US is Trying to Drive Erdogan into a Corner - but Without Success

Joe Biden’s administration is currently losing on all its foreign policy fronts, but he is still hoping for success, if nowhere else, in his confrontation with the Turkish leader Recep Erdoğan, so that he can demonstrate to the world and the US public, that there is still some “gunpowder left in the barrel.” This consideration took on a special importance for Joe Biden and his team in the days leading up to the US President’s Middle East trip, which promised little chance of victory for the White House. Joe Biden’s trip to Saudi Arabia did, in fact, turn out to be a total failure - it did nothing to improve his image and yielded no positive results either in terms of oil deals or in terms of reining in Russia’s influence in the region. In view of this failure, Washington needed to find a scapegoat, and picked on Recep Erdoğan.

The White House has realized that getting rid of the Turkish president, as it had hoped, is not going to be an easy matter, and has therefore stepped up its machinations in a bid to entrap him. One of its tactics was to inflame tensions between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean. Relations between the two countries are not easy at the moment, given Turkey’s demands for Athens to demilitarize certain Aegean islands near the Turkish border and its challenges to Greece’s sovereignty over these islands. At the end of June Recep Erdoğan took the rather undiplomatic approach of publishing threatening tweets in Greek, demanding that Greece give up its territorial claims in the Aegean Sea, and referring to the 1919-1922 war between the two countries: “We warn Greece once more to avoid dreams, statements and actions that will lead to regret, as it did a century ago... .” He also warned Turkey will “not hesitate to enact rights recognized by international agreements on the demilitarization
of the islands.” In a later tweet he accused Greece of “oppressing” the Turkish minorities in Western Thrace, Rhodes, and Kos, and supporting international terrorism, a reference to Athens’ relations with the Kurds. Greece, in turn, accuses Turkey of violating Greek airspace, and of carrying out illegal hydrocarbon exploration activities off the coast of Cyprus - a region that, Greece claims, falls within its exclusive economic area.

Over the last 200 years there have been numerous wars between Greece and Turkey - the Greek War of Independence in 1821-1829, and subsequent conflicts in 1897, 1912-1913, 1919-1922, and, in Cyprus, 1974. But Greece was only able to win with support from powerful allies, including Russia. Currently, however, as one of the key supporters of the West’s sanctions against Russia, Greece cannot rely on support from Moscow. Athens is unlikely to get much support from the US either, as recent years have seen a marked shift in Washington’s attitude to its vassal states and even to its obligations under international agreements. Washington’s recent decision to support Greece rather than Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean region is a striking example of such a change.

As for the relative strengths of the Greek and Turkish militaries, here Athens clearly lags behind Istanbul - the Greek army may be large, but due to lack of funding its weaponry is very out of date and its troops are poorly trained. Turkey, on the other hand, has the second most powerful military in NATO, after the US.

The standoff between Greece and Turkey, both members of NATO, has been going on for a long time, but it has intensified in recent years as relations between Washington and Turkey have deteriorated and Greece has replaced Turkey as the main US ally in the region. The new military alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean was recently formalized by an agreement between the two countries on long-term military support, under which Greece will host additional four US military bases.

Washington was perhaps hoping that the heightened tensions with Greece will encourage domestic opposition to Recep Erdoğan’s policies, but the effect has in fact been quite the opposite - the Turkish public have rallied round their president. On June 20 the Turkish opposition newspaper Cumburiyet published an article by Mehmet Ali Guler, calling on Turkey to “sever ties with NATO” and looking at how its departure from the alliance might affect the balance of powers in the region. And, according to the Greek newspaper Vima, citing an interview with the commentator Erdoğan Karakuş for the Turkish television channel Haber Global, there have even been belligerent calls within Turkey for the country to “attack the US” if the latter were to provide assistance to Greece.

Well aware of Turkey’s need to update its Air Force, Washington is making use of the situation to put pressure on Ankara. Thus, even though following the meeting between Joe Biden and Recep Erdoğan in Madrid earlier this year Congress approved the supply of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey, Washington has recently made the supply conditional on Turkey demonstrating its willingness to toe the White House policy line. First, a group of US Congressmen signed a statement objecting to the sale of the jets to Turkey. And then Washington required Ankara to break off its relations with Russia as a precondition for the supply of the jets. It appears that the US is only ready to sell its military hardware to countries that share its values. According to a report from the Greek press agency AMNA, that was the stance taken by Senator Robert Menendez, Chair of the US Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee.

The US House of Representatives has also obstructed the sale, by approving an amendment to the defense budget preventing the US from transferring the jets to Turkey unless the Turkish government guarantees that they will not be used in order to violate Greek airspace.

In response to these moves, Turkey reiterated its support for Recep Erdoğan’s policies, making no secret of the fact that anti-American sentiments are growing in the country. For example, according to the Turkish newspaper Aydınlık, Doğu Perinçek, President of the Vatan Partisi, or Patriotic Party, called on the Turkish government to cancel its order for the F-16s on national security grounds.

Given the above background, it is interesting to speculate about the content of the private meeting between Recep Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 19. Especially since Russian military aircraft have demonstrated their clear superiority of US jets both in Syria and in Ukraine. Moreover, Turkey and Russia have in recent months been stepping up their cooperation on defense industry projects, and, in an interview published in Turkey’s Milliyet newspaper last December, Ismail Demir, President of Turkey’s Defense Industries, stated that the two countries may work together on the development of Turkish TF-X jets. Unlike the US, Russia will not impose any conditions on Turkey that go against its interests, nor will it push the Turkish Air Force into a corner by refusing to service its aircraft when Turkey most needs them, as the US is quite capable of doing should its strategic interests so require.

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