



CAPITALIZING ON

CHAOS

*By Ridvan Bari Urcosta
Institute of International Relations
at the University of Warsaw*

IS RUSSIA CREATING THE 'EURASIAN TRIUMVIRATE' WITH IRAN AND TURKEY?

From the fall of the Berlin Wall until 2014, the West and the international community were crucial pillars in settling international disputes. But it seems the old rules of international politics are re-emerging these days. As a result, something uncontrollable and incomprehensible is happening in the world, making the future far less predictable. A post-World War II state has been partitioned, and geopolitical influences are shifting. Chaos is becoming reality.

Consider: Russia is taking leadership in the eastern Mediterranean; China is taking a more aggressive stance in the South China Sea and other areas, stressing the stability of the international order; the current

relationship with Brussels and other EU member states, such as Germany and France.

Historically, when countries seek new alliances or nonaggression pacts, it signals a change in international politics. Russia, in particular, wants to inject a tectonic change into the international system. As with any tectonic transformation, it requires a severing of the peace underlying the existing order, something Russia seems willing to undertake. Its current strategic aim is to reshape the regional system. By doing so, Russia believes it can achieve the ultimate goal of reshaping the larger international system. Its deleterious activity in the Middle East is designed to create alliances with two regional powers, namely Iran and Turkey. The eventual aim is to create the first working coalition in Eurasia, which would serve along with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) as an alternative to Western security systems. The CSTO was created to act as a "security belt" along Russia's southern frontier. A new alliance with Iran and Turkey would be created to upend spheres of influence in the Middle East. Even if the Kremlin is unable to establish these new

social and political climate in the United States may cause Washington to focus more on domestic problems than international disputes; and finally, Europe is facing internal geopolitical perturbations from the immigration crisis, Brexit and Poland's altered

A Russian Defense Ministry photograph shows a pilot in a Russian Su-25 bomber being refueled at Hmeimim Air Base in Syria in 2016. Russia waged a five-month air campaign in Syria.

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alliances, it will still try to change the security sphere by signing nonaggression pacts with neighboring states.

NEGOTIATIONS IN ASTANA

The recent negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan, represent a test run of Russia's vision, which is on display in Syria. From the beginning of its military campaign in Syria, Russia has managed to adjust its own geopolitical goals to coincide with the national interests of Iran. However, its relations with Turkey over Syria are more dramatic. Ankara and Moscow have experienced periods of stress and periods of bromance. As a result, they have been surmounting grievances and establishing close connections.

It should be noted that until now deep suspicions overshadowed their frequent attempts to create an alliance. But Russia does not give up easily. Sergey Karaganov, head of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, says Russia possesses a "strategic vision and strategic patience" lacking in the West's grand strategy.

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has attempted to implement its own international agenda. It represented a diplomatic triumph in 2016 for Russia, Iran and Turkey, and a disaster for Europe and the U.S., when the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 2336. Consequently, Russia and its allies developed several documents:

- A statement establishing a cease-fire regime in the Syrian Arab Republic;
- An agreement on the mechanism to record violations of the cease-fire regime;
- An agreement establishing delegations to launch negotiations for a political settlement.

The final document is actually aimed at starting pre-negotiations with Turkey. According to these documents, Iran, Turkey and Russia act as guarantors of territorial integrity in Syria. To date, the only notable achievement by the new "Eurasian triumvirate" after meeting in Astana is the establishment of a trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with a cease-fire in Syria, the results of which are unclear. But it marks the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia is taking a leading role as an "engineer" of the regional security system. Before the Astana negotiations, it was clear that Russia wanted high-ranking officials from Washington to participate, indicating the Kremlin was uncomfortable taking the lead. But Moscow will now try to conclude the peace processes it initiated. The Kremlin is ready to reach beyond its immediate national interests and offer Iran and Turkey a package of proposals, which mostly aim at dividing Syria into several spheres of influence involving Turkey, Iran and Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime. In practice, the approval of a new constitution in Syria will enshrine a form of federalization.

PRAGMATIC ALLIANCE

The repercussions around the possible creation of a Moscow-Ankara-Tehran geopolitical axis are remarkable; the national interests of the three countries collide, as do their historical ones. Russia is pushing hard for the new geopolitical alliance, but its success will depend on the willingness of all three to recalibrate national interests for common denominators.

For instance, until now Russia has pursued its own objectives: First, preserving the authoritarian regime of Assad.



A Turkish Coast Guard boat escorts the Russian Navy's landing ship Azov in the Bosphorus Strait on its way to the Mediterranean Sea in May 2017.

REUTERS

Second, legitimizing Moscow's military presence in Syria. In January 2017, Russia and Syria signed a significant agreement that extends access for Russian warships at Syria's Tartus naval base and military aircraft at its Hmeimim Air Base for 49 years with the possibility of extensions for successive 25-year periods. With the extensions, Russia is effectively establishing a client state in the Middle East. After obtaining a geopolitical fulcrum in the region, Moscow could become more pliant in negotiations with Ankara and Tehran. The third objective is to drive the West from the Middle East or at least diminish its dominance in the region.

The three states have similar histories. All were former empires and, as such, each has a history of conflict with the others. Iran, Turkey and Russia have specific attitudes toward the West. Anti-Western grievances in those countries are deeply rooted, and Russia is effectively manipulating the political elite and the media in those countries to stoke those grievances. In the first decades of the Cold War, when Turkey and Iran (from 1955-1979) were members of the Central Treaty Organization, they were aligned against the Soviet Union to contain its ambitions along its southern frontier.

In the 21st century, something is happening that would have been hard to imagine years ago — a NATO member-state (Turkey) having military drills with Russia and executing a common military operation against a common enemy, the Islamic State. Tellingly, it is the first joint operation between Ankara and Moscow since the end of the 19th century, when Ottomans and Russians fought against Napoleon. Interestingly, a Turkish fighter plane shot down a Russian attack aircraft near the Syria-Turkey border in 2015 while both countries were participating in the Syrian

conflict. Contradictions and paradoxes in this alliance are everywhere, while pragmatism is off the charts.

Putin's envoy to the negotiations in Astana, Alexander Lavrentyev, hailed the talks as a new day in the search for peace in Syria. But Russia's international stance as a broker between belligerent actors in the conflict could end as an awkward misunderstanding. Moscow tirelessly criticized the West, and particularly the U.S., for its inability to bring peace to the Middle East. If Russia fails to resolve the conflict in Syria, it will be a blow to its prestige and its long-held claim of being a great power. It is questionable whether Russia has enough political, economic and military might to accomplish such a grand mission. Russia feels its power is limitless in its own back yard. or "near abroad." But to deal with a region as complicated as the Middle East, Russia needs a surplus of resources. With its strategy of creating the triumvirate, Russia is trying to extend its reach beyond its own back yard.

Pragmatism is guiding these three nations to join forces in the Middle East. Iran is preserving its national interest in Syria by enhancing the Shias' influence in the eastern Mediterranean while at the same time allowing Russia to fulfill its expansionist ambitions. Turkey hopes to contain the Kurds through this alliance and is gaining access to negotiations over the future of Syria. Turkey's exclusion from negotiations over the Iraqi city of Mosul might explain why Ankara is joining an alliance with Tehran and Moscow. Iran and Russia need Turkey in order to appease the Sunni military groups in Syria. Without Ankara, it will be impossible to achieve a lasting cease-fire. Neither Turkey nor Russia wants the creation of an "Iranian land corridor," which could connect Iran with Shias in Syria and Lebanon. Such plans can undermine the national interests of Turkey and Russia. Russia needs Iran, though it can be troublesome to join with Tehran in the conflict. The alliance with Turkey opens a much broader space for Russian maneuvers.

Russia's grand strategy — in addition to gaining permanent access to the eastern Mediterranean — also protects Russia's southern frontier if a military confrontation erupts with NATO. Another reason Russia is pursuing the triumvirate is to derail Turkey's membership in NATO. Russia aims to create a strong geostrategic axis; however, a more realistic outcome would be the signing of legally binding nonaggression agreements with Iran and Turkey. Russia, like the Soviet Union before WWII, is attempting to encircle itself with alliances to prevent conflicts from all directions.

To challenge Russia's plans in the Middle East, the U.S., with their allies and partners, should develop a strategy that entices Turkey to continue to be a close ally of the West. Without Turkey, Moscow is destined to be bogged down in a long-term confrontation with ISIS in Syria. If the West succeeds in improving relations with Turkey, it will degrade Russian aims to create a strong geographic axis between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran. Russia has masterfully leveraged disconnections between U.S. and Turkish strategies regarding the Syrian conflict, using the weaknesses of Washington and the West to manipulate the conflict, and will continue to use these and any future divides to further its interests. □