

Trump Threatens Turkey with Sanctions. What If He's Serious?

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The frequency with which US President Donald Trump holds out threats to other countries is such that he is no longer being taken seriously. The list of countries threatened by Trump so far includes North Korea, Germany, Canada, China, Venezuela, Pakistan, Syria, Iran and Turkey.

In all fairness, Trump makes no distinction between enemies, adversaries, friends or allies. Turkey, a NATO ally, holds a record of sorts as the country most threatened by the Trump administration. [In separate tweets on Thursday, Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence gave an ultimatum to Turkey](#) that unless Andrew Brunson, an American evangelical pastor of a small Protestant church in western Turkey, is released from detention immediately, Ankara should be “prepared to face the consequences” in the form of “significant sanctions.”



Source: Religion News Service

For the benefit of the uninitiated, Brunson who has been living in Turkey for 23 years was arrested in the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup attempt to overthrow Erdogan, charged with spying and involvement in the failed coup. The Turkish government had probably hoped for a tradeoff – Brunson in exchange for the Islamist preacher Fetullah Gulen who is living in Pennsylvania whom Ankara regards as having masterminded the 2016 coup attempt to overthrow Erdogan. Ankara has been pressing Gulen's extradition and Washington has been stonewalling. It's a complicated case history, since Gulen has had

links in the past with the CIA.

[Turkey has shrugged off the latest threat from Trump and Pence](#). However, for Trump, Christian groups form a core constituency politically, and taking a tough stance on the high-profile Brunson case has endeared him to those groups. Dr. Ronnie Floyd, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, recently made the following remark in praise of the White House effort:

“I thank God we have an administration that cherishes the freedom of religion as our founders hoped we would.”

Trump’s latest threat puts Erdogan in a fix because releasing Brunson without a reciprocal move on Gulen’s extradition means a loss of face. Erdogan is acutely conscious of his strongman-image. He must be wondering whether Trump is serious about the ultimatum on Brunson’s release. Brinkmanship comes naturally to Trump. Indeed, with Trump one really doesn’t know what happens next.

But Erdogan can be more than a match for Trump in the ‘art of the deal’. At a meeting today with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in South Africa, [Erdogan added disdainfully that Trump’s real grouse in giving such an ultimatum](#) yesterday could be that Turkey has drawn close to Russia in the recent times. That is a spin, of course. But then, Erdogan is also hoping to extract a big concession from Putin – deferment of the [planned military operation to liberate the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib](#) on the Turkish border from Ankara’s proxy groups. Turkey is keen to retain Idlib as its zone of influence.

Does Putin feel impressed that US-Turkish ties are deteriorating? There are no easy answers here. Nonetheless, Erdogan sees no harm in playing Trump against Putin. After all, who knows, Putin may hold back on the assault to liberate Idlib...

Yet, the chances are that this time around, Trump probably intends to carry out his ultimatum to impose sanctions on Turkey. The point is, US patience with Turkey seems to be wearing thin. Turkey is no longer a ‘swing’ state in the US’ Middle East strategies, given the poor state of Turkish-Israeli relations, Erdogan’s ‘pivot to Russia’ and the overall trust deficit in Turkish-American relationship. Erdogan snubbed the US threat of sanctions and upheld his decision to purchase S-400 missile defence system from Russia. Last week, [Erdogan bluntly rejected the demarche by Washington that Turkey should cut back its oil imports from Iran](#).

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