



Joining the dots and making sense of the key geopolitical developments in Europe, Eurasia and MENA

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Key points:

1. *In Idlib (Syria), Turkey walks on a tight rope in an attempt to play Russia against the United States and Europe.*
 2. *President Trump's "Deal of the Century" for the Middle East portends a neo-Hobbesian world where "might makes right".*
 3. *Is the "deal" with the Taliban worth more than scoring few points in the upcoming US presidential elections race?*
 4. *Russia and Ukraine replaced their main negotiators on Donbass with "pragmatists". Would this suffice to overcoming the deadlock in negotiations?*
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In Idlib (Syria), Turkey walks on a tight rope in an attempt to play Russia against the United States and Europe.

The Syrian government, backed by Russian forces, has accelerated its offensive to seize control of Idlib, the last province held by the opposition. "About 900,000 people, mostly women and children, have fled their homes since December, joining the largest exodus of Syria's civil war since it began nine years ago." (nytimes.com) In addition, Idlib hosts 4.5 million Syrians displaced from elsewhere in the country, and Turkey would not want to add those to an already heavy burden of over three million Syrian refugees living on its territory.

On the other hand, Turkey's strategy to protect its Southern borders against Kurdish militants potentially joining PKK clandestine operations on its territory has resulted in "Ankara's support for a variety of Syrian rebel groups with equipment to battle Damascus and its Russian and Iranian allies, while bringing its diplomatic weight to bear to negotiate with Russia to slow the assault". (worldview.stratfor.com) To avoid a potential collapse of its Syria strategy, Ankara has had to "dig in its heels" in Idlib. But in doing so, Turkey risked getting embroiled into an unwanted military confrontation with Russian forces supporting Damascus offensive in Idlib. Moscow, unlike Ankara, is most interested in finishing up more quickly the military operations in Syria, and in speeding up the political settlement process by creating more favourable conditions for Damascus to control its internationally recognized territory.

The current tensions in Russia-Turkey relations might be a boon for the United States, who had been struggling for several years to bring its NATO ally, Turkey, into the fold. "Turkey will want the United States to show stronger measures than just diplomatic ones if it's about to start reducing ties

with Moscow in favour of Washington. The Patriot missile system request is just one potential area where Washington might win favour in Ankara." (worldview.stratfor.com) Nevertheless, how Washington would adjust its conflicting policies against Ankara and Syrian Kurds could be anyone's guess. America's public military support for Turkey might backfire in its already troubled relations with the Syrian Kurds. While leaving Ankara fighting alone against the Syrian-Russian offensive in Idlib would once again question, in Turkish eyes, NATO's support against Turkey's perceived critical security threats.

Eventually, Turkey asked its European allies for diplomatic and material support in facing a new humanitarian crisis at its borders with Syria. President Erdogan has recently invited a summit with Russia, France and Germany focused on how to deal with the humanitarian crisis in Idlib. He might have probably reckoned to build common diplomatic fronts with France and Germany against Russian support to the Syrian forces' offensive, and with Moscow to urge European financial and material support in dealing with the ensuing humanitarian crisis. Given the European major interest in getting back some leverage in the Syrian conflict and, in particular, over the ensuing flows of refugees to Europe, president Erdogan might eventually succeed in drawing European and Turkish positions closer to each other. It remains to be seen, however, at what cost such an outcome could be achieved, and how Moscow would respond to possible Turkish-European collaboration in Syria.

If Ankara will skilfully play the delicate balancing act with Russia, US, and Europe in Idlib, the tenets of current Turkish foreign policy would be validated. If Turkey will eventually fail in its walk on the tight rope, its current mix of formal and ad-hoc alliances might need a serious revamp.

President Trump's "Deal of the Century" portends a Hobbesian new world where might is right

On January 28, in a show of diplomatic unilateralism, President Donald Trump disclosed his long-awaited Middle East Peace Plan. He praised it as the "last opportunity they (Palestinians) will ever have" ([nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)). However, his numerous critics deplored it for merely endorsing the territorial *status quo*.

Prime-minister Benjamin Netanyahu stood by the side of the American president at the ceremony announcing the "Deal of the Century". Meanwhile, from his headquarters in Ramallah, President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority denounced the plan as a "conspiracy deal" unworthy of serious consideration.

Mr. Trump's new "peace plan" would guarantee that Israel controlled a unified Jerusalem as its capital and would not require the dismantlement of any of the existing settlements in the West Bank. Mr. Trump promised to provide \$50 billion in international investment to build the new Palestinian entity and to open an embassy in its new state. In exchange, Israel would agree to limit its settlement construction in a four-year "land freeze," during which Palestinian leaders can reconsider whether to engage in talks.

The logic of the new Middle East "peace plan" revolves around the fact that Israel essentially won the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that the terms of the new peace should necessarily favour the victor. That logic has been enshrined in a "Palestinian state completely enclosed by Israeli sovereign territory (including Gaza's territorial waters, permanently), and cut into at least six main blocs of land, connected by highways." ([brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu))

The Arab states, concerned with the prospect of a resurgent Iran that could only be kept under

control by the regional presence of US military power, were expected to press the Palestinians to accept this "last chance."

Indeed, three Arab states — Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE — reportedly did send their ambassadors to the White House ceremony, but the two Arab states with peace treaties with Israel, i.e. Egypt and Jordan, did not. Moreover, the initial Jordanian response to the plan was a call for the Israeli withdrawal from the occupation zone up to the 1967 border lines. The initial Saudi response was more ambiguous. "An editorial in the government-controlled Al Arabiya paper urged the Palestinians to enter direct negotiations with Israel without accepting the plan. The king spoke with Mahmoud Abbas and repeated the traditional Arab position and the strong "steadfast" support for the Palestinian Authority." ([brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu))

Besides the expected electoral benefits of this "peace plan" for both of its godfathers (President Trump and Prime-Minister Netanyahu) the "Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and a Brighter Future for Israel and the Palestinian People" (as it is formally known) has probably zero chances for being casted into an international peace treaty in the near future. However, its unilateralist perspective, and "zero-sum" logic might play decisive roles in future conflict resolution processes around the globe. From Crimea to Nagorno-Karabakh, from Syria to the Sahel and Libya, the race for establishing (or having a great power "legalising") a favourable territorial *status quo* has already started. Hence, the prospects for the "losers" to use any available means to recover their territories were on the rise, while multilateral diplomacy and international law might have just got a bloody nose.

Is the "deal" with the Taliban worth more than scoring a few points in the upcoming US presidential elections race?

After one year of talks, the United States signed a deal with the Taliban on February 29, which allegedly “sets the stage to end America’s longest war — the nearly two-decade-old conflict in Afghanistan that began after the Sept. 11 attacks, killed tens of thousands of people, vexed three White House administrations and left mistrust and uncertainty on all sides.” (nytimes.com) The agreement laid out a timetable for the final withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan. However, it was not a final peace deal, as it excluded the currently elected Afghanistan government, led by president Ashraf Ghani, and it was filled with ambiguity that could unravel.

“I really believe the Taliban wants to do something to show that we’re not all wasting time,” President Trump said in Washington after the agreement had been signed. (nytimes.com) Meanwhile, Defence Secretary, M. Esper, and NATO Secretary General, J. Stoltenberg, were in Kabul to ease the ensuing concerns of the elected Afghan officials. A declaration asserting the United States’ commitment to continue helping to sustain the Afghan military was issued, as the US Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Z. Khalilzad, was signing in Doha (Qatar) the agreement with the Taliban. And Secretary of State M. Pompeo, who was in Doha for the signing ceremony, poured cold water on Taliban leaders’ excitement over the deal: “The agreement will mean nothing — and today’s good feelings will not last — if we don’t take concrete action on commitments stated and promises made” (nytimes.com).

The phase one deal would include a temporary cessation of large scale attacks, and an irreversible US reduction of troops deployed in Afghanistan, (from about 14,000 to 8,600). For their part, beyond the ceasefire, the Taliban would have to sever links to al-Qaida and affiliates. The second phase of the peace accord would be essential. It

would aim at a complete, or at least nearly complete, U.S.-NATO troop departure, as well as at an Afghan power-sharing agreement among all relevant political forces, including the Taliban. This phase should also feature a full stop to violence. (brookings.edu)

Among the most controversial issues included in the deal there were: the size of the remaining U.S. security footprint in Afghanistan, and the timelines of the U.S. withdrawal (as they were conditional to concrete progress made by the Afghans in meeting the goals of phase two); Taliban's pledge not to allow militant groups (such as al Qaeda and the remnants of the Islamic State) to use Afghanistan as a base of operations for launching attacks elsewhere; mutual distrust and unwillingness to set up a power-sharing arrangement between the Taliban and the other Afghan political forces, stemming from completely different visions on the content and requirements for the new Afghan Constitution, and the ensuing legislation. (worldview.stratfor.com)

The way ahead for the implementation of the recently signed Doha “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” looks murky and tedious. It might be worth just another point ticked on president Trump’s 2016 electoral agenda, allowing him to claim some success on reducing the military deployments in Afghanistan during the upcoming electoral campaign in the US. Geopolitically, it wouldn’t significantly change the situation at either the global or the regional levels.

The price for this apparent Pyrrhic victory that is to be paid not only by the US government, but by NATO as a whole, might consist in Afghans proving once again their centuries old resistance against being subdued by foreign powers, whatever their agendas. That should be a lesson to be learned by all those who might have an interest in taking advantage from a possible future Western complete withdrawal from Afghanistan.

**Russia and Ukraine replaced their main negotiators on Donbass with “pragmatists”.
Would this suffice to overcoming the deadlock?**

Five years ago, on February 12, 2015, the Minsk Two agreements were signed by the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France, Germany, and Ukrainian separatists. They re-established a ceasefire in Donbass, expanded the OSCE observer mission there, and laid out a roadmap for a political conflict resolution process involving the eventual reunification of the territory with Ukraine, but with Donbass receiving a level of autonomy. Five years on, in February 2020, little progress has been achieved in the implementation of Minsk Two agreements for reasons that had been forecasted in previous issues (2/ 2015, 1/2016) of the “EGF Geopolitical Trends” (gpf-europe.com).

At the most recent summit in the “Normandy Format”, held on December 9, 2019, in Paris (the first of its kind in three years), chancellor A. Merkel and president E. Macron intermediated the peace talks between president V. Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart V. Zelensky. The Paris summit communiqué required *inter alia* the implementation of the “Steinmeier Formula”, proposed in 2016 by F.W. Steinmeier (former foreign minister, current president of Germany), to be incorporated in the Ukrainian law. The “Steinmeier Formula” called for elections to be held in the separatist-held territories Donetsk and Luhansk under Ukrainian legislation and the supervision of the OSCE. If the OSCE judged the balloting to be free and fair, a special self-governing status for the territories would be initiated and Ukraine would be returned control of its Eastern border with Russia.

This last February, the high level representatives of Russia and Ukraine for the negotiations on the Donbass conflict have been replaced, apparently a coordinated response by both presidents to the

ongoing deadlock in the implementation of the Minsk Two agreements.

On February 11, Andriy Bohdan was replaced as chief of the presidential administration by Andriy Yermack, informally nicknamed “the negotiator”. Yermack was also given a seat on the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (President.gov.ua). Yermack was Ukraine’s main negotiator with Russia, which resulted in two mutually agreed prisoner exchanges in 2019 (September 7, and December 29), and would have allegedly had a significant contribution to signing the new Russian-Ukrainian gas transit deal, in December 30, 2019. The reason for Yermack’s success in negotiations with Russia might be related to his personal and business ties with Russian top officials closely connected to Putin (jamestown.org). Nevertheless, his recent success in negotiations with Russia has also proved him a political pragmatist negotiator.

In exchange, on February 18, president Putin signed an executive order dismissing his long-time political advisor V. Surkov. It seemed that Surkov’s dismissal was tied to his opposition to the Kremlin’s official support for the Minsk Two agreements that had been reiterated during the recent Paris summit (jamestown.org). In turn, Dmitry Kozak was transferred to the Kremlin as deputy chief of the presidential administration in charge of Ukrainian policy (Newsru.com). Kozak, a Ukrainian native, had overseen the prisoner exchange between Russia, Russian-led separatists and Ukraine in September, and December 2019, respectively. He is well-known as a political pragmatist negotiator.

Therefore, by appointing D. Kozak as Russian special envoy for Ukraine, the Kremlin might have implicitly decided to help instrumentalize the “Steinmeier Formula” in Ukraine, which didn’t seem popular with most Ukrainian politicians so

far. Kozak's expertise on constitutional law and regional affairs might have secured him the post.

It remains to be seen though whether a “pragmatic approach” to conflict resolution could be effective in overcoming the five years long deadlock in the implementation of the Minsk Two agreements. Questions remain in particular regarding whether A. Yermack and D. Kozak could work together to align Ukraine’s vital state building, security, and regional integration interests with the geopolitical interests of the main regional players, and with the broader East European context.



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Mr. George Vlad Niculescu is originally from Bucharest, Romania, and is currently acting as the Head of Research of the European Geopolitical Forum. He is also currently acting as co-Chair of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group of the [PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes \(PfPC\)](#). In October 2019, he has successfully defended his PhD thesis on "[SECURITY SCENARIOS PLANNING IN THE GEOPOLITICAL AREA FROM THE BALTIC SEA TO THE WIDER BLACK SEA \(INTER-MARIUM\)](#)" at the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (NSPSPA) Bucharest. He has also academic experience as a member of several other PfPC working groups, as well as assistant professor and/or visiting lecturer at the NSPSPA, "Dimitrie Cantemir" University, NATO Studies Centre, and the PfP Training Centre from Bucharest (1997-2004). Mr. Niculescu has been involved in several international research projects sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation), the European Commission (HiQSTEP Project), and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. His full CV and list of publications could be found [here](#).

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