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**Biden s Turkey challenge**

Like multiple foreign policy challenges in countries such as Afghanistan, China nad Russia, another key challenge for the incoming Biden administarion will be how to deal with a more assertive Turkey under Erdogan.

In recent years, Ankara has pursued its own foreign policy objectives via various military offensives in Syria, provided assistance to Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia, has been in confrontation with Greece, Cyprus and the EU, and particularly has shown no restraint over drilling rights in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

The most significant and thorny issue that has affected Turkey-US bilateral ties is Ankara’s purchase of Russian S-400 defence system, ignoring all US threats. Whether or not to impose the US Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) will be a tough test for Biden. While Turkey was severely pressurised by the Trump administration not to go ahead with a military deal with Russia, Trump also repeatedly refused to enforce the said sanctions despite multiple calls from Congress and State Department officials’ threats to Turkey.

Following the purchase of Russia S-400 components, the Trump Administration announced in July 2019 that it was “removing Turkey from participation in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program”. Hence, there is also the possibility that the new US administration could impose sanctions or some kind of arms embargo on Turkey as it did in the 1970s on the Cyprus issue.

Historically, Turkey has mostly remained a key US ally. Outside Europe, it was the only nation that received US aid under the Marshall Plan aimed for the reconstruction of war-battered European countries. Turkey was provided $137 million from 1948 to 1952. The 1950 Korean War also played a key role in bringing Turkey and the US closer as the former sent about 4,500 military personnel under the US command. In terms of troops, Ankara provided the fourth largest number of soldiers following the US, Britain and Canada. Because of Turkey’s vital support in this overseas military mission under the US command, the latter fully endorsed Ankara’s membership to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato). Consequently, Turkey became an important member of Nato in 1952.

It has been appropriately pointed out that, unlike Israel or Greece, Turkey did not have any domestic constituency in Washington to lobby for it but despite that it emerged a key country in the cold war theatre due its geo-strategic location as it was situated at the fulcrum of three distinctive regions comprising Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

During the cold-war period as well as during the two Iraq wars and in the US-led ‘war on terror’, Turkey sided with its Western allies and reaped the dividend in the form of US economic and military aid as well as getting access to US defence arsenals. According to data obtained from USAID, from 1948 to 2008, the US provided a total of $30 billion in economic aid and over $40 billion in security assistance.

Similarly, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Turkey has purchased military arms worth $57 billion from 1950 to 2019, out of which the US alone has delivered Turkey arms worth about $34 billion. It is more than half of the amount that Turkey has purchased from all other countries together. These figures indicate the significance of Turkey for successive US administrations and policymakers.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, Turkey’s geopolitical importance decreased for a while. At the same time, there was a brief period of the end of the honeymoon era in the Turkish-US relations. However, the first Gulf War once again proved Turkey’s geostrategic significance. It would not have been possible for the US and its allies to successfully conduct military operations without the military and intelligence support provided by Turkey.

Hence, Turkey’s vital role during the Gulf crisis once again ensured US policymakers who had their own acumen, pertaining to “Turkey’s enduring strategic importance”. Because of Turkey’s contribution in the Gulf crisis, President Bush paid an official visit to Turkey in 1991. The aim of the visit was to offer his country’s gratitude for Turkey’s pivotal part in the US-led military campaign against Saddam Hussein. It was the first visit of a US president to Turkey in more than 30 years as Eisenhower was the last president who had travelled to Ankara in 1959.

However, Turkey did not offer much assistance to the US and its coalition forces in the Second Gulf War. In October 2003, the matter was brought to the Turkish parliament to decide whether to send its troops to Iraq or not. During the voting, the Turkish parliament voted 358 to 183 to respond positively to the US request for about 10,000 Turkish troops to help contain the rising wave of insurgency in Iraq following the ouster of Saddam. Although the US offered billions of dollars in loans to Turkey, it decided not to send its security forces to Iraq because there was a strong objection from the Iraqi side. Although Turkey declined to send its troops to Iraq, it allowed US flights more than 4,000 sorties over its territory into Iraq.

Because of unabated civil war and instability in neighbouring Syria and volatility in Iraq, Turkey has been hosting over 2.5 million refugees from war-ravaged Syria and over 200,000 from Iraq. Turkey criticises the role of the international community, particularly the US-led coalition forces which are largely responsible for the destruction in these countries. The US and EU countries have not been able to provide sufficient support to Turkey to bear the costs related to hosting such an unprecedented influx of refugees.

In addition to the above issues related to the role of Turkey in Syria and purchase of the latest weapons and defence system from Russia, there is another set of issues that has become contentious between the two countries in recent years. These issues include the Eastern Mediterranean tensions with Greece and Cyprus, evading US sanctions in dealing with Iran, matters regarding democracy and human rights violations, Erdogan’s highly critical stance towards Israel and sympathies with Hamas and the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. There has been increasing divergence between the two countries on these matters.

Although Turkey established diplomatic and trade relations with Israel long ago, the Zionist state has been consistently chastised by President Erdogan by highlighting human rights abuses by Israel against Palestinians on various international forums including at the UNGA. It is believed that Ankara has been tacitly supporting Hamas. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and some other members of the Congress were openly critical of the conduct of the Turkish government when the regime decided in July this year to reconvert Istanbul’s iconic Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque. It must be mentioned here that the building had been built as a church in the 6th century and was transformed into a mosque during the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century. However, the mosque was designated as a museum in 1934, following Turkey’s declaration to become a secular republic.

In sum, all these issues have become major points of concern and have caused some kind of estrangement in the Turkey-US relations in recent years and will be an additional headache to the new US administration.

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