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The Turkish-Russian Military Balance

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Brief Analysis

While Turkey's numerical advantages and other factors would seemingly give it the upper hand in limited clashes with Russia, Moscow could bring overwhelming force to bear if the conflict escalated -- a development that would invite NATO intervention.

Turkey's recent downing of a Russian Su-24 underscored the longstanding clash between their geopolitical interests. If more such incidents occur, Turkey would enjoy certain advantages so long as the fighting remained limited. Yet it would encounter existential shortfalls if the situation escalated uncontrollably.

Any force-on-force engagement between the two countries has the potential to spur a problematic domino effect that could be difficult to contain. Yet unless Turkey failed to coordinate with its allies or was seen as the instigator, a total war scenario would inevitably bring NATO into the strategic calculus, so neither side is likely to take such a risk.

Therefore, assessments of military balance should focus on limited engagement scenarios involving relatively small forces and small, isolated clashes.

Three scenarios for limited conflict seem most plausible:

- Turkish combat air patrols engaging Russian planes in the event of further airspace violations
- A naval conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean
- A proxy war and subversive activities by special operations forces

Barring major escalation, the military balance in each of these scenarios would favor Ankara, though Turkey could still face serious losses.

THE TURKISH-RUSSIAN BALANCE IN THE AIR

About one-third of Russia's nearly 35 fixed-wing deployments to Syria are Su-25 attack aircraft that would not pose a meaningful threat to Turkey's F-16s, and another third are Su-24M tactical bombers with limited air-to-air capabilities. Thus, the main air-to-air threat would come from Russian Su-34s and Su-30s, of which there are 12 total in Syria.

Following last month's Su-24 shootdown, it was publicly revealed that Russia had deployed Su-34 Fullbacks to Syria. The Su-34 is a derivative of the Su-27 and can carry advanced beyond-visual-range air-to-air missiles (BVRAAMs) such as the AA-12. It is designed for multirole tasks and could pose a challenge in air-to-air combat. Even more menacingly, Su-30 Flankers enjoy kinematic advantages over many Western aircraft, and their maneuver capabilities would ensure important advantages during within-visual-range combat by offering many effective angles of attack.

Yet current trends in air-to-air combat suggest a greater role for BVR kills. On paper, some of Russia's BVRAAMs might have superior range compared to the F-16's advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles (AMRAAMs). BVR combat depends on various other factors, however, including sensors, radars, missile technologies, and communication systems. In this regard, radar and infrared signatures are becoming as important as speed and maneuverability.

In an air-to-air engagement scenario against the Russians, the Turkish Air Force could reach its most effective kill ratios in BVR combat, launching AIM-120 AMRAAMs from advanced F-16 blocks as in the November shootdown. Turkey would also hold a numerical advantage. Since downing the Su-24, it has assigned packages of 18 F-16s on combat air patrols along the Syrian border. In case of an engagement, nearby Turkish bases could provide robust support in a very short time. Moreover, Turkish pilots have ample flight hours and good combat skills.

Yet these advantages depend on the assumption that engagements would be limited to Russia's forces in Syria. Were Moscow to conduct provocations in the Turkish 3rd Army's area of responsibility -- namely, the border areas with Armenia and Georgia -- the numerical advantage would shift dramatically in Russia's favor. By igniting more intense Armenian-Azerbaijani border clashes, for example, Moscow could try to overstretch Turkish deployments between the 2nd and 3rd Armies' areas of responsibility and divert Ankara's strategic focus.

RUSSIAN AIR DEFENSE ASSETS

Despite being outnumbered, Russian aircraft in Syria are now operating under an increasingly robust air defense umbrella. In the wake of the Su-24 shootdown, Moscow made clear that it was deploying the S-400 very-long-range air and missile defense system to Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia. It has also deployed the guided missile cruiser *Moskva* off the Eastern Mediterranean coast. The S-400 batteries provide multitargeting capabilities 200-300 kilometers into Turkish airspace, and boost Russia's radar surveillance and detection ranges. More important, the Syrian air defense architecture is based on Russian systems, so Moscow's S-400s and naval air defense platforms could be multilayered with some of Syria's systems. Such a configuration would provide unprecedented offensive and defensive advantages to the Russians.

In the Turkish Air Force's doctrinal order of battle, the 151st Squadron based in Merzifon is assigned to missions involving suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD), and are equipped with AGM-88 high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARMs) for that purpose. Yet in a SEAD scenario against S-400 batteries in Syria -- especially if they are multilayered with other systems -- the squadron's losses could be rather high. This reality confirms the strategic warning issued in September by Gen. Philip Breedlove, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander-Europe, who voiced concerns about the establishment of a Russian antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) "bubble" in the region.

In other words, the Kremlin's decision to deploy advanced air defense systems in Syria goes well beyond political signaling. It is more of a military move to counterbalance Turkey and NATO's numerical advantages in a small theater of air-to-air operations. In fact, ever since Russian military reforms replaced the Soviet-era corps-regiment system with the air base-squadron system around the turn of the century, air defense units have been mostly merged with air force units. Last but not least, many Russian violations of Turkish airspace over the past couple months have been coupled with radar lock-on harassment by Syrian air defenses.

ELECTRONIC WARFARE, NAVAL ASSETS, AND UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

Since the outset of its Syria intervention, Moscow has placed special emphasis on the deployment of electronic warfare (EW) and intelligence assets. The IL-20 surveillance aircraft and Krasukha-4 EW system are especially noteworthy in this context.

Russia has already used the Krasukha-4 in Ukraine, causing great damage to enemy equipment. The system is believed to be capable of concealing an object from radar detection at 150-300 kilometers, as well as damaging enemy radars and communication systems and suppressing spy satellites. In a limited engagement scenario, Russia would probably use such systems to blind Turkish assets. And if Turkey opted to take out the Krasukha-4s using HARMs, it would have to execute that operation against a menacing air defense umbrella that could inflict significant losses on its aircraft.

At sea, the naval balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean seems to favor Turkey to a considerable extent. The Turkish Navy's submarines -- especially its 8 total Preveze- and Gur-class vessels equipped with UGM-84 Harpoon antiship missiles -- would be key when hunting Russian surface vessels. Turkey's numerical advantage in principal surface combatants would also be extremely challenging to Russian vessels in the area.

In addition, both countries have tools to bleed each other through unconventional means. Since the intervention began, Moscow has been developing its relations with the principal Syrian Kurdish group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), while the Assad regime has a notorious record of waging proxy war against Turkey by supporting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). For Ankara's part, despite the iron fist of Ramzan Kadyrov, who runs Russia's restless Chechen Republic on behalf of Vladimir Putin, Turkey can still respond to any threats in the North Caucasus by allowing freedom of action to Chechens and similar diaspora elements inside its territory.

BITTER DEMISE FOR TURKISH EURASIANISM

Although the conventional military balance of power would favor Turkey in a limited engagement against Russia for a limited time, any significant escalation would put Ankara in a dangerous position. This risk of uncontrollable escalation should serve as a stark reminder of the merits of NATO membership. Indeed, recent developments could mark a dramatic end to Eurasianist geopolitical thought in the Turkish strategic community, which for some time has postulated a Russian-Turkish axis as a viable alternative to traditional defense and security ties with the West. Such Eurasianism has found support not only among socialist movements in Turkish politics, but also among some conservative figures. Following the Su-24 incident and the Kremlin's hostile rhetoric against Ankara, however, it will not be easy to defend such ideas anymore.

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