



Russia-Turkey Rapprochement: A New Paradigm of Relations

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The growing rapprochement between Russia and Turkey in recent times has come at a sensitive time given the developments taking place in West Asia. Historically, during the Soviet era, Russia-Turkey relations were marred by geopolitical rivalry, distrust and conflict of interests. Turkey until now has perceived Russia as a real threat to its national interests and security. Turkey joining NATO was one such act to insulate its borders from Soviet threat during the Cold War period. Russia on the other hand has been skeptical of Turkish intentions due to its western orientation and membership in NATO, which until now has influenced its foreign policy behaviour. The dissolution of Warsaw Pact and the disintegration of the Soviet Union had however redefined the bilateral relationship between Russia and Turkey but failed to achieve a full-fledged strategic partnership.

Current regional developments in West Asia especially the Syrian crisis and the emergence of the Islamic State have brought about a change in the dynamics of bilateral engagement between Russia and Turkey. The factors identified for the shifting trends in the relations between Russia and Turkey are:

- Russia's increasing profile in West Asia
- Russia's resurgence as a military power
- Downturn of relations between Turkey and the US
- Syria crisis- the immediate priority
- Turkey's determination to shed its uni-dimensional (pro-Euro-Atlantic) foreign policy
- Turkey exploring new regional arrangements with Russia

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International community has been monitoring Russia's increasing profile in West Asia which is mainly due to its renaissance as a military power. Fortunately for the Kremlin, its cost effective and successful military 'anti- ISIS' operation in Syria has helped Russia emerge as a 'potential alternative' non-regional player given US' own diluted and ineffective role in resolving the Syrian crisis. Interestingly, Russia's growing influence, military resurgence and role in West Asia is

viewed today as a 'heavyweight' by many countries in the region including Turkey- a long term ally of the United States and a NATO member. Despite US displeasure and caution of imposition of sanctions, Turkey has made the purchase to receive S-400 anti- missile defence system from Russia- a case in point. Also, the growing proximity between Turkey and Russia could be attributed to US' unilateral actions in West Asia as well as its failure to accommodate the interests of Turkey.

Turkey's Participation in Astana Peace Talks

Turkey's pro-active participation in the Russia led Astana Peace talks to find a viable political settlement in Syria has led to a new regional arrangement, i.e., Russia-Turkey-Iran-Syria quadrilateral engagement. When all-out assault on the rebel enclave of Idlib in north-west Syria drew closer, Iran hosted a trilateral (Russia, Iran and Turkey) summit on 07 September 2018 with Syrian crisis as the main agenda of deliberation. The concerned parties agreed to keep humanitarian situation in the region in utmost priority. The parties also concurred that Syria has to keep its 'territorial integrity and sovereignty; the armed conflict has to be solved by "political methods" through the creation of the Constitutional Commission coordinated with international organizations (primarily with the UN)'.¹

Syria's Idlib region- Merger of Interests

Syria's Idlib region has been a host to nearly 60000 radical Islamists and the largest concentration of ISIS and Al-Qaeda members in Syria. This region which has been a bastion for IS has emerged as a critical area of concern in Russia-Turkey engagement. More importantly, a large-scale military operation in Idlib meant threat to civilian lives and huge flow of refugees to Turkey.² The meticulous handling of the security zone in Idlib was therefore crucial for both the countries while formulating a strategy to annihilate radical Islamists from the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met at Sochi on 17 September 2018 to discuss the Idlib situation. The outcome of the talks has been hailed a success as both Russia and Turkey agreed to create a demilitarized buffer zone in Idlib region which is to be implemented by 15 October 2018. The two leaders also agreed to withdraw heavy weaponry from the zone and carry out coordinated military patrols on the borders.³ Nevertheless, the future of Idlib and other security zones of Syria depend a lot on Russia's military diplomacy and Turkey's experience in counter-terrorism as seen in the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch Operations including use of diplomatic space to resolve the crisis situation.

The Way Forward

The rapprochement between Russia and Turkey is a reality today despite the progress being strenuous following incidents such as the shooting down of Russian fighter aircraft SU-24. Although Syrian crisis has been the main factor in bringing the two countries together, at the same time clash of interests continues to exist on many issues including Syria itself. Turkey has been accused of buying oil from the black market provided by ISIS in Syria and Iraq which antagonised many countries including Russia as it is the main financial source of income.⁴ Also, Ankara has traditionally expressed solidarity with Syrian Turkmens, who are Syrians of Turkish descent. Friction between Ankara and Moscow had intensified over alleged Russian airstrikes on Syrian villages dominated by Turkmen in November 2015⁵

Turkey on the other hand has accused Russia using the 'Kurdish card'. Turkey had claimed that Russia supported the Kurdistan Workers' Party- Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK) terrorism in its land while Russia claimed that the Chechen terrorists' active involvement in its territory was

supported by Turkey. Due to this, Russia used the “Kurdish Problem” as a “counter attack” to challenge Turkish interests in the region.

While Syrian crisis has led to a shift in Russia-Turkey relations, the sustainability of this partnership depends not just on immediate interests but also a lot on long term prospects. In order to sustain the existing cooperation, economic relations which has been a major plank in Russia-Turkey relations in the post Cold War era, should continue to be the key area of interests in the partnership. Factors that have shaped the current phase of economic interaction between the two countries are: a) Turkey’s strategic location acts as a transit route for Russia’s energy supply markets as it is an energy export oriented country. Turkey has cast itself as a bridge for the international transit of energy raw materials from Russia, Transcaucasia, the Caspian Sea area, and potentially the Arab states to Europe and Israel and b) Turkey is also developing a growing dependency on Russian energy resources as it is second only to Germany as the buyer of Russian natural gas, accounting for nearly one-fifth of Russia’s gas exports outside the former Soviet Union.

Tourism, as well as construction and contracting work, are carried out by Turkish companies in Russia. Trade in Turkish agricultural products, light industrial goods, and textiles also play an important role. Russia is also building Turkey’s first nuclear power station, a project estimated at more than \$20 billion that is largely financed by Moscow.

Despite the tensions between Russia and Turkey in the past, the above mentioned factors will be essential to maintain a sustained partnership between the two in coming years. In terms of security and stability of Syria, positive change in the attitude towards each other has been a relevant factor in the emerging contours in Russia-Turkey relations. Conversely, the two countries today seek to establish new regional arrangements that could secure their common interests and concerns in West Asia. In order to resolve the Syrian crisis and containing the ISIS, both Russia and Turkey should play a pro-active role together that accommodates each other’s interests and concerns. Any miscalculation from either side or from its coalition forces may lead to serious repercussions on the regional security environment of West Asia.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ Vladimir Yevseyev, “Prospects of Solving the Idlib Problem”, Valdai Club, 20 September 2018

http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/prospects-of-solving-the-idlib-problem/?sphrase_id=433695

² Ibid.

³ “Russia, Turkey agree to Create Buffer Zone in Syria’s Idlib”, REFERL, 17 September 2018. www.referl.org/putin-erdoganpt-to-meet-in-sochi-to-discuss-syria-s-idlib/29493691.html

⁴ “Russia says it has proof Turkey involved in Islamic State oil trade”, Reuters, 02 December 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey/russia-says-it-has-proof-turkey-involved-in-islamic-state-oil-trade-idUSKBN0TL19S20151202>

⁵ “Turkey protests at 'intense' Russian bombing of Turkmen villages”, Middle East Eye, 20 November 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-protests-intense-russian-bombing-turkmen-villages-1603191925>