Escalating the New Cold War: Turkey downs a Russian Jet

Now that the Justice and Development Party (or AKP) is back in power, Turkey is all but continuing its tenuous Syria policy aimed at causing the downfall of the Assad regime and arguably establishing a friendly Sunni-dominated government in Damascus. Russia’s recent intervention in the Syrian theatre has strengthened Bashar al-Assad’s position and delivered a blow to his opponents. But now Turkey has apparently retaken the initiative by means of downing a Russian jet.

Quite some time ago now, in the summer of 2011 in fact, I mused that Syria's not-so civil war was in reality nothing but a proxy-theatre for enacting the New Cold War between the U.S. (and its NATO allies) and Russia (variously supported by Iran and China). War to unseat Bashar al-Assad has now entered its fifth year and recently turned more dangerous than ever, in view of Turkey’s unprecedented action against a Russian fighter. The Vice News’ contributing editor Ryan Faith succinctly summarized the debacle as such: "On Tuesday, [24 November 2015] a Turkish Air Force F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24 that had intruded into Turkish airspace. If Turkish reports are to be believed, two Russian jets were warned over emergency frequencies as they approached the border. One broke off and headed south. The other did not respond to the 10 warnings issued over five minutes, so the Turkish fighter fired a missile, downing the Russian plane. Its two occupants are both believed to have ejected. One is currently reported alive; the status of the other pilot is unconfirmed." In this way, Turkey has unilaterally done what the U.S. has arguably been dreaming of for many many years now. In fact, the Turkish media report as if the reckless military move was all but a heroic action, a heroic deed to protect the motherland and challenge the Russian bully that has been making threatening gestures for the past month and harassing Turkmen tribesmen on the Turco-Syrian border. The pro-AKP daily Star, for instance, went ahead liberally quoting the Daily Telegraph’s Con Coughlin who had earlier written that the "Russians had it coming to them" and that "Mr Putin might finally understand that if you play with fire, you end up getting burned."

As such, the Turkish action really amounts to an act of war, though Ankara claims that the shoot-down was justified given that the Russian planes had violated Turkish airspace, thus posing an immediate danger to the country's national sovereignty and security. The U.S. President immediately rushed to Tayyip Erdoğan’s side, saying that "Turkey, like every country, has a right to defend its territory and its airspace." While holding a press conference with his French counterpart Hollande, Obama took hold of the opportunity to take a swipe at Russia and Vladimir Putin. The U.S. President elaborated on the "ongoing problem with the Russian operations", namely that these operations take place in close proximity of the Turkish border and also take aim at "a moderate opposition that are supported by not only Turkey but a wide range of countries", including the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.

The New Cold War Heats Up???

Following Turkey's recent November Surprise and the subsequent return to power of the AKP as the sole proprietor of governmental initiative and authority in the land, President Erdoğan issued a “friendly warning” to Putin's Russia, saying that “[w]ere Russia to lose a friend like Turkey, it would lose a lot [indeed].” In fact, in the run up to the electoral contest on November, 1st Tayyip Erdoğan made a brief tour of Western Europe, and, while visiting the Belgian PM Charles Michel, he made his and NATO's long-term intentions quite clear: "[t]here are those who understand [and] those who do not understand [that] for the Syrian crisis, the war to end Assad has now reached a..."
point where he has to go. A person promoting state terror [and who is] responsible for the death of 350,000 people is now at the head of [the] Syria[n state], but there are those who are trying to protect him. One of these is Iran. Russia is one of them [as well] . . . It is not possible for us to remain patient in this respect," clearly hinting at the fact that Turkey could (and would) intervene to thwart Russia's quest for a stable Syria under Assad's aegis. Less than a month later, Turkey's Armed Forces have shot down one Russian jet as if strengthening the President's words by means of adequate and appropriate measures.

In order to justify its actions the Turkish Army has made radar footage public, footage that confirms a breach of national sovereignty. The release, however, makes plain that the Russian jets but repeatedly passed over a tiny sliver of Turkish territory, a small Turkish strip inside the Syrian mainland. The Turkish pro-government broadcaster Haberturk TV showed footage of the downed Russian jet, trailing a "long plume of smoke trailing behind it as it crashed in a wooded part of an area" apparently known as "Turkmen Mountain." The semi-official Anatolian Agency, for its part, then released images of two pilots parachuting out of the jet before its crash. The Turkish media have since started a barrage of coverage stressing that the affected area inside Syrian territory is held by Turkmen opposition groups, and not by the Caliph and his IS (Islamic State or ISIS/ISIL). Hence, the message being purveyed is that the Russian campaign is not aimed at rooting out ISIS, but rather at protecting the Assad regime against its opponents, the so-called "moderate opposition" as well as ISIS. The Turkish media stress the fact that a Turkmen opposition group is in control of the lands targeted by the recent Russian air attacks, in an effort to sensitize the public and garner support for the military action. In fact, the Turkish government makes no bones about its support for the Turkmen opposition militias, providing them with humanitarian aid and weapons by means of truck deliveries carried out by the Turkish Intelligence Organization (or MİT). Turkey's AKP-led government sees itself as the ultimate defender of Ottoman and even pre-Ottoman heritage in the region, stressing Turkish services to Islam in the past and present. The Turkmen ethnic group, which is obviously part and parcel of that very legacy of Islam in the region, consists of approximately 200,000 individuals, descendents of the Turkmen tribesmen that moved into Anatolia and its surrounding areas in the late 11th century. In the present context, these Turkmen militias form part of the Free Syrian Army (or FSA), the supposedly "moderate opposition." Russia has lately targeted the Latakia region where the FSA and its Turkmen allies operate. According to Turkish sources, the area is primarily inhabited by members of the Bayir-Bujak Turkmens, many of whom were forced across the border into Turkish territory. As a result, Turkey reproached Russia, summoning the Russian ambassador in Ankara last Friday (20 November). Subsequently, Turkey's Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying that the "Russian side's actions were not a fight against terror, but they bombed civilian Turkmen villages and this could lead to serious consequences."

The Russian Response and NATO's Reaction

Now that the situation has escalated, the Turkish government has started its own efforts at damage control. While delivering yet another speech in Ankara Tayyip Erdoğan even declared that "[n]obody should doubt that we made our best efforts to avoid this latest incident," while remaining adamant that "everyone should respect the right of Turkey to defend its borders." By sheer coincidence, the Russian jet was downed on the same day that the wily PM Ahmed Davutoğlu presented his new cabinet members to the public as he unveiled Turkey's 64th government. The following day he addressed the AKP group meeting and assured his audience that "Russia is an important partner of ours. At this moment our lines of communication are open. We have no desire to strain our relations with Russia. Russia is our friend, is our neighbour." Following his initial conciliatory tone, Davutoğlu nevertheless went down to the nitty-gritty straightaway, declaring that the Russian "plane fell down while it was trespassing Turkish airspace. Our rules of engagement have been explained in an plain and open manner. This is an event that we would never have wanted to take place under any circumstances. Following the event we are taking all the necessary diplomatic precautions. The sovereign Turkish airspace that has been violated is also a NATO airspace."

In contrast to Turkish efforts at striking a somewhat conciliatory tone, Russia's reaction was predictably rigorous and radical. For one thing, Russia categorically denies that its aircraft entered Turkish airspace. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov immediately canceled his scheduled trip to Turkey on 25 November. And as a result, the continued delivery of Russian natural gas and the completion of a planned nuclear power plant to be built by Russia on Turkish soil now also appear threatened. Russian President Vladimir Putin has since also come out using strong language: "IS has big money, hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars, from selling oil. In addition they are protected by the military of an entire nation," obviously hinting at Russia's southern neighbour. Though the words complicity and duplicity seemed apparent between Putin's lines, it was up to PM Dmitry Medvedev to spell out the issue, declaring the existence of a “direct financial interest of some Turkish officials relating to the supply of oil products refined by plants controlled by ISIS."

For his part, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared publicly that "we stand in solidarity with Turkey and
support the territorial integrity of our NATO Ally, Turkey. We will continue to follow the developments on the South-Eastern borders of NATO very closely. I look forward to further contacts between Ankara and Moscow and I call for calm and de-escalation." As a result, one can but wonder whether Turkey acted merely to safeguard its Turkmen allies forgetting the wider ramifications of its actions or whether the U.S. and NATO gave the go-ahead to then engage in a high-stakes game of chicken?? Either way, nobody seems willing to take the bait and domestically, the military action all but benefitted the ruling AKP and the figures of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, whose popularity has been climbing to ever greater heights . . .

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