



OP-ED / EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA 8 AUGUST 2018

How Turkey's Ties to the West May Survive the Syrian War

Crisis Group's Middle East & North Africa Program Director Joost Hiltermann participated in the 2018 [Körber Policy Game](#), designed to explore possible outcomes in the event of a crisis between Turkey and the West in Syria. While the exercise underscored many of the Syrian conflict's complexities, it also revealed that a strong desire by stakeholders to find common ground can help overcome them.



Joost Hiltermann

Program Director, Middle East and North Africa
 🐦 [JoostHiltermann](#)

You can listen to an interview with Joost Hiltermann about his experiences at the event [here](#).

If it were up to regional experts advising their governments, things in the Middle East needn't look so bad: the Syrian conflict could be contained; a war between Israel and Iran could be avoided, and so, too – and more importantly – a war between Russia and the United States; and Turkey would return to providing regional stability, anchored firmly in the West through its NATO membership.

Related Tags

TURKEY

SYRIA

At least, such can be concluded from a one-day “policy game” in Berlin on July 2 that focused on crisis management in Turkey's neighbourhood. Brought together by the Körber-Stiftung in a so-called scenario exercise, participants from Russia, the U.S., Turkey and Europe – some of them government officials, others with more informal advisory roles at home – tried to navigate a path toward the best possible

outcomes for their countries in response to imagined future developments involving Syria and Turkey. The questions guiding the exercise were: What are Turkey's foreign policy options in case of a crisis situation in Syria, in particular toward its relations with the West and Russia? What are the interests and preferences of Russia and the U.S. in such a case? And what role would Europe play?

There is a certain artificiality to such an exercise. The scenarios, which project twelve months into the future based on current realities, are plausible but not probable; any unanticipated incident could dramatically alter the trajectory of events, rendering the best possible policy advice

instantly obsolete. Once you get one move wrong (in this case, there were three), any subsequent move, which derives from your decisions taken in the previous ones, unavoidably goes wrong as well, carrying you ever further from the core of the problem, and your ability to effectively tackle it.

What I discovered is that this sort of exercise is potent not for its predictive powers – which are feeble – but for the discussion it triggers and the channels it opens. On this score, it is priceless. It helps clarify perceptions, policy priorities and positions, preoccupations, fears and red lines, as well as areas of divergence and convergence. And it creates bonds of trust that could translate into honest communication, if not cooperation, between the participants in addressing future crises involving their governments. Call me a convert.

Still, there is reason to be sceptical. The selection of participants was, by the nature of the beast, selective, even if carried out in good faith and with the intent to attract a range of political opinion. Nuance in policy positions was likely lost. As anyone who has been part of a bureaucracy will readily acknowledge, opinions on any emotive issue are as many as there are people in the room, and battles are fiercely fought, in most cases forcing a difficult compromise that threads the policy needle. Instead, in a scenario exercise such as this one, we were working with what amounted to types: views that were only broadly representative of different policy lines.

“What I discovered is that this sort of exercise is potent not for its predictive powers – which are feeble – but for the discussion it triggers and the channels it opens.”



This, too, was useful in stirring discussion, but I could not help but notice that there appeared to be a salutary and shared sentiment in the room toward wanting to resolve conflict, and that this derived from the participation of policy experts who were principally inclined to accept the invitation to join such an exercise in the first place. What about those who seek war to advance their national interests? Would they have readily agreed to participate as well? This, one must doubt.

This inherent self-selecting bias produced an admirable convergence on conflict resolution in Syria, which found its expression in the notion that no one present sought a prolongation of the war; instead, everyone worked hard to devise ways to prevent its inadvertent escalation through misread signals or “black swans” – abrupt game-changing events to which no one is quite prepared to respond, because no plans for such eventualities exist. I can only wish that in any future real policy debate back home, these advisers prevail for the sensibility and humanity they exhibited in Berlin.

What emerged was that all participants, unanimously, deemed the Syrian crisis extremely dangerous not just for the harm it has done to Syrians, but also for its potential to bleed across borders and ignite secondary, possibly more deadly conflicts in the region. The scenario design contributed to what appeared like a mounting concern across the teams, as each move introduced new volatile elements in an already unstable situation. It climaxed in the question not just how to end the Syrian war but how to preserve the regional and international order. In other words, the exercise was not so much about Syria and Turkey, as its title indicated, but about the overall regional equation involving Turkey, Iran, Israel and the Gulf states, and ultimately about the tense relationship between the United States and Russia, and how to avert a death spiral toward a third world war.

Based on this shared perception, everyone started looking for ways to defuse the crisis. In our individual team discussions (whose conclusions we would communicate to the plenary following each move) we emphasised what we saw as our nations’ bottom-line concerns, shedding our preferred outcomes in the Syrian war in favour of a flexibility that focussed on possible areas of common interest as a basis for at least limited or tactical cooperation.

For example, while the European team expressed deep scepticism about dealing with a Turkey ruled by an autocrat, they identified protecting Europe’s unity and cohesion as their overriding goal. To this they subordinated Europe’s approach not only toward Turkey (keeping it in the Western alliance), but also toward the Syrian regime (no reconstruction funding without a meaningful political transition), Russia (encouraging it to back the Geneva process and a political transition), the United States (strengthening its commitment to the Geneva process and keeping U.S. troops in Syria), and issues such as the migrant/refugee crisis (maintaining the deal with Turkey) and fighting the Islamic State as part of

“As a participant noted, the Europeans are vegetarians in Syria compared to the other powers, who are carnivores”

the U.S.-led coalition. The team assigned particular importance to the need for Russia and the U.S. to preserve their de-confliction mechanism in Syria.

As the crisis worsened with the game's third move, the European team found itself clutching at straws, recognising they had a particularly poor hand compared to the two super powers and Turkey, all with assets on the ground in Syria. The result was an almost desultory resort to declaratory responses: urging the parties to de-escalate, and offering no more than diplomatic support. Thus it became clear that while such an approach did not endanger unity, it also exposed the fact that Europe's main foreign policy strength – its soft power – has turned it into a bystander to the growing Syrian crisis from whose fallout it suffers, while its strategic ally, the U.S., has been reluctant to use its matching hard power to jointly effect a diplomatic end to the war. As a participant noted, the Europeans are vegetarians in Syria compared to the other powers, who are carnivores; as long as Europe lacks its own hard power, it won't play a role until there is a political process that might give it limited leverage through its hands on the reconstruction purse.

The other teams likewise ordered their countries' policy priorities. The Turkish team proposed Ankara's to be as follows: a quick end to the Syrian war; every effort to avoid confrontation with the U.S. over the YPG (the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, which both Turkey and the U.S. label a terrorist organisation); fighting the PKK with vigour, but not at the risk of straining Turkey's relationship with NATO (indeed emphasising the importance Ankara continues to attach to NATO membership); a continued U.S. military presence in north-eastern Syria, despite U.S. support for the YPG, but only if a U.S. withdrawal would mean a resurgence of the Syrian regime there and increased Iranian influence; encouraging Europe to provide reconstruction funds even with Assad still in place (a marked departure from standing Turkish policy); and fighting the perception that Turkey is in Syria to stay, even if it finds it cannot afford to withdraw its forces for now.

With the third move, which suggested a major escalation between Turkey and the Syrian regime, the Turkish team counselled moderation. They proposed that Ankara open a communication channel with the Syrian regime and ask for international (especially Russian) mediation, efforts to stem the renewed flow of refugees and increased humanitarian assistance (at the threat of reopening its borders to Europe for refugees). This approach bespoke an acknowledgment of Turkey's relative weakness in the face of a possible escalation in Syria directly affecting its military presence and the stability of its borders. Turkey's fate in Syria, like that of other

regional players (not present in the policy game), is ultimately at least partly dependent on actions by the two superpowers.

The Russian team acknowledged that the Syrian crisis was Russia's to manage, but seemed eager to spread the responsibility to others with skin in the game. They therefore sounded a strikingly conciliatory tone, at least initially. They defined Russia's main policy priority in Syria to be continued cooperation with the U.S., including in the fight against the Islamic State, despite deep scepticism concerning the reliability of the current White House tenant. They said Russia was committed to the Geneva process, but only if Assad's ultimate departure would not be a condition. They pointed at Europe's marginal role in Syria, while expressing hopes for European reconstruction funds, if only of a symbolic nature (likely to legitimise a resurrected Assad).

Most importantly, to preserve the Syrian regime and Russia's other gains in Syria, they proposed that Moscow continue to play its precarious regional balancing act: cooperating with Iran without thereby provoking Israel, including by keeping Iranian proxies at some distance from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights; and cooperating with Turkey while protecting the Kurds, and encouraging a rapprochement between Damascus and the YPG that would see a degree of Kurdish autonomy and a sharing arrangement for the Deir al-Zour oil fields (without which, they claimed, the central government would be unable to function).

With the third move, the Russian tone became more strident. The team exhibited a distinct hardening in its attitude toward Turkey, suggesting that any attempt by Turkey to change the status quo in Syria would justify a military response by the Syrian regime. The team opposed any move that would threaten Syria's territorial integrity; suggested that the Syrian regime has every right to retake Syrian territory, especially if the area is controlled by jihadists (excluded under the Astana agreement); mooted the possibility of arming the YPG; and advocated closer cooperation with Iran. At this point in the discussion, not a word was said about the U.S., indicating there was no desire in Moscow to even tweak the Syrian conflict's overall direction.

“There can be no doubt, however, that the Syrian crisis brooks no partial solutions; the interests of all stakeholders will need to find reflection in a final settlement, if we are to reach one.”



The U.S. team started out assertively, almost as if on the premise that the United States has a finger in every Syrian pie. It does, of course, but the team's aspirations intimated a capability Washington may not possess, except as spoiler. They started with the presupposition that there should be no early withdrawal of U.S. troops and proceeded to posit the need to counter the influence of both Russia and Iran (which happen to be the two predominant powers in Syria); to continue fighting the Islamic State, while balancing relations between the Kurdish and Arab partners in the local alliance Washington backs (the YPG-led Syrian Defence Forces); and to keep Turkey in NATO, while persuading it to accept pluralistic and multi-ethnic arrangements for governance in northeast Syria on terms that promote stability in the way the Kurdish region in northern Iraq has.

The dearth of workable policy responses to a rapidly evolving situation – as the plot thickened with moves two and three – suggested a certain powerlessness. This may have sprung from the Trump administration's evident lack of interest in investing in a Syrian endgame. Its priority seems to be to substitute Iran for the Islamic State as its main regional adversary – to be confronted in the smoking wreckage that is Syria.

I should also note who and what were missing from the policy game. There were no country teams for Iran or Israel, two key players. This was understandable, given the game's focus on the Syrian war in relation to Turkey. There can be no doubt, however, that the Syrian crisis brooks no partial solutions; the interests of all stakeholders will need to find reflection in a final settlement, if we are to reach one. Missing also were European states other than Germany and France, and also no *real* sense of European commonality; The Europe team just paid lip-service to that fragile notion. Some issues one would expect to come up didn't: no explicit mention by the Russian team of its country's troop presence in Syria (only of the need for military-to-military cooperation and for all foreign forces to leave the country eventually), or the UN's role and the Geneva process (except to say that Assad is reluctant to go down that path). No mention by the Turkish team of jihadists, whom they may be seeing as a lesser evil compared with the PKK/YPG. And no mention by the U.S. team of the European Union – an apparent irrelevancy – except as a supplier of humanitarian aid. Most sobering was the omission of any reference by anyone to the need to reassert values in international politics; the discussion strictly concerned interest-based trade-offs.

What emerged clearly from this policy game was that the main stakeholders in the Syrian conflict may be able to sign off in principle on a process to end it, as laid out in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (December 2015), but only as long as the end point remains undefined and they think they can still shape this process in order to yield the outcome they desire. In the end, Russia sees the Syrian uprising as what caused the war, and thus wants to revert to the stable status quo ante, with the Assad regime still in place. By contrast, the U.S. and its allies see the regime's violent response to the uprising as having sparked the war, and therefore want to see Assad gone. (Interestingly, the U.S. team didn't even mention the regime's departure as a U.S. policy goal.) Yet Russia, which has been pursuing the Astana process with Iran and Turkey precisely to get what it wants, holds the better cards. As one of the participants noted, we are living in a multi-axial world, with no single superpower or organising principle. In the Syrian crisis, it is Russia, not the U.S., that has the initiative and holds escalation dominance; with advantage comes responsibility: Moscow now must navigate a way out without making things worse for itself and everyone else.

“From Ankara’s perspective, Russia may have things to offer, but these do not outweigh the benefits of Turkey staying in the Western alliance.”



As for Turkey's foreign policy direction, which was a main focus of this exercise: Despite initial concerns that Turkey would drift away from the Western alliance because of U.S./EU dissatisfaction with Turkey's internal problems and Ankara's anger at lack of NATO/U.S./EU support in its campaign to suppress the PKK in both Turkey and Syria, both sides strongly reaffirmed Turkey's belonging to the Western family as the crisis in Syria escalated. Strains in the relationship will doubtless remain, but in the final analysis, Europe needs Turkey to manage the refugee crisis and keep jihadists in check, and Turkey needs European help in weakening the PKK. Likewise, the U.S. needs Turkey as a bulwark against Iran, Russia and jihadists; inversely, Turkey needs the U.S. as protector of last resort against Russia and Iran – especially if they support Kurdish irredentism – and it needs NATO's support in countering the PKK/YPG when these groups threaten its borders. From Ankara's perspective, Russia may have things to offer, but these do not outweigh the benefits of Turkey staying in the

Western alliance. Russia must be engaged but not actively courted as a strategic alternative.

At the end of the day, I should have felt drained. Instead I was filled with a sense of exhilaration. I had been part of a tremendously stimulating set of conversations within and between four country teams about three successive scenarios that left me alarmed, as anyone covering the Syrian war should be, but not panicked. The war has taken a horrific toll on Syrian society, which will need generations to recover. But the conflict's regional metrics do not (yet) give cause for despair. Sufficient common ground remains (for now) to prevent things from spinning out of control. The Körber Policy Game both led to that finding and helped contribute to it.