

The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia

[Charles Thépaut](#)

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Although the process demonstrates the success of Moscow's agile military and diplomatic strategy in Syria, it also highlights the Kremlin's inability (or unwillingness) to resolve the interminable crisis.

On April 22, the top diplomats of Russia, Turkey, and Iran held a virtual meeting of the "Astana format," a forum established three years ago to help negotiate an end to the Syrian conflict. Coming just a few weeks after an uncertain ceasefire [was reached in Idlib province](#), the latest meeting confirms the Astana format as both an interesting diplomatic feat and a misleading showcase of Syria's political reality.

INCREMENTAL AND OPPORTUNISTIC MILITARY DIPLOMACY

The Astana process has had one key purpose for Russia: connecting the war's various military fronts under a broader diplomatic umbrella in an effort to protect Moscow's overarching political goal, namely, keeping Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in power. The "Astana format" was officially launched in January 2017 to formalize Russia's dialogue with Turkey and Iran, who back a number of the armed groups involved on the ground in Syria. Symbolically, the format's creation was also a major achievement in Moscow's efforts to sideline the United States and derive legitimacy from Russian relations with Turkey, a leading opponent to Assad. However, the Kremlin had begun to develop the Astana rationale before 2017, as an incremental process to reshuffle both the military and the diplomatic fronts.

Moscow first organized meetings in Astana (now named Nur-Sultan), Kazakhstan, to promote the idea that part of the opposition in Syria was not anti-Assad. Astana was also intended to be a platform for Syrian representatives to start preliminary negotiations outside the UN framework, despite constant Russian claims that Astana was connected to UN efforts. Indeed, UN resolutions put Assad on the same footing as the opposition, which was seen as unacceptable by Damascus and dangerous by Moscow. By late 2014 and early 2015, Russia had brought together regime representatives and opposition figures who were not demanding Assad's departure. The Syrian National Council, which represented genuine opposition to Assad, boycotted these meetings. Ultimately, this dynamic led to the creation of a "Moscow group" within the Syrian opposition, contributing to further fractures.

Russia's divisive efforts also included bypassing political opposition figures, using its assets on the ground to focus on local military actors whose connection to the political opposition has always been tenuous. Beginning in 2015, Russia organized a series of informal meetings in Astana among Syrian armed groups close to Turkey, Assad's representatives, and Iran-backed militias.

To combine its political and military tracks in Syria, Russia began devising a flexible "umbrella" of convenient concepts. Even as the Assad regime used Iranian proxies and Russian air support to launch offensives on one rebel-controlled area after another, Moscow talked about the need for "de-escalation" to freeze other frontlines where the regime's ability to launch simultaneous offensives was insufficient. Russia also used the notion of "dissociation" between rebel factions to justify breaking ceasefires in areas where jihadist groups were also present. When the focus on one front allowed the regime to retake a given area, Moscow then brokered "reconciliation" deals asking local fighters to either surrender or accept deportation to the rebel stronghold in Idlib. This dynamic played out full-speed in 2017: for example, between Turkey and Russia in northwest Syria in May; between Russia and senior opposition figure Ahmed Jarba at a July meeting in Cairo on "de-escalating" Ghouta and Rastan; and between Russia, the United States, and Jordan in south Syria in September.

Even if these deals were brokered with different international actors, Vladimir Putin's parallel summits with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iranian president Hassan Rouhani provided a high degree of visibility to their leadership dialogue on Syria. The summits also signaled to the world that Russia, Turkey, and Iran were the decisive players in Syria, because they alone were willing to take significant risks and use military force to shape political outcomes.

Beyond its symbolism, however, the core logic of Astana remains clear: it is a set of bilateral discussions between Russia and military actors on the ground that are then bolstered by high-level political meetings. The process has been built incrementally, without a clear end game beyond the creation of alternative tracks that are more favorable to Russia's goals than to the framework defined by UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Step by step, Moscow and Tehran have methodically exploited divisions among opposition groups, the increasing dominance of Salafi jihadist rebel groups over more moderate ones, and Western fatigue in Syria.

“IF YOU BREAK IT, YOU BUY IT”

The ceasefire that Putin and Erdogan brokered in Idlib on March 5 highlights the reality of Astana: that real decisions do not happen there. In fact, none of the past major ceasefires in Syria was brokered within the trilateral Astana format. Like last month’s agreement, the September 2018 Sochi deal on Idlib and the October 2019 deal on northeast Syria were negotiated bilaterally between Moscow and Ankara.

The Astana format is built mainly around Turkey in order to pull Ankara further away from its Western partners. At the same time, however, this gives Erdogan some leverage over Moscow. Such contrary dynamics make the Astana format less sustainable as Turkish and Russian interests in north Syria become less compatible.

Tellingly, Turkey, Russia, and Iran could not agree on a joint statement after the April 22 Astana meeting between their foreign ministers. Instead, the Russian and Turkish Foreign Ministries issued separate press releases. The [Russian release](#) reflects a pick-and-choose approach to Syria’s political process and contradicts certain Turkish positions. It references Security Council Resolution 2254 only to recall the sovereignty of Syria (by which Moscow and Tehran mean the Assad regime), while [Ankara’s release](#) references the resolution in order to call for a substantial political process. The Russian release also limits intra-Syrian dialogue to the UN-led constitutional committee created in September 2019, whereas Ankara describes the Resolution 2254 framework as broader than the constitutional issue. In addition, Moscow insists on lifting international sanctions against the Assad regime due to the coronavirus emergency, while Ankara focuses on the need to implement confidence-building measures between the Syrian parties and jumpstart the stalled issue of releasing detainees and abductees. On the military front, the Russian release pressures Ankara to do more on separating opposition groups from what it calls “terrorists” in Idlib, meaning jihadist fighters from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

As for the March 5 ceasefire, it is holding so far, and six joint Russian-Turkish patrols have been conducted in the past few weeks. Yet the agreement will likely last only as long as the Assad regime lacks the resources to restart its offensive. In any case, Idlib will not be the last episode in Syria’s war. Whether Turkey stops the regime again in Idlib, or Assad retakes all of the northwest or leaves [a Gaza-style enclave](#) under Turkish influence, Damascus will eventually turn its attention to the northeast, where the Syrian Democratic Forces already let the regime expand its reach in October 2019 after the United States withdrew many of its forces.

In the near term, the Astana process will continue to provide Russia with military and diplomatic space to manage one crisis after the other. Yet it is unlikely to deliver a sustainable political solution because all of the issues it is supposed to deal with are stalled: ceasefires are used for tactical gains and rarely last; prisoner exchanges are limited; no political negotiations are happening between Syrian parties; and the constitutional committee is paralyzed by Assad’s procedural obstruction.

Astana’s longer-term survival will further depend on short-term arrangements between Russia and Turkey. Although the Kremlin likely sees it as a success, the Astana format highlights challenges ahead for Moscow. It will mostly be up to Turkey to decide how long and for what benefit it wants to keep entertaining a Russian showcase that has failed to protect the border, manage refugee flows, or address the core issue sustaining the conflict: namely, the lack of a viable negotiation process in which Syrians themselves determine the future organization and practice of power in their country.

Charles Thepaut is a resident visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.