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Issue Brief

Erdogan's Nuclear Rhetoric

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S*ummary*

While Turkey's nuclear ambitions are not new, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's nuclear rhetoric is in the backdrop of Turkey's deteriorating regional security situation. Turkey has strained relations with the US and Europe while Russia has emerged as a critical partner fulfilling the country's air defence needs. It remains to be seen how Erdogan manages Turkey's conflicting relationships, regionally, as well as with NATO and Russia, in pursuit of his country's geo-political ambitions.

Will Turkey go on the path of nuclear weaponisation? Some scholars suggest it might do so. They cite Turkish President Recep Erdogan's speech to his party workers in September 2019 where he stated 'some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But (they tell us) we can't have them. This, I cannot accept.'¹ Further, Russia is also building the Akkuyu nuclear power reactors in Turkey.² This Issue Brief places in perspective aspects relating to Turkey's nuclear aspirations and rhetoric.

The Nuclear Dilemma

Turkey's inclination towards nuclear weapons is not a new phenomenon. As per declassified documents compiled by the National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., members of the Turkish security establishment were interested in producing a nuclear bomb. According to a declassified 1966 US State Department Memo, Turkey's General Directorate of Mineral Research and Exploration officials had been asked to cooperate with General Tulga and Professor Omer Inonu in a Turkish programme to develop the bomb.³ This suggestion, though, was not carried forward.

Turkey became a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance at the start of the Cold War. Since 1950, it has played host to approximately 50 U.S. B61 tactical nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear sharing agreement.⁴ It was only in 1980 that it became a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It subsequently signed the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1996 and ratified the same in the year 2000.⁵ Being part of these two agreements is a legal hindrance if Turkey decides to go towards nuclear weapons.

While addressing the United Nations General Assembly on 24 September 2019, President Erdogan asserted that "nuclear [military] power should be forbidden for all or should be permissible for all".⁶ He made a similar pitch earlier while addressing his party members in Sivas, Turkey.⁷ Turkey is still struggling to start its nuclear energy programme. Also, till the time Turkey is under NATO's nuclear umbrella, it doesn't need to indulge in nuclear proliferation.

Currently, Turkey doesn't operate any nuclear power plant but it has signed an agreement with the Russian Federation's Rosatom in 2010 for building the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in Mersin Province. Article IV of the NPT gives Turkey the right

¹ **"Erdogan Says It's Unacceptable that Turkey Can't have Nuclear Weapons"**, *Reuters*, 5 September 2019.

² John Spacapan, **"Conventional Wisdom Says Turkey Won't Go Nuclear. That Might be Wrong"**, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 2020.

³ William Burr, **"Nuclear Weapons and Turkey Since 1959"**, National Security Archive, 30 October 2019.

⁴ **"Turkey Country Spotlight"**, The Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2021.

⁵ Shannon Bugos, **"Turkey Shows Nuclear Weapons Interest"**, Arms Control Association, October 2019.

⁶ **"Speech at the 74th United Nations General Assembly"**, Press Release, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 24 September 2019.

⁷ **"Erdogan Says It's Unacceptable that Turkey Can't have Nuclear Weapons"**, No. 1.

to produce nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The first unit of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, which is under construction, may be operationalised by 2023 and it is estimated that all the four units once operationalised by 2026, will generate a total of 4,800 MW of electricity.⁸

Another nuclear power plant which has been planned at Sinop in Northern Turkey, was to be built in cooperation with the Japanese Mitsubishi Heavy Industries but the latter pulled out in 2020.⁹ Turkey plans to generate 10 per cent of its total energy needs from the Akkuyu Power Plant. Under the current agreement with Russia, Turkey will not be able to enrich Uranium (U-235) nor can it extract weapons-grade plutonium (PU-239) from the spent nuclear fuel and reprocess it.¹⁰

The Iran Nuclear Threat

While Erdogan takes inspiration from the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Turkey and Iran have had their own set of conflicts largely based on Shia–Sunni sectarianism since the time of Ottoman and the Safavid empires. Although under Erdogan, both states have had warmer ties as compared to the past, Turkey is still wary of the Shiite ‘crescent’. Turkey’s neighbourhood has increasingly become a combat zone with Turkey itself engaged in Syria against the Assad regime, which is supported by Iran.

Erdogan has supported Iran’s nuclear energy programme but is wary of the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons. Former President Abdullah Gul, as far back as in September 2010, raised concerns about the Iranian nuclear programme while addressing Council on Foreign Relations, when he stated: “Our position does not under any circumstances mean unconditional support for Iran’s nuclear program. On the contrary, we have made it clear to the U.N. that we do not want Iran to have nuclear weapons in our neighborhood”.¹¹ This was during the time the Erdogan administration was busy in diplomatic efforts like the May 2010 Tehran Declaration to find solutions to the Iranian imbroglio.

Though Turkey–Iran trade and security relations have been on an upswing, the balance of power in West Asia will shift in favour of Iran if it were to develop nuclear weapons. Iran and Turkey are on the opposing side of regional sectarian conflicts. Turkey has been trying to dislodge Bashar al-Asad in Syria who is an Alawite Shia supported by Iran and Russia. Iran and Turkey also have conflicting position on Yemen and Lebanon, though they are not militarily involved as of now.

Erdogan sees himself as reviving the old glory of Ottoman Caliphate and uniting the Muslim Ummah under the Turkish Leadership. Iran also talks about the unification of Muslim Ummah but with a Shiite supremacy. With a nuclear Iran, there is a high

⁸ **“Akkuyu Construction to be Completed by 2026, Says Project CEO”**, *World Nuclear News*, 10 February 2021.

⁹ **“Turkey, Japan Scrap Partnership in Sinop Nuclear Plant in Turkey’s North”**, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 20 January 2020.

¹⁰ **“Nuclear Power in Turkey”**, World Nuclear Association, November 2021.

¹¹ **“A Conversation with Abdullah Gül”**, Council on Foreign Relations, 24 September 2010.

chance that this will lead to Iran's power projection in the entire Muslim world which will go against Erdogan's ambitions. Also, there would be competitive arms race in West Asia, possibly nuclear, which would threaten Turkey's security. Iran already has the highest stockpile of ballistic missiles in the region.

Erdogan desires a Turkish-dominated neighbourhood and wants to limit Iran and Saudi Arabia's influence in the region. Civil war or conflict is detrimental to its interest in the region and also Turkey's own national security. Turkey has criticised the United States pull out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), terming it an 'unfortunate step' and has been urging the Biden administration to lift sanctions on Iran and return to the JCPOA.¹² Turkey doesn't support the US coercive sanctions policy on Iran and desires increasing trade ties with Iran. Iran, though, remains a threat to Turkish advances in the West Asian region, especially in terms of the Syrian and the Kurdish issues.

Erdogan's Geo-political Ambitions

Turkey under Erdogan has been pushing for an aggressive power projection that is not just limited to its neighbourhood. Turkey's threat perception and the use of military force was limited till the 2010s as their primary threat was the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) insurgency, a conflict brewing for more than four decades. The Turkish establishment's approach towards the PKK militancy outside of Turkey was defensive in nature but post the 2015 breakdown of the negotiations with the PKK, Turkey has been going on an offensive with strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan and involvement in Syria.¹³ Being part of the NATO bloc helped Turkey allay its fears against Moscow and other regional powers.

With the rise of an Islamist Erdogan and the fall of the old Kemalist order, Turkey's regional ambitions began to rise with the state's involvement in regional conflicts like Syria and Libya. As Erdogan's involvement in the region increases, any rhetoric about build-up in terms of armaments, whether nuclear or otherwise, only helps him in sending a strong message to its neighbours.

Also, Erdogan has been highlighting Turkey as the leader of the Muslim Ummah and the one who stands up in defence of every Islamic cause. Since the Saudis are increasingly seen to be very passive on the issues of Israel-Palestine, Pakistan-India and many other such emotive Islamic causes, its leadership role of the predominantly Sunni Islamic countries has been dwindling. This has created a vacuum that Erdogan is trying to fill by raising his pitch for the leadership of the Islamic Ummah.

In the September 2019 UN General Assembly speech where Erdogan spoke about nuclear discrimination, he incessantly spoke at length about the problems the Muslim world is facing. Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the only nuclear armed state

¹² Tuqa Khalid, "**Russia, Turkey Want to Save Iran Nuclear Deal, Urge US to Lift Sanctions on Tehran**", *Alarabiya News*, 4 March 2021.

¹³ "**Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups**", Center for Preventive Action, Council for Foreign Relations, 12 May 2022.

in the entire Muslim world also raises such issues time and again but is seen as a body politic ridden with political instability, internal insurgencies, and a state which is beholden to the Arabs for support on various issues, especially on its economy.

Turkey on the other hand is a large economic and a major military power in the Islamic world. It also has a rich Islamic historical past, perhaps the longest running Caliphate in the history of Islam and is now repositioning itself as a big power in the whole of West Asia and North Africa region. By painting Turkey as a victim of nuclear discrimination and raising the rhetoric for it on international platforms, Erdogan hopes to garner popularity within the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region and also in the larger Islamic world.

Although Turkey hosts NATO nuclear weapons at its Incirlik Air base, the Western powers have always had a passive response towards Turkey's external and internal threat perceptions. Whether in Syria or the PKK or on Greco-Turkish maritime disputes, the West has largely been on the opposite side of Turkey's interests.¹⁴ The European Union has also repeatedly shown its disinterest in including Turkey in the grouping.¹⁵ This 'blaming the West' helps Erdogan domestically and in the larger Muslim world. Using the nuclear rhetoric, especially at the backdrop of raising Islamic issues whether at home or abroad, further buttresses Erdogan's popularity. After his September 2019 UN speech, Erdogan got a lot of appreciation from countries like Pakistan, which are hotbeds of Islamic fundamentalism.¹⁶

Nuclear Messaging

US-Turkey relations have been dwindling, especially since the July 2016 unsuccessful coup allegedly by Islamic Preacher Fetullah Gulen who Turkey declared a terrorist and resident in the US. Turkey has since developed closer defence and security ties with Russia and China. It acquired the Russian S-400 air defence system after which the US administration formally excluded Turkey from the F-35 programme and cancelled deliveries of the fighter jet. Turkey has since been sanctioned by the US under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in December 2020.¹⁷

US and Turkey have also had diverging interests in the Mediterranean Region. With the ongoing Greco-Turkish maritime dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean waters, Turkey has been critical of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, officially formed in September 2020 by Greece, Israel, Italy, Greek Cypriot administration, Palestinian National Authority, Jordan and Egypt with the US and the European Union as

¹⁴ Amanda Sloat, **"The US Played Down Turkey's Concerns about Syrian Kurdish Forces. That Couldn't Last"**, Brookings, 9 October 2019.

¹⁵ Soner Cagaptay and Raffaella Del Sarto, **"How Europe Keeps Losing Turkey"**, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 October 2020.

¹⁶ **"President Erdogan Trends on Twitter after UN Speech"**, TRT World, 25 September 2019.

¹⁷ **"The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231"**, Press Statement, U.S. Department of State, 14 December 2020.

Permanent Observers. This was seen by Turkey as a snub on its energy rights over the Eastern Mediterranean waters.

The Biden administration recognised the Armenian Medz Yeghern (genocide) just months after the Nagorno-Karabakh war, in which Azerbaijan defeated Armenia with the help of Turkey.¹⁸ With this growing bitterness in ties, Erdogan through his nuclearisation rhetoric may want to send a message that just because Turkey is protected by NATO's nuclear umbrella, it will not be a subservient partner to the West.

The nuclear rhetoric is not necessarily aimed at the West but should also be seen as indirectly conveying a message to Russia. The Turkish establishment has been moving towards strategic autonomy, as it has diverging interests with both the Western world and Russia. Russia's and Turkey's position on Syria are antithetical to each other. Also, amidst the whole Russia-Ukraine ongoing conflict, Turkey has been one of the most reliable defence partners of Kyiv, which has angered Moscow.¹⁹

This muscle flexing also helps Erdogan domestically at a time when his economic handling has come under criticism. Any such bravado abroad helps Erdogan boost his image in the domestic constituency and to pivot away from problems back home. As issues on the economic and political front escalate, there is a high chance that Erdogan might increasingly indulge in such a rhetoric more so before the 2023 Turkish general elections.

Conclusion

Erdogan's statements on nuclear weapons could be nothing more than his efforts to showcase Turkey as a major power in the Islamic world. Despite such rhetoric, though, Turkey is more isolated regionally now. Turkey has strained relations with the US and Europe. Erdogan in recent times, though, has given indications of reconciliation with Israel. Russia has emerged as its main partner for air defence needs as well as for its civil nuclear energy programmes. Erdogan has had to dial down on the Ummah rhetoric internationally. With US shifting its focus to China, Turkey may want to flex its muscle in the region and such nuclear rhetoric can be useful in signalling Turkey's regional intentions. It remains to be seen how Erdogan manages Turkey's conflicting relationships, regionally, as well as with NATO and Russia, in pursuit of his country's geo-political ambitions.

¹⁸ **“Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day”**, Press Statement, The White House, 24 April 2021.

¹⁹ **“Russia Complains to Turkey Over Drones Sales to Ukraine, Turkish Bureaucrat Says”**, *Reuters*, 8 April 2022.

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