

Russia in a New Bermuda Triangle: Relations with Iran, Turkey and Israel



Nowadays Russia is present in the Eastern Mediterranean region on an extended scale using the whole set of political, economic and military instruments. Kremlin's Mediterranean/Middle East strategy is focused on several goals. Firstly, it is status-rebuilding in the region that Russia lost in the 1990s – “*if you want to be heard, you should be on the ground*”. Secondly, it is a policy aimed at overcoming isolation imposed by the West after the Ukraine conflict. Expanded access to the Mediterranean serves this broader goal by implementing “*the foot in the door*” policy in Europe's sphere of influence and reducing the US ability to manoeuvre militarily. Thirdly, it is a demonstration of Russia's ability to draw a red line to the US policy of regime change and “*fix what the West breaks*”. The last but not least, Kremlin claims it

is present in the region to fight terrorism, which means that Russia is still the most valuable partner of the West.

Russia like all ambitious actors needs reliable allies or at least *ad hoc* partners. Iran, Turkey and Israel are singled out by Kremlin as the key actors for its Middle East policy. At the same time their competing interests and irreconcilable rivalry create serious risks for Moscow in the region and beyond. Russia has to maintain a filigree balance between them, which is a difficult endeavour. Not so long ago Russian leadership made every effort to build the informal alliance with Iran and Turkey around the Astana peace process in Syria. For tactical reasons Ankara has found the way to cooperate with Moscow and Tehran, the protectors of Assad's regime, as long as Kurds are excluded from the Astana peace process. However from the very beginning it was clear that this alliance would be short-lived.

Of all three countries only Iran can be viewed as Russia's ally in the Middle East great game as well as a counterbalance to Turkey's influence in the post-Soviet space. Although Kremlin recognizes Iran's claims to be an important player in the Middle East region and appreciates Tehran's support to Assad regime, at the same time it is fearful that Iran's regional ambitions may go too far and involve Russia in a military conflict with Saudi Arabia and the Sunni world. Likewise Russia fears that Tehran's decision to go nuclear will trigger an Israeli strike on the Iranian nuclear infrastructure and confront Kremlin with a difficult foreign policy dilemma. Therefore Russia has joined forces with Europe to rescue the Iran nuclear deal that Trump abandoned.

What will contradictory Russian and Turkish geopolitical ambitions lead to?

Russia and Turkey are presently portraying their relations as strategic partnership, but in reality



they are doomed to be only situational partners and strategic rivals. This can be explained by the fact that their neighbourhoods overlap while their strategic interests, inspired to a large extent by their conflicting imperial past and current ambitions, diverge. Turkey pretends to become a regional hegemon in the Moslem world of the Wider Mediterranean and wants Russia to recognize the region as Turkish sphere of influence.

Interestingly, the Caucasus crisis (2008) and the Ukrainian conflict (2014) did not seriously affect the relationship between two countries although these conflicts revealed the differing goals of Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea region. Ankara was interested in maintaining status quo in the region by preserving its own positions, while Kremlin's understanding of the status quo meant Moscow's increasing role in the region of "*its privileged interests*" and preventing NATO's expansion to the post-Soviet space by all means. Erdogan's statements about Georgia's and Ukraine's territorial integrity have been merely verbal and rhetorical, but Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict, in Turkey's immediate neighbourhood has triggered deeply hidden contradictions. In the eyes of the Turkish president Vladimir Putin violated the unwritten gentleman agreement and entered Syria, which was Turkey's near abroad and sphere of its special interests.

The situational rapprochement between Putin's Russia and Erdogan's Turkey in mid 2000 has been built on their dissatisfaction with the West – US/NATO and EU. However anti-Westernism is too fragile a foundation for real partnership. Every time relations with Russia deteriorate Erdogan remembers that Turkey is NATO's member. The downing of the Russian jet by Turkey on the Syrian border in 2015 has created a risk of a military conflict with NATO. That conflict has been smoothed out but geopolitical ambitions of two leaders may lead them to new conflict with unpredictable consequences.

Russia-Israeli relations: friendly neutrality built around high expectations

The Russia-Israel relations are built on mutual expectations but it is not clear whether they can be met. Israel's importance for Russia goes

far beyond the region. Israel is viewed by Moscow as a kind of bridge to president Trump who, unlike his predecessor, strongly supports the US ally in the Middle East. However, it is unlikely that Israel will be able in the current circumstances to positively change the attitude of the American establishment towards Russia. For its part, Israel recognizes Russia as an important regional player with leverage over its allies and partners, first and foremost, Iran and Hezbollah. The latter present a direct military threat to Israel. Russia and Israel equally try to avoid any direct confrontation between Israeli and Russian forces in Syria and prevent Russia's involvement into clashes between the Israel Defense Forces and Syrian Forces. At the same time, both Russia and Israel are well aware that each of them could be a spoiler for the regional plans of the other. For the time Putin has good personal relations with Netanyahu, which cannot be said about the Russian military who barely tolerates Israeli military operations in Syria. So far, the Russia-Israeli relations can be defined as friendly neutrality built around high expectations, which is also too fragile a foundation for stable relations.

Any incident, wherever it comes from, could trigger a chain reaction of tragic events in this explosive region. It looks that Russia in the Middle East region is trapped in a kind of a new Bermuda triangle, which is fraught not with mythical accidents but with very concrete threats.

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Although half a partner, Iran can be viewed as Russia's ally in the Middle East great game as well as a counterbalance to Turkey's influence in the post-Soviet space.