

SECURITY CHALLENGES

Continued from page 17
Bismarck would blush

as the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Trump has been undermining the America's role as the ultimate mediator, which almost all regional states have relied upon irrespective of Washington's never-hidden pro-Israeli bent.

Russia, in contrast, seems to have learned something from previous US-policy books for the Middle East, particularly in presenting itself as an interlocutor for all while making no secret of its strategic interests. It is cooperating with Iran to stabilize the Assad government, but also received the Saudi monarch before even Washington had. It is Syria's most important military ally yet continues to demonstrate its excellent relationship to Israel, not least through the well-publicized visit of its defense minister to Tel Aviv. There have even been suggestions that Russia may be acceptable as a mediator on Jerusalem. And whereas the US has been ignoring – at least in Ankara's eyes – some of Turkey's main national security priorities, Russia has been able to restore a relationship that was on the verge of war in 2015.

Moscow may not come across as a benign actor. The brazen announcement by Russia's ministry of defense that the Russian military had used the war in Syria to test "more than 160 modern and prospective types" of weaponry will certainly be seen as utterly cynical by members of Syria's opposition. Russia may appear as a brute – but it is a brute with a plan both to end the war in Syria and to broaden its reach across the region.

In contrast, while militarily spearheading the anti-IS coalition, Washington has become somewhat of a diplomatic bystander in the region. In 2015 and 2016, US Secretary of State John Kerry and the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov co-chaired four ministerial meetings of the International Syria Support Group, which helped launch the UN-led intra-Syrian talks in Geneva and succeeded in establishing a first short-lived cessation-of-hostilities. In 2017, the US was content with its observer status in the Russian-led Astana talks. Even America's new Syria policy, as laid out by Secretary of State Tillerson in January 2018, has confirmed the military's lead on Syria. It calls for an open-ended US military presence in the country even after the defeat of IS, mainly to deny an expansion of Iranian influence, but shows no ambition to reassume a lead political role with regard to Syria's future.

Observers may be forgiven for seeing similarities between this lesser US role and the position the EU has occupied for quite some time, minus the preparedness to dump substantial amounts of money into regional schemes. It is yet unclear whether the EU, most probably under French leadership, would be able to fill some of the diplomatic void created by America's absence in the region; given the habit of Middle East leaders to balance their external relations rather than leave the politics and diplomacy to one of the great powers, it is likely there would be takers for such a European role.



Problems with the neighbors

Erdoğan wanted Turkey to embrace its Western and Arab allies. Now he's tied to Putin

BY CAN DÜNDAR

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in 2002 with a commitment to full membership of the EU. His then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu initially endeavored to deliver on his promise of "zero problems with neighbors," making advances to Armenia and the Kurds of Northern Iraq while promoting commerce with Russia. On the back of amicable breezes blowing between Greece and Turkey, attempts to engineer a solution to Cyprus accelerated. Radical legislative steps were taken to facilitate the EU accession process and close relations were forged with Syria's Assad.

All this took place in the first six years of Erdoğan's rule.

Serious cracks in his diplomatic course first appeared in 2009. Turkey faced the Islamic world in the East. Forsaking its centuries-old westward direction and abandoning Atatürk's principle of "Peace at home, peace in the world," it embarked upon an adventurous path of advancing Turkish influence. No longer would Turkey preserve the status quo. The result was a friendless Turkey that soon ran aground.

The first indication of this change was Erdoğan walking out of the 2009 Davos Conference after accusing the Israel of President Shimon Peres of being experts in killing. Mesmerized by the reverberations of his name on Arab streets, Erdoğan indulged in dreams of transforming Turkey into a major power in the Islamic world.

The 2010 Israeli commando raid on the MV Mavi Marmara, the lead vessel in an aid convoy to Gaza, resulted in the death of ten activists; Erdoğan immediately severed relations with Jerusalem.

The Arab Spring of 2011 might have been just the opportunity he was looking for; but he soon found himself out of favor in the Muslim world as the uprising was quashed, and he realized he had fallen out with the Syrian, Iraqi and Egyptian regimes.

The Syrian leader, his "brother Assad" for so long, had all at once become his "foe Esed." In 2012, as Erdoğan mentioned "praying at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus," Turkey's parliament resounded with exclamations of "reaching Damascus in three hours." Thus did Ankara embroil itself in the swamp at its southern flank. It shipped weapons to Syrian rebels in order to topple the regime in Damascus and unseat the increasingly more powerful YPG in northern Syria, opened the borders to jihadists and turned a blind eye to the rise of IS cells in big cities. This traffic intensified further in the refugee flood of 2014.

Next came the big crisis with the big neighbor. In 2015, Turkey downed a Russian fighter jet for allegedly violating Turkish airspace. Putin promptly instructed Russian tourists to steer clear of Turkey and halted imports of Turkish foodstuffs. The cost to Turkey was some \$10 billion.

Foreign policy driven by unrealistic ideology and chauvinist posturing had suddenly left Ankara with countless enemies. His "zero problems with neighbors" had led to the opposite dynamic: "problems with every neighbor." It was time for a volte-face, and a scapegoat. Davutoğlu was forced to resign in 2016. Settling into the chair still warm from his predecessor, the new Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım asserted: "We shall increase the number of our friends and decrease the number of our enemies." Ankara had once again adopted a more pragmatic diplomacy.

It took two apologies for Yıldırım to solve two crises. First, the five-year rift with Israel was settled when Jerusalem apologized for the sinking of the Mavi Marmara and paid reparations.

Next, Turkey apologized to Putin, thereby resolving the

coup attempt in July 2016. His declaration of a state of emergency and his subsequent regime of oppression effectively burned bridges with Europe. The European Parliament promptly recommended, and acted upon, suspending negotiations.

of "Nazism," the Germans withdrew their forces from Incirlik.

An inauspicious start with Trump was soon to follow. Turkey's demand to extradite Fethullah Gülen was refused, which led to Erdoğan accusing the US of engineering the coup attempt

suspended all visa applications by Turkish passport holders. The coup de grâce was US National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster's condemnation of Turkey and Qatar as the new sponsors of radical ideology.

Cast adrift as a result of his break with the West, Erdoğan proved easy pickings for Putin. Moscow invited Ankara – along with Tehran – to the table to discuss solutions to Syria. In its loneliest hour, Turkey was turning to its traditional enemy to the north. Erdoğan's recent decision to purchase Russian S-400 defense missiles could easily signal a departure from NATO.

Stuck in a quagmire in Syria, without a single friend in the West and unsuccessful in securing Trump's backing, Erdoğan is going all in with Putin. As a reward, the Russian president has opened Syrian air space to Turkish forces engaged in the Afrin operation that began in January. However, a potential clash between Ankara and Washington, the sponsors of Syrian Kurds, would have only one winner: Moscow.

Meanwhile, Erdoğan finds himself in a struggle to transform the risky war he has embarked upon in Syria into a step that will elevate his presidency on the domestic front.



FOREIGN POLICY DRIVEN BY UNREALISTIC IDEOLOGY AND CHAUVINIST POSTURING HAS SUDDENLY LEFT ANKARA WITH COUNTLESS ENEMIES

seven-month conflict. Ankara backtracked from its earlier determination to oust Assad – Turkey's third policy change in five years. Erdoğan would now cozy up to Moscow and fall in line with Putin in Syria.

Entente with Moscow is partly attributable to Erdoğan losing patience with the West. Despite the apparent thaw in the wake of the 2016 refugee deal between Turkey and the EU, Erdoğan raised the temperature of his anti-Western polemic once again, blaming the US for the

Strains with Germany, one of Turkey's oldest allies, soon followed; a German delegation was denied access to Incirlik Air Base in response to the German Bundestag's official recognition of the Armenian genocide. Germany granted asylum to Turkish officers involved in the July 15, 2016, coup attempt; the Turkish Intelligence Agency increased its activities; and Erdoğan was ultimately prevented from campaigning for his referendum in the Federal Republic. After he accused the Berlin government

and supporting terrorism by arming the PYD. Relations were so strained by the arrest of US Embassy officials on charges of supporting Gülen that the US

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