

1. TURKEY WEST POISED TO DANCE A VIOLENT TANGO BEHAVIOR AND CYPRUS

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Turkey, West poised to dance a 'violent tango'

Washington-based foreign policy expert Nicholas Danforth talks about Recep Tayyip Erdogan's provocative behavior and Cyprus

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An expert on Turkey and US foreign policy in the Middle East, Nicholas Danforth has collaborated with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). Based in Washington, he just finished a policy brief on Turkey for the Brookings Institution and he's set to publish his first book this summer, titled "The Remaking of Republican Turkey: Memory and Modernity Since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire."

Recep Tayyip Erdogan is trying to reposition Turkey on the world stage. How far can he go?

A lot of Erdogan's rhetoric focuses on making Turkey a great power. He sees that as challenging European hegemony and standing up for the rights of the oppressed that according to him are the Muslims. It's a vision both Islamist and anti-imperialist.

Does he really want to revive a version of the Ottoman past?

When you look at his vision for being a great power it actually seems a lot closer to a late 20th century American or Russian sort of old-fashioned superpower status. Erdogan talks a lot about the United Nations. He says for example that Turkey has never been part of the UN Security Council. But the UN is a late 20th century innovation. Also, Turkey talks a lot about establishing foreign military bases. But those are things that 20th century powers are supposed to have.

Does he see Turkey as an emerging power ready to counteract France on the European and Mediterranean grand stage?

France is both a Christian and secular nation. French President Emmanuel Macron has anti-Islamist views and France has a long colonial history in the Middle East. It's easy for Erdogan to cast himself against France.

Opinion polls suggest that it will be very difficult for Erdogan to win the 2023 presidential election. Why then is there persistent pessimism that the pendulum will not return toward emboldening Turkey's secular and modernizing forces?

It seems like his popular support has been waning. But it also seemed like that in the last two elections. People have been predicting that he'd be unable to win in a truly fair election. But he's been very good at calculating just the minimal amount of undemocratic behavior necessary to win. So far, he has been good about maintaining his rule without having to completely abandon a pretense of democracy. He does have a lot of tricks up his sleeve.

How about the Cyprus question? Do you think he is really moving

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toward a two-state solution in Cyprus or it is just rhetoric?

My suspicion is that the negotiations that are about to start are very unlikely to lead toward positive results. Turkish expectations seem to me irreconcilable with any kind of solution that the international community or the Greek side would agree with. It could be said that the goal of negotiations right now is to play for time. To buy some time while the new Biden administration starts operating.

Could a possible collapse of the negotiations be used as an excuse for a Turkish-backed unilateral declaration of independence for the break-away state in northern Cyprus? It certainly seems likely that these



Nicholas Danforth doesn't expect a positive result from the upcoming negotiations on the Cyprus issue. "Turkish expectations seem to me irreconcilable with any kind of solution that the international community or the Greek side would agree with," he says.

negotiations will break down and there will be renewed talk of pushing for independence for northern Cyprus. But I don't know what this actually means. Does it mean that from the whole world only Turkey, Azerbaijan and half of Libya would recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus?

Where does Washington stand on this?

When the Greek side rejected the Annan Plan there was a lot of sympathy for northern Cyprus in Europe and in Washington. Turkish foreign policy makers tried to capitalize on that frustration. But today, after this kind of provocative behavior, even if there is some real sympathy over Cyprus, it's not going to amount to much diplomatically.

In your recent Brookings policy brief titled "Between Cooperation and Containment" you suggested that the US should work around Turkey to contain Turkey. Could you elaborate on that?

Turkey is behaving provocatively. The US should work with other partners in the region, such as Greece and Cyprus, to help contain that provocative behavior and at the same time leave the door open to negotiations. I think that defense cooperation between the United States and Greece will continue. Also, US rhetorical diplomatic support for the Eastern Mediterranean gas forum will also continue.

How can the US effectively handle Turkey when Erdogan knows that

the West cannot really afford to lose Turkey?

There are very real concerns in Washington about losing Turkey. There are people in the Biden administration who are very concerned about that. But Erdogan may have overplayed his hand. People are worried about losing Turkey but if thresholds will be crossed, if everyone in Washington suddenly decides that Turkey has already been lost, then Erdogan loses that leverage.

So, what's the next act in the play?

For a long time, people in Washington thought that if you were nicer to Erdogan that would improve relations with Turkey. It was not the case. You also had people who held out a lot of hope that as soon as you threatened him with sanctions he'd fall back in line. I don't think that's the case either. I think you're much more likely to have a very strange situation in which Turkey does try to use the leverage that it has against the United States and against Europe. But at the end of the day, life will get very difficult for Turkey if it alienates absolutely everyone. Erdogan knows that the backlash is going to be too much to handle. So, I think that what you're going to see is a very strained and somewhat hostile dance between Turkey and the West. Two steps forward, one step back.

Is a kind of geopolitical tango about to unfold on the world stage?

It'll be uglier than that. It will be a violent tango.

Everybody wants to know what the US would offer Turkey in return for abandoning the S-400 missile system.

Washington does not think there should be rewards for behaving like a good NATO ally. The rewards for Turkey for abandoning the S-400s will be lifting CAATSA sanctions. And if things really go well, then Turkey's participation in the F-35 program might be reconsidered.

So, there's the catch – the F-35s.

Not at this point. But in the long run, if the S-400s are abandoned and other changes happen, it might be considered.

Would Turkey finally agree to refer the differences over the continental shelf in the Aegean to the International Court in The Hague?

The short answer is no.

Why not?

This is the problem with the Libya deal. Given how aggressively Turkey staked out its claims with the Libya deal and given how much it played that up for domestic consumption, it has put itself in a position where I don't think it is going to be able to accept any decision that would be a result of fair arbitration.

Do you expect any kind of violent conflict between Turkey and Greece?

I don't think there's going to be a violent conflict. But I think it's a bad sign that we're even talking about that.

What is the main message of your upcoming book "The Remaking of Republican Turkey: Memory and Modernity Since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire"?

One aspect of it is the rewriting of history in order to fit the new geopolitical developments. So, for example, in 1953 Turkey celebrated the 500th anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople. Turkey had just joined NATO the previous year and the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, a western city, was presented as being an expression of Turkey's pro-Western orientation. There were talks about how the conquest of Constantinople helped trigger the Renaissance in Europe and also helped save Greece from Russian domination because the Ottomans protected the Greek Orthodox Church from the Russians. I assume that the rewriting of history will continue to happen in accordance with changing geopolitical realities.