



DIALOGUE SNAPSHOT

U.S.-Türkiye Relations

**Their Impact on the MENA
Region**

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U.S.-Türkiye Relations: Their Impact on the MENA Region

The evolving dynamics of the U.S.-Türkiye relationship are emblematic of broader shifts in global geopolitics. For decades, the United States has viewed Türkiye as a critical ally, strategically positioned at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. However, recent recalibrations in U.S. foreign policy—marked by a pivot toward countering China's influence in East Asia and addressing the conflict in Ukraine—have introduced complexities to this partnership. The reduction of the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East, alongside a perceived withdrawal of strategic vision in the region, has not only altered the balance of power but also tested the resilience of U.S.-Türkiye ties.

Türkiye's response to this shifting landscape has been proactive yet complicated. Seeking to assert itself as a regional power, Türkiye has expanded its military operations, economic partnerships, and diplomatic engagements in the Middle East and North Africa. However, these actions often intersect uneasily with U.S. interests, particularly on contentious issues such as American support for Kurdish militant groups, Türkiye's procurement of Russian defense systems, and divergent approaches to regional conflicts. These points of friction have strained institutional trust, which has further eroded as both nations centralize foreign policy decision-making within their executive branches, bypassing traditional diplomatic mechanisms.

However, in the past year, the issues complicating the U.S.-Türkiye relationship have shown some progress. The sale of F-16s to Türkiye, and Sweden's ascension into NATO are positive examples of movement on what had been intractable issues in the relationship. The Hollings Center for International Dialogue hosted a dialogue conference in Washington, D.C. in June 2024. The dialogue explored how American attempts at foreign policy realignment toward East Asia has impacted bilateral ties, Türkiye's evolving role in the MENA region, and the broader implications for regional stability. By analyzing key areas of contention and cooperation—such as military coordination, energy security, and Türkiye's balancing act between Russia and NATO—the dialogue sought to understand the opportunities and challenges shaping the future of this complex alliance.



President Trump and President Erdoğan meet during a NATO summit in 2018. Source: [Shutterstock](#).

Strategic Shifts and U.S. Policy Recalibration

Historically, the U.S. maintained a robust presence in the Middle East, with extensive military and diplomatic engagements aimed at stabilizing the region and protecting American interests. However, recent administrations increasingly focused on countering the rise of China and addressing renewed hostility with Russia through the war in Ukraine, leading to a gradual transition of attention away from the MENA region. This recalibration reflected a broader strategic shift, where the U.S. prioritized its competition with China and managed its involvement in East Asia. The reduction in military presence in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan underscored this pivot. This shift had profound implications for U.S.-Türkiye relations, as Türkiye navigated a changing geopolitical landscape with a reduced U.S. footprint in the region.

The dialogue highlighted perceptions of a notable shift in U.S. foreign policy, marked by public statements signaling a pivot away from the MENA region. Despite such statements, the reality on the ground continues to draw in U.S. involvement, particularly through security commitments. However, participants contended that American credibility issues

throughout the region make most diplomatic and security engagements less effective than in previous decades. Yet, despite attempts by successive American administrations to reduce American commitments, too often the U.S. remains unable to extricate itself from regional crises. Participants from both the United States and Türkiye commented that American shifts away from the region remain publicly overplayed and unrealistic. One representative from Türkiye mentioned, “We have been talking about American withdrawal from the region and it hasn’t happened. There are less troops but, there are still troops. And, Americans have significant interests to protect in the region.” Furthermore, one American participant concluded, “The question isn’t really about U.S. withdrawal; we will have military forces in many places. We are not going to withdraw. What we are doing is withdrawing vision and mission in the region.”

The events of the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel and the subsequent aftermath of the Gaza War emphasized the reality of continued significant U.S. involvement. However, participants questioned the limitations of U.S. influence in the region caused in part by the decisions by recent administrations to shift foreign policy priorities. The lack of a clear, comprehensive vision or end state has led to a fragmented approach, where policies are often reactive rather than proactive. This fragmentation is evident in the U.S.’s handling of issues like Syria and Iran, where the absence of a cohesive strategy has led to uncertainties and challenges in forming reliable partnerships. As a result, some policy analysts at the dialogue representing both countries contended that this required the United States to rely more heavily on regional allies toward regional policy responses. An example of this could be seen in the American efforts to secure a ceasefire in Gaza following the dialogue program. While a first phase of a ceasefire agreement went into effect in January 2025, U.S. action alone was insufficient to carry a deal to fruition. The U.S. could not singlehandedly exert influence on Israel to stop military operations. And, it took seven months, the prospect of a new American administration, and the involvement of Egypt and Qatar to reach a deal.

Türkiye’s Strategic Positioning

For Türkiye, even the perception of the U.S.’s decreased engagement in the MENA region presented both opportunities and challenges. Türkiye’s proactive approach aimed to enhance its regional influence as an interlocutor and security guarantor. This included military operations in Syria and Libya, efforts to build stronger economic ties with MENA states, and diplomatic initiatives to address regional instability. Türkiye’s strategic calculus was driven by the desire to capitalize on the U.S.’s reduced influence and expand its role as

a regional power. Some examples cited by participants included the efforts by Türkiye to mediate a Gaza War ceasefire and the 2022 Ukraine grain deal. However, skepticism from some participants remains about Türkiye's ability to be a trusted partner in mediation efforts, particularly given its current foreign policy stances.

For example, Türkiye initially attempted to act as a negotiator following the October 7 attack, given its standing relationships with both Israel and Hamas. However, according to several participants, Türkiye did not capitalize on this opportunity, due to domestic politics and ideological factors. As the conflict continued, Türkiye's diplomatic role diminished, resulting in a shift from neutrality to a pro-Palestinian stance and support for Iran's anti-Israel actions. This resulted in part from key players like the U.S. and Arab countries reluctance for Türkiye to play a larger role. Post-war, Türkiye has expressed a desire to play a significant role in the reconstruction of Gaza, but again, other regional actors seem reluctant to welcome Türkiye's involvement. Despite this, Türkiye has emerged as the second-largest provider of humanitarian aid to Gaza after the UAE, although its initial idea of serving as a post-war security guarantor in the region has diminished.

The participants discussed Türkiye's global foreign policy hedging strategy, where it has attempted to balance its relationships between major powers. Since the outbreak of the Syria conflict in particular, Türkiye has a tenuous, some argued ambiguous, geopolitical stance between major powers in the region, specifically the United States and Russia. Some participants displayed concern about Türkiye's increasing economic dependency on Russia in recent years as Türkiye's economy has struggled. Combined with Türkiye's purchase of the S-400 missile system, many American observers remain concerned that Türkiye may fall into Russia's sphere of international influence. However, participants at the dialogue stressed this is unlikely to be the case by citing several examples. Türkiye currently sells drone technology to Ukraine in its war against Russia. Türkiye's stance on Syria opposed the Russian backing of the Assad regime. Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its military intervention in Libya further emphasize the point that Türkiye's geopolitical aims do not always align with Russia's interests.

However, this expanded hedging strategy came with significant challenges. Türkiye had to manage complex regional dynamics, including its relationships with neighboring states and emerging powers. The dialogue underscored Türkiye's concerns about the American support for the YPG, which Türkiye viewed as a direct security threat. This issue had strained U.S.-Türkiye relations and highlighted the need for more effective policy

coordination and reassurance between the two allies. Participants also highlighted the complexities of the relationship between Türkiye and Iran. The two countries are important economic partners, particularly in energy resources, but even that has become strained in recent years with Türkiye's compliance with sanctions and the halting of oil from the Iraq-Türkiye pipeline. Geostrategically in the region, Türkiye and Iran were opposed in the conflicts in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, but politically aligned on the war in Gaza. Clear lines on policy remain difficult to find as a result.

Impact on Regional Stability

The shifting dynamics of U.S.-Türkiye relations had notable implications for regional stability and the broader MENA region. With the U.S. influence decreasing, Türkiye's increased involvement had the potential to reshape the regional balance of power. Türkiye's actions, from its military operations in Syria to its diplomatic engagements with various MENA states, reflected its goal of asserting influence in a less U.S.-dominated environment.

The dialogue pointed out that Türkiye's involvement in regional conflicts and diplomatic efforts had significant consequences for stability. For instance, Türkiye's military operations in Syria aimed to address security concerns related to Kurdish militant groups, but they also impacted regional power dynamics and relationships with neighboring states. Similarly, Türkiye's diplomatic engagements, including its efforts to normalize relations with Israel (prior to October 7) and its role in regional economic projects, reflected its aim to enhance its influence and shape regional outcomes.

The emergence of new global players, particularly China, added another layer of complexity to the regional dynamics. China's growing influence in the MENA region, marked by investments in infrastructure and economic partnerships, contrasted with the U.S.'s diminishing influence. This shift in global power dynamics influenced Türkiye's positioning. China's increasing presence in the MENA region presented both opportunities and challenges for Türkiye. On one hand, Türkiye could leverage its own economic and strategic partnerships to balance the influence of emerging powers like China. On the other hand, Türkiye has to navigate the competition between global powers and address the implications of China's growing economic footprint in the region.

The dialogue highlighted that Türkiye's strategic positioning was influenced by these emerging dynamics, as it sought to balance its interests with the broader regional trends.



Recent negotiations between the US and Türkiye, such as Sweden's ascension into NATO, were seen by participants as positive steps towards better policy alignment. Source: [Shutterstock](#).

Türkiye's proactive approach to regional issues reflected its desire to maintain and expand its influence amidst a changing geopolitical landscape.

U.S.-Türkiye Relations and Policy Coordination

The dialogue underscored the importance of effective policy coordination between the U.S. and Türkiye. Despite the shifts and challenges, participants noted both nations share core interests, such as anti-terrorism and regional security. The discussions revealed that successful coordination and collaboration were essential for managing shared interests and addressing common challenges.

The disconnect comes not from understanding each side's capabilities, but rather a lack of understanding on intentions and priorities. Several participants noted that the events of the past 15 years have eroded decades of institutional trust between the two countries. Some of that erosion stems from the changing nature of foreign policy construction in both countries. Participants noted that in the U.S., aspects of foreign policy have shifted away from the State Department to the White House or other executive institutions.

Similarly, in Türkiye, foreign policy ideation has shifted from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the President's Office. This bypasses established diplomatic links. Participants contended that this makes the U.S.-Türkiye relationship less predictable and more reactionary.

During the course of the dialogue, participants from both countries underlined some of the issues that need to be addressed between the two countries. Some of these issues remain points of contention, but others highlighted could be opportunities to continue recent trust-building momentum.

Syria and the YPG: The participants identified Syria and the YPG (People's Protection Units) as one of the most challenging issues in U.S.-Türkiye relations. The U.S. support for the YPG, which Türkiye views as an extension of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a designated terrorist organization, continues to strain relations. Participants noted the changing security focus in the region by the United States from ISIS to other regional concerns suggest that there may soon be some movement on this impasse.¹ At the time of the dialogue, support for Kurdish militias had already been deprioritized by the Biden administration. Participants noted that support may continue to wane regardless of the outcome of the U.S. elections. Participants supported this notion by outlining the perspective of Syrian Kurds, who feel disappointed by the Biden administration's lack of engagement in pushing for a peace process.²

S-400 Purchase: The purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system by Türkiye was highlighted as a critical sticking point for the United States. While the issue remains unresolved, there was a sense that it has become somewhat muted in bilateral discussions, though it still poses an impasse to U.S.-Türkiye defense cooperation. The purchase is still cited as a primary reason for Türkiye's removal from the F-35 project.

Military Cooperation: Despite the challenges at the diplomatic level, there was recognition of the importance of maintaining strong military-to-military relations.

¹ Author's note: The dialogue occurred prior to the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024. It remains to be seen how Türkiye will act when it comes to the Kurdish-controlled region in Syria's northeast. Furthermore, it remains to be seen how the incoming Trump administration will alter American support for the YPG or Syria as a whole.

² Further note: Following the dialogue in November 2024, representatives of the ruling AKP and MHP coalition signaled efforts to restart stalled peace efforts with the PKK. This is a reflection of internal political priorities in Türkiye and not necessarily regional geopolitics.

Participants noted this institutional relationship, both bilateral and through NATO, remains positive. The potential for improving these ties through increased cooperation and training exchanges was discussed, with a focus on rebuilding trust through direct military cooperation. The future of the U.S. military presence in Türkiye, particularly at Incirlik Air Base, was a point of concern for some participants. The ongoing construction of a U.S. base in northern Greece was mentioned as part of the broader strategic considerations in the region, as it would provide NATO with alternatives for forward regional deployment. Participants recognized that both the U.S. and Türkiye need to adjust their frameworks to address current security challenges.

Mediterranean and Energy Security: Türkiye's claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and its pursuit of underwater energy exploration were discussed as key issues affecting regional security. The potential for cooperation between Türkiye and U.S. allies in developing natural gas resources in the Mediterranean was considered as a way to enhance economic security and stability in the region. Such cooperation could create an improved security relationship with other European allies, and serve as a trust-building exercise with the EU. Participants from both sides noted that the United States could play the role of mediator in any disputes.

European Security and Türkiye's Role: The discussion also touched on the broader European security architecture and Türkiye's role within it. The challenges faced by the EU in working with Türkiye, particularly due to political straitjackets imposed by certain member states, were noted as areas where the U.S. could potentially play a facilitating role.

Future Directions and Implications

The trajectory of U.S.-Türkiye relations will be pivotal in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the MENA region in the coming years. Both nations must navigate a web of interdependencies, competing interests, and regional uncertainties while finding common ground to sustain their partnership. Despite recent strains, there remain several avenues for realignment and collaboration that could yield benefits for both nations and the broader region.

Türkiye's ambition to act as a regional power in the MENA region is evident in its proactive military, diplomatic, and economic initiatives. However, its dual strategy of deepening ties

with non-NATO actors, such as Russia, while maintaining its NATO commitments, poses significant challenges. The U.S. and Türkiye must work collaboratively to align their strategic goals, particularly in areas like counterterrorism, energy security, and the stabilization of conflict zones such as Syria and Libya. Ensuring Türkiye's NATO alignment and addressing mutual security concerns, including Ankara's apprehensions over the YPG, will be central to avoiding further fractures.

For Türkiye, the challenge lay in maintaining a stable and predictable environment while navigating the complexities of regional and global dynamics. This involves a continued focus on policy coordination with the U.S., managing relationships with other regional powers, and addressing both security and economic challenges. Türkiye's role in the MENA region was shaped by its ability to adapt to shifting dynamics and leverage opportunities amidst a changing geopolitical environment.

Participants emphasized that, for the United States, the perceived withdrawal of U.S. interest in the MENA region has contributed to policy fragmentation and reduced influence. For the U.S., maintaining a balanced presence—both diplomatically and militarily—will be essential in ensuring stability while addressing shared challenges such as terrorism, regional conflicts, and economic insecurity. By working with Türkiye as a regional partner rather than merely a subordinate ally, the U.S. can enhance its credibility and effectiveness in the region. Participants from both countries were hopeful that the transition of U.S. presidential administrations in early 2025 will provide an opportunity to reset regional approaches and redefine policy alignments with Türkiye.

Ultimately, the future of U.S.-Türkiye relations hinges on a shared commitment to dialogue, mutual respect, and pragmatic policy alignment. Both nations have much to gain from strengthening their partnership, particularly in an era marked by evolving global power dynamics and rising regional instability. By addressing core issues of contention, building on recent positive developments and leveraging shared interests, the U.S. and Türkiye can reshape their relationship as a cornerstone of stability in the MENA region. Achieving this will require vision, patience, and sustained effort from both sides.

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The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations around the world. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Türkiye.

To learn more about the Hollings Center's mission, history and funding:
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