

Break-up of Astana Partnership Was Inevitable. The Turkey-Russia Relation in Jeopardy?

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has ordered his forces to strike Syrian army positions in retaliation for targeting a Turkish military convoy bound for the Saraqeb in Syria's north-western Idlib province. His forces obeyed on Monday and allegedly struck a number of Syrian army positions, killing, he claims, 75 troops. The Syrian army was simply exercising the country's right to self-defence when it fired on an invading convoy, killing five Turkish soldiers and one civilian and wounding nine. This right is guaranteed by international law and the UN Charter.

The Charter says the "exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council", which should be expected to take action to "maintain or restore international peace and security". Of course, the Council will do nothing if Syria lodges a complaint against Turkey, which has been committing aggression against Syria for nearly nine years. Turkey has also enjoyed tacit Western backing for this campaign and has been joined by the US, which has used Syria's Kurds to seize vast areas of the eastern provinces of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor and the latter's oil fields.

Nevertheless, Turkey's impunity seems to be coming to an end. Russia, which tried and failed to rein in Erdogan's ambitions in Syria, has at long last decided to challenge Ankara's "charade" claims it is only defending Turkey's "interests" by invading Syria.

However, this could be a dangerous business. The Trump administration cannot be counted upon to curb Turkey, while Ankara could call on "all-for-one-one-for-all NATO" partners to defend Turkish forces illegally invading Syria if Turkey is resisted by the Syrian army and Russia. It is unlikely, however, that NATO would become involved as the heartland of the alliance would not be under threat.

Turkey and Russia were supposed to be partners in the Astana process designed to bring an end to the civil and proxy wars in Syria. Under a 2018 agreement, they were meant to impose a ceasefire in Idlib, now controlled by Al Qaeda's Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham and its allies, and take other steps to stabilise the province. The ultimate objective was to prevent an all-out Syrian army offensive against insurgents based in Idlib where some 3 million civilians dwell.

While joint patrols were meant to monitor the ceasefire, Turkey was assigned the tasks of separating taqfiris from "rebels" and disarming the former, expelling heavy weapons and taqfiris from a buffer zone around Idlib, opening the north-south and east-west highways passing through Idlib and preventing attacks on Syrian forces from Idlib. When Turkey did not meet any of its commitments, Russia unleashed the long-planned Syrian army-Russian

offensive to retake Idlib. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is now crying foul and claiming falsely that Russia reneged on its commitments.

It looks as though the Astana partnership is over. The break-up was inevitable. Turkish and Russian aims were always at odds. Soon after unrest erupted in Syria in March 2011, Ankara did everything it could to undermine and overthrow the government. Turkey invented the Free Syrian Army, to fight the Syrian army, and the Syrian National Council, to take over from the government, but neither proved to be of much use. Hordes of foreign takfiris were recruited to join the battle but the objective of the most successful group, Daesh, was the founding of a false “caliphate”. They are considered a threat to the international community.

Russia has formed an alliance with Syria that goes back to the days of the Soviet Union and gave the government both political and military support. At the end of September 2015, Russia dispatched its air force to provide Syrian troops air cover for operations. This turned the tide of battle and enabled the Syrian army to recapture most territory seized by taqfiris and so-called “rebels”.

Erdogan did not give up on his plan to oust the government but pretended that he and his Russian counterpart Valdimir Putin were both dedicated to finding a peaceful end to the Syrian conflict. Ultimately, Putin and the current occupant of the White House, Donald Trump, will have to contain Erdogan. Since Trump launched his “Deal of the Century” plan for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, Erdogan has loudly condemned this plan in the hope of leading regional opposition to it. This has almost certainly alienated Trump, who had been in the habit of consulting Erdogan on Syrian and regional affairs and meeting his demands. Trump does not take snubs lightly.

If the Syrian war is to end sooner rather than later, Putin and Trump will have to reach an accommodation on Turkey’s actions in Syria and the 25 per cent of Syrian territory held by US-sponsored Syrian Kurdish forces. Since Putin is a far more powerful world figure than Erdogan, and Trump seems to admire Putin more than Erdogan, some sort of Syrian post-war political agreement just might be achieved at the Turkish leader’s expense.

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