



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Erdoğan Battles on Multiple Fronts in Risky Regional Power Bid

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is at odds with just about everybody. He is on opposite sides with Russia in Syria as well as Libya and is trying the patience of his US and European allies. Turkey and Russia are testing the limits of what was always at best an opportunistic, fragile partnership aimed at capitalizing on a seemingly diminishing US interest in the Middle East, already evident under President Barack Obama and continuing under Donald Trump, who is haphazardly redefining what he sees as America's national interests.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's relations with his US and European allies are strained over unilateral Turkish moves in the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey's acquisition of a Russian S-400 anti-missile system, Ankara's military intervention in Syria, refugees, and much more.

Turkey has [threatened to close Incirlik Air Base and a critical radar station in Kurecik](#) if the US and the EU fail to recognize what Turkey views as its national interests.

At the same time, [Erdoğan is fretting about his alliance with Qatar](#) in the wake of suggestions that the Gulf state and Saudi Arabia are searching for a way to end the Saudi-led 2.5-year-old economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar.

Reports that [talks between the kingdom and Qatar have failed](#) may not be sufficient to put Erdoğan's concerns to rest, as the UAE, Qatar's most hardline detractor, has [restored postal services with the Gulf state](#). The restoration, mediated by the UN's Universal Postal Union, marks the first time a third party has succeeded in negotiating any easing of the boycott.

Meanwhile, Erdoğan's [powerful navy, imitating Chinese tactics in the South China Sea, has significantly raised tensions in the eastern Mediterranean](#) by sending naval forces to escort Turkish drill ships into contested waters and to block Greek and Cypriot petrochemical exploration vessels in waters recognized as theirs under international law.

Ankara has also raised Israeli hackles by warning Jerusalem that it needs Turkish approval to build an undersea natural gas pipeline to Europe together with Greece and Turkey.

As he battles on multiple regional fronts, Erdoğan is walking a tightrope. He is hitting out at everyone on the assumption that neither Russia nor the US nor, for that matter, Qatar, can afford to lose Turkey. But neither can Turkey risk jeopardizing those relationships.

Erdoğan's confrontational moves are thus a high stakes gamble, particularly with Turkey's military build-up in northern Syria, an area where Turkey does not enjoy air superiority.

The Turkish leader is betting that Russia will blink first by reining in Syrian forces and pressing for a negotiated resolution of the crisis.

Erdoğan's provocative visit to Kiev and backing for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia was about far more than differences over the Russian-backed Syrian assault in Idlib, the last rebel outpost in the country.

Concerned that Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 put a halt to Turkey's maritime dominance of the Black Sea and turned it into a Russian lake, Erdoğan sought in Kiev to play both sides against the middle.

The International Crisis Group has warned that in the Black Sea "Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea has [enabled it to expand its naval capability, project power south and shift the strategic balance in its favor.](#)"

Following the annexation, Russia's *de facto* coastline grew from 475 to 1,200 kilometers, or about 25% of the sea's total shorefront.

Add to that 300 kilometers of coastline belonging to Abkhazia, a Russian-backed breakaway region of Georgia.

Erdoğan's bid to counter Russian advances is also a bid to persuade NATO to back Turkey in the Black Sea, which would reverse a decades-old policy of keeping the alliance out of the region.

With Turkish soldiers dying in Syrian attacks on Turkish targets and Turkey killing many Syrian soldiers in retaliation, Erdoğan's gambit appears to have produced initial dividends, with the Trump administration backing the Turkish leader in his high-stakes Syrian bid.

One unknown is the degree to which Erdoğan may feel he has no choice but to escalate further than he would like in response to far-right nationalists who resonate with part of his voter base and are pressuring him to go for Syrian president Bashar Assad's jugular.

"What are you waiting for? [Don't beat around the bush while Turkish soldiers are being martyred](#) in attacks carried out by soldiers of another state," said Meral Aksener, leader of the İyi (Good) Party.

Added Devlet Bahçeli, head of Erdoğan's coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP): "Assad is a murderer, a criminal and the source of hostility. [There will be no peace in Turkey until Assad is brought down](#) from his throne. Turkey must start plans to enter Damascus now and annihilate the cruel ones."

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