

Sudden shifts in Turkey's relations with the US

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During a phone conversation between Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Donald Trump on 14 January, a preliminary plan to establish a 30 km-wide safety zone in north-eastern Syria was agreed. This is to allow for the settlement of the situation after Trump's unexpected announcement of the decision to withdraw US troops from Syria, where they had been cooperating with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the core of which is made up of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Ankara sees the YPG as the Syrian branch of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and treats the Kurdish para-state as its main threat from the direction of Syria. Just the day before, via the social networking site Twitter, Trump had openly threatened to launch a trade war on Turkey if it attacked Kurdish forces.

Commentary

- Although the Turkish-American relationship is strategic in nature, regular tensions have arisen between the two countries over the last two decades. Most recently these disputes have revolved around US support for the Syrian Kurds, which Turkey treated as a strike against its territorial integrity; the problem of the rule of law in Turkey (the case of an imprisoned American pastor); and the protection granted by the US to Fethullah Gülen, whom the authorities in Ankara accuse of standing behind the failed coup of 2016. Since last autumn there has been a visible recovery and clear attempts to improve relations have been made. Ankara used the case of the journalist murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to strengthen its position in its relations with Washington. At the same time, Trump announced the decision to withdraw US troops from Syria, which was received in Turkey as a step taking its interests into account; also, Trump offered to sell Turkey Patriot air defence systems (which for Ankara would be an alternative to purchasing the Russian S-400). However, these conciliatory gestures were interwoven with threats from both sides, including a US threat to strike at the Turkish economy (the example of possible effect of it were US sanctions last year which brought about the Turkish currency crisis).
- Turkey is determined to continue the fight against the Kurdish para-state in north-eastern Syria, and has planned a military operation there, independently of the US's declarations that it will withdraw its support for the Kurds. The 'Euphrates Shield' (2016) and 'Olive Branch' (2018) operations, in which the Turkish army removed the forces of Islamic State and the YPG from the area of north-western Syria directly adjacent to the border, show that Turkey has the capabilities to carry out similar activities in north-eastern Syria, and

will consistently pursue such a plan.

- The proposal to create a common security zone was as unexpected as the earlier declarations of the withdrawal of US troops from Syria. Ankara has received it positively, because it allows Turkey to implement what it sees as its minimum plan, namely to remove the YPG from its own borders, and to exploit the pro-Turkey Syrian opposition. However in the long-term, this plan cannot be implemented without a Turkish-Kurdish confrontation. The most important Kurdish cities of Kobani and Qamishli lie right by the Turkish border. Turkey cannot afford to let them remain in Kurdish hands, and in the case of a confrontation with Turkey, the Kurds themselves will inevitably turn to the patronage of Syria or Russia.