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Trump, Syria, And The Betrayal Of The Kurds

By Adrian Ang U-Jin

SYNOPSIS

What are the political and diplomatic implications of the US decision to withdraw its forces from northeastern Syria?

COMMENTARY

ON SUNDAY 6 October 2019, the White House announced abruptly that the United States would withdraw its forces in northeastern Syria to accommodate a long-threatened Turkish offensive in the region. The Trump administration's decision must be considered within the context of strained US-Turkish relations.

While this is so, it also threatens America's strategic interests in Syria, calls into question policy making within the White House, strains the president's relations with Republican allies at a crucial time for him, and casts doubt about America's commitments and loyalty to its allies.

Syria, the Kurds, and Strained US-Turkish Relations

The decision to withdraw US troops from northeastern Syria is occurring in the midst of US-Turkish relations strained by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's suspicions of American complicity in the 2016 failed military coup; his courting of Vladimir Putin and Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 missiles; the US decision to expel Turkey from the F-35 project in retaliation; and the fight against Islamic State (IS) in Syria.

America's principal military allies in Syria, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are anathema to Turkey. Erdoğan views the SDF as a Kurdish terrorist outfit allied with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fighting for independence in Turkey.

The SDF, having served as the armed spearhead of the US-led campaign against IS, now controls nearly one quarter of Syria after eight years of civil war.

It is a development viewed by Ankara as an existential security threat. Turkey fears the emergence of a semi-independent Kurdish-controlled region on its borders fuelling separatism among its own restive Kurdish population.

As such, Turkey has long threatened to intervene to create a buffer zone and resettle refugees from the Syrian civil war in the region, thereby diluting the Kurdish presence with Sunni Arabs. Furthermore, Erdoğan may have calculated that military action against the Kurds in Syria will induce a “rally around the effect” to help ease domestic political pressures.

Withdrawal from Syria and Threat to US Interests

Sunday’s announcement of the withdrawal of US forces was essentially a replay of the one from last December. In December 2018 the president declared victory over IS and announced that he would be withdrawing US troops from Syria.

It was a radical and abrupt change of policy that threatened to undermine America’s efforts in eradicating IS, its strategic interests not merely in Syria but also in the wider Middle East, and prompted the resignations of Secretary of Defence, Jim Mattis, and the US Special Envoy on IS, Brett McGurk.

The underlying strategic environment has not changed fundamentally since then: IS is not vanquished, and Russia and Iran continue to underwrite the Assad regime.

The president unleashed a veritable Tweet storm to justify his actions. In [one tweet](#) he argued that “it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home. WE WILL FIGHT WHERE IT IS TO OUR BENEFIT, AND ONLY FIGHT TO WIN”. In [another](#) he boasted that he “was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars, where our great Military functions as a policing operation to the benefit of people who don’t even like the USA”.

Trump’s Republican Allies Turn on Him

Republicans on Capitol Hill have joined Democrats in a rare display of bipartisanship to condemn Trump’s decision to abandon the Kurds to the mercy of the Turks. Speaker Nancy Pelosi [called](#) on Trump to “reverse this dangerous decision,” while Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell [warned](#) that a “precipitous withdrawal of US forces from Syria would only benefit Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime”.

McConnell urged the president to “exercise American leadership”. Frequent Trump critic Mitt Romney [criticised](#) the “betrayal” of the Kurds and warned of an impending humanitarian disaster.

One of Trump’s staunchest defenders Lindsay Graham [castigated](#) the president for his “shortsighted and irresponsible” decision, accused him of outright lying about IS, and threatened a bipartisan Senate resolution to force a change in policy. Another

usually dependable Trump ally, Marco Rubio [described](#) the decision as “a grave mistake that will have implications far beyond Syria”.

The isolationist-leaning Rand Paul was just about the only Republican to [support](#) Trump’s decision: “He once again fulfills his promises to stop our endless wars and have a true America First foreign policy.” The president’s Syria decision is antagonising senior Republicans in the Senate at the very time where he will need their support as he seeks to avoid an altogether inevitable impeachment by the Democrat-controlled House.

Betrayal of the Kurds and American Loyalty

America’s stated position is that it neither endorses nor support the Turkish military operation. But it is a distinction without a difference and will be of little comfort to the Kurds, who have suffered over 11,000 casualties in battling the IS.

Trump was unsentimental about the plight of the Kurds and characteristically [viewed](#) their contribution to the fight against IS in purely transactional terms: “The Kurds fought with us, but were paid massive amounts of money and equipment to do so.”

While the decision to abandon the Kurds might be justified in light of fulfilling a campaign promise or as part of a “deal” to reset US-Turkish relations, most will view it simply as a betrayal of a US ally. It calls into question the value of American commitment or loyalty to friends and foes alike. The potential damage to America’s reputation will reverberate far beyond Syria and the fate of the Kurds.

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