Despite the US president’s claim to have killed the ISIS leader and thus prove his country’s relevance to the Syrian crisis, the US ability to influence the ground realities in such a way as to shape the end-game to its own advantage are limited. The death of Baghdadi is highly unlikely to win the US a seat in the Russian-led peace processes, although this assassination might allow Trump to boost his presidential election campaign. Similarly, despite the recent Turkey-US agreement regarding Turkey’s military operation and the resolve to establish a “safe zone” in Syria, Russia’s counter-agreement with Turkey has a lot more actual potential to shape the end-game. The aspect that creates a decisive difference between the two is the extent of their physical presence in Syria. As such, whereas the US has already relocated most of its forces from Syria to Iraq, Russian troops continue to remain actively present in Syria and remain Syrian forces’ crucial partners.

As a matter of fact, enforcement of Turkey-Russia agreement largely depends upon Russian military forces in that the Russians will be jointly managing the Syrian-Turkey border to prevent YPG/PKK infiltration inside Turkey. The deal is a “win-win” for both Russia and Turkey. For Turkey, joint patrolling of the border region up to the depth of 10 kilometres would serve and consolidate the gains it was able to made through its latest military operation. This is in addition to the provisions in the agreement about the withdrawal of the People’s Protection Units (YPG) from nearly all the remaining areas of the border up to a depth of 30 kilometres. For Russia, while a Turkish military presence presents a problem and lacks legitimacy, joint-patrolling increases Turkey’s dependence on Russia in Syria and provides a crucial string that would keep a NATO power attached with Russia and relatively detached from Brussels.

For Russia again, the agreement is a “win-win” in that it does not sanction a long-term Turkish military presence in Syria and doesn’t aim to cause Syria’s territorial disruption. The agreement, as such, duly provides for the securing Turkey’s national interests but not at the expense of the political unity and territorial integrity of Syria. Thus, the US politics of “safe-zone” stands effectively dead, at least for now.

Similarly, while the US withdrawal from Syria is not absolute and it has decided to retain Syria’s oil wells under its control, the territory now under the US control has shrunk and that under Russian and Syrian control increased manifold. This is due not only to Turkey’s agreement with Russia about not furthering its military advances in Syria, but due also to the US’ forces withdrawal. This means that the vacuum left by a US sudden withdrawal is, in the absence of Turkish forces in these areas, being filled by Syrian forces with the help of Russian troops.

However, even though Turkey will not be advancing further into Syria, Turkish military presence in Syria remains a big problem for Assad, who, in his recent visit Idlib, minced no words critising Erdogan as a “thief” bent upon stealing Syria’s land. Assad’s criticism is despite Moscow’s claim to have taken Syrian regime into confidence about Turkey’s military presence in Syria.

For Russia, Syria’s criticism of Turkey is not worrisome. For one thing, if Erdogan keeps affirming support for Syria’s unity and territorial integrity, Turkey cannot indefinitely occupy such large areas of Syrian territories, although the fact that it has come to control almost two-third of Syria’s norther border puts it in a very strong position vis-à-vis Syria’s final settlement.

For Russia, however, this doesn’t present a serious problem; for, to end Syrian crisis a grand bargain among key regional players is going to be the key to peace.

As far as the US presence and its “control” of Syrian oil fields is concerned, it lacks legitimacy and has no sanction
under international law. Furthermore, the Syrian forces will never accept a permanent or even long-term US military presence in Syria, nor will Russia. The US presence has already reduced considerably over the course of last three-four years, and given the Syrian forces’ national drive to reclaim Syria’s sources of food, agriculture and energy, this presence will continue to shrink.

In the end, it is Syria and Russia who win not only in terms of having defeated the sinister plan of “sending Assad home” but also in terms of winning over a NATO power, successfully changing the course of its policy from supporting a “regime change” in Syria to vowing to protect Syria’s “territorial integrity” and “unity.”

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