

SHIFTING BALANCES OF POWER IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

The question of the Kurdish state and natural gas pipeline proposals are at the core of the power struggle among states key to Middle Eastern stability and global balance. The various friendship-hostility configurations between the US, Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran are analyzed to present how changes in the direction of the conflict and cooperation disturb the regional balance of power in the Syrian conflict. Given the stable hostility between the US and Russia, and the stable friendship between Russia and Syria, the Turkish preferences for coveting friendship and leaning toward enmity are central in the formation of balances. Conditions for Russo-Turkish rapprochement and the possibility of an overall friendship between Russia, Turkey, and Syria are also discussed. Iran's inclusion in the analysis reveals the possibility of a four-state front against the US. Furthermore, a competition or an agreement between the US and Russia over Kurdish independence in Syria implies a protracted conflict for years to come in the Middle East.

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Syría is the perfect example of a failed state occupying territory, subjected to the controversial ambitions of foreign powers. It has been transformed into a theater of shifting alliance positions among numerous including the US, Russia, and Turkey. The trajectories of pipelines transporting natural gas reserves from the Persian Gulf to world markets are at the heart of US-Russian interactions in Syria.¹ The eventual formation of a Kurdish state covering northern Syria and Iraq is the prize as the pipelines traverse the new state's territory. An independent Kurdish state also means the insertion of a new actor in the map of the Middle East, together with its prospects of being involved in territorial conflict with neighboring Turkey and perhaps with Iran as well. The enlargement of the Middle Eastern system with a new state creates fundamental changes in alliance possibilities and balances of power. Combined with energy and territorial issues, these possibilities would affect not only the region but the whole international system.

Furthermore, the Syrian conflict evolves at such a pace that ally-enemy distinctions become blurred almost daily. While they are NATO allies, the US and Turkey disagree on the issue of helping Syrian Kurds militarily so that they can be of use in fighting against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Russia and Turkey are now cooperating in contrast to the hostility experienced following the Turkish downing of a Russian fighter jet.² And while the US and Russia oppose each other on the issue of world energy distribution, they harbor aligned interests with respect to helping and cooperating with Syrian Kurds, a move which alienates Turkey. These volatile conflict positions can confuse the most astute observers of the region.

Shifting Balances in Friendship and Hostility

We need an analytical perspective to make sense of the swift and complex shifting of conflict-cooperation directions in the Syrian conflict. Age-old precepts of balances of power among states are helpful in this task. The precepts are not foreign to policy makers. They help us not only analyze alliance dynamics but also conduct thought experiments about who would align with or against whom. They are formulated as follows: "A friend of my friend, as well as an enemy of my enemy is my friend," and, "a friend of my enemy, as well as an enemy of my friend, is

¹ F. William Engdahl, "Russia Trumps USA Energy War in Mideast," *New Eastern Outlook*, 17 September 2016; Mitchell A. Orenstein and George Romer, "Putin's Gas Attack: Is Russia Just in Syria for the Pipelines?" *Foreign Affairs*, 14 October 2015; Christina Lin, "Saudi Arabia and Turkey's pipeline wars in Yemen and Syria," *Asia Times*, 12 June 2016, http://www.atimes.com/saudi-arabia-and-turkeys-pipeline-wars-in-yemen-and-syria/#_ftn8; Rob Taylor, "Pipeline Politics in Syria," *Armed Forces Journal*, 21 March 2014. Qatar and Iran are the possessors of the field by the ratios of two-third and one-third, respectively.

² "Turkey's downing of Russian warplane – what we know," *BBC News*, 1 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>

my enemy.” These principles constitute the axioms of structural balance theory.³ The theory implies that balanced international systems can occur either when all states are mutual friends, or, when they are divided into two antagonistic alliances such that alliance members are friends.⁴ Thus, in general, in a triangular (or trilateral) relationship, a balance occurs either if all three states are mutual friends or any two states become friendly with each other but hostile against the third. Take, for example, the US’ assistance to Syrian Kurds. The top priority of Turkey in Syria is to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state. If the US reveals its preference for Syrian Kurds to form their independent state, Turkey might befriend Russia. If Russia opposes US plans of creating a Kurdish state in Syria, or is perceived by Turkey to do so, then Russia and Turkey become mutual friends according to the principle of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Today, the situation is rather different: Both the US and Russia oppose Turkey by siding with Syrian Kurds. Both countries helping Syrian Kurds weakens the US-Turkey alliance relationship and erodes recent Russo-Turkish rapprochement as well.

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This perspective allows us to do two things. First, we are able to understand and analyze actual hostility–friendship relations among actors involved in the Syrian conflict, and, second, we can explore unobserved developments in the process of alliance formation and dissolution. This is important, because the Syrian conflict takes so many sharp turns that the above mentioned developments previously qualified as hypothetical actually occur, such as the US-Russia move to help Syrian Kurds. Therefore, our analysis does not permit us to ignore the possible changes in hostility and friendship directions, which policy makers might evaluate as imaginary and speculative.

The Emergence and Atrophy of Russo-Turkish Rapprochement

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Initially, Turkish disillusionment with US activities aimed at helping Syrian Kurds facilitated Russo-Turkish cooperation over natural gas transportation. Turkey and Russia have started to cooperate especially concerning the issue of energy and the natural gas pipeline called the Turkish Stream, which connects both countries.⁵ Only

³ Fritz Heider, “Attitudes and Cognitive Organization,” *Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 21, No. 21 (1946, pp. 107-112.

⁴ Donald Cartwright and Frank Harary, “Structural Balance: A Generalization of Heider’s theory,” *Psychological Review*, Vol. 63 (1956, pp. 277-293; Tibor Antal, Pavel L. Krapivsky, and Sidney Redner, “Social Balance on Networks: The Dynamics of Friendship and Enmity,” *Physica D*, No. 224 (2006, pp. 130-136; Frank Harary, “A Structural Analysis of the Situation in the Middle East in 1956,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1961, pp.167-178.

⁵ John Galt, “Why the CIA, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are Furious about Erdoğan’s Russian Rapprochement,” *International Reporter*, 15 August 2016, <https://theinternationalreporter.org/2016/08/15/why-the-cia-saudi-arabia-and-qatar-are-furious-about-erdogans-russian-rapprochement/>

a dramatic event interrupted the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. This was the Turkish decision to down a Russian warplane along the Syrian-Turkish border. Russia later accepted Turkish apologies and the presidents of both countries resumed relations. Russia and Turkey then started to cooperate, for example, they agreed on the evacuation of Aleppo. Hence, Turkey and Russia became good friends. It is not surprising that the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Ankara in 2016 did not weaken ties. Rather, on the contrary, it reinforced good relations.⁶

While Russia and Turkey cooperated on targeting ISIS positions, US participation in these operations remained limited. These developments meant that the initial US-Turkey alliance on the Syrian regime and the Qatar pipeline targeting Russia morphed into a Russia-Turkey alliance on ISIS and the Turkish pipeline, in spite of the fact that Turkey is a NATO member and an ally of the US. As Russia opposed the US and Turkey resumed cooperation with Russia, Turkey faced an alignment problem. This is because if Russia and the US are both friends of Turkey, they should not be involved in mutual conflict as, “a friend of mine cannot be an enemy of my other friend.” In such a context, a balance occurs only if an overall cooperation among the three states is established.

The other balanced situation is that two states coalesce against the third. Thus, if Turkey cooperates with Russia, Russia must compete with US designs for an independent Kurdish state in Syria. If both pursue such an objective, then this would mean that Turkey is confronted with two global competitors/cooperators. Turkey merely becomes a thorny problem in a confluence of great power stakes. In fact, Vladimir Putin’s recent reassurance to Turkey about Moscow’s military cooperation and Donald Trump’s silence about US collaboration with Syrian Kurds during his meeting with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reveal that a two-against-one configuration exists in this context.⁷ The US and Russia have aligned interests, opposing those of Turkey. These are the early signs of the deterioration of Russo-Turkish rapprochement.

The Impact of the Russo-Turkish Rapprochement on the Russia-Syria Alliance

The precepts of balance of power imply that one cannot have friends in conflict with each other. We understand these implications by taking a close look at the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. We note that the rapprochement

⁶ “Russian ambassador to Turkey shot dead by police officer in Ankara gallery,” *The Guardian*, 20 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/19/russian-ambassador-to-turkey-wounded-in-ankara-shooting-attack>

⁷ Josh Lederman and Vivian Salama, “Erdogan to Visit Trump Amid Rising Tensions Between the U.S. and Turkey,” *Time*, 15 May 2017, <http://time.com/4778783/trump-erdogan-visit-turkey-us/>; Roland Oliphant, “Russia ‘to train US-allied Kurds in Syria,’” *The Telegraph*, 21 March 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/21/russia-train-us-allied-kurds-syria/>

was problematic in the first place. The reason for this can be framed as a question: How could Russia cooperate with Turkey, a country which publicly revealed its preferences for the end of the Syrian regime? If Turkey and Syria are in conflict, then Russian cooperation with Turkey would mean that “the enemy of my friend is my friend.” Ankara and Damascus must then establish friendly relations to be consistent with the balancing

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precepts. Hence, Russians must solve the problem of their support for the Assad regime while Turkey, a new friend, is aiming for its removal. The Russian mission is, therefore, to reduce mistrust and uncertainty to the extent that Russia-Turkey rapprochement does not damage the Russia-Syria axis. One then has to ask, to what extent would an alignment of Russian and Syrian interests toward the Kurds alienate Turkey today? As for Syria, it would perceive the rapprochement as a Russian deception in the following form: “My best ally now cooperates with my sworn enemy,” or, “how can Russia, our staunch ally, be cooperating with Turkey?” Syria would wonder how long the Russia-Turkey rapprochement can endure or how deep it will be, and ask why their foremost ally has now reduced its level of conflict with Turkey. Syrian suspicions would in turn feed a Russian urge to explain to Syria why Russia suddenly shifted from conflict to cooperation when dealing with Turkey or at least to try and ease Syrian suspicions and concerns. As for Turkey, it would now ask, “how can we secure our objective of ousting the Assad regime with the support of my new friend, Russia?” The Turkish foreign policy problem then becomes one of whether the Turkish objective of toppling the Assad regime will be realized under the rapprochement. And if Russia helps Syrian Kurds, then one could assert that the Turkish problem is mitigated as Turkey would perceive that Russia is no longer a stable friend.

A new phase in a Turkey-Syria friendship while Bashar Al-Assad remains in power would provide relief for all three states. If Turkey no longer pursues its objective of ousting the Assad regime, then bilateral relations among Russia, Turkey, and Syria can transform into mutual friendships under one condition: Turkey coexists with an unchanged Syrian regime that prevents Kurds from creating a separate enclave. Such a *modus vivendi* can be achieved through Russian mediation and diplomacy to mollify the attitudes, beliefs, and positions of Turkey and Syria with respect to each other. Syria and Turkey can then work out a solution similar to the Camp

David Agreement of 1973 between Egypt and Israel with the help of Russia.⁸ A necessary condition might be that Turkey prioritizes the prevention of a Kurdish state in Northern Syria rather than the removal of Assad, and that the Syrian priority is Assad's leadership. Therefore, Russia, Turkey, and Syria can cooperate and become friends, yet the actual course of events indicating US-Russia collusion about Kurds eliminates such an optimistic development.

Balances and Imbalances among the US, Russia, Turkey, and Syria

The principles imply that the US-Turkey friendship can be pitted against a Russia-Syria alliance, or, if Russia, Turkey, and Syria become friends, the US becomes their common target. The first configuration is discarded under the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey and the US' preference to arm Kurds in Syria. The second one, a Russia-Turkey-Syria alliance targeting the US, generates a "three against-one" configuration. The second configuration can evolve into the first one under the condition of US-Turkey cooperation which would require the end of the Russia-Turkey rapprochement. Such an evolution would again put Turkey under strain, as its two friends, the US and Russia, are in conflict.

The US' assistance to Syrian Kurds prevents a full US-Turkey friendship anyway. So, we can also propose that the precepts allow for yet another balance configuration, namely a coalition of the US, Russia, and Syria against Turkey. Whom can Turkey rely on then? Two answers can be given to the question: Turkey can rely on itself through internal balancing efforts to increase and improve its military might, or, through external balancing efforts by aligning with another state that has very high stakes in Syria.

Iran's Debut

Let us imagine that Turkey and Iran discuss the Syrian issue from the perspective of the creation of a Kurdish state. If we include Iran in the picture, then we must deal with the mutual hostility and friendship relations of five states. While there exist ten triangular relations among the US, Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, two types of configurations offer consistency with the balancing precepts: Either all states become mutual friends, or they are divided into two competing alliances such that states in the same alliance are friends but enemies of all states in the other.

⁸ The Camp David agreements signed on 17 September 1978 were worked out once it is found that the Egyptian priority is sovereignty over the Sinai Peninsula and that the Israeli priority was security and recognition by an Arab state. The solution was a demilitarized Sinai as an Egyptian territory satisfying both sides. According to the agreement, Egypt retrieved the Sinai with the withdrawal of Israel from the peninsula and Israel reached its aim by getting a recognition from an Arab State. The accords were a sign of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Egypt and Israel, and a big step for the purpose of peace and stability in the Middle East. See, Howard Raiffa, *The Art and Science of Negotiation: How to Resolve Conflicts and Get the Best out of Bargaining*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 205-217.

Overall cooperation between the US, Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran is very desirable but not attainable in the current conflict. No perfect alignment of interests is possible among these states. Thus, there can be three-against-two and four-against-one configurations consistent with the precepts. Of the five possible four-against-one configurations, the one that pits Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran against the US is obviously more likely than, for instance, the alliance of the US, Russia, Iran, and Turkey opposing Syria. The cooperation of the four states with each other and their antagonism toward the US generates consistent friend-enemy relations. However, the US-Russia collaboration with respect to the Kurds in Syria under an eventual green light given by the Syrian regime would reveal that a US-Russia-Syria friendship isolates Turkey. Iran, in this case might join Turkey or its two friends: Russia and Syria. The latter option is more likely. Thus, the isolation of Turkey can be strengthened further by Iran.

“To what extent would an alignment of Russian and Syrian interests toward the Kurds alienate Turkey today?”

An alternative configuration can form if Iranian geopolitical interests toward the Kurds align with those of the US. Now suppose that the US and Iran have concordant interests toward the establishment of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq and Syria. It follows that Russia, Turkey, and Syria should oppose them under the condition that Russia, Turkey, and Syria all agree upon Syrian territorial integrity. Such a bipolarization necessitates a split of the friendship relations among Russia, Syria, and Iran. Therefore, there would be strong incentives for antagonism over the Kurdish issue upsetting the Russia-Iran and Syria-Iran cooperation. Hence, the Iranian interest in the formation of a Kurdish state should be so deep that Iran would forego its incentives to remain a Russian ally and a supporter of the regime in Damascus. Such a change is impossible. Iran would rather choose Russia and Syria creating a problem for Russia. Russia collaborating with the US would then have to solve its foreign policy problem of the US and Iran, now both Russian friends, who are in conflict with each other.

Concluding Remarks

One can still add Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, and any other actor into the analysis and arrive at clear-cut results. The overall result is that the precepts of the structural balance generate clear directions of enmity and friendship relations over Syria. The analysis mostly produces a black and white picture of friendship and enemy relations in the conflict. Yet, it provides significant guidance by delineating the maze

of international politics in all its shades of gray. We learn that balancing precepts magnifies the details of the impact the ongoing interactions have over the course of the conflict.

“If a Kurdish state is born, it cannot have both the US and Russia as friends if these two oppose each other on the energy issue.”

We see that if Russia and the US become friends by agreeing on a working solution regarding the Kurds and pipeline trajectories, Iran, Syria, and Turkey could become alienated. The US-Russia alignment of interests over the creation of a Kurdish state is, however, fragile. Russia can permit a Kurdish state formation in Syria only under the condition that the newly formed state becomes a

Russian ally in Syria, a development the US would reject since the whole Syrian territory again remains under Russian influence. In the case of US-Russia competition or cooperation to attract the Syrian Kurds, the latter would then choose either the US or Russia as friends, adding complexity to the opposition of interests in the region. If a Kurdish state is born, it cannot have both the US and Russia as friends if these two oppose each other on the energy issue. Consequently, if the US and Russia agree or disagree over the allegiance of the Syrian Kurds, wars will devastate Syria for many years to come. Therefore, a competition or an agreement between the US and Russia over Kurdish independence in Syria implies a protracted conflict in the Middle East. Indeed, the current US-Russia collision over the strategic Syrian town of Manbij may turn into an endless struggle.⁹

Continuous instability in the Middle East endangers world peace. Policy makers of involved actors in the Syrian conflict should reconsider their decisions of alignment and de-alignment to prevent further conflagration in the region. The more complex alignment politics becomes, the less chances there are to reach a workable peace.

Currently, the political map of the Middle East has become such a roller coaster ride that it is critical to make analyses within a well-defined framework. The available evidence on the Syrian conflict becomes meaningful when viewed within the framework of simple balance of power principles, showing that imbalances which imply inconsistent friendships are more harmful than a stable bipolarization of the conflict. Thus, policy makers on each side of the conflict that are busy evaluating the

⁹ “Kurds pledge to fight Turkey to retain Syria’s Manbij,” *Al Jazeera*, 18 February 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/kurds-pledge-fight-turkey-retain-syria-manbij-170218134339051.html>; Henry Meyer and Taylan Bilgic, “Russia, Turkey, U.S. Hold Military Talks Amid Syria Standoff,” *Bloomberg*, 7 March 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-07/russia-turkey-u-s-hold-military-talks-amid-syria-standoff>

possible courses of enmity might neglect how friendly bonds perceived as the least likely are indeed possible. The Middle East constitutes an important global theater, and policy makers must be careful of myopic friend/enemy dynamics in the region, which could only lead to worldwide instability.

Finally, the inner dynamics and relations of states make a world of difference. More than two millennia ago, Sun Tzu remarked in his work *The Art of War*:

There are not more than five musical notes, yet the combinations of these five give rise to more melodies than can ever be heard. There are not more than five primary colors, yet in combination they produce more hues than can ever been seen. There are not more than five cardinal tastes, yet combinations of them yield more flavors than can ever be tasted.¹⁰

Sun Tzu's quote illustrates how friendship and hostility relations among the few shape not only the stability of the Middle East, but also that of the global system.

¹⁰ Sacred Texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/aow/aow13.htm#fn_281