



Erdoğan's victory and the west

Description

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Erdoğan's re-election as Turkish president means that Ankara's relations with its Western allies will remain turbulent. The West should expect a bumpy ride.

On May 28th, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan secured re-election as Turkish president with 52 per cent of the vote. Erdoğan's victory came despite a broad range of opposition parties uniting behind a single presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The question for Western policymakers is what Erdoğan's re-election for another five-year term means for Turkey's domestic politics and particularly for its foreign policy. A change of direction in domestic governance appears unlikely, as there is little incentive for Erdoğan to change course and become more accommodating to his opponents.

The degree of foreign policy tensions between Turkey and the West is more difficult to predict. Over the past decade, Erdoğan has embarked on an increasingly assertive and militarised foreign policy that has led to friction with Turkey's NATO allies. Ankara has sent ships near Greek islands and Cyprus to assert claims to a large maritime zone in the eastern Mediterranean; forged close ties to Russia, including in the military field; and is holding up Swedish accession to NATO. But there have also been periods where Erdoğan has sought to reduce tensions with the West. For example, after the catastrophic earthquakes that struck Turkey in February this year, he tried to improve relations with the West, allowing Finland to join NATO and dialling down tensions with Greece.

In the near term, there is a fair chance that this policy of détente towards the West will go

on. Turkey's economy is in a fragile condition. Public spending ahead of the election created additional pressure on public finances and further weakened the lira, even as the central bank propped it up with its foreign exchange reserves – which are running dangerously low. Inflation remains extremely high, and Turkey's current account deficit is near record levels. The risk of a currency crisis is very high unless Turkey raises its interest rates to fight inflation or asks the IMF for a loan. Both options, however, are difficult for Erdoğan politically.

Turkey's current economic fragility does not guarantee that Erdoğan will pursue constructive relations with the West in the coming years. First, he could easily make the West the scapegoat for his economic difficulties. Second, he may use foreign policy precisely to distract from the country's economic problems and rally public opinion. The temptation to engage in foreign policy behaviour that has relatively low costs and high political benefits – such as ratcheting up tensions with Greece and Cyprus – could be particularly strong. Third, there is no reason to believe that Erdoğan's overarching foreign policy ambitions and outlook have changed. He remains focused on establishing Turkey as a major regional power with a foreign policy that is not beholden to any bloc. Reducing Turkey's economic reliance on the West is an important part of that strategy.

The first test in Turkey's relations with the West will be the issue of Swedish NATO accession, which Turkey is still holding up. Erdoğan is likely to want something highly tangible in return for lifting the veto. Turkey wants to buy F-16 fighter jets from the US, but there is opposition to the deal in Congress. It is possible that the US and Turkey will reach an understanding that Ankara will allow Sweden to join, with the US providing F-16s soon after. But, if a deal cannot be struck before the NATO Vilnius summit in July, tensions between Turkey and its Western allies are bound to increase.

Even if Turkey allows Sweden to join NATO, there is significant potential for clashes with the West on other issues. US military support for the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, which Turkey sees as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist organisation, would still be a major source of Turkish resentment towards the United States. For the EU, US and NATO, Turkey's relationship with Russia would continue to be a major potential cause of friction. Erdoğan is likely to carry on with Turkey's balancing act between the West and Russia, but that policy could be increasingly difficult to sustain.

The EU and the US are likely to ramp up pressure on Turkey to align with Western sanctions, or at least to prevent Russian companies from obtaining sanctioned goods via

Turkey. However, Ankara will remain reluctant to act. Maintaining good relations with Russia is important to Turkey for a range of reasons. Turkey is still reliant on Russian gas, and Russia's military presence in Syria could make Turkey's operations against the YPG more difficult or push more Syrian refugees towards Turkey. Russia has also been a source of economic help for Turkey, injecting money into the Turkish economy for the construction of a nuclear power plant and allowing Ankara to defer gas payments in the run-up to the election. And more tourists visit Turkey from Russia than from any other country.

The eastern Mediterranean will also undoubtedly remain a source of friction between Turkey and the West. There is little reason to think that Erdoğan will stop pushing for a separate state for the Turkish Cypriots. Tensions with Greece are likely to ebb and flow, but the underlying issues on the delimitation of maritime zones and airspace, on the demilitarised status of Aegean islands and on sovereignty over certain islets are bound to stay intractable. There is a risk that Ankara may at some point return to its policy of sending military ships to waters near Greek islands and Cyprus, to assert its claims to a large maritime zone and stoke nationalist opinion. In that scenario, some EU countries – like France – would probably call for sanctions on Turkey, as they did in the summer of 2020. But consensus both in Europe and the US could be elusive.

Tense relations with Greece and Cyprus, combined with the EU's concerns about the state of democratic freedoms in Turkey, mean that the EU-Turkey relationship will remain tense and transactional. Ankara's EU accession talks will remain frozen. But many member-states worry that ending the accession process would further weaken pro-Western sentiment in Turkey, leading Ankara to become even more disruptive and detached from the West. Any deepening of EU-Turkey relations can only take place outside of the accession framework, but even that will be very challenging. In principle both the EU and Turkey would like to modernise the customs union. But the EU does not want to open negotiations until Ankara strengthens democratic freedoms and takes steps to improve relations with Cyprus. It is difficult to imagine that Erdoğan would be willing to do either, making it likely that the customs union will continue to erode if Ankara introduces new non-tariff barriers such as certification requirements. Over time, bilateral trade could shrink, driving the EU and Turkey further apart.

Still, the EU and Turkey will have to work together in a range of areas, including energy, migration, and even foreign policy. In the energy field, Turkey will remain an important partner for the Union, as a major country for the transit of gas. Migration will also remain a major area of co-operation, as it is in the EU's interest to continue to help Turkey

support the nearly four million refugees that it is hosting. In foreign policy, the EU and Turkey will have to work together on a case-by-case basis when they have overlapping interests – for example in trying to stabilise Libya or reducing Russian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The need for some co-operation in energy, migration and foreign policy means that it is not in the EU's interest to minimise communication with Turkey, as has been the case in the past few years. The newly established European Political Community is particularly well placed to serve as a platform for intensified consultations between EU countries and Turkey given that it is focused on discussing shared challenges and that it is unencumbered by the logic of accession.

Erdoğan's re-election means that Turkey will redouble its efforts to forge an independent path in world affairs, reducing its ties to the West and strengthening those with other powers. Co-operation with the West will still take place, but it will be wholly transactional. The potential for additional turbulence, particularly over foreign policy will remain high, as there are a range of issues on which Ankara is likely to clash with the EU and the US. The West should expect a bumpy ride.

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