

How Will the Turkey-Russia Crisis Affect Ankara's NATO Ties?

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Brief Analysis

Moscow's lack of easy retaliatory options and Ankara's longstanding fear of Russia should forestall any showdown requiring NATO intervention, and the recent shutdown incident will help bring Ankara closer to the alliance in the long term.

While the current crisis between Moscow and Ankara may not escalate into a military conflict, it serves as a reminder that Turkey is deeply engaged in a proxy war with its historic Russian nemesis in Syria. When a Russian jet was shot down on November 24 after violating Turkish airspace, the pilots were on a bombing run against Syrian Turkmen rebels, whom Ankara supports given their ethnic ties to Turks and their armed opposition to the Russian-allied Assad regime. Turkish leaders are now worried about containing the Kremlin's potential retaliatory steps and making longer-term contingency plans to strengthen their hand vis-a-vis Russia. These concerns will have major positive ramifications for Ankara's ties with NATO.

THE CRISIS MAY ESCALATE

Of Turkey's near-dozen neighbors, there is just one that Ankara really fears: Russia. This is rooted in history stretching back to the Ottoman Empire. At one point or another, the Ottoman Turks ruled over or defeated all of modern Turkey's neighbors except Russia. Between the fifteenth century, when the Ottoman and Russian Empires became neighbors, and 1917, the year of the Bolshevik revolution, the two peoples fought at least seventeen long wars,

all of them instigated -- and won -- by the Russians. With good reason, then, most Turkish elites are keen to avoid escalating the current crisis.

In contrast, Russian president Vladimir Putin may well embrace escalation, at least to a certain degree. Over the past decade, he has tried to position Russia as a military superpower in Eurasia and the Middle East, and himself as a global leader. In his view, the shutdown has dented those lofty ambitions, and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has personally humiliated him, so he is likely bent on retaliating for one or both of these affronts. Russia already deployed S-400 surface-to-air missiles to Syria following the Su-24 incident, so it now has the ability to strike Turkish planes anywhere in northwestern Syria or even well inside Turkey. This suggests that Ankara will think twice before it shoots down another Russian plane -- a development that effectively rewards Moscow with a de facto no-fly zone in much of northern Syria.

BUT RUSSIA HAS LIMITED OPTIONS FOR PRESSING TURKEY

Beyond taking action against tourism and the foodstuffs trade with Turkey, Putin has only limited commercial tools for retaliating. Cutting off natural gas would force Ankara to scramble, since Russia supplies 55 percent of Turkish domestic consumption. Yet the Turks could partially compensate by importing more liquefied natural gas and converting gas-burning electrical plants to oil. Moreover, Turkey is Russia's second-largest gas customer, and Putin seemingly cannot afford to lose an important client at a time when Moscow is pressed by dropping hydrocarbon prices and international sanctions. Similarly, if Russia cancels its contracts for two Turkish nuclear power plants, Ankara could quickly find other providers.

Beyond threatening Turkey's allies in Syria and setting up a de facto no-fly zone in the northwest, Putin's military options are constrained as well. He has only limited forces in Syria and the Trans-Caucasus area bordering Turkey, while Ankara has the second-largest fleet of F-16s in the world and the second-largest army in NATO. It also has logistical and geographical advantages that include control of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, Russia's egress to Syria. And Moscow would be playing with fire if it urged its Armenian ally to restart the Nagorno-Karabakh war with Turkey's ally Azerbaijan.

With this in mind, Russia will instead target northwestern Syria with increased vigor, aiming to drive Turkish-backed rebels out of the country -- a scenario that would mean complete defeat for the ground component of Ankara's anti-Assad policy. This might also create a massive new wave of refugees, adding to Turkey's current burden of nearly 2.2 million asylum-seekers from Syria.

Another danger is potential Russian asymmetrical warfare against Turkey. This could include supporting Ankara's longtime foe, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), or its Syrian franchise, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which aims to capture a nearly sixty-mile stretch of territory along the border in order to link its two existing enclaves. Russian assistance in that effort would allow the PYD to establish a 400-mile-long pro-PKK cordon abutting Turkey.

In essence, each of these scenarios would be Putin's way of taking revenge against Erdogan by making him look weak. Yet that would be a dangerous approach because Erdogan's instinctual response would be to reassert Turkish might.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TURKISH MILITARY AND NATO

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rose to power in 2002, the Turkish military's role in politics has been greatly weakened. During the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials in 2007-2012, the government jailed several top military officials on coup allegations. Although they were later released when the appeals courts threw their cases out, the military largely withdrew from politics in response to the crackdown.

Today, the military remains broadly resentful of the AKP, and it will likely avoid any campaigns in Syria whether or not they are aimed at escalating with Russia -- partly to spite Erdogan, but also to avoid a messy military engagement. In practical terms, this means continuing to come up with technical (but in reality political) objections to any AKP

plans for deepening Turkish involvement in the war next door. While the Su-24 shutdown is unlikely to spur the military's overt return to politics, the armed forces are no doubt aware that such effective demonstrations of their capabilities tend to greatly increase their public support, and consequently their ability to resist AKP pressure.

These calculations have budgetary implications as well -- unless Moscow implausibly decides to escalate into a direct military conflict with Turkey, Ankara will probably not increase its defense spending. Rather than launching new weapons acquisition or modernization projects with the United States and other NATO partners, Turkey is more likely to continue pursuing its four-decade-old policy of building a domestic defense industry.

Even so, the latest incident will help Ankara remember the value of NATO, which Turkey joined in the first place as a shield against Cold War Russia. Following the shutdown, Putin knew full well that he could not treat Turkey like Ukraine or Georgia -- two neighboring countries that Russia has invaded in recent years -- because Turkey is a NATO member. This realization will drive Turkey closer to NATO, building on Ankara's recent decision to cancel the purchase of Chinese air- and missile-defense systems that were incompatible with those of other alliance members.

Pivoting toward NATO will also help counter souring Turkish public attitudes toward the alliance. Recent polls by the Pew Center indicated that Turkey was unique among member states in that a majority of its citizens do not hold positive views of NATO. The confrontation with Russia will help change this fact, though perhaps only to a certain degree -- for example, when NATO deployed air-defense assets to help protect Turkey during regional crises in 1991, 2003, and 2012-2015, many citizens and elites still viewed the alliance as another Western instrument of power projection.

CONCLUSION

Although Turkey's decision to down a Russian jet appears rash, it demonstrated that a state can trip up Putin if it is willing to take risks. Dangers remain, however, so job one in Washington is to work with both sides to avoid escalation. This means pressing hard for a compromise solution to the Syrian war that Turkey and Russia can live with. Yet any such effort will require more American "skin in the game." Avoiding a serious escalation that drags in NATO is thus the latest rationale for Washington to engage seriously in the Levant, joining a long list that includes unsustainable refugee flows, mass civilian deaths, and the Islamic State threat.

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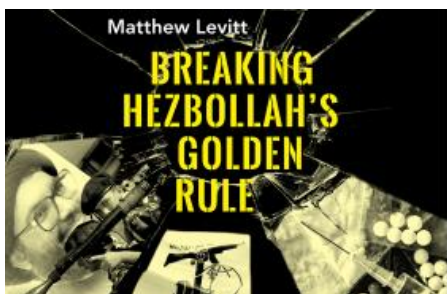
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