Virtual Event | Turkey’s Role in the Ukraine Crisis

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………2

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Mike Doran:

Hi, I'm Mike Doran. I'm the director of the Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East at Hudson Institute. And it's my honor and pleasure today to host three internationally recognized experts on Turkey to have a discussion with us about the role that Turkey is playing in the Ukraine crisis.

Joining me today is Svante Cornell. He's the director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute here in the Washington, DC, and Colonel Rich Outzen. He's a geopolitical consultant and analyst in the private sector, but he's also a former career military officer. And finally, last but not least, Sinan Ülgen. He's the director of the Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies in Istanbul. And he's a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe. All three of my guests have years of experience in Turkey. Of course, Director Ülgen is himself a Turk. Rich Outzen and Svante Cornell are both fluent in Turkish. And I can't think of a panel that is going to be better placed to help us understand the complexities of this moment.

Let me start with you, Sinan, if I may. Could you just set the stage for this discussion? Could you just give us the view from Ankara. And when I say the view, can you widen the aperture and talk about this, not just in terms of the bilateral relations between Ankara and Kyiv, but also the wider context of Turkey's relationship with Russia, with the United States and any other major factors that you think are significant as President Erdogan tries to decide what to do in this crisis?

Sinan Ülgen:

Yes. Mike, thank you very much for the invitation. It's a pleasure to be here. Let me try to give you in terms of how I see the general overview or context of how things are seen from Ankara's perspective. Firstly, this crisis is a very unwanted crisis sitting in Ankara. You don't want to be compelled to choose between Ukraine and Russia. And the reason is, Turkey has a particularly complex, often difficult relationship with Russia. But at the same time, this relationship matters to Turkey on different levels. Firstly, on a diplomatic level, Turkey has learned to work with Russia in different theaters and particularly in Syria. With the Astana Process, Russia is a critical partner in trying to manage the very difficult situation in Idlib. Then there's also the experience over Nagorno-Karabakh, which are Kyiv and Russia ultimately work together.

So Turkey does not want to undermine these other areas of diplomatic engagement with Russia by seeming to have sided firmly and exclusively with Ukraine. But the opposite is also true. Namely, Turkey has also a burgeoning relationship with Ukraine that's been carried by the dynamic with regard to defense industries. There's a burgeoning corporation there. Turkey has been selling armed drones to Ukraine. And President Erdogan confirmed that Turkey would continue to do that. And therefore Turkey values the relationship with Ukraine as well.

Now, on top of that, Turkey has been firmly on the same line as the other members of the alliance because politically speaking, Turkey refuses to acknowledge the presence of Russia and Ukraine. It values the territorial integrity of Ukraine. It does not recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea. So on all of those counts, Turkey has been very clear in terms of its political position.

So in view of all that, it's a real delicate balancing act that is required of the Turkish government. And so far, I think the diplomacy that Ankara undertook tends to confirm this. When Erdogan went to Kyiv, he confirmed Turkey support for Ukraine. He confirmed that Turkey would continue to sell armed drones,
but at the same time, he appealed for a diplomatic settlement of the problem. Turkey certainly does not want any sort of military escalation because of this political context.

But also because Turkey stands to be one of the countries that is likely to be most affected by such escalation scenario, there's a lot of talk about Germany, the impact that this crisis may have on Germany, particularly through the energy channel if the Nord Stream 2 project is suspended, but the second country that is likely to be affected most negatively was likely to be Turkey. On a different number of counts, economically Ukraine and Russia are countries that top the list of tourists that come to Turkey. So there's a tourist angle. There’s the economic angle. These are also export markets for Turkey. There's the energy angle, especially if there happens to be sanctions that would be reciprocated by a Russian blockade of energy supply.

And finally, even though Turkey has been politically singing from the same tune as its NATO allies, what it has not done for reasons that I’ve tried to explain is to follow the sanctions policy towards Russia. So the U.S. has sanctions, the U.S. sanctions on account of the illegal annexation of Crimea and Turkey as discussed has been critical of this, but it has not implemented the same sanctions as its other allies because it needs Russia on other theaters.

So that sort of escalation is also unwanted because then there would be, at least that's Ankara's calculus that there could then be increased pressure on Ankara to also apply sanctions against Russia, firstly. And secondly also, pressure to reinterpret the provisions of the Montreux Treaty of 1936 that regulates the crossing of the Turkish Straits in a way that would make also the relationship with Russia much more difficult.

So it is in this context that Turkish policy makers look at the Ukraine crisis, but so far the position has been to firmly re-assert the provisions of international law, though Turkey recognizes the territorial integrity of Ukraine. And even under these difficult conditions, the Turkish position has been to continue to supply arm drones to Ukraine. And that's certainly much more than we can say compared many other NATO allies, including Germany.

Mike Doran:

Well, thank you. Svante, I'd like to turn to you right now and let me start from the last point that Sinan made in comparing Turkey to Germany. It's really quite striking to me because here in Washington we've been treated for a few years to a lot of rhetoric on Capitol Hill and elsewhere, even sometimes inside the government to Turkey being a Trojan horse of the Russians in NATO.

And then when it comes to crisis, we see that yes, Turkey's carrying out a delicate balancing act with regard to the Russians, but it's also taking some very, very clear positions that put it on the opposite side of what I think is a very sharp divide between the West in general and Moscow, selling drones being the most dramatic example of that. And let me just put that in a little bit of context, the Turkish drones destroyed Russian weaponry in the last year and a half, two years in Karabakh, in Idlib, and in Libya and especially the route of the Armenian army in Karabakh which was carried out not exclusively, but significantly by rocket drones that Azerbaijanis got from Turkey. That must make Vladimir Putin very, very uncomfortable.

And when I look at this bloc that Turkey... the micro alliance that Turkey has put together with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, I'm thinking that maybe we should think of Ukraine as part of that
alliance and to see it as a significant counterbalance to Russia. Is that the way you would read the
geostrategic map?

Svante Cornell:

Well, Mike, thanks for the question and thanks for the invitation to join you to talk about this. I think it’s
a very important subject because there have been many differences between the United States and
Turkey, primarily in regards to issues further south and the previous situation of Turkish foreign policy in
the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean. But I think what’s become very clear over the past several
years is two things. First, how Turkey is emerging as a counterbalance to Russia in many areas, including
in the Middle East, but also that there is a big difference in how Turkey behaves or rather how Turkish
behavior in the Northern Theater compared to the Southern Theater, if you will, and how that relates to
foreign policy.

The problem in Washington is very often to try to keep two things in mind at the same time. We may or
may not agree with some of Turkey’s foreign policy actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the
Middle East. But when we look at what’s happening in the Black Sea region and the Caucasus and
Eastern Europe, it’s a completely different picture in terms of how that aligns with U.S. foreign policy.
And I think that’s very important.

Your question is whether there’s a regional block. There might be one in the making. I’m not convinced
there is one quite yet. What I think is absolutely clear is that Turkey is emerging as an independent force
in regional geopolitics and in regional conflicts across the Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The
interesting part is that unlike in the past, Turkey’s stance does not follow anyone else. It doesn’t follow
the U.S. or Russia or Iran. Like you pointed out in your introduction, there is a tendency to view Turkey
as part of something, but I think increasingly Turkey is its own power, its own force. And in some
situations, its interests align with one or another of the other powers. Like I mentioned, Turkey has
clashed with the U.S. in the Eastern Mediterranean, for example, or in Syria. It clashed with Russia in
both Syria, Libya, and in the Caucasus. It clashed with the Saudi-led bloc, and Egypt and Libya. And it’s
clashed with Iran as well most lately in the Caucasus.

I think the big question is, is Turkey strong enough have to build a block of its own? And I think that
remains to be seen. We have to remember that there are very serious domestic issues that factor into
how Turkey can project power, the economic situation of its own, the political instability, the deep
unpopularity of Erdogan right now, all of these are very issues that mean that we have to take
everything with a grain of salt. But I think what’s begun to happen in which I believe is almost
independent of who is in power in Turkey because we’ve tended to personalize Erdogan with Turkey and
I think we shouldn’t do that, that’s a different question.

But what I think is going to remain whether or not Erdogan stays in power, or if there’s somebody else in
power in Turkey is that there is now a Turkish-Azerbaijan alliance, which is the most salient new feature
of the geopolitics of the Caucasus. You mentioned Georgia, that Georgia would be a logical part of this
relationship, and I think it could well be. The building blocks are in place there for cooperation between
Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, there are trilateral summits and so on. But Georgia is led by a mercurial
oligarch who follows a policy I would say of accommodation with Russia while paying lip service to the
countries in Western orientation. Part of the political base from Mr. Ivanishvili’s government is
[inaudible 00:14:37] which in Georgia means being skeptical to Turk and Muslim partners. I think a more
pragmatic future government in Georgia is very well could well be a natural of a Turkish-led bloc, but we’re not there quite yet.

Now, as for Ukraine, the same process that we’ve seen happening in the Caucasus seems to be going on in the Black Sea with Turkey emerging again, as the strongest counterbalance to Russia, I think in Eastern Europe today. But I’m not sure Turkey is willing to go all in Ukraine. And I think there is key difference between the Karabakh conflict and Ukraine. In the case of Karabakh, in spite of Russia’s closed relationship with Armenia, Mr. Putin and his friends were ambivalent on what to do because they recognized that Azerbaijan was the most important power in the Caucasus and did not want to alienate Azerbaijan, which meant that there was a certain level of toleration for what Azerbaijan wanted to do and did with Turkish help.

This is not the case in Ukraine, which means that if you are going to totally make a form of a bloc or alliance with Ukraine, you are going to directly challenge Russian interest. And I’m not sure that Turkey is ready to do that. I’m also not necessarily sure that anybody in Turkey would like Ukraine to be such a clear member of your bloc because Ukraine is a difficult country to deal with in many ways.

Now, if talking about a bloc, and I would end on this is, I would urge you to consider the Organization of Turkic States. This is what was Turkic cooperation has been there for many years, but it was upgraded just a last year to the Organization of Turkic States where unlike in the past, Uzbekistan is a full member. Kyrgyzstan is an observer member. Hungary is an observer in this cooperation as well. It’s far from being a regional bloc, but is definitely a vehicle for Turkish influence in a much broader area. And it signifies a much bigger shift, I would say in priorities in Turkish foreign policy.

We're no longer in the period of the Middle Eastern adventures of let's say 2010 to 2015, which didn't turn out very well for Turkey and where Turkey was not on the same page as the United States. If we see a Turkey that continues to put its primary emphasis on areas of the north and east, I think we have a completely new situation in terms of how Turkish and U.S. interests align. And I think definitely the question for the United States as the U.S. is increasingly unwilling or unable to be directly present on its own in Central Asia and the Caucasus is how Turkic cooperation and Turkey's role in these areas is to play and if should be a priority in U.S. policy, but I think others, maybe Mr. Outzen could speak about that.

Mike Doran:

Thanks, Svante. I'm going to come back to all of you about this question of the Organization of Turkic States and also the possibility of the United States aligning with it. But right now, let me move to Rich. And let me ask you if you could just give us the view from Washington as both Sinan and Svante have pointed out that the Turkey's been going its own way in the last few years. And that that doesn't mean that it's with anyone else at all. It's just developing a very strong sense of its own independent interests. As United States pulls back from the greater Middle East, however, that raises the question as to whether Turkey's independent interest in these issues can be effectively used by the United States to protect its interests.

I wonder if you could give us your sense. And as I ask you this, let me just tell our viewers that you served just recently in the State Department. You've been out I guess for about a year if I'm not mistaken, but so you're someone I think who's extremely well versed from the inside on what the
tensions are between Russia and Turkey. So can you explain to us as President Biden is looking out in the White House at this Ukraine crisis, he sees the potential Turkey is a counterbalance, but also some of the difficulties of working with Turkey as a counterbalance to Russia. How do you see the U.S. thinking through these issues and how would you advise it to think through these issues?

Colonel Rich Outzen:

Sure. Well, thanks, Mike, and it's great to be here with you. And Sinan and Svante, very distinguished panel and a great mission that you're engaged in with your new center. The bottom line up front is that I am reasonably and surprisingly positive towards how Biden has handled the bilateral relationship with Turkey. I thought that starting it off with breaking that taboo on designating or in publicly speaking of the events of 1915 as a genocide in the U.S. government's term probably was not the tone setter that you would have looked for. But the funny thing is, we're in this era where both on the right and on left in Washington, people recognize that a certain degree of retrench in U.S. foreign policy is necessary. I won't say we've exhausted ourselves with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We can throw Libya in there as well.

But there's a general recognition that this post-Cold War era of a decade, better part of two, where we tried to directly re-engineer strategic balances in the Middle East and Europe and other places failed. And it failed at the cost of American lives and treasure. Now, that doesn't mean that we're all as isolationist and small America thinkers now. There are still many who see great value in managing the alliance network and sustaining American primacy in an era of multipolarity.

But I think that this is the first, well, we'll say the Trump administration in its own way as well, they've come to grips with the fact that we can't manage this all directly. So we're going to have to make some reassessments and we're going to have to make some pragmatic decisions. And I have seen pragmatism in how the Biden administration, despite some elements within it that are very anti-Turkey and reflexively slow on democratic issues, on humanitarian issues, in some parts of the world on lobby or ethnic interest group-based issues. There is a big anti-Turkey sentiment. Such has it always been though that part's not new. And my Turkish friends know of course, that Turkey has, as you've stated an image problem in Washington.

One of my Turkish friends was doing research of the early years of the revolution that established the independent Turkish Republic at the close of the World War I, and there was an interesting correspondence, I think was Kâzım Karabekir and one of the other leaders that said "oh my goodness, we've just heard from Washington. God, the Congress really hates us." This was in 1920, 1921. And I think we have to take the long historical view on that, which by the way, I think we're coming up from the depths that we hit maybe in 2015, '16, '17, but that still is nowhere near as bad in my view as it was in '74. In '74, Congress sanctioned Turkey over opium, even before the peace operation in Cyprus. This was a time when there was a popular cinema. So Midnight Express and so forth that was explicitly anti-Turkish in the United States. There was a time when Turkish diplomats were being killed in the United States and terrorist acts against Americans in Turkey were not unheard of as well.

So we let's take the long view on this, it's not as bad as it has been, but we're in a cyclical pattern. The other historical bit of context I think is important here is how Turkey views itself. A lot of Americans came to view Turkey through the lens of 80s and 90s NATO membership. And we had a very close convergence of interest. But in many ways, this was driven by Turkish weakness. And I would say over
the long scope of Turkish history, the devastation wrought by the first World War and the series of wars leading up to that, the Balkan Wars and so forth, the need to re-industrialize and implement Atatürk's reforms led to a period of real weakness in terms of Turkish reform policy. It was maybe dropped from where it had been a great power as the Ottoman Empire, not even to a middle size power. Turkey was very much punching below its weight. It was a small power in terms of its sway over international events.

Well, that's changed clearly. Changes in the Turkish economy, demography, working out some dialectics within the Turkish body politic and how secularism and piety balance, these sorts of things, but more than anything else, economic reforms that restored Turkish economic dynamism have pushed Turkey at least back up into the league of middle size powers while a middle size power does not behave like a small compliant NATO ally. So Turkey within NATO cannot be viewed in the same way that say a Belgium or one of the smaller countries is. Of course, it's going to have its independent foreign policy. And again, thus has it always been.

So what we've seen though, and I'm going to riff off the Organization of Turkic States comment here is that Turkey does not want to be dominated by Russia or China or any other bloc anymore than it wanted to be dominated by the United States. So what I see going on here is a cobbled together by Turkey of other powers that are threatened by external hegemons. And that could include an Azerbaijan and a Georgia, obviously a Ukraine, and it wants at all costs in my view. And this is something I think that all sides of the political spectrum and Turkey agree with to support the sovereignty and self-defense capabilities of other countries that might be threatened by the great power hegemons.

So Turkey's role in what's been called Great Power Competition, and I think the Pentagon's now calling it Strategic Competition, is as the ultimate buffer zone. And to have a strategically, we'll call it semi-non-aligned, maybe a grouping of states that don't want Russia to come in and fill spaces that frankly the United States doesn't care enough to fight over. In many cases, I think is a very valuable role. And by the way, it's performing this role in Africa, as well many places where the United States is not engaging with both and Turkey is engaging, and that can be a hedge against Chinese hegemony and control of that area as well. So it's an interesting and a complex role.

Now, it does imply a possibility for convergence. I am concerned that Washington may not see the opportunity though, because as you know, there's different levels of looking at foreign policy. There's the unitary actor or rational actor model where everything follows a common logic and we all assess by the same criteria and then execute. That's not really how the U.S. government works. The organizational rivalries and bureaucratic politics. And frankly, our very constitutional design that says public interest groups, ethnic lobbies being among them, have a say, they get a say through Congress.

So we have this wonderful key to unlock some of the tensions with this F-16 deal that you've probably paid attention to, or the Turks have requested to purchase 40 new F-16s and to upgrade 40 additional. And this would both close a capability gap as some of their F-16s age out in the next five to 10 years, but also solve some of the damage done by the F-35 expulsion. It would make money for Americans and it would provide an important capability for Turks. This would be great for NATO. And then last week-

Mike Doran:
Sorry, one second, Rich, and can I just stop you for a second and just add a little context to what you just said for some of our viewers who may not have been following this really, really closely? So President Erdogan made a deal with President Putin and he bought S-400s, an air defense system from the Russians. In response, the United States sanctioned Turkey and expelled Turkey from the F-35 program that premier next generation fighter jet program, which was a huge blow to the Turkish arms industry. In response, then the Turks have come back and said, "okay, we're out of the F-35, let's upgrade the F-16 program." And the F-16 program which has been the centerpiece of U.S.-Turkish military cooperation, I don't know since when, but for quite a long time.

Colonel Rich Outzen:

2002 roughly.

Mike Doran:

2002. And now there is opposition to that and they want to throw Turkey out of the F-16 program. And that then would be... Well, let me just ask you, what blow would that represent to U.S.-Turkish military cooperation?

Colonel Rich Outzen:

So the good news on this is that it's by no means a done deal, 50 members of Congress having signed a letter saying don't give Turkey F16s is an expression of the sense of the mood in parts of Congress. But there's really only four members of Congress who matter in this because arm sales that are recommended by the executive branch really have to clear four hurdles, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, and the ranking minority member, and then House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman and ranking minority member. None of whom signed the letter and none of whom have come out against.

However, because there has been, according to press and insider rumor, a defacto embargo on any major arms sales to the Turks for several years now, it will take President Biden pushing. He will have to push on Robert Menendez, for instance, in order to get this across the transom. So question A is, will it happen? I think there's still a fair chance of it. 1B, what if it doesn't happen? Well, this is a relationship that has had as ups and downs, and we have been in a down and we have an op opportunity to get back to an up. I don't think this would drive us to a new down, so to speak, in the cycle because the Turks are pragmatic and they have their own fifth generation or quasi fifth generation fighter, the TFX.

One of the reasons they're so close to Ukraine is because Ukraine's defense industry is very good at engines, both for UAVs and for helicopters and potentially for jets of this type. So Ukraine as technical defense technology partner is critical to Turkey weaning off its dependence on the U.S. for these sorts of things. Because Turkey is far less dependent now on American military hardware than it was say 10 or 15 years ago, it won't be a death blow to U.S. relations if we don't sell F-16s, but it'll make U.S. look a little silly every time we try to get Turkey to partner on anything geopolitically.

Now, look, the Brits have played it differently. The Brits in several other countries and NATO have partnered very closely with Turkey. So Turkey's not going to swing virulently anti-western, but they will
certainly hedge against the United States if we continue doing these sorts of things where there is no carrot, there are only sticks.

Mike Doran:

Thanks, Rich. I do want to come back to Ukraine, but all of your comments have taken us to wider view of the region and taking I'm going to send to central Asia, all the way from Europe through the Middle East to Central Asia. So let me just stay there for a moment and let me put to you Sinan, if I may, a proposition, and because I personally putting all my cards on the table, I agree with every word that it Rich said about the potential of this, I don't know if I want to call it a Turkic bloc because this is such a far flung geographic area that the area represented by the Organization of Turkic States. They have vastly different interests. They're not at all connected in hard power terms and so on.

But clearly they do all share, as rich said, a desire to be independent of the Russians and the Chinese, and are working together in that context. And I think Svante mentioned as well, that Hungary is an observer member of the organization. It strikes me as rich said, that if you're looking at this from the American point of view, and you start from the premise that the United States, whether we have a Democrat in power or a Republican, the United States is going to be pulling back from this region.

The way my mind works is I say, "Okay, our number one goal is that Russia and China don't become hegemons in Eurasia. And that there isn't a Russia-Chinese alliance that dominates you Eurasia." And then I say, there should be a network of states that are working to assure that that doesn't happen. How could we possibly put something like that together? Well, it's being put together without us.

And so here's my proposition tonight and I'd love to get your reaction to it. It's that you describe this delicate balancing act. And the critics of Turkey in Washington, look at that balancing act and they look at all of the elements of cooperation with the Russians in it and they say, "See, Turkey's not an ally." And they ignore the other elements like the sale of drones to Ukraine at this particular moment.

When I look at that, I see something else. If the United States would align its own interest and its own strategic worldview more closely with Turkey, we would get much more out of Turkey on the plus side than we are currently. So the more critical we are, the farther we pull back, the more we are actually incentivizing Turkey to hedge in the opposite direction. Do you agree with that? Or do you think I'm missing something? I'd just love your reactions to all that you've heard here about this.

Sinan Ülgen:

Yes. Well, thank you for the opportunity to address this question because very few people actually present such an opportunity for a more constructive Turkey-US relationship. And I think this is exactly the right approach because indeed we do have a number of problems bilaterally, and there is certainly a need to rebuild some of the trust. Both sides have justified grievances with regard to each other. And just looking at those bilateral problems, sometimes you need to be creative about how you want to approach things.

And this angle of trying to look at how Turkey and the U.S. can indeed cooperate in geographies where Turkey has a significant value added is the right way forward in my mind because that's exactly the type of construct that would help the agendas of both countries, the U.S. and Turkey, as they look at this reshaped global dynamic at the strategic competition. And one indeed particular area where already the
Turkish involvement has made a significant leap is Central Asia for understandable reasons. The Organization of Turkic States and you know how you build something more permanent and something more effective around that idea.

But the other geography where I think a lot more can be done is Africa. Because as we look around the world where the strategic competition takes place, there are areas where the U.S. is obviously as the dominant actor in world politics as a primary role, there are areas of this world where Turkish involvement matters little because it's either far off it's geographically distant and so on. So the issue is, where do we find the areas where the Turkey-US Corporation can indeed be in very concrete terms yield outcomes that are beneficial for both parties. The Middle East has been a problematic area as we seen in recent memory, but the Central Asia and Africa, I think are the two theaters where much remains to be done and a lot remains to be explored about how we can build up this bilateral relationship in a way that makes Turkey a more influential player there.

Just to perhaps back this statement, in Central Asia, there is a generational divide. The generational divide is the older generation that grew up under the Soviet rule have still some attachment to those conditions. The new generation on the other hand have a very, and for lack of a better word, have a very clear Western package. They want to live like their youth group in the West. They watch all the same things, they listen to similar music. They want those type of freedoms. And the only country in this respect that can help to some degree the transformation of all of those states in this direction is Turkey. Because when you look at all the other countries that are part of this group, they come from a similar political background. It's Turkey that as an ally of NATO, a secular democratic country, with free market economy, with a growing economic might can actually play a transformative role. But obviously Turkey's own resources are also quite limited and more so recently with the economic duress that we are experiencing.

But nonetheless, over the medium and long term, this is the area where a Turkey-U.S. alliance could indeed make a significant impact. It's just a matter of being more creative about what we want to do together and having the bandwidth, frankly, to talk about these issues. And here, I would fully agree with you that Central Asia and I would that Africa are the two regions where this discussion needs to take place between our policy makers.

Mike Doran:

I think Rich, did you want to, sorry, Rich. Did you want to get in on this?

Colonel Rich Outzen:

Just one quick comment, I want to fully associate myself with Sinan’s observations, but I also wanted to add one little bit of context here is that I think the Biden administration came to the same conclusion that Sinan has in about August, September, October timeframe as Afghanistan was reaching the crescendo of the debacle and as we started noticed that Ukraine was becoming a problem.

There was as a result of one of the conversations between the two presidents something called a joint mechanism that was discussed, that was supposed to be a way forward to do exactly what Sinan was calling for, which was for both sides to look globally at different areas where we can cooperate and
collaborate instead of waiting for the crisis in country X or country Y to come about. There were one or two initial meetings and then nothing.

So to be fair, we have a new ambassador who's just started in Ankara and there's some other bandwidth problems I think as Sinan put it that keep the administrations focus on something else, but there has been a consistent appetite, especially from the Turkish side for structured conversations to find these areas for cooperation because there's clearly overlap in a lot of areas. Instead of having just the crisis points absorb all the bandwidth, we should have a systematic talk about where we can build progress and traction in the bilateral relationship. And I hate to say, Washington has not upheld its part of the bargain in terms of making this joint mechanism work.

Mike Doran:

My impression is that the United States has yet to settle on a kind of strategic concept for this new era of Great Power Competition by which I mean, there are a lot of people, a lot of influential people in Washington who were saying we just have to move all of our resources to East Asia because that's where the real action is without... I think the recognition is going to come and maybe it's coming right now before our eyes in Ukraine, but I think it's going to come that this competition with China is global. And I also think that the recognition is going to come that Russia is in an alignment certainly, but I would even go further say alliance with China. But Svante, let me get you in in this conversation. What do you see as the potential and the impediments for U.S.-Turkish Cooperation on a larger field?

Svante Cornell:

Well, I think the discussion so far has made it clear that there is a huge potential and our opportunities coming up both from the what's happening in the world simply, but also from the fact that we are gradually putting some distance to the situation about five years ago when there was a very unlucky confluence of events, if you will. On the one hand, the situation in Syria where the United States ended up supporting an affiliative organization that we ourselves classifies a terrorist organization, which is the Kurdish militias that are under the control of the PKK.

And the other, I would think in many ways, excuse me, even more unfortunate situation of the unsuccessful coup against Erdoğan that by all accounts was masterminded by a wayward imam sitting in the United States in Pennsylvania, Fethullah Gülen. I think those two things, if one of them had happened, that would've been bad enough. Both of these things happening at the same time is what really sensed the relationship into a tailspin in ways I think that are not understood in Washington how this was perceived in Turkey.

So I just want to say that the more we get away from that situation and can rebuild the relationship, the opportunities are going to be bigger as long as we don't make similar mistakes. That said, I think there are two major problems I would say, one on the American side, one on the Turkic side. On the American side is a complete lack of strategic thinking in Washington and the inability of the Biden administration or for that matter, the Trump administration to see how Turkey fits into the broader geopolitical interest of the United States, whether in Europe, whether in the Middle East, whether with regard to Russia and China. I think that absolutely has to change.
On Turkey's side I think to put it very simply the mouth of President Erdogan can be the biggest problem because even though and without even get into a discussion, maybe we have to get into a discussion of how Turkish foreign policy is made because I think it's much more complicated than just assuming that President Erdogan decides everything by himself. I don't at all believe that that's how it happens. But the fact is that Turkey does one thing and President Erdogan sometimes says another thing. And very frequently he resorts to Islamist type of language, anti-American type of language that in one quick shot can undermine weeks or months of bureaucratic and think tank in other work in order to build up the opportunities and the relationship.

And frankly, I don't know that there is a solution to that problem. So the likes of us, people who matter more than U.S. within the governance of the two countries can do work to convince the U.S. to think more strategically. And then President Erdogan can go off and mouth off about something and suddenly all that work will have been ruined. And I think that is the knowledge that that is danger is an impediment to people who are working in this direction within both governments of Turkey and United States because we’re not sure if the work we’re going to do if we’re going to end up with egg on our faces simply and I think that's the way a lot of people think.

But I think the most important thing is to begin in Washington and to stop putting an equal sign between Turkey and President Erdogan. They are not one on the same thing. There are a national interest in Turkey that are being developed by a policy process that involves the military, that involves part of this state bureaucracy and of course, on top of which sits President Erdogan. But I think there are things that are happening in Turkey, particularly the outreach or the policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus of the Black Sea region that are not going to necessarily change very much independent of who is in power in Turkey. And we have to deal and work with these other forces in Turkey that are influential in the policy making process as opaque as it might seem to us and not just constantly focus our energies on President Erdogan himself.

Mike Doran:

Rich, do you have a short list of the items that you would like to see the United States to address in, in the near term, not the big strategic questions, but the short list of things that we could do that are doable that could result in the strategic conversation that I think all of us here would like to see?

Colonel Rich Outzen:

Yes, well, obviously in a perfect world, there would be some progress or resolution on Turkey's main gripes or qualms over the last five to 10 years. I don't think the politics in the U.S. will allow that to happen. And I'm talking about the complaints about the Gülen organization and their role that I think is not widely disputed in the serious academic circles about the coup attempt and about support to the YPG. We seem to have settled into an agreement to disagree on those things. And I don't think that those are going to be the resolution. The resolution of those are not going to be what leads to newer and better equilibrium.

The short list for me of things that would get us to a newer and better equilibrium, the first would be engagement by President Biden personally with the four key committee members that we talked about before to get the F-16s moving because the F16s are a tangible statement of cooperation and affiliation. It restores some momentum in the U.S.-Turkey defense industrial ties. It remedies a real shortfalls in
Turkish air power until the TFX comes online and it makes money for Turks and Americans. So I don’t think there’s a bad aspect to that deal. And that would be a powerful symbol.

The second would be energetically pursuing this, if you want to call it a joint mechanism, but some a globally focused conversation about where we can do things together because the truth is, the further you get away... I’ve always felt that there’s an inverse relationship between proximity to Turkey geographically and the Turkish risk tolerance and our ability to cooperate with one another. The further we get away from Turkey’s borders, the more Turkey is willing to accept the U.S. role and the more our roles are complimentary.

We have big problems that stem primarily from two countries, that's Iraq and Syria and because of the way that both of those have gone down in the last 10 to 15 years. And by the way, we’ve worked through most of the Iraq problems. So actually the United States and Turkey now are both firmly invested survival of the Kurdistan Regional Government. We have business ties, our companies work through there sometimes together when we're both trying to push back on Iranian hegemony over Baghdad. Syria may approach that. At some point, it’s going to have to come at a time when we've stopped arming the YPG for obvious reasons. But the further you get away from those, the more good that we can do together. And I think that's always been the case.

The hope had been in Afghanistan was going to be the resuscitator. That was going to be the place where as we draw down, the Turks standup become the power that represents NATO and operates, but that's done. That's done because of the way the whole thing collapsed when we stepped away. Ukraine is a possibility, but there are others. And I think Svante and Sinan have both referenced them. Africa is a place where we could do that. So you got to have the mechanism. So the State Department needs to find the bandwidth as does with the White House and with NSC backing to throw themselves into finding some cooperative projects there.

Libya is a place where, for example, in Africa, the United States and Turkey have actually been working in complimentary matters, not always together, but rolling back the assault on Tripoli and restarting reigniting the UN led talks. Those were both the product of work that the United States and Turkey put in.

And especially now that we have rapprochement, this will be the third one on the list blooming and Turkey is assiduously pursuing a rapprochement over the last five years with the Emirates, with Saudi, with Israel and the rapprochement with Egypt I think will be in the cards at some point as well. The United States needs to do everything it can to strengthen that and to encourage and then to incentivize it because in addition to this semi-nonaligned bloc of countries in the middle we've talked about, we have to just get our own house in order, in terms of friends of the United States age, countries that aren't exactly not aligned, but they are friends of the United States. The last five years, we've had them at each other's throats, and that's not been propitious for anyone. So a little bit of statesmanship to foster and accelerate what they're already doing with themselves would be a great thing to do.

Mike Doran:
That's great advice.

Sinan Ulgen:
Mike, can I add very briefly two thoughts on very valuable comments about by Rich?

**Mike Doran:**

Sure.

**Sinan Ülgen:**

I think answering the question that you posed them, but not to me, I’ve taken the liberty to pitch in with two general remarks. One is, in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, if this crisis is going to be sold by diplomatic means, that means that the overlap between Russian demands and the NATO position as disclosed in the NATO paper that was sent to Moscow is actually the renegotiation over the security regime in Europe that would involve transparency measures, a new disarmament process and monitoring. And I think there is a lot of scope for the strengthening of mutual trust between particularly U.S. and Turkey because what Turkey fears is that this project, the U.S. will let the EU and particularly France run with this project. And that would be very detrimental to how Turkey sees its own security.

So the fact that the U.S. makes the extra effort to incorporate Turkey in the discussions to value Turkey's input and to not make this a purely EU-driven security negotiation with Russia would be very important. I think this is perhaps the time to highlight this given the crisis in Ukraine. And the second dimension, of course, Syria. Syria will matter a lot. And if there is a political settlement, then the way that Turkey and the U.S. could work together, not only to stabilize Syria, but also in the reconstruction phase. And that's very important because that's the only way in my mind that would create the conditions for a safe and secure return of the large number of Syrian refugees in Turkey to Syria.

There needs to be a lever there, and the lever is reconstruction. And we all know that if there is going to be the reconstruction of Syria, that's not going to be funded by Iranians or the Russians. It's going to be the West. And I think they're trying to link to the degree that's possible reconstruction efforts to the guarantees by the regime that these refugees can return, can be relocate to their home places will be very important. And that's another angle where I think the Turkey-U.S. relationship can make a huge impact.

**Mike Doran:**

Well, thank you for that. Listen, I want to end here in one last round of questions. We're already at about an hour mark. So let's see if we can do this really quickly, but I want to take it back. We went to these larger strategic questions that I wasn't expecting to hit so much. Let's take it back to Ukraine. Sinan, let me start with where you left off, but let me put another picture in front of you, an alternative picture and get your response to it. You premised comments on the notion that we'll have a diplomatic solution to Ukraine. I think there’s a lot of signs are, I would guess that in Las Vegas, the odds are, we're going to see a Russian invasion very soon.

And I think most, if not, all military analysts who are looking at this assume that it's going to be a Russian victory. The only question is the extent of the victory and what the Russian aims are going to be. But let me give you a worse case, not exactly worst case scenario, but a very bleak scenario. And that is that the Russians move in and they take the entire coast of the Black Sea all the way down to Odessa. And we find ourselves in with Russians up against... Now, Russian troops right up against Romania.
And as a result of this, the Russian position in the Black Sea becomes that much stronger. The Russian capacity for bullying Georgia becomes that much stronger. The Russian position in Syria becomes that much stronger because of the direct connection than the military connections as umbilical cord running from Crimea down to Latakia. And then if you’re sitting in Ankara, you’ve got Russian forces in Armenia, you’ve got empowered Russian forces just to your north in Ukraine in the Black Sea, you’ve got Russian forces in Syria. Does that create a context in which Turkish-US relations become stronger? Or does that create a context in which President Erdogan moves closer to Putin?

Sinan Ülgen:

It would definitely create a context in which Turkey-NATO relations would become stronger and by extension Turkey-US relations. The that you've described quite you are actually as we speak a plausible scenario, unfortunately, would be a security nightmare for Turkey.

Now, perhaps today Turkey does not perceive a direct threat from Russia, but obviously when you make your threat assessment, capabilities is one big part of that threat assessment. So the more Russia enhances its offensive capabilities that could target Turkey, the more concerned Turkey shall be because intense, which is the second parameter of that calculus may not be there today, but once the capabilities are there, you can never have a guarantee intent will not change. And therefore, for the security policy establishment for the foreign policy establishment of Turkey, that would be a very undesirable outcome and Turkey would further value its presence within NATO and by extensions relationship with the US.

Now, that does not mean necessarily that Turkey will move every bit in the direction that the U.S. wants in terms of containment of Russia because of the very complex relationship that Ankara has with Moscow. It’s the tiring of geography in other words that Turkey cannot act the same way. It has other considerations than countries that are not neighbors of Russia.

Mike Doran:

Svante, do you have anything to add to that scenario?

Svante Cornell:

Well, I do because I think smarter people than me disagree on whether Russia plans to invade or not, I think there’s still a good chance that Mr. Putin is more interested in splitting the western alliance and is going to be a winner in any case, whether he invades or not. I also think that the irrespective of what he wants, the situation is now so tense that a work can emerge by mistake.

The problem is that the Russians have gotten Ukraine wrong at practically every step of this conflict since 2014. Because they don't think Ukraine is a real country, they didn't expect Ukrainians to defend themselves against Russia. And I think if they decide to go very far into Ukraine, they're going to face a very difficult situation and get bogged down there. And you know the Russians have been gloating up how the U.S. got bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq in the past couple of decades. Well, let's see what happens if they try to control the whole of Ukraine or even a big chunk of it.

I think that could end up creating completely new geopolitical dynamics that might not at all be in Russia’s long-term interest that might create a situation in which we spoke about how Azerbaijan has
taken a stand on Russian issues in Ukraine that has fairly unprecedented in terms of supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and launching itself as an alternative in terms of natural gas production for Europe, for example, which of course is wanted to do for a long time. But I think many other country Greece are going to react to what the Russians are doing in ways that we might not expect.

I am not at all sure that everybody would see Russia as an extremely powerful country. A lot of people further east see Russia as a declining power, but is trying to cling on to whatever influence it has in this and its so-called Near Abroad. And I think other... If this does not go well for Russia, I think a lot of-

Mike Doran:

Sorry to interrupt, when you say further east, you're talking about Kazakhstan [crosstalk 01:00:11].

Svante Cornell:

I'm talking about Central Asia, for example.

Mike Doran:

Yeah.

Svante Cornell:

Yeah. Yeah, I think a lot of states will react in ways that will get them to find ways to opposed Russian influence in their region and in their territory. So it could create completely new processes, new relationships, new alliances that are only embryonic to stage them.

Mike Doran:

Thanks, Svante. Rich, you want to take us home here?

Svante Cornell:

Sure.

Mike Doran:

Do you have any reactions to what you've heard?

Colonel Rich Outzen:

It's always great to be able to follow such distinguished and insightful commentators because then I can just add a little equipped to it and look as smart. Look, the bottom line is I, I agree with those who say that Russia is playing a fairly weak and declining hand very well. They are playing it aggressively. Now, the problem... And I don't think they'll go in all the way to Odessa. I don't think they'll go all the way to Kyiv because I think the further they go in the longer those lines of supply get, the more they are liable to have a lot of body bags going back to mother Russia. And that's not in anybody's interests, not even Putin.
So I think there's already been a galvanizing effect within NATO which is encouraging. To an extent, I think people now realize that hard power conflict is once again a possibility here. I think if he actuates this all the way with a big war, then it's going to be a paradigm shift even more so. And, that again, will rob Putin of the ability to do what he's done so successfully with Germany and with Turkey and with others, which is to say, "Look, really I have modest and very reasonable goals and I want to make money. We can do that together. I want to exert a little influence on it." But if he goes from that to a full out hegemonic power, trying to gobble up a country that is seen as a legitimate and sovereign state by most of the world, he will have misplayed that hand. And that's not the Putin that we've observed before.

Now, Mariupol, trying to link the Crimea to Donetsk Luhansk, that seems credible. You'd find a lot of Germans probably who would say, "Well, yeah. I could see why... And that would be more in the Putin playbook. I think doing a little bit. The problem with that is that once you start doing that a little bit, then it becomes accepted both by your competitors and by your own people that that's the normal rule of the game.

I had a friend, a Japanese geopolitical thinker once who said, "look, of course, we're very strong against China, it's because we have much to fear from Chinese hegemony in this region. But if we see that the United States fails to stand up to China and that there is no structure off which the balance, guess what we're going to be making deals with China." That's from the Japanese.

So I think the same goes, there's a lot of people watching this, including Turkey, Turkey and other states of NATO, including Romanian, Bulgarian and others, probably never the polls will be put in a position of saying, "Well, look, if this is the bully and he's not gulping, but he's nibbling, we're going to have to make a deal with him." And I don't think that's a Europe that we want to see. So yeah, I don't see the big invasion, but I think he'll try something small. He has dealt this hand in such a way that he has to do something. And I think it's important for us to be resolute in trying to drive up his costs in doing so. And I very much hope that we support Ukraine through means open and covert, economically and material to do everything we can to raise costs if he actually does this thing. And I think the Turks might be open to working with us in that regard.

Mike Doran:

So you even if, Rich just to follow on what you're saying, even if he goes... So Sinan said if he goes in for the major operation and the attempt to take over all the coastline down to Odessa, that's going to push the U.S. and Turkey together one way or another. But you're saying even if he goes for half a loaf, goes for Mariupol and just to complete the land bridge to Crimea, that as well will push the U.S. and Turkey together. I wasn't quite sure because you're saying both can go either way.

Colonel Rich Outzen:

I'm saying that- Whether it does or not, we'll depend on the quality of U.S. statesmanship. And I will tell you if they do that, we need to raise costs and we need to make a good deal with Turkey to make sure that they help as much as they can in raising those costs. Because Mariupol' if allowed to stand what will be the death knell later for Kyiv and for Odessa?

Mike Doran:
Okay.

Colonel Rich Outzen:
That's what I'm saying.

Mike Doran:
So if the United States get serious and works with Turkey to as the counterbalance consciously, it can work to the advantage of the U.S.-Turkish relationship. But if the West is feckless as it has been in the past, then that will encourage Turkey to go toward Russia.

Colonel Rich Outzen:
Pragmatic deals for him.

Mike Doran:
Yeah. Okay. Well, listen, and I think we've had a very rich and informative discussion and I think I'll bring it to an end unless somebody has a major comment that they like to make here. No? Okay. Speak now or forever hold your peace. Listen, let me thank all of you. This was one of the best discussions that I've... Absolutely the best discussion on Turkish-U.S. relations that I have heard in a very long time. And I really have a deep debt of gratitude to the three of you. Thanks very much up to see you back soon.

Svante Cornell:
Thank you.

Sinan Ülgen:
Thank you.