

Russia's triumph in Syria

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Russian president Vladimir Putin and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reached an agreement on 22 October regarding coordination of operations in north-eastern Syria, including the future prospects for the Turkish military operation 'Peace Spring'. Among other things, the parties agreed that Turkey would keep in place the suspension of armed operations against Syrian Kurds for another week, until 29 October, that Turkey would maintain control over the territory taken to date, that Kurdish divisions would withdraw from the entire security zone sought by Turkey, and that combined Russian and Turkish, and Russian and Syrian, patrols would be introduced, depending on the conflict zone. In practice, implementation of the deal is guaranteed by Russia. It was also agreed that future Turkish operations in Syria will be carried out with regard for the country's territorial integrity, and be based on a revival of the Turkish-Syrian Adana pact (1998). Turkish operations will also be incorporated into the Astana peace process overseen by Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Commentary

- The Turkish-Russian talks were held to discuss the Turkish operation in Syria that has been going on since 9 October. The true aim of the operation is to destroy Kurdish para-state structures in the north of the country, created by forces linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and create a security zone along the shared border on the Syrian side, which is a strip 480 km long and 30 km wide. The next step will be to use this area as a destination for relocation of some of the Syrian refugees currently in Turkey. The Turkish authorities are talking about moving as many as 2 million of the total of approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees to the area. If realised, these plans would permanently alter the ethnic structure of the border zone. Turkey's operation was suspended on 18 October following pressure from the US. At the moment the ceasefire took effect, the Turkish army and Syrian opposition divisions under its command had taken a relatively small amount of territory between Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn; points of strategic value targeted in the operation have been taken successively by Syrian and Russian divisions.
- Turkey sees the Sochi agreement as an opportunity to achieve minimum goals set prior to the operation: it *de facto* legalises Turkey's activities in northern Syria (for instance under the 1998 Adana Pact the PKK could be fought in the strip adjacent to the border). It substantially restricts the PKK's operations (withdrawal from the border zone, subordination to Moscow and Damascus) and means that a confrontation with Russia

can be avoided. These goals were attained in spite of harsh criticism from the West; for instance, sanctions have been imposed on Turkey for its attack on Syrian Kurds. Domestically, the agreement is seen as a major coup for Erdoğan, but seen more broadly it has curtailed Turkey's presence in Syria considerably in relation to its plans, and now the Kurdish question has come under Moscow's unilateral control. With regard to the paramount issue of security, Turkey is now reliant on Russia's approach. As US troops were almost fully withdrawn from north-eastern Syria in October, and also in view of Russia's fundamental dominance in the Syrian theatre of war (envisaged offensive in the Idlib region, which is under opposition control) in strategic terms the deal means Turkey is dependent upon Russia.

- The Sochi agreement is a huge success for Russia. Following the withdrawal of the most of the US' troops from north-eastern Syria, Russia has become the principal military force, and undisputed political arbiter in the region affected by the Syrian conflict. The agreement is confirmation that Moscow has the capability of imposing solutions on Turkey and the Damascus authorities (who were not party to the talks) as well as the Kurds, who at the beginning of October controlled one third of Syria and were protected by the US, while at the same time ignoring the interests of its ally, Iran. Russia now indisputably holds all the cards in the Syrian conflict. Looking beyond the region, Russia is exploiting the discord between Turkey and the US, has subordinated Ankara, and is gaining power in talks with EU countries on further developments in Syria (such as stopping refugee and terrorism problems from escalating).
- Regardless of potential problems with implementation, the Sochi agreement leaves no doubt that the Syrian conflict is entering a new phase, with the US now absent, the Kurds (together with their political and military structures) marginalised, and Turkish ambitions substantially curbed. Given the current circumstances, the Astana format peace process, which is being dictated by Russia, work to resolve the conflict politically (such as the efforts made by the Constitutional Committee) and Russia's military dominance (an offensive can be expected in the last area controlled by the opposition – Idlib) mean that a breakthrough and efforts to bring the dispute to an end can be expected. Still unresolved are the issues of rapid normalisation of the situation in Syria, the conditions for Turkey's presence (for instance in the Afrin region and west of the Euphrates), and the future position of Iran (worried about the growing imbalance in relations with its ally Russia). The question of financing reconstruction remains open, while a mass return of refugees can probably be ruled out. These problems will be addressed according to completely different conditions than up to now.