

EUROPE

NATO Chastises Turkey Over Syria, but Fears Driving It Toward Russia

Ankara isolated after assault on Kurdish militants; alliance's unity tested



Turkish soldiers are seen atop a military vehicle in the Turkish border town of Akcakale in Sanliurfa province on Friday. PHOTO: MURAD SEZER/REUTERS

By *Emre Peker*

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BRUSSELS—Turkey’s military incursion into northern Syria this week triggered a new rift between Ankara and its NATO allies, highlighting a growing divergence on security concerns and complicating efforts to thwart an increasingly assertive Russia.

Most North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies swiftly condemned the Turkish offensive against Western-backed Kurdish militants in northern Syria, with some moving to punish Turkey after Mr. Erdogan launched operations Wednesday.

President Trump on Friday readied sanctions that “can shut down the Turkish economy,” Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said, putting Turkey on notice to halt its Syria operations. The move came as Norway said it would halt new arms sales to the country. Italy and Spain are expected to withdraw air-defense deployments protecting Turkey’s southern border. And the European Union, with 22 of its 28 members also in NATO, is poised to shelve billions of euros in refugee aid to Turkey.

“Turkey has always been a difficult ally in NATO, especially in the last 10 years,” said former U.S. ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder. “In a consensus organization, it doesn’t much care if it stands alone.”

The developments risk pushing President Recep Tayyip Erdogan closer toward Moscow, at a time the alliance is looking to firmly counter Russian aggression.

Three days into the offensive, the Turkish army has captured Syrian villages to the east and west of the border town Ras al-Ain and was moving to encircle it, according to Turkish military analysts.

The Turkish Defense Ministry on Friday reported the first fatalities in its ranks, saying one soldier was killed on Thursday and another one on Friday. The ministry declined to comment on media reports that about 30 Syrian militants taking part in the offensive alongside Turkey have been killed.

The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights said 41 militants from the Kurdish-led forces fighting Turkey had been killed. Over 70,000 civilians have been forced to flee the area of fighting between Ras al-Ain and Tal-Abiad, another Syrian town targeted by Turkey, according to a United Nations relief agency.

Ankara is decoupling from the West and moving toward Moscow’s orbit at a time when the 29-member alliance is grappling for a response to Russia’s expansionist policies. As Mr. Trump decided to pull U.S. troops from Syria, Turkey had to secure Moscow’s blessing to operate in northern Syria, where Russia is backing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Turkey is also considering more Russian arms purchases following its recent acquisition of a missile-defense system.

“We’re talking about an alliance that is 28 plus one,” said Fabrice Pothier, a former policy adviser to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and his predecessor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. “The more you isolate and exclude Turkey, the closer Turkey will get to Russia.”

NATO’s structure gives members few options to punish one of their own. How the operations in Syria unfold could determine allied responses to Ankara, but efforts to suspend Turkey from NATO—as some U.S. lawmakers have suggested—are unlikely.

Mr. Erdogan’s threat on Thursday to release a wave of refugees into Europe in response to EU criticism of the offensive will likely mute reactions from European capitals. “The reality is the Europeans are paralyzed by the issue of refugees,” said Jonathan Eyal, associate director of the Royal United Services Institute, a think tank in London.



NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, left, holding a press conference with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in Istanbul on Friday. PHOTO: TOLGA BOZOGLU/SHUTTERSTOCK

European Council President Donald Tusk on Friday reiterated the EU's position that Turkey's intervention in Syria "will only make matters worse" and called on Ankara to stop its operations. He also restated Europe's support for the Kurdish militants Turkey is fighting and said Mr. Erdogan's threat to unleash refugees toward the EU was "totally out of place."

The Syrian Kurdish militia, known as the YPG, is at the heart of Turkey's dispute with NATO allies and one of the main factors behind its effort to deepen defense ties with Russia. Ankara views the militia as an extension of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which is listed as a terrorist organization by Ankara and its NATO allies. But U.S. and Western countries have also armed and backed the YPG in the U.S.-led coalition fighting Islamic State.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Thursday blamed the U.S. for the escalation of violence in Syria.

"We cautioned against playing the Kurdish card because it could have a sorry end," Mr. Lavrov said, adding that Russia understands Turkey's "legitimate concerns" over border security.

Mr. Stoltenberg, ahead of a meeting with Mr. Erdogan in Istanbul on Friday, acknowledged the disagreements among allies over the YPG while seeking to reassure Turkey of NATO's support. He said he recognizes Turkey faces terror threats from Syria, but still pressed it to avoid undermining the coalition's gains against Islamic State.

"Turkey is at the forefront of a very volatile region. No other NATO ally has suffered more terrorist attacks," Mr. Stoltenberg said. "While Turkey has legitimate security concerns, I expect Turkey to act with restraint."

Speaking alongside Mr. Stoltenberg, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Turkey expects solidarity, not just understanding. He slammed six NATO members—Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany, Poland and the U.K.—for calling on Turkey to cease operations, after they failed to secure a resolution to that effect at the United Nations Security Council on Thursday.

“You call it legitimate, and then you oppose the ongoing operation,” Mr. Cavusoglu said. “This is you being two-faced.”

The Turkish incursion has raised fears that the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces would pull guards away from prisons and camps housing Islamic State militants and their relatives. Several thousand Islamic State members were captured by the SDF on the battlefield, including around 1,000 foreigners and their wives and children.

A car bomb exploded outside a restaurant in the Kurdish-held city of Qamishli on Friday, killing several civilians. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the car bomb, according to Site Intelligence Group, which tracks extremist activity.

The growing distrust between Ankara and its Western allies over the Kurdish militants in recent years provided an opening for Moscow to position itself as Turkey’s regional champion. A major defense contract and military cooperation in Syria followed.

Mr. Cavusoglu lamented Turkey’s inability to purchase air-defense systems from Western allies. He said persistent security threats on Turkey’s southern borders, coupled with the uncertainties over rotating NATO deployments in the country, had forced Ankara to purchase Russian missiles. Turkey still needs to bolster its arsenal, he added, opening the door to potential deals with NATO allies.

However, U.S. measures being drafted by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) and Chris van Hollen (D., Md.) would block new defense contracts with Turkey, blocking sales and transfers of ammunition, services and technology to the Turkish Armed Forces that could severely hit its capabilities.

Amid risks that Turkey would face U.S. sanctions and an arms embargo, Mr. Stoltenberg reiterated his concerns over Turkey’s decision to deploy Russian-made S-400 missiles. The move would put allied aircraft at risk and diminish collective defense because they can’t be integrated into the NATO system, Mr. Stoltenberg said.

“We should continue to provide support to Turkey,” he said, urging discussions for Ankara to purchase Western-made missiles.

—David-Gauthier-Villars in Istanbul, and Daniel Michaels in Brussels and Isabel Coles in Erbil, Iraq, contributed to this article.

Write to Emre Peker at emre.peker@wsj.com

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