Why Would Turkey Risk War Over a Russian Plane

The shooting down of a Russian fighter bomber by Turkish war planes this week throws into stark relief the complex multiple games being played by Turkey and its NATO allies. The incident further highlights the misuse and misquotation of international law by apologists for the US and its allies. It is also a further study on the highly selective nature of Australian mainstream media reporting and its invariable pro-US stance.

It is not in dispute that two F16 fighter aircraft of the Turkish air force attacked a Russian fighter-bomber. As a result the Russian plane was destroyed. The wreckage landed well inside Syrian territory. The pilot and navigator aboard the Russian plane ejected safely. Whilst parachuting to the ground they were fired upon by Turkmen militia members, killing the pilot. The navigator was able to avoid capture and was subsequently rescued.

None of that is in contention. There are however, some areas of dispute, most notably whether or not the Turkish military authorities warned the pilot to change direction while still in Syrian air space. The Turkish authorities have released what they say are recordings of multiple warnings. That is something that is capable of independent verification, including from Russian and American satellites. The Russians flatly deny such warnings were given.

The second major area of dispute is whether or not the Russian fighter-bomber did traverse Turkish territory. The territory in question is a very narrow (3km wide) finger of land that juts from Turkey into Syria. The Russian navigator on board the plane flatly denies that his aircraft was in Turkish air space. Again, that is something that is capable of independent verification.

On the Turkish account the Russian plane spent a total of 17 seconds in Turkish air space. That length of time would be broadly consistent with the plane’s reported speed and the width of territory traversed.

Both Turkey and the US have advanced the justification that Turkey was entitled to defend itself. As a general proposition that is true. The question however, is whether self-defence actually arose, and if it did was the Turkish response appropriate.

Article 51 of the UN Charter provides that a country may defend itself against armed attack. It has been held in multiple international law cases that the attack must be actual or imminent. Even then, the response must be proportionate to the threat.

Not even the Turks have claimed that they were being attacked by the Russian fighter-bomber, or that an attack was imminent. To shoot down a non-threatening plane, that even on the Turkish account was in Turkish air space for no more than a few seconds while heading elsewhere, cannot on any reasonable interpretation of international law be reasonable or justified.

The real reason for the shoot down therefore had nothing to do with self-defence. Some inferences as to the real motives may be drawn from the available evidence. Turkey was outspokenly angry about Russian military fighters and bombers attacking militias whom Turkey supported as part of the ambition to overthrow the Assad government. The Turkmen who killed the pilot and then another Marine in a helicopter coming to the rescue are just such a Turkish controlled militia.
The Turkish government is also one of the principal supporters, financiers and armors of the ISIS terror group. At the recent G20 meeting President Putin made a presentation of satellite and other data showing that stolen Syrian oil was being transported to Turkey where its sale is a significant source of ISIS financing. Mr Putin referred specifically to members of the G20 being backers of ISIS. It is hardly a secret that he was alluding to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the US among likely others.

The Russian intervention since 30 September 2015 at the invitation of the Syrian government has been devastatingly effective. For the first time in more than three years the Syrian Army has regained the initiative. It is to be contrasted with the pseudo efforts of the US and its erstwhile allies such as Australia who claim to have been attacking ISIS when manifestly they have not, or supporting so-called and non-existent “moderates.”

A further factor is that Turkey has for decades fought against the aspirations of its significant Kurdish minority for autonomy. Those aspirations, combining as they are with those of the Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian Kurds for similar autonomy, are bitterly opposed by President Erdogan. The failure of the Turkish backed militias to overthrow the Assad regime has given fresh impetus to hopes for Kurdish autonomy.

Turkey would not, as a member of the US controlled NATO, have risked a war with Russia unless it had the backing of the US government. American foreknowledge of the shoot down, which as a matter of timing alone must have been planned, is to be inferred from the ludicrous statements emanating from the White House.

One such ludicrous defence of the Turkmen militia came from a US government spokesman who when asked about the shooting of the pilot from the downed Russian jet said that the Turkmen militia “were entitled to defend themselves.”

This would be almost funny were it not for the alarming ignorance of international law that such a remark displays. Article 42 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which both Turkey and the US have signed and ratified, and Protocol 1 of the 1977 amendments to the Convention, specifically provides as follows:

1. No person parachuting from an aircraft in distress shall be made the object of attack during his descent.

2. Upon reaching the ground in territory controlled by an adverse Party, a person who has parachuted from an aircraft in distress shall be given the opportunity to surrender before being made the object of attack....

The Russian pilot in question, on the unqualified boasting of the militiamen who killed him, had no such opportunity. The killing of the pilot was therefore a war crime.

It is the latest illustration of where criminal acts carried out in pursuit of geo-political objectives are given the courtesy of not even being discussed in the mainstream media. Instead, prominence is given in the media to ludicrous and self-serving statements by politicians and their official spokespersons.

The silence of the Australian government in the face of these latest outrages is nothing less than shameful.

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