

SULTANIC ACROBATICS

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Publication date: 21 April 2018

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“The fact is clear that Turkey should not become a member of the EU... Apart from this, I’ll speak to my colleagues to see if we can reach a joint position on this so that we can end these accession talks.”

Angela Merkel

Contrary to his own repeated statements insisting Turkey won’t be going to early elections, would-be president-for-life Recep Tayyip Erdogan has announced a snap early ballot “necessary” because of the “uncertainties” Turkey faces today.

Those who believed the would-be sultan’s stern earlier rejection of elections before November 2019 failed to see Erdogan’s disingenuous manipulation of the ballot timing. In a classic ploy of deception, aimed to confuse and misdirect an already disorganized opposition, the Turkish autocrat completed his “flanking” maneuver by presenting his opponents with an electoral *fait accompli* and thus throwing their political planning into disarray.

Political manipulation is a centerpiece of the neo-sultan’s autocratic antics but propaganda alone won’t change Turkey’s bleak predicament “on the ground.” And, thus, even neo-sultans need to do something about this state of affairs before the whole affair turns toxic.

To Erdogan's distress, the economy is tanking. The lira, after plummeting repeatedly in recent weeks, [temporarily stabilized](#) upon the early ballot announcement. On March 7, Moody's Investor Service [downgraded](#) Turkish credit rating to Ba2 from Ba1; both ratings represent "junk" status. The downgrade triggered furious Erdogan histrionics which, however, hardly change the [deeply discouraging facts](#) about Turkey's economic stability:

Turkey's external dollar-denominated debt is so large that a combination of rising U.S. dollar interest rates and a slowing global economy could quickly turn Turkey from model EM to the canary in the coal mine of the next great global debt crisis..... Turkey's debt is huge, one of the highest debt burdens of any EM. Turkey owes \$450 billion to foreign creditors, of which \$276 billion is denominated in hard currency, mostly dollars and euros. The remainder of \$174 billion is denominated in Turkey's local currency, the lira. Both kinds of debt are problematic. The lira debt is a growing burden because lira interest rates have skyrocketed from 6% to 12% in the past five years.

The neo-sultan, eager to sweeten the pill for Turkish consumers, squeezed by increasing public utility rates and taxes, rejects austerity with great fanfare, keeps social benefits flowing, and refuses to rein in consumer and public spending. Such huge outlays cannot be financed in any other way but by more borrowing. Part of this risky balancing act is the Turkish central bank announcing ["a sizeable interest-rate increase"](#) to bolster the lira. The rate increase is an unmistakable sign to investors the Turkish economy is overheating.

Erdogan has also botched his cozy arrangements with Iran's mullahs, seeking to evade US sanctions, by getting involved in a conspiracy to help maintain the illegal dollar flow into Iranian coffers intact. But a Turkish-Iranian intermediary, privy to Erdogan's machinations and the corruption of him and his family, has been [convicted](#) by a US court paving the way for hitting Turkish banks with billions of dollars in [fines](#) from the US government. Erdogan's fuming over this US "blackmail" accomplished little past making the already problematic US-Turkish relations even worse.

To make matters more difficult and complicated for the inhabitant of the opulent [Golden Palace](#) in Ankara, even the routinely wishy-washy EU is apparently losing patience with Erdogan's increasingly tyrannical rule. After years of European pussyfooting, the European Commission 2018 report on Turkey has discovered, at long last, "serious shortcomings" besetting Turkish "democracy." In a (reluctant) change of tack, the EU commissioners now appear more in tune with the [demand](#) of terminating membership negotiations with Ankara than anything else.

Aside from Erdogan's pushing his country down the oiled chute and into the embrace of Islamist fanaticism, Turkey's fresh steep increase of threats against Greece and Cyprus appear to have an impact on EU positions: a recent meeting between Erdogan and the EU duo of Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk in Varna [ended](#) with a frosty handshake and even frostier conclusions.

Erdogan is also outraged with France's President Macron stating, during a speech at the European Parliament, France is [ready to support Greece](#) in the event of Turkish threats in the Aegean. It is also certain the neo-sultan won't appreciate France [transferring two modern frigates](#) to the Hellenic Navy on a lend-lease arrangement.

From a Greek perspective, the early election announcement muddies the waters and creates further fears of military conflict. With growing scenarios of ["Greece and Turkey... inching towards war,"](#) Greece's traditional inability to deal with the Turkish threat, in any meaningful way beyond appeasement, now manifests itself in a new round of hand-wringing and combative, but empty, expressions of resolve. Greek planners (those, at least, with a pragmatic cool-headed sense of Turco-Greek realities) need to look at the combination of the following broad scenarios.

FIRST: Building up Aegean tension as a prop for Erdogan's electoral campaign designed around supranationalist slogans and neo-Ottoman fables addressed at the hard-core Moslem conservative "deplorables" forming the backbone of Erdogan's AK party. Bashing Greece in the Aegean is used to reinforce the nationalistic euphoria following the seizure of Afrin from the Kurdish militias the Turks approach as deadly enemies. The neo-sultan won't abandon the Aegean brinkmanship until he wins the election. Possibility of war *by design*, under this scenario, appears low although the risk of a botched incident due to Turkish provocations remains high.

SECOND: Building up Aegean tension as a preamble to Turkish *limited military action*, resembling the 1996 Imia crisis, designed to manhandle Greece to the table of negotiations over Turkish territorial demands. Possibility of launching such action is low during the pre-election period but increases exponentially *after* an (almost certain) Erdogan victory.

THIRD: Building up Aegean tension as a boost to Erdogan's alliance with Devlet Bahçeli's extreme Nationalist Movement party (MHP) which demands an attack in the Aegean to claim Greek islands and islets "belonging" to Turkey. The Erdogan-Bahçeli alliance presently commands a comfortable majority which, however, is not immune to

postelection tensions and disagreements (up until recently, Bahçeli was one of Erdogan's severest critics). Possibility of a military incident during the election campaign is low but, again, it increases exponentially after the vote.

In view of the above, the Greek government should immediately move, first and foremost, to clarify all conceivable support from its "friends" and "allies" in case of Turkish aggression. It must seek immediately a *formal Alliance clarification of the infamous Article 5 on collective NATO defense*. This is an urgent necessity since it is an established NATO tactic to avoid chastising Turkey as a matter of "geostrategic necessities" and the fear of "losing Turkey." The most recent reconfirmation of this Pontius Pilate approach is [this statement](#) by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. It must also seek immediately summit-level consultations with EU principals toward a firm understanding of EU intentions in case of the Turkish attack.

Greece has disastrously underestimated the Turkish threat and overestimated the "benefits" of appeasement and leaving the Turkish theory of "grey zones" in the Aegean to grow unopposed. Greek "pragmatists" approach Turkey's non-stop no-war-no-peace "hybrid" warfare, carried out with the constant violations of Greek sovereign air space and territorial waters, with their heads deep in the sand. The same Greek "pragmatists," including all recent prime ministers, are guilty of refusing to recognize Turkey demands *the collapse of Greek sovereignty in the whole of the Aegean Sea* and not just the repossession of a few rocky islets.

The Greek political establishment, "opinion makers," media, and public opinion *must digest* the glaring fact [Turkey is an unrepentant threat to peace](#) seeking to change the established geopolitical balances in the Eastern Mediterranean through aggressive war and constant unorthodox warfare already spreading in the Balkans.

True realism is required. In its absence, the future won't be pleasant.