

1. WARM WORDS , HARD REALITIES : TRUMP AND ERDOGAN'S FRAGILE RESET

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Warm words, hard realities: Trump and Erdogan's fragile reset

COMMENTARY | BY RONALD MEINARDUS*

There was no shortage of pomp. US President Donald Trump showered his Anatolian guest with flattering remarks. For Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had been denied a White House invitation under President Joe Biden, the visit had long been a matter of personal ambition. The lavish reception from Trump signals a foreign policy reversal.

Under the reign of President Trump, Oval Office meetings have a way of generating their own momentum – not always to the liking of the visitor, as the world has seen in recent months. This time was different: Trump greeted his Turkish counterpart with unusual warmth, even camaraderie at moments. “He’s a highly respected man. He’s respected very much in his country and all throughout Europe. It’s an honor to have him at the White House,” Trump said. The praise was somewhat undermined by his aside that the two had known each other for years – even during what Trump described as his own “exile” following the “rigged” US elections of 2020 – before adding, “You know, he knows about rigged elections better than anybody.”

Anyone expecting this jab to pivot into a lecture on democratic principles, given Erdogan’s increasingly authoritarian rule, was left disappointed. Turkey’s drift into authoritarianism was not on the agenda – and, clearly, not worth a word to the current US administration.

Beyond that awkward exchange, the summit was framed around improving bilateral relations. “We are capable of raising relations between Turkey and the United States to a new level,” Erdogan declared. He then named the shorthand that has defined



US President Donald Trump (left) shakes hands with Recep Tayyip Erdogan as he welcomes his Turkish counterpart to the White House, in Washington, DC, on September 25, 2025.

US-Turkish defense talks – F-35 and F-16 – and, somewhat unexpectedly, mentioned the “Heybellada School,” better known as the Theological School of Halki. Closed since 1971, the seminary on an island near Istanbul was the central training ground of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Its fate has been a perennial flashpoint in Greek-Turkish relations and the focus of international campaigns, especially by the influential Greek lobby in the United States.

Anticipating that Trump might raise the issue, Erdogan moved first: He would personally take up the matter and meet Patriarch Bartholomew, he said. The patriarch had already ap-

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pealed to Trump in a White House meeting. For the Ecumenical Patriarchate, reopening Halki is existential. That Trump seized on the issue points both to his instinctive affinity for religious questions and to the sway of Greek-American lobbying.

Still, the heart of the talks lay in arms and energy. Erdogan is pushing to modernize Turkey’s aging air force. While the Biden administration had approved the sale of additional F-16 fighter jets in return for Ankara’s consent to Sweden’s NATO accession, the F-35 program remains highly contentious. These aircraft are the most advanced multirole fighters in service across NATO and allied air forces. Turkey had originally signed on as a founding partner, planning to acquire up to 100 jets, with Turkish industry deeply embedded in the supply chain. Erdogan’s decision to purchase Russia’s S-400 missile defense system, however, led Washing-

ton to eject Turkey from the program in 2019. Since then, the Russian system has stood as the immovable obstacle to any normalization of defense cooperation. With bipartisan determination, US lawmakers have insisted that the S-400 be scrapped before Turkey could ever rejoin the F-35 project.

Now Trump signaled a willingness to reopen talks. “I’m going to see to it that we get that to him. He needs certain things and we need certain things,” he said in his typically vague manner, hinting at a possible deal. But any arms transaction requires congressional approval, and Capitol Hill remains a formidable obstacle. A seasoned coalition of pro-Greece and pro-Israel lawmakers is already mobilizing to block the arms sales to Ankara.

Erdogan did not arrive empty-handed. On the day Trump rolled out the red carpet, Turkish Airlines announced a multi-billion-dollar order for 75 Boeing aircraft – 50 firm purchases and 25 options for its long-haul B787-9 and B787-10 fleet. Altogether, the deal covers up to 150 planes. In addition, Washington and Ankara signed a “Memorandum on Strategic Cooperation in Civil Nuclear Energy.” “We have launched a new process to deepen the long-standing and multifaceted cooperation between Turkey and the United States in nuclear energy,” Turkish Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar said.

Yet Trump’s ambitions go further. In exchange for a reset in relations and possible arms deals, he demanded nothing less than Ankara’s energy decoupling from Moscow. “I’d like to have him stop buying any oil from Russia, while Russia continues this rampage against Ukraine,” Trump declared

in the Oval Office. Official figures show that in 2024, 66 percent of Turkey’s oil imports and 41 percent of its gas came from Russia. These numbers illustrate the depth of Turkish-Russian energy ties – precisely what Trump now seeks to undercut.

Reports of a \$43 billion, 20-year US liquefied natural gas agreement are unlikely to make much difference to this dependence. In Turkey, concern is already rising over soaring heating costs, as Greek correspondents note.

That the summit passed without a blowup – and was even described by some as “historic” – owed largely to the decision not to air the many points of dispute in public. On Gaza, the divide could hardly be starker. Asked by a reporter about Erdogan’s position, Trump feigned ignorance: “I don’t know his stance. I can’t tell you about that.” Erdogan likewise ensured that Gaza and Hamas did not spoil the celebratory mood. On his presidential plane, where he traditionally fields questions from the Turkish press, he made no mention of Israel or the war. Instead, he offered a diplomatic gloss: Relations with the United States were developing “on the basis of mutual respect.” True, not all issues can be resolved “in a single meeting,” Erdogan conceded – but the summit had allowed “substantial progress on many points.”

For now, it appears Erdogan has been the one to extend goodwill in advance. Time will tell whether the glittering White House reception and Trump’s warm words will prove worth the price Turkey has paid.

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