



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Turkey's bargaining game will threaten common European security



Recep Tayyip Erdogan wants more planes carrying restrained and extradited Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers from Finland and Sweden to land in Istanbul. The more such flights, the more self-confidence and points with his voters by defending the country resolutely against Kurdish terrorists in the presidential elections in May or June. The recent deportation of Mahmut Tat, a Kurd who has been seeking asylum in Sweden since 2015, is not enough for Erdogan to lift the barrier for Sweden's possible entry into NATO. He is looking for dozens of Mahmut Tats from Stockholm.

Bargaining in the market is not only a Turkish specialty, nor even an oriental one. Political bargaining is an important part of it, wherever it is conducted. However, Erdogan's blockade of Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO goes beyond bargaining, and becomes a threat for the whole "business" to fail. It becomes an end in itself, and no skilled Turkish merchant will allow himself such behaviour.

Erdogan has proven to be a "skilful businessman" in many tense international situations so far. Often with the Europeans, who, although as pragmatic as the Turkish leader, are less adept at playing games. One of his biggest victories came with the 2016 deal with the EU on refugees from the Middle East. The EU paid Turkey 6 billion euros for its role as a gatekeeper for three to four million migrants eager to reach Western Europe.

Even then, there were many angry and disappointed people in Europe. Because of the (trade) agreement itself, the stakes, which were living people, and particularly due to its poor implementation, they mourned the destruction of European humanity and solidarity, as fundamental values.

Erdogan is introducing trade where it does not belong - into the basic security of Europe

In tensions over the membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO, Erdogan is introducing trade where it does not belong - into the basic security of Europe in the face of Russian aggression. What is at stake here?

By rejecting the Scandinavians' membership of NATO, Erdogan confronts their natural need to protect themselves with the equally important feeling that they should live in countries that take care of their people, especially those who, for various reasons, sought refuge with them from poverty and political persecution. Turkey is playing a dangerous game by asking the developed democracies of Sweden and Finland to decide which priorities are more important to them.

Erdogan thereby underestimates the importance of the Finnish and Swedish decision to renounce their neutrality of which they are, and should be, proud, both as a tradition and as an important resource of their foreign policy influence. The step they took at the beginning of the year, in the face of an open danger from Russia, is unprecedented in their history and demanded great responsibility not only from governments, but also from their citizens. Erdogan's Turkey does not respect that sacrifice, and puts it on the same scale as Kurdish asylum seekers, whom it considers to be terrorists.

"As long as terrorist organisations demonstrate on Swedish streets and terrorists are present in their parliament, our approach to the issue will not be positive", Erdogan told reporters on October 1 at the Prague meeting of the European Political Community.

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There is also a whole series of Turkish

bargaining demands, primarily the lifting of the Swedish and Finnish embargo on arms exports to Turkey, which has been in force since 2019. It is realistic that an agreement will be reached, bearing in mind that all three parties to the dispute share an ambition to become official partners in NATO one day, where arms issues are resolved "in house" and where common interests are safeguarded. Also, there is the unresolved issue of Turkey's purchase of F-16 aircraft from the USA. On that issue as well, Turkey wants to use its right to block the admission of new members, in order to secure the purchase of American aircrafts for itself.

Turkey even showed a desire to undermine Swedish-Finnish unity in the movement towards NATO membership. Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin previously reported that the Turkish president told her that there were more controversial issues for Sweden than for Finland. Despite this, the two countries are not giving up on walking hand in hand towards NATO.

The obstacles that Ankara presents to the membership of Finland and Sweden have cooled the unity that NATO has shown since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. This is one of the most important consequences, which the Kremlin is certainly looking forward to. The specific relations between Turkey and Russia did not disrupt Western unity in its response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine to the extent that the uncertainty surrounding the admission of Sweden and Finland to NATO does. At the summit this summer in Madrid and recently at the ministerial meeting in Bucharest, NATO confirmed that the Black Sea area is still of strategic security interest for the Alliance. But it seems that this is not enough for Erdogan to dispel unfounded fears that the southern wing of the Alliance, in which Turkey is the main support, will become peripheral in relation to other zones, above all to the northern one, where Sweden and Finland are located.

Ultimately, and when (not if) the bargaining is over and the two Scandinavian countries formally join NATO, the burden of bad mutual relations in a process that was vitally important to hold the agreement in Turkey”

threat of veto has probably cost Ankara a loss of goodwill in Stockholm and Helsinki, two capitals which were supportive of Turkey's EU membership bid”, said Galip Dalay, Chatham house expert. Turkey creates odium not only with Sweden and Finland, but with all other developed European democracies. Turkey challenged their fundamental values of democracy and human rights, for the sake of political bargaining, thereby endangering common security and defence against an aggressive Russian neighbour.