



CENTER FOR THE
NATIONAL
INTEREST



Türkiye and the Problem of an 'America First' Foreign Policy

Joshua Yaphe, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, Center for the National Interest

September 5, 2025

Contents

● Getting Attention in Washington	3	● The Opposition is Weak	6
● Erdogan is Indispensable	4	● The Future of the AKP	7
● Setting a New Agenda	5	● 'America First' Foreign Policy	9

Executive Summary

President Erdogan is having a moment. The political opposition is disorganized, militant Kurdish groups are offering to disarm, Syrian refugees are returning home, and everyone is looking to Türkiye to help provide regional stability. Erdogan now has three years until the next election to burnish his legacy, and shore up the reputation of his political party, which has an uncertain future should Erdogan leave the scene.

This would normally prompt a serious discussion in DC about the need for foreign assistance, joint exercises, and a strategic dialogue. However, the only space available in the foreign policy debate in Washington right now is for countries that pose a critical national security threat or a massive economic investment opportunity. Türkiye is a perfect example of the many countries that do not fit easily into that America First agenda. Considering Türkiye's strategic importance to the United States, this should prompt the administration to reconsider some of its basic assumptions about how America engages with the world.

Getting Attention in Washington

For decades, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has reveled in grand-standing about his country's leadership of the Muslim and Arab worlds. This has routinely prompted commentators in Washington to remark about a [neo-Ottoman revival](#), a [strategic competition with Israel](#), and an [emerging Islamist alliance](#) against the West. The policy recommendations have oscillated wildly between condemnation for human rights abuses and proposals for a closer bilateral relationship, occasionally featuring a [mix of both](#). Much of this was unnecessary and overblown melodrama by both his supporters and his critics. Strip away all the rhetoric and you find that Erdogan is simply a man with a gift for retail politics. He is just as comfortable maneuvering within the party rivalries on the national stage as he is giving his stump speech out in the countryside, which is rare. It is to his credit that he has acted swiftly and decisively in response to a series of crises that might otherwise have destabilized his country, including conflict in several neighboring states, massive flows of migrants into Europe, several earthquakes, and a pandemic.

Türkiye's star is now in the ascendance. The last year has seen a dramatic shift in the structural factors that impact Turkish diplomacy and security throughout the Middle East, from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) voluntarily offering to lay down arms, to the roadmap for peace in Azerbaijan and Armenia, to the retreat of Iran's malign influence in Syria. It has created the

conditions for Erdogan to finally achieve his ambitions. Namely, to become an indispensable partner and a proactive force for change in the region. And it has led to something of a hushed silence in Washington, almost as though there is a tacit acceptance in the Trump Administration of Türkiye's essential role, but also a cautious hesitation about venturing closer bilateral ties. Rich Outzen has best expressed this growing awareness in Washington of Türkiye's [importance](#), the [nuanced](#) understanding of its role in the region, and the [uncertainty](#) about how to proceed.

The Trump Administration is focused on deal-making with tangible outcomes that benefit the American people. In that regard, Türkiye cannot offer billions of dollars in high-tech investment in the United States or key skills needed for a multilateral Artificial Intelligence initiative. The Administration seeks alliances that can help advance American interests in the strategic competition with China. But Erdogan is unlikely to abandon long-standing plans for Turkish-Chinese economic cooperation, including the [middle corridor](#) of the Belt-Road Initiative. Ultimately, the next three years will likely be much as we see it now, with Türkiye playing a key role in any U.S. engagement with the Middle East, but never assuming center stage. That is to the detriment of the long-term relationship. But there is no other way to discuss Türkiye, or so many other countries like it, as long as America First priorities dominate the policy debate in Washington.

Erdogan is Indispensable

For the United States, for China, and for Russia, Erdogan now fills in the gaps where the great powers lack the influence, the ability, or the desire to affect an outcome of peace and stability on their own. Türkiye recently increased its [armed presence](#) in Mogadishu to backstop and train the Somali military, which is part of a long-term commitment that involves infrastructure investment, [oil exploration](#), and [diplomatic mediation](#) with Somalia's neighbors. Ankara recently welcomed [Saddam Haftar](#) for discussions on military training, joint exercises, and support for Turkish claims to maritime exclusive economic zones, in a pragmatic move to diversify its relationships in Libya beyond the Government of National Accord. Erdogan has welcomed outreach from Armenia as part of a [larger settlement](#) of the conflict with Azerbaijan, which helps expand Türkiye's influence in the Caucasus. Türkiye has spent [over a decade](#) building closer defense and security ties to Pakistan, with military training and equipment sales that have onward benefits for other Turkish allies, [like Azerbaijan](#).

In turn, Ankara is demonstrating a willingness to collaborate more closely with the Great Powers, in ways that can reduce friction in the international order. The deal with Rosatom to build the Akkuyu nuclear power plant leaves the Russians responsible for construction, fuel delivery and waste management, while granting Russia a long-term concession for [owning and operating](#) the facility and the Turks locked in to fixed purchasing rates for 15 years. Türkiye has been a key player in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, brokering a



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 2021

Image: Alessia Pierdomenico / Shutterstock.com

series of dialogues and prisoner swaps, yet receding into the background whenever the United States or other Europeans prefer to [assume the lead](#). It is far from the [situation in 2019](#), when Erdogan attempted to purchase both the Russian S-400 missile defense system and the American F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft, though Erdogan is now indicating he may yet again try to have it [both ways](#).

With the fall of the Asad family in Syria and Israel's thrashing of Iran and its proxies over the last year, Türkiye is now an essential partner for everyone interested in establishing a new regional order. The 12 Day War between Israel and Iran left an uncertain situation in which Iran still [affirms its right](#) to nuclear enrichment, the international community is hinting at a [snapback](#) of full sanctions, and [cyber attacks](#) continue apace under threat of a [resumption of hostilities](#). The transitional government in Damascus

appears eager for international recognition and willing to assert its independence from Iran, but unable to extend [full sovereign control](#) over its own territory in a peaceful reconciliation with the country's diverse population. The multiple rounds of Turkish-Israeli talks hosted in Baku earlier this year were probably just the start of what will be a long process of direct and indirect attempts by many different players to broker side agreements between the two sides. Türkiye is the bulwark helping to prevent Syria's fragmentation – a situation that would probably be in no one's interests – and Israel's guarantor that Damascus does not return to being a state-sponsor of terrorism.

Image: Sebastian Casteller / Shutterstock.com



Kurdish Village of Cizre in 2015, after the Last PKK Ceasefire Broke Down

Setting a New Agenda

Erdogan has the freedom to maneuver at will in this evolving regional landscape, because he is rapidly removing a series of long-standing domestic challenges to the state and his personalized style of rule. After months of political delegations visiting the prison on Imrali Island, Abdullah Öcalan publicly called for the PKK to [lay down arms](#), and a group of PKK fighters held a [press event](#) in northern Iraq on July 11 where they destroyed their weapons. The mainline Kurdish political party has been instrumental in welcoming the process. Even Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the far-right party and a key supporter of the negotiations, has proposed the idea of appointing a [Kurdish Vice President](#) as a means for national reconciliation.

On the face of it, this appears to be a far different affair from [previous reconciliation attempts](#) over the last quarter century, which critics often held up as cynical ploys for Erdogan to crack down on the opposition and extend his rule. It may end up in a [new constitution](#) to replace the current document that was the product of the 1980 coup, which is something all political parties have called for, even if each has a slightly different idea of what it would entail.

And Erdogan is the fortunate beneficiary of other prevailing winds. The Turkish Ministry of Interior has announced that [411,649 Syrians](#) out of an approximate total of 2.5 million living in Türkiye have returned home to date, with the numbers accelerating in recent weeks. Next year, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party will celebrate its 25th anniversary, and

he is ushering in the celebrations with an outline for a new “Century of Türkiye” reform agenda. In addition to such broad but vague calls for a green and digital transformation, the [program](#) includes populist proposals for taxing the rich and rent stabilization, attracting Turks abroad to repatriate their skills homeward, and getting Turkish soccer into the Champion’s League.

Image: Tolga Ildun / Shutterstock.com



Republican People's Party (CHP) Rally, 2023

The Opposition is Weak

Above all, Erdogan is blessed with a [divided and dis-oriented](#) opposition, a situation that appears likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the opposition in 2023, chose to compete for the presidency despite polls showing that he was the least likely of the three leading candidates to beat Erdogan. He ended up losing [four ballots](#) in a year, including the leadership of his own party, resulting in a disillusioned base of opposition support and a new party leadership struggling to emerge from his shadow. The [comments on X](#) in response to his poetic musings on political affairs are scathing, and even if many of them are simply pro-government trolls, there is an underlying feeling throughout that the opposition under Kılıçdaroğlu’s leadership inadvertently extended Erdogan’s tenure in office.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former Prime Minister and AKP chairman who resigned government in protest over Erdogan’s assumption of presidential powers, was once considered a credible rival taking a principled stance against his former boss, but he has since receded into the background. The most likely opposition candidate to challenge Erdogan, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, is on trial and facing jail time for several offenses, meaning he can really [only endorse](#) future candidates for president.

For what it’s worth, the current chairman of the main opposition party, [Özgür Özel](#), has almost the exact same approval (41.5) and disapproval ratings (53.4) as [Erdogan](#) (43.9 and 53.9), according to Metropoll

surveys conducted in April 2025. And there are [polls](#) that show a [large majority](#) of the public is fed up with the Erdogan era, in part because of the prevailing sentiment that the government has [no viable plan](#) for solving the country's economic woes. But the real issue, as [Mehmet Ali Kulat](#) and other Turkish commentators have noted, is that most disillusioned Turks would rather stay home than go to the effort of showing up on election day and pull the lever for an opposition in which they have no confidence.

Image: paparazza / Shutterstock.com



Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, 2025

The Future of the AKP

Perhaps the new Century of Türkiye reform agenda will usher in a new era of jobs, skills, and hope for the entire country, as Erdogan parlays his regional influence and international partnerships into foreign investment at home. It seems far more likely, however, that he will continue to trade in his political capital for a chance to go after the opposition and entrench the AKP in single-party rule for yet another generation. Almost every day there is a new round of arrests with [conspiracy charges](#) for treason, opposition politicians [switching parties](#) (with rumors of threats and coercion), or ever-expanding [corruption probes](#) that ensnare high-rising young opposition politicians.

Minister of Foreign Affairs [Hakan Fidan](#) is the most obvious beneficiary, as he meets with world leaders and basks in the glow of Türkiye's regional power and international influence. His background in the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) puts him in good stead with the security services. There are lots of rumors circulating online that he could be Erdogan's [anointed successor](#), and there is now a full-length book on Fidan's mindset and formative years by veteran journalist [Caner Taspinar](#). Of course, a lot can happen between now and 2028.

But there are problems for the AKP as a whole, which cannot simply be solved by rejuvenating its leadership and promoting [Millennials](#) like Ahmet Büyükgümüş and Ahmet Mucahit Arınç. The AKP's stewardship of the economy is one. According to a [Metropoll](#) survey from April, 71.8 percent of respondents felt that the national economy has been managed badly, including

43.5 percent of respondents who voted for AKP in the 2023 election cycle. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's [Turkish Youth Study 2023](#) found that 80.6 percent of respondents felt the country's economic policies were unsuccessful, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's [Youth Study Türkiye 2024](#) found that 58.7 percent of respondents had a moderate to very strong desire to move to another country for more than six months.

Another problem is that of nostalgia. As columnist and author [Osman Ulagay](#) has noted, in the early days of the AKP the party was able to turn out dedicated volunteers who sought nothing more than the chance to help bring about a more just and prosperous society. [İsmail Kılıçarslan](#) goes one step further, writing that Erdogan's most ardent supporters have no interest in planning for a post-Erdogan era and no desire to see the younger ranks of the AKP become part of that future. Nostalgia is a powerful thing. It can sustain a person through many hardships. But it is like an overdraft account that the owner keeps writing checks against, despite the lack of funds. People will withhold their criticism out of respect for the past and their memories of it, but at some point a line is crossed and then there is no restraining what follows.

If the institutions themselves – not just the AKP but the government as a whole – cannot find a way to adapt and transform to meet the challenges of today, they will face a hard reckoning. For example, the fertility rate now [hovers around 1.5](#), which has prompted the government to declare this the Year of the Family, though the types of cash incentives for having more babies that the Turkish Government now allows haven't led to long-term improvements [in other countries](#).

'America First' Foreign Policy

That being said, what is this strange thing we call the U.S.-Türkiye bilateral relationship? Under any other administration, we would talk about forming a strategic dialogue, offering foreign assistance, creating new visitor exchange programs, and encouraging Turkish participation in more multilateral forums, not to mention the usual joint military exercises, defense sales, and intelligence sharing. This is a key ally, a member of NATO, on the cusp of what could be an important period of peace and stability for itself and its neighbors, if given a little help from its friends.

But this administration is different. And rightfully so. There are so many reasons why the current White House would not want to move beyond a transactional relationship with Ankara, and each one is perfectly valid:

- 1) We cannot want a better future for Türkiye than then Turks want for themselves. The government has to make a serious investment in programs that will help build an economy for the 21st century before the United States can join in with its own form of economic and technical support.
- 2) We cannot push for democratic reforms thinking that all cultures and societies want to be like America. Some Turks genuinely want change, but many of them also appreciate that Turkish politics can be rough and [they expect their parties](#) to engage in some rather mean and ugly tactics in order to win.

- 3) We cannot expect that American outreach will produce different Turkish foreign policy outcomes. Erdogan will surely welcome American military sales and other forms of assistance, but neither he nor any successor government is likely to abandon China or engage with the region any differently as a result of U.S. incentives or conditionalities.
- 4) We cannot be in the lead engaging on Turkish policies that primarily impact others. Ultimately, it is the Europeans, the Israelis, and the Arab Gulf states that have to work with Türkiye to protect and promote their own interests.

Accordingly, the next three years will probably proceed apace, with a quiet respect for Turkish influence and power in the region, a sincere effort to consult Türkiye on any policy move that might require Turkish support, and a push for others to cooperate with Türkiye so that America does not have to be directly involved in every regional crisis. The administration wants to expand the [Abraham Accords](#) to Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states, and surely that will require Ankara's assistance in convincing its regional neighbors to participate.

For isolationists or "restrainers," it is enough. And for interventionists, there is little to argue in favor of immediate dividends that might pay out from boosting the relationship. There will be a new President in the White House in 2028. It is possible that there may even be a new President in the White Palace (the Ak Saray). When that happens, both sides may wake up and realize that there are a lot of lingering issues

that need to be addressed. But for now, America First reigns supreme.

And yet, this presents a question, not just for Türkiye but also for the many other countries in the world that do not pose a critical national security threat or a massive economic investment opportunity. It was one thing during the election campaign for the Republican candidates to have a debate about funding Ukraine, and another thing during the run-up to the 12 Day War to feud over support for Israel. Those, too, were litmus tests within the GOP for a person's commitment to the America First agenda, eventually leading to a [brief and bitter fight](#) over what American First means and who gets to define it. But in both instances, the issues at stake involved billions of dollars in military equipment for conflicts that have the potential to drag the United States into war.

Rather, Türkiye is a matter of long-term, strategic planning. Small, cost-effective forms of U.S. engagement today could have a major impact on the country's future and the attitude of a new generation toward America and the West. There are dozens of countries around the world in that situation, but Türkiye's situation right now presents a unique set of circumstances. Somewhere within the Trump Administration there must be someone willing to make the case for that type of active engagement with the world. Even if it means re-considering some basic assumptions about the utility of foreign assistance, civil society programming, and public diplomacy. And even if it is treated only as a rare exception to the rule of an overall America First foreign policy.

About the Author

[Joshua Yaphe](#) is a Senior Fellow at the Center for the National Interest and was a Senior Analyst for the Arabian Peninsula at the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. He has a PhD in History from American University in Washington, DC, and is the author of [Saudi Arabia and Iraq as Friends and Enemies: Borders, Tribes and a History Shared](#), currently out in paperback through the University of Liverpool Press. In 2020, he was a Visiting Fellow at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, and from 2022 to 2024 he served as a visiting faculty member at the National Intelligence University. His latest book, [Time and Narrative in Intelligence Analysis: A New Framework for the Production of Meaning](#) (Routledge, 2025), is available for free in an Open Access online edition.

The opinions and characterizations in this piece are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Government.