Turkish Call of Duty: A game the POTUS wishes he had a restart button for

“They say truth is the first casualty in war […] The only truth I found out is that the world we live in is a giant tinderbox. All it takes…is someone to light the match.”

By Sabyasachi Biswal

The words spoken by a fictional character – Captain Price in the famous Call of Duty franchise gives more sense and wisdom to the recent turn of events than any global political or conventional war theory, which is speculated to have rocked the imagination of the entire world, since 9/11 or Arab Spring in 2011. Tilting towards a conventional war of magnitude proportions between Turkey, the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) and Syria, the event stands at the peak of disrupting any credible peace and humanitarian efforts achieved in the region in the last three to four years. But who would dare tell the truth to self-proclaimed Supreme Leader Trump? Who would dare put his life in line, to be eventually executed by the Supreme Leader with a thread of tweets, and maybe a termination of job?
President Trump has been known from the beginning of his tenure as an impulsive maniac, taking uncalculated decisions that would risk the immediate status quo of the international community. His dealings with China, Iran, North Korea, and Afghanistan only reiterate the fact that his vacuity goes unchallenged, threatening to change the course of history, for bad. It seems as if his decisions have been influenced by a first-person simulator game, where the player has the liberty to do whatever he wants, regardless of the consequence. In fact, his recent covfefe with Turkey on 7th October 2019, which includes ordering the complete withdrawal of US troops from Northeast Syria to allow Erdogan’s army to penetrate and ethnically cleanse the entire region of Syrian Kurds and the vestiges of YPG (Schmitt, et al., 2019) is another case in point, and quite frankly, a disastrous one. Nonetheless, our Supreme Leader has highlighted the fact that if Turkey does anything wrong, he will “destroy Turkey’s economy” (Gaouette, 2019) and one can only imagine how much of it is really true, as the US itself depends largely on Turkey for pushing its agenda in the Middle East, so much so that it stores its nuclear capable weapons in the Incirlik Air Base (Blanc, 2019).

To clear the air around the conflict, Operation Peace Spring, as it is called by Ankara is an ongoing military operation in Northeast Syria, conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). It started from 9th October 2019, two days after POTUS gave the orders of withdrawal from Syria. The order of withdrawal which shocked many, some of which even came from Trump’s own cabinet – the likes of Defence Secretary Mike Esper. The withdrawal was agreed on the mutual understanding that Turkey will create a “safe zone” for the return of refugees (Fakih, 2019) in Northeast Syria and cleanse the area of remaining non-state factions, particularly the Kurdish YPG. In turn, this decision led to the abandonment and isolation of the Kurds, both the paramilitary and the civilians in the region, who were the strongest ally of US in its fight against the Islamic State (IS) and now are directly involved in ensuring their survival against the Turkish Army. When asked about the abandonment of Kurds, Trump replied apologetically and rather absurdly that “The Kurds didn’t help at Normandy” (Fortin, 2019) and they are “no angels” (Borger & Safi, 2019). Turkish Forces then went on to capture 52 villages and towns near the Syrian border, claiming to have crushed Kurdish offensive every single time, a claim that has been quashed by YPG.

However, a battle which in the first three days seemed like a strike and clear mission, now has turned into a full-blown war, with consequences which seem difficult for Trump to handle in the coming days. The war, which was first a simple clash between the TAF and the Kurdish YPG, now includes the TAF, the Syrian National Army (SNA), Free Syrian Army (FSP) at one side, and surprisingly, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Kurdish YPG along with the Syrian Forces (Assad’s) at the other. The obligation towards geographical sovereignty and a last chance at legitimacy allowed Assad to agree to a Russian brokered a peace deal with rebel forces and carry on a direct offensive against Turkey (Najjar, 2019), crushing the long-going US agenda of delegitimising and dethroning Bashar-al-Assad. This, in turn, has upped the scale of violence as two nation-states will directly collide with their subsidiary factions to support them, in a decisive battle, which threatens to re-escalate Arab Spring. As Mike Esper describes “it is a development that has paralyzed the fight against ISIS and ceded the US and Kurdish battlefield gains to Moscow and Damascus” (CNN Wires, 2019). Not only that, the fight has led to a consequential death of an unknown number of civilians and the creation of another refugee and IDP crisis in border towns, with 130,000 plus people illegally crossing into
Iraq as we speak, paying smugglers 150 USD per head (Reuters; Haaretz, 2019). Adding more fuel to the fire, the indiscriminate bombing by the Turkish Army near Ayn Issa prison compound has led to the escape of 750 IS sleeper cells, majority of who have Iraqi citizenship and are expected to cross into Iraq easily due to vulnerable border control (McKernan, 2019). This, in turn, ironically defeats the entire narrative of US intervention into Syria, the concern for human rights and the fight against IS and makes a complete and long-lasting mockery of international laws.

The decision is currently under scathing attack from the US Congress and US allies, including Trump’s own Republican party, who have criticised the lack of farsightedness by him and have held him responsible for escalating the situation in the Middle East for his own political gains. It is to be noted that since the withdrawal, there still is a considerable amount of US personnel stuck between the offensive as sitting ducks, with their fate currently uncertain. As fellow Republican senator Lindsey Graham puts it “He (Trump) will have American blood on his hands if he abandons Kurds because ISIS will come back, and if any American is killed anywhere because a resurgent ISIS, it will fall on the Trump administration like it did on Obama.” (Shesgreen & Groppe, 2019) Evidently, those who have followed Trump and his interaction with Erdogan after the offensive will find an amateurish pattern of handling affairs, where POTUS himself has been hanging on ropes, dazed and delusional about his own decisions. From putting sanctions just days after allowing an offensive, to continuously taking U-turns by asking Erdogan to stop the offensive immediately or face consequences, Trump has been falling short in satisfying all the factions under his political umbrella, and certainly has been running out of ideas to control a furious Erdogan, hell-bent on committing a genocide against Kurds. In fact, Trump, being the head of a state, should have been careful, as Erdogan, since 2018, has shown signs of being a near autocratic ruler, evident from the way he handled the Mayor’s election in Istanbul. It is this lack of analysis that is going to cost Trump dearly and draw hordes of ire and criticism towards him, regardless of the plan backfiring or not.

In the end, with an official letter sent from the office of the White House to Erdogan, obtained by the (in)famous Fox News, part of which I now quote “Let's work out a great deal! You don’t want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don’t want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy – and I will [...] Don’t be a tough guy. Don’t be a fool [...] I will call you later!” (Reuters, 2019), things look bleak and terribly uncertain, to say the least, for Trump and the Middle East, probably making him and people around him think in their full consciousness that if only he had a restart button to the unknown game he started. But alas!

References