

Turkey faces new tensions with Germany and US

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Washington

Following a build-up of tensions over several months, Turkey is faced with rapidly deteriorating ties to two key allies – Germany and the United States – a double blow that could deepen Ankara's isolation.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, campaigning to win a fourth term at the helm of Europe's most powerful economy in an election this month, said she would ask the European Union to end membership talks with Turkey. Merkel's challenger, Martin Schulz, promised to do the same if elected.

The twin announcements, coming after months of bickering between Berlin and Ankara and amid concern in Germany about German citizens held in Turkish prisons, were a bombshell. Even though Merkel's plan has little chance of becoming reality as few EU countries are keen to cut ties with Turkey, the powerful political symbolism of the move by Turkey's biggest trading partner points to a long period of crisis in relations. Even before Merkel's new statement, the Berlin government said it would review its overall policy towards Turkey.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Merkel of "fascism" and told the chancellor to "mind your own business."

Even as Erdogan slammed Germany, Turkey's relations with the United States took a turn for the worse. Federal prosecutors in New York charged a former economy minister in Erdogan's cabinet with violating US sanctions against Iran.

The case against Zafer Caglayan expands an investigation into actions by an Iranian-born Turkish gold trader, Reza Zarrab, who is accused of helping Tehran to circumvent sanctions and who is awaiting trial in New York. Zarrab and Caglayan are key figures in a corruption scandal that shook the Erdogan government in 2013. Erdogan called the investigation



Walking away. German Chancellor Angela Merkel (L) standing next to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as he arrives to attend the G20 summit in Hamburg, on July 7.

(AFP)

politically motivated. "The case against Zafer Caglayan shows how low the US has sunk," Erdogan said on September 8.

The charges against Caglayan came several days after a US grand jury indicted 19 people, including 15 Turkish security officials, allegedly involved in a brawl between Erdogan's bodyguards and demonstrators during a visit by the Turkish president to Washington in May.

The indictment means that Erdogan must leave some of his most trusted bodyguards behind when he travels to the UN General Assembly in New York this month. He called the indictments a "complete scandal" but a US Senate committee has approved a measure that would ban the sale of US weapons to Erdogan's bodyguards.

In another sign of a deepening crisis between Washington and

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Amanda Sloat, of the Harvard Kennedy School Initiative

Turkey, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington heard testimony calling for a fundamental review of ties.

The two countries have clashed over conflicting priorities in Syria, where Washington is supporting Kurdish rebels seen as terrorists by Ankara. In return, Turkey angered the United States with talks aimed at buying a Russian anti-missile defence system. Relations also suffered because of what critics say is a demolition of the rule of law in Turkey following last year's coup attempt.

Steven Cook, a Middle East expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, told senators the United States should conduct a full review of the "value" of its relationship with Turkey and restrict Turkey's access to high-tech US weapons.

The downward spiral in Turkey's ties with two of its key allies

in the West and in NATO is picking up speed at a time when Ankara is increasingly isolated in the Middle East and analysts said chances for any improvement soon are slim.

"Since the failed July 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan has blamed the United States and other states, to include now Germany, of harbouring coup plotters," Andrea Taylor, a Middle East analyst at the Atlantic Council in Washington, said in e-mailed comments. "This narrative strengthens Erdogan's domestic support."

Domestic politics also shapes Erdogan's approach to Turkey's EU accession talks, analysts said. "Erdogan wants the EU to blink first and officially suspend the talks or end the membership process," Amanda Paul, a Turkey expert at the Brussels-based think tank European Policy Centre, said via e-mail. "This would be useful for him domestically."

Turkey's problems with the United States have a similar potential to create long-term trouble. "Turkey cannot be considered the totally reliable ally that it once was," Paul said.

She cautioned that Ankara remained a crucial partner for Washington despite current difficulties. "I believe [the United States] will adopt a strategic patience approach rather than take any drastic step," such as pulling US soldiers out of bases in Turkey.

Keeping communication channels open with Turkey will be a key challenge for both Europe and the United States. Amanda Sloat of the Harvard Kennedy School told the Senate that Turkey remained of strategic importance for Europe and America.

"If the EU and US abandon Turkey, Ankara will seek partners elsewhere – as demonstrated by its recent interactions with Russia and Iran," she said in her testimony. "The only people who benefit from the US curbing ties significantly are those who don't want Turkey facing west."

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Erdogan could be caught in a 'double gripper'

The more defiant to calls from allies for a return to the rule of law Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan remains, the more cornered he becomes.

Erdogan faced strong challenges in recent days as Germany, Turkey's top trade partner, issued statements that EU membership negotiations should be terminated in October when EU leaders meet.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel gave clear hints of what she would do if her party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), wins the elections: She called for a unity among EU members in expelling Turkey from the EU process. The other parties, in the heat of the elections, agreed with her in a joint stance against what they say are Erdogan's extortion politics.

Erdogan is not the one to blink at such escalation and he continued his name-calling against the German leadership. This may keep his power perception intact at home but if he at all has a strategy beyond harsh tactical moves to provoke the European Union to end the accession process, he obviously is suffering from myopia.

Germany, in fury over attempts to import oppressive policies onto its mark, means serious business. If Merkel asks for a two-thirds majority to back her proposal, it will be a slam dunk. There is good

reason to presume that Erdogan's sycophantish economic advisers have no idea what the consequences of such a radical move would be to the frail Turkish economy.

The obstinacy in Ankara shows no sign of letting go. On the contrary, it stretches most of Turkey's decades-long alliance and partnership network to its limits of tolerance. For foreign nationals, Turkey has become a high-risk territory, as governments advise their citizens not to visit the country.

Arbitrary arrests have risen to levels that confirm the notion of absence of the rule of law. The traditional security cooperation between Turkey and Germany has reached a breaking point, observers said.

"I understand that the relations between the intelligence structures and security units of the two countries have come to a halt," said Bernd Liedtke, a German security expert. "The cooperation not only on ISIS (the Islamic State) or jihadists but also on drug smuggling and organised crime is at a standstill. This is very bad."

Perhaps more seriously, the Erdogan government has been treated with utter caution within NATO, whose leadership lost fundamental trust in the Turkish government on sensitive issues.

"There is information that a new cooperation (agreement) has been under way," Liedtke said.

"This means Turkey comes closer to Russia in the domain of intel sharing. Nobody in NATO wants this to happen... The fact is, Turkey is lonely within NATO now."

"Turkey is no longer a trusted partner within NATO. My impression is no strategic data any longer is shared with Turkey," concluded Liedtke in an interview with Deutsche Welle Turkish.

The rapid worsening of relations is in sync across the Atlantic. At a session of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, senior US politicians agreed that a revision of relations with Turkey was necessary. One expert, calling Turkey "an ally, but not a partner," urged the Trump administration to think of an alternative to Incirlik Air Base, a key post for NATO near the Syrian border.

What brought the patience in Washington to a boiling point was the Erdogan-style challenges to legal orders exported to US territory: 15 of his bodyguards have been indicted for severely beating peaceful Kurdish demonstrators in Washington. They would be arrested if they entered the United States.

There is much more that adds to Erdogan's anger. The US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York announced that former Turkish Economy Minister Zafer Caglayan and three others had been charged with conspiring to use the US financial system to conduct hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of transactions on

behalf of the government of Iran and Iranian entities barred by US sanctions.

Caglayan is among those charged with laundering funds in connection with the transactions, including millions of dollars in bribes to Caglayan and others, and defrauding several financial institutions by concealing the nature of the transactions.

The indictment further alleged that Caglayan's co-defendants – Turkish-Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab, previously charged in this case with similar offences – participated in the same crimes. Zarrab was the prime suspect in a graft investigation in 2013, along with others from the inner circle of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, including Erdogan, for having bribed cabinet-level officials to facilitate transactions benefiting Iran.

Is Erdogan caught in a double-gripper? Top-level Turkish military officers and organised crime prosecutors granted asylum in Germany and Belgium put his links to EU capitals to an all-time low. Further on, it seems the American judicial system will run its natural course. Under such circumstances, even a routine visit to New York for the opening of the UN General Assembly seems an option for Erdogan to think twice about.

All this points to a bleak future: Erdogan is left with no choice but to remain defiant to whatever comes his way.

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