

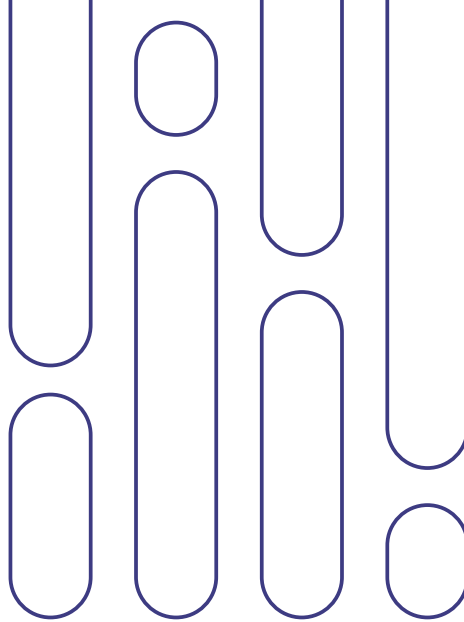
REPORT

The Tehran Summit and the Impossible Alliance

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On June 19, 2022, the Iranian capital Tehran hosted a summit bringing together Iran's president along with the leaders of Turkey and Russia. The trilateral meeting came in the context of the Astana process to resolve the Syrian crisis. In their speeches and press statements, the three leaders raised their security, political and economic concerns. The volatile regional and global developments overshadowed the summit. Russia has its hands full in the Ukraine war, while Iran's negotiations with the Western powers over its nuclear program have reached an impasse. Turkey, for its part, seems to be the only party that fully focused on the Syrian file, which is ostensibly the primary reason why the three leaders met. The Turkish focus was on the military campaign it has been threatening to launch in northern Syria over the past months. The outcomes of the bilateral (Iranian-Turkish) and bilateral (Iranian-Russian) cooperation council meetings were far better compared to the outcomes of the tripartite summit. Moreover, the tripartite meeting did not lead to consensus on a small issue like the Turkish military campaign. Russia and Iran announced they rejected it while Turkey did not declare that it would abandon it.

In addition to the Syrian issue, there are other security issues — no less important than the Syrian one — that brought the three countries together, such as illegal immigration, smuggling on the Iranian-Turkish border, and Iranian intelligence activities inside Turkey. Tehran has its own security concerns, such as the Iranian Azeri minority and Turkey's links to rising Azeri nationalist and separatist sentiments, not to mention Ankara and Tehran having divergent policies toward Iraq and Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Russia is a global superpower that plays a role in nearly all of the contentious issues between Iran and Turkey, siding with Iran at times and Turkey at others. It sees NATO, of

which Turkey is a member, as the greatest threat to its national security, and opposes its expansion toward its borders. However, Turkey uses NATO membership to further its own interests. It opposes membership of countries that provide safe havens for groups designated as terrorist organizations by Ankara, such as the PKK and the Fethullah Gulen movement. Besides the aforementioned, these countries have ties with other countries, each of which has its own security calculus, which the three countries consider.

Thus, in light of this geo-security intermingling of geographic considerations, the three countries' expansionist inclinations, conflicting security priorities and interests, and building on past trilateral coordination to resolve the Syrian crisis, the question that now arises is whether Russia, Iran, and Turkey could form a strategic alliance in the near future?

Turkish Strategic Priorities in Syria

Turkish Interests in Syria

Since the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is preparing for elections, Turkey considers security and stability in northern Syria to be a top priority. One of the major issues in these elections will be the plight of Syrian refugees. The country has been facing an economic crisis for several years for a variety of reasons. However, populist rhetoric has blamed it primarily and specifically on Syrian refugees. They have been blamed for causing unemployment to spread among Turks. The Turkish opposition has taken advantage of the situation, blaming the AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for the economic crisis. The Turkish opposition has even vowed to repatriate Syrian refugees. This narrative has spread throughout Turkish society. One of the most visible indicators is the incitement directed at

Syrians, as well as the dozens of killings committed on the basis of race.

Despite not being on the scale advocated by the opposition, the issue of refugees remains one of the causes of Turkey's economic crisis. On the contrary, the presence of refugees is advantageous because it helps to propel the Turkish economy. Regardless of this issue, it is certain that the refugee issue will be one of the most important levers used in the presidential election next year (June 2023). Erdoğan will go to any length to prevent his opponents from exploiting the refugee issue. Therefore, his interest at this point is in providing a safe haven to return the greatest number of Syrian refugees home in order to win the votes of those voters who oppose the presence of Syrians in Turkey. According to Erdoğan, the challenge is to return the Syrian refugees to their homes through securing some guarantees or through a direct agreement with the Assad regime. Erdoğan will lose votes from both supporters and naturalized citizens in both cases.

The Iranian-Russian Calculus

Russia and Syria are both in favor of securing the Turkish border on the Syrian front. However, they want such security to be provided by the Assad regime. This requires the Assad regime to exercise authority over the entire Syrian territories, forcing Syrian opposition groups to surrender. Turkey is faced with two issues in this context. The first is that many Syrian refugees refuse to return to Syria under Assad's rule because they fear for their lives and retaliatory attacks. The second issue is that some armed groups oppose any agreement reached between Turkey and the Assad regime. Therefore, northern Syria will remain a dangerous region; Erdoğan's goal will not be met; and he will lose his popular base of support. However, this option remains

on the table, and the AKP may pursue it if it runs out of other options. Perhaps Iran and Russia are pressuring the AKP to do so. President Erdoğan [stated](#) at a press conference with his Iranian counterpart, “We expect that the Damascus government will initiate the political process. The Syrian issue is high on the agenda of the Astana process, and we anticipate good outcomes regarding it.”

The Turkish Levers

Until a political settlement is reached, Turkey will work to set the minimum level of conditions, even if nominal, for the return of refugees back to northern Syria. In this context, Turkey possesses bargaining chips to place pressure on Iran and Russia in relation to the security issues that concern it the most — foremost of which are the following:

- Guiding the Syrian opposition forces — active on the battlefield — to target Russian and Iranian forces. Rekindling the dispute on the Syrian front will not serve Russia particularly, which is busy fighting the Ukrainian war. It will find itself unable to fight effectively on the two fronts. It is worth noting also that there are other parties harmed by the current developments in Syria, who prefer restoring a balance between the disputants and pushing the Assad regime and Iran to concede and reach a political settlement. At this point, Turkish and Jordanian interests converge regarding border security on their shared borders with Syria. In a press interview shortly after the Tehran summit, Jordan’s king stated that [his country is regularly attacked on its borders](#) by “militias linked to Iran,” expressing his hope for a “change in Tehran’s behavior.”
- Through the Ukrainian war, Turkey could put pressure on Russia. According to a [report](#) published by the Russian news agency Sputnik, Turkmen factions aligned with the Turkish

army have opened offices in the countryside of Aleppo, Raqqa and Hasakah in northern and northeastern Syria to recruit militants who want to fight as mercenaries against Russian forces in Ukraine. NATO forces and the Turkish army are assisting them. They will be paid handsomely, as were their Syrian counterparts sent to fight in Libya and Azerbaijan.

- It is likely that Turkey will link its mediation, which aims to open the door for exporting Ukrainian grain in return for allowing Russia to export grain amid the international sanctions, with the Syrian file and its demand to take into consideration Ankara's interest even for this temporary stage.

- Because NATO grants its members the authority to approve the admission of new members, Turkey plays a critical role in the accession of Sweden and Finland to the organization. Turkey has insisted that both countries cease supporting terror outfits (the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the Fethullah Gulen movement) and hand over officials from both organizations. In principle, expanding the NATO alliance is not in Russia's best interests. Moscow, on the other hand, sees it as a direct threat to its national security. Based on this, Turkey's refusal, followed by a conditional approval, could be used as a bargaining chip to put pressure on Russia to make concessions in the Syrian file.

- Iran has deep concerns about reigniting the Azerbaijan-Armenia dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It fears that any new conflict would spill over into its territory, especially in light of the internal split over the Iranian position toward the past conflict, with a segment of Iranian Azeris condemning Tehran's support for Armenia and the possibility of Azeri separatist inclinations escalating. Turkey is not unconcerned about this file; it strongly [backs Azerbaijan. The racial dimension is considered one of the reasons behind this support](#), which Iran

rejects and considers a threat to its territorial integrity. Additionally, Turkey links it to the Syrian file [through the agreement it had concluded with Azerbaijan](#), which provided for the establishment of a Turkish military base in Nakhchivan, an Azeri region adjacent to the Turkish territories but geographically detached from the Azerbaijani territories. It is worth noting that Russia then expressed discontent and rejection of the direct Turkish intervention in the war, calling on it to help ease tensions and find resolutions for a peaceful settlement. Therefore, rekindling the Nagorno-Karabakh front remains possible, or at the very least will provide an opportunity for Turkey to retaliate against Russia and Iran. Turkey and Iran are also at odds in northern Iraq. Iran is concerned that Turkey will become a transit point for Kurdish gas into Europe, putting Iran's economic interests at risk.

Russian Strategic Priorities

Russian Interests in Syria

Russia wants to increase its clout in the Mediterranean, and the Assad regime has given it the opportunity to do so. Russia wants to keep Assad in power because the armed opposition is losing ground against him. It seeks to restore his international legitimacy, and any agreement between him and Turkey serves as a springboard for this. Any political shift could significantly alter Russia's presence in Syria. It also seeks to exclude the United States by pressuring it to leave the country. At this point, Russia's interests converge with Iran's. During his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his entourage in Tehran, [Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei demanded that the Americans be driven out of Syria's Eastern Euphrates](#).

After the war in Ukraine broke out, which Russia is seeking

to emerge victorious from using all means possible, Moscow realized that Syria can serve the purpose of supplying fighters to partake in the Ukrainian war on its side. On March 11, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave the green light for thousands of fighters from the Middle East to partake in the fight against Ukraine. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Kuzhugotov told a Russia Security Council meeting that there were 16,000 volunteers in the Middle East “ready to fight alongside Russian-backed forces inside the separatist region of Donbas in eastern Ukraine.” He also quoted Vladimir Putin as [saying](#) “If you see that there are these people who want of their own accord, not for money, to come to help the people living in Donbas, then we need to give them what they want and help them get to the conflict zone.” It seems that this step came in the context of Russia’s response to the Western powers that sent fighters against Moscow, masquerading as volunteers.

The overlap between the Ukraine war and the Syrian crisis emerged diplomatically when Ukraine severed diplomatic ties with the Syrian government after the latter recognized the independence of the pro-Russia separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. As a result of the move, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [declared](#) that his relations with Damascus were over. In retaliation, the Assad regime severed ties with Ukraine in a tit-for-tat move.

The Iranian and Turkish Calculus

It is not in Iran’s best interests to become involved in the Ukraine conflict, either directly or indirectly. This will at the very least risk the nuclear negotiations. If the West intervenes in Syria and targets Russian forces in some way, it will benefit Tehran by allowing it to remain a heavyweight player there and make Moscow dependent on it. However, if Western intervention in-

tensifies to target the Assad regime, it will harm Tehran, which insists that Assad remains at the helm of the regime while Russia does not mind if he is changed.

Turkey is protesting the United States' and Western countries' support for Kurdish organizations. However, it is not in its best interests for the United States to completely withdraw from Syria, leaving Russia as the sole actor there. This will exacerbate Turkey's position. It is worth noting that Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015 was a watershed moment in the civil war. Iran and Russia being the sole players versus Turkey in Syria is one of Ankara's strategic blunders. It should have relied on more powerful world powers to balance Russia in the negotiations regarding Syria. Perhaps this is what prevented it from imposing its own vision for border security with Syria as a minimum demand.

Iranian Strategic Priorities

Iranian Interests in Syria

When it comes to the legitimacy of the Syrian regime, its control over the entire Syrian territories, and the necessity of the United States' withdrawal from the country, Iranian and Russian interests converge. Therefore, Iran will do everything in its power to keep Assad as Syria's president. Iran engages in a zero-sum game with Turkey on this specific issue. It will apply all forms of pressure on Turkey to accept the Assad regime. Despite an ostensible agreement with Turkey to designate Kurdish groups as terrorist organizations and to protect Syria's territorial integrity, Iran refuses to launch any military operations against them. Iran is aware that these Kurdish groups and the Assad regime are working together, and it believes that such operations will exacerbate the crisis, foment instability, and benefit terrorists.

Meanwhile, Iran conducted several operations against Kurdish outfits along the Iraqi border without consulting the Baghdad government. It regards such operations as necessary for its national security, posing no threat to regional stability.

Assad has given Tehran enormous clout in the region, effectively turning Syria into a pawn of Iran. Sectarian militia groups aligned with the IRGC have become a tool for Iran's regional expansionism and a major source of instability in the region's countries. The link between the Iranian presence in Syria and the nuclear issue emerges here. One of the reasons the nuclear deal negotiations stalled was Iran's demand that the IRGC be removed from the US terror list. It will be extremely difficult for the United States to take such a step because Israel will vehemently oppose it given Iran's current presence on its border, with Tel Aviv constantly carrying out missile strikes against IRGC military targets in Syria. If this occurs, Washington will create yet another schism with its Gulf allies, who insist that it should consider their interests. They will not unquestionably accept a nuclear deal that risks their security.

The Russian and Turkish Calculus

Everything related to the Russian and Turkish calculus has been mentioned above. What could be added here is that it will be difficult for Russia to support Iran while antagonizing the Gulf states by taking positions that endanger their interests, particularly Saudi Arabia, which has remained neutral in the Ukrainian war and possesses the lever of oil, which could exacerbate the impact of Western sanctions on Moscow. Turkey will benefit from weakening Iran's presence in Syria, whether through Israel, the United States, or any other force. Turkey's rejection of international sanctions against Iran does not imply that it will always support it. If Tehran faces tougher sanctions, Ankara

will take advantage of the situation by massively increasing its trade with it. If the sanctions have a negative impact on Ankara's security and economy, it will bargain and find justifications to meet international demands and leverage its support of sanctions in edging closer to other powers.

Potential Scenarios

The three countries are facing several challenges that dictate they should cooperate and coordinate with each other. Their interests overlap on several issues. The potential scenarios expected in the short and medium term are as follows:

The Formation of a Strategic Alliance

A strategic alliance generally aims to yield common and long-term perspectives and plans in various fields as well as to forge cooperation to confront challenges and threats. This scenario is likely ruled out for the three countries due to their geographical proximity and expansionist tendencies, which means that their thorny issues/disagreements are likely to turn into zero-sum games. Therefore, it is quite difficult for the three countries to establish a comprehensive long-term strategy.

The Dispute

The three countries have significant differences. On numerous occasions, they endanger national security. Turkey's lack of security in northern Syria, Iran's nuclear issue, and Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian war and NATO expansion are all examples. Therefore, positions such as the Iranian intelligence's schemes to target Israelis in Istanbul, including diplomats, as well as the Iranian assassinations carried out against dissidents there, are sometimes regarded as a blow to national security and a threat to stability. However, it is unlikely that this divergence will lead to a dispute and a symmetrical war be-

tween the two countries because the costs will be prohibitively high. Each side emphasizes the lines that the other should not cross. Despite their competing interests, the three countries are interdependent. For example, despite the difficulties that have gripped Russian-Turkish relations, it is in Russia's best interests for Turkey's current ruling elite to remain in power and to avoid any potential pro-American elite such as the one that took control of Ukraine. This explains Russia's stance on the failed coup attempt in 2016.

Tactical Alliances (Interim Cooperation)

It is the most likely scenario and is regarded as a continuation of the status quo. The three countries recognize that reaching consensus on all issues is impossible. At the same time, several areas of cooperation, whether collective or bilateral, serve their interests. Thus, they are likely to stick to some sort of partial separation when it comes to areas of cooperation, the majority of which are economic. Trade between the three countries has doubled, especially given the economic woes and sanctions imposed on all of them to varying degrees. Partial agreements have been reached on the contentious issues of security and politics. Each party gives each stage a different priority depending on respective interests. They coordinate with one another to maintain a minimum level of agreement.

Conclusion

The intertwined security issues of Russia, Turkey and Iran indicate the extent of the disagreements/conflicts between these countries on the Syrian issue as well as why they have failed to resolve even one thorny issue. The fact that these intertwined security issues are exacerbating other issues, such as the Ukrainian war and security tensions between Iran and Turkey

in northern Iraq, demonstrates that what divides these countries is greater than what brings them together. The primary impediment is the geographical disparity and its implications for the three countries' priorities and calculations. Hence, a party resorts to zero-sum games, as Turkey has in northern Syria and Russia has in Ukraine. For some, the game is not a zero-sum game. Agreement and cooperation coexist with hostile actions. Consequently, the most they can achieve is tactical understandings — for a limited time — in which they show minimum commitment to the conditions of the agreements that are held together through the threat of the deployment of military force. The various parties also use indirect tools such as militias and dissenter movements in response to a party breaking an understanding on a particular issue. We can draw several conclusions from the aforesaid:

- For Iran: The Tehran summit, which aimed to tackle the Syrian issue, failed to achieve any progress in the Syrian file. Focusing only on bilateral relations confirms that the “policy of axes” has become obsolete. As a result, Tehran must adopt a cooperative approximation that considers the interests of other regional and international powers that have the tools to pressure Iran and protect their interests.
- For Turkey: Despite Russia's distance from the two countries, Ankara's failure to extract concessions from Tehran and Moscow regarding its national security in northern Syria reflects the level of divergence and the gap at the geo-security level. As a result, if the policy of compromises and shifting axes continues, Ankara will appear untrustworthy to regional and global powers. It will be more vulnerable to taking blows as a result of such shifts, requiring it to reconsider its policy of tactical alliances with Iran and Russia; a policy that cannot be used with all countries.

- For Russia: Moscow, as a global power, used to exert pressure on regional powers without the latter having the ability to respond. However, the Ukrainian war demonstrated that in times of crisis, the major power will need to rally many regional powers to its cause. Furthermore, simply adopting a neutral position is a great accomplishment for regional countries, such as Saudi Arabia's position. The war also has shown that Turkey has levers at its disposal that it can use to extract concessions related to its national security. Therefore, when dealing with regional powers, Russia must consider such realities.
- For Saudi Arabia: In one sense, the Tehran summit was a reaction to the Jeddah summit, particularly given the United States' attempt to push Riyadh toward the "policy of axes," i.e., favoring one side/axis rather than another. The outcomes of the Jeddah summit did not connote any hostile rhetoric toward Iran and Russia but rather demonstrated a divergence in views between the United States and the Gulf states, which influenced the Tehran summit. According to the scenarios outlined in this report, the "axes policy" is nearly an exclusive Iranian demand at this point. As a result, the continuation of the approach outlined and confirmed at the Jeddah summit — taking positions that serve the future of countries in the region — is regarded as the best option at this stage.

