



How Moscow Inherited The Middle East

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What a difference four years can make. In the Fall of 2015, Russia's government made the decision to formally launch a military offensive in support of the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Back then, the Kremlin's regional position was profoundly weak. After a period of protracted post-Cold War decline, Moscow's Mideast presence had been whittled down to just one permanent military outpost: its naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus. And, at the time, even that facility was in danger of being lost if Assad's government ended up falling to rebel forces.

Today, by contrast, Russia's regional presence is robust – and getting even stronger. In Syria, Moscow has succeeded in bolstering its naval base at Tartus (where it now has an open-ended long term lease), building at least three additional military facilities in the country, and significantly beefing up its maritime presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Simultaneously, Russia has also managed to leverage its involvement in Syria to launch a landmark expansion into the region via stepped-up arms sales, new bases in North Africa, and a more robust presence in regional politics. Over the past several years, this strategy has helped restore Russia to the role of a key power broker in regional affairs.

That status was cemented earlier this week, when Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi to hammer out a bilateral agreement over the future of Syria. The new deal, which comes on the heels of Turkey's recent military invasion, includes a number of key provisions that simultaneously help strengthen the Russo-Turkish strategic relationship and secure Moscow's now-dominant regional position.

The first is the codification of a shared commitment to deeper counterterrorism cooperation. That pledge is significant, because it foreshadows a further Turkish turn away from Europe. Ankara, after all, has blamed European nations for not resolutely combat Islamic extremism, and that failure was one of the core rationales behind Erdogan's decision to take independent military action. Turkey's conclusion, clearly, is that Russia – which has military assets deployed and operational in Syria – will be both willing and able to do much more than Europe ever was.

The agreement also enshrines a commitment by the two countries to jointly patrol Turkey's newly-created buffer zone in northern Syria. Here, too, Russia has deftly positioned itself as a guarantor of Turkish security. The Trump administration, having initially given Turkey the "green light" to invade Syria, belatedly attempted to temper Ankara's actions through biting new sanctions and hints of even more serious possible consequences. That, however, isn't likely to happen so long as Russia is involved – something that Erdogan understands very well. His government thus sees Russia's involvement in policing northern Syria as an insurance policy of sorts against America.

Finally, the agreement includes a Turkish commitment to abstain from pushing deeper into Syrian territory. That had previously been a real possibility, both because the initial ceasefire announced by Erdogan on October 17th was just temporary in nature, and because powerful ideological forces inside Turkey have been urging his government to press its advantage. By securing a pledge from the Turkish leader not to do so, Putin has managed to head off the possibility of a future conflict between two of Russia's major strategic partners in which Moscow would inevitably be forced to take sides.

The October 22nd deal should thus be seen for what it is: a clear victory for Moscow. Through it, Russia has managed to outmaneuver both Europe and the United States, strengthen its political role in Syria, and make itself an indispensable player in regional geopolitics. The Kremlin, in other words, has succeeded in playing what was once a very weak political hand exceedingly well.