



Turkish-Russian partnership dynamics

The statements after the Moscow summit reveal that both sides are determined to work together despite disagreements.

Bora Bayraktar on page 04

BORA
BAYRAKTAR

Dynamics of Turkish-Russian partnership

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in person in Moscow this time, for the 18th time since the summer of 2016. The one-hour and 50-minute-long meeting will have consequences not only on bilateral relations but also for the Middle East, Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean regions.

The meeting was important because it is the first one since U.S. President Donald Trump declared his intention to withdraw his troops from Syria. Because many issues like what will happen to the east of River Euphrates after the American withdrawal, Turkey's intention to establish a safe zone in the north of Syria, Russia's reaction to this plan, how to stop the advance of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib, and the future of the constitutional process of Syria depend on the talks between Erdoğan and Putin.

The statements after the Moscow summit reveals that there are disagreements between Turkey and Russia on many issues, but both sides are still determined to work together.

Erdoğan's statement that "Turkish-Russian cooperation is the touchstone of peace, stability and security of Syria; with our close partnership and dialogue, we achieved many positive developments. We are determined to enhance our coordination with our Russian friends" reflects this determination.

Meanwhile, Russia is still distant to the idea, while Erdoğan repeated his concerns about the YPG and PYD. It seems that for the Russians, the YPG/PYD should remain as leverage to be used against Turkey. One should not forget that Russia from the 1980s used the PKK as an asset. When jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was deported from Syria, his first stop was Russia in 1998. In the early years of the Syrian civil war, Russia insisted on having the PYD on the negotiation table. But Russia stepped back many times upon Turkey's resolve against this idea. Russia understands that Turkey can offer much more than the terrorist organization can provide in Syria. Moscow reluctantly supported Turkey's Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations in Syria. For Russia, Turkey is a partner that can't be lost, and Putin proved many times that he is aware of this reality.

The Moscow meeting also showed the limits of this partnership. Putin referred to the Adana Agreement of 1998 between Turkey and Syria. In a way, he confirmed Turkey's security concerns in Syria. But at the same time, he pointed out that Turkey needs to coordinate before it takes action in Syria with Bashar al-Assad's regime.

For Russia, Turkey's importance came from its geopolitical location. When you look at the Russian Naval Doctrine, Moscow wants to be a Mediterranean and an Atlantic power.

For this, Russia needs naval

bases in the Black Sea (Crimea), Eastern Mediterranean and in points close to Gibraltar. Russia for the last couple years tried to develop its naval base in Tartus, Syria. Russian officials are chasing opportunities to build bases in Egypt and Libya. For the security of its base in Tartus and its supporting air base in Khmeimim, Russia needs Turkey's help. These two military bases are within the range of terrorist groups in Idlib. The permanent threat in such a close location is a weakness. For Russia, Turkish-Russian understanding beginning with the Moscow Declaration of 2016, and then the Astana and Sochi talks, providing relative calm in Syria is critical for Russia.

That's why the question of Idlib was a priority for Russia in the latest Erdoğan-Putin talks. Erdoğan provided his commitment by saying: "We will continue our common fight against terrorist organizations in Idlib." In return, Russia reluctantly and implicitly consents Turkish designs in the north. But obviously, Russia continues its efforts to take the Kurdish card from Americans' hand and play it against Turkey in negotiations.

The second importance of keeping good relations with Turkey for Russia is its efforts to deepen the split within NATO. The closing statements of each NATO summit are full of criticisms against Russia. For Moscow, this is regarded as a serious threat and they try to stand by Turkey who was left alone by her allies in difficult times. By doing that Russia is aiming to weaken the southern flank of NATO.

From Turkey's point of view, first of all, Russia is a balancing actor for Turkey in its relations with the western countries. Secondly, Russia is one of the main military powers in Syria, so practical reasons Turkey has to deal with Moscow. Eighteen meetings in person and 38 phone calls between Erdoğan and Putin in 30 months prove the importance of this relation for both sides. Thanks to this partnership Turkey denied a terror corridor in the west of the Euphrates and Russia and regime-controlled Aleppo and the rest of the country until the river.

For the last three years, there were a series of attempts to sabotage the relationship between the two countries. The most brutal of this attempt was the murder of Russian ambassador to Ankara Andrey Karlov in front of cameras. Karlov was one of the victims of this horrible crime and the other target was Turkish-Russian relations. But the Russian leader did not give in against this terrorist action and managed the crisis with a cool-headed approach and protected the partnership with common understanding with his Turkish counterpart. Putin continued working in coordination with Turkey and he has been paid in kind for being a determinant actor in the Middle East, Black Sea and the Mediterranean.