

Turkey's 'NATO Ex-communication', Excluded From the Atlantic Alliance? Will Ankara Align With Moscow?

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*While still a NATO member, Turkey has drifted away from the alliance to a great extent, indicating the way conflict in Syria has changed the Middle East's geo-political landscape, and largely continues to. It is particularly the end-game in Syria that has now greatly crystalized which country stands where in the regional geo-political spectrum, and **Turkey is certainly not in the US-led Western camp**, which means that Turkey is an ally of Russia and will directly or indirectly counter-act any NATO manoeuver against Russia.*

In simple words, **Turkey's strengthening relations with Russia mean a full NATO member working in a very close tandem with a country that happens to be the reason for NATO's very existence in the post-cold war era.** That certainly sounds counter-intuitive in terms of what NATO seems to stand for, thanks to Russia's active and truly anti-terror policy in the Middle East where the organization has not only failed to eradicate terror, but its biggest military power, the US, also stands accused of plotting a coup against Turkey, the second biggest NATO power; hence, the crisis within NATO.

The US and the NATO have clearly sensed that their current position is not comparable to the pre-conflict scenario, which means that they need to re-define their relationships with a number of countries. Ironically, the first on the list happens to be Turkey. And, its first emphatic glimpse came on last Monday when **HR McMaster**, Donald Trump's National Security Adviser, described Turkey along with Qatar as two countries responsible for the spread of extremist and radical Islamist ideology.

While he did make a passing reference to Saudi Arabia's past involvement in the spread of radical ideology, he emphasised that Qatar and Turkey were more involved into it, adding further that the core reason for Turkey's growing problems with the West was largely the rise of the Justice and Development Party, to which president Erdogan belongs, in Turkey and presumably its connection with extremism.

While McMaster didn't make any reference to Turkey's growing relations with Russia, he did not hesitate to describe Russia and China, just a few days before his Monday statement, as two "revisionist powers", encroaching on US allies (read: Turkey) and thus bent upon undermining the (US dominated) international order. When the two statements are read together, McMaster seems to clearly mean that the "revisionist powers" are not only undermining the US dominated order, but also bent upon undoing the gains the US claims to have made in its 17 years of 'war on terror' by allying with powers, such as Turkey, which

are spreading 'terror' in the Middle East.

There is as such a little more than a coincidence that McMaster's verbal attack on Turkey came just within hours of Erdogan's meeting Russia's Putin. This meeting not only greatly underscored the fast growing alliance between the two states but also indicated the potential lift both leaders are in the middle of giving to their relations.

"We see significant prospects for expansion of cooperation in the military-technical sphere. We finalized the credit agreement during today's work and I hope it will be signed in the soonest possible time," Putin said after talks with his Turkish counterpart, Erdogan.

Erdogan added that "the relevant agencies of our two countries are expected to complete what needs to be done this week" with regard to Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 missile system. The purchase of Russian defence system is no small thing within NATO's strategic culture; for, as it stands and as hinted above, what it potentially means is integration of Russian systems within the 'NATO territory', which further means that Russia is now setting its own foot in response to NATO's own advances towards Russia through Ukraine. Erdogan's this particular statement came only few days after he had criticized NATO for interfering in Turkey's defence deals. The deal, besides it, is also a clear rebuff to the US & NATO's withdrawal of Patriot air defence batteries from Turkey.

Besides the co-operation in military and technical fields, it is particular the Syrian end-game that has brought Turkey and Russia as much closer as it has driven a wedge between the Turkey and NATO, whose officials were reported to have said that "No NATO ally currently operates the S-400", implying that Turkey was perhaps no longer an ally.

Thanks to Russia's ability and capacity to use its leverage over the Kurds, Turkey is no longer even objecting to a Kurdish participation in the Russia led Syrian National Dialogue. Not only does this badly isolate the US in the region—one again—but also leaves with potentially no effective allies on the ground to influence the Syrian end-game and manage a loose ended military presence in Syria even.

"We have handed the list of those who represent the Kurds to Russia," said recently Turkey's foreign minister **Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu**.

He sounded fairly positive when asked if Kurdish groups other than the YPG could join a conference on Syria's future to be organized by Russia. There is, as other reports have indicated, more to it than meets the eye.

Russia and Turkey are already in the middle of negotiating the ways and means of clearing Afrin of the Kurdish militia, YPG. Were this to happen, this will be a major paradigm shift not only in Russia-Turkey bi-lateral relations but also in terms of striking at the heart of American interests in the region. While a new flashpoint may arise out of a possible Russia-Turkish operation in Afrin, what is clearly on the horizon is that this flashpoint may very well turn out to be the last nail in the coffin for Turkey's status as a full NATO member.

While NATO so far has no precedent of ousting a member, and any such decision on Turkey will require unanimity in the organisation, what is becoming evident is that Turkey might

just become the first country to face an 'ex-communication' from NATO, which might just be necessary to complete its embrace with Russia and re-define its regional and global position.

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