish decision-makers. The Cuban Missile Crisis was, infamously, resolved with a diplomatic backchannel through which the USSR agreed to immediately withdraw its missile installation from Cuba in exchange for the US withdrawing the Jupiter IRBMs from Turkey. While averting further escalation, American willingness to make such a deal with the Soviet Union without consulting the Turkish side infuriated Turkish decision-makers and intensified their fears over abandonment.<sup>58</sup>

While relations were reeling from Cuba, Turks also felt betrayed by the American dismissal of Turkey's core interests in Cyprus. Citing the need to preserve NATO unity, US President Lyndon Johnson sent a threatening and highly controversial letter to Prime Minister İnönü to the effect that should Turkey engage in any unilateral action over Cyprus, it could no longer count on the support of its NATO allies in the event of a Soviet intervention. Objections over Turkey's potential use of NATO weapons against Greek Cypriots strengthened Turkish convictions that Turkey needed to develop military capabilities and relations independent from the US.

Disillusionment led Turkey to explore alternatives and make overtures to the Soviet Union. Ironically, though, pragmatism and realism also pushed the US to concomitantly pursue détente with the Soviet Union, from which Turkey would derive material benefits in the form of developmental assistance as well as securing the tacit neutrality of the Soviet Union in 1974 when Turkey intervened in Cyprus. Not only was the US preoccupied with the Watergate Scandal, but Turkey was able to conclude a second round of military operations on the island. The domestic backlash against Turkey's intervention engendered powerful ethnic lobbies in the US to issue an arms embargo on Turkey, as discussed below. Yet, the embargo did not last long, suggesting that both sides remained keen to sustain the relationship against all odds, hence the assignment of a score of 0.

## 6.3. Domestic Constraints

This period of the relationship is one that witnessed the intense influence of domestic political factors. The Cuban Missile Crisis and President Johnson's letter provoked significant domestic resentment in Turkey across all echelons of politics and society. In response, İnönü had expressed in an interview deep personal resentment and distrust towards the US while alluding to the possibility of distancing Turkey from the alliance, famously declaring that, "A new kind of world then come into being on a new pattern, and in this new world Türkiye will

<sup>58</sup> See, Nur Bilge Criss, "Strategic Nuclear Missiles in Turkey: The Jupiter Affair, 1959–1963," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 20, no. 3 (1997): 97–122.

find herself a new place.”<sup>59</sup> Societal backlash reverberated in daily life from universities to a variety of left-wing and other (violent) political activists. Such activists attempted to kidnap US sailors, assassinate the US ambassador, regularly aired their grievances in protests, and, most dramatically, set ablaze the American ambassador’s car!

Even traditionally pro-American and conservative politicians began raising objections to the US and had to acquiesce to their constituents. Anti-Americanism became a cudgel to be used by opposition elements against ruling governments.<sup>60</sup> Due to a coup by memorandum, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel eventually resigned on account of his inability to govern effectively. His successor, Nihat Erim, appointed by the military, complied with President Richard Nixon's demands to curtail opium production in Turkey.<sup>61</sup> Instituted in June 1971, the ban was controversial and contributed to Erim’s eventual resignation. Ecevit would repeal the opium ban in 1974.<sup>62</sup> Relations would further deteriorate as Turkey intervened in Cyprus in 1974. Conversely, domestic constraints appeared in the US as the rising Armenian and Greek lobbies pushed for an arms embargo to be placed on Turkey.<sup>63</sup>

Since the domestic decision-making environment was unfavorable for both states to promote cooperation, we conclude that a score of -1 is appropriate for this dimension. Likewise, for the breadth of the period, we tabulate a total score of -1 points for the American-Turkish partnership cohesion score, hence why we argue that the partnership was transactional in this period. We note, however, that transactionalism did not undermine the fundamental necessity and endurance of the relationship. The arms embargo, put in place in 1975, would be short-lived. By 1976, the embargo was partially lifted, and it was removed completely in 1978. Kassimeris writes that maintaining Turkey’s military capacity was a conscious desire on the part of the US executive; in this case, the invisible hand of the bureaucracy seemed to favor a close strategic relationship with Turkey.<sup>64</sup> In fact, the positive reorientation of foreign policy in the US towards Turkey in this period can only be explained through the purposeful intervention of foreign policy elites in the US and Turkey.<sup>65</sup> While later developments like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic revolution in Iran served to re-anchor the relationship, the force behind the initial push can only be found in what approximates to a bureaucratic inertia in favor of maintaining the partnership.

## 7. Model Partnership: The Resurgence of American-Turkish Relations (1980-2012)

The final years of the Cold War saw a return to normalcy in the relationship, while the end of the Cold War would pave the way for increased Turkish-US cooperation. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, détente gave way to a period of escalation in American-Soviet relations, also known as the Second Cold War.<sup>66</sup> The strong partnership cohesion

<sup>59</sup> “Turkey Ready to Quit Alliance,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1964, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/04/17/archives/turkey-ready-to-quit-alliance.html>

<sup>60</sup> See, Füsün Türkmen, “Anti-Americanism as a Default Ideology of Opposition: Turkey as a Case Study,” *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 3 (2010): 329–345.

<sup>61</sup> Kyle T. Evered, “A Proxy Geopolitics of Poppies, Peasants, and National Sovereignty: Turkey’s Rhetorical Resistance to America’s War on Drugs,” *Political Geography* 98, (2022): 6.

<sup>62</sup> Baskın Oran, “Relations with USA and NATO,” ed., *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1919-2006: Facts and Analyses with Documents* (Utah: The University of Utah Press, 2010), 422–424.

<sup>63</sup> See, James F. Goode, *The Turkish Arms Embargo: Drugs, Ethnic Lobbies, and U.S. Domestic Politics* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> Christos Kassimeris, “The Inconsistency of United States Foreign Policy in the Aftermath of the Cyprus Invasion: The Turkish Arms Embargo and its Termination,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 26, no. 1 (2008): 91-114.

<sup>65</sup> Seyfi Taşhan, “Turkey and the Atlantic Alliance,” *NATO Review* (1977): 28-31.

<sup>66</sup> See, Fred Haliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (New York: Verso, 1986).

parameters in American-Turkish relations in this period carried over into the post-Cold War period. This was a new and dynamic time for the relationship since neither state would be bound by the constraints of the Cold War. While the US experienced its unipolar moment, so too did Turkish foreign policy endeavor to expand into new vistas by way of moving from geopolitical marginality to centrality. American-Turkish relations exhibited the greatest ideational convergence in this period, and the two countries experienced some of their most cooperative relations since Turkey's early years in NATO—a veritable second honeymoon.

### 7.1. Ideational Affinities

Turkey entered this period in the throes of yet another military coup that sought to purge Turkey of the violent left-right-wing clashes and accompanying instability. The intervention came as a wave of democratization in southern Europe spread and human rights gained prominence in American foreign policy. Fortunately, after a brief hiatus, Turkey returned to parliamentary democracy and embarked on liberalizing reforms with the goal to eventually join the European Communities. In 1987, it applied for membership and extended to its citizens the right to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

The end of the Cold War proved even more auspicious since the US's unrivaled position in global affairs instigated its desire to reform the international order by promoting human rights and liberal democracy globally. Turkey and the US significantly aligned in terms of these goals and found ample opportunities to cooperate, especially during the Clinton administration. Additionally, in close coordination with the US, the Turkish Armed Forces assumed important NATO and UN peacekeeping missions across conflict regions around the world, ranging from enforcing the Dayton Accords in Bosnia to heading a UN peacekeeping operation in Somalia.

The US elites and foreign policy establishment shared and actively supported Turkish efforts to join the EU in the 1990s.<sup>67</sup> Americans urged their European counterparts to be fair with Turkey, advocating progress in Turkish integration pending human rights reforms in Turkey. It was with this conviction that the US supported Turkey's accession to the Customs Union in 1996.<sup>68</sup> The US became an ardent supporter of Turkey's EU membership bid, too. So much so that some EU leaders, like Jaques Chirac, voiced concerns that the US was meddling in EU affairs.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, at a key moment, Clinton's personal diplomacy helped to broker a deal between Prime Minister Ecevit and the EU, paving the way for Turkey to become an EU candidate country at the Helsinki Summit in December 1999,<sup>70</sup> an important development in terms of bringing the US and Turkey towards a shared ideational commonality. This was accompanied by the efforts of the US State Department to convince opposition in Congress to have the 1999 OSCE summit held in Istanbul.

Turkey implemented important human rights and democratizing reforms in the form of Constitutional amendments and the revision of its anti-terror laws. This was also

<sup>67</sup> Nathalie Tocci, "Let's talk Turkey! US influence on EU-Turkey relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 3 (2012): 399-419.

<sup>68</sup> Notable officials from the State Department, such as Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbot, Assistant Secretary Mark Grossman, and ambassadors Mark Parris, Nicolas Burns, and Stuart Eizenstaat "were heavily engaged in constant behind-closed-doors advocacy in favor of Turkey's EU candidacy." See, Tocci, "Let's talk Turkey," 402.

<sup>69</sup> See, Ian Black, Michael White, and Giles Tremlett, "Angry Chirac puts Bush in his place: French president publicly carpets the US leader for pressing Turkey's case for EU membership," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2004, accessed date December 29, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jun/29/eu.nato>

<sup>70</sup> Tocci, "Let's talk Turkey!" 402-403.

accompanied by the liberalization of the Turkish economy, a process that had started in the 1980s and culminated in 2004 with the EU recognizing Turkey as a “functioning market economy.”<sup>71</sup> These developments became reflected in Turkey’s foreign policy priorities. Turkey became more inclined towards building political, economic, and cultural relations with its neighboring regions, showcasing features of a trading state rather than continuing its security-oriented “Cold-Warrior” disposition.<sup>72</sup> Turkey sought to be a bridge between East and West and aspired to present itself as a viable model of economic development and advanced democracy,<sup>73</sup> clearly qualities that strengthened the ideational convergence between the US and Turkey.

Interestingly, Turkey would eventually be presented as a model, not necessarily for its Western character, but as a functioning Muslim democracy. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US’s emerging neo-conservative elite reasoned that democratizing authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world could be a panacea to the root causes of anti-American sentiments and terrorism. By then, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had established itself as the Turkish government and was all too happy to spread the new gospel as it also coincided with its image as a moderate Islamic movement seeking to liberalize Turkey.<sup>74</sup> Taşpınar notes that this was the first time that the US wanted to use Turkey not for its geostrategic qualities but for “what it was.”<sup>75</sup> Democracy promotion and liberalism dominated Turkey’s foreign policy agenda as a projection of Ahmet Davutoğlu’s “Zero Problems with Neighbors Policy.”<sup>76</sup> For Turkey, this would be an opportunity to grow its presence in the Middle East. Arguably, it was this conviction, along with the transformation of Turkey’s elite and institutional makeup, that compelled Turkey to pursue a more activist foreign policy in the Middle East.

Such an agenda also coincided with the US’s efforts to support stability in the Middle East. Upon election, President Barack Obama’s first international visit (after Canada) was to Turkey. Obama, moreover, addressed the Turkish Parliament in April 2009, emphasizing the importance not only of common security concerns in the region, but also of their shared “common values... as democracies.”<sup>77</sup> American-Turkish cooperation reached new heights due to the Arab Spring and the common desire to initially democratize, but later topple, Bashar Assad’s regime in Syria.<sup>78</sup> We can infer a strong ideational affinity between the foreign policy executives of both countries during this period and assign a score of 1 to the 1980-2012 period.

<sup>71</sup> Ziya Öniş, “Turgut Özal and his Economic Legacy: Turkish Neo-Liberalism in Critical Perspective,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no.4 (2004): 113–134; Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, “Turkey Regular Report 2004,” *European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations*, November 27, 2004, accessed date December 21, 2024. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkey-regular-report-2004\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkey-regular-report-2004_en)

<sup>72</sup> See, Kemal Kirişci, “The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 40, (2009): 29-56.

<sup>73</sup> Berdal Aral, “Dispensing with Tradition? Turkish Politics and International Society during the Özal Decade, 1983-93,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (2001): 72–88.

<sup>74</sup> Gerald Knaus, “Islamic Calvinists. Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia,” *European Stability Initiative (ESI)*, September 19, 2005, accessed date June 13, 2024. [http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_document\\_id\\_69.pdf](http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_69.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> Ömer Taşpınar, “The Anatomy of Anti-Americanism in Turkey,” *Brookings Institute*, November 16, 2005, accessed date October 13, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-anatomy-of-anti-americanism-in-turkey/>

<sup>76</sup> Behlül Özkkan, “Turkey, Davutoglu, and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,” *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 132-133.

<sup>77</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama to The Turkish Parliament,” *Office of the Press Secretary*, April 6, 2009, accessed date October 13, 2024. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-turkish-parliament>

<sup>78</sup> Henri J. Barkey, “Syria’s Dark Shadow Over US-Turkey Relations,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (2016): 26.



## 7.2. Geostrategic Interests

Nothing signaled a return to American-Turkish geostrategic alignment after détente than the signing of the Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement (DECA) between Turkey and the US in March 1980. This agreement sought to subsume all existing Turkish-US military aid and defense cooperation agreements under a common framework. The same year, Turkey assented to Greece's return to NATO's integrated military structure. While the two countries did not overtly participate in any joint operations, Turkey was among the countries to support the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan in their struggle against the Soviet invasion. Moreover, Turkey was able to expand its military capabilities through its first-time acquisition of F-16s and, eventually, their co-production locally.

The aftermath of the Cold War could have led to a severe undermining of American-Turkish relations since, without the Soviet Union, NATO no longer had an existential threat to justify its *raison d'être*. Surprisingly, however, NATO would continue to bind the Western alliance together, now under a new mission of intervening in conflicts in or near Europe as an alternative platform for the US to reshape the international order. Turkey, for its part, remained committed to NATO and duly supported its membership expansion. Overall, at least initially, American-Turkish national interests converged with respect to preserving the rules-based international order and committing to the preservation of extant borders and sovereignty. Yet, regional politics constituted a strain on the partnership. Turkey experienced several rounds of tensions with Greece, including the crisis in 1996 over uninhabited islands in the Aegean that brought the two countries to the brink of war. The US was compelled to mediate between the two NATO allies. Furthermore, Turkey in the 1990s fought an insurgency led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that caused widespread human rights violations leading to extensive criticisms in Congress, complicating weapons procurements for Turkey.<sup>79</sup>

However, these issues did not preclude Turkey from participating in multilateral initiatives, such as providing troops for various UN and NATO missions abroad.<sup>80</sup> Turkey was also supportive of the removal of the Saddam Hussain regime in Iraq. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the US was able to forge a coalition to remove the Iraqi army from Kuwait. President Turgut Özal, after overcoming resistance from the military, was able to lend Turkey's support to dislodging Saddam from Kuwait. However, Saddam's defeat culminated in the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq that complicated Turkey's fight against the PKK, straining relations between the two allies. Yet, this strain was repaired when the US assisted Turkey in apprehending the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, in Kenya in 1999 and began to share actionable intelligence with Turkey for its fight against the PKK in northern Iraq in 2007.

American-Turkish geostrategic cooperation was considerable in the 1990s. It would, however, be a mistake to ignore the fact that there were also problems. In the case of Iraq, the lost revenue from sanctions on Iraq was considerable. It was also politically exhausting as successive Turkish governments would have to spend political capital in parliament to pass resolutions extending the US and UK's use of Turkish airspace and Incirlik to continue operations over Iraq. Turkey was also gravely concerned with the US's increasing involvement in conflicts in the Middle East and rising American unilateralism. Perhaps the biggest issue

<sup>79</sup> Şükrü Elekdag, "2 1/2 War Strategy," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 4 (1996): 1-12.

<sup>80</sup> Uğur Güngör, "United Nations Peace Operations and the Motivations that Lie at the Root of Turkey's Involvement," *SAM Papers*, no. 11 (2015): 1-46.

was that the two countries did not develop a common threat perception, even on matters of global terror, which constituted the US's primary security concern after September 11. The fallout from the conflict sowed the seeds for future discord between Turkey and the US as it paved the way for, among other things, greater operational space for the PKK and affiliates.

Despite its unambiguous support for the US and participation in its operations against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Turkey opposed a second invasion of Iraq, as did an overwhelming majority of the international public. Turkey's decision to decline participation in the conflict left a bitter taste among US decision-makers. Bush II would express that Turkey failed to rise to the occasion when the US needed its support the most.

Relations took another severe hit the same summer when the US apprehended Turkish Special Forces members, detaining them with sacks covering their heads. Despite the furor that the incident provoked in Turkey, both sides managed to overcome the crisis and bad feelings. Nevertheless, US involvement in the region and the decision to cooperate with local Kurdish militias and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) were met with hostility. Even though Turkey would become a major stakeholder in the region and develop cordial relations with the KRG, the US could never reassure Turkey to the effect that it had no intentions of facilitating Kurdish independence. Yet, we also identify a strong convergence of material interests between Turkey and the US throughout this broad period, paradoxically despite objections to American unilateralism in the Middle East. This was also the period when in 2009-10 Turkey was elected to serve as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council with US's active support, a first since 1961. Hence, we argue that a 1-point score on the geostrategic convergence dimension is appropriate for this period.

### 7.3. Domestic Constraints

In the 1990s, foreign policy elites in both countries were able to pursue positive agendas toward one another despite some constraining factors. In the US context, ethnic lobbies would attempt to increase pressure on Turkey, pushing for Congress to recognize the displacement and deaths of Ottoman Armenians in 1915 as a genocide. Human rights watchdogs also mounted pressure to reduce Turkey's access to high-tech weapons because of their concerns over human rights abuses in Turkey and the intensification of repressive practices in the early 1990s against the Kurds—a sentiment shared by EU states. Turkish decision-makers lamented the power of ethnic lobbies in the US. While there were domestic obstacles, supportive figures also exerted themselves. Turkey being able to host the 1999 OSCE Summit in Istanbul, mentioned above, perfectly encapsulates this dynamic. The joint chairs of the Congressional Committee on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) wanted the State Department to find an alternative location for the Summit because of Turkey's human rights violations. The Assistant Secretary of State, Mark Grossman, convincingly argued that showing solidarity with Turkey would hasten its democratic reforms. Furthermore, upon assuming the co-chairmanship of the CSCE, newly elected Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a veteran of the Korean war and a Native American, took a more constructive approach than his predecessor, arguing Turkey was valuable as an ally deserving support to remedy its democratic deficits.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, Turkey improving its relations with Israel and winning the support of the

<sup>81</sup> Kemal Kirişci, "U.S.–Turkish relations: new uncertainties in the renewed partnership," in *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Regional Power*, eds. Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişci, (Colorado: Lynne Reiner, 2001), 142–143.

Israeli Lobby offset anti-Turkish sentiments in Congress.<sup>82</sup> From Turkey's perspective, a host of domestic security, economic, and social problems led to a succession of weak coalition governments in the 1990s that pursued a variety of foreign policy agendas ranging from developing relations with the West to fostering ties to the Ummah. There was arguably a silver lining to these issues as Turkey's foreign policymaking came to rest on two additional, and independent from the government, pillars in the form of the largely pro-American military and foreign ministry. These institutions embodied the interests of Turkey's secular elites, focusing respectively on developing relations with the US, Israel, and the EU. Turkey's secular elites surmised that maintaining cooperation with the US and developing relations with Israel would ultimately give them more space for foreign policy maneuvering, including support for countering calls in the US for the recognition of the Armenian genocide.<sup>83</sup>

This formulation functioned well until 2003, when Turkey was called up to participate in the Second Gulf War. Given the mounting resistance to US unilateralism, not only was Turkish society wholly hostile to Turkey's military participation in a US-led conflict, but virtually none of Turkey's principal foreign policy institutions or veto actors took a decisive role in the decision-making. The then-fledgling AKP government failed to pass the March 1<sup>st</sup> motion in parliament, giving the Turkish legislature a rare decisive role on a significant foreign policy decision.<sup>84</sup>

In the meantime, the emergence of the AKP represented the consolidation of Islamists in mainstream Turkish politics, which occurred at the expense of Turkey's secular elites' pro-Western and status-quo-oriented foreign policy. The AKP government reined the bureaucracy by attempting to reengineer the Turkish Ministry of Affairs through hiring practices that favored loyalists and also shifted the burden of foreign policymaking to missionary agencies over which the government had greater control.<sup>85</sup> Having secured a majority in the parliament, the AKP would go on to infiltrate and pacify other veto institutions like the judiciary and the military, resulting in a foreign policy agenda focusing primarily on domestic political priorities.<sup>86</sup>

None of these developments undermined American-Turkish relations. In fact, Turkey was not alone in undergoing bureaucratic transformation. US foreign policy elites traditionally favored a largely pro-Atlanticist disposition, often exercising restraint and generally preferring multilateralism and cooperation with NATO allies during the Cold War.<sup>87</sup> The post-Cold War international system presented US elites with an opportunity to reinforce US leadership and recreate the world in its own image.<sup>88</sup> Crucially, the US foreign policy establishment had

<sup>82</sup> Meliha Altunışık, "The Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement in the post-Cold War Era," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2000): 172–191.

<sup>83</sup> Ersel Aydınli and Onur Erpul, "Elite Change and the Inception, Duration, and Demise of the Turkish-Israeli Alliance," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 2 (2021): 8.

<sup>84</sup> Baris Kesgin and Juliet Kaarbo, "When and How Parliaments Influence Foreign Policy: The Case of Turkey's Iraq Decision," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 1 (2010): 19–36; Samet Yilmaz, "A Government Devoid of Strong Leadership: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation of Turkey's Iraq War Decision in 2003," *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 10, no. 2 (2021): 197–212.

<sup>85</sup> See, Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, "The Sociology of Diplomats and Foreign Policy Sector: The Role of Cliques on the Policymaking Process," *Political Studies Review* 19, no. 4 (2021): 558–573; Berkay Gülen, "Turf Wars in Foreign Policy Bureaucracy: Rivalry between the Government and the Bureaucracy in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 4 (2022): 1–20.

<sup>86</sup> Aydınli and Erpul, "Elite Change," 2, 11–12.

<sup>87</sup> See, Priscilla Roberts, "The transatlantic American foreign policy elite: its evolution in generational perspective," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2009): 163–183. Perhaps the sentiment was shared by the Atlantic Community. See, Ivo H. Daalder, "The End of Atlanticism," *Survival* 45, no. 2 (2003): 147–166.

<sup>88</sup> Straight from the horse's mouth: See, George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A.

been shifting towards a neo-conservative agenda since the 1980s and consolidated itself under the Bush II administration. As discussed above, this group sought to reengineer the Middle East and the broader Muslim world. Within this design, Turkey was showcased as a model democracy that other states should emulate. This provoked the ire of secular Turks because the US legitimized the rising conservative elite by highlighting Turkey's religious identity alongside its democracy while overlooking ontological commonalities like Turkey's Western orientation and secularism. Turkish-US relations would henceforth be placed on an identitarian path shaped by an elite with little memory of the Cold War or cognizance of their common geostrategic interests. The Neocon elites' unilateralism and disregard for the international order they purported to lead, as well as Turkey's growing independent foreign policy in the Middle East, reflect these domestic changes and would have negative repercussions after 2012.

In the post-Cold War period, Turkey-US relations exhibited signs of cooperation despite tensions over local/regional geostrategic issues of significance to Turkey. Ideationally, both countries converged on principles concerning the significance of democracy. The US was congenial and supportive of Turkey's engagement with the West. While domestic politics initially militated against further cooperation given Congressional disapproval and the state of Turkey's domestic politics, the former was pacified by Turkey's improving reputation and its flourishing relations with Israel. In the years to follow, and with the changing preferences of US foreign policy elites and the emergence of a new elite in Turkey, the US began to champion Turkey as a Muslim-majority democracy that could act as a model for the Muslim world. We judge that both states' foreign policy-making environments were amenable to cohesive partnership, hence why we assign a positive 1 point to this dimension. Despite occasional differences in their geostrategic interests, the period spanning the late Cold War until the early 2010s can be described, with a general cohesion score of 3, as a model partnership. After all, this was the period when two US presidents, Clinton and Obama, got to address the Turkish parliament, an unprecedented event suggesting the depth of the partnership. Conversely, Demirel, as President, made four "working visits" to the US, an unusual frequency, and a sign of close cooperation.

## 8. The Present-Day Transactional Partnership, 2013-2024

Contemporary American-Turkish relations are unstable due to ideational divergences and conflicting local geostrategic priorities. Ironically, this period had started off on a strong footing. In practice, however, Obama's model partner approach to relations panned out very differently. As Turkey's commitment to EU-driven reforms weakened, American assessments of Turkey became unfavorable.<sup>89</sup> American support for Kurdish proxies in Syria, of course, constituted the primary source of Turkish gravamen.

### 8.1. Ideational Bonds

It is hard to argue that both sides have diametrically opposed values, yet one can observe a palpable lack of ideational convergence. Anti-American sentiments were hardly new or unique in past decades, but in this period, Turkish public opinion became strikingly hostile

Knopf, 1998), 564.

<sup>89</sup> Ahmet K. Han, "From 'Strategic Partnership' To 'Model Partnership': AKP, Turkish-US Relations and The Prospects Under Obama," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 23 (2010): 77-112.

towards the US.<sup>90</sup> Foreign policy elites echoed these sentiments. Erdoğan, for instance, often highlights the common interests of NATO allies but has regularly repeated the invective that the world is “bigger than five,” often questioning why the US is involved in conflicts near Turkey.<sup>91</sup> Turkey’s decision-makers are not alone in making contradictory remarks, as American and other discourses about Turkey’s standing vary greatly across issue domains. Turkey is a compliant NATO member one day, working with the Russians another, and at other times, an advocate of a foreign policy exceptionalism sometimes labelled neo-Ottomanism that pushes its own regional foreign policy agenda with little coordination with its transatlantic allies.<sup>92</sup> On the US side, it is not unusual to come across commentaries demanding Turkey’s expulsion from NATO. Meanwhile, Trump did not hesitate to threaten Erdoğan with destroying the country’s economy, and the US Congress set into motion Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions on Turkey, clearly practices that are difficult to reconcile with a strong sense of alliance bonds.

American-Turkish ideational convergence, especially over the rules-based international order, is waning. In Turkey’s case, one must note the obvious ideational and discursive shift in Turkish foreign policy. While Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, had presided over a period of excellent cooperative relations with the US, his tenure as Prime Minister was notably less auspicious. Davutoğlu’s Pan-Islamist worldview, fueled by geopolitical theories from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eventually led to Turkey adopting a sectarian and extremist foreign policy. Rather than promoting regional stability or zero problems with neighbors per his Strategic Depth doctrine, Davutoğlu seemed far more interested in promoting a bloc of Ikhvanist states under Turkey’s aegis.<sup>93</sup>

Democracy became another source of divergence. Despite retaining a functional electoral democracy, Turkey’s democratic credentials dipped to a point that its ontological anchor to Western-style democracy is considered to be tenuous.<sup>94</sup> Turkey’s dimming accession prospects fueled resentment towards the EU in Turkey. This dynamic played an important role in Turkey’s slide towards authoritarianism and reversal of the democratic gains of the previous decade, sometimes referred to as “de-Europeanization.”<sup>95</sup> Particularly since 2016, the EU has largely abandoned efforts to encourage Turkey to re-democratize and has opted for a more transactional and less ontological engagement.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Efe Tokdemir, Melike Metintaş, and Seçkin Köstem, “A Multi-Dimensional Evaluation of Turkish Public Opinion towards the United States,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-24.

<sup>91</sup> On the significance of the “World is bigger than five,” See, Kutlay and Öniş, “Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order,” 1094. Erdoğan uttered on October 12, 2023: “Bay Amerika, Amerika nere Akdeniz, İsrail, Filistin nere? Ne işin var senin orada?” [“Mr. America, where is America, where is the Mediterranean, Israel, and Palestine? What are you up to there?”]. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “President Erdoğan: ‘If we do not help Palestine win, the law of the strong and the oppressor will prevail,’” *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications*, December 12, 2024, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-if-we-do-not-help-palestine-win-the-law-of-the-strong-and-the-oppressor-will-prevail>

<sup>92</sup> For a discussion of foreign policy exceptionalism and neo-Ottomanism, See, Lerna K. Yanık, “Constructing Turkish “exceptionalism”: Discourses of liminality and hybridity in post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy,” *Political Geography* 30, no. 2 (2011): 80-89.

<sup>93</sup> Behlül Özkan, “Turkey’s Imperial Fantasy,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2014, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/29/opinion/ahmet-davutoglu-and-turkeys-imperial-fantasy.html>

<sup>94</sup> See, Kemal Kirişçi and Amanda Sloat, “The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West,” *Brookings Institution*, February 02, 2019, accessed date December 13, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-rise-and-fall-of-liberal-democracy-in-turkey-implications-for-the-west/>

<sup>95</sup> See, Senem Aydın-Düzgüt and Alper Kaliber, “Encounters with Europe in an Era of Domestic and International Turmoil: Is Turkey a De-Europeanizing Candidate Country?” *South European Society and Politics* 21, no.1 (2016): 1–14.

<sup>96</sup> Beken Saatçioğlu, “The European Union’s Refugee Crisis and Rising Functionalism in EU-Turkey Relations,” *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 2 (2020): 169–187.

In the case of the US, one could speak of an authoritarian and leader-based solidarity that briefly existed between Erdoğan and President Donald Trump during the latter's first term. However, Biden maintained a distance from Erdoğan, and his decision to exclude him from the Summit of Democracies in 2021 symbolized the deep ideational divergence. Following the Gezi Park protests in 2013, criticisms over Turkey's democracy and rule of law seemed to wax. The attempted overthrow in July 2016 of the Turkish government by the followers of a cult leader based in the US elicited no immediate reaction, unlike Putin who was quick to denounce the attempted coup. This slow reaction raised concerns in Turkey that the US was hedging its bets for a new government and led even to bitter accusations of American involvement, going as far as a minister calling the US a terrorist state.<sup>97</sup> From close alignment as late as 2012, American-Turkish ideational commonalities disappeared; hence we assign a score of -1 in the ideational convergence score in the post-2012 period.

## 8.2. Geostrategic Interests

Turkey and the US arguably maintained strong geostrategic commonalities well into the early 2010s. It soon became clear that a period that began with a joint effort to subdue the Assad regime would experience such a transformation that Turkey would come to prevaricate on Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO, which was in direct contradiction with Turkey's traditional foreign policy practices. It sought, instead, to leverage its position as a veto actor to extract military-economic concessions from the US as well as the two NATO membership candidates. These developments came on the heels of Turkey's decision to purchase S-400s from Russia, throwing such doubt into Turkey's dependability that the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, called Turkey "our so-called strategic partner."<sup>98</sup> On the Turkish side, the US's decision in 2014 to cooperate with the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria to combat ISIS engendered similar reactions. Turkey views these organizations as natural offshoots of the PKK, and continued US patronage is viewed with outright hostility, constituting, perhaps, the most fundamental conflictual issue in the relationship.

Against this background, Turkey's new governing elites' hedging policy aims to avoid overcommitting to what it considers to be an unreliable US, thereby aspiring to enhance its strategic autonomy. The logic of Turkey's strategic autonomy promotes the belief that Turkey is powerful and exercises considerable regional influence, and that it should keep its alignment options open instead of suffering the consequences of entrapment.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps these sentiments are a natural symptom of what appears to be an emerging (lop-sided) multipolarity in which alignments are more malleable and flexible.

Aiding this geostrategic confusion is the attitude of recent US administrations, particularly the Trump administration, which had a restrained attitude towards Russia and dismissive attitude towards NATO compared to the traditional US foreign policy establishment.<sup>100</sup> Given the positive sentiments expressed between Erdoğan and Trump, their common populist discourses, and their predilections for personal diplomacy conducted via non-institutional

<sup>97</sup> "Turkish minister says U.S. behind 2016 failed coup,"

<sup>98</sup> "U.S. Secretary of State Nominee Calls NATO Ally Turkey a 'So-called Strategic Partner'," *Reuters*, January 19, 2021, accessed date December 20, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-secretary-state-nominee-calls-nato-ally-turkey-so-called-strategic-partner-2021-01-19/>

<sup>99</sup> Mehtap Kara, "Turkish-American Strategic Partnership: Is Turkey Still a Faithful Ally?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023): 432.

<sup>100</sup> See, Joyce P. Kaufman, "The US perspective on NATO under Trump: lessons of the past and prospects for the future," *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (2017): 251-266.

channels, American-Turkish relations seemed to align not on geostrategic principles, but more so on a kind of affinity based on strong-man rule.<sup>101</sup>

The Biden administration, meanwhile, has exhibited a comparatively tougher stance on Turkey, but the real noteworthy development is in the return of geostrategic commonalities. Turkey supports NATO expansion, desires the maintenance of the territorial status quo in its neighborhood, and is apprehensive of Russian expansionism. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 acted as a catalyst for renewed Western security cooperation, but American-Turkish cooperation failed to transcend transactionalism. In a break from established practice, Turkey resisted Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO for some time and maintained ties with Russia, all the while denouncing Russian attempts to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. The Biden administration, in turn, displayed willingness to work with Turkey on occasions and managed to reach a *modus vivendi* to ensure Sweden's NATO membership in exchange for greenlighting the sale of F-16s to Turkey. The partnership's cohesion score on the geostrategic dimension is therefore best defined as 0 in this period.

### 8.3. Domestic Constraints

In Turkey, foreign policy institutions traditionally favoring strong relations with the US have been all but severed from foreign policymaking. Turkey's traditional foreign-policy bureaucracy has become far more insulated from potential sources of constraints. In the US, meanwhile, Congress retains its strong influence and has been punitive towards Turkey. Even without Congress, however, the Biden administration's foreign policy establishment evaluated Turkey as an overall unreliable partner. Turkey's democratic regression is a part of the problem, too, playing into the hands of Congress and ethnic lobbies in undermining the relationship. These perceptions bear significance because domestic congressional obstruction appears to be the most pressing issue in the relationship, rather than fundamental divergence of interests. It was Congress's decision to deny Turkey an opportunity to acquire SAMs during the early years of the Syrian Civil War that ultimately pushed Turkey to pursue alternative sources and was the catalyst for Turkey's preference for alternative systems like the S-400, as admitted by Trump.<sup>102</sup> Slapped with CAATSA sanctions because of its insistence on the adoption of S-400s, Turkey was removed from the F-35 program despite being a major contributor and has not been able to muster any support in favor of lifting the sanctions. If domestic decision-making environments did not impede relations at the start of the period, it had become abundantly clear by 2020 that institutions like Congress present the most formidable obstacles. Hence, a cohesion score of -1 is appropriate for the decision-making environment dimension. We conclude that the current period is a transactional one with an overall total partnership cohesion score of -2.

### 9. Conclusion

Like in the aftermath of Turkey's intervention in Cyprus and the Congressional decision to impose sanctions on Turkey, current American-Turkish relations appear to be at an impasse. Given the bleak assessment above, the natural answer to our original inquiry may be that

<sup>101</sup> Mehmet Yegin and Salim Çevik, "From Biden to Trump: Waning Turkish-American Relationship Demands Greater European Engagement," *SWP Comment*, no. 54 (2024): 5.

<sup>102</sup> Cagan Koc and Margaret Talev, "Trump Says Obama Treated Erdogan Unfairly on Patriot Missile," *Bloomberg*, June 29, 2019, accessed date June 21, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-29/erdogan-says-no-setback-on-missile-system-deliveries-from-russia>

the “anchor” is gone! There is, nevertheless, a silver lining: not unlike in the second half of the 1970s, American and Turkish authorities are exploring ways to overcome some of the most outstanding problems in the relationship, such as the S-400/F-35 debacle.<sup>103</sup> There is an unmistakable mutual interest in a *modus vivendi*. Inevitably, our framework suggests *via negativa* the continued functioning of the bureaucratic “invisible hand.” The reason for this is evident: if not any other factor, Turkey’s geographical real estate value and NATO membership supply the invisible hand with a *raison d’être*. In this vein, it will be interesting to see if this “hand” succeeds in assisting both sides to meet the challenges likely to emerge from the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria.

Reducible neither to a geostrategic, threat-based logic, nor to ontological conceptions, the American-Turkish relationship has endured a wide range of international and domestic challenges in a span of almost 100 years. The goal of this research was to revisit the enduring relationship to illustrate the influence of geostrategic, ideational, and domestic politics/decision-making factors and discuss their impact on the relationship at various junctures. These factors help us better understand the dynamics behind the so-called “ups and downs” of the relationship. Even during the honeymoon periods early in the Cold War and then during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the American-Turkish partnership was far less harmonious than is generally assumed. Conversely, we also observed that during periods when there were ideational drift, geostrategic vagaries, and domestic political challenges to the partnership these were cushioned by an entrenched culture dating back to the days of Ambassador Grew. This culture manifested itself among foreign policy decision-makers and elites on both sides prioritizing the preservation of the relationship no matter the countervailing trends. We called this the invisible hand of the bureaucracy, or “bureaucratic inertia.”

Moving forward, with Donald Trump assuming the presidency again in 2025, US foreign policy will likely shift towards a personalistic style that eschews institutional linkages in favor of leader-based diplomacy. This means that even if it may be possible to improve US-Turkish cooperation on matters of common interest, the strength of the bureaucratic inertia will be limited, if not eroding. Moreover, we may expect significant ideational divergences and an ever-weakening of the ontological bonds between the two states since Trump may be inclined to downgrade alliance relations and promote transactionalism with all states at large, not just Turkey! On the other hand, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan may nurture closer relations with China and Russia under the guise of a quest to achieve strategic autonomy. Time will tell whether the steady hand of bureaucratic inertia will still be able to preserve the partnership.

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<sup>103</sup> Laura Kelly, “Congress cheers Biden’s Turkey gambit in Russia tug-of-war,” *The Hill*, September 25, 2024, accessed date October 2, 2024. <https://thehill.com/policy/international/4899653-us-turkey-relations-s400-f35/>



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