

Trump's election escalates Turkey's disputes with its NATO allies

By Halil Celik
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Since Trump's election as US president, the Development and Justice Party (AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has further advanced its authoritarian agenda, while signaling a possible geo-strategic shift away from NATO and towards China.

On November 21, the AKP government detained former Mardin co-mayor Ahmet Türk, a Kurdish bourgeois nationalist politician of the Democratic Regions Party (BDP). The BDP is sister party of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), nine of whose lawmakers, including co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were arrested on November 4.

As part of the witch-hunt that followed the failed, NATO-backed coup attempt of July 15, Istanbul public prosecutors last week issued arrest warrants for 103 academic personnel, detaining 73 from Yıldız Technical University. They are charged with "membership of an armed terror group", that is, the "Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO)", of US-based preacher Fethullah Gülen.

The AKP accuses the Gülen movement of leading the failed coup. Since July 15, some 110,000 people have been sacked or suspended in the civil service, army and judiciary. Some 36,000 are jailed. Defense Minister Fikri İhsan told parliament that 20,088 were Turkish Army personnel.

Meanwhile, the AKP, working with the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), is preparing to amend the constitution, setting up an authoritarian presidential system. It has reportedly drafted 29 articles, enabling the president to appoint ministers from outside parliament and rule by decree. The president would also be able to appoint half of the members of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors, as well as university rectors.

However, the main change has occurred in Ankara's relations with its partners in NATO and the European

Union (EU). On November 20, at NATO's annual Parliamentary Assembly in Istanbul, Erdogan again criticised NATO member states' ties to the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PKK is banned as a terror organization in Turkey.

Erdogan said, "We want you to prevent members of terror organizations from acting comfortably in your countries, making propaganda, choosing militants and racketeering with threats." Referring to the PYD's military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), he said terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria were "using the weapons of friendly nations."

Erdogan was also quoted on Sunday as saying that Turkey did not need to join the EU "at all costs" and could instead join a security bloc dominated by China, Russia and the Central Asian nations. On November 18, as another sign of Turkey's escalating alienation from its NATO allies, Erdogan had warned the EU that it had to "decide by the end of the year" on Turkey's membership. He said that Ankara should look at other opportunities, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

After Erdogan's statement, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said on November 21 that China would consider any application from Turkey to join the SCO. The Russia and China-led pact was formed with the participation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as a regional security bloc in 2001. The Turkish President has already repeatedly expressed his wish to join the SCO, where Ankara has dialogue partner status since 2013.

Discussions of a move towards closer ties with China, which previously were a more or less obvious bluff to give Turkey leverage in talks with NATO, increasingly appears today—amid a global war drive and turn to authoritarian forms of rule—as a serious possibility.

Speaking to NTV on November 18, İhsan stated that Turkey has been in talks with Russia to purchase S-400

air-defense missile systems. “We are negotiating on S-400 not only with Russia, but with other countries that have similar systems. Russia’s position on this issue now is positive,” he said, adding: “We hope that NATO member states would take this seriously, and our system will be compatible with the alliance’s requirements.”

Last year, under heavy pressure from NATO, Turkey canceled a \$3.4 billion tender for a Chinese long-range missile defense system.

Applications for asylum from 40 Turkish soldiers working at NATO bases and headquarters after the July 15 coup further increased tensions between Ankara and its NATO partners. On November 18, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg confirmed these reports. He avoided any direct confrontation with Turkey, however, saying: “As always, this is an issue that is going to be assessed and decided by the different NATO allies as a national issue.”

The deterioration of Turkey’s relations with NATO and the EU is not new, nor is it the result of Trump’s election. However, Trump’s election has escalated Ankara’s nationalist, authoritarian and militarist agenda, as well as the centrifugal tendencies in NATO and the EU.

Ankara has welcome Trump’s election as an opportunity to further its nationalist program. However, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), the two pro-EU bourgeois opposition parties, together with their pseudo-left followers, are watching Trump with deep concern.

Erdogan was one of the first heads of state to congratulate Trump for his election, saying, “With this choice, a new era has begun in America. I hope this choice of the American public will contribute to beneficial steps toward basic rights and freedoms, democracy and developments in our region.”

Relations between Erdogan and Trump are extremely fragile, however. On June 24, Erdogan denounced Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric, calling for the removal of Trump’s name from the “Trump Towers” shopping center and residence complex in Istanbul.

The AKP hopes that with Trump as US president, they will be able to play a prominent role in the Middle East and rebuild bridges with Washington. Once one of US imperialism’s best allies, the AKP is deeply disappointed in Obama, who did not satisfy Ankara’s demands to strengthen Islamist forces in the Syrian war, but used as proxies Kurdish nationalist fighters opposed to the Turkish government.

Disputes between Washington and Ankara have risen sharply, particularly after the attempted coup of July 15, which enjoyed tacit support from the Obama administration and Germany. Since then, Turkey has repeatedly asked for Gülen’s extradition, but Washington has not yet agreed to Ankara’s request. There is no clear sign that Trump would do so, either.

Nor is there any clear sign that he would change the policy of relying on the Kurdish-nationalist PKK and PYD as the main proxies against the Syrian regime and the Islamic State (IS) militia. Speaking to the *New York Times* in late July, Trump called himself a “fan of the Kurds” and hoped that the Turkish government would work with its Kurdish minority.

Since August 24, Turkish army has launched its Euphrates Shield Operation in Syria, to push Kurdish forces back to the eastern bank of the Euphrates River and strengthen the FSA, Ankara’s own proxy. Turkish army and FSA forces have occupied Syrian territory along the Turkish-Syrian border, and now aim to capture the strategic town of Al Bab from IS.

The Turkish operation apparently faces opposition not only from Russia and the Syrian regime, but also from Washington. In remarks to journalists on November 17, US Colonel John Dorrian implied that the US-led coalition does not support Turkey’s move to “liberate” Al-Bab. Speaking from Baghdad in a video conference with reporters, Dorrian said: “That’s a national decision that they have made.”

The offensive on Al Bab threatens to unleash all-out conflict between the Turkish-backed FSA and US-backed Kurdish forces that are suffering under Turkish artillery fire.

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