

## Turkey jeopardises NATO unity

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Any showdown pitting key NATO allies Turkey and the US against each other would be a dangerous escalation of the Syrian imbroglio and seriously threaten efforts aimed at preventing Islamic State from returning to its former “caliphate”. Such a showdown, unfortunately, is a serious possibility as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan masses troops and tanks in preparation for a full-scale attack against the US-backed Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) just across the border with Syria. Mr Erdogan has vowed to “strangle” and “tear down” what he insists is an “army of terror”. He should think again. One key issue at stake is whether Turkey, which has NATO’s largest army after the US, remains a credible Western ally.

After being outmanoeuvred by Russia and Iran in Syria, Washington is seeking to build a pro-Western force of 30,000 Kurdish fighters (veterans of the battle against Islamic State) to police the 822km Turkey-Syria border. Ankara’s failure to staunch the flow of foreign jihadists across that border did much to help the caliphate. The aim now is to ensure water-tight control as part of a broad strategy to prevent a resurgence of Islamic State.

Mr Erdogan, however, claims that the YPG force is part of the separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party, which has been battling the Turkish military for three decades. Despite firm denials from the YPG, Mr Erdogan insists it poses a major threat to Turkey. He should discuss his concerns with the US, not threaten a full-scale “war” against its proxy. The Kurds were indispensable allies against Islamic State.

And the US-backed force will be a moderate, pro-Western alternative to Iran’s ambitions in alliance with Russia and the Assad regime.

Mr Erdogan’s new-found friendship with Moscow and Tehran explains his hostility to the US-backed force. This is clear from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s warning to the US to stay out and abandon the Kurds. It should do no such thing. After Barack Obama’s failures in Syria, Donald Trump has much ground to make up in reasserting US influence. The Kurdish border force is a sensible way forward.