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Turkish-Russian tension over the Syrian crisis

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On 10 October, Turkey forced a Syrian aircraft which was flying through its airspace on the way from Moscow to Damascus to land in Ankara and inspected its cargo. The Turkish authorities suspected that the plane was illegally transporting military equipment to Syria. After an inspection that revealed Russia-made parts for military radars and missiles onboard, the cargo was detained.Over a dozen of Russian Federal Security Service officers were travelling on this aircraft, according to the Turkish press.

The following day the Kremlin announced that President Vladimir Putin's visit to Turkey, which had been scheduled for the end of the week, would be postponed until December. However, the Russian diplomacy's reaction to the incident was limited to a mere request for an explanation from the Turkish side. On its part, Turkey condemned Russia for its military support to the Syrian regime. Nevertheless, both parties declared that the incident would not harm their relations. Turkish action received political backing from Western states - including the United States and Germany, which also condemned Moscow's action.

Commentary

- This incident has clearly damaged the bilateral Turkish-Russian relationship. For over a decade, the two countries have been making efforts to develop political and economic co-operation and have striven to ensure that differences over individual issues (e.g., the Russian policy in the Southern Caucasus or the deployment of elements of the NATO missile defence shield in Turkey) do not hurt their diplomatic and economic relations. However, significant growth of economic ties between the two countries (in 2011, the trade volume reached approximately US$30 billion, and almost 60% of natural gas and approximately 30% of petroleum products imported by Turkey came from Russia) has not prevented their rivalry in political and security sphere. The mutual distrust has grown particularly since Moscow and Ankara took different approaches to the Syrian crisis – with Russia backing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and Turkey working for its overthrow.

- For Turkey, the interception of the cargo is primarily a form of retaliation against Damascus following the attacks launched from Syria in early October, which caused several casualties in Turkey. The incident demonstrates that Turkey is ready to risk a deterioration in its relations with important partners in order to promote its interests in the Syrian crisis. It seems also that by provoking an international scandal, Ankara has

made another attempt to increase the level of engagement of the international community (above all the West) in the resolution of the crisis.

- The fact that Russia sent military equipment to Syria on board of a civilian aircraft demonstrates that Moscow is still resolved to support the Assad regime in Syria, but is going to great lengths to do it discreetly. Russia is aware that her support for Damascus is damaging its image both in the West and in the Arab world, and is also undermining its tactics towards the Syrian crisis, which is based on its claim to neutrality in the conflict. The incident also suggests that the partnership with Ankara, which Moscow has been painstakingly building over the years, has not provided it with effective tools to influence Ankara's policy.

- Contrary to reassuring declarations from both sides, the incident, most likely, will deepen mutual distrust between Turkey and Russia and will hinder their eventual attempts to reach an understanding over the Syrian issue. The dynamic situation in Syria and the consistent support provided by Turkey and Russia to the opposing sides of the conflict, are likely to lead to more incidents and further tensions between Ankara and Moscow.