

Erdogan Repairs Syria Ties with Eye on Eurasianism

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Yesterday, Russian President Vladimir Putin [spoke](#) with Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev regarding the forthcoming Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Samarkand on September 15-16. This must be the fourth or fifth time the two leaders confabulated over the upcoming event. One lost count!

Putin and Mirziyoyev conceivably exchanged notes on a major event likely on the sidelines of the SCO summit — a meeting between Turkish President Recep Erdogan and his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad signalling a breakthrough in the conflict in Syria.

As I wrote recently — [Russia-Turkey reset eases regional tensions](#)— one major outcome of the meeting between Putin and Erdogan in Sochi on August 5 was that a reconciliation between Ankara and Damascus may be happening. On his return journey, Erdogan said he was going to contact Assad. Hardly anyone noticed, though, that Putin also invited Erdogan and Assad to participate in the upcoming SCO summit.

Indeed, Mirziyoyev, who will be hosting the summit in Samarkand, has been in the know of it all through. Putin and Mirziyoyev have forged a close working relationship suffused with warmth and mutual respect that puts Tashkent back as the key capital in Russia’s Central Asian strategies, as has been the case historically dating back to the Tsarist era.

Moscow has outclassed and outmanoeuvred the recent US attempts to stir up unrest in Central Asian region, whilst the Kremlin has one eye riveted on Ukraine. (The secretary of Russia’s Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, a longtime associate of Putin, lashed out last week at a meeting of SCO security tsars at [US attempts to stage colour revolutions in Central Asia](#).)

Coming back to Syria, western media missed the wood for the trees while assessing the Putin-Erdogan summit in Sochi. The leitmotif in Sochi was regional security in the Greater Middle East — the vast swathe stretching from Levant to the steppes of Central Asia and the Pamirs bordering Xinjiang.

The [Guardian came tantalisingly close](#) to smelling the real story behind the 4-hour long “secretive meeting” at one-to-one level in Sochi, but lost the scent somehow after hearing that “Before the meeting began, Russian journalists noted that Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechen leader who has sent forces under his command to both Syria and Ukraine, was in attendance.”

The Putin-Erdogan axis is riveted on a balancing of interests to ensure differences (which are aplenty) do not turn into disputes. Thus, Putin is unfailingly attuned to Erdogan’s concerns today which devolve upon the state of the Turkish economy and the upcoming presidential and parliamentary polls (the two are inter-related.)

Erdogan has his finger on many pies — from the Balkans to North Africa and Persian Gulf to the Caucasus — but what concerns him most is the situation in Syria, which has serious implications as he prepares to seek a renewed mandate. For Erdogan, Syria is like a Matryoshka doll — a set of problems of decreasing size placed one inside another. Who else but Putin could understand a Matryoshka doll better?

For the Russian mind, the Matryoshka doll symbolises above all other values the search for truth and meaning. That is how Syria figures prominently in Putin’s cogitations with Erdogan. Packed inside the doll, one inside another, are: PKK and Kurdish separatism; US-Kurdish unholy alliance; Israeli footprints; Turkish-American discord (following the failed US-backed coup d’état in 2016) — all of which impact Turkey’s vital concerns.

At Sochi, Putin could persuade Erdogan that the best way to address his concerns will be by engaging with Assad. Of course, Erdogan and Assad are no strangers to each other. The two families used to vacation together — until 2011 when Barack Obama and Joe Biden weaned Erdogan away.

Fundamentally, there is a Turkish-Russian understanding that the strengthening of Syrian government’s sovereignty will strengthen regional security and that Ankara and Damascus have a common interest in fighting separatism and terrorism. Indeed, the natural corollary is that the longer the US occupation continues, the greater the danger of a “Kurdistan” consolidating in northern Syria.

But the US is in no hurry to end its occupation, since the troops aren’t taking casualty; large scale smuggling of oil makes the occupation rather “self-financing” (like the ancient Roman legions); and the region also happens to be Syria’s most fertile river valleys.

Erdogan’s security concerns in Syria are best addressed in cooperation with Damascus. As the first step in this direction, he [publicly stated last week](#) that destabilising the Assad government is not Turkish policy (anymore.)

Meanwhile, reports have appeared that a Turkish delegation of former ministers and diplomats led by the leader of the Patriotic Party (Vatan Partisi) [Dogu Perincek plans to visit Damascus](#) to hold talks with Assad for the restoration of Turkish-Syrian relations. Interestingly, [Tehran has since called for](#) the rebuilding of relations between Turkey and Syria.

Now, Perincek’s appearance makes this a demi-official Track 1.5 mission. Perincek is a seasoned politician with a Marxist pedigree, who was associated with both “Kemalists” and Kurdish PKK, had spent something like 15 years in jail during various periods until an

intriguing prison release in 2014, and a makeover as fellow traveller of the Erdogan regime.

However, one consistent trait in Perincek's ideological make-up has been his advocacy of "Eurasianism", namely, that Turkey should turn its back on the Atlantic system, pursue an independent foreign policy and head toward Eurasia to work with the Russia-China axis.

Without doubt, Perincek worked on receptive minds, as a belief was gaining ground within the Erdogan government that Western powers — the US, in particular — are trying to weaken and divide Turkey through their support of Kurdish separatism, whereas Russia and China scrupulously refrain from interference in Turkey's internal affairs.

Curiously, Perincek and Russian philosopher and ideologue Aleksandr Dugin have enjoyed a warm personal friendship over many years, cemented by their conviction that Russian nationalism and Turkish nationalism have a meeting point in the ideology of "Eurasianism". They have met more than once. And, like Dugin, Perincek is also credited today with influence among the power circles surrounding Erdogan.

A presentation of the "Eurasianist" perspective on the Syrian question is available in a most recent [interview by retired Lt. Gen. Ismail Hakki Pekin](#), former head of the Turkish Armed Forces' Military Intelligence (2007-2011) who used to be the deputy chairman of Perincek's party.

It is possible to see Perincek's influence in the Turkish foreign policy in the so-called [Asia Anew initiative](#), which was unveiled at the annual Turkish Ambassadors' Meeting in Ankara three years ago.

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