

# What Explains the Unexpected Diplomatic De-Escalation Between Turkey and the West?

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*Although both sides are acting like they’ve moved on after last week’s events, their strategists know better than to naively think that everything will go back to how it was before those 10 ambassadors issued their joint statement.*

Most observers were surprised by Monday’s diplomatic de-escalation between Turkey and the West.

President Erdogan [announced](#) over the weekend that 10 Western ambassadors would be declared persona non grata after they released a joint statement last week demanding that their host country’s authorities release a jailed businessman who they regard as a “political prisoner”.

The West presumably predicted how the Turkish President would react to such a provocation so it was widely believed that they intended to catalyze a self-sustaining cycle of diplomatic escalations as part of the US-led Hybrid War on Turkey.

Nevertheless, those 10 countries’ embassies unexpectedly took a step back by releasing statements [reaffirming](#) their official policy that they don’t interfere in the internal affairs of their host state. In response, President Erdogan said that the issue was resolved, at least for now unless they decide to diplomatically meddle once again.

This development suggests that the West might have bit off more than it can chew last week, perhaps by underestimating President Erdogan’s resolve to respond to their provocations. They might have thought that he wouldn’t risk an all-out crisis with them by threatening to declare their ambassadors persona non grata.

If that’s the case, then it would mean that the West wasn’t prepared to initiate the self-sustaining cycle of diplomatic escalations that was previously speculated. It would also imply that their intelligence agencies don’t have as solid of a grasp of the Turkish leader’s psyche as some might have thought. Another related explanation could be that the European participants hadn’t fully predicted the costs of complying with the US’ presumed

demands that they follow its lead. In particular, they might have realized in horror that Turkey could potentially refuse to stop Afghan and other migrants to the bloc, which could destabilize the EU at this sensitive time.

Another explanation is that President Erdogan also realized the mutually detrimental costs of entering into the earlier mentioned self-sustaining cycle of diplomatic escalations and pragmatically offered some of those countries (most likely the EU ones) a “face-saving” way out. That doesn’t mean that he’s “weak”, but just that he would understand better than everyone else how disadvantageous it would be to worsen relations at this particular point in time. In this scenario, he would have delegated his diplomats to explain why he reacted as he did but that he’s still extending an olive branch to them if they take the first step to de-escalate.

After all, Turkey aspires to practice a very complex “balancing” act in the midst of the ongoing global systemic transition whereby it leverages its geostrategic position to comprehensively diversify its foreign partnerships with the intent of preemptively avoiding disproportionate dependence on any one of them. In practice, this means that the self-sustaining cycle of diplomatic escalations that those Western ambassadors set into motion would have unbalanced Turkey’s “balancing” act by abruptly removing its Western component and thus risking disproportionate Turkish dependence on its Eastern half with Russia and China.

From the Western perspective, some of their diplomats might have feared this outcome not because they have Turkey’s best long-term strategic interests in mind, but simply because it could have quickly resulted in them losing most of their leverage over that West Asian country and thus by default leading to the expansion of Russian and Chinese influence there in the coming future like some might have feared. For reasons of simple pragmatism, these comparatively more sober-minded diplomats might have compellingly made the case before their decision makers to step back from provoking Turkey for the time being in order to avert that scenario.

The accuracy of this explanation can only be speculated upon since such diplomatic processes are naturally opaque to those observers relying solely on open sources, but should there be some credibility to it, then this would suggest that those countries’ strategists aren’t in agreement over the most effective way to handle the so-called “Turkish Question”. That provocative term refers to the best way for the West to tackle Turkey’s increasingly independent foreign policy that poses a latent threat to their interests. There seems to be a divide between “hawks” who want to punish Turkey and “doves” who want to continue trying to woo it.

The failure to bridge this divide resulted in the West’s volte face following President Erdogan’s decision to have his Foreign Ministry declare those 10 countries’ ambassadors persona non grata. The hawks provoked this escalation but the doves pragmatically moved in to manage the fallout for the time being. Even so, the general trend is that the West is becoming increasingly hostile towards Turkey. As proven by the latest diplomatic incident, the hawks have the power to provoke a full-blown crisis in bilateral relations, though they’re still being somewhat restrained by the doves.

Trust between Turkey and the West is at an all-time low after what just happened. Although both sides are acting like they’ve moved on after last week’s events, their strategists know

better than to naively think that everything will go back to how it was before those 10 ambassadors issued their joint statement. Turkey and the West can thus be described as “frenemies” in the sense that they’re heated rivals yet also understand the need to pragmatically prevent their tensions from spiraling out of control, at least for now. Considering the hawks’ rising influence, though, more such provocations can be expected before Turkey’s summer 2023 elections.

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