

Russian-Turkish confrontation over Syria

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Russian-Turkish relations have been plunged into deep crisis in since a Turkish fighter jet downed a Russian bomber aircraft on 24 November. The Russian government has accused Ankara of supporting terrorist groupings in Syria (Islamic State), and President Vladimir Putin passed a decree on 28 November imposing economic and visa sanctions on Turkey. By increasing tension in relations with Turkey, the Kremlin is trying to isolate and eliminate it from the game over the future of Syria. At the same time, it hopes that it will gain greater opportunities for reaching a compromise on Syria with the West on its own terms by way of discrediting Turkey and escalating the atmosphere of crisis. To achieve this, the Kremlin is ready to put its good relations with Turkey at stake, while trying to reduce the economic costs of the conflict.

The end of the Russian-Turkish rapprochement

Moscow had been patiently building close relations with Ankara for more than a decade (from 2004). Personal ties between President Putin and the Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan were an important element of these relations. Developing economic co-operation, especially in the energy sector, was the foundation of these relations. The trade volume between the two countries in the pre-crisis year 2008 reached US\$38 billion; Turkey became the second largest (after Germany) importer of Russian gas, depending on Russian supplies to a level of 60%. The strategic goal of the Russian policy towards Turkey was to encourage the diversification of Turkish international links and loosening Turkey's bonds with the United States and NATO. As a result of the Turkish-Russian rapprochement, Ankara reacted with great caution to both the Russian military operation in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Symptomatically, Turkey did not join the West in the imposition of the sanctions on Russia.

The disagreement over Syria

Serious disagreements between the two partners appeared when the civil war in Syria broke out in 2011. The Kremlin has backed President Bashar al-Assad from the very beginning, for example by supplying military equipment to him, while President Erdogan has set a target of removing him from power and has offered assistance to the anti-Assad armed opposition. Despite the various incidents (for example, a Syrian passenger aircraft was forced to land in Turkey in 2013 so that the Russian military equipment that was onboard could be confiscated), both Moscow and Ankara made efforts to prevent their disagreements on

Syria from adversely affecting their mutual relations as a whole. As can be concluded from Erdogan's own words, the Kremlin was feeding his illusion that sooner or later it will agree to a solution to the Syrian conflict where Assad would be removed from power. The Russian military intervention launched on 30 September, targeted mainly against the anti-Assad opposition from northern and north-western Syria (these are backed by Turkey) most likely put an end to this illusion.

The Russian reactions to the shooting down of the aircraft

The Russian reactions to the incident of 24 November have been aimed at: 1) demonstrating that Russia will not change its policy in Syria and is ready for a military confrontation with Turkey over this issue; 2) causing the diplomatic isolation of Turkey; and 3) ostentatiously 'punishing' Turkey through the imposition of economic sanctions on it.

The Kremlin's first reaction was to strengthen its troops in Syria with S-400 air defence systems and moving the Moskva missile cruiser (which is also equipped with air defence systems) closer to the Turkish-Syrian border. At the same time, the Russian General Staff warned that "any targets which pose potential danger to us will be liquidated". Russian aircraft continued attacks on territories inhabited by the Turkish minority and controlled by the rebels supported by Turkey in the direct vicinity of the Turkish border.

Turkey receives a telling off

The Russian government has suspended contacts with Turkish leaders. Putin not only refused to meet with Erdogan in person during the conference in Paris, but was also unwilling to answer his calls. Similarly, the Russian minister of foreign affairs has refused to meet with his Turkish colleague (however, he talked to him on the phone soon after the incident). The Russian side cancelled the consultations of the ministers of foreign affairs scheduled for the end of November and the Russian-Turkish forum combined with the summit meeting of the two leaders planned for December.

At the same time, the Russian government and media launched a propaganda offensive against Turkey. The Russian president, prime minister and minister of foreign affairs accused the Turkish government of supporting the terrorists from Islamic State, and especially of helping this organisation in the trade of oil (Russian deputy minister of defense directly charged the Turkish president and his family's son of being involved in this). The image of Turkey in the media has undergone a dramatic change – from a friendly country to a country which is fundamentally hostile to Russia.

The tension is not abating

It seems that by publicly formulating the conditions for settling the incident which are both humiliating and unacceptable for Turkey (a public apology, compensation for material losses and punishment of the guilty parties), the Kremlin wants the tension to continue in bilateral relations. In combination with the accusations of supporting Islamic State, this is expected to discredit Turkey in the eyes of its Western allies as an unreliable partner in combating terrorism, who provokes unnecessary conflicts with Russia (and thus makes it

more difficult to forge an anti-terrorist alliance with it) and as a country which contributes to further destabilising the region. Apparently, its goal is to isolate Ankara and eliminate its influence on the conditions on which the internal crisis in Syria will be regulated. According to the Kremlin's calculations, bilateral tension with Turkey will further destabilise the situation around Syria and thus should serve as a factor that will convince the United States and the Western Europe to accept the Russian solution to the Syrian problem, i.e. leaving President Assad in power under the and combating Islamic radicals hand in hand with him.

'Making an example' of Turkey

The Russian government announced a number of economic sanctions in retaliation to the Turkish "crime". These sanctions are addressed to two audiences. One of them is the Russian public. By demonstrating its relentlessness in dealing with an external enemy, the government responds to public expectations rooted in imperial *ressentiment*, consolidates support for the regime, and also diverts people's attention from the increasing economic difficulties. The other audience is Ankara; the Kremlin wants to put pressure on it to force it to 'symbolically abase itself' and accept the Russian policy in Syria. However, the tough rhetoric and the threats to impose severe sanctions have so far been realized only to a very limited degree.. Under a decree signed by President Putin, it was announced that visa-free movement for Turkish citizens would be suspended (effective from 1 January 2016), chartered flights were suspended and a ban on selling holidays to Turkey was imposed on Russian travel agencies. In turn, the closing of the Russian market to Turkish goods and services announced in the decree has been introduced to a very limited extent. The government's decision published on 1 December provides that the sanctions will only be imposed (starting from 1 January 2016) on imports of fruit and vegetables, salt, and poultry (worth around US\$1 billion, which accounts for around 1/6 of Turkish exports to Russia). The sanctions will not affect most imports from Turkey nor the service contracts (covering predominantly construction services) implemented and signed by the end of this year with Turkish firms (contracts signed this year alone are worth a total of US\$2.6 billion). Similarly, the Russian government has not decided to extradite around 60,000 Turkish expatriate workers from Russia. Nor is there any possibility that Russian gas exports will be suspended or that energy co-operation in general will end. The only really painful sanction for the Turkish side is the suspension of Russian mass tourism (Russian tourists account for around 12% of the Turkish market). In consequence of this Turkey will sustain losses worth at least US\$4 billion annually.