

# Multi-Generational Perspectives on U.S.-Turkey Relations



**Dialogue Snapshot Report**  
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the Hollings Center  
*for international dialogue*

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Notwithstanding very serious challenges, the United States and Turkey continue to share goals and interests across a broad range of geostrategic issues. The two countries continue to cooperate in certain fields, such as defense and counterterrorism. Despite the threat of tariffs and sanctions, trade relations continue with prospects for growth. Both Turkey and the U.S. also have mutual interests in promoting stability in the Middle East. Strategic reasons exist for the bilateral relationship to grow despite of challenges. What are these strategic reasons? What areas of cooperation exist? What are new areas of collaboration that can help to move the relationship forward?

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue has hosted periodic meetings over the past decade to evaluate the state of the relationship between the United States and Turkey, and assess important points of cooperation and contention. In doing so, the Center strived to convene people in an open and impartial environment to allow for deliberation and creativity. Those dialogue meetings convened a wide range of experts working on key aspects of the relationship and included academics, think tank representatives, journalists, and NGO and government representatives. In each of these meetings, the Center aimed to provide a forum to present positions and discuss differences—with the long term aim of building productive relationships that could improve ties between these important allies. In turn, the outcomes of these discussions have proven informative and instructive to governmental and non-governmental actors on both sides, furthering mutual understanding.

With the start of a new U.S. presidential administration, the Hollings Center conducted a two-day virtual meeting to evaluate the state of the relationship and project possible ways forward. To create diversity of opinion and perspective, the dialogue was divided into two discussion groups. One featured a group of experts with decades of experience in the bilateral relationship and its facets. The second group contained rising next-generation analysts that could provide new perspectives.

Both meeting sessions highlighted the continued importance of the strategic relationship between these two countries, despite the numerous challenges currently facing the relationship. While the groups differed on specific causes for disagreement and how to start rapprochement, there was a consensus that while the relationship may remain difficult in the short term, there is room and opportunity for improvement. This interest exists on both sides, but it is important to take a realistic analysis of what can and cannot be done.

### Approaches

As an American participant in the experts group stated, “Things are starting at a low point. We are going to have to show concrete progress in improving our relations with our allies.” Both the experts and next-generation groups left little doubt that the relationship currently suffers from extensive “historical baggage and ideological assumptions.” The question is how to approach the relationship and the challenges in a way that can bring forward progress. To this effect, the generational groups offered different perspectives about the best method of approach.

Both groups debated whether to approach the relationship from a wholesale perspective or through compartmentalization of issues. The experts group clearly advocated for compartmentalization, while fully recognizing that this would be challenging and require a “beautiful, delicate diplomacy.” As a Turkish participant commented, “Given the number of disagreements, we will have to move towards transactional cooperation, which many will not like, but is the *de facto* situation.” If such compartmentalization is to be successful, it will require a careful identification of the issues on which the two countries can cooperate on, a deft understanding each side’s limits, and improvement in the perception of each country’s reliability. And for there to be significant improvement of major issues such as recommitment to NATO, improvement in regional security coordination, trade, or business-to-business ties, focusing on the smaller “lower-hanging fruit” to start may be the only option.

In contrast, the next-generation group favored a wholesale, trust-building approach and conditional re-engagement of the two countries. “As much as we can manage individual crisis points, we can’t compartmentalize the bigger points,” said one participant. Another participant from Turkey highlighted how such big-picture re-engagement is necessary, but will be difficult



**Trade and commerce remain strong points in the relationship between the two countries. Dialogue participants from both groups noted the importance of continuing to foster additional trade opportunities. Photo source: [CANARAN](#)**

given the current global shift towards national self-sufficiency accelerated by the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, Turkey had shifted its economic focus more toward the Asia-Pacific and the United States took more isolationistic stances. According to another, to move from issue-based crisis management to a more proactive relationship will require, "...many Track II initiatives to erase toxicity until we can find enough potential common ground to more cooperative avenues." For this to succeed, more effort should be placed on people-to-people relationships than intergovernmental contexts.

Both generational groups debated whether rapprochement should focus on bilateral engagement or be conducted through multilateral agreements, alliances, or regional relations. Such debate was typical of all previous Hollings Center dialogues on the US-Turkey relationship. Both the United States and Turkey will need to engage on multiple fronts—bilaterally, within alliances, and within regional groups. Said one participant, "It is difficult to dissociate the regional issues from the bilateral relationship. We'll need to focus on how to improve the bilateral relationship as a tool to approach regional issues."

## Issues

The United States and Turkey in 2021 find themselves in several binding positions from which it will be difficult to dislodge. This resulted from certain actions and viewpoints taken by both countries over the past five years, which all participants readily admitted had been suboptimal to the relationship, but consistent with the oscillating tensions that have always defined this relationship. A Turkish participant in the experts' session outlined current issues into three categories. The first category includes issues where policy convergence between the two countries is plausible. The second category contains issues of disagreement where negotiated resolutions are possible. The third category consists of the "toxic issues" with little chance of convergence or negotiation. Many issues exist in each category, far more than could be discussed in one dialogue program.

However, which issues should take primary focus differed between the two generational groups. In the experts' group, the top issue of concern for Turkey was the United States' continued support for the PYD/YPG in Syria. American participants were most concerned about Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S400 missile defense system. While other issues and potential positive developments were discussed among the experts' group, the conversation consistently gravitated back to these two seemingly immovable issues.

The next-generation group's issues of focus were similar to the experts, but took slightly wider viewpoints. There was significantly more discussion on regional and multilateral issues that affect the US-Turkey relationship. Those issues included the dispute over drilling rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, resolution of conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, and the future role of security alliances. When the conversation did focus specifically on bilateral matters, the discussion was more about how to improve mutual perceptions and national image rather than on specific issues.





**Soldiers from Turkey and the United States conduct joint anti-terrorism operations in northern Syria in September 2017. Photo source: [Mohammad Bash](#)**

## Perceptions

In a previous Hollings Center U.S.-Turkey dialogue in 2013, the participants noted that while mutual perceptions had strained somewhat, there was still a recognition that the two countries could be natural partners on regional challenges. Additionally, while popular perceptions between the countries were not high, they were considerably better than perceptions towards other regional actors. By 2021, the increased strain on the relationship frayed perceptions further, and the participants in both groups stressed the need for serious effort to improve those perceptions. Participants in both groups conveyed a sense that both Turkey and the United States want to reset, each on their own terms. Much work remains to be done.

The perceptions gap between governments has some opportunity for improvement. In the next-generation group, a Turkish participant noted a desire by some to return to more typical relationship and reaffirm traditional alliances. “There’s evidence that the Turkish public is growing more discontent about separating from traditional allies. The Turkish public says they want more freedom from the West, but also recognizes the economic and security benefits of that relationship.” Likewise, an American participant in the experts’ group emphasized that U.S. opinion should not overestimate Turkey’s “shift toward Russia.” While Turkey did indeed purchase the S400 missile system, Turkey stands opposed to Russian involvement in Syria, Libya, and in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict despite dialogue. The U.S. debate on whether “Turkey is to be punished or appeased” has only toxified rhetoric on issues that may actually align well for both Turkey and America’s interests.

Several members of the next-generation group stressed the importance of dealing with the realities of each government. As an American participant noted, making decisions or creating a

productive working relationship requires acknowledging current power dynamics. “The AKP isn’t Turkey and Turkey isn’t the AKP, but the AKP is the government. Government to government relations cannot be practiced through the opposition.” The hope by some in American policy circles of a new government in Turkey has stalled meaningful agreements and antagonized political relationships. Likewise, Turkey needs to temper its expectations with the multiple branches of the U.S. Government, particularly Congress, which has displayed “rare bipartisan distaste” of Turkey. As an American participant furthered, “We really need to hope that there will be real effort [by Turkey] to engage the Biden administration, but also Congress.” Without that dual engagement on the part of Turkey, President Biden’s options for engaging Turkey may ultimately be limited by Congress. Average Turkish citizens will also need to better understand this reality of the American political system. While foreign policy is traditionally within the purview of the executive branch, Congress can still influence and force diplomatic hands through legislation and funding.

Improving popular perceptions between the two countries as a whole will require further long-term, focused effort outside traditional tracks of diplomacy. Emotions run high and will be difficult to dissuade. Anti-Americanism in Turkey, while always present in the relationship, has steadily increased. As one participant from Turkey in the experts’ group noted, “emotions are so entrenched.” Many in Turkey remain disappointed about the U.S. response to the July 15 coup attempt, with one American participant from that group revealing, “Turks across the political spectrum are united in their dislike of the United States.” On the other side, Americans do not seem to understand the source of distrust and want Turkey to go back to being an “obedient ally.” “Americans,” said an American participant, “do not understand that Turkish willingness to oppose the US comes from an understanding that the US is not that reliable [in the region].” Yet, all is not lost. As one participant from the next generation group surmised, “This is a better time to focus on the people-to-people context by promoting cultural and people-to-people relations.” Participants from both groups advocated for cooperation outside of the political sphere by continuing educational exchange and business-to-business ties to improve on these perceptions.

### **Suggestions of Actions**

While both groups noted the importance of conducting further dialogue on the US-Turkey relationship, the question arose about where best to start new engagement. None of the issues noted by the two groups contained easy solutions. “Low-hanging fruit” is in limited supply. However, there were several suggestions of opportunities.

- While both groups acknowledged that the implication of CAATSA sanctions will be unavoidable given the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the experts’ group in particular warned that sanctions may have the unintended effect of driving Turkey further away from the West toward Russia and China. Some participants suggested applying the least detrimental sanctions options and trying to find a deft way out of the impasse.
- One possible avenue of cooperation suggested by the experts’ group is collaboration on refugee issues in the region. With Turkey managing millions of refugees from the Syria

conflict and the Biden administration aiming to reform US refugee policies, this could be a natural point of engagement and trust-building, particularly when it comes to material support.

- The experts' group stressed that improving business-to-business ties would be one way to build momentum toward improving the relationship. The United States remains a top trading partner for Turkey. Several participants advocated for improving trade relations through tariff relief and the promotion of U.S. foreign direct investment. Another participant in the next-generation group suggested focusing on energy trade, particularly natural gas, which would help to supply Turkey's growing energy needs.
- Members of both groups highlighted the importance of the NATO alliance going forward. In the next generation group in particular, there was a belief by some that the traditional role of Turkey as a bulwark against Russian and Iranian aggression is still relevant and should be emphasized by diplomats and strategists.
- Similarly, participants from the experts' group suggested that the United States could build trust with Turkey by acting as a mediator in EU-Turkey relations, starting with helping to broker a resolution to disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. A new presidential administration in the US creates a window of opportunity to do so, albeit a small one.
- Representatives in the next-generation group stressed the importance of better managing and improving public opinion on both sides. While there will always be issues affecting public opinion, not factoring public opinion into strategic decisions has often closed off options.
- While there will be efforts to rebuild the relationship through multilateral organizations, participants in the next-generation group stressed that bilateral exchanges between institutions in the US and Turkey should be rebuilt. Too often, both within and outside of government, channels of communication that could improve government-to-government or people-to-people relationships have broken down or become stale.
- As international relations have become more transactional in nature, personal relationships between leaders are becoming increasingly important throughout the region. Despite the desire by many to multilateralize and institutionalize the relationships in the region, there will need to be a recognition that this inter-personal trend is unlikely to change immediately. Several participants in both groups stressed that rapprochement will require recognition of this regional reality.

Cover Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia, and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey.

To learn more about the Hollings Center's mission, history and funding:

<http://www.hollingscenter.org/about/mission-and-approach>

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