With friends like Turkey’s Erdogan, who needs enemies?

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US-Turkish relations are mired in the worst crisis of their history. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is demanding President Donald Trump turn over Erdogan’s sworn enemy, Fethullah Gulen. Trump seeks the release of US pastor Andrew Brunson, who was imprisoned on the pretext he had been involved in Turkey’s 2016 coup attempt.

The US has levied sanctions on two senior Turkish officials, akin to those imposed on Russian oligarchs after the seizure of Crimea. Turkey responded by freezing non-existent Turkish assets of two Trump cabinet members.

As tempers flare, it’s worth underscoring what is taking place: an unprecedented standoff between the presidents of two NATO-member countries.

The two leaders — recognising one’s America First and the other’s New Turkey as opposing faces of the same populism — may soon come off their testosterone high and stage-manage a reconciliation. Trump has shown himself capable of this with Kim Jong-un. Meanwhile, Erdogan, sensitive to currency woes and dependence on foreign investment, will be looking for a way to halt the escalation without losing face. The conflict nonetheless points to a deeper rift.

As Western democracies worked to stop the spread of Islamist extremism in the Middle East, Turkey engaged in a double game. Witness the government’s delivery of arms to groups affiliated with al-Qa’ida and later Islamic State in 2014, several months before the latter’s siege of Kobani.

Or consider the all-out offensive by Turkish forces against a Kurdish enclave in northeast Syria earlier this year. Afrin was under Western protection. Yet the US condoned the attack on its
staunchest and most courageous allies in the region, even announcing the pullback of its own troops shortly after.

Between these two outrages, as if to highlight more clearly his neo-Ottoman ambitions, Erdogan posed with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and — in Ankara this April — with both. The trio met at a summit called to find a “solution” to the violence in Syria that they have fomented, spitting in the face of every friend of democracy and international law.

Erdogan’s relations with Putin are not limited to photo-ops. The sultan-in-the-making, who already had signed an agreement with the Kremlin to build nuclear power plants in Turkey, turned again to Moscow late last year for anti-aircraft missiles that could pose compatibility problems with NATO weapons systems.

Erdogan is going forward with the provocation even after the US suggested it could jeopardise the Pentagon’s promised delivery of F-35 jet fighters.

At the 10th annual summit of the BRICs nations, held in Johannesburg last month, Erdogan was received as a guest of honour. There he very conspicuously raised the prospect of a strategic rapprochement with China — and, once again, Putin’s Russia. Erdogan’s ambition of resurrecting the ancient Turkic empire has snuffed out the secular, modern ideals of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

Leaders of other illiberal states across Eurasia help him along, dreaming variously of reviving the caliphate; restoring the China of the Han, Ming, and Qing dynasties; recreating a tsarist empire; and bringing back the reign of the Achaemenid and Persian kings.

The US-Turkish crisis is about much more than the egos of two phony tough guys. We must ask, calmly but unflinchingly, about the wisdom of our relations with an admittedly great country possessed of a great civilisation that is no longer a friend or ally.

Should the West continue to share military secrets on which our security depends with a nation that is forming strategic partnerships with the powers most hostile to us?

Trump said in July that Erdogan “does things the right way.” The rest of us cannot say the same of a leader who increasingly opposes the West on virtually all of the issues on which liberal civilisation depends. Not long ago Europeans were debating, prematurely, whether to admit Turkey to the EU. Now the time has come for the West collectively to demand not simply the release of a hostage, but the expulsion of Turkey from NATO.
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