Turkey & the US: Far from Allies in Syria

The recent agreement between the US and Turkey regarding the creation of a “safe-zone” in Syria notwithstanding, the underlying divergence of interests between the two countries continues to exist in a far more explicit way than meets the eye. As such, while the agreement apparently seems to imply that both NATO-members have agreed to cut a territorial chunk from within Syria’s main territory, the very reasons why these states have done so differ markedly and so do the long-term implications of such a zone. To begin with, we must not lose sight of the fact that Turkey’s advocacy of a “safe-zone” does not rest on the same logic as it did back in 2013-2015 during the Obama administration. Back then, Turkey was a staunch rival of Assad and wanted to send him home. It opposed Russian military involvement in the conflict and supported US operations. This, however, has changed and the Turkey of 2018-19 is a key member of Astana peace process, a multilateral platform that includes Russia and Iran and aims to create peace in Syria without sending Assad home. Needless to say, Turkey, to the detriment of the US/NATO, is already strategically allied with Russia.

The US is, needless to say, deeply aware of the shift that has taken place in Turkey’s foreign policy orientation ever since the ill-fated coup attempt of July 2016. That their relations remain far from strategically strong, despite the recent agreement, is evident from the acute vagueness surrounding the agreement itself. For instance, the agreement reads that measurements will be taken to “address Turkey’s security concerns” and that a joint operations base will be set up in Turkey “as soon as possible” to establish a “peace corridor.”

As is evident, there are no concrete time-lines set-up to either “address Turkey’s security concerns” or set up a joint operations base. There is equally no time-limits set either for the creation of this “safe-zone” nor has its geographical extent been decided at all. That the agreement is extremely vague and that it lacks substance explains why there
hasn’t been a strong reaction from the main opponents of the politics of “safe-zone” i.e., Damascus, Moscow and Tehran.

Even for Turkey, this agreement doesn’t mean a territorial disintegration of Syria. While Turkey was a supporter of this idea up until 2015, it does no longer see Syrian division as strategically beneficial; hence, the divergent paths the US and Turkey are pursuing in Syria.

While the US aims to use the “safe-zone” as a permanent territorial chunk for its main allies on the ground i.e., Kurds, Turkey aims to use this “peace corridor” only to send back millions of Syrians refugees living inside Turkish territory.

While there is no doubt that public opinion in Turkey is increasingly turning against Syrian refugees in Turkey, the fact that the agreement came against the backdrop of an explicit Turkish threat to invade Kurdish areas in Syria speaks volumes about the conspicuous absence of shared interests between the two NATO members.

Also, the fact that the agreement is silent on a number of significant aspects means that the US isn’t going to really “address” Turkish interests but mainly buying time to consolidate the position of the only allies it has on the ground in Syria.

Let’s not forget that the US hasn’t yet honoured its previously made similar pledges with Turkey. On top of it is the pledge that the US made regarding tacking back all the heavy weaponry it had provided to the Kurdish militias. When those weapons were provided, the US intention was to defeat the ISIS and leave the country. This policy has obviously changed in favour of an “unfinished business” the US has with Iran. To tackle Iran, the US needs to have forces on the ground and the only force it has are Kurdish militias, which Ankara wants to eliminate militarily or otherwise and the US wants to protect in any case; hence, the dilemma that Turkey continues to face even after the apparently significant agreement with the U.S.

Considering the contradiction, it wouldn’t be too much to contend that Turkey’s worries have indeed increased manifold as the US has once again shown that it doesn’t really intend to address Turkey’s core concerns, especially when Turkey is not interested in a kind of “safe-zone” that splits Syria into two differently controlled regions, a division that would allow the US to maintain its stranglehold in the region and maintain its influence as well on the same lines as in Iraq.

Turkey, on the other hand, is unlikely to address this particular interest of the US, for, it would create a permanent Kurdish territory in such close territorial proximity to Turkey as to encourage Kurds from within Turkey to start making similar demands of a “separate territory.” In a way, the US plan runs fundamentally contrary to Turkish interests; hence, the inability of the U.S. to really “address” Turkish interests in Syria at all. This explains why the agreement is vague; why there are no time-lines and no clearly set targets and why this agreement wouldn’t make much difference in terms of altering the current balance of power in and around Syria.

The underlying antagonism between the US and Turkey would thus cause further deterioration in their bi-lateral relations, a development that Russia and Tehran would be keenly observing with a lot of interest, for this would present yet another opportunity to wean Ankara away from the US/NATO camp.

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