

FOREIGN POLICY TALKS (3)

Seminar Report

Is Turkey at a crossroads?
The Russian perspective



What are the convergences and divergences between Turkish and Russian policies in Syria ?

What are Russian short - and long-term objectives in Syria ?

Why has Russia been in Syria in the first place ?

What keeps Turkey and Russia together: animosity towards the West?

How will Russia react to Turkey's eventual decision regarding the issue of S-400s?

SPEAKER	MODERATOR
Alexander Shumilin Political Scientist, Russian Academy of Sciences	Edgar Şar Political Scientist, Co-founder and Chair of IstanPol Institute

The third of the Foreign Policy Talks, a closed-round table with experts, researchers, academics and journalists was held on May 14, 2019 with the participation of Political Scientist Alexander Shumilin. Edgar Şar, Chair of Istanbul Political Research Institute (IstanPol) moderated the seminar. Alexander Shumilin delivered a presentation on Russian domestic and foreign policies and their repercussions on the Middle Eastern scene including Turkey

The presentation was followed by a discussion session with the participation of foreign policy experts, academics and journalists. Turkey-Russia relations, Syrian context and the issue of S-400s were covered during the discussion.

During the past decade, “Turkey at the crossroads” and “Turkey’s shift of axis” have often been headlines in the press, with many experts questioning Turkey’s alignment with the West and the Atlantic Alliance and pondering whether Turkey is abandoning its Western-oriented foreign policy.

In the aftermath of the July 15 failed coup attempt in Turkey, the relations between Turkey and much of the Atlantic Alliance were strained. US-Turkey relations have been suffering from a set of unprecedented crises over the past three years, which resulted in a clear loss of trust on both sides.

Meanwhile, Turkey–Russia relations have become increasingly close to the extent that it became impossible to consider this trend separately from deteriorating relations between Turkey and the US. Notably, with Turkey’s recent decision to purchase Russian S-400 missile system, Turkey-US relations apparently reached a new historical low. Although the Turkish-Russian relations have been primarily discussed within the context of Turkey-US relations, it is equally important to understand Russia’s short-term and long-term policy goals, which have not been addressed sufficiently, in this puzzle.

Turkey-Russia relations: The Syrian context

Mr. Shumilin started his talk by asserting that Turkey-Russia relations cannot be discussed without the Syrian context. He mentioned two major events that determined the course of the Syrian civil war for Turkey-Russia relations: the Syria chemical weapons disarmament deal between Russia and the US in 2013 and the July 15 failed coup attempt in Turkey.

First, the chemical weapons disarmaments deal, Shumilin argued, enabled Russia to maintain military presence and make critical achievements, if not a complete victory, on the ground. Second, the July 15 failed coup attempt incentivized Ankara to accelerate its rapprochement with Russia that had begun in 2015, largely thanks to two countries’ willingness to resolve the fighter jet crisis.

Turkey and Russia in Syria: Issues of convergence and divergence

Mr. Shumilin underscored the need to understand Russia's short-term and long-term policy objectives in Syria to have a full grasp of its Syrian policy. Even though support for Assad appears to be the cardinal priority for Russia's Syria policy, he argues, Russia's Syria policy has been primarily motivated by domestic considerations. On the other hand, he argues, Russia sustained its relations with Turkey on Syria, based on geo-political considerations at the expense of negative public opinion towards close co-operation with Turkey on Syria.

Within this context, as for converge, Mr. Shumilin noted three issues of converging interests for Turkey and Russia: first, the fight against ISIS; second, the strategy of de-confliction to avoid mass displacement on the ground and, third, a political settlement to install an inclusive government in Damascus. In explaining what "inclusive" means from a Russian perspective, Mr. Shumilin reiterated that unlike Iran, Assad's survival is not a sine-non-qua for Russia.

As for divergence, Mr. Shumilin noted three issues of diverging interests for two countries: i) the future of Assad; ii) the Kurdish issue; and iii) the future of the territories in northeastern Syria. In this framework, Russia considers Syrian Kurds as a balancing instrument in its broader Syrian policy, while, for Turkey, the Kurdish question is a long-standing critical issue for its domestic and foreign policy.

For Mr. Shumilin, despite the apparent converging interests, the issues of diverging interests outweigh the converging ones in Turkish-Russian relations.

Russia's objectives in Syria

According to Mr. Shumilin, the positions of Turkey and Russia are fundamentally different in Syria. While Turkey, as a regional power, has concrete objectives on the ground – largely linked to the Kurdish issue – Russia, as an outside power, has been acting with a broader agenda in Syria. So far, this has provided Russia with a degree of flexibility and a maneuvering space to adjust its policies on central issues in Syria, whenever it perceives the need to do so. Afrin is a good example for Russia's flexible policy, where Russia had initially promised to defend Kurds, but eventually changed its mind at President Erdogan's request.

The Afrin case also demonstrated that for Russia, Syria is not a central focus of its foreign policy. Rather, it is a tool in Russia's broader foreign policy agenda. In this vein, a major objective for the Russian military deployment in Syria was the desire to demonstrate Russian military strength to the outside world.

Another goal of the Russian military deployment in Syria was to create space for negotiation with the West. After Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia following the Russian actions in Ukraine in 2013, Russia viewed Syria as a field for a political breakthrough in its relations with the West. Therefore, unlike Turkey, Syria has not been a vital issue for Russia; rather, it is an instrument within Russia's broader foreign policy agenda.

The Rationale for Russian Presence in Syria

According to Mr. Shumilin, Syria is not a strategic priority for Russia. Rather, he argues, Mr. Putin instrumentalized Syria in response to a set of domestic challenges he faced in 2013. Russia's decision to intervene in Syrian Civil War came at a time when Mr. Putin faced mass protests in the run-up to his decision to run for the Presidency in 2012. In his campaign to return to Kremlin in 2012, Mr. Putin used "besieged fortress" slogan to underline that Russia was under a severe threat from the West. At the time, when there was no clear threat or aggression from a foreign power, Mr. Putin presented the conflict in Syria, which had then already turned into a civil war, as a threat against Russia.

Framing both colored revolutions and the Arab uprisings as provocations of the West, Mr. Putin had laid the ground to instrumentalize Syrian civil war in his domestic political calculus. As a result, Mr. Putin presented Assad as a friend of Russia, whom the West targeted, and Mr. Putin's campaign started using the slogan: "Today, it is Assad; tomorrow, it will be Russia."

While many have been asking why President Putin has been heavily invested in Assad, Shumilin underlined that it was not Assad but the "after Assad, the next target is Russia" argument that Mr. Putin employed in domestic politics. This was Mr. Putin's main slogan in his campaign to come back to the Kremlin in 2012 to appeal to his traditional electorate, namely i) elderly Russians, ii) the Soviet-minded segment of the Russian society and iii) economically dependent populations in the provinces. The legend that Assad is a great friend of Russia also aimed at reminding pro-Putin sections of the Russian society of the Soviet Union's greatness in the Middle East during the Cold War.

After being elected as president in 2012, during his first year in office, Mr. Putin seemed to have forgotten about Syria. During this time, it was the Russian Foreign Ministry that led Russia's Syria policy with a realistic approach rather than Mr. Putin's personal team, whose main concern was domestic politics and Mr. Putin's success in the election. The Foreign Ministry convinced Mr. Putin to not put all his eggs in the basket of Assad, whose political future was in danger by then.

Mr. Shumilin underscored the Russian Foreign Ministry's by-then-position that envisioned a mediator role for Russia in the conflict between Assad and the opposition. However, President Putin decided to do otherwise and stick to the "today, it is Assad, and tomorrow, it is Syria" myth while continuing to support Assad, which paved the way for his re-election. For Mr. Shumilin, this is a proof that the Syrian issue was more of an instrument in domestic politics for Mr. Putin, rather than a geo-strategic issue for Russia.

The bond that keeps Turkey and Russia together: animosity towards the West?

Mr. Shumilin highlighted the July 15 failed coup attempt as a critical juncture in Turkish–Russian relations. The coup attempt had coincided with a period, when Russia became almost totally isolated from the international community due to its position on Syria and Ukraine. He further argued that the Erdogan government’s suspicions towards West, particularly the US, and its belief in an alleged US role in the coup attempt became major factors that motivated Turkey to seek closer ties with Russia.

The issue of S-400s: the Russian perspective?

Shumilin argues that S-400 deal is a purely tactical move for Russia. For him, it is obvious that Russian strategic objective in its decision to sell its S-400 missile system to Turkey is driving a wedge between Turkey and NATO, a goal which Russia seems to have already achieved. He emphasized the Russian military’s skepticism towards S-400 deal, noting that the S-400 system is such a critical defense technology that was clearly not designed to be sold to a NATO member.

The billion-dollar question is what Russia’s reaction would be if Turkey backs down from the S-400 deal. Mr. Shumilin noted that the Russian side has long been expecting Turkey to eventually back down from the decision. That is why, he argued, Russia would stay silent in that case and downplay Turkey’s decision to cancel the deal in bilateral relations.

Furthermore, a probable cancellation by Ankara to finally purchase the S-400 missile system would also assuage the concerns of the Russian military, which has opposed to the S-400 deal with Turkey from very beginning. Since the Russian military establishment has an upper hand in Syria and partly in Ukraine, it is important for Mr. Putin to ease the discontent of the Russian army.

In connection, Mr. Shumilin asserted that Russia's silence in response to a Turkish request to cancel the S-400 deal would also aim to make sure that other partnership projects with Turkey – TurkStream and the Akkuyu Nuclear Plant – be realized without any complications. He also noted that, compared to the S-400 deal, these two projects have been more realistic, and they have been much more important and profitable for Russia.

Russia-Iran partnership in Syria

Mr. Shumilin asserted that relations between the Russian military and the Iranian-controlled Shia militia on the ground in Syria are not as smooth as often portrayed. Iranians have had several issues with Russian polices in Syria, the most important being the Russian inaction vis-a vis Israeli attacks against the Shia militia in Syria. Iran accuses Russia of not defending these pro-Assad forces in the face of Israeli attacks.

Moreover, Mr. Shumilin underscored Russia's growing discontent with the ever-expanding footprint of Iran on the battlefield in Syria. Similar to Turkey and unlike Russia, Iran has concrete objectives in Syria. Russia is not content with Assad's increasing dependence on Iran and expanding Iranian influence on Assad. In fact, Mr. Shumilin put forward, Assad is almost completely dependent on Iranian support because Assad is aware that his survival is not to be taken for granted given Russia's flexibility in Syria. For Iran, however, keeping Assad in power has always been the cardinal priority. Iran has heavily invested in Assad's survival and never regarded this issue as a matter of compromise. Therefore, Shumilin argued, there are still many uncertainties, and Russia's relations with Iran will continue to be uneasy.

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