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## THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: DRIVING FORCES OF BALANCES AND IMBALANCES

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## THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: DRIVING FORCES OF BALANCES AND IMBALANCES

At the core of the power struggle among states key to Middle Eastern stability and global balance is the question of who controls whose natural gas flow via whose territories. The United States, Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran are analyzed in this context to present how changing alliances have disrupted the regional balance in the Syria conflict. Given the stable hostility between the United States and Russia as well as the steady friendship between Russia and Syria, Turkey's alliances and enmities are central in the formation of balances. Competition or disagreement between the United States and Russia over Kurdish independence in Syria could lead to a protracted conflict for years to come in the Middle East.

Turkey used to violate Syrian airspace on a regular basis, now let's see them fly there. –Vladimir Putin, 2015 [\[1\]](#)

I don't believe the United States will be ready to join Russia in fighting terrorists in Syria. –Bashar al-Assad, 2016 [\[2\]](#)

Due to the swiftly changing strategic interests and alignments of actors involved in the ongoing Syrian conflict, it has proven challenging for policy analysts to assess the situation. Observations of daily military operations in northern Syria, Russian-Turkish rapprochement, opposing U.S.-Turkish interests regarding the Syrian Kurds, and cooperation among former adversaries Russia, Turkey, and Iran all reveal the complexity of the conflict. Kurdish involvement in the war and the possibility of the formation

of a Kurdish state in Northern Syria have also played determinant roles, primarily in foreign policies of the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Control over oil and gas flow through new pipelines passing through the region is yet another factor affecting strategic calculations.

The question of “who controls whose natural gas flow via whose territories?” is at the core of the power struggle among states key to Middle Eastern stability and global balance. Many claim the South Pars/North Dome in the Persian Gulf (possessed by Qatar and Iran), the world’s richest natural gas field, to be the source of the massacres, human rights violations, refugee crises, and bloody battles sweeping across Syria.<sup>[3]</sup> In 1989, Qatar and Iran began to develop the field and proposed a plan to connect it to the European gas market via two alternative pipelines. One pipeline, generally called the Qatar pipeline, is expected to run from Qatar through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey. The second, Islamic pipeline would connect the Iranian part of the field to Europe via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It is of vital importance that both pipelines pass through Syrian territory. The prospect of an independent Kurdish state in northern Syria and Iraq, and controlling the flow of natural gas and oil complicates the conflict.

Following the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurds of Iraq obtained de facto autonomy. Saddam Hussein’s removal from power further strengthened the Kurds. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was formed, which included their own Kurdish security forces and control of the natural resources under their autonomy.<sup>[4]</sup> The Syrian Kurds, however, have not been able to achieve the same degree of autonomy as their Iraqi brethren. While the Kurds of Syria have their own political party—the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—and militia—the People’s Protection Units (YPG)<sup>[5]</sup>—the KRG and PYD do not necessarily have brotherly relations. In addition to ideological differences, there have been armed clashes between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds.<sup>[6]</sup> Nevertheless, if they succeed in unifying the Kurds and forming an independent Kurdish state, a new actor would gain control of the gas pipelines and oil in its territory. Were such a state to be established along the border with Turkey, a large part of Turkish territory could possibly be seized as well, creating an even greater Kurdistan.

Also fueling the Syrian conflict are the incompatible geopolitical aims of the United States and Russia. The core U.S. interest is to prevent a single state from becoming a hegemonic power in Europe. The diversification of energy supplies is a concern due to European dependency on Russian energy resources. The goal of the United States is to end Europe’s dependence on Russian energy resources.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, the United States and Russia have diametrically opposed interests with regard to energy in the region. A hegemonic or near-hegemonic Russian power in Eurasia would be a geopolitical failure for the United States. The United States would therefore prefer the establishment of a Kurdish state, which would control oil and gas flows and be a loyal ally. Such a scenario there would thereby eliminate any Russian involvement. Syria’s territorial integrity is therefore dispensable for the United States, unlike for Russia, whose core interest is the weakening of NATO. Russia possesses a considerable amount of bargaining power through its control over the oil and natural gas flowing from its territory to Europe. The Islamic pipeline traversing the territories of Russia’s friends and allies, Syria and Iran, serves Russian geopolitical interests. In contrast, the realization of the Qatar pipeline would decrease Russian gas exports to the European gas market.<sup>[8]</sup>

In this context, this article addresses political alignments and factors affecting the balance among the key players in the Syrian conflict—which pose serious challenges for policymakers. The following simple principles of balance are applied:

“A friend of my friend, as well as an enemy of my enemy is my friend”;

“A friend of my enemy, as well as an enemy of my friend, is my enemy.”[\[9\]](#)

The smallest system with which one can analyze conditions of balance and imbalance is a three-state system, that is, a triad. At least three states are needed in interaction to conduct an analysis, since if only two states interact, then states are either friends or enemies of each other. However, in a triad, a state can be the friend or an enemy of another depending on its relation with the third member of the system. Hence, these principles help to assess policy implications for those actors involved to understand the dynamics of balance among them. An analysis based on these principles can clarify the implications of the Russia-Turkey rapprochement and cooperation among Russia, Turkey, and Iran with respect to the ceasefire in Syria.[\[10\]](#) This analysis does not only cover triads but larger systems as well. The four-actor system of the United States-Russia-Turkey-Syria is discussed followed by the five-actor system of the United States-Russia-Turkey-Syria-Iran. The balancing principles allow one to predict possible shifts and changes in the directions of conflict and cooperation for these larger systems in order to generate important policy implications.

#### BALANCE UNDER FRIENDSHIP AND HOSTILITY

The following dictum by Indian philosopher and statesman Kautilya from over two millennia ago is striking, since it underlines the major principles of friendship, enmity, as well as balance and imbalance among states:

The king who is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror’s territory is termed the enemy. The king who is likewise situated close to the enemy, but separated from the conqueror only by the enemy, is termed the friend (of the conqueror)... In front of the conqueror and close to the enemy, there happen to be situated kings such as conqueror’s friend, next to him the enemy’s friend, and next to the last, the conqueror’s friend, and next, the enemy’s friend’s friend.[\[11\]](#)

While this dictum can help with system-level assessments in geographical terms, conflicts are not solely shaped by physical juxtapositions of states’ territories. Rather, they are also shaped by complex relations of friendship and hostility, which have been observed in contemporary diplomatic history. Thus, the focus in this article is on the configuration of balances at the system level.[\[12\]](#)

Within this framework, two types of balance exist in triads, the smallest system one can analyze for balancing dynamics. If all three states are friendly with each other, then the triad is said to be balanced; there exists no inconsistency in the three states’ preferences to become mutual friends: “The friend of my friend is my friend.” The other case of balance is two states’ friendship targeting the common enemy: Two states gang up on the third. The alliance of AB targeting C in the triad of ABC implies for A that “C is my enemy; B who is the enemy of C is my friend.” As for C, it reasons in the following way: “A

and B are my enemies, but they are mutual friends; B (or A), the friend of my enemy A (or B), is my enemy.” Therefore, if relations between two actors are friendly but the actors’ relations with the third are marked by hostility, then the triad is again said to be balanced.

A triad becomes unbalanced if two out of three bilateral relations are cooperative but one is marked by hostility or all three bilateral relations indicate antagonism. In the first case, a state has two friends who are mutual enemies. The balance condition is then violated: “The enemy of my friend is my friend.” In the second, all states are mutual enemies: “The enemy of my enemy is my enemy.” Balance principles forecast a change in relations for balance to be established: “The enemy of the enemy cannot remain an enemy; one enemy out of my two enemies must finally become a friend.” The triad will then evolve into an alliance between two states coalescing against the third.

In this article, triads are qualified as unbalanced whenever two out of three bilateral relations are cooperative but one is marked by hostility or three mutual hostility relations. Unbalanced triads generate the problem of holding relations, choices, beliefs, and attitudes in harmony in opposition to balanced triads.<sup>[13]</sup> The state of having two friends in conflict with each other, “a friend of mine conducts hostile relations with my other friend,” is another challenge to the principle of “the enemy of my friend is my enemy” in a balanced system. Hence, when a state has two friends who are mutual enemies, it must find a way to reestablish consistent relations by siding with one of the friends; the other relation of friendship thus becomes antagonistic. The principles do not, however, specify which of the two enemies the state will select as its friend. Accordingly, one can analyze configurations of balances in each triad among the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Syria.

#### THE U.S.-RUSSIA-TURKEY TRIAD

The United States and Turkey cooperated until Turkey perceived that the Islamic State presence in Syria constituted a pretext for the United States to supply arms to the Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units). The U.S. assistance to the Syrian Kurds has exacerbated Turkish suspicions and fears that the United States has a hidden agenda of forming an independent Kurdish state in northern Syrian and Iraqi territories:

For many in Turkey, the decades-old belief that the United States intends to create an independent Kurdistan that would partition Turkey appears as if it is becoming a reality. This perception can inflict great damage on the U.S.-Turkey relationship. If a new Kurdish autonomous entity permanently establishes itself in northern Syria, Turkey may eventually work with it, as it has done with the KRG. However, if Turkey were threatened by such an entity or by the PKK’s efforts to use it as its backyard, cooperation would be impossible, and Turkey could come into conflict with a U.S.-enabled entity in northern Syria. Prospects such as this make it imperative that the United States and Turkey bolster their efforts to create a common political understanding on Syria.<sup>[14]</sup>

Indeed, Syrian Kurds have progressively gained ground against the Islamic State. A second source of strain in U.S.-Turkey relations revolves around Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, who resides in the United States. According to Turkish authorities, the cleric orchestrated the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016. The United States refuses to extradite Gulen to Turkey. Thus, U.S.-Turkey relations took a sharp turn,

evolving from friendship into hostility. Given the U.S.-Russian opposition of interests, one would expect that Turkey to begin to befriend Russia so that balance could be established. This is exactly what has happened.

The period preceding the coup witnessed several striking developments. Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Ankara on December 1, 2014 and proposed an alternative pipeline (later called Turkish Stream) connecting Russian gas to Turkey and to European markets through Greece. Putin's proposal came after Bulgaria's rejection of the South Stream project linking Russian gas to Bulgaria and Europe, under European Union and U.S. opposition. The Turkish Stream proposal meant that the United States and Turkey had drifted apart, generating U.S. concern.<sup>[15]</sup> Putin again visited Turkey on November 15, 2015, for the occasion of the G-20 Summit in Antalya, following Russia's September 30 entry into the Syrian war upon Bashar Assad's request. The visits meant that a Russian-Turkish partnership was burgeoning but that Russia at the same time was putting its military might into action in Syria.

The emerging friendship between Russia and Turkey took a sharp turn under an action rarely witnessed in world politics: A Russian warplane was shot down by Turkey on November 24, 2015, along the Syrian-Turkish border. The result was the transformation of the Turkish-Russian relationship into one of mutual hostility. The triad thus became unbalanced, with the United States, Russia, and Turkey all involved in mutual antagonism. The principles outlined previously imply that a balance would be restored in the triad. The question was whether Turkey would choose to cooperate with Russia again or with the United States. In this case, Turkey chose Russia.

The imbalance of three hostile relations did not last long. On June 27, 2016, following a Russian embargo on Turkish agricultural products and tourism (which caused considerable harm to the Turkish economy), Turkish President Erdogan sent the Kremlin a letter of apology for the Turkish action.<sup>[16]</sup> Erdogan's apology was followed by four key developments. These included a failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016; Erdogan's visit to Saint Petersburg on August 9, 2016; a second meeting between Putin and Erdogan on the September 3, 2016, during the G20 meeting in China, and Putin's visit to Istanbul on October 9 for the Turkish Stream signing ceremony. Then, in November 2016, Russia and Turkey agreed on the evacuation of Aleppo.<sup>[17]</sup>

The Russian-Turkey rapprochement has since been reinforced, especially following the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Ankara on December 19, 2016, and the Russia-Turkey-Iran ceasefire negotiations in Syria on December 20 and 21, 2016. Instead of an expected Russian protest, Russian and Turkish teams cooperated to clarify the assassination, and both countries intensified their collaboration on Syria. The triad was once again balanced, with Turco-Russian cooperation excluding the United States. Cooperation between Moscow and Ankara to target Islamic State positions, with reticent and limited U.S. participation in these operations, has further strengthened the balance in the triad. Thus, the initial U.S.-Turkish alliance targeting Russia has now been transformed into a Russian-Turkish alliance opposing the United States. Any successful attempts at mending U.S.-Turkish relations would imply an imbalance in the system. If Turkey befriends both the United States and Russia, then it must solve an alignment problem, indicating the dissonance it should suffer. If Russia is a friend of Turkey,

Russia should not be in conflict with the United States, as “a friend of mine cannot be an enemy of my other friend.”

#### RUSSIA-TURKEY-SYRIA TRIAD

With the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey, several issues arise. Russian foreign policy must harmonize cooperative relations with Turkey and Syria, which do not get along well. The Russia-Turkey-Syria triad will remain unbalanced unless Ankara and Damascus can establish friendly relations. The Russians must ask how to reconcile their support for the Assad regime while Turkey, their new friend, aims at its removal. Russia therefore must reduce mistrust and uncertainty in the triad to the extent that Russia-Turkey rapprochement will not damage the Russia-Syria axis. In addition, Russia must convince Syria that its friendship with a sworn enemy of the Assad regime will not impair Moscow-Damascus relations. From the Syrian perspective, the rapprochement would produce a perception of a Russian deception: “My best ally now cooperates with my sworn enemy,” or, equally, “How can Russia, our staunch ally, be on a cooperative path with Turkey?” Syria would wonder how long the Russia-Turkey rapprochement could endure and how far it might go, and ask why their foremost ally has reduced its conflict level with Turkey. Syrian suspicions would in turn feed a Russian urge to explain to Syria why Russia suddenly shifted from conflict to cooperation with Turkey or at least to try to ease Syrian suspicions and concerns. As for Turkey, it would ask, “How can we secure our objective of ousting the Assad regime supported by our new friend, Russia?” The Turkish foreign policy problem then becomes one of whether the Turkish objective of toppling the Assad regime will be realized under the rapprochement. The imbalance these questions illustrate involves conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors, indicating the degree of instability in the Russia-Turkey-Syria triad. A subsequent development could be a growing relationship between Ankara and Damascus, thus generating balance in the triad.

In general, the principle of cognitive consistency implies the avoidance of incompatible foreign policy actions and relations, which the three states must circumvent to reach harmony in their conduct toward each other. Under a robust Russia-Syria friendship, the only way toward balance in the Russia-Turkey-Syria triad would be a new phase of a Turkish-Syrian friendship while Bashar al-Assad remained in power. Hence, if Turkey no longer pursues its objective of ousting the Assad regime, then bilateral relations in the triad can transform into mutual friendships under one condition: Turkey can coexist with an unchanged Syrian regime that prevents Kurds from creating a separate enclave. Such a *modus vivendi* could be achieved through Russian mediation and diplomacy to mollify attitudes, beliefs, and positions of Turkey and Syria with respect to each other. The imbalance in the Russia-Turkey-Syria triad would then completely dissipate.

As Russia is Syria’s key ally, the Assad regime can also tend to perceive favorably the Russian-Turkish rapprochement under Russian guarantees to Syria that a renewed Russian-Turkish friendship will not harm its incentives to support the regime. [\[18\]](#) Syria and Turkey can then work out a solution similar to the Camp David Agreement of 1973 between Egypt and Israel, with the help of Russia, provided that the Turkish priority is the prevention of a Kurdish statelet in northern Syria rather than the removal of Assad, and that the Syrian priority is Assad’s leadership. [\[19\]](#) Therefore, no Kurdish statelet in northern

Syria (which for Turkey weighs more than the objective of removing the Assad regime) nor Russian guarantees to Syria of its continued support can remove the imbalance in the triad created by Russian-Turkish rapprochement. Syria must then fight against the PYD and YPG while Assad remains in power. Such a development might not, however, serve U.S. or perhaps Iranian interests in the region.

#### THE U.S.-TURKEY-SYRIA TRIAD

Turkish-Syrian relations once witnessed a period of full friendship. Turkey and Syria signed a free trade agreement in 2004. Turkey mediated between Israel and Syria on the issue of the Golan Heights, and both countries held military exercises together in April 2009. This was the apogee of the Turkey-Syria friendship. As for the United States, its relations with Syria were cordial, especially in 2003, when then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell met Bashar Assad, and the U.S. Embassy was functioning in Damascus. Thus, the triad was balanced with three mutual relations of friendship. U.S.-Syria relations turned sour, however, especially after 2009, when Syria vetoed the gas pipeline plan proposed by Qatar.<sup>[20]</sup> Turkey then had to change its relationship with Syria given the U.S.-Turkish friendship. In terms of balancing principles, Turkey had to choose either Syria or the United States as a friend for a balance to be maintained, as it could not cooperate with both antagonist states.

Turkey's alliance choice cannot, however, be discussed in terms of the balancing principles on this relational aspect. One can presume that Turkey evaluated a change in Syrian leadership or regime as not leading to a division of the country. It might have underestimated the feasibility of an independent Kurdish enclave in northern Syria. It is possible that the Arab Spring events in Syria in 2011 and Bashar al-Assad's consistent refusal of U.S. and Turkish suggestions to step down from power might have contributed to Turkey's underestimation. The observed Turkish move of abruptly assuming a hostile policy toward Syria meant that U.S.-Syrian and Turkish-Syrian relations turned into stable hostility. The U.S.-Turkey-Syria triad was then balanced by conflictual Turkey-Syria and U.S.-Syria relations. Thus, the observed balance among three friends turned into a balance of two states coalescing to oppose the third.

#### THE U.S.-RUSSIA-SYRIA TRIAD

The U.S.-Russia-Syria triad is characterized first by an imbalance followed by a stable balance. The imbalance in the triad originated from the period when the United States and Syria were still friends. With Russia being an ally of Syria, there was an unstable balance, with Syria having two friends in conflict. The balance principle was violated as Syria's two friends were engaged in a deep-rooted antagonism stemming from their conflict of interest over the Qatar and Islamic pipelines, and therefore over Syria's territorial integrity. Hence, Syria had to choose either Russia or the United States as its ally. The triad found its balance with Russia backing Syria first and then Russia's entry into the war in 2015 on the side of Damascus, following Bashar al-Assad's cooperation with Iran over the Islamic pipeline and his refusal to step down from power. The balance implies Russian-Syrian cooperation preventing Syrian Kurds—who were U.S. allies—to declare independence. In other words, Russia and Syria would not let the Kurds control the flow of gas through former Syrian lands.

#### BALANCE IN LARGER SYSTEMS



Considering the four-state system of the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria, any polarization of the system into two against two, three against one, or all states befriending each other implies balance. The system is balanced if each of the four triads is balanced. Thus, the balance and imbalance in each triad must be analyzed. The analysis is simplified when one considers that U.S.-Russia and U.S.-Syria relations are not friendly.

It follows that two possible balance configurations exist in the system: The United States and Turkey can side with each other against a Russian-Syrian alliance or Russia-Turkey-Syria can coalesce, leaving the United States as the common enemy. The first configuration is discarded under the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. The second one, a Russia-Turkey-Syria alliance targeting the United States, generates a “three-against-one” configuration. The second balance configuration could evolve into the first one under the condition of U.S.-Turkey cooperation, which would require the end of the Russia-Turkey rapprochement. Such an evolution would lead to an imbalance in the system, placing Turkey under strain as its two friends—the United States and Russia—would be in conflict. Nevertheless, the United States seems to hold to its objective of helping the Kurds in the region, thereby preventing a full U.S.-Turkish friendship.[\[21\]](#)

The introduction of Iran into the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria system produces a five-state system of the United States, Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, thus generating ten triads: U.S.-Russia-Turkey; U.S.-Russia-Syria; U.S.-Russia-Iran; U.S.-Turkey-Syria; U.S.-Turkey-Iran; U.S.-Syria-Iran; Russia-Turkey-Syria; Russia-Turkey-Iran; Russia-Syria-Iran; and Turkey-Syria-Iran. Each triad must be in balance for the whole system to be balanced; otherwise the whole system becomes unbalanced. Two balance configurations can be discussed in this case: Either each triad consists of mutual alignments of interests or friendship or two states coalesce, targeting the third. Thus, there could be a “four-against-one” configuration on issues with Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran opposing the United States, with Turkey no longer opposing the Islamic pipeline and all four states aiming at preserving Syrian territorial integrity.[\[22\]](#) The four states’ cooperation with each other and their antagonism toward the United States generates balance. Prior to the Russia-Turkey rapprochement, the balance configuration was a Russian-Syrian-Iranian friendship opposing the U.S.-Turkey alliance. As of the writing of this article, however, the United States appears to be moving away from a working solution in Syria. With the United States sending its ambassador—instead of a fully participating team—to the Astana peace talks in Kazakhstan on January 23 and February 6, 2017, this sent a message of indifference at best. The United States thus showed no interest in a path toward balance through a comprehensive friendship.

If Iranian geopolitical interests toward the Kurds align with those of the United States, this could lead to an alternative configuration. One such example would be if the United States and Iran had a mutual interest in the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq and Syria.[\[23\]](#) Russia, Turkey, and Syria would likely oppose them under the condition of Russia, Turkey, and Syria all agreeing upon the principle of Syrian territorial integrity. Such a bipolarization of balance in the system would necessitate a split in the Russia-Syria-Iran alliance. This would likely create antagonism over the Kurdish issue, upsetting the Russian-Iranian and Syrian-Iranian friendships. Iran’s deep-seated interest in the formation of a Kurdish state would forego its incentives for remaining a Russian ally and a supporter of the regime in Damascus. Therefore, Iran would not jeopardize its friendship with Russia.



Another scenario is if Russia and the United States were to agree on a working solution on the pipelines. A compatibility of U.S.-Russian interests over gas flow is necessary for such a development. However, the U.S.-Russian friendship would alienate Iran, Syria, and Turkey. In addition, Russia could give the green light to the formation of a Kurdish statelet in northern Syria only under the condition that the newly formed state were to become a Russian ally à la Syria; the United States would likely reject this, since the whole Syrian territory would again remain under Russian influence. Another possibility would be for the United States and Russia to compete to attract the Syrian Kurds. Kurds would then choose between the United States and Russia, further complicating opposing interests in the region. Consequently, either if the United States and Russia were to disagree over the allegiance of the Syrian Kurds, wars would devastate Syria for many years to come.

## CONCLUSION

With the ongoing instability in the Middle East, it is critical to make analyses within a well-defined framework. It is important to address how balancing maneuvers in the Syrian conflict can affect policy. For those actors involved in the Syrian conflict, policymakers should reconsider their alignment strategies. . This article has argued that Syria's territorial integrity is the driving force of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and is closely connected to the issues of Kurdish independence and pipeline trajectories.

The various factors of balance and imbalance among the United States, Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran are analyzed to present how changes in the direction of conflict and cooperation affect the regional balance in the Syria conflict. Given the stable hostility between the United States and Russia as well as the steady friendship between Russia and Syria, Turkey's alliances and enmities are central in the formation of balances. Competition or disagreement between the United States and Russia over Kurdish independence in Syria could lead to a protracted conflict for years to come in the Middle East. Indeed, U.S.-Russian collusion over the strategic town of Manbij in Syria could turn into an endless struggle.[\[24\]](#)

Iran is another potential actor affecting the issue of Kurdish independence, yet it is quite unlikely for Iran to sides with the United States with respect to this issue. A U.S.-Russian modus vivendi in Syria could force Iran to enter the conflict with full force to protect its interests or to align with Turkey. An alliance between Turkey and Iran would then balance the United States and Russia. As for the Russian-Turkish rapprochement, it might last, as long as the United States and Russia do not cooperate or the United States does not stop its support for the Syrian Kurds. The United States should figure out whether Turkey or a newly formed Kurdistan is an indispensable ally.

The topic of this article could be extended with the introduction of additional states, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iraq, and by discussing possible alliance shifts and their implications for even larger systems. Due to limitations of space, however, these states were not covered. To conclude, the inner dynamics and relations of states make a world of difference. More than two millennia ago, Sun Tzu remarked in his work *The Art of War*, "There are not more than five musical notes, yet the combinations of these five give rise to more melodies than can ever be heard. There are not more than five primary

colors, yet in combination they produce more hues than can ever been seen. There are not more than five cardinal tastes, yet combinations of them yield more flavors than can ever be tasted.” [25]

Similarly, relations of friendship and hostility among but a few actors, shape not only the stability of the Middle East but that of the wider global system.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has attempted to assuage Turkey regarding Russian cooperation with the United States. U.S. President Donald Trump’s silence on U.S. military assistance to the Kurds has also been met with disapproval by the Turks. U.S.-Russian collaboration with the Syrian Kurds has thus alienated Turkey, and a joint front is forming against Ankara. This could also create future problems for the Kurds themselves. If they befriend both Russia and the United States, they will have to solve their own alignment problem—unless the United States and Russia remain cooperative with respect to each other. Any cleavage between the United States and Russia would force the Kurds to choose their position: They will either align with the United States or with Russia so as not to face the issue of “my friend is the enemy of my other friend.” Naturally, Turkey would then be on the opposite side, due to Turkey’s interest in preventing the creation of a Kurdish state in the region. If the Kurds side with Russia, Turkey will side with the United States. This is another possible outcome of the weakening Turco-Russian rapprochement demonstrating the complexity of the web of alliances that continue to destabilize the Middle East.

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#### NOTES

[1] “Putin’s Best Q&A Quotes from ‘Ankara Sucking Up to US’ to ‘Trump Being Absolute Frontrunner,’” RT News, December 17, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/326354-putins-turkey-trump-quotes/>.

[2] “Full Transcript of AP Interview with Syrian President Assad,” Fox News, September 22, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/09/22/full-transcript-ap-interview-with-syrian-president-assad.html>.

[3] F. William Engdahl, “Russia Trumps USA Energy War in Mideast,” New Eastern Outlook, September 17, 2016, <https://journal-neo.org/2016/09/17/russia-trumps-usa-energy-war-in-mideast/>; Mitchell A. Orenstein and George Romer, “Putin’s Gas Attack: Is Russia Just in Syria for the Pipelines?” Foreign Affairs, October 14, 2015; Christina Lin, “Saudi Arabia and Turkey’s Pipeline Wars in Yemen and Syria,” Asia Times, June 12, 2016, <http://www.atimes.com/saudi-arabia-and-turkeys-pipeline-wars-in-yemen->

[and-syria/#\\_ftn8](#); (Maj.) Rob Taylor, "Pipeline Politics in Syria," *Armed Forces Journal*, March 21, 2014. Qatar owns two thirds and Iran one third of the field.

[4] Jim Zanotti and Kenneth Katzman, "The Kurds and Possible Iraqi Kurdish Independence," CRS Insights, July 15, 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IN10105.pdf>.

[5] Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD, "Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG)" (in Kurdish).

[6] Till F. Paasche, "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2015), p. 83.

[7] "Stratfor Chief's 'Most Blatant Coup in History,' Interview Translated in Full" translated by Paul R. Grenier (article originally appeared in *Kommersant*), January 20, 2015, <http://russia.insider.com/en/politics/stratfor-chiefs-most-blatant-coup-h>.

[8] Russia's Gazprom exports 80 percent of its supply to Europe.

[9] T. Antal, P. L. Krapivsky, S. Redner, "Social Balance on Networks: The Dynamics of Friendship and Enmity," *Physica D*, Vol. 224, No. 1-2 (2006), p. 130. The two principles constitute the pillars of the structural balance theory: Fritz Heider, "Attitudes and Cognitive Organization," *Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1946), pp. 107-12; Frank Harary, "On the Notion of Balance in a Signed Graph," *Michigan Mathematical Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1953), pp. 143-46; Donald Cartwright and Frank Harary, "Structural Balance: A Generalization of Heider's Theory," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 63, No. 5 (1956), pp. 277-93; Frank Harary, "A Structural Analysis of the Situation in the Middle East in 1956," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1961), pp. 167-78. The current authors use the principles as they define balance of power in precise terms unlike much discussed and contested classical balance of power theory in which there are at least eight meanings of balance conditions. See, Ernst Haas, "Balance of Power Theory: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda?" *World Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1953), pp. 442-77.

[10] The United States, Russia, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have roles in the conflict over pipelines but not all of them are equally involved in the Kurdish issue. Accordingly, the analysis does not include Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

[11] Kautilya, "Arthashastra" (Science of Politics), reprinted in Paul A. Seabury (ed.), *Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), p. 8.

[12] "For example, the U.S.' somewhat surprising support of Pakistan, in the Bangladesh conflict of 1972 becomes less surprising when one considers that the USSR was China's enemy, China was India's foe, and India had traditionally bad relations with Pakistan. Since the U.S. was at that time improving its relations with China, it supported the enemies of China's enemies." See Michael Moore, "An International Application of Heider's Balance Theory," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1978), p. 401.

[13] The problem is called "cognitive dissonance" in the jargon of structural balance theory. See Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957); James M.

Goldgeier and Philip. E. Tetlock, "Psychology and International Relations," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4 (2001), pp. 67–92; Lee Ross and Andrew Ward, "Psychological Barriers to Dispute Resolution," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 27 (1995), pp. 255-304.

[14] Kilic Kanat, and Kadir Ustun, "U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria," *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2015), pp. 88-97. See also Pinar Ipek, "Oil and Intra-State Conflict in Iraq and Syria: Sub-State Actors and Challenges for Turkey's Energy Security," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (2017), pp. 406-19; Kemal Kirişçi, "The Kurdish Question and Turkish Foreign Policy," in L. G. Martin and D. Keridis (eds.), *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 277-320.

[15] John Galt, "Why the CIA, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar Are Furious About Erdogan's Russian Rapprochement," *The International Reporter*, August 15, 2016, <https://theinternationalreporter.org/2016/08/15/why-the-cia-saudi-arabia-and-qatar-are-furious-about-erdogans-russian-rapprochement/>.

[16] Selin Girit, "Turkey Faces Big Losses As Russia Sanctions Bite," *BBC News*, January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>.

[17] F. Stephen Larrabee, "The Turkish-Russian Rapprochement: How Real? How Durable?" *The National Interest*, November 21, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/print/blog/the-buzz/the-turkish-russian-rapp>; Brandon Turbevill, "Turkey Warms to Russia; Pipeline, Sanctions to Be Discussed, Qatar Blames KSA, UAE for Coup," *Activist Post*, July 28, 2016, <http://www.activistpost.com/2016/07/turkey-warms-to-russia-pipeline>.

[18] Such Syrian behavior is expected: Charles Osgood, *An Alternative to War or Surrender*. (Champaign, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1962), pp. 26-27.

[19] The Camp David agreements signed on September 17, 1978, were worked out once it was found that the Egyptian priority was sovereignty over the Sinai Peninsula and that the Israeli priority was security and recognition by an Arab state. The solution was a demilitarized Sinai as an Egyptian territory, satisfying both sides. According to the agreement, Egypt retrieved Sinai with the withdrawal of Israel from the peninsula, and Israel reached its aim by receiving recognition from an Arab State. The accords were a sign of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Egypt and Israel, and a big step for the purpose of peace and stability in the Middle East. See Howard Raiffa, *The Art and Science of Negotiation: How to Resolve Conflicts and Get the Best out of Bargaining* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 205-17.

[20] Iakovos Alhadeff, "The Myth of the Iran-Iraq-Syria Pipeline," August 14, 2016, <https://iakal.wordpress.com/2016/08/14/the-myth-of-the-iran-iraq-syria-pipeline/>.

[21] Jonathan Marcus, "U.S.-Turkey: The Strained Alliance," *BBC News*, March 29, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-35882201>. See also Nick Cohen, "The Kurds Should Not Be Denied Our Support," *The Guardian*, January 16, 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/16/west-must-back-kurds-independence-allies-against-isis>.

[22] Iran and Turkey are aligned on the territorial integrity of both Iraq and Syria: Hemin Lihony, “Does the Turkey-Russia-Iran Deal Mean Kurds Are Back to Square One?” Rudaw, August 17, 2016, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/17082016>.

[23] This is an imagined sequence of events; it is not based upon any observed facts. These are simply theoretical implications of virtually impossible U.S.-Iranian cooperation regarding Kurds in the Middle East.

[24] For more on this possibility, see: Michael R. Gordon, “Top U.S. General Discusses Syria with Counterparts from Russia and Turkey,” New York Times, March 7, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-deconfliction.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-deconfliction.html?_r=0).

[25] Internet Sacred Text Archive, [http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/aow/aow13.htm#fn\\_281](http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/aow/aow13.htm#fn_281).

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