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What might Turkey's enhanced engagement in Afghanistan mean for Ankara, NATO, and for the future of Afghanistan?

Aiming at upgrading relations with the US and other Western partners, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proposed a leading role for his country in securing Hamid Karzai Airport in Kabul after the retreat of allied troops from Afghanistan. Although those plans have seemingly become moot after the Taliban took over Kabul on 15 August 2021, Turkey is continuing its dialogue with all the sides in Afghanistan, including the Taliban. What might such an enhanced engagement of Turkey mean for Ankara, NATO, and the future of Afghanistan?

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By offering to secure the Kabul airport after a US withdrawal, Ankara hoped to help improve US-Turkey relations. The rapid fall of the Afghan capital to the Taliban changed that equation, but Turkey still holds out hope that it may show NATO its value as a majority-Muslim member state by establishing relations with and exerting some influence on the Taliban regime. Doing so could bolster Turkey's role as a regional power and Erdoğan's ambitions to lead or inspire the Muslim world. That would be a welcome domestic political win for him.

There are potential areas of collaboration. Turkish companies could play a role in post-conflict reconstruction. Moreover, Turkey hosts some 120,000–600,000 Afghan refugees and desperately does not want more. By working with the Taliban, Erdoğan might stave off a new wave of refugees. Finally, given the close-if-murky relations between the Taliban and Pakistan, one could at least imagine a deal whereby Turkish overtures toward the Taliban win Pakistani support for the Turkish position on Cyprus, perhaps even recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

However, it is not yet clear that the Taliban wants Turkish involvement, or that any of these objectives are realistic. Moreover, an offer to secure the airport is one thing. Maintaining good relations with a severely repressive Islamic Emirate is another, and one that may not win Ankara any favours in the eyes of Western leaders.

Alan Makovsky, Center for American Progress, Washington, D.C.

The Turkish proposal, at US behest, to run Kabul Airport primarily reflected a desire to stabilise relations with the US and the West. Turkey wanted to reinforce the message to potential Western investors that it remains a committed, fully accepted and stable member of the Western alliance. That plan, of course, is now moot. Whether it would have eventuated, even had the Ghani government remained in power, is

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unclear; after weeks of negotiating terms, Ankara and Washington still had not succeeded in sealing the deal.

But Turkey may now have other means to achieve Western appreciation. Among NATO nations, it likely will have unique channels to the Taliban – which, even while calling on Turkish troops to leave the country, has made clear its respect for Turkey, calling it a ‘great Muslim nation’. In seeking dialogue with the Taliban, Erdoğan will no doubt receive a boost from Pakistan and Qatar, states close to both Turkey and the Taliban. As problems emerge between the West and the Taliban in the rocky period ahead, Turkey may have occasion to demonstrate its value to the West by helping to mediate. For its part, the West will have to accommodate Turkey’s refusal to become a repository for fleeing Afghans, even, it appears, on a temporary basis.

Magdalena Kirchner, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Afghanistan Office, Amman

What started as a golden opportunity to revive US-Turkish ties and score a significant soft power success in Afghanistan has been negated by recent military escalation. It might, however, resurface after a Taliban consolidation of power. Militarily, Turkey had always been a reluctant player in Afghanistan but gained recognition as the only predominantly Muslim country that to fill senior positions in NATO’s ISAF, RS and civilian missions. In the past months, Ankara’s eagerness to take the diplomatic and military baton from the US has not played out well. Turkey found itself hung out to dry by Washington in the ill-omened Istanbul conference and, lacking credible NATO backing for maintaining a presence at Kabul Airport, was forced to seek approval from the Taliban instead, at the risk of estranging other Afghan allies. Following the implosion of the Ashraf Ghani government, rapprochement might be imminent due to mutual interests: an initially isolated Taliban regime can bolster its international credentials by cooperating with a NATO member state. Turkey, in turn, can improve its relations with Western states struggling to evacuate citizens and local embassy staff. Moreover, the recent decision by the UAE to grant asylum to Ghani and sever ties with the Taliban leaves Turkish Airlines without competition for international Kabul air traffic and could situate Afghanistan as the latest theatre for Turkey-UAE rivalry.

Fatih Ceylan, Retired Ambassador, Ankara Policy Center, Ankara

The Afghanistan imbroglio is in full swing on the international agenda. It has become the dominant item for almost every country. The Taliban is back in Kabul after 20 years, now holding power. It should come as no surprise when the so-called ‘honeymoon’ introduced by the Taliban in terms of some fundamental rights and freedoms, particularly for women, is over. At that time its genuine and familiar face will resurface in the country. The main question now is, are we back to square one?

The Afghanistan conundrum still continues to be a toxic issue in Turkey. It is among the priority items on Turkey’s domestic agenda. Now that the Taliban is back in power there is an entirely new situation for the Turkish leadership to reckon with.

Its intention to operate and protect the Kabul international airport has become a relic of the near past. A new approach and a sound strategy is needed on how to address the challenge posed by the Taliban. That challenge is destined to remain on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy agenda in the days ahead.

Lisel Hintz, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, Washington, D.C.

President Erdoğan's offer to provide security at the Kabul airport could afford his government a prime opportunity to progress toward two clear goals. First, by taking on the risk of securing a highly valuable Taliban target – albeit one potentially mitigated with Syrian mercenaries – Erdoğan seeks to soften a US stance hardened by Turkey's missile purchase from Russia and increasingly assertive gambits in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkish officials also stipulated efforts in Afghanistan would be contingent upon financial support from Western allies. This would provide much needed resources at a time of political and economic crisis for Turkey, while creating the conditions for leveraging those resources – as per Ankara's threats to send Syrian asylum-seekers to Europe if more EU funding was not forthcoming. Second, the ongoing presence of Turkish troops in Afghanistan enables Turkey to extend its presence and influence in the region. As with Turkey's military campaigns in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, the future of Afghanistan concerns key regional players with which Turkey seeks to improve its bargaining position, including China, Russia and Iran. While Turkey's unsolicited involvement would initially complicate matters, Erdoğan's government has a history of working with extremist Sunni groups. Erdoğan stated publicly that Turkey had nothing against the Taliban's beliefs, later indicating he was open to cooperation with them. These amiable overtures, perhaps, should worry the international community the most.

Zalmai Nishat, Asia Centre, University of Sussex, Brighton

The Doha peace process of Afghanistan, which officially commenced in September 2020, was made possible on the back of the US-Taliban Accord of February 29. Now, this process is effectively dead as a result of the flight of ousted President Ashraf Ghani and the subsequent crumbling of his government. Besides the Doha process, Turkey was supposed to assist Afghanistan's future political settlement through the formation of a broad-based power-sharing government, which would include both sides and the 'silent majority' who see themselves represented neither by the Taliban nor by the Kabul government. In addition, Turkey was supposed to play a key role in securing Kabul Airport, an essential gateway to the country that has been critical for international engagement with Afghanistan. All of these scenarios hang in the balance now, after the unexpected and shocking developments in the country. Turkey failed to upgrade its diplomatic mission by appointing a Presidential Special Envoy to Afghanistan, who would engage not only with diverse actors within the plural and mosaic Afghanistan but also with the multiple regional and international actors on the future political settlement. Further, such an Envoy could enable action on the looming humanitarian crisis ongoing in the country and with the outflow of

refugees from Afghanistan. Still, Turkey can achieve these aims if there is the political will in Ankara.

Kemal Kirişci, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.

Chaotic scenes streaming from Kabul suggest that Turkey's aspirations to secure Hamid Karzai Airport are now history. Managing the flow of refugees out of Afghanistan may, however, provide a vehicle for enhanced cooperation between Turkey, the EU and the US.

Afghans have long constituted a major refugee population, as the second-largest group enroute to Europe during the 2015–16 crisis and comprising 36 percent of all sea arrivals in Greece in early 2020. Turkey, already a desired destination as well as a vital hub for Afghans heading towards Europe, is facing a new wave of arrivals since the US withdrawal of troops, precipitating strong reactions from both public and opposition.

Numerous European leaders have suggested that Turkey, already host to the largest number of refugees globally, should welcome the Afghans. Yet, there is dire need for a more effective burden-sharing approach than just transferring large funds to Turkey to keep refugees from reaching Europe. Resettlement remains one important durable solution enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention and reiterated in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. A global comprehensive plan could help resettle Afghan refugees, perhaps akin to the 1989 'Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indo-chinese Refugees' adopted for 'boat people' fleeing Vietnam after the 1975 fall of Saigon. Such a plan would avoid a 'beggar-thy-neighbour' response to the Afghan crisis by supporting a multi-lateral approach, and would strengthen solidarity among Western allies.

Ergin Saygun, Retired General, Istanbul

After 20 years of fighting, the US is leaving Afghanistan, abandoning its people to an unknown and not very promising fate, as it did in Vietnam in 1975. It is also unfortunate to see the US and NATO defeated by a terrorist group, while trying to contain Russia and China.

The Afghan people traditionally have great respect and affection for Turks. This is a hard-earned reputation which should be preserved at all costs. The Taliban do not want a Turkish presence in Afghanistan, as part of NATO or with the Americans. There are negotiations the content of which is unknown. What is in the future cannot be predicted. Therefore, we do not know the extent of the collateral damage to the region and beyond.

Would Turkey's engagement help to upgrade its relations with the US and the EU? Highly unlikely. As Turkey-US negotiations on Afghanistan were continuing, 27 US Representatives sent a letter to the State Department demanding the suspension of export permits for US drone technology to Turkey. As for the EU, Turkey is remembered only when there is a trouble, such as the refugee problem. Turkish involvement, if any, should be on a bilateral basis between Turkey and whoever rules Afghanistan. Turkey should continue to help the Afghan people, as it did in the past, and under no conditions should Turkish troops engage in combat operations.

Amina Khan, Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI), Islamabad

While there has been talk of an inclusive political set-up, it is too soon to tell how events will pan out once its composition and mandate is declared. Until then, Afghanistan will continue to be a major issue of concern for the international community, and more so for the region.

Despite their previous differences and diverging interests, there is a strange regional strategic coincidence amongst regional states to play a pivotal role in helping to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan. One such country is Turkey, which has played a substantive role, be it through initiatives such as the Heart of Asia Istanbul Process or the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Turkey trilateral. Moreover, Ankara appears to share a consolidated approach on Afghanistan, which entails regional ownership, recognition of an inclusive political settlement, a role for the Taliban as a major component of a peaceful settlement as well as curbing transnational terrorist groups like the Islamic State.

A major pitfall in achieving a negotiated settlement has always been the question of who could serve as a credible interlocker of a brokered peace deal within Afghanistan, and in this regard Turkey's role certainly cannot be ruled out. Hence, it is time for Turkey along with Afghanistan's immediate neighbours take ownership of the region, and work towards a framework or monitoring mechanism to ensure some stability in Afghanistan.

Haldun Solmaztürk, Retired General, 21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü, Ankara

As the rapidly unfolding events put the so-called Afghan Peace Process to rest, the Taliban has established itself as the country's unchallenged power centre. The United States has led the way out by negotiating a unilateral, almost unconditional withdrawal deal with the Taliban, and has left the country for good. There is no imaginable role for NATO in Afghanistan and the Alliance is unlikely return to the country. Although the Turkish government initially gave the impression that the Turkish army would continue running the Hamid Kharzai airport – military side only – and take on the additional burden of securing and protecting it, this was never confirmed. To the contrary, the most recent Ministry of Defence press briefing on 29 July stated that the Turkish army while terminating 'advice' and 'training', and

would 'only continue safely running the airport'. Since even this is hardly doable now, there is no prospect of an enhanced military engagement for Turkey. The Turkish military will continue to assist evacuation, will probably advise and aid Taliban authorities in taking over the airport, and then leave. Turkey does not have the capacity to intervene unilaterally but can take part in and facilitate international political and humanitarian efforts. The war has been lost in Afghanistan. This historic event has already triggered a multiplicity of international dynamics. It is time for reflection, lessons learned and to formulate a sound international scheme for damage control in Afghanistan and beyond. A very tough road is ahead.

Tuba Eldem, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

The quick Taliban takeover of Kabul following NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, 20 years after the US-led invasion, signals the end of myth of liberal world order and damages NATO's credibility.

Turkey's enhanced engagement in Afghanistan reasserts Turkey as a pivotal swing state, offering NATO an opportunity to maintain its compromised strategic reach to this geostrategic hotspot. President Erdoğan's offer of Turkey as a potential peace broker and security provider also shows his desire to improve Turkey's transatlantic ties – and the extent of national sacrifices he is prepared to make. It also recalls the former PM Menderes' decision to participate in the Korean War in 1950 to prove Turkey's worth as an ally. Menderes' gamble eventually paid off as Turkey became both a NATO member in 1952 and one of the most important beneficiaries of US Cold War military assistance. Whether or not Erdoğan's latest turn to the East will be a route back to the West remains, however, in very much doubt today.

The US decision to withdraw apparently without a workable exit strategy has already left Turkey facing another wave of irregular migration. Still coping with at least four million Syrian refugees, it is unlikely that Turkey will be able to stop such an influx or host so many Afghans. Given the allied commitment to revive a rule-based international order, the US and the EU have both an interest and a moral responsibility to urgently act.