

PULL-OUT PUZZLE: ON WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. TROOPS FROM SYRIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

President Donald Trump's [planned withdrawal of American troops from Syria](#) ran into trouble this week as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rebuffed National Security Adviser John Bolton's suggestions for an orderly exit. After Mr. Trump announced the pull-out of about 2,000 troops from northeast Syria, Mr. Bolton had said the troops would leave the war-torn country after the Islamic State is beaten. He also said Kurds, U.S. allies in the fight against the IS, should be protected. This has ostensibly angered Turkey, which considers the Syrian Democratic Forces, the official military wing of Syrian Kurdistan, an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, deemed a terrorist group by Ankara and Washington. Mr. Erdogan, who initially welcomed Mr. Trump's announcement of troops withdrawal, lashed out at Mr. Bolton for setting conditions for the pull-out. Tensions were so high that Mr. Erdogan refused to meet Mr. Bolton, who was in Turkey. The U.S. is now in a fix. Its President has announced the withdrawal. But it cannot just exit Syria without considering the existing geopolitical equations in the region. Kurds were pivotal in the war against the IS, and it is highly likely that Turkey could attack them as soon as the U.S. troops leave. Ankara sees an autonomous, militarily powerful Kurdistan on the Syrian side of the border as a threat to its territorial integrity.

Part of the problem is with the way Mr. Trump announced his decision to withdraw troops. He should have held talks with the stakeholders, including Turkey, Russia and Kurds, before taking a decision. Or he could have used his intent to pull out from Syria as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from other countries involved in the civil war. In the event, the abrupt announcement has become a concession to Turkey, which was hamstrung by U.S. presence in the Kurdish-populated region in pursuing its own military options. In practical terms, the U.S. has three options. One, it could go ahead with the unilateral pull-out irrespective of what Turkey does. This would leave the Kurds at the mercy of Mr. Erdogan and the Turkish troops. Two, Mr. Trump can walk back on his decision and continue to station troops in Syria, influencing, at least partially, the outcome of the civil war. This is unlikely given his aversion to keeping troops indefinitely in Syria (and other West Asian conflict zones). Three, the U.S. can stagger the withdrawal and pursue talks with Turkey, Russia and the Syrian government to reach an agreement to guarantee the protection of the Kurds and the defeat of the IS in Syria. Mr. Bolton's Ankara trip may have failed to extract any assurances from Mr. Erdogan, but Washington should continue to keep diplomatic channels open to ensure that the pull-out is done in an orderly fashion.

As India takes over operations in the Iranian port, the possibilities and challenges are huge

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