The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Putin-Erdogan Deal Poses a Challenge to the West

The Kremlin offers authoritarians a brokerage service based on cynical principles of mutual gain rather than values and allegiances.

By Leonid Bershidsky

October 23, 2019



syria.mil.ru

Vladimir Putin is in the brokerage business. The deal on northern Syria that Russian President Vladimir Putin hammered out with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday serves as a perfect advertisement for the service Putin is offering authoritarians around the world, but primarily in the Middle East and Africa.

Ever since Putin intervened on President Bashar Al-Assad's side in 2015, he has used the Syrian conflict as the shop window for the new international role he sees for Russia. Based on Russia's behavior in Syria, a situation that defies the very idea of long-term alliances and adversarial relationships, these principles are:

- Incumbents should hold on to power. No regime change from the outside.
- Every party with a legitimate interest should get something. There are no permanent red lines.
- Russia will work with anyone who wants to work with Russia.
- Russia will only get involved when it can get something out of the situation.
- Russia won't get involved when threatened with overwhelming force or heavy losses.

A player who intervenes on these terms may not appear valuable to anyone except threatened rulers such as Assad. But a big outside power without any lasting commitments is often a necessary element in talks between parties that hate and distrust each other. It can be a calming influence even if it provides few implicit guarantees.

Related article: Turkey and Russia Show That Land Grabs Can Pay Off

Take the Putin-Erdogan deal. It gives Turkey de facto control of the territory it already has invaded in Syria, despite previous Russian statements that Turkey's invasion violates the country's territorial integrity. Turkey also gets an opportunity to resettle some of its more than 3.5 million unwanted Syrian refugees back on Syrian territory.

But Assad, who has called Erdogan a "thief" for his incursion, gets something too: His border guards get to patrol the rest of the Syrian-Turkish border, which the Kurds earlier prevented them from doing.

The Kurds aren't forgotten, either. While the deal requires them to pull back their armed forces 30 kilometers from the Turkish border, Russia and Turkey will jointly patrol only a 10 kilometer-wide strip. As long as they can coexist with the Assad regime, Russia won't help Assad crush them, and the Kurds will have bought safety from further Turkish attacks and keep most of the territory currently under their control.

The Russian commitment, meanwhile, is minimal. Russian military police will take part in the various patrols, but that doesn't represent a major change. These forces have been present in Syria all along, guarding the Russian naval and air force bases, helping Assad maintain order in recaptured territories and providing security for various humanitarian corridors and convoys.

Erdogan knows Russia can be a nasty adversary if something happens to those forces. After the Turkish air force downed a Russian warplane over northern Syria in 2015, Moscow imposed painful economic sanctions on Turkey and disregarded its interests in waging the Syria campaign until Erdogan apologized in 2016. Yet there's a clear limit to Russia's determination to protect its belligerents. It didn't retaliate when U.S. forces killed an undisclosed number of Russian mercenaries who attempted to capture a Syrian oil refinery last year; Putin won't get into all-out wars in such situations.

If the Putin-Erdogan arrangement fails for any reason, Russia won't sustain any serious damage. Putin's Russia is not spending trillions of dollars in Syria as the U.S. did in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's keeping boots on the ground to a minimum, and it's not seeking to expand its permanent presence beyond the two military bases already established in Syria. Putin expects Europe to shoulder the substantial economic burden of rebuilding Syria, not least so it

can send back refugees, though Russia would expect to be rewarded with concessions to develop oil fields and determine pipeline routes.

On Wednesday, Putin gathered dozens of African leaders at his southern residence in Sochi for an unprecedented summit — in effect, to offer them services similar to those he's been providing to Assad, Erdogan, the Iranian regime and, increasingly, to the Saudi Arabian monarchy. He'll help keep incumbents in power and look for realpolitik compromises in conflicts in exchange for mineral concessions and arms contracts.

Related article: Russia Welcomes African Leaders at First-Ever Russia-Africa Summit, in Photos

"We see how a number of Western states resort to pressure, intimidation and blackmail with regards to sovereign African nations," Putin said ahead of this week's summit. "In this way, they are trying to claw back their lost influence and dominance in former colonies. We aim to defend common economic interests with our African partners."

The U.S. and European nations can do much more for developing nations (and for broken ones like Syria) than Russia can; it's just that they can't operate on the same cynical basis as Putin does — or try to do so and fail.

Recall what the U.S. has done in northern Syria. First, as it sought to defeat the terrorist Islamic State without putting too many boots on the ground, it backed Kurdish forces hostile to a formal U.S. ally within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Turkey. When Turkey understandably balked, Barack Obama's Defense Secretary Ash Carter accused it of having "blurred the lines between ally and adversary, though, from the Turkish point of view, it had been the U.S. that had done so. Then, President Donald Trump turned around and abandoned the Kurds by pulling the small U.S. contingent out of northern Syria and thus letting Turkish armed forces invade; at the same time, Trump wrote an insulting letter to Erdogan telling him not to be "a tough guy" and "a fool."

On the other hand, Western politicians who reject transactional politics often struggle to stay consistent or establish workable coordination mechanisms. For example, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer recently made the eminently sensible suggestion that an international safe zone be established on the Turkish-Syrian border — but even politicians representing other parties in the German coalition government were surprised by the sudden initiative that hadn't been discussed with them, much less with Germany's foreign allies and partners. Putin has been able to move much faster with his inferior solution.

In an increasingly unbalanced world, Putin's set of essentially opportunistic principles can help anchor a difficult situation. But it can't be the basis for a global order any reasonable leader should seek to establish. The West needs a convincing alternative to Putin's emerging international offering. It can only be military and economic assistance conditional on clear, specific rules rather than historic loyalties.

This article first appeared in Bloomberg.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow

Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/23/the-putin-erdogan-deal-poses-a-challenge-to-the-west-a67877