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Who's Benefitting From Trump's Jerky Foreign 'No-policy'?

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Trump's much-hyped missile strike on Syria is already looking like a part of forgotten history, thanks to the frequent jerks the US officials continue to give to whatever they think the US is supposedly aiming at achieving in Syria. Whereas this absence of a clear cut foreign policy is partly a result of Trump's own constantly fluctuating mind-set (read: Trump no longer considers NATO obsolete), it has allowed the American military establishment to come into a steering position and take from the president, for instance, the power of solely deciding on the number of troops that the US can or cannot send to the various arenas of conflict, particularly Iraq and

Syria. Trump has appointed a number former generals to his cabinet and it seems that these appointments are now paying off—or backfiring— a) not only in terms of allowing the defense establishment, the Pentagon, to play a domineering role, b) but also allowing crucial US allies, such as Turkey and Israel, to mount up their own campaigns in Syria and raise the stakes.

Let's first see how the insertion of generals—that include “Mad God” Mattis as secretary of defense, McMaster as national security adviser and John Kelly as secretary of homeland security—has altogether given America's overseas military engagements a new ‘life-line.’

Trump has lifted restraints on how his commanders in the field can act (hence those soaring civilian casualty figures), let them send more military personnel into conflict arenas, taken the constraints off the CIA's drone assassination campaigns, and dispatched an aircraft carrier strike group to the waters off the Korean peninsula. And in doing that he has already picked up enough tension across the whole of Asia. There is of course more to come in Afghanistan as General John Nicholson has already asked for, and then in Somalia where the US has deployed a “few dozen” troops. It is apart from the military campaigns the US is planning in Syria (in Raqqa and in southern Syria near the Jordanian border).

The US, as such, is clearly resetting its military foot in the world—and this is happening at a time when the US' two most important strategic peers, Russia and China, are equally busy redefining their role in the world. While we need not deal here with what Russia and China are doing, it appears that this renewed global military push by the US has emboldened its erstwhile allies in the Middle East to up their own antes and expand their roles.

As such, what lies behind Turkish and Israeli air campaigns against Kurds and Damascus respectively is not some perceived geo-political threat but a sense that America's renewed military push is likely to lead to some geo-political upheavals, may be Syria's de facto division into “zones” controlled by the US and its allies on the one hand, and Russia and Assad on the other hand. Hence, Turkish bid to decimate Kurdish power and Israel's push for reducing the Hezbollah threat to zero in Syria.

Needless to say, Israel attacked today an Iranian arms supply depot near Damascus. That this action was taken specifically against Hezbollah was confirmed by Israel's Intelligence Minister, Yisrael Katz on Thursday who was quoted by Jerusalem Post as saying, “attack is consistent with our policy to prevent Iran's smuggling of advanced weapons via Syria to Hezbollah by Iran”, adding further that “The prime minister has said that whenever we receive intelligence that indicated an intention to transfer advanced weapons to Hezbollah, we will act.”

According to other reports appearing in the Israeli media, Israeli military officials, making a rare admission of this kind, did disclose that Israel has destroyed about 100 Syrian missiles, many of which were due to be delivered to Hezbollah, in the last one month or so.

Of similar sort is the attitude that Turkey has adopted vis-à-vis Kurds and, as the latest incidents have shown, it is exacerbating into a sort of Turkish aggrandizement of the kind Israel is undergoing vis-à-vis the Syrian regime, an ally of Iran.

While the US is reported to have “sparked its concerns” over the strike, Turkish authorities’ defiance of their NATO ally does show that Turkey, sensing a clear military build-up that might change the game, is deepening its own engagement to secure its own “territorial integrity” ahead of a possible Kurdish victory in Raqqa.

American officials are reported to have said that Turkey informed the US only less than an hour in advance about its intention to carry out the bombing raids in the crowded airspace over northern Syria and Iraq. Official US statements have also show that the strike was carried out without seeking proper co-ordination with the US and that the US forces didn’t have enough time to evacuate the targeted region.

Regardless of the US’ “deep concerns”, the Turkish military said in a statement that it had struck “terror nests” in northeast Syria and northwest Iraq that Kurdish separatists were using to send weapons and plan attacks inside Turkey. “The designated targets were hit,” said the statement, which asserted that the bombing raids were “based on international law.”

What this build up might lead to?

While a cursory look at these disparate developments would suggest that the US and its allies are not on the same page, the real issue goes beyond mere policy disagreements. Israel is attacking Syria despite the fact Tillerson has only recently stated that fighting ISIS remains top US priority in the region. Turkey is attacking a long terms US ally against ISIS.

While both Israel and Turkey are attacking anti-ISIS forces, this is happening when the US itself doesn’t have a clear cut policy about Syria and Kurds. These regional countries, which also happen to be Syria’s immediate neighbours, are benefitting from this ‘no-policy’ unwitty scenario and are busy upping their own ante to influence whatever policy the US decides to follow in the near future.

Needless to say, it is setting a dangerous scenario as the more the US does military this build-up regionally and globally, the more emboldened these states would feel, leading to complex mix-up of forces in Syria. Such a scenario would totally evade whatever chances of peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue and negotiations exist today.

That is to say, the military build-up and consequent spread of the conflict across countries, nations and indeed continents isn’t going to allow America to produce any positive results, not even rhetorically. Allowing the defense establishments and partner countries a ‘freehand’ is setting a dangerous precedent that, if turn violent, the US itself might not be able to stem. Time is now to reverse the tide and engage with the forces actually fighting terror rather than their own petty national interests. For that to happen, Trump would have to come out of his “twitter den”, which he quite often uses to launch verbal attack, and start acting as the president who knows what he had stood for in his election campaign: a resolve to ‘bomb the shit out of terror groups.’

