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The American-Russian-Turkish Triangle and the Civil War in Syria

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Ex-empires may all be equal, but some are apparently more equal than others. Since he became US Secretary of State in February 2013, John Kerry has met with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu four times. Only one other foreign dignitary has spent more time with Kerry – Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Simple arithmetic does not reveal much about foreign policy priorities, but this fact does symbolize the importance that the Obama administration attaches to a new, improved version of the “reset” in Russian-American relations. That attachment even overrides Barack Obama’s relationship with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whom Obama recently described as one of his five best international friends. And that, in turn, has important implications for the outcome of the ongoing civil war in Syria.

Foreign intervention has been one of the most important factors affecting the course of the upheavals washing over the Arab world since the first uprising, in Tunisia in late 2010. In Syria, a loose, disjointed coalition of opposition forces that receives material support but no direct military assistance from a loose, disjointed coalition of third parties (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) has waged a persistent though inconclusive campaign for over two years against a regime that enjoys direct military assistance from Iran and Hizbollah – the only outside forces with “boots on the ground” in Syria – but also critical material and diplomatic support from Russia.

A variety of factors have been adduced to explain Russia’s commitment to Bashar al-Assad, including a belief that Russian accommodation on a Security Council resolution to protect civilians in Libya was exploited by the Western powers to bring about regime change there. The most plausible reasons, however, are Russia’s determination to retain what appears to be a strategic asset in order to entrench (or renew) its status as a global power, and the Russian conviction that the success of popular opposition movements in the Arab world strengthens radical Islamism that, given Russia’s own large Muslim population, also threatens domestic stability. Whatever the case, Russia has clearly lined up behind Assad.

The Obama administration has been urged repeatedly to help shift the balance in favor of the opposition by a variety of American analysts and high profile political figures, as well as by foreign actors advocating the ouster of Assad. Of these, Turkey has been the most vocal. Turkey's role at the forefront of the international anti-Assad coalition may be due in some degree to Erdogan's personal pique at former friend Assad's refusal to follow his advice. But there are now weightier political and strategic concerns. In the event that he eventually prevails, Assad could exploit ethnic and confessional sensitivities in Turkey in order to jeopardize the country's economic stability – without which Erdogan's hopes to push through constitutional reform and become a French-style president would suffer a potentially fatal blow – and even the integrity of the Turkish state. But though Turkey has been prepared to act assertively in its relations with other regional parties like Israel, Cyprus, or Greece, it is unwilling to confront Russia on the Syrian issue on its own, and it understands that only direct American involvement can produce a decisive shift in the balance of forces on the ground in Syria. It is therefore not surprising that Syria was the main focus of the Turkish-American summit during Erdogan's mid-May visit to Washington.

In effect, however, Erdogan was sent home empty-handed. In response to other such requests for greater activism (and to outrage at the brutality of the Assad regime's counteroffensive), Obama has sent financial and humanitarian support and some non-lethal equipment to the anti-regime forces, but he has consistently resisted calls for direct weapons transfers or even more active measures, such as the establishment of a buffer zone and/or no-fly zone inside Syrian territory. The relative balance of interests in its relations with Russia and Turkey is certainly not the only explanation for American strategic modesty on Syria. Reluctance to risk involvement in another Middle Eastern war in the post-Iraq and pre-post-Afghanistan era is undoubtedly the overriding consideration. Added to that is real ambivalence about America's preferred outcome, fed by growing doubts about the character of the Syrian opposition. In other words, America's strategic stake in the conflict in Syria is too ambiguous to justify a major military commitment. Nevertheless, the desire to improve prickly relations with Russia, perhaps in the hope of gaining Russian cooperation on other issues, is also a factor. Other things being equal, the United States on this issue has no clear reason to favor Turkish preferences over Russian ones. In fact, Kerry's acceptance of Lavrov's proposal to convene another Syrian peace conference in June – "Geneva II" – appears to signal priority on the American agenda for Russian preferences over Turkish ones, though what it really signifies is Obama's own priority: to avoid military intervention in Syria.

Absent that, the overall impact of foreign involvement inside Syria will apparently continue to work to the regime's advantage. That does not necessarily mean that Assad

will win a clear and unequivocal victory, though his fortunes do seem to have improved in recent weeks. But barring some dramatic change, it does suggest that Assad will avoid the fate of Zein al-Abdin bin Ali in Tunisia and Husni Mubarak in Egypt, not to speak of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. At some point, Assad may even be able to turn on those foreign tormentors who have supported his domestic opponents, including Turkey. Needless to say, that prospect will hardly contribute to the materialization of the “zero-problems” vision of Ahmet Davutoglu. But he is only Kerry’s second-best friend.

