

Future Backlash Against the Pentagon's Hybrid War in Syria

by M.K. Bhadrakumar via claire - The American Conservative *Sunday, Mar 11 2018, 3:25am*
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Turkey is throwing in with Russia and Iran, all three of which want to see the US gone.

U.S. and Turkish officials are due to meet in Washington today to begin thrashing out the range of issues now threatening to tear the already fragile relationship between the two NATO allies apart.

The Turkish-American discord goes back to the Obama administration when Washington persuaded Ankara to spearhead the regime-change project in Syria circa 2011, only to see the U.S. retract later, leaving Turkey holding a can of worms.

Since then the relationship has become mired in several disputes, with the overarching geopolitical result that Turkey has steadily drifted away from its Western allies towards a détente with Russia. This has taken the form of a quasi-alliance with Moscow over the Syrian conflict—a partnership that appears to be flourishing as a “win-win” economic relationship and has resulted in the Turkish decision to purchase an S-400 air defense system from Russia.

The situation in Syria will top the agenda during the talks in Washington on Thursday. The priority for both sides will be to avert a standoff in northern Syria where the U.S. and Turkey are pursuing sharply divergent interests. At least since 2014, the U.S. has aligned with Kurdish groups that Ankara regards as terrorists belonging to the PKK, the separatist movement waging a bloody struggle to carve out an independent state in the Kurdish homelands in eastern Turkey. On the other hand, Kurds are the Pentagon's foot soldiers in its war against the Islamic State in Syria.

To say the talks are taking place in an acrimonious climate is an understatement, and the trust deficit is palpable. The only high note is that both Turkey and the U.S. are diplomatically experienced enough to navigate their perennially problematic relationship as allies and, most certainly, neither seeks a showdown in Syria. Recent remarks by Pentagon officials suggest the U.S. has no intentions of terminating its alliance with Kurdish militia in eastern Syria anytime soon, as Turkey demands. Meanwhile, Turkey wants the redeployment of the Kurdish militia in Manjib in northern Syria to the east of the Euphrates. During his visit to Ankara in February, Tillerson had assured the Turks that the U.S. would heed their sensitivities over Manjib. But curiously, Turkey now alleges the U.S. is instead “lifting” the Kurdish fighters in Manjib to the frontline in the canton of Afrin, 100 miles to the west, to stiffen the Kurdish resistance against the current Turkish military operation there.

To be sure, an elaborate pantomime is playing out. The Turks suspect that Washington is simply playing for time by engaging them in talks, while on a parallel track systematically advancing a geopolitical project to create an independent Kurdish entity carved out of northern Syria, which would eventually have direct access to the eastern Mediterranean. The Turkish press is awash in accusations of bad American intentions. In a sensational report on Monday, the pro-government Turkish Daily Star published a supposed American blueprint for establishing a full-fledged Kurdish state in eastern and northern Syria along Turkey's borders.

Amidst all this, Erdogan recently spoke on the phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin on

Tuesday to discuss Syria. The Kremlin evidently takes an interest in creating space for Turkey to negotiate effectively with the U.S. Ankara also finds it useful and necessary to keep the line open to Moscow. The Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu plans to meet his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Moscow next Tuesday prior to a likely visit to Washington on March 19 to activate yet another “mechanism” between himself and Tillerson.

Turkey is openly disregarding Washington’s misgivings over the Astana process on Syria and continues to work actively with Russia and Iran. The foreign ministers from all three countries plan to meet in Astana on March 16. A statement by the Kazakh Foreign Ministry on Tuesday said that the ministers of the three “guarantor countries” would assess the results of their collaboration and “identify common steps.” The three foreign ministers propose to issue a joint statement after their meeting to determine areas of further work within the Astana process with specific reference to the tragic events in Eastern Ghouta. Again, the Turkish Foreign Ministry announced on Wednesday that a trilateral summit of the Turkish, Russian, and Iranian presidents is slated for April in Istanbul to “discuss Syria and potential steps in the region.”

Suffice to say, if Tillerson’s mission to Ankara had aimed at getting Turkey out of the Russian-Iranian orbit, he had no success. The Astana process is returning with renewed vigor, and Turkey’s growing frustration and anger towards the perceived U.S. intransigence is strengthening its axis with Russia (and Iran). It is of the utmost importance for Turkey that Russia continues to remain passive while it presses ahead with the present operation in Afrin. A tacit understanding is apparent between Turkey on one side and Russia and Iran on the other as regards the Turkish operation in Syrian territory. For its part, Ankara will not impede the operations by the Syrian government forces and allied fighters in the Eastern Ghouta region and in Idlib and Aleppo provinces. Significantly, Erdogan virtually held out an assurance to Moscow on Tuesday when he said in a TV interview that Turkey will not cancel the contract for purchasing the air defense systems S-400 Triumf from Russia, even if it risks U.S. sanctions.

In hard-hitting remarks on Monday, Erdogan warned the Trump administration “Today we are in Afrin, tomorrow we will be in Manbij, the day after we will be east of the Euphrates to clean up all terrorists all the way to the border of Iraq. We will hold the terrorist organization [Kurdish militia] and its supporters [U.S. special forces] accountable... We are well aware of their treacherous tricks... Turkey has the power, energy and strategy to deal with those tricks.” To be sure, in immediate terms, the Turkish objective will be to coax out of the Trump administration a firm timeline for the redeployment of the Kurdish fighters in Manjib. But it is hard to see the Pentagon agreeing. Manjib serves as a supply hub for various front lines in northeastern and eastern Syria.

The bottom line is that Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran have converged on the opinion that an open-ended U.S. military presence in Syria will be detrimental to their interests. The recent testimony by the commander of the U.S. Central Command General Joseph Votel before the House Armed Services Committee cast Russia as an adversary in the Syrian conflict. Votel described Russia as playing the destabilizing role of “both arsonist and firefighter” in Syria. Ankara gathers that the U.S. is fueling Kurdish nationalism for geopolitical purposes, which poses a threat to Turkey’s security and sovereignty. Iran, of course, is only too aware of the United States’ containment strategy towards it in Syria and Iraq.

The fundamental contradiction here is that the Pentagon is fighting a “hybrid war” in Syria using the Kurdish proxy without formal congressional approval. Behind the fig leaf of the residual operations to mop up the defeated ISIS, the U.S. hopes to take advantage of Syria’s overall fluidity to weaken the regime, get the Russians bogged down in a quagmire, roll back the Iranian presence in Syria and Iraq, and tame Turkey—all without really putting boots on the ground. Somewhere along the line, in

a not-too-distant future, there is going to be a backlash.

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