

Libya: Erdogan's Vietnam?

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Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan is the equivalent of the bull let loose in the china store. The only difference is the Turkish autocrat does not break china but, rather, threatens, bullies, and blackmails both his immediate and more distant neighbors over the delimitation of EEZs in Eastern Med realizing Turkey's complete diplomatic isolation. His latest escalating antic was [his illegal deal](#) with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) to bring Turkish troops ('advisers') into its fight with its rival the Tobruk-based regime whose Libyan National Army (LNA), operates under the command of Gen. Khalifa Haftar.

This time through Erdogan has bitten off more than he can chew. Libya is not Syria. The Turks can't roll in and roll out at whim thanks to a long common land border. Any dispatching of Turkish troops to North Africa will require far more complicated lift operations by sea and air, not to mention complicated supply arrangements.

Aside from the technical side, Turkey will step right into a hornet's nest brimming with rival militias, tribal rebels, and mercenaries backed by various external actors. Erdogan has even ignored that Haftar's LAN is aided by [Russian veteran mercenaries](#) supported by jet fighters, precision-guided artillery, coordinated missile strikes, snipers and drones under the silent approval of President Putin, whom Erdogan misses no opportunity to declare his "friend" in the Middle East melee and the game of bringing natural gas to Europe.

Erdogan's blundering into Libya is reminiscent of the fateful decision of the USA to step into Southeast Asia in the 1960s. Adjusted for time and place, the Libya conflict resembles

in many aspects the Vietnam war as it evolved after the US intervention beginning in the early 1960s, viz.: Two opposing governments, each claiming absolute legitimacy and the right to govern the whole country; regular armies battling well-trained insurgents supplied from outside powers; a mix of “conventional” large unit tactics and “irregular” forms of warfare; various tribal groups conducting parallel “small wars” of attrition; and the usual mix of nonstop atrocities against civilians.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, who backs the LNA, has repeatedly warned that any escalation of the Libyan conflict by outsiders is a keen threat to Egypt’s security, the implication being Egypt won’t stand idle if things heat up further. Haftar is also backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The UN-sponsored government in Tripoli is ostensibly backed by the US and other Western countries but , in effect, [its only sponsor is Ankara](#).

So far, Erdogan acts in slow motion. He [announced](#) that Turkish forces have arrived in Libya but there were no details as their numbers and warfighting capabilities. The Turkish strongman said the Turkish troops will conduct primarily “coordination and training” and, eventually, establish a naval and land base, possibly in Misrata. Those who remember the Vietnam war can draw easy parallels (the first US Marines landing at Danang in March 1965 to beef up security of the US base there, etc.)

In case the Turks do get involved in full-scale operations, their going will be tough given the fervor and literally religious determination of the opponents—not to mention they will have to fight well-equipped and battle-hungry forces controlled by “friendly” Russia. The mathematics of escalation are well known thanks to the Vietnam disaster and the Turks will face the same dilemmas of deploying more troops every time the fighting reaches a deadlock. As for Haftar’s forces, they not only have their own sponsors, they have already proved they can deliver severe pain and suffering upon their enemy.

If all else fails, and Erdogan will be left to fight this out alone – a distant terrible story of pain and suffering could be replayed in all its devastating splendor on the shores of North Africa.