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Erdogan's Syria faux pas

The Turkish president has taken miscalculated steps in Syria. A rapprochement with the West now seems the only option

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Idlib, a small but inflated city in northwest Syria, has come to play a central role in Turkey's foreign and security policy. Turkey's insistence to prevent the Syrian army regaining Idlib recently led to a severe crisis which involved Russia, NATO, US and the EU.

A quick recap: After the defeat of ISIS in late 2017, the Assad forces moved towards Idlib, the last Islamist stronghold in the country. At that moment, Turkey intervened diplomatically and reached a deal with Russia in Sochi in September 2018 and assumed the task of de-militarising these militant groups, creating a zone of de-escalation and set up observation posts to oversee the process of de-escalation.

However, the biggest jihadist group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham refused to disarm and, along with other small radical groups, continued firing at the Syrian army posts and in proximity of the Russian Hymeymim military base. Realising that Turkey was not intent to abide by the Sochi deal, the Syrian army – with the aerial support of Russian jets – moved to the outskirts of the city at the beginning of August 2019, capturing critical towns around Idlib.

Turkey's fatal miscalculation

Ignoring Syrian and Russians complaints, warnings and military gains, Turkey began to reinforce its military presence in the area. The Syrian-Russian strategy was to close in on the city, encircling the 12 military posts that had Turkish troops stationed (seven of them are currently encircled by the Assad forces), heavily bombing the civilian areas with an aim to trigger a refugee flow leading to another humanitarian crisis with nearly one million Syrians who fled to the Turkish border.

When eight Turkish soldiers were killed by the Syrian shelling at the beginning of February, Erdogan responded by sending a strong ultimatum to Syria: if the Assad forces did not withdraw to the Sochi demarcation line, Turkey would drive them out militarily. This was escalating a conflict in a region that Turkey promised to de-escalate.

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Turkey also beefed up its military reinforcements, sending hundreds of tanks, armored vehicles and thousands of troops. Russia's response was severe. The Syrian-Russian jets targeted Turkish military convoys killing 33 servicemen, bombing them for about five hours to inflict as much damage as possible – apparently to call Erdogan's challenge.

It was a fatal miscalculation on the part of the Turkish government to send so many troops to a war zone, while knowing that they had been targeted before and had no air cover. The Idlib battle was the first clash the Turkish army lost, with the highest personnel loss in a single raid. In other words, the Russians could easily stop Turkish military's advance and Turkey could not even risk confronting Russia.

The diplomatic faux pas

While it was apparent that Russia was involved in the killing of Turkish soldiers, Turkey refrained to point out directly Moscow's role. Fearing further action the Turkish military was not able to retaliate against the Russian forces and facilities in Syria but chose to target the Syrian army.

The ensuing Turkish military's bombing of Syrian military posts, missile batteries, tanks and downing three fighter jets in retaliation has now turned the Syrian civil war to a conventional inter-state war.

On the diplomatic front, Erdogan then pleaded to get a meeting with Putin, which ended with a three article deal in which Turkey conceded the opening of the M-4 highway runs through Aleppo to Latakia with Russian-Turkish joint patrols overseeing the 12 km wide area.

It was difficult to understand the Erdogan government's insistence to control Idlib at the cost of a stand-off with Russia. Erdogan and pro-government media declared before the intensification of the crisis that Turkey moved from fighting against terrorism to ground control on Syrian territory. The Idlib battle showed that this strategy was difficult to sustain without Russian approval – and it came with serious costs.

Internationalising the problem

The Idlib battle has also turned out to be a critical milestone in Turkish foreign and security policy. Unable to reach its political and military goals in Idlib, Erdogan turned to its traditional ally, the US, and remembered that it is a member of NATO. However, Erdogan's visit to the NATO Headquarter did not bring any concrete outcome apart from verbal support that the alliance is showing full solidarity with its member, Turkey. Erdogan demanded the purchase of Patriot ground to air missiles but it was tied to Turkey's removal of the Russian-made S-400 missiles due to go into operation next April.

This was another diplomatic blow for the Erdogan government. Obviously, its policy of balancing the West with closer ties to Russia has failed on the ground in Idlib. And its policy of balancing Russia with NATO and US support failed. The Idlib affair showed the limits of cooperation with Russia in Syria; it was a bitter lesson for the Erdogan government that a balance of power policy was sustainable as long as the balancing powers wanted to play it.

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In desperation, the Erdogan government used the refugee card against the EU, aiming at internationalising the problem. Its move to open the border with Greece and sending the refugees to the border and forcing the EU to compromise on the refugee deal signed in 2016 failed again. Erdogan's meeting in Brussels with the EU Council and Commission presidents didn't bear any fruit, the EU refused to make a new deal and didn't accept to finance the refugees on the Turkish border near Idlib. When Turkey opened the border, Greece closed its border crossing.

Although it was the refugees that paid the price, Athens' move made Turkey's strategy of blackmailing the EU, which it has been employing for a while, meaningless – since the EU openly stated that it rejects the use of migrants as a bargaining chip. This was another blow for the Erdogan government.

Turkey's reorientation towards the West?

All the Turkish government's instruments that it could often deploy

effectively – the powerful army, its high-tech drones, a policy of balancing and ultimately unethical use of refugees – collapsed. The Idlib crisis marks the end of the policy of balancing and limits of Erdogan government's capacity to play the great powers against each other.

One of the consequences is that the ruthless Russian action in Idlib and the ensuing diplomatic humiliation (Putin made Erdogan's delegate wait for two minutes and broadcasted the footage on a public TV channel) forced the Islamist-nationalist coalition to reconsider the reliability of Russia as a partner.

It has also dealt a blow to the Eurasianists (those who advocate a break with the US and NATO and ally with Russia, China and Iran) in the country, undermining the position of those circles. Taking advantage of the crisis with Russia, a strong pro-US group inside the Erdogan administration pushed for a redirection of foreign policy towards the US, demanding a more belligerent posture in Syria and further rupture in relations with Russia.



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