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Turkish-Russian Relationships in the Context of Syrian Conflict

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Abstract

The article is about Turkish-Russian relationships in the context of Syrian conflict. It is known that, this conflict has aggravated due to the coinciding reasons, even led to the emergence of the challenging crisis between the sides. Simultaneously, the chain of events has demonstrated that both states, Turkey and Russia, are forced to cooperate stem from the logic of Realpolitik. The article is devoted to the analysis of the essence of this cooperation.

Keywords: national interests, Realpolitik, Arab Spring, Astana negotiations format

Турецко-российские отношения в контексте сирийского конфликта

Аннотация

Статья посвящена турецко-российским отношениям на фоне сирийского кризиса. Известно, что этот конфликт приобрел ожесточенный характер из-за противоречивых причин, что впоследствии привело к кризису между сторонами. Одновременно цепь событий показала, что как Турция, так и Россия вынуждены сотрудничать согласно логике Реалполитик. Эта статья также посвящена анализу сущности этого сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: национальные интересы, Реалполитик, Арабская весна, Астанинский формат переговоров

Turkey between Reapolitik and national interests

If one pays attention to the Turkey's policy towards Syria, Cardinal Richelieu's maxim comes back to our memory: "Man is immortal, his salvation is hereafter. The state has no immortality, its salvation is now or never".

In first 3 years of the conflict an official Ankara has started to hold an intense negotiations with the Gulf states, particularly, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Untill Russian military intervention to Syria, the mentioned countries were ready to send troops to Syria to struggle against both ISIL and rejime forces to topple Bashar Asad (*Saudi Arabia*, 2016).

As a result of this cooperation, military-political opposition of Syria getting a financial and military support from 3 states were able to seize and control a large territory of the country¹.

In the context of "pragmatic cooperation" based on economic interests, what comes to our mind, as we analyse Turkish-Russian relationships? Even looking at both countries' foreign policy, pursued in post-Soviet region as well as in Near and Middle East, it is obvious that, there has been a redline, particularly during Putin's reign that, both sides hadn't cross. And to some extent, Syrian case played a role of litmus paper at the backdrop of Turkish-Russian relationships. At the same time, it has demonstrated the potential of states and their capability to access the existent risks.

Still, in the initial period of the civil war in Syria, president Erdogan has said that, Russia can lose Turkey as ally (Топалов, 2015), though it was known that, these countries weren't allies, at best they were strategic economic partners. Then the main Russian gas exporter "Gazprom" was complaining at the twofold decreasing of gas transferring through "Blue stream" pipeline, that supplies a significant demand of Turkey. Till breaking down of Russian Su 24 bomber in November 24, 2015, both countries were endeavouring not to cross the redline.

The main reason of deterioration of relations was frequent breaking of Turkish borders with Syria by the Russian battle planes since September 2015. Although an official Ankara repeatedly expressed its protest, hot line

¹ These realtions has so developed that, the states supporting Basha Assad rejime began to accuse Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar of contributing to create ISIL.

was created between the general stabs of two countries, nevertheless the tension hadn't cease between them. Afterwards president Erdogan even declared about declining to purchase a gas from Russia, also to create a nuclear power plant "Akkuyu" with the significant Russian investment (Турция пригрозила, 2015).

It should be noted that, if an official Ankara plainly demanded Bashaq Asad's departure from power in previous years, since October 2015 the Turkish government proposed 6 month period of transition for him. In any case, Russian support to Ba'ath rejime since 2015 "seriously devastated Turkish policy in Syria" as security expert, professor Sedat Lachiner noted (Bishku 2012).

It is known that, after Turkish F16 pilot brought down Russian Su 24 bomber in the border on November 24, 2015, the mutual relationships worsened during short time. Considering this event from the international law point of view, one can justify Turkey's reaction due to the evident border breaching fact (Огонь на расторжение, 2015)². But if to approach this issue in the context of "existing potential and capability to use them", the case would require another attitude.

It is known that, Russia has taken a rough stand after that event occurred. One of the Moscow's fair claims was inopportune and nonoperative reaction from Turkish officials, when the battle plane was brought down. Although I partly clarified the issue: embarrassment among power representatives in Turkey. As it is known that, Putin's accessing it as "stab in the back" made concrete steps beginning from threatening declaration, stationing anti-aircraft systems (S 400) across Turkey-Syria border till "crippling sanctions against vulnerable economic and service sectors of Turkey (РФ заявила, 2015).

Paying attention to 6 months crisis between the sides, one can notice an interesting fact. The Turkish leadership, including the president Erdogan, made their best efforts to restore relations with Russian Federation, at least to reach a status quo. Erdogan in his numereous declarations called Putin "my dear friend", when the latter avoided such epithets in his speeches towards his Turkish colleague.

² It should be noted that, untill Su 24 bomber was brought down, the Turkush pilot of F16 has repeatedly warned his Russian counterpart of dangerous flight in the border.

Firstly, on November 25 Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its regret due to this event that in its turn led to the Sergey Lavrov's, Russian Minister of Affairs following reaction: "We were waiting for an explanation from Turkey at more high level. But it is better, than no reaction" (Лавров: Турция, 2015) Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoghlu's "Russia is Turkey's friend, neighbour and very important partner. The relations between official Moscow and Ankara can't be sacrifice to Su 24 bomber downing" (Давутоглу: Анкара, 2015) can be another example.

It is known that, since the beginning of the 2000's Russian has been traditionally taking first place in tourism market of Turkey. But after jet downing event, Rosturizm, the state body, regulating tourism sphere in Russian Federation, put an end tourists' flow it Turkey, as a result of which, the number of Russian tourists had decreased in a half. When the conflict emerged, the British Capital Analytics company prognosticated the damage on Turkish GDP at 0,5% (4–4,5 bln USD) as a result of sanctions imposed by Russia (В Британии, 2015). European Development and Reconstruction Bank calculated this indicator at 0,3–0,7% (Bilgic-Alpaslan and others, 2015). The point is that, Turkey didn't respond drastically against Russian sanctions pressure policy. Let's be familiar with Movlut Chavushoghlu's, the Minister of Foreign Minister of Turkey words: "Turkey has sufficiently suffered from sanctions in the past. Sacntions imposed against our neighbours and partner countries (Russia) heavily damaged our economy. Namely by this reason, we don't approve it, as we hear about sanctions..." (Турция выступила, 2017). This declaration shows, that Turkey's high-level official in fact was criticising the West's sanctions policy against Ukraine.

At last, in July 24, 2015 Erdogan government presented its apologies and agreed to pay compensation for material losses and victims incurred on Russia. During a short time, most of the sanctions against economic and service sectors of Turkey had been lifted, as a result of summits, both sides were able to come to agreement on restoring of "Akkuyu" power plant, also Turkey decided to purchase S400 anti-aircraft systems.

By the way, restoring and even development of mutual relations during a short time verified the following thesis of neorealism school:

1. regional countries are forced to take into consideration great powers' interests;

2. nuclear powers have capability to impose their political will on others' in time of military-political alliances.

De-escalation of mutual relations

After the relations had been restored, both sides made efforts to reach some compromises around Syrian crisis. In any case, due to the fact that, the Syrian government forces were able to establish control in 90% the territory by military intervention of Russian Federation, the latter together with Iran, and sometimes by its own will now dictates its policy on Turkey during negotiations process.

In January 23–24, 2017 in Astana meeting Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to create 4 de-escalation zones in Syria (Eastern Gouta, Homs, Deraa and Idlib) as well as stationing of military police forces in those zones with the participation of the mentioned states. Soon it was also obvious that, so-called Astana format, unseriously perceived by Syrian military and political opposition representatives, didn't justify itself. Syrian army owing to Russian air force excepting Idlib was able to retake other 3 districts, thus the agreement reached by Russia, Iran and Turkey was in fact broken. By the way, in that time the Turkey government's formal objections demonstrated that, an official Ankara was forced to keep Realpolitik rules.

At present time Turkish-Russian relations have reached such a point that, its deterioration and entering a new negative phase at the background of Syrian crisis would seem incredible. If any serious cataclysm will not happen in Russia, more precisely, or Putin will not leave power, the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria is seemingly not real, which means continuation of B. Asad dictatorship. On the other hand, a single resistance hotbed Idlib region, where Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham is going on to fight against government forces, most probably will be also retaken in near time.

One shouldn't forget about PKK factor that is considered as existential threat to the national security of Turkey. By this reason, Erdogan government is forced to abide the Russian dominance in Syria in order to neutralize the PYD (PKK wing in this country) factor that has political and military power in border region.

Summary

Summing up our article we can come to the following conclusions: for such countries as Turkey and Russia the Syria has played in fact a geopolitical arena, where both countries at first came into collision, although till the crisis they could be considered as effective partners. It also demonstrated that, the partnership based on deep strategic interests, e.g. can be protect despite of temporary crisis.

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