

Turkish, Russian and Iranian presidents meet in Ankara

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On April 4, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Vladimir Putin and Hassan Rouhani—the presidents of Turkey, Russia and Iran, respectively—came together in Ankara to discuss developments in Syria as well as the relations between the three countries.

According to the joint statement issued after the summit, “The presidents rejected all attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism and expressed their determination to stand against separatist agendas aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as the national security of neighbouring countries.”

Erdogan, Putin and Rouhani also “reaffirmed their determination to continue their cooperation in order to ultimately eliminate Daesh/ISIL, the Nusra Front and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al Qaeda or Daesh/ISIL.”

The Ankara summit, the second between the three countries, was part of the so-called Syria peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, bringing together different factions fighting in Syria. The first summit was hosted by Russian President Vladimir Putin in November in the Black Sea city of Sochi.

The tripartite summit came amidst the US-British-led aggression against Russia over the poisoning of the former Russian agent Sergei Skripal and ongoing disputes within the ruling elites of the imperialist countries over the Syrian war and their attitude towards Russia and Iran.

With NATO and European Union states expelling Russian diplomats, Turkey, an important member of the alliance since 1952, refused to “express solidarity” with Britain and other NATO countries. On March 26, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag stated that Ankara will not take any actions against Moscow. “Relations between Turkey and Russia are currently positive and good,” he said. “In this sense, Turkey is not planning on taking any decisions against Russia.”

As for the attitude of the United States and other main NATO powers over the Syrian war, Ankara has long gone its own way in contradiction to its ostensible allies. In less than one and a half years, Ankara launched two successive military invasions against the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the Pentagon’s main proxy force in Syria, in defiance of sharp criticisms from its NATO partners and with the consent of Moscow.

The Turkish government, which considers the existence of a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria as a main threat to Turkey’s “territorial integrity,” has repeatedly declared its aim of extending its military operations towards the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, the oil-rich northeastern part of Syria controlled by the PYD/YPG.

In a press conference after the Ankara summit, Erdogan reiterated Ankara’s position, saying, “We are ready to work together with our Russian and Iranian friends in order to turn Tal Rifaat, too, into a liveable place for our Syrian brothers and sisters. I would like to reiterate that we will not stop until we turn all areas under PYD/YPG’s control into safe places, first and foremost Manbij.” The Turkish president has more than once vowed that the Turkish army will continue its operations until clearing “the area, which extends from the east of Euphrates to our border with northern Iraq.”

At the time of the Ankara summit, conflicting statements were being issued from Washington over US policy in Syria—an indication of the continuing factional warfare in which President Donald Trump is being targeted by the Democrats, sections of his own party and the military for not taking a sufficiently anti-Russian stance. During a March 29 speech in Ohio, Trump had said that the US would “be coming out of Syria like very soon. Let the other people take care of it now.” In a National Security Council meeting that coincided with the tripartite summit, however, the White House announced

that there was no change in US policy toward Syria—a declaration that anticipated the current escalation of hostilities by the Trump administration against Syria, Russia and Iran.

In a lead article published April 7 by the *Daily Sabah*, Turkey's main pro-government newspaper, Turkish presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin, attempted an appraisal of the attitude of Washington. "It is becoming increasingly clear in recent months that the US wants to stay in eastern Syria as a counterforce to Iran—a policy supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). ... Clearly, the issue is not about Daesh anymore, but about creating a new power balance in Syria and beyond. The fight against Daesh is a secondary goal now, and the US military has a problem finding justification to stay in Syria within US law, which allows the military to operate in foreign lands only to fight against terrorism," he wrote.

European powers have also been in search of a more active military policy in Syria to advance their imperialist interests in the Middle East. In recent weeks, there were several news reports in the media that not only the Pentagon but also London and Paris have deployed additional troops in Manbij, in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the main proxy force of the Pentagon largely consisting of Kurdish nationalists. The escalation of British and French involvement in the Syrian war would only fan the flames of the Syrian conflict, while exacerbating the ongoing tensions within NATO, especially with Ankara, which has declared Manbij as its next military target.

It is the growing pressure of the imperialist drive to war in the Middle East as part of broader geostrategic aims against Russia, China and Iran that is forcing Moscow, Ankara and Tehran to leave aside, at least for now, their differences over the future of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. They do this under the cover of phrases such as being "in agreement on the restoration of Syria's territorial integrity, prevention of bloody conflicts and reconstruction of the country's future."

In view of the fact that Ankara is a fierce enemy of the Syrian regime, which is resolutely supported by Moscow and Tehran, one could hardly imagine a lasting cooperation between the three initiators of the Astana talks, unless either party changes its position over the Syrian war.

This, however, does not prevent Ankara, Moscow and Tehran from improving their relations in areas of trade, economy and even the military, as they feel under threat

from the US-led imperialist coalition. While coming closer together to defend their own capitalist interests and existence, the ruling elites of Turkey, Russia and Iran are trying to make use of the growing inter-imperialist contradictions in their own ways as well.

Deeply frustrated with its Western allies because of their support for the Kurdish nationalists, which Ankara considers as "terrorists," and by their involvement in the attempted coup of July 15, 2016, the Turkish government has significantly boosted its ties with Moscow. It has initiated the Astana talks with Russia and Iran, largely excluding its NATO partners, and bought the S-400 air defence system from Moscow, despite repeated warnings from the US and NATO. Moreover, Moscow and Ankara are now discussing additional projects in military technical cooperation.

Russian President Putin came with ministers and representatives of various Russian companies to Turkey, where the Russia-Turkey High-Level Cooperation Council held several ministerial meetings. Turkish and Russian ministers signed dozens of agreements on trade, tourism, investments and the funding of several projects, including the Akkuyu nuclear power plant and a bilateral gas pipeline project.

According to media reports, Russian and Turkish agencies also signed memorandums of cooperation in information technology, physical fitness and sports, social policy, and the rights of women, families and children.

The Turkish president has already expressed his hope that the Turkish-Russian trade volume will grow to \$100 billion from \$22 billion in 2017. Turkey imports around half of its gas and 30 percent of coal from Russia, and Moscow is Ankara's third biggest oil supplier. Russia is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant and will supply the fuel for it. On Friday, April 6, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak declared that Russia is able to complete the construction of Turkey's Akkuyu nuclear power plant even if it is unable to attract other investors.



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