Osservatorio TURCHIA CeSPI

Brief n. 78/April 2026

Rebuilding U.S.–Türkiye Strategic Convergence

Paolo von Schirach

With the support of:

Fondazione CSF

Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo

For well over a decade Washington-Ankara relations have been strained, at times turbulent. From Ankara's perspective, a low point was touched in the perceived American indifference to (or maybe even support for) the failed attempted coup of July 15-16, 2016, planned and executed by some rogue units within the Turkish armed forces.

Lukewarm support

The attempted coup was clearly aimed at toppling Türkiye's legitimate government. Looking at American late statements of support to the Turkish state in the aftermath of this major crisis, some Turkish policymakers concluded that many in Washington appeared disappointed that the attempted coup had failed. Indeed, messages of U.S. support and solidarity to the Turkish Government and some visits by American officials to Ankara came rather late, well after those who had attempted the coup had been defeated and arrested. All in all, U.S. declarations of friendship seemed to be perfunctory, at bottom insincere. [i]

Even though in August 2016 Washington dispatched first General Joseph F. Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, (therefore the highest-ranking U.S. military officer), and later on Vice President Joe Biden to Ankara as a formal expression of solidarity, these tardive gestures of solidarity did not repair the damage.[ii]

And it got worse. When the Turkish authorities concluded – almost immediately – that the attempted coup was masterminded by the exiled Muslim Cleric Fetullah Gulen, and then executed by his loyal lieutenants in Türkiye, relations with the United States further deteriorated. Indeed, it was well known to all that Gulen at the time (and until his death on October 20, 2024) resided in an almost inaccessible compound located in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania. In 1999 Gulen had received U.S. residency with the apparent help (according to some rumors) of U.S. intelligence services.

Sheltering Gulen

When Ankara requested Gulen's extradition in the aftermath of the attempted coup, so that he would stand trial in Türkiye, Washington was most unresponsive. The extradition was never granted.[iii] Gulen died of natural causes in 2024 while still residing in his protected Pennsylvania compound. Right or wrong, in Ankara there was never any doubt that the Americans were protecting not only Gulen but his transnational movement – known as Feto in Türkiye – that has activities, especially in the education sector, in many countries, including the United States.

Given this context, modest support for a NATO ally after an attempted coup, while sheltering an opponent of the Turkish state who most likely played a role in the military uprising, led many in Ankara to conclude that Washington would have favored the toppling of the legitimate Turkish government, or at the very least that it was not opposed to it. In fact, at least some Turkish observers went as far as arguing that U.S. intelligence actually had some role in the attempted coup.

The S 400 crisis

On a different note, bilateral relations further deteriorated on account of the 2017 decision by the Turkish government to purchase S-400 air defense systems from Russia. Keeping in mind that Türkiye was and is a NATO member country, in Washington this acquisition looked like a betrayal. Indeed, a NATO ally buying a Russian air defense system designed to intercept and shoot down western military aircraft appeared incomprehensible, or worse. In retaliation, the U.S. government cut Türkiye off the high value F-35 fighter jet program, even though Türkiye was in the deal not just as a buyer but also as a co-producer of some of the aircraft components.

America supporting Kurdish terrorists?

And this is not all. Relations got even worse on account of the thorny issue of U.S. military support to the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Forces and the YPG, its military core. The YPG, are the Kurdish fighters in Syria. Washington argued that those Syrian Kurds, with American training and U.S. supplied weapons, were most helpful in the ongoing fight against ISIL (the Caliphate) that was still operating in northeastern Syria.

Ankara vehemently disagreed, maintaining instead that the YPG fighters were and are in fact closely allied with the PKK in Türkiye, a terrorist organization. At some point, the Turkish government threatened military action against the YPG, something that conceivably might have resulted in open hostilities between Türkiye and U.S. forces on the ground who were supporting the YPG as trainers and advisers. While the strong disagreement did not escalate to a real crisis, the deep differences on the Kurdish issue have not solved.

The Hamas issue and relations with Israel

Finally, Ankara's support for the Palestinian group Hamas, designated as a terrorist organization by Washington, (and, of course, Israel), further complicated relations with the U.S. and Israel, always a strong ally of the United States. This pro-Hamas advocacy became a real problem in bilateral Ankara-Washington relations after the massive Hamas terror attack against Israel on October 7, 2023 which included widespread atrocities against Israeli citizens, and the kidnapping of 251 civilians. Türkiye (along with other countries) justified the Hamas attack as an understandable Palestinian military action against Israeli occupiers. Both Israel and the United States strongly condemned this pro-Hamas stance.

In the past, despite strong political disagreements, economic relations between Israel and Türkiye used to be surprisingly stable. Indeed, bilateral trade volume has typically ranged between $6–9 billion annually. Turkey exported machinery, vehicles, steel, and consumer goods. Israel exported chemicals, technology components, and energy-related inputs. Turkish ports and airspace have been commercially important for Israeli logistics. That said, all this abruptly changed in February 2026 after President Erdogan announced the end of trade relations with Israel. While this is a very significant turn for the worse, it is too early to conclude that relations between the two countries have collapsed. Major swings are not uncommon in this complicated bilateral relationship that clearly affects U.S. Türkiye relations as well.

On the side of Azerbaijan

Looking elsewhere in the region, regarding the long Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, America, thanks to the effective lobbying of the well-heeled Armenian diaspora operating in the U.S. had tilted towards Yerevan, while Türkiye fully supported Baku. If we fast forward to today, as the territorial issues between the two old enemies have been resolved, after the Azeri victories that led to the retaking of Karabakh, the worst part of the conflict is now over. However, the U.S. and Türkiye have yet to agree on shared policy goals regarding a final settlement that will bring lasting peace to the Caucasus Region.

Looking ahead: How to manage strained relations

So, here is the picture. Two old allies, Türkiye and the United States, drifted apart. From Washington's standpoint, Ankara created the problem when it started flirting with enemies, notably Russia and Iran. From Ankara's perspective, America would have liked a change of government in Ankara, (hence suspicion of support for the failed attempted coup), while it demonstrated complete lack of concern for Turkish national security by openly supporting Kurdish fighters in Syria who are closely associated with the PKK, and its terrorist methods.

Notwithstanding a few state visits, and continuing U.S. Türkiye exchanges at multiple levels, over time the contentious issues discussed above created an atmosphere of almost permanent mutual suspicion between Washington and Ankara. It got to a point in which many U.S. experts wrote opinion pieces for major national newspapers in which they openly argued that it was time to recognize that Ankara "had switched sides." In their opinion, it was no longer an ally. Similar expressions of disappointment in America appeared in Turkish media. At the same time, various opinion polls taken In Türkiye routinely indicated that a majority of respondents now see America as a hostile power.

A new wind?

That said, it seems that now, in 2026, there is ample opportunity to rekindle this somewhat damaged, yet critically important bilateral relationship. Indeed, the new international and regional environment gives Ankara a chance to play the role of stabilizing factor. And America sees this.

Let's be clear, disagreements regarding the threats to Türkiye represented by the Syrian Kurds, Ankara's balancing act between the West and Russia while remaining a full NATO member, and Ankara's open-ended support for Hamas in the context of the Israeli heavy-handed retaliation in Gaza did not vanish. However, they appear less acute, and therefore more manageable, especially because both countries have shared security interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, in the Middle East and the Caucasus that will facilitate a return to active cooperation.

Indeed, both countries have an interest in making sure that post Assad Syria will not become a failed state. Likewise, neither country wants to see a resurgence of ISIL in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else. Both capitals have an interest in supporting a Caucasus-Eastern Mediterranean-Europe energy and trade corridor. Both countries have an interest in seeing that Russia's regional influence will be contained.

The way forward

Let's begin with the obvious. Disagreements and bickering notwithstanding, from Washington's standpoint, it is apparent that Türkiye remains an indispensable NATO ally. It has the second largest armed forces within NATO (the U.S. is number one). It hosts critical U.S. and NATO assets at the large Incirlik base, and elsewhere on its territory. Via the 1936 Montreux Convention, (never suspended, therefore still in force), Türkiye controls maritime access from the Mediterranean Sea to and from the Black Sea. Furthermore, over many years Ankara provided critical military and financial support to the Syrian insurgents factions that eventually toppled Bashar al Assad's regime in Damascus on December 8, 2024. Going forward, it is to be expected that Ankara will play a significant role in Syria, both in terms of security issues and reconstruction efforts that will take years. These contracts (most of them financed by wealthy Arab countries) will be worth several billions of dollars.

In addition, to the extent that Washington wants to promote a Europe-Eastern Mediterranean-Caucasus corridor that will link Europe to the Caspian Region and Central Asia, just by looking at the geography of the region it is obvious that Türkiye's role in the implementation of this design will be essential. Hence a clear interest on the part of the U.S. Government to involve Ankara as much as possible in all aspects of this plan. Finally, while Türkiye has a dialogue with Iran, it is clear that the two countries are not natural allies. All the more reason for Washington to convince Ankara to play a more pro-western role in its dealings with Tehran.

That said, Washington cannot expect that Ankara will simply take orders from the U.S. It is now abundantly clear that the Turkish Government wants to operate as an independent agent, interpreting its obligations as a NATO ally in ways that suit its own national interest. It is up to Washington to demonstrate, through dialogue and diplomacy, that in the areas outlined above Turkish and American interests do not diverge. In fact, they overlap.

Can there be Policy Convergence Between the United States and Türkiye?

As described above, differences notwithstanding, the U.S. and Türkiye over many decades developed deep relations at multiple levels, military, geopolitical, trade, and more. Given this background, there is ample opportunity for deepening these relations, provided that policymakers focus on areas where mutual interests prevail.

Rather than a major effort aimed at redefining the bilateral relationship, it would be wise to concentrate on cooperation on selected areas where Washington and Ankara's interests overlap with the goal of identifying shared interests and mechanism aimed at identifying win-win solutions.

Below are specific domains where convergence opportunity is real, the costs of non-cooperation are high, while a pragmatic dialogue can produce tangible gains.

Black Sea Security

Considering the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and all its geopolitical repercussions, it is clear that both Washington and Ankara would like to contain the impact of Russia's naval presence

in the Black Sea. While we know that the Russian Black Sea fleet has suffered significant losses, (about 30 to 40 per cent of its vessels sunk or disabled) on account of successful Ukrainian asymmetric military attacks, the Russian navy is still the largest in the Black Sea. It is now headquartered further east from Ukraine in Novorossiysk.

Türkiye has the second largest Black Sea fleet. While there is no likely scenario in which Türkiye and Russia would engage in any kind of direct armed conflict, both the U.S. and Türkiye have an interest in creating a regional framework, (hopefully with the cooperation of the other Black Sea coastal states), aimed at deterring any Russian hegemonic "sea control" ambitions. This could include intelligence sharing mechanisms aimed at monitoring Russian fleet movements. There could also be efforts aimed at creating/strengthening norms aimed at reaffirming freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, notification of fleet movements, protection of sea lanes, and the like.

Syria: Deconfliction and Stabilization

Both the U.S. and Türkiye, for different reasons, have a strong interest in shaping the future of post-Assad Syria. Understandably, since Syria and Türkiye share a 900 km border, Ankara wants a stable neighboring country. The U.S., on its part, wants stability in the Middle East. That must include a stable post-conflict Syria. While there is U.S.-Türkiye competition that may be cause for friction –which country will have more influence on the new Syrian government? -- it is also true that both Washington and Ankara have a shared interest in the creation of a new, stable, and peaceful Syria, no longer vulnerable to aggression by radical Islamist groups often maneuvered by Iran. Therefore, both countries could agree on forms of cooperation with the goal of rebuilding the Syrian economy, while creating solid Syrian institutions eventually capable of delivering basic services.

In all this, Washington and Ankara continue to disagree on the role played by the Syrian Kurds, operating mostly in Northeastern Syria. Ankara still sees them as closely tied to the PKK, a Kurdish terrorist organization operating inside Türkiye. The new Syrian government, (most likely in coordination with Ankara), has undertaken military actions against the Kurds.

In contrast, Washington regards the Syrian Kurds as trusted allies in the ongoing fight against the remnant of the Caliphate and other Islamic armed radical groups. It is true that both Türkiye and the U.S. want to see the complete defeat of Islamic armed groups in the region. However, Türkiye continues to view all Kurdish armed groups at home and abroad as an existential threat. The Turkish government will never accept armed Kurdish units operating just across the Syrian border as legitimate combatants, no matter what Washington says regarding their valuable contribution in the continuing fight against Islamic radicals.

In all this, it is not just desirable, but also possible for both sides to engage in forms of consultation, cooperation and potentially joint military actions aimed at crushing Islamic armed factions resorting to terrorism that continue to operate within Syria. To this end, both governments could agree on a step-by-step approach requiring the creation of an ongoing policy dialogue in which objectives for Syria's stabilization, reconstruction and governance reform are discussed and hopefully agreed upon. This could include modalities to integrate the Kurdish units into a new Syrian army.

While this may prove to be difficult, in the end, whatever their differences on the Kurdish issue, neither Washington nor Ankara want an unstable Syria that could become a failed state, easily preyed upon by hostile powers. Some degree of cooperation is better than a rivalry that could compromise the rebirth of Syria.

A New Vision for the Caucasus

In the Caucasus region there can be significant U.S.-Türkiye convergence and potentially real cooperation, with an economic upside for all. In September 2023, Azerbaijan, with Ankara's political support, managed to finally regain full control over all Azeri territories previously controlled by Armenians. After a brief but decisive Azeri military action, all the Armenians residents (about 120,000) voluntarily left their last Karabakh enclave known as Artsakh, in September 2023. Unlike the rest of Karabakh, Armenians had inhabited the Artsakh enclave for centuries, since antiquity. However, the Azeri army did not forcibly expel them. The ethnic Armenians fled to Armenia because they did not want to be citizens of Azerbaijan.)

The end of the long occupation, and of all territorial claims and counter claims set the stage not just for engaging in bilateral peace negotiations between Yerevan and Baku but also for launching ambitious new plans for regional development centered on the idea that the Caucasus region could soon become the linchpin between Europe, Central Asia, and parts of the Middle East.

On this very issue, on August 8, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump scored a major diplomatic success after the successful conclusion of a White House summit. The high-level meeting featured Nikol Pashinyan, the Armenian Prime Minister, Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, and President Donald Trump in his role as host. While at the White House, the two leaders publicly stated that the old conflict is over, that neither side has any residual territorial ambitions against the other, and that a final peace agreement that would settle all outstanding issues is at hand.

In addition, a key outcome of the August 8 summit is a U.S.- Armenia Memorandum of Understanding in which Armenia approved the creation of a land corridor, to be constructed on Armenian territory under U.S. supervision. This planned road and rail link, (only about 44 km), known as the Zangezur corridor, will link the territory of Azerbaijan to the exclave known as the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, part of Azerbaijan but accessible by land from Azerbaijan only through Armenia. The construction will take place under American direction and supervision.

That said, this short road, once built, will not just link the two parts of Azerbaijan. It will be a critical component of a new "East-West Highway" that would go from the Caspian Sea all the way to the Eastern Mediterranean, across Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Türkiye ending on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean, and also via Greece and Albania to the Adriatic Sea.

Should this ambitious project come to fruition –and the Zangezur corridor is an essential part of it—this new "West-East Highway' could attract trade and investments to the region, with obvious economic benefits for all, including Türkiye and the United States as the guarantor of the security of the Zangezur corridor. Much remains to be done before this grand vision of the Caucasus as a region of growth and prosperity will come to fruition.

However, since both Armenia and Azerbaijan agree that cooperation has to be the way of the future, it is quite possible for Washington and Ankara to play a constructive role in this initiative. It should

also be pointed out that in this new context the U.S. gains a solid foothold on a region traditionally influenced by Russia, while Moscow will play no role in this new scenario.

Conclusion

Relations between Washington and Ankara are suboptimal. As noted here, there are many areas of disagreement. However, a dispassionate assessment indicates that both sides have more to gain from dialogue and engagement than by trying to score points against each other. Let's restate the obvious. Türkiye is and will continue to be an important member of NATO and thus a key ally of the United States. It plays a critical role in Black Sea and Middle East security, not to mention the Caucasus region.

If both Washington and Ankara are convinced that the other side also wants peace and stability in that part of the world, there are many opportunities to make progress on a dialogue whose ultimate goal should be win-win outcomes. From this perspective, Ankara's agreement to become part of the U.S.-sponsored and U.S.-led Board of Peace is encouraging.

Indeed, while at first it was proposed as a forum to manage a peace process in Gaza, it now appears that this Board of Peace may have a broader mandate. Whatever its ultimate shape and mission, the fact that Ankara and Washington will be at the same table, discussing issues of international peace and security of mutual interest, is encouraging. As cooperation among the Board participants is essential, sitting at the same table while seeking actionable solutions will contribute to foster a better climate in this complicated Washington – Ankara relationship.

Paolo von Schirach, President, Global Policy Institute, Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Bay Atlantic University in Washington, DC, Editor of the Schirach Report

---

[i] Here is a summary of U.S. Government reactions to the failed coup in Ankara. Long excerpts from the chronology complied by the Middle East Democracy Center, posted on August 8, 2016
https://mideastdc.org/publication/u-s-statements-on-turkeys-attempted-coup-a-timeline/

*On **Sunday, July 17**, in remarks on several U.S. political talk shows, Secretary Kerry repeatedly called on Ankara to refrain from using the coup attempt as a reason to carry out mass arrests of all opponents of the government. He also emphasized that Turkey had not yet formally requested Gulen's extradition, and that he had urged Foreign Minister Cavusoglu to send any evidence that Gulen had directed the coup effort to U.S. authorities. Finally, he underscored U.S. support for the democratically-elected government of Turkey, and assured viewers that Turkey was still focused on the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS).*
*On **Monday, July 18**, in remarks to the press after a meeting in Brussels on U.S.-E.U. relations, Kerry raised concerns over Turkey's purge of bureaucrats and other officials: "Obviously a lot of people have been arrested and arrested very quickly. The level of vigilance and scrutiny is obviously going to be significant in the days ahead. Hopefully we can work in a constructive way that prevents a backsliding." He added that "NATO [membership] also has a requirement with respect to democracy," and he warned that NATO will "measure" Turkey's actions.*
*State Department Spokesperson **John Kirby** shortly afterwards clarified Kerry's remarks, stating that it is "too soon to say that their membership [in NATO] is at risk" and that the U.S. Government expects that "the [Turkish] government will live up to the democratic principles enshrined in its constitution."*

*Also on Monday, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey **John Bass** in a statement categorically denied that the US had anything to do with the coup: "Some news reports – and, unfortunately, some public figures – have speculated that the United States in some way supported the coup attempt. This is categorically untrue, and such speculation is harmful to the decades-long friendship between two great nations." He asserted that any allegation that the United States did not support the Turkish government was "an absolute fabrication" and continued to express the United States' willingness to cooperate with any legal, formal requests for assistance in the investigation into the coup attempt.*

*In the White House Daily Press Briefing that same day, Spokesperson **Josh Earnest** affirmed that the United States would follow the procedures established in an extradition treaty between the United States and Turkey if and when a formal extradition request for Fetullah Gulen was filed. He furthermore asserted that any allegation that the United States was "harboring" Gulen was "factually incorrect."*

*During the Department of State's Daily Press Briefing on Monday, Deputy Spokesperson **Mark Toner** made several statements regarding the situation in Turkey. He continued to stress that the United States would, within the bounds of the law and provided evidence, cooperate with any formal request for extradition of Fetullah Gulen. He also cautioned the Turkish government against overreach that would violate democratic principles in the wake of the coup, noting several specific concerns of the U.S. government and reaffirming the United States' unilateral condemnation of the coup attempt. Toner rejected "wholeheartedly" any insinuation that the United States delayed any statements on the coup in order to determine in which direction the coup attempt would fall.*

*On **Tuesday** morning, **July 19**, the National Security Council released a statement summarizing the President's telephone conversation with Erdogan earlier in the day. The statement reiterated President Obama's condemnation of the coup attempt, urged Turkey to ensure that "the investigations and prosecutions of the coup's perpetrators be conducted in ways that reinforce public confidence in democratic institutions and the rule of law," and offered "appropriate U.S. assistance" in the investigation.*

Later that day, during their respective Press Briefings, both the White House and the State Department confirmed that they had received documents from the Turkish government and were analyzing them to determine if they constitute a formal extradition request for Fetullah Gulen. State Department Spokesperson Toner emphasized that "this is not an overnight process." Toner also commented on the recent purge of government officials and civil servants in Turkey, saying: "it is understandable and justified, frankly, that the government would take actions to go after the perpetrators, to conduct a thorough investigation into what happened, and really to try to provide for the security of the Turkish people." However, he urged the government of Turkey "to maintain calm and stability in the wake of Friday's events" and "to uphold the democratic standards that the Turkish constitution provides for, as well as rule of law."

White House Spokesperson Earnest also emphasized that "this is a particularly important time for the Turkish government and the leaders of Turkey to adhere to the principles of democracy and support the democratic institutions and traditions of the Turkish government."

As we can see from the above detailed chronology and quotes it appears that the U.S. Government, while expressing support for the Erdogan Government, seemed to be equally concerned that investigations on people and entities allegedly responsible for the attempted coup could degenerate into a wholesale repression effort aimed at silencing all political opponents. Needless to say, these pleas for moderation and fairness were not well received in Türkiye

[ii] https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-joint-chiefs-chairman-visits-turkey-anti-coup-message; https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/25/remarks-vice-president-biden-and-president-erdogan-turkey-pool-spray

[iii] Neither the Obama nor the Trump administration seriously considered extraditing Fetullah Gulen to Türkiye, so that he could stand trial. See: National Public Radio report; November 17, 2018https://www.npr.org/2018/11/17/668898939/trumps-says-extraditing-turkish-cleric-fethullah-gulen-is-not-under-consideratio