
RUSSIA, TURKEY, U.S. HOLD MILITARY TALKS AMID SYRIA STANDOFF

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The top military officials from Russia, Turkey and the U.S. met on Tuesday in a bid to defuse escalating tensions outside a strategic Syrian town.

The meeting follows Turkish threats to attack the northern town of Manbij, which is controlled by Kurdish groups seen by the U.S. as key allies in the fight against Islamic State. The U.S.-led coalition said on Saturday that it had deployed troops outside the town to deter aggression, a day after Russia announced that Syrian government forces would be stationed near Manbij.

Joseph Dunford, left, Hulusi Akar, center, and Valery Gerasimov, March 7. Source: Turkish Military Pool Photo via AP Photos

U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Joseph Dunford, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov and Turkey's Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar are discussing joint issues related to regional security, including Syria and Iraq, in the southern Turkish city of Antalya, the Turkish military said in a statement on its website.

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said his country seeks a trilateral mechanism to clear the area of terrorist groups. In Manbij, the U.S. is raising a flag, Russia is raising a flag nearby, things have turned into a flag competition, Yildirim said in an interview with ATV television late Monday.

The mounting strains around Manbij have emerged as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan prepares to visit Moscow on Thursday accompanied by his defense minister for talks with Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Russia has taken the diplomatic lead in seeking to resolve the war in Syria after its military intervention in 2015 succeeded in bolstering President Bashar al-Assad.

Turkey sent troops across the border into Syria in August, backing Free Syrian Army rebels in battles against Islamic State. The army has also clashed with Kurdish groups that the government in Ankara regards as terrorist organizations with links to separatists in Turkey, and which took control of Manbij after expelling Islamic State from the town just before the Turkish incursion.

Turkey has sought the support of the U.S., its NATO ally, to lead a ground offensive against Islamic States main Syrian stronghold of Raqqa that would advance through areas controlled by Kurdish fighters, a Turkish official said last week. The U.S. views the Kurds as an essential element of the battle against the radical Sunni group that waged a global campaign of terrorist attacks from its self-declared caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

Deter Aggression

The U.S. has moved 500 soldiers to the outskirts of Manbij, according to Ilnur Cevik, chief adviser to Erdogan. The U.S.-led coalition has taken this deliberate action to reassure coalition members and partner forces, deter aggression and keep the focus on defeating ISIS, spokesman Col. John Dorrian said on Twitter.

There's a high risk of a Turkish assault on Manbij, said Anton Lavrov, an independent Russian military expert who follows the Syrian conflict closely. That could provoke a bigger crisis as both the U.S. and Russia want to maintain the status quo and keep the Kurds in control of the territory they hold.

The U.S. deployment was a clear signal to the Turks not to go down that road, said Abdsalam Ali, a Syrian Kurdish representative in Moscow. The Kurds are hopeful that Turkey will be forced to stand down, he said.

Kaynak/Source: