

Erdogan's 'Disruptive' Policies On Russia, China, Iran & Syria Frustrates The West; Will Turkey Be Ejected From NATO?

Prakash Nanda

July 2, 2023

The discretion of the Holy Quran in Sweden by a group of protestors on June 29 could greatly impact Stockholm's plan to join NATO as its 32nd member. It looks unlikely that Turkey, which is allegedly getting increasingly Islamized and has an unsavory image of being a "fickle ally," will remove its objection to Sweden being allowed as a NATO member so easily.

In the process, the issue of Sweden's membership at the forthcoming NATO summit, set for July 11-12 in the Latvian capital Riga, may require harder efforts toward an amicable resolution.

It may be noted that Turkey ratified, not without reluctance, though, Finland's NATO accession in March. But it continues to raise objections to Sweden's membership. It alleges that Stockholm supports Kurdish militants, namely the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which Ankara deems a terrorist organization.

Though Sweden has amended its anti-terror laws, Turkey is not convinced that Sweden, a democratic country with an independent judiciary, cannot prevent peaceful demonstrations and curtail freedom of expression.

"Turkey maintains its constructive stance regarding Sweden's membership but that legislative amendments would be meaningless so long as PKK/PYD/YPG supporters organize demonstrations freely in this country," said Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reportedly last week to NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

It may be noted that Turkey is one of the oldest members of NATO. Its accession to the Western alliance was way back in 1952. But over the recent years, particularly after Erdogan assumed office, Turkey is now considered the "most isolated" in NATO.

Let alone the accession of first Finland and now Sweden, Turkey has had differences with many NATO objectives and principles. Turkey is reported to be not in consonance with a new “defense strategy,” said to be the most ambitious overhaul to be drafted since the end of the Cold War.

This strategy, drafted in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is supposed to be given the green light by the leaders during the forthcoming NATO summit in two weeks.

The details of the draft have not been made public. However, it is understood that it comprises secret “regional plans” running into thousands of pages that propose in detail how the alliance would respond to a Russian attack. It is viewed as a “fundamental shift” as NATO needs large-scale defense plans. For decades, it has fought smaller wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; it has not faced a big war.

However, in their meeting in Brussels on June 15, NATO defense ministers failed to agree on new plans for how the alliance would respond to a Russian attack. According to [Reuters](#), Turkey was the one that blocked the move.

Quoting an unnamed diplomat, the Reuters report said that Turkey blocked approval over the wording of geographical locations, including concerning Cyprus.

Other reports suggest that Turkey wants the draft text to refer to critical waterways connecting the Black Sea to the Aegean as the “Turkish Straits” rather than the “Straits.”

It may be noted here that the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates maritime traffic through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits and the Sea of Marmara that lies between them, refers to them simply as the “Straits.” Using the term “Turkish Straits” could have legal implications that would give Turkey greater control over the bodies of water than it currently enjoys under Montreux. In ways that could undermine Western interests, it is feared. Greece, another NATO member, will never agree to the Turkish demand.

As it is, Turkey has a dispute over maritime rights with Greece. It threatens to attack Greece, though both are NATO members. “We may suddenly come one night,” Erdogan warned not long ago, suggesting a Turkish operation against one of the Greek islands that hug Turkey’s southern and western coast. He has even hinted that Turkey can strike Athens with ballistic missiles.

Turkey and Greece, or for that matter, the European Union (EU), also have differences over the status of Cyprus. The island in the eastern Mediterranean has remained divided since 1974 between the internationally recognized Greek Cypriot administration and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, protected by Turkish troops and recognized solely by Ankara.

Cyprus is a member of the EU, but Turkey has blocked its membership in NATO and refuses to acknowledge its legitimacy. Cyprus, in turn, has blocked Turkey’s move to become a member of the EU (membership in both the EU and NATO depends on the consensus of all who are already members).

Tensions between Turkey and Cyprus have been further heightened over exploration and production rights for natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey has also quarreled with France. Last year, the French frigate, the Courbet, had tried to stop Turkish arms smuggling to Libya. Besides, Erdogan had called for a boycott of French products after French President Emmanuel Macron firmly upheld the right of cartoonists to depict religious figures.

In fact, in 2009, the Turkish President blocked the appointment of a new NATO chief from Denmark because the country was too tolerant of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad and too sympathetic to “Kurdish terrorists.” Erdogan relented on Dane’s appointment when the then US President Barack Obama promised that NATO would appoint a Turk to a leadership position.

Many argue that Turkey is increasingly “a disruptive ally” within NATO. Despite warnings from fellow NATO members in general and the US in particular, Erdogan went ahead with purchasing an S-400 air-defense system from Russia.

The US canceled the proposed sale of F-35 fighters to Turkey in retaliation. The US and fellow NATO members had a point that Buying the Russian S-400 would complicate their integrated defense systems.

Turkey is following an autonomous policy, quite different from that of NATO in general, regarding its relations with Russia. Turkey has sided with or benefitted greatly in managing the Kurd rebels from Russian intervention in Russia. The buffer zones Turkey has created in Syria’s north would not have been possible without Russian approval.

Besides, in 2019 Erdogan mounted a military incursion to battle Kurds in northern Syria who were aiding the fight against the Islamic State with US support.

As the Economist magazine says, “From the war in Ukraine to those in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, to relations with China, to sanctions against Iran, to press freedoms, human rights, and terrorism, the list of issues where Turkey and its Western allies no longer see eye to eye is long.

“The institutional links, including membership in NATO and the Council of Europe and the customs union with the EU, are intact. But in policies, a decoupling is underway. In 2008 Turkey aligned itself with 88% of the EU’s foreign-policy decisions and declarations. By 2016 that share had fallen by half to 44%. Last year it was only 7%.”

So much so that Doug Bandow, a Senior Fellow at Cato Institute, has argued that “The US and the rest of NATO should stop catering to Turkey. If the alliance is serious, it should insist on members’ loyalty to other members and their willingness to join collective action against a presumed antagonist. If a government’s behavior significantly diverges from the alliance’s objectives, other members should consider ousting that state—and forging more realistic cooperative arrangements for the future.”

Similarly, in an opinion piece in Wall Street Journal, Joseph I Lieberman, a former independent US senator from Connecticut, and Mark D Wallace, the chief executive of the Turkish Democracy Project, have argued that the alliance (NATO) should explore ways of ejecting Turkey.

“Turkey is a member of NATO, but under Mr. Erdogan, it no longer subscribes to the values that underpin this great alliance,” they wrote.

Even some leading US politicians like Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has said that “Turkey under Erdogan should not and cannot be seen as an ally.”

However, expelling Turkey from NATO is not an easy option. Turkey gives NATO a crucial strategic position at the intersection of Europe and Asia, astride the Middle East and the Black Sea. It hosts a major US air base where American nuclear weapons are stored. Turkey is the NATO country with the second largest number of military personnel after the United States.

Erdogan has been quite friendly with Russian President Vladimir Putin, now NATO’s number one enemy. He continues with Turkey’s business dealings with Russia and refuses to align with Western sanctions. But it is also a fact that Erdogan blocked Russian warships headed toward Ukraine. He forced Russia to lift the naval blockade of Ukraine, allowing it to export its agricultural products. It is he who negotiated prisoner swaps with Russia. He takes credit for giving a besieged Ukraine the drones that helped save Kyiv.

And it is Erdogan who could be an effective mediator between the West and Russia to end the war in Ukraine if any possibility of a negotiated peace arises.

Viewed thus, the marriage between Turkey and the West may be unhappy, but it has not reached the level of a final break-up. There are optimists within NATO, like Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who think that, ultimately, Turkey would not do anything that hurt either Europe or the United States.

After all, the EU is Turkey’s main trade partner and source of foreign investment. And America happens to be Turkey’s biggest supplier of weapons. So Erdogan will ultimately agree to the accession of Sweden to NATO, it is argued.

Be that as it may, things will become clearer at the forthcoming NATO summit next fortnight.