

Russia Consolidates in East Mediterranean

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The curtain is coming down on the brutal 11-year old Syrian conflict, which former US President and Nobel Laureate Barack Obama initiated, as the Arab Spring swept through West Asia two decades ago. The United States has suffered yet another big setback in West Asia as the year 2022 draws to a close. The unfolding Turkish-Syrian reconciliation process under Russian mediation is to be seen as a saga of betrayal and vengeance.

Ankara came under immense pressure from the Obama Administration in 2011 to spearhead the regime change project in Syria. Obama blithely assumed that Turkiye would gleefully serve as the charioteer of "moderate" Islamism for the transformation in West Asia. But Ankara took its time to calibrate its foreign policies to adapt to the Arab Spring before responding to the shifting landscape in Syria.

Erdogan was caught unprepared by the uprising in Syria at a juncture when Ankara was pursuing a "zero-problems" policy with Turkiye's neighbours. Ankara was unsure how the Arab Spring would play out and remained silent when the revolt first appeared in Tunisia. Even on Egypt, Erdogan made an emotional call for Hosni Mubarak's departure only when he sensed, correctly so, that Obama was decoupling from America's staunch ally in Cairo.

Syria was the ultimate test case and a real challenge for Erdogan. Ankara had invested heavily in the improvement of relations with Syria within the framework of the so-called Adana Agreement in 1998 in the downstream of Turkish military's massive showdown with Damascus over the latter harbouring the PKK [Kurdish] leader Ocalan. Erdogan initially did not want Bashar al-Assad to lose power, and advised him to reform. The families of Erdogan and Assad used to holiday together.

Obama had to depute then CIA chief David Petraeus to visit Turkey twice in 2012 to persuade Erdogan to engage with the US in operational planning aimed at bringing about the end of the Assad government. It was Petraeus who proposed to Ankara a covert program of arming and training Syrian rebels.

But by 2013 already, Erdogan began sensing that Obama himself had only a limited

American involvement in Syria and preferred to lead from the rear. In 2014, Erdogan went public that his relations with Obama had diminished, saying that he was disappointed about not getting direct results on the Syrian conflict. By that time, more than 170,000 people had died and 2.9 million Syrians had fled to neighbouring countries, including Turkey, and the fighting had forced another 6.5 million people from their homes within Syria.

Simply put, Erdogan felt embittered that he was left holding a can of worms and Obama had scooted off. Worse still, the Pentagon began aligning with the Syrian Kurdish groups linked to the PKK. (In October 2014, US began providing supplies to Kurdish forces and in November 2015, US special forces were deployed in Syria.)

Indeed, since then, Erdogan had been protesting in vain that the US, a NATO ally, had aligned with a terrorist group (Syrian Kurds known as YPG) that threatened Turkiye's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

It is against such a backdrop that the two [meetings in Moscow on Wednesday](#) between the defence ministers and intelligence chiefs of Turkey and Syria in the presence of their Russian counterparts took place. Erdogan's reconciliation process with Assad is quintessentially his sweet revenge for the American betrayal. Erdogan sought help from Russia, the archetypal enemy country in the US and NATO's sights, in order to communicate with Assad who is a pariah in American eyes. The matrix is self-evident.

On Thursday, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said:

"At the meeting (in Moscow), we discussed what we could do to improve the situation in Syria and the region as soon as possible while ensuring peace, tranquility and stability... We reiterated our respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty rights of all our neighbours, especially Syria and Iraq, and that our sole aim is the fight against terrorism, we have no other purpose."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been counselling Erdogan in recent years that Turkiye's security concerns are best tackled in coordination with Damascus and that Adana Agreement could provide a framework of cooperation. The Turkish Defence Ministry readout said the meeting in Moscow took place in a "constructive atmosphere" and it was agreed to continue the format of trilateral meetings "to ensure and maintain stability in Syria and the region as a whole."

Without doubt, the normalisation between Ankara and Damascus will impact regional security and, in particular, the Syrian war, given the clout Turkiye wields with the residual Syrian opposition. A Turkish ground operation in northern Syria may not be necessary if Ankara and Damascus were to revive the [Adana Agreement](#). In fact, Akar disclosed that Ankara, Moscow and Damascus are working on carrying out joint missions on the ground in Syria.

The Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's willingness right in the middle of the Ukraine war to take the steering wheel and navigate its reconciliation with Syria adds an altogether new dimension to the deepening strategic ties between Moscow and Ankara. For Erdogan too, Syria becomes the newest addition to his policy initiatives lately to improve Turkiye's relations with the regional states. Normalisation with Syria will go down well with Turkish public opinion and that has implications for Erdogan's bid for a renewed mandate in the upcoming elections.

From the Syrian perspective, the normalisation with Turkiye is going to be far more consequential than the restoration of ties with various regional states (starting with the UAE) in the recent years who had fuelled the conflict. Turkiye's equations with Syrian militant groups (eg., Syrian National Army and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), its continued occupation of Syrian territory, Syrian refugees in Turkiye (numbering 3.6 million), etc. are vital issues affecting Syria's security.

The US resents Erdogan's move to normalise with Assad — and that too, with Russia's helping hand. It is now even more unlikely to give up its military presence in Syria or its alliance with the Syrian Kurdish group YPG (which Ankara regards as an affiliate of the PKK.)

But the YPG will find itself in a tight spot. As Syria requests Turkiye to withdraw from its territories (Idlib and so-called operation areas) and stop supporting armed groups, Turkiye in return will insist on pushing the YPG away from the border. (The government-aligned Syrian daily Al-Watan reported [quoting sources](#) that at the tripartite meeting in Moscow, Ankara has committed to withdrawing all its forces from Syrian territory.)

Indeed, the replacement of the YPG militia by the Syrian government forces along the borders with Turkiye would lead to the weakening of both YPG and the US military presence. However, the question will still remain unanswered as regards the place of Kurds in the future of Syria.

The US State Department stated recently,

“The US will not upgrade its diplomatic relations with the Assad regime and does not support other countries upgrading their relations. The US urges states in the region to consider carefully the atrocities inflicted by the Assad regime on the Syrian people over the last decade. The US believes that stability in Syria and the greater region can be achieved through a political process that represents the will of all Syrians.”

Last week's meetings in Moscow show that Russia's standing in the West Asian region is far from defined by the Ukraine conflict. Russian influence on Syria remains intact and Moscow will continue to shape Syria's transition out of conflict zone and consolidate its own long-term presence in Eastern Mediterranean.

OPEC Plus has gained traction. Russia's ties with the Gulf states are steadily growing. The Russia-Iran strategic ties are at its highest level in history. And the return of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister means that the Russian-Israeli ties are heading for a reset. Clearly, Russian diplomacy is on a roll in West Asia.

Conventional wisdom was that Russia and Turkiye's geopolitical interests would inevitably collide once the floodgates were opened in Ukraine. Herein lies the paradox, for, what has happened is entirely to the contrary.

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Featured image: Turkish military convoy in border with Northern Syria (File photo)

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