How the US is Trying to Play Turkey against Russia in Syria

Whereas Trump’s telephonic conversation with Erdogan opened the way for a US exit from (northern) Syria and Turkey’s subsequent incursions into Syria against Kurdish militias, the very fallout of Turkish operation in Syria has led to events that appear to be at the centre of US efforts to ‘appease’ Turkey in such a way as to not only to make amends for previous US policies but also to purposefully put Turkey-Russia relations in a difficult position so as to create a conflict of interest between them in Syria - something that the US hopes to use to its advantage to revamp its weak position in Syria as well as the larger Middle Eastern geo-political landscape. This was precisely the purpose of Mike Pence’s recent visit to Turkey, and the US commitment to create a Turkish military controlled “safe zone” inside Syria - a long held Turkish demand which runs counter to its pledges with respect to protecting and respecting Syria’s territorial integrity.

By thus wetting Turkey’s maximalist appetite for a “safe zone” stretching across the entire 440 kilometre - almost the size of Greece - border with Syria up to Iraqi border, the US has sown the seeds of conflict of interest between actors who want to reunify Syria under Syrian command and control as soon as possible and actors who aim to divide Syria to break the ‘axis of resistance.’

As such, whereas the US-Turkey joint statement released after Pence’s visit sad that “the two sides agreed on the continued importance and functionality of a safe zone in order to address the national security concerns of Turkey” and that “the safe zone will be primarily enforced by the Turkish Armed Forces and the two sides will increase their cooperation in all dimensions of its implementation”, indicating a US intention to keep itself involved in Syria through a jointly managed Turkish military presence, Syria’s Assad was clear in his meeting with a high-profile Russian delegation about the necessity of clearing Syria of “of all Turkish, US and other forces illegally present in
Syrian territories.” Clearly, the Syrian and Russian authorities are unlikely to allow an open-ended Turkish military presence in Syria, deployed with an intention to thwart their bid to re-establish Syrian control over all of its territories.

But the US officials, focused as their intention is on weaning Turkey away from Russia, are intent on using the politics of “safe-zone” to create a rift between Turkey and Russia. As such, while the US has whetted Turkey’s appetite for a big “safe-zone”, it has still left it to the Russians and the Syrians to agree to the creation of such a zone. In other words, while the US doesn’t, as the Pence-Erdogan agreement shows, oppose the creation of a big safe-zone inside Syria, it is up to the Turks to convince the Russians and the Syrians to agree to create such a zone. The Syrians, of course, want to clear their country of all illegally present forces, let alone give the Turks an open-ended and long-term military presence.

Erdogan is, accordingly, looking towards Russia’s Putin to see Turkey’s maximalist Syria design materialising as soon as possible. On October 19, Erdogan said in a statement that after holding talks with president Trump, he will be focusing on his talks with president Putin. To quote him, “In the area of the operation [referring to Kobani town] are forces of the regime [of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad] under Russia’s protection. We will be tackling the issue with Mr. Putin”, adding further that in the wake of a no-agreement situation with Russia with regards to certain Syrian areas, “Turkey will be implementing its own plans”.

And, whatever the plans might be, what is evident here is that the US will have a significant role to play in designing and executing those plans with regards to not just Syria, but also the whole Middle East.

Turkey is already anticipating a return to the F-35 programme, and with a US assurance about Turkish military control of the “safe-zone”, Turkey’s regional ambitions have come to throng Ankara once again whereby Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman dreams might come to fruition.

Given the US’ position in the region, offering a little help to Turkey to act out as a ‘regional power’ would serve many purposes, including that of limiting Russia’s influence in the region and countering that of Iran in both Syria and Iraq. It is precisely for this reason that the US has, in the first place, decided to abandon Kurds and made an agreement with Ankara to not only to push back the YPG but also de-weaponize them.

With Syrian forces now firmly present in the strategically important town of Kobani, which falls between a Turkish-controlled enclave farther west and smaller areas to the east that Turkey seized in the past week, and a Syrian resolve to push Turkish forces out of the Syria, tensions are likely to mount - a scenario that will most suit the US as it will allow the latter to continue to extend a ‘helping hand’ to the second biggest NATO military in a bid to remain relevant to the Syrian end-game and influence efforts at de facto territorial redistribution of the region into “zones” of influence.

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