

U.S. Sanctions Could Push Turkey to Leave NATO

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The administration of the Kurdish-controlled regions in north-eastern Syria announced on Sunday that they had reached an agreement with the central Syrian government in Damascus to deploy Syrian troops along areas of the border region with Turkey to help repel the Turkish aggression.

Turkish **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** legitimized Turkey's operations in Syria because of so-called security concerns, particularly from the Islamic State and the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian branch of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). However, with the YPG finally allowing Syrian troops to enter their controlled areas, what options does Erdoğan have left?

Turkish officials have endlessly said that the establishment of a "[safe zone](#)" that penetrates 30km into Syria is for the purpose of expelling the YPG from this region and to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees. With the Syrian Army soon to control the area with the withdrawal of the YPG, Erdoğan's "safe zone" has now been achieved, thus illegitimizing his operation once Syrian government control has been established.

Turkey assured that its operation was only against terrorism and not territorial expansionism with Turkish **Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu** stating in [an interview](#) that

"Russia is concerned about some sensitive issues, such as territorial integrity and the unity of the country. We are also worried. If we look at all the joint statements of Turkey, Russia and Iran, we emphasize it."

Although Turkish leaders assure that the purpose of the operation is not for annexation, this has not eased the belief among Syrians that Turkey plans to permanently occupy the area, as they remember the illegal 1939 Turkish annexation of Hatay and the invasion of neighboring Cyprus in 1974, with the status of the occupied Turkish-controlled northern regions of the island remaining doggedly unresolved by Ankara.

Therefore, with patient diplomacy with the political branches of the YPG, the Syrian government has trapped Erdoğan into leaving all Syrian territory since terrorism cannot be cited as a reason, a reason they heavily focused on. If Turkey does not withdraw from the occupied territories, it will surely become an international issue involving all major countries.

Such a situation will not be easy for Washington. In fact, the major factor for Ankara's split from the U.S. is because of the American support for the YPG, despite contradictorily recognizing the PKK as a terrorist organization. Although Ankara is a NATO member, Turkey

has been strengthening relations with Russia, a source of American anger against its supposed NATO ally.

U.S. **President Donald Trump** threatened the complete destruction of the Turkish economy last week if Ankara exceeded its operation targets. With the U.S. putting a direct threat against Turkey, it is unlikely for Ankara to submit to Washington's demands, which will inevitably create another source of division between Ankara and Washington.

This is especially crucial as Çavuşoğlu boldly stated that

“We are not afraid to remain isolated if the truth is on our side, since we are destined to fight terrorism.”

It would suggest that if Turkey is willing to be isolated over fighting the YPG, then it would be willing to be isolated for the goal of territorial expansionism, a suggestion that can be legitimized if the Turkish military does not withdraw after Syrian government administration is achieved in the border region.

For its part, Moscow understands Turkey's concerns about its safety but advocates that Ankara respect its agreements with Damascus. With Russian and Turkish relations strengthening in the economic, military and diplomatic fields, Erdoğan's next move can also affect the image of Russia, who is also a close ally of Syria, having defended the country from terrorism since September 2015.

As Russia has consistently adhered to international norms and laws, and strongly advocates that all states should follow such norms and laws, any refusal of the Turkish military and its proxies to withdraw from Syrian territory could be a source of resentment from Moscow. Russia has invested heavily into flourishing its relations with Turkey after its Black Sea neighbour downed a Russian jet in Syria, leading to the murder of the pilot by Turkish-backed forces.

However, any chance for Washington to reconcile with Ankara is all but over with the imposition of sanctions on Monday. These measures have been considered ineffective by Republican senator **Lindsey Graham** and Democrat **Chris van Hollen** who want wider sanctions against Turkey and to cut military support, despite being NATO allies. This is in a supposed effort to stop Turkey's [widespread human rights abuses](#) and the release of ISIS terrorists.

Therefore, Erdoğan's next decision towards Syria will heavily impact the future of not only the region, but his relations with the U.S. and Russia. With murmurings existing for years now whether Turkey should leave the NATO alliance, these sanctions against Turkey, a country already in a deep economic crisis, will only bring this question to the forefront of debate.

Although the U.S. cites human right abuses as the reason for the sanctions, an allegation that cannot be taken seriously considering their own long list of war crimes, it is likely Trump is 'punishing' Erdoğan for his insistence and defiance in buying the Russian S-400 system. This means that the souring relations between Washington and Ankara provides the perfect moment for Russian President Vladimir Putin to consolidate his country's relations with Turkey.

Turkey has the second largest military in NATO, but more importantly has sovereignty over the imperative waterways of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles that gives Russia access to the Mediterranean from its Black Sea ports. Whether Putin will be able to convince Turkey, a fellow Eurasian country and Black Sea neighbour of Russia's, to leave the NATO alliance is to be seen. But, if he can convince Turkey to leave, this would not only be a powerful military blow to NATO, but a strategic one as they will lose any challenge they could pose against Russia in the Black Sea.

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