Refugee deal solves little

Turkey uses crisis to win concessions from Europe, writes Fadi Hakura

Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, breathed a palpable sigh of relief after the European Union and Turkey secured a controversial strategy at a summit on March 17-18 to stem the stream of undocumented migrants through the Balkans.

Turkey agreed to send one Syrian refugee to Europe for permanent resettlement in exchange for accepting the return of a migrant entering Greece by crossing the Aegean.

EU leaders are willing to admit up to 72,000 Syrians under this scheme as from 2016. The EU will also give €6 billion in aid – around €2 billion a year – to Turkey and has undertaken to accelerate procedures for visa-free travel for Turkish citizens through the Schengen area by the end of June.

Merkel's relief may be short-lived, however. This agreement is fraught with potential difficulties. To begin with, its legality is questionable given that Turkey does not officially extend to non-European citizens the protections afforded by the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees.

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Further, French President François Hollande has promised no concessions on the 72 tough criteria that Turkey must satisfy to enjoy visa-free travel. So far, according to the European Commission, Turkey has complied with only 35 of them, which comes as no surprise since they include, from the Turkish perspective, politically incendiary requirements, such as recognizing Cyprus and rewriting anti-terrorism laws.

Both sides may, equally, balk at fully implementing the one-to-one exchange. Europe is not keen to take in more Syrian refugees, while Turkey seems reticent about embracing returning migrants. And neither is genuinely committed to Turkey's EU accession. After all, Turkey is perceived to be regressing on European norms on democracy, human rights and media freedoms and the EU is sceptical of Turkish aspirations.

European desperation

Fuelled by the sour aftertaste left by its accession experience, Turkey has relished the chance to extract advantages by employing shock-and-awe tactics against a panicking Europe.

By endorsing Erdogan’s demands, Europe is encouraging more unilateral concessions in the future. His zero-sum style of negotiations conflicts with the EU’s give-and-take, trust-driven and rule-oriented posture. Such a dichotomy could undermine relations should the EU fail to deliver on visa removal.

To ensure a more constructive outcome, the EU has to realize that it has more leverage with Turkey. Not only is Turkey bearing the burden of hosting 2.7 million largely unskilled Syrian refugees, its sluggish economy is stuck in long-term stagnation known as the ‘middle-income trap’ and is encircled by unfriendly neighbours.

In addition, once a paragon of tranquillity in a stormy region, this geo-strategically critical country has witnessed five major attacks in Ankara and Istanbul perpetrated either by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) or Islamic State in the past five months. It is now suffering from the factional, sectarian and ethnic chasms tearing the Middle East apart.

Europe should also appreciate that Turkey’s lack of reliable partners other than the EU necessitates stronger bargaining with Erdogan. Trade statistics are quite telling in this regard: Turkish exports are stabilizing with EU countries but plummeting with Arab states, Iran and Russia. Undoubtedly, the EU is vital to stabilizing Turkey’s economy and prosperity.

Consequently, the EU should adopt a more robust and ‘smarter’ approach towards Turkey rather than simply dangling carrots. It should condition the amount of financial assistance and closer economic ties to carrying out specific and measurable milestones. These include official application by Turkey of the UN Refugee Convention to non-European citizens to guarantee the rights of returning migrants, better management of Turkey’s porous 910-kilometre border with Syria, greater efforts in combating human traffickers and improving Turkey’s widening democratic, freedom and human rights’ deficits.

It also should also link the process of visa liberalization to the level of implementation of the 72 criteria to incentivize Turkey’s behaviour and performance. This synchronization between the two will bolster confidence among Turkey-wary European leaders and heighten the probability that Turkey will attain its coveted objective of visa removal.

Turkish leaders have the possibility to use the migration crisis to rejuvenate bilateral ties by concluding a fair and realistic agreement on this issue. That this episode has created an important opportunity to persuade both sides that they need each other more than ever is, perhaps, a silver lining that should not be neglected.

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