

# Will Turkey and Russia Make Up?

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## Articles & Testimony

On June 27th, the Kremlin announced that Turkey had apologized to Moscow for downing a Russian jet, which had violated Turkish airspace while flying over Syria in November 2015. The following day, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had expressed his regrets to Russian President Vladimir Putin but that "an apology is out of question."

Even though Turkey, and more specifically Erdogan, may not be ready to apologize to Putin, both Ankara and Moscow have much to gain from normalizing their ties. Since the November incident, Russia has adopted an aggressive posture against Turkey in military, intelligence, and cyber realms. Turkey has been the target of a number of extensive cyberattacks, including rolling blackouts, which affected much of the country in March.

What's more, Putin has deployed additional troops in Armenia to Turkey's east and has set up an air defense system in Syria to the south. Taking into account the Russian military presence in Crimea to the north, Russia now encircles Turkey on three sides. Last but not least, Russia has also started to provide weapons to the Party for Democratic Unity (PYD) in Syria, whose sister organization, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Erdogan is currently fighting inside Turkey.

Russia is Turkey's historical nemesis, and the Russian Empire has defeated the Ottomans over and over again in the past. The return of Russia as an adversary scares not only Erdogan, but the broader foreign policy-making community in Ankara as well. All this prompted Turkey's decision to send Putin a letter expressing Erdogan's regrets.

Erdogan also has his own reasons for wanting to make up with Russia. On May 14, the PKK shot down a Turkish military helicopter. This happened after warnings from Russian officials on April 27 that Moscow would arm the PKK with MANPADS to shoot down aircraft over eastern Turkey if Ankara allowed such weapons to reach Syrian opposition groups. Whether Russia is providing weapons directly to the PKK, Russian military support for its sister organization, the PYD, greatly worries Erdogan due to the threat it poses to his personal political agenda.

In the current Turkish system, President Erdogan faces limitations. He is head of state, but not head of government. Moreover, since becoming president in 2014, he has had to leave the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to comply with the constitution's stipulation that the president must be a non-partisan figure. Erdogan wants to win a

popular referendum or have his AKP cross the 50 percent threshold in snap elections. Either of these paths would allow him to make amendments to the country's constitution in order to become an executive-style and partisan president, thereby consolidating power.

The problem for Erdogan is that his AKP has maxed out twice at 49.5 percent of the vote in recent elections in 2011 and 2015. To cross the 50 percent threshold comfortably in a potential snap election or referendum, Erdogan needs to expand the AKP's base, and to this end, he has set his sights on voters from the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), a similarly right-wing party like the AKP.

If Erdogan can deliver a military victory against the PKK, this development would make him massively popular in the eyes of many MHP voters, bringing some of them into his fold. That, in turn, would reward Erdogan with more than 50 percent of the vote, opening the path for an executive and partisan presidency, fulfilling his long-awaited dream.

Erdogan knows that in order to defeat the PKK, he has to delink Russia and the PKK/PYD, and therefore, he will do everything he can to bring forth normalization with Putin. In this effort, Erdogan will find support across the non-partisan policymaking community in Ankara, including erstwhile adversaries, the secular-minded Turkish military. Everyone in Ankara wants to defeat the PKK, and everyone knows that this is not possible if the group has Russia's backing.

Putin will likely reciprocate Turkish overtures for reconciliation. Since the end of the Cold War, Russian policy towards Ankara has had one guiding principle: never completely alienate Turkey. Especially beginning with the rise of Putin, Russia's strategy has been to keep Turkey close to Moscow and away from NATO. Putin knows that at this stage, further alienating Turkey will push the country closer to NATO.

Putin also knows that Russia will suffer more than Turkey under a regime of sustained Russian sanctions towards Turkey. The Turks have many customers to buy their cheap but high-quality wares. The Russians, already suffering under European and U.S. sanctions and from collapsing oil prices, ultimately need access to the deals of the Turkish markets.

Therefore, in the coming days, Russia will nudge Turkey towards a full apology with diplomatic gestures, such as lifting some of the economic sanctions put in place after the plane incident, while simultaneously continuing to intimidate Ankara in cyberspace, military, and intelligence realms. Good cop Putin and bad cop Putin will work together to move Erdogan towards issuing an apology.

If the joke in Turkey was that Erdogan, the Sultan, would never stoop to apologize to the Russians, the answer would be "yes, except to the Tsar." So, while the most recent letter from Erdogan to Putin does not mean the two countries are normalizing ties, Erdogan will do everything he can to make up with Moscow, and the Russian leader will goad him to that end. Putin will exchange a full and formal apology from Erdogan with an end to the more overt Russian provocations towards Turkey and threats of Russian support to the PKK/PYD. But the underlying tensions and basic differences will remain.

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