

In Brief: The Middle East is subject to exceptional influence and intervention from the outside world, just as now Turkey and Russia are battling for dominance in Syria. This has culminated in Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter. Turkish decision-makers seem to have assumed that the mitigating effects of mutual economic interdependencies and the complexities of bilateral relations would soften the Russian response, but they have largely misread Russia's foreign policy priorities. Turkey is losing its leverage in Syria, and in Iraq. This is a disruptive development for Turkey, with possible grave domestic implications. Turkey is now rediscovering the value of its transatlantic ties, but it is not likely to resuscitate its Syria policy without drastically changing the dynamics.

Pride and Pragmatism: Turkish-Russian Relations after the Su-24M Incident

by Ahmet K. Han

Introduction

One framework proposed in order to analyze the Middle East treats it as a penetrated regional sub-system. As such, the Middle East is subject to exceptional influence and intervention from the outside world, especially by the great powers operating at the international system level. As Russia's military posture in Syria has transformed into an expeditionary, combat role, this is reminding many of the darkest days of the Cold War. By eliminating what it deems "unacceptable" opposition groups, (including groups that Turkey supports), the Russian strategy is to turn the quagmire in Syria into one that is an "easy choice" for the international community: Assad or the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS). (There is an exception shared with the United States of the Kurds of northern Syria.)

Two Foreign Policies

Over the last decade, Turkey and Russia had developed a tacit and functioning agreement to compartmentalize their relations, separating geostrategic disagreements and economic-strategic interests. That said, Turkish and Russian endgames in Syria were at odds from the start. Ironically, both countries' assessment of the future of the Middle East mirrored each other's in terms of their points of departure. Since U.S. cred-

ibility is at a low point, a result of Bush's Pax-Americana (that alienated the Arab societies) followed by Obama's "offshore balancing" (that alienated the Arab monarchies) strategies, both countries see an opportunity to strengthen their role and alliances while filling in a policy vacuum left by United States. The U.S. "pivot to Asia" initiative serves to further strengthen their respective positions.

The logic of their strategies of exploitation also mirror one another. They are both "penetration" strategies enabled by an extremely divided regional system, but their difference lies in the mechanics. Russia, a systemic heavyweight, is a self-aware "outsider," both geographically and culturally. It chooses penetration over material power and prioritizes Westphalian high politics. Its strategy is based on demonstrating its ability to create discernable change in terms of balances of power. Turkey, a regional actor and a mid-size power — and a self-perceived "insider" — tries to achieve penetration in the Middle East through religious and cultural affinities and values, and the potential clientelistic effects of its comparative economic advantages. It relies on its ability to appeal to subnational and supranational identities, as well as the prospect of creating its own proxies. In essence, while Russia was treating Syria as a beachhead, Turkey was trying to maintain it as a springboard of power and influence projection.

These conflicting priorities clashed on November 24, 2015, when Turkey downed a Russian Su-24M fighter jet over Yayladağ, along the Syrian border. The Russian plane was in violation of Ankara's airspace, as confirmed by U.S. sources. What is more, this was clearly not a one-off event but rather the latest in a series of such incursions by Russian planes. Russia was quick to exploit the loss of its bomber as an opportunity to consolidate its Syria policy, which had already been bolstered in the context of Paris attacks. While representing a certain blow for Russia's pride and the personality cult of its president, Vladimir Putin, Russian foreign policy responded pragmatically.

While maintaining the claim that it is exercising restraint by not reciprocating in kind, and is hence acting responsibly, Russia has so far secured a tacit, albeit reluctant, mandate from the international community for its position in Syria. This position seems neither bound to Bashar al-Assad nor contingent on Syria preserving its pre-conflict borders. Moscow could easily accept a "boutique" state covering the western parts of former Syria. Today's military reality makes this is more or less attainable goal. Russia might be said to have effectively exchanged a plane for a kingdom. It has also beefed up its standing as a prospective ally the region's states. Its position is simple: domestic autocratic practices notwithstanding, if an ally is in trouble it will not hold back in defense. In today's Middle East, this proposition resonates.

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Where Next?

In shooting down the Russian aircraft, Turkish decision-makers seem to have assumed that the mitigating effects of mutual economic interdependencies and the complexities of bilateral relations would soften the Russian response. In doing so, they have largely misread Russia's foreign policy priorities, and unrealistically discounted the influence of similarities between the countries' two leaders and the dynamics of domestic politics. Ankara was quick to realize its mistake. Despite taking considerable blows, and amidst some naïve rhetoric, Ankara choose to take a de-escalatory tone, even imposing limits on Turkish Air Force reconnaissance flights in the Black Sea. However, it should also be noted that at some level,

Russia also seems to be still compartmentalizing. At the start of the crisis, Gazprom was quick to announce there would not be any sanctions on gas — none explicitly related to the incident at least. Also, despite Russia imposing heavy and potentially consequential economic sanctions on Turkey, as in the case of the tourism industry, right before these sanctions came into force in full, Russia cleared the way for 53 Turkish companies with considerable investments in Russia to receive new employment permits.

At present, as Turkish-Russian relations reach a nadir, Turkey is losing its leverage in Syria and is watching as Russia hammers the groups that it supports, including the Bayırbucak Turkmens, a group of Turkish origin. Turkey is also losing ground in Iraq, and Turkey's

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regional rivals are seizing the moment. At a time when regional Kurdish actors are gaining more international recognition and momentum, and both the United States and Russia treating the Democratic Union Party and People's Protection Units (both Kurdish groups in Syria associated with the PKK) as primary and legitimate ground forces in the anti-ISIS effort, Turkey is facing a precarious situation with its own Kurdish issue. Additionally, Russia could also intervene in Kurdish matters. Also, the risk of a Russian military response could render Syrian territory inaccessible for Turkey, so an emerging Kurdish belt could isolate Ankara from the rest of the region. Turkey's ability to contribute to anti-ISIS coalition and balance the activities of PKK-related groups in northern Syria is limited. Supranational and subnational identity politics, the enablers of Turkey's penetration strategy, are becoming

international in tandem with its regional rivalries. Given the present circumstances, Turkey's ability to control these identities is limited. This is a disruptive development for Turkey, with possible grave domestic implications.

Back to Basics

Since 2009, the ruling Justice and Development Party has increasingly tried to stretch the limits of Turkey's autonomy in foreign policy. Syria policy in particular has been a constant test of the limits of this much-treasured autonomy, even though these limits are set by the country's objective capacity on the international stage. A potentially transformative crisis, such as the one facing the Middle East now, does not provide a conducive environment for testing those limits.

Turkey is now in a situation where it is rediscovering the value of its transatlantic ties. Ankara should realistically base its foreign and defense policies on this premise, and work more closely with its transatlantic partners in Syria and elsewhere. Ankara seems to have learned this lesson, since the first thing the government did right after the Russian plane was downed was to call for an emergency NATO meeting — a move that is said to have enraged Putin. Expectedly, and despite the chafing in some NATO capitals, the Alliance has made it clear from the start that it will back Turkey, and even sent warships to the Eastern Mediterranean and German aircraft to İncirlik Airbase in southern Turkey. However, for Moscow the spat was much deeper. Consolidating its Syria policy was just an extension of a larger foreign policy strategy that included Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere. While "Turkey bashing" is a popular sport nowadays for the Kremlin, it was Washington and Brussels that Russia was actually talking to. In that regard, NATO's membership invitation to Montenegro in December 2015 also helped keep Moscow at bay retaliating against Turkey, reminding the Kremlin of the wider picture.

Considering that the eastern Mediterranean is no longer “NATO’s” as it was during the crisis in Libya in 2011, a comprehensive agreement in Cyprus might be another opportunity for strengthening Turkey’s transatlantic ties, provided that it echoes robustly with the EU and Greek Cypriots. A solution in Cyprus may serve as an additional conduit for Turkey’s relations with its transatlantic partners and enhance NATO’s security in the eastern Mediterranean. Also, as Turkey coordinates more with its allies, it is possible that Ankara could develop new relations with opposition groups in Syria, including the Kurds, who seem to be bent on undercutting Turkey’s redline of crossing the west bank of Euphrates River.

Despite its geographic proximity, Ankara is risking marginalization in Syria. Being left out of the Syrian endgame entirely is not an option for the country, and softening its tone against Damascus is hard to swallow. However, as there is no domestic, regional, and systemic momentum for Ankara’s current policies, and with at least some of its policies unpopular even with its allies, Ankara might find it difficult to resuscitate its Syria policy without drastically changing the dynamics. As things stand today, it seems hard to believe that Turkey might get back to the Syrian table without biting the proverbial bullet. Such an attempt probably involves making some amends with Russia, and Turkey hopes that its de-escalatory approach would serve to do that.

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