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Turkey goes for broke: tension after a Russian bomber is shot down

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On 24 November the Turkish air forces shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber, which allegedly violated Turkish airspace in Hatay province on the border with Syria. The Turkish side says that it has repeatedly warned Russians against violating its space, including just before the incident. The fact that the bomber was on the territory of Turkey for only seventeen seconds before being shot down is indicative of the Turkish side's great determination to curb the aggressive actions of Russia.

The plane came down in the Syrian province of Latakia, in an area occupied by Syrian Turkmens. A few hours later, President Vladimir Putin said that the Su-24 had only been flying in Syrian airspace and had not been threatening Turkey in any way, and called its destruction a “stab in the back” by “supporters of terrorists”. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov ruled out a military response to Turkey’s action. At the request of Ankara, a meeting of ambassadors from NATO member states was held in Brussels, after which the Secretary-General of NATO reiterated support for the territorial integrity of Turkey, but urged Ankara and Moscow to de-escalate the conflict. Presidents Barack Obama and François Hollande spoke in a similar vein after a meeting in Washington, during which the American leader said that Turkey has the right to protect its own airspace.

The shooting of the Russian bomber by Turkey is a risky attempt to ward off the adverse development of the situation in Syria, from Ankara's point of view (the emerging Western-Russian alliance, the marginalisation of Turkey). By demonstrating its own destabilising potential, Turkey is also trying as a NATO member to force the West to take their interests into account in the Syrian conflict, and to prove to Moscow that it is still a major player. However, the initial conciliatory reactions from the West and Russia’s relatively moderate comments indicate that Ankara may have serious problems with achieving the objectives it has set for itself. It must also take into account possible retaliatory actions by Russia, although at the moment it is difficult to determine what form these would take.

The political context

Turkish interests in Syria are completely contrary to those of Russia. Ankara’s main objective is to remove President Bashar al-Assad from power, create a security zone in northern Syria and weaken the Syrian Kurds. To this end, Turkey has consistently supported armed anti-Assad groups (including the Free Syrian Army), and has adopted an ambivalent position towards the Islamic State. For Moscow, Assad is its main partner, and keeping him

in power is its most important political goal. Tensions between Ankara and Moscow have been boosted by the Russian military intervention in Syria, the more so as Russian aircraft have mainly attacked the troops fighting against Assad, which are supported by Turkey. Russia is also maintaining the fiction that it is fighting against Islamic State, although the main targets of the Russian raids have been the anti-Assad opposition, which causes irritation in Ankara. The situation was inflamed by Russian planes' frequent violations of Turkish airspace, the aim of which was probably to test NATO and send Turkey a clear signal of Moscow's intentions.

The shooting of the Russian bomber was immediately preceded by an offensive by troops of the Assad regime, supported by Russian air forces, in the northern Latakia region near the border with Turkey. According to Ankara, this attack was directed at Syrian Turkmens. They are a Turkish-speaking ethnic minority, whose guerrilla forces have been fighting alongside the Free Syrian Army. The case of the Syrian Turkmens was raised by Ankara at the international level even before the Russian bomber went down; on 23 November Turkey requested a meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the defence of the Turkmen minority from attacks by Assad's forces and summoned the Russian Ambassador to the Foreign Ministry to discuss the matter. The Turkish authorities have also highlighted the possibility of another wave of refugees leaving Syria. The issue has also been widely discussed domestically; nationalist circles in Turkey have called for assistance to be given to the ethnically-related Turkmen population.

Turkey's position on the Syrian issue has been further weakened as a result of the international consequences of the destruction of the Russian airliner over the Sinai and the terrorist attacks in Paris, after which the positions of Russia and the West moved closer together. On 14 November a meeting of the International Syria Support Group was held in Vienna, during which a framework plan to resolve the Syrian conflict was developed, although it did not take Turkey's demands into account (including the removal of Assad and the construction of a safety zone between the towns of Jarabulus and Mareh in northern Syria). Another defeat for Ankara came at the G20 summit in Antalya in Turkey (15-16 November), during which Turkey was effectively marginalised over the Syrian issue, and Vladimir Putin even suggested that Turkey was supporting Islamic State.

Turkey's game

The deliberate shooting down of the Russian bomber, which took place on the day of President Hollande's visit to Washington, and just before the talks between the leaders of the USA & France and Putin, is most likely an attempt by Ankara to reverse the adverse trends in the game around Syria. Its aim is to show Russia and the West that Ankara is a player whose interests should not only be acknowledged, but which also should participate in all considerations concerning Syria. By deciding on such an unprecedented step (similar incidents between NATO troops and Moscow have only occurred in the 1950s), Turkey is also most likely seeking to break up the prospect of an emerging Russian-Western alliance on the Syrian issue. At the same time, it puts the West in a very difficult situation (the need to support an unpredictable ally) and shows its own destabilising potential, which could also be used in the future. This is particularly important for the European Union, because Turkey is a key country in the context of the migration crisis in Europe.

The Russian reaction

The shooting of the Russian bomber met with fierce rhetoric from the Kremlin, although considering the scale of the incident, their response was quite moderate. Moscow faces a choice: on the one hand, maintaining its image would require a symmetrical response (for example, shooting down a Turkish aircraft in the border area); on the other, the emerging alliance with the West demands a de-escalation of tension in Russia's relations with Turkey as a NATO member. Although Moscow has ruled out military retaliation, the incident will certainly have a negative impact on Russian-Turkish relations; Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov cancelled his visit to Ankara scheduled for 25 November, and has appealed to Russians to refrain from trips to Turkey; Moscow has also announced the suspension of military cooperation with Turkey and threatened to impose trade sanctions. At the same time, however, it stated that bilateral energy cooperation will continue: any interruption or restriction to it would undermine both sides (Russia is the main supplier of hydrocarbons to Turkey, which in turn is one of the Kremlin's most important clients). However, the incident will probably provide a pretext for attempts to discredit Turkey internationally (including in the West), and for Ankara's even greater marginalisation in the Syrian issue. Already, Moscow is trying to blame Turkey alone for the escalation of the conflict, and to present it as an unpredictable country which effectively supports terrorists, making it (according to the Kremlin) a problematic ally for the West; its activities are to be offset by the joint effort of Russia and the West to end the Syrian civil war. In this situation, Moscow will work for Turkey's political isolation (including within NATO), while not actually escalating tensions with NATO and individual Western countries.

The West's dilemma

The shooting of the Russian plane puts the West in a very difficult situation. On one hand, Turkey is a member of NATO, which must take Ankara's interests into account, to preserve its own credibility and demonstrate consistency, as well as its formal solidarity with Turkey. On the other, Turkey's attitude is complicating the ongoing attempt to develop a common plan with Russia to resolve the conflict in Syria, and threatens to cause tensions between NATO and Russia. The incident may also aggravate differences within NATO itself, especially as there is no consensus between member states on cooperation with Russia in Syria, or on how to resolve the Syrian conflict. The United States actively supports Ankara (for example by their joint preparation to strengthen Turkey's southern border, and their support for the removal of Assad from power), although because of US support for the Kurds, relations between Washington and Ankara are not without tensions. The US has not ruled out a search for an agreement with Russia on Syria, but Washington would like to take Moscow on board a coalition against Islamic State on its own terms (the cessation of Russian bombing of the Syrian opposition, which de facto strengthens Islamic State). On the other hand France – which since the attacks in Paris has become a major European champion of operations against the Islamists – is seeking to strengthen cooperation with the Kremlin. In this situation, it seems that the West will above all try to ease the tension as soon as possible, working on one hand to continue the dialogue with Moscow, while on the other assuring Ankara that its interests will be considered to a greater extent.

Appendix

The shooting of the Russian Su-24: the military aspect

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The Su-24M bomber aircraft (of which there are at least 12) were moved to the airport at Khmeimim near Latakia towards the end of September, and these planes is one of the main components of the Russian Federation's Air-Space Forces contingent in Syria. Their main role is to carry out strikes - using both precision-guided and unguided weapons - on the fortified positions and lines of communication of opponents of Assad's regime. However, some of these aircraft – such as the Su-24MR version – have since the beginning of Russian involvement in Syria been carrying out reconnaissance and electronic warfare, directed not only against formations resisting the army of the Syrian Arab Republic, but particularly against the Turkish army supporting the anti-Assad forces. The Su-24MR's main task is to gather information about the enemy, as well as disrupting his command, reconnaissance and communications (for example, by preventing Turkish army transmissions of information about the movements of Syrian government troops to allied formations fighting the Assad regime). Turkey has drawn attention to violations by Russian planes of its airspace since the beginning of the Russian contingent's involvement in Syria. Several such cases have been revealed as of 3 October, and Su-24M aircraft are alleged to have committed most of these violations. With two exceptions, Russia has denied Turkey's reports of the violation of its airspace.

From a military point of view, one reason for shooting down the Su-24M may have been the Russian contingent's overly long and/or intense activity against the Turkish army's command, reconnaissance and communications systems on the Syrian border, up to the level of disturbing the functioning of all these systems inclusive. The information provided by the Turkish air defence (photo from radar screens) shows that the Russian plane was carrying out a classic mission in the field of reconnaissance and electronic warfare (a repeated loop over the region of operations), and that the violation of Turkish airspace occurred more than once. It should be assumed that the Turkish planes had received prior approval or a direct order to shoot down the Russian aircraft; and the only issue is whether the Su-24M was hit over the territory of Turkey (in which case the Turkish fighter jets must have fired their missiles while the Russian craft was still in Syrian airspace), or shortly after it had returned across the Syrian border.