

TURKISH QUAGMIRE

WHY TURKEY BLOCKS SWEDEN'S NATO ACCESSION

HALIL KARAVELI

Summary

Turkey was bound to have issues with Sweden and its pro-Kurdish stance, and singled out Sweden because of its longstanding commitment to Kurdish aspirations. However, it is the continued US support for Kurds that is Turkey's main concern. The issue is not what Sweden says or does, but what the US does or fails to do on the ground in Syria that is consequential for Turkey's national security interests – and this will decide its position on the Nordic enlargement of NATO that the US government is pushing for.

Turkey is going to remain pro-Western, but it will also, as it is showing today, stand its own ground and not hesitate to confront other Western powers. Turkey is not going to defer to the US as it did during the Cold War. Nonetheless, the hard strategic interests of the US and Turkey coincide to a much larger extent than what appearances suggest.

Washington will have to decide what it cares most about: the survival of the PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish statelet or a strengthened NATO with Sweden as a member. Ultimately, the crisis in NATO over Sweden's membership will only be overcome when the US and Turkey resolve to address their differences and reach a new, mutual understanding.



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The Turkish Quagmire

Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO remains blocked by Turkey and the membership process has stalled. On January 12, left-wing activists from the Rojava Committee of Sweden hanged an effigy of Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in front of the city hall in Stockholm. On January 21, Swedish authorities granted a far-right activist permission to hold a protest outside the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm, where he burned a copy of the Quran. On the same day, left-wing activists mounted a protest against Turkey and Sweden's bid to join NATO and expressed their support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency against Turkey since 1984. The protesters, who carried PKK flags, rolled out a banner that stated, "We are all PKK".

In response, President Erdoğan lambasted Sweden on January 23, saying that the country should not expect any goodwill from Turkey as long as it fails to "show respect for the religious beliefs of Muslims and Turkish people", allowing the burning of the Quran and letting "terrorist organizations run amok". On February 1, Erdoğan spelled out that Sweden should not "bother" to try to secure Turkey's acceptance as long it remains legally permissible in Sweden to burn the Quran. On February 5, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Çavuşoğlu, said "terrorist organizations, radicals, are placing mines on Sweden's NATO path" and that "Sweden is voluntarily stepping on these mines when it could have cleared them".

The PKK is listed as a terrorist organization by the EU and the US as well as by Sweden. Nonetheless, Sweden has been a sanctuary for the PKK. "One of the reasons that Turkey's spotlight has been directed toward Sweden, and not toward Finland, is the Swedish relation to the PKK", explained Ambassador Oscar Stenström, Sweden's chief NATO negotiator, on January 29. Stenström pointed out that a "non-negligible part of the financing of the organization emanates from Sweden". "Unlike Finland, we have a greater proportion of PKK's financing from

Sweden", Stenström said.

Moreover, several Swedish politicians, mostly from the left, have taken part in public events organized by PKK sympathizers. The former Social Democratic government of Sweden offered political and financial support to PKK-linked Kurdish groups in northern Syria – the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG). The PKK and the PYD are both members of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), whose honorary leader is Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's leader (who serves a life sentence in Turkey). The KCK is officially committed to implementing Öcalan's ideology of "democratic confederalism", that is, the unification of the Kurdish populated areas in Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

To join NATO, Sweden has pledged to sever these ties and amend its laws to make PKK activities – financing and recruiting -- on its soil illegal. Indeed, the new conservative government has been eager to earn Turkey's trust. It has publicly distanced itself from the PYD and YPG. Swedish Prime Minister, Ulf Kristersson, condemned the hanging of the Erdoğan effigy as an "act of sabotage" against Sweden's NATO bid. He also stated that the burning of the Quran was, although legal, "deeply disrespectful".

Yet, as Erdoğan's statement makes clear, no Turkish government will ask the Turkish parliament to ratify Sweden's NATO membership as long as what Turkey perceives as anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim emotions run high in Sweden. While the Swedish government has lived up to its pledges to Turkey in the tripartite agreement that Sweden, Finland and Turkey signed at the NATO summit in Madrid last June, it now needs to convince the Swedish public that meeting Turkey's demands does not amount to surrendering to "fascism" as leftists and liberals in Sweden protest, and to stem the rise of anti-Turkish opinion. This, however, will not be easy as other Western countries, in particular the US, remain committed to the Kurdish militants with whom Sweden has severed ties. As Turkey sees it, the continued

US support for the PYD and YPG undermine the argument—which the Swedish government needs to make—that Sweden, by meeting Turkey’s demands, is joining other Western democracies in a united front against terrorism.

Turkey was bound to have issues with Sweden and its pro-Kurdish stance, and singled out Sweden (not Finland, with which Turkey has no issue and would ratify were it to pursue the NATO process without Sweden) because of its longstanding commitment to Kurdish aspirations. However, it is the continued US support for Kurds that is Turkey’s main concern. The establishment of a Kurdish statelet adjacent to its long border with Syria has alerted the security bureaucracy in Ankara to the risk that Turkey could lose control over its own Kurdish region. Sweden and Finland’s NATO applications have presented Turkey with an opportunity to neutralize what it sees as the principal threat to its national security: the PKK and Kurdish groups with links to the PKK.

The fact that Sweden and Finland are the first Western nations to say the Kurdish groups that have carved out a self-governing territory in northern Syria are linked to the PKK and pose a security threat to Turkey represents a diplomatic gain for Ankara. But that was never going to be enough for Turkey. The issue is not what Sweden says or does, but what the US does or fails to do on the ground in Syria that is consequential for Turkey’s national security interests – and this will decide its position on the Nordic enlargement of NATO that the US government is pushing for. Turkey will continue to veto Swedish accession (Finnish accession is only blocked at the moment because the application was made jointly) as long as its main concern has not been addressed – and pro-Kurdish left-wing and anti-Muslim right-wing activists in Sweden will keep providing Turkey with excuses for doing so. But Erdoğan’s outrage about these incidents is a sideshow.

Optimistic Expectations: Elections and F-16s

It is generally assumed that Turkey is leveraging its

veto against Sweden and Finland to win concessions from the US. However, the fact that Turkey deems this an opportunity to neutralize what it sees as the principal threat to its national security is not fully, if at all, recognized. Instead, there is an expectation among Western observers and policy-makers that Turkey will ultimately be swayed by the sale of F-16 fighter jets that Turkey badly needs to maintain its air force. Yet, not only is the sale meeting stiff resistance in the US Congress, but its realization would – at most – save the Turkish-American relationship from collapse. For one, being allowed to buy the soon-outdated F-16 would not compensate for Turkey’s ejection from the F-35 combat aircraft project after its ill-advised purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system. On January 31, İbrahim Kalın, President Erdoğan’s spokesperson and chief diplomatic advisor, warned that the attempts to link the sale of the F-16 fighter jets to Sweden and Finland’s NATO bids were futile. “Then it is better that the US Congress chooses not to address the issue at all, because an acquiescence to the sale is not going to change our position (on Sweden and Finland joining NATO)”, Kalın said. On February 5, Turkish Defense Minister, Hulusi Akar, who is also a former Chief of the General Staff in charge of Turkey’s military build-up in recent years, said the F-16 fighter jets are not the only option for Turkey.

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Neither should it be hoped that the US will be able to either pressure or cajole Turkey into accepting Sweden and Finland into NATO after the Turkish presidential election in May 2023. The Biden administration may wager that Erdoğan, if he is

re-elected, will yield as he no longer would need to appear strong against the US for electoral needs, or, if he loses, that the new Turkish president will be eager to restore the relationship with Washington and do America's bidding. Yet, this too is an excessively optimistic view. It would be a mistake not to appreciate that Turkey's stance reflects the long-term strategic interests of the Turkish state, which is a broad, non-partisan view unrelated to electoral concerns. Hence, it will not be affected, one way or the other, by the outcome of the upcoming presidential election. Instead, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO depends on the bonds of trust being restored between the US and Turkey.

The Deterioration of US-Turkey Relations

In a recent interview Erdoğan's chief diplomatic advisor, Ibrahim Kalın, remarked that it was strange that the leading anti-Marxist and capitalist power, the US, has aligned with Marxist-Leninists, the PKK-affiliated Kurdish groups in northern Syria, and is supporting their socialist experiment. That is indeed ironic and a historic first. But the US arms and finances the PKK-linked Kurdish militants in Syria because they have fought against the Islamic State. Their success against the Islamic State at a time when Turkey was doing little to fight the terrorist group is the main reason why the US government relies on them. Initially, US officials denied that there was an organic link between the PKK and the PYD/YPG, but today accept that link, while defending American support to the Kurdish party and militia as being only tactical, temporary and transactional. However, US support is anything but temporary. Washington deems it crucial to preserve the alliance with the Kurdish groups in Syria as an insurance against a possible re-emergence of the jihadist threat there. Also, this alliance provides the US military with a territorial foothold in Syria, a forward base that may prove useful in a future conflict with Iran, the main backer, alongside Russia, of the Syrian regime.

However, what represents a national security asset for the US is something that Turkey considers an existential threat. US backing of the PKK statelet has undermined Turkey's faith in the US, which has come to be seen by leading figures in the Turkish state elite as a hostile power. "For years, America and the West have not given up on their dream of establishing a terrorist state in the region by providing money, supplies and human resources", Turkish Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, said on February 2.

Yet, the US is unlikely to budge and accommodate Turkey, abandoning the Kurdish groups unless the Turkish government recognizes that the US faces a strategic threat too, and is prepared to help address it. When former US Vice President, Mike Pence, and former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, visited Turkey in 2019, as Turkey was preparing to launch its latest intervention in northern Syria to date, ambassador Kalın argued that the US did not need the Kurdish groups as an insurance against the Islamic State, implying that the US instead trusted Turkey. Yet the Turkish argument failed to impress the Americans. There is no trust left between Washington and Ankara.

In an interview in 2012, US President, Barack Obama, listed Erdoğan among the five world leaders with whom he had been able to forge "friendships and bonds of trust". But these bonds were broken when Obama and Erdoğan disagreed over Syria. Since then, Turkish-American relations have not ceased to deteriorate. Obama relied heavily on Turkey in seeking to oust Bashar al-Assad from power, and American and Turkish officials initially cooperated closely. But while the Obama administration encouraged – unsuccessfully – a broad Syrian opposition coalition, in which the influence of Islamists would be circumscribed, the Turkish government threw its weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey provided a crucial sanctuary for the Sunni rebels fighting Assad and helped to arm and train them. Worse still, Turkey turned a blind eye to the presence of jihadists on its territory, and used them to suppress the aspirations of the Kurds in Syria. In

November 2012, Islamist rebels from Jabhet al-Nusra, which reputedly had links to Al Qaeda in Iraq, entered the Syrian town of Ras al-Ain from Turkey and attacked the militants of the PYD which had earlier that year wrested control of parts of north-eastern Syria and declared it an autonomous region, Rojava, western Kurdistan. In response, the Turkish government retorted that it was not going to allow any fait accompli in Syria.

While Obama worried that arming the Sunni rebels would have unintended consequences and was particularly concerned about genocide against the Alawites (the minority to which Assad belongs), Erdoğan was cavalier about what arming the Sunni rebels might lead to. Erdoğan publicly rebuked Obama for his reluctance to become involved in Syria, calling on the US “to assume more responsibilities and take further steps”. Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu (who is today a leading member of the opposition alliance against Erdoğan), downplayed the Islamist threat, insisting that the existence of the Islamist militants should not serve as an excuse for passivity. Yet Turkey remained passive when in October 2014 the Islamic State laid siege to the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani, held by YPG/PYD, and Turkish Kurds were prevented from joining the defense of the town. This fed the suspicion among Kurds in Turkey and Syria that Ankara was offering covert aid to the Islamic State.

Erdoğan, meanwhile, had come to suspect that the Obama administration was scheming against him. After Erdoğan responded to the 2013 Gezi protests in Istanbul with force, Obama distanced himself from Erdoğan, refusing to return his phone calls. The 2013 coup in Egypt that toppled the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi and, which was tacitly endorsed by the Western powers, fanned Erdoğan’s fears. The next turning point in Turkish-American relations was the 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan. The tepid reaction by the US to it consolidated Erdoğan’s conviction that the US wants him ejected from power.

It is in response to this perceived American hostility that Turkey has developed its ties with Russia as a defensive measure, which, however, has further exacerbated the crisis with the US. Turkey purchased the Russian S-400 air defense system in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt, but the decision was in part a compensation for Turkey’s 2015 downing of a Russian fighter plane on the Turkish-Syrian border, which nearly precipitated a collapse in Russian-Turkish relations. Also, the US had proved unwilling to provide the Patriot air defense system to Turkey.

The Ascendance of the Nationalist Right

Turkish democracy has also suffered, as the perception of American hostility has empowered the ultra-nationalists in the Turkish state. In 2015, Erdoğan rescinded the peace deal that the Turkish government had reached with the Kurdish movement after two years of negotiations. Faced with the threat of an emboldened PKK, backed by the US in Syria, Erdoğan chose to embrace the hard-line policies that the military had been calling for and aligned with the far right nationalists. The latter, *ülküçüler* as they are called, are in control of the police and the National Intelligence Agency (MİT). The far right nationalists are also strong in the military and the judiciary. Politically, they are represented by the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), on whose support in parliament Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) since 2018 depends to stay in government. The MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, has pushed Erdoğan to the far right, notably on the Kurdish issue. Bahçeli is in the habit of denouncing the “colonial mentality” of the US, but the far right has by tradition been equally hostile to Russia. That, though, is not the case with the left-wing faction of Turkish ultra-nationalism: *ulusalcılar* as they are called have a strong presence in the military. The leading representative of the nationalist left is Doğu Perinçek, the chairman of the Patriotic Party, another ally of Erdoğan. The nationalist left insists that

the PKK is the “infantry” of the US and calls for an alliance with Russia and China. The American support for the PKK- affiliated Kurds in Syria has brought about a historically unique convergence of views between the far right and the nationalist left.

The founding leader of the MHP, Alparslan Türkeş, whom Bahçeli succeeded upon his death in 1997, was a US-trained counterinsurgency officer. During the 1970s, a period when the social democratic left was on the rise in Turkey – which kindled fears in the state security establishment that the country faced the threat of communist takeover – the militia of the MHP staged a campaign of mass killings under state protection that claimed the lives of thousands of left-wing sympathizers.

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The new anti-Americanism of the Turkish nationalist right mirrors its Cold War anti-communism: it feeds on the same perception – that the state is threatened by an internal enemy that in turn is held to be encouraged and abetted by an external patron. During the Cold War, the latter was presumed to be the Soviet Union; today it is the US. Then, the internal enemy to defeat in order to save the state was the left; now it is the Kurdish movement with its bases in northern Syria and northern Iraq.

An Eurasian and Western Power

In 2002, some Turkish generals suggested that Turkey should forge a new alliance with Russia and

Iran against the West. Once marginal figures advocating such a realignment have today come closer to the mainstream, although it is difficult to gauge their influence in the ranks of the military. As Bruno Maçães reminds in his book, *The Dawn of Eurasia – On the Trail of the New World Order*, the Russia question has always been an important one in the Turkish military. Maçães remarks that secularist and progressive officers tend to see Russia as a partner in resisting Western hegemony. They point to the genesis of the Turkish republic and the critical, financial and military support that the Turkish independence movement received from Bolshevik Russia. Indeed, Gustaf Wallenberg, Sweden’s ambassador to Turkey between 1920 and 1930, argued that Russia and Turkey shared a common interest – to check British advances – and discerned “tendencies to form and consolidate an Eurasian bloc comprising Russia, Turkey, the Caucasian republics, Bukhara, Persia and Afghanistan”. But this Eurasian bloc never materialized and is unlikely to ever do so.

The rivalry between Turkey and Russia has deep roots: while Turkey won its independence fighting Greece, a proxy of Britain, and with Russian support, it was Russia that broke the back of Ottoman power, reaching the outskirts of its capital Constantinople by the end of the nineteenth century. The military officers who were the founders of the Turkish republic that was proclaimed in 1923 harbored no illusions about Russia, and many in the Turkish state elite still think that Turkey would be too vulnerable to Russia without Western support. Even though Russia has recently come to be seen as a balancing factor against the West, it nonetheless remains a geopolitical rival in Eurasia, the Middle East and North Africa, where Turkish and Russian interests clash. Turkey has militarily inserted itself in the Caucasus, recently forging an alliance with Azerbaijan, which challenges Moscow. To be sure, Turkey claims to be sensitive to Russia’s interests in Caucasus and Central Asia so as not to provoke it. Meanwhile, the fact that Turkey deploys the rhetoric of opposing Western hegemony allows Russia to accept, albeit reluctantly, a Turkish presence in its backyard. Nonetheless, the Turkic

states of Central Asia – in particular Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – have become apprehensive of Russia’s designs after its invasion of Ukraine, and are increasingly looking to develop their ties with Turkey, notably in matters of defense, and Turkey’s longstanding ambition to create Turkic unity has borne fruit with the creation of the Organization of Turkic States.

Turkey is a country that lends itself all too easily to exoticism and to facile characterizations of what is supposed to be its national and cultural identity, which in turn is supposed to explain its past and future international choices, strategic alliances and relationships. The strategic imperatives that have dictated Turkey’s Western orientation tend to be overlooked. In his controversial book from 1993, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington described Turkey as a “torn country” pulled, he argued, between a desire to become European, to assert itself in the Islamic Middle East and in the Turkic Central Asia. At one point, speculated Huntington, “Turkey could be ready to give up its frustrating and humiliating role as a beggar pleading for membership in the West and to resume its much more impressive and elevated historical role as the principal Islamic interlocutor and antagonist of the West”. According to a recent survey by Speed Medya, 39.3 percent of the Turkish people want their country to maintain its alignment with the US and Europe; 29.5 percent favor a reorientation toward China and Russia; and 31.1 percent has no preference, leaving the decision to the state.

An affinity with the West had begun to take root among Ottoman intellectuals and among the state elite in the nineteenth century, and the lurch toward the West that accelerated in the twentieth century was indeed rooted in a deeper set of cultural prejudices and in a teleological reading and understanding of history. Turkey was to join what was termed the “community of civilized states”, or simply put “civilization”, presupposing that the West itself was what constituted “civilization” and that the non-West was by definition backward. Backward or underdeveloped it indeed was in terms of power, as the non-Western

powers had manifestly proven unable to withstand the onslaught of the West. Ultimately, though, it is not to be European, Muslim or Turkic that matters; what has preoccupied the Turkish elite has not been the question of whether Turkey belongs to the West or to the East, but how its survival could be ensured.

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That in turn requires power – and that Turkey teams up with those powers that rule, or set the rules of the world order. And, of course, those powers have for the last centuries been the Western powers, Europeans and the US.

The ultimate aim of Turkey’s foreign and national security policies – to ensure state survival and secure advantages for it – has determined its international choices, with Turkey joining those alliances and entering into those relationships that seemed to provide the best security solution and which offered most material advantages for its ruling elite. When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the Turkish leadership was ecstatic. Turkish and German geopolitical interests aligned: the submission of Russia offered Turkey the opportunity to promote pan-Turkism among the Turkic peoples under Russian dominion and to revive its imperial ambitions. But when the tide turned in the war after Stalingrad, Turkey abandoned its de facto alliance with Nazi Germany and teamed up with the US and Great Britain. Joseph Stalin never forgave Turkey and made territorial demands after the war ended, which had the effect of cementing Turkey’s alliance with the US. In 1952, Turkey became a member of NATO. During the Cold War, Turkey’s belonging to the West was never called into question, even though

Turkish democracy was flawed and was regularly interrupted by military coups. But with the end of the Cold War, the Turkish elite needed to find new arguments for why the West should accept Turkey. It was in this new context, when anti-communism no longer glued Turkey to the West, that the notion that it represents a “bridge” between the East and the West began to be exploited to resell it to the West. In the words of Tansu Çiller, Turkish prime minister in the 1990s, Turkey was both a “Western democracy” and “part of the Middle East”, and “bridge(d) two civilizations, physically and philosophically”.

And when Erdoğan’s Islamic conservative party ascended to power, the notion that Turkey represented a “Muslim democracy”, a model to be emulated in the Muslim world gained international traction. Its brand of Islamic conservatism appeared to be a welcome antidote to militant Islamism. But Western powers never really bought into the “bridge” metaphor – the fact that Turkey’s attempts to join the EU were rebuffed even before the country drifted back into authoritarianism is a case in point. Nonetheless, Turkey remains a Western asset as a “barrier” against Russia in Central Asia and against refugee flows that state collapses in the Middle East have produced, and which the climate crisis is expected to generate in much greater numbers. The threats that Turkey, and by extension Europe, faces to its south and east, and the challenge of mitigating these threats make it all the more paramount for the Turkish elite to keep Turkey safely anchored to NATO – and conversely for the West to maintain Turkey in its camp. Membership in NATO is simply vital for Turkey’s ruling elite; it anchors Turkey in what is likely to remain the most powerful global bloc for the foreseeable future and leverages Turkey’s geopolitical position, compensating for the weaknesses of Turkish capitalism.

Turkey is going to remain pro-Western, but it will also, as it is showing today, stand its own ground and not hesitate to confront other powers in the Western camp. Turkish Defense Minister, Hulusi Akar, emphasizes that Turkey’s zone of influence now

includes Africa, Asia and Europe and that its interests are global; its partners need to recognize that Turkey is a “subject and make their plans accordingly”, he says. Turkey is not going to defer to the US as it did during the Cold War; it will be vexing like France, another independent-minded Western power, has been on more than one occasion. In 1980 the US succeeded in securing Turkey’s unconditional acquiescence to Greece’s return to NATO’s integrated military structure (which it had left in 1974). Then, US General, Bernard Rogers, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, gave the head of the Turkish military junta, General Kenan Evren, his word that Turkish military concerns in the Aegean Sea would be accommodated – a promise that was promptly disregarded by the socialist government that came to power in Greece in 1981, which refused to abide by the deal. Turkey is not going to repeat that mistake, Erdoğan assured in one of his early statements after Sweden and Finland applied for NATO membership.

Nonetheless, the hard strategic interests of the US and Turkey coincide to a much larger extent than what appearances suggest. It is also in Turkey’s interest that NATO’s northern flank against Russia is reinforced, with the alliance standing strong and united from the Arctic and the Baltic to the Black Sea. “Our motto is strong Turkey, strong Turkish Armed Forces, strong NATO”, Defense Minister Akar said on February 5. But Washington will have to decide what it cares most about: the survival of the PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish statelet or a strengthened NATO with Sweden as a member. Ultimately, the crisis in NATO over Sweden’s membership will only be overcome when the US and Turkey resolve to address their differences and reach a new, mutual understanding.