

Position Papers

Implications of Downed Russian Jet on Turkey-Russia Relations



Al Jazeera Center for Studies

2 December 2015



Erdogan and Putin's countries share economic interests but diverge on political issues [AP]

Abstract

After Turkish fighter jets shot down a Russian warplane 24 November 2015, tensions between the two countries came to a head, particularly given their very different political positions on the Syrian issue. With Russia an ally of the Assad regime, and Turkey an ally of the opposition, the downed Russian jet has been the latest in a string of incidents that have threatened otherwise growing economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. This position paper argues that escalation of the tension between the two sides will have ramifications not only for the two parties involved, but also for the Syrian crisis.

Introduction

On the morning of 24 November 2015, two Turkish F-16s struck a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 that had invaded Turkish airspace near the Syrian border. In official statements afterwards, Turkey said it had issued ten warnings to the pilot of the Russian plane in less than five minutes, and that it was not the first time Russian warplanes had invaded Turkish airspace since the start of Russian air attacks on Syrian opposition positions to aid the Assad regime.

However, the downing of the Russian plane was not the start of tension over Syria between Russia and Turkey. Turkey has long been involved in the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime given the over 900 kilometres of its shared border with Syria, the support it has provided to opposition fighters against Assad and the over two million registered Syrian refugees hosted by Turkey.

This latest incident not only illustrated just how complicated the Syrian issue has become, but also raised questions on the future of Turkey-Russia relations, particularly given their history of shared economic and trade interests. This position paper addresses the roots of the current crisis in Turkey-Russia relations and to what extent this incident will impact future relations between the two countries, particularly given that the last ten years saw a steady increase in economic and trade activity between the two countries.

Roots of tension

While Russia has been an ally to the Assad regime since the early days of the revolution, the start of its overt intervention on 30 September 2015 was a source of displeasure for Turkey and other countries supporting the Syrian opposition. For Turkish officials, the new phase of Russian air attacks on Syria was simply Russia use of Syria's miserable state as leverage in its conflict with the west.

Furthermore, while Russia had stated that the goal of the strikes was to fight terrorism, namely, the Islamic State (IS or Daesh), the reality is that it has been striking any opposition group fighting Assad, with only a small percentage of its operations actually against Daesh. Most recently, Russian strikes have focused on Jabal Turkman, a mountainous region north of Latakia on the Turkey-Syria border that is home mainly to Syria's Turkmen.

Two things are notable here. It is well-known that the Islamic State has no presence in Jabal Turkman, and that Turkey's foreign minister, after a high-level military security meeting with prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, had called Russia's foreign minister to protest Russia's attacks on Jabal Turkman and to warn Russia about its continued violations in Turkish airspace.

Reactions

Russia reacted to Turkey bringing down its warplane by accusing Turkey of "stabbing it in the back" in Russia's fight against terror, even going so far as to implicate Turkey as a supporter of Daesh and claiming Erdogan was implementing a project to "Islamicise" Turkey. In comments after the incident, Putin also promised revenge. Russia's foreign minister cancelled a previously-scheduled visit to Ankara, although he commented that Russia was not looking for a war with Turkey.

Turkey reacted by trying to contain the situation. Turkey's president, Erdogan, attempted to call Putin, however Putin refused to speak with him. When Turkey's foreign minister attempted to arrange a meeting with his Russian counterpart, the request was also refused. Reactions from Turkish officials can be summed up in four points. First, this was not a direct attack on Russia as Turkey did not even know it was a Russian plane when it was hit. Second and third, Turkey adamantly refused to apologise and stated a desire to prevent escalation as Russia is a "neighbour and friend". Lastly, Turkey made it clear that despite an aversion to escalation, it was still dissatisfied with Russia's attacks on the opposition and on civilians.

NATO's reaction was supportive of Turkey, as was the US reaction. However, all parties insisted that escalation of the tension was not desirable and would only complicate matters further. European reactions were particularly reserved and in favour of de-escalation, as the incident occurred only ten days after the Paris attacks claimed by Daesh, with European considerations to buy into Russia's "war on terror narrative" if Russia would focus only on stamping out Daesh (and not Syrian opposition groups) in Syria.

Possible outcomes

There are a number of possible outcomes after the downing of the Russian plane. The first is that Russia and Turkey engage militarily. It should be noted that in the days after the incident, Russia significantly increased attacks on the Jabal Turkman region. However, this scenario is not very likely, particularly given Turkey's membership in NATO and Russia's awareness that full-blown war with Turkey would translate into full-blown war with NATO, something Russia cannot commit to at this time.

The second scenario is more likely – Russian sanctions on Turkey. With trade volume between the two countries at 35 billion dollars, Turkey stands to lose more than Russia if trade between the two countries is interrupted. While Russia's foreign minister instructed all tourism to Turkey be stopped in the days after the incident, Russian travel agencies announced that they would continue booking trips to Turkey. Putin's decree (to go into effect 2016) that travel to Russia by Turks would now require a visa and that certain Turkish products could no longer be imported will have some economic impact, but it will be limited.

There is a remaining card that Russia may play militarily. It has already escalated attacks on the Syrian opposition supported by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but it is expected that Russia will reinforce its military relations with the Kurdish PYD units in north-eastern Syria. Turkey considers the PYD as an enemy force given its links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), so Russia is likely to use this group's military capabilities to retaliate against Turkey in Syria.

Risks of escalation

Turkey argues it shot down the plane according to clearly stated laws designed to protect their country's sovereignty. However, Russia viewed the incident as an aggressive offensive by Turkey. Either way, an escalation in the tension between Russia and Turkey will not just affect the two countries. It will undoubtedly have a negative impact on the Syrian people and exacerbate civilian suffering. In the days after the incident, Turkey's presidential spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, wrote in [the Daily Sabah](#):

"The downing of a Russian jet fighter over the violation of Turkish airspace is another casualty of the Syrian conflict. The incident has created short-term turbulence in Turkish-Russian relations but will not derail it. The relationship has enough depth and political-economic capital to overcome it".

To conclude, it is necessary for all parties to comprehend that the longer this tension lasts, the bigger the ramifications, economic or otherwise. A political solution in Syria will be the best exit strategy for all parties, including Russia.

**This is a condensed version of the Arabic position paper published here: <http://studies.aljazeera.net/positionestimate/2015/11/20151129111257760771.htm>.*

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