

Germany's spat with Turkey has long-term consequences

Germany and Turkey are locked in a major diplomatic confrontation. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel had vowed this week to block any fresh Turkish trade deal with the European Union as long as the current Turkish government remains in power, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan retorted by calling on the three million-strong ethnic Turkish community living in Germany not to vote for the current ruling party there.

The spat could abate after Germany's general election, scheduled for Sept 24. Still, the bitter confrontation between the EU's most powerful nation and one of Europe's most significant immediate neighbours could have serious repercussions on the continent's security, and raises major questions about the integration and political role of migrant communities in Europe.

Trouble has been brewing between Germany and Turkey since Mr Erdogan crushed an attempted military coup against his regime in July last year, resulting in a crackdown which included the wholesale sacking of tens of thousands of Turkish academics, journalists and civil servants.

Germany refused to hand over to Turkey people against whom the Turkish authorities had issued arrest warrants, prompting Mr Erdogan to accuse the Germans of a "betrayal of trust". Turkey subsequently retaliated by refusing entry to a group of German MPs who wished to visit a German military contingent stationed on Turkish soil, an unprecedented move between two members of Nato, the US-led military alliance in Europe.

Relations reached their nadir after the Turkish authorities in February arrested Mr Deniz Yucel, a German journalist of Turkish descent working for a prominent German newspaper. Since then, eight other German citizens have also been held.

Given the presence of a large ethnic Turkish community in Germany, the country's relations with Turkey are not a foreign policy matter, but an integral part of its domestic politics. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the confrontation quickly featured in the German electoral campaign, with politicians from both the centre-right Christian Democrats of Chancellor Angela Merkel and her centre-left

Socialist opponents vying with each other in criticising Turkey.

Never famous for taking diplomatic snubs, Mr Erdogan publicly appealed to Germans of Turkish descent to vote against both main political parties next month. "I call on them (Turks in Germany) not to vote for those parties who have been engaged in such aggressive, disrespectful attitudes against Turkey and I invite them to teach a lesson to those political parties at the ballot box," he told a major rally in Turkey.

Mr Erdogan reserved special bile for Mr Gabriel, whom he mocked as a novice in politics. "How old are you?" the Turkish President asked rhetorically, to laughter from his supporters.

But the German Foreign Minister, who is a senior leader in the Socialist party and considered a potential future chancellor, did not take the insults quietly. Instead, he vowed this week that "Turkey will never become a member of the EU", not "because we don't want them, but because the Turkish government and Erdogan are moving fast away from everything that Europe stands for". The statement broke an informal taboo under which European politicians never precluded Turkey's eventual European Union membership although Turkey's application to join the EU has stalled for over half a century.

Both countries are certain to dial down the rhetoric when the German elections are over. Sabah, a daily newspaper close to Mr Erdogan, has been running a series of editorials this week urging a compromise, a possible indication that the Turks may be looking for a way out.

And Mr Erdogan is famous for his sudden diplomatic U-turns. He presided over major confrontations with Israel and Russia, but claims to be close friends with both countries today. The assumption in European capitals is that a deal negotiated two years ago, under which Turkey sealed its borders to migrants from the Middle East in return for EU cash, will continue to hold.

But Mr Erdogan's determination to use ethnic Turks residing in Europe as a battering ram against their own European governments remains deeply troubling for all EU capitals. For it seems to be a constant policy, used anywhere there are Turkish communities, and regardless of how warm political relations with individual EU countries are. The Netherlands unceremoniously expelled earlier this year a Turkish minister who held electoral rallies on Dutch soil and, more

recently, Austria refused entry to another minister who attempted to do the same.

At least in that respect, therefore, the current spat threatens to have long-term consequences.

"We can live well with two identities," Mr Gokay Sofuoğlu, the head of the Turkish community in Germany, told local media. "But," he ruefully admitted, "it has become more difficult."

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on August 26, 2017, with the headline 'Germany's spat with Turkey has long-term consequences'.

Source: <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/germany-s-spat-with-turkey-has-long-term-consequences>

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