

TURKEY: Ankara likely to delay, not stop, Swedish and Finnish NATO membership

- President Tayyip Erdogan's current insistence on blocking Swedish and Finnish membership of NATO is likely to delay, rather than prevent, the two countries from eventually joining the alliance.
- As is often the case, Erdogan's abrupt move has more to do with domestic politics than foreign policy. Creating artificial crises in foreign policy has often helped him boost, at least temporarily, his popularity.
- In the most likely scenario, Erdogan will soften his stance in the coming weeks following pleas from NATO partners. A call from US President Joe Biden would help, especially if accompanied by a pledge to speed up the sale of weapons to Turkey.

On 18 May, Turkey blocked what had been expected to be the fast-tracking of Sweden and Finland's applications for NATO membership, refusing to remove the veto unless they lift their restrictions on arms sales to Ankara, cease what Turkish officials have described as their support for "terrorism", and extradite alleged "terrorists" to Turkey.

Both Sweden and Finland have restricted arms sales to Turkey since its 2019 invasion of northern Syria against the Kurdish dominated People's Defence Units (YPG), which Turkey regards as being an extension of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). But Ankara's anger – and most of Turkish officials' public and private vitriol – has been directed at Sweden, which has long been a refuge for dissident Kurds and, more recently, members of the Gulen Movement, Erdogan's former ally and now bitter foe. Earlier today (19 May), Erdogan publicly described Sweden as a "terrorist nest".

The standoff comes at a time when opinion polls are continuing to show a long-term decline in popular support for both Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections, which are due to be held by June 2023 at the latest. Living standards are rapidly falling and independent research suggests that annual inflation is running at more than twice the official figure of 70% as the Turkish economy slides towards its worst crisis in a generation. For Erdogan, an international confrontation – particularly one in which he can be seen as defying the West – plays well with hardcore Turkish nationalists amongst his support base. However, the longer the confrontation continues, the higher risk that it could exercise more downward pressure on the increasingly vulnerable Turkish Lira.

Erdogan is no stranger to about-turns. On 7 April, an Istanbul court – acting under instructions from the presidential palace – acceded to a request from Riyadh and formally halted the trial in absentia of 26 Saudi Arabian officials who had been accused of involvement in murder of Saudi dissident Jalal Khashoggi in Istanbul in October 2018. On 28-29 April, Erdogan visited Saudi Arabia to try to persuade Riyadh to pump money into the Turkish economy.

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Also, recall Turkey's failed 2009 attempt to block former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen from becoming NATO's secretary general. Ankara objected to Rasmussen because the pro-Kurdish Roj-TV was based in Denmark. Under pressure from its allies, Ankara ultimately accepted Rasmussen's election even though Copenhagen refused its demands.

However, given the central role that anti-Western rhetoric now plays in Erdogan's narratives to his domestic audiences, finding a way out of the current crisis without incurring either a domestic humiliation or an economic meltdown is likely to be more of a challenge. Nevertheless, there is a limit to how long Erdogan can maintain his current stance before the domestic costs, in the form of the economic repercussions, outweigh the benefits. There is also a limit to how long a single issue can hold the Turkish public's attention. As he has done in the past, at some point Erdogan is likely to create a new distraction – such as stepping up his attacks on the domestic opposition. Once the issue of Swedish and Finnish membership within NATO is no longer a staple of Erdogan's public pronouncement, there is room for maneuver and compromise.

There is no prospect of the Swedish and Finnish governments extraditing the alleged "terrorists" to Turkey, partly because they cannot dictate to their countries' legal systems and partly because some of those wanted by Turkey are known never to have engaged in or advocated violence, merely to have been outspoken critics of Erdogan. But there is a possibility that, once the current furore has abated, Turkey will be prepared to settle for pledges of a crackdown on outlawed organizations – and the PKK is already on the EU's list of proscribed terrorist groups.

There is also room for maneuver on the ban on arms sales, such as promising to review it. In addition, although Turkish officials have publicly claimed that no country which imposes restrictions on arms sales to a NATO member should ever be allowed to join the alliance, several existing members already impose such restrictions on Turkey, including the US.

There is no prospect, as some Turkish officials have advocated, of the US rescinding the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions imposed on Turkey after it took delivery of Russian S-400 air defense systems in 2019. Nor is there any possibility of a reversal of the expulsion – for the same reason – of Turkey from the F-35 stealth fighter program. But the White House could step up pressure on a currently reluctant US Congress to approve Turkey's request for 40 new F-16 fighters and for 80 upgrade kits for its existing fleet of now aging F-16s.

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