

How Trump's Trying To Win Back Turkey

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It should be evident to all objective observers by now that "America First" [doesn't equate](#) to international isolationism or peace. Rather, just as the author predicted in his [Sputnik analysis](#) on Trump's foreign policy right after his election, the 45th President is taking a firm stand against [Iran](#) and [China](#), and even making overtures to Turkey in seeking to tempt it away from the [Tripartite of Great Powers](#) that it's presently a part of together with Moscow and Tehran.

It's this second element of geopolitical grand strategy which occupies the focus of the present article, and it'll be revealed that Trump not only has a few cards up his sleeve, but that he's already playing his opening hand quite well in advancing his country's interests.

Without getting too deep into the background behind it (which is explained in the above hyperlinked article about the Tripartite), Turkey decisively pivoted away from the West midway through 2016 and started to embrace its Eurasian neighbors. This dramatically culminated not only in the [Moscow Declaration](#) of late-December and subsequent [Astana](#) gathering the month afterwards, but even in the [first-ever joint anti-terrorist mission](#) between Russia and a NATO country. The US clearly realized that it's on the verge of "losing Turkey", to use "deep state" parlance, and that something urgently had to be done to rein in its rogue "ally". The Obama Administration's policies towards Turkey - the failed Gezi Park Color Revolution, supporting the PYD-YPG Kurds despite Ankara's objections that they're PKK-linked terrorists, and the [failed pro-American coup attempt](#) - were so disastrous that they seriously risked making the country an American adversary in the near future.

Erdogan is much too wily to burn bridges with the US despite all that it's done in undermining his rule and his country, which is why he has yet to seriously contemplate the "nuclear option" of opting out of NATO and openly disowning his former long-held dream of joining the EU. Ankara has indeed stalled on the latter and was behaving as an 'independent' 'Gaullist' member of the former over the past half a year, but it never did anything to publicly break with either of them, at least not yet. Still, the situation is dire, at least according to the American perspective, which is why Trump's team knew they had to move quickly in trying to win back Turkey. Luckily for them, the US' cyclical change of administrations (especially between rivaling parties this time) gave them the plausible grounds needed for justifying their volte face towards Ankara, and thus far, it appears to be very promising.

Before proceeding, it's important to review the most important points of geopolitical disagreement and potential problems between the US and Turkey. In any given order, they are:

- * The US' hosting of Gulen and patronage of his terrorist network;
- * The US backing the PYD-YPG Kurds in Syria despite Ankara viewing them as PKK-linked terrorists;
- * The unresolved territorial dispute in Cyprus;
- * and Turkey temporarily hosting millions of immigrants per the now-fraying deal which it earlier reached with Brussels.



In response to these four pressures, each of which are driving Turkey's Eurasianist reorientation, the Trump Administration decided to act quickly in making the following moves:

- * Paying [lip service](#) to Erdogan by promising to "take Turkey's request to extradite Gulen very seriously";
- * Officially denying [reports](#) (whether in sincerity or as a Machiavellian lie) that the US sent armored vehicles to the PYD-YPG Kurds, [clarifying](#) that they were given to the Arab members of the Kurd-dominated "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF);
- * Pursuant to the above, [scrapping](#) the SDF-dependent "[Race For Raqqa](#)" from the Obama Era and [inviting](#) Turkey to partake in joint operations on Al-Bab and Raqqa;
- * Jumpstarting Cypriot reunification talks which [aim to achieve](#) the favorable pro-Turkish solution of "federalization";
- * and [seriously discussing](#) the prospect of "[safe zones](#)" in Syria, which would essentially internationalize Turkey's hoped-for "buffer zone" in the north and create a 'dumping space' for the millions of immigrants that it's hosting.

The quickness with which the Trump Administration has sought to win back Turkey seems to have come as a surprise for Russia, which is now all of a sudden reminding the public that – in spite of Moscow [officially acknowledging](#) that "Russia is coordinating both Syria's and Turkey's efforts in Aleppo province, heading off any provocations and clashes between the sides" – the two sides "[still have many differences](#)". This last statement was issued after all of the abovementioned American moves were made and it became obvious what Washington was up to. Even so, Russian strategists and decision makers don't usually resort to overreactions, which is why the reminder of differences was almost immediately followed up by a [separate statement](#) emphasizing that Moscow doesn't believe that Ankara is creating a "buffer zone" in northern Syria.

The whole point behind this "good cop, bad cop" approach is to signal to Turkey that Russia understands what games the US is up to, but is trustingly giving Ankara the benefit of the doubt and not rushing to render judgement on its leadership solely based on the obvious ulterior motives of the American administration. This explains the reminder that both sides have differences ("bad cop", pointing to Russia's acknowledgement that the US is trying to woo back Turkey), but that Turkey isn't setting up a "buffer zone" ("good cop", demonstrating that Ankara and Moscow still trust each other). What's interesting, however,

is that the Russian statement denying Turkey's intentions to create a "buffer zone" was followed by the caveat that "Ankara, just as us, speaks in favor of preserving the territorial integrity of the country and inadmissibility of its partition." This suggests that Russia is equating a "buffer zone" with separatism or annexation, though such a Turkish-desired end could still theoretically and **inadvertently be achieved** by the de-facto "[federalization](#)" contained within the unamended Russian-written "[draft constitution](#)" for Syria.

Although the Russian-Turkish Strategic Partnership is getting stronger by the day, the historic gains of the past six months shouldn't be taken for granted by Moscow. The US is noticeably trying to drive wedges between the two sides in a classic display of divide and conquer, this time declaring that it'll back Turkey in its anti-terrorist operations around Al-Bab while knowing full well that this could possibly set the ground for Washington-Ankara vs Moscow-Damascus if Russian diplomacy isn't successful in preempting this scenario. Moscow needs to be careful that it's not perceived (whether rightly or wrongly) as making 'concessions' to Turkey in northern Syria in order to keep Ankara on its side and away from Washington, as this might fuel speculation that Russia is exploiting Syria's sovereignty as a bargaining chip in gambling for geopolitical gains in the New Cold War.

Whether such a policy would be a masterstroke or a mishap is a separate matter of debate, but the point is that Russia might ultimately be compelled to show 'flexibility' towards some limited Turkish interests in northern Syria if it's to simultaneously protect its rapprochement with Ankara, deflect American advances in trying to turn Turkey away from Eurasia, and promote pragmatic steps in furthering the desire for joint anti-terrorist operations with the US. The strategic situation is therefore extremely complicated and moving at a rapid pace, and the decisions undertaken in the [coming months](#) will be pivotal in shaping the end game to the War on Syria. As Moscow continues to make its chess moves all across the Mideast and tries to bring American strategy there into a checkmate, it would do well to keep an extra cautious eye on Ankara amidst Washington's renewed efforts to woo it back to the unipolar camp, and Russia might even have to countenance throwing Erdogan a few symbolic bones in order to maintain Turkey's loyalty.

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