

Turkey Needs Help from its Allies

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Turkey has woken up to a traumatic day with 33 Turkish soldiers killed in Idlib overnight by an airstrike reportedly conducted by Syrian jets. Normally, such an attack against Turkish troops would incite unified public uproar against the perpetrator, but not this time. The Turkish government's reluctance to inform the public in a timely manner about the incident has added to the dissonance. Western allies may have all reasons to say "we told you so," but they should not. Such callousness will not be forgotten and will certainly not help those that have been swimming against the current to defend Turkey's transatlantic orientation. Support from allies on such a difficult day will also not be forgotten, but allies should avoid creating false expectations that will lead to frustration.

While both Ankara and Moscow have pointed toward the Syrian regime as the perpetrator, there is no doubt that Assad could not take such a decision without Russia's support. One may wonder why Putin turned his back on Erdoğan after Turkey has delivered so much to Russia: the Akkuyu nuclear plant, Turkish Stream, and the S-400 purchase. But for those of us who have been arguing that Turkey and Russia were not strategically compatible, it comes as no surprise. Turkey-Russian rapprochement has nothing to do with shared strategic interests and that the relationship was bound to falter.

As Şaban Kardaş explained in his recent German Marshall Fund On Turkey series piece (Uncertainty, Power, and Rethinking Turkish-U.S. Relations after S-400 Debacle), rapprochement with Russia was driven by the combination of frustration with the West at the state level and fear of the West at the individual level. The West's insensitivity to Turkey's security interests frustrated the Turkish state, while President Erdoğan and many of his followers feared that there were efforts in the United States to remove him from the office. Cooperation with Russia would make it possible to address Turkish security concerns in Syria vis-a-vis the PKK in a way that was not possible in cooperation with the United States, and for Erdoğan, Russia represented a counterbalancing ally against the threat he perceived from the United States.

Russia's helping hand to Turkey and President Erdoğan came at a modest fee, including the S-400 sale and the agreement on the TurkStream Project on terms that are favorable for Russia. With these deals Russia not only made significant financial gains, but also inserted a wedge between Turkey and its western allies. The arrangement penetrated Turkish politics so well that, for a while, criticizing Russia was equated with treason.

But now that Russia has already reaped the gains, it has no reason to accommodate Turkish demands in Syria, which slow down the regime advance in strategic areas such as Idlib. From Turkey's perspective, the capture of Idlib by the regime forces is expected to create a humanitarian disaster and another influx of refugees to Turkey and through Turkey to Europe. This would create a political threat to President Erdoğan that is much

more concrete than the threat he perceives from the United States. Thus, the already weak foundation of the Turkey-Russian rapprochement has collapsed, bringing us to the conflict with Russia in Idlib.

The conflict in Idlib has led President Erdoğan to return to traditional allies

After the jet attack against the Turkish troops last night, Turkey immediately requested Article 4 consultations with NATO allies. It has already requested deployment of Patriot systems on Turkish soil from the United States. Particularly the latter puts Turkey in an awkward position after it purchased S-400 systems from Russia despite strong protests from the United States and other NATO allies and now is requesting the deployment of Patriot systems from the United States. Equally awkward are Turkey's threats to Europe that it will allow refugees to move on to Europe while simultaneously asking allies for help.

Despite this awkwardness, Turkey's NATO allies have so far demonstrated solidarity with Turkey, verbally. What actions they could take is a more complicated matter, given that this is clearly not an Article 5 situation. But there are some options. First, Patriot batteries, belonging to the United States or other allies, can be deployed to Turkey with the condition that Turkey will not activate the S-400 system as long as these Patriots are in Turkey. This could create a new window of opportunity for finding a lasting solution to the S-400 crisis. Second, allies could publicly commit to help Turkey shoulder the responsibility of potential refugees from Idlib. Third, allies could impose new sanctions on the Syrian regime for war crimes in Idlib. One would also assume that the U.S. Senate would not push for sanctions against Turkey under the current conditions. In return, Turkey should commit to deescalating the conflict in Idlib and commit to working in closer cooperation and coordination with NATO allies in the future.

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