Turkey: Why is the ‘Sick Man of Europe’ itching in Syria?

If Turkey’s Erdogan had some ‘neo-Ottoman’ dreams, they seem to have been almost fully shattered by the fast-pace Russia-Syria offensive in norther Syria and recovery of the territory hitherto being controlled by the so-called ‘rebel’ forces, including those being funded by Turkey ever since the beginning of the ‘civil-war’ in Syria. An analysis of the evolution of Turkey’s policies in Syria shows that it has been a massive failure. Starting with the objective of ‘sending Assad home’, which ultimately meant to allow Turkey to extend its influence in Syria and thereby impose a ‘permanent solution’ on its Kurdish problem, to collaborating with Russia, Iran and Syria in Sochi and Astana processes, Turkey’s primary motivation has always been to raise its regional strategic profile in a way that allows it to become a new regional hegemon. It has been trying to maintain a calculated distance from the US/NATO, considering that the US support for the Kurds remains the key element of its Middle Eastern policy, and it has been maintaining a calculated relationship with Russia—Syria in the hopes of finding the same ‘permanent solution’ to its Kurdish question through a direct control of large swaths of Syrian territory.

As long as it looked possible for Turkey to retain control of norther Syria, everything was fine. However, its inability and perhaps unwillingness to remove jihadi elements from Idlib has led Russia and Syria to shore up their offensive to liberate the whole of Syria from jihadi elements, including those being funded by Turkey. This offensive has most certainly sabotaged Turkish interests, forcing it to lose control of some of the key strategic territorial points in Syria, including the all-important M-5 highway, a road that is at the heart of the future of Syria’s territorial integrity and its politics and economy. The M-5 highway connects the Syria’s economic hub, Aleppo, with the capital and other key areas, including the border with Jordan.
For Turkey, the road is important because it also connects Syria with Turkey’s southern city of Gaziantep, an industrial hub and a centre for imports and exports. Even according to Turkish state media reports, if the highway had remained under [Turkey backed] groups, it would have meant a permanent physical inability of Syria to establish its authority over all of the country. On the other hand, control of the highway by [Turkey funded] jihadi groups would have meant a permanent Turkish control of Syria’s economic jugular vein—something that would have allowed Erdogan to realise his ‘neo-Ottoman’ dreams. The fact that Syria, supported as it is by Russia, has brought the road under control and even operationalised the city of Aleppo, means that Turkey’s own entire ‘Syria project’ is crumbling. It explains why Turkey’s state media has chosen to call the fall of M-5 highway under Syrian control a ‘strategic coup’ [against Turkish interests].

Although the US has indicated to support Turkey’s stance, Erdogan knows that he can rely on the US only at the expense of his Kurdish policy, and a major compromise thereof defeating yet again his entire Syria project. And as far as NATO is concerned, its officials have been reported to have said that NATO countries will neither support the invocation of Article 5 over the death of Turkish troops in Idlib nor provide Turkey with military assistance in the event of a military operation in the region.

Turkey, having thus been checkmated in northern Syria, is threatening to launch its military offensive in Syria. Whereas the official discourse remains focused on Turkey’s ‘national security interests’, the fact that Turkey backed jihadi groups are being increasingly cornered in Syria also means that they might flee to Turkey, becoming a serious security threat for Erdogan, costing him his political fortune.

And although Turkey continues to put pressure on Syria and Russia by threatening a military offensive, the facts on the ground show that Turkey’s options are minimum. There is no way Syria and Russia will put the M5 on the negotiating table. This, again, is because of Turkish inability and unwillingness to implement the original Idlib deal. Not even Erdogan can deny the fact that Idlib situation has come to this point over a period of time since last year when Russian and Syrian reached an estimation that Turkey had no intentions of fulfilling its commitments to evict the al-Qaeda affiliates. Syria and Russia are only doing what Ankara was supposed to do in Syria: freeing the country of the hold of jihadists.

War, therefore, would do no good to Turkey. All it can hope to do, as far as the question of its security interests vis--vis rolling back Kurds from areas near its border is concerned, is to coordinate with Syria and Russia and avoid a war. As Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized that, “It is only natural that the Syrian armed forces, reaffirming their commitment to the original agreements on Idlib, including an agreement on a ceasefire, respond to such inadmissible provocations. We support them in this.”

Turkey, as it shows, has badly lost in Syria. There is no way it can force Syrian forces away from the areas under their control. What is rational for it to do is to adjust its position according to the ground realities and seek to achieve its interests in ways that do not jeopardise its relations with Russia irreparably; for, Russia remains the key to realising Turkey’s core interest in Syria: containment of Kurds. It explains why despite all the ‘tension’ Turkish forces still continue to patrol jointly with Russia areas in northeast Syria to prevent the return of US forces to the Turkish-Syrian border regions with their Kurdish allies.

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