



Erdoğan's victory and the West

by Luigi Scazzieri, 31 May 2023

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. Erdoğan's control of government resources and the media meant that the contest was always stacked in his favour. But it is also clear that a broad majority of Turks ultimately trusted him more than the opposition, which he consistently painted as divided and ineffective.

The question for Western policy-makers 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. Instead, he will probably try to consolidate his power, perhaps by further changing the constitution. The state of freedoms in Turkey will continue to be a source of friction with the US and with the EU.

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](#), as the government's spending and lira-supporting measures continue to suck in too many imports. 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: he has opposed high interest rates, saying they would fuel inflation, and going to the IMF would be embarrassing and entail signing up to its loan conditions. That means that Ankara will probably try to maintain its current policy for as long as it can, while trying to secure external financing from the Gulf and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, 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. And the very strong performance of nationalist forces in the elections will encourage Erdoğan to be even more assertive and uncompromising on issues that are seen as vital to Turkey's interests.

The first test in Turkey's relations with the West will be the issue of Swedish NATO accession, which Turkey is still holding up. In theory, there are fewer political benefits for Erdoğan in blocking Stockholm's accession now that he has secured re-election. Still, Erdoğan is likely to want something highly tangible in return for lifting the veto. One of the things he reportedly wants is an invitation to the White House, which Biden has so far refused. Turkey also wants to buy F-16 fighter jets from the US, but there is opposition to the deal [in Congress](#), unless Turkey first lifts its veto on Sweden joining. 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. Some allies may even call for Turkey to be excluded from NATO structures – but there is no procedure for implementing such a step, as the alliance operates by consensus.

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. Even prior to the conflict, Western allies were annoyed at Turkey's close relations with Russia. Ankara's purchase of a Russian S-400 air defence system led the US to exclude Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet programme.

Since Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Turkey's Western partners have appreciated Ankara's mediation efforts in the conflict, including its role in brokering the grain deal, and Turkey's supply of drones to Ukraine. However, Europe and the US have increasingly been concerned that Turkey is being used by

Russian companies to bypass sanctions. 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 – more than 500,000, or 13 per cent of the total, in the first two months of 2023.

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, with many EU countries thinking that sanctions would achieve little.

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, and some member-states are likely to question whether Turkey should still be a candidate country at all. 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. As long as resettling the refugees in the EU remains politically impossible, the only alternative to working with Turkey would be for the EU to rely even more on illegal pushbacks at the border. 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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