



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

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SHOOTING DOWN OF RUSSIAN SU-24: ESCALATION OF TENSIONS IN SYRIAN CRISIS

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Syria has become a region for proxy war as various factions and international actors have been actively involved aimed at promoting their interests. Due to the complex nature of the crisis, elimination of Islamic State (IS) has become an uphill task as collaboration between countries (Russia, Iran, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) is trounced by clash of foreign policy interests.

The recent shooting down of a Su-24 Russian warplane by Turkey (a pilot reportedly dead), has led to a further escalation of the Syrian crisis. In response to its action, Ankara stated that the Turkish F-16 shot down the Russian Su-24 jet after repeated warning for air space violations.¹ However, Russia has insisted that it had not violated any Turkish airspace. Interestingly, the Russian MoD denied that any warning was radioed (by the F-16) to the Russian Su-24.

With regard to exploring the relations between Russia and Turkey; the geographical location of both the countries makes them the members of the strategic system of Eurasia covering Central Asia, Middle-East, Caucasus and the northern Black Sea. While Russia's geographical proximity has not been a boon, especially with regard to access to sea routes, Turkey on the other hand, has enjoyed control over Balkans, Middle-East and Anatolia. Russia for long has a formulated foreign policy that favoured control over Black Sea, the Turkish Straits, the Marmara Sea and the Dardanelles.² Fearing possible Soviet invasion to gain control over the Black Sea resulted in Turkey becoming a NATO member. It was the precipitous decline in Russian economic and military capabilities that removed the spectre of the "Soviet threat" that was bothering the Turkish security elites. Thus, the disintegration of the Soviet Union however, revived the relations between the two countries.



Source:

http://www.eastgateministries.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=135&Itemid=66

Economic relations have been the true engine behind the strengthening of ties between the Russian Federation and Turkey in the post Cold War era. Russia now sees Turkey as a transit route for its energy resources as Russian natural gas is exported to European markets through Turkish territory. Turkey is also developing a growing dependency on Russian energy resources. Tourism, as well as construction and contracting work, are carried out by Turkish companies in Russia. Trade in Turkish agricultural products, light industrial goods, and textiles also play an important role. Factors that have shaped the current phase of economic interaction between the two countries are: Turkey's new found willingness to take advantage of its geographical location and its dependence on foreign energy markets. Turkey has cast itself as a bridge for the international transit of energy raw materials from Russia,

Transcaucasia, the Caspian Sea area, and potentially the Arab states to Europe and Israel.

However, both these countries are yet to achieve a full-fledged strategic partnership. Russia has often been sceptical of Turkish intentions as its western orientation and membership in NATO continues to influence its foreign policy behaviour. Turkey has time and again displayed this with the global and regional developments that have taken place post 9/11, Iraq war 2003 and currently, its role in the Syrian crisis.

The current developments in Syrian crisis have only made it evident that the relations between the two countries have ultimately plunged to its lowest. As retaliation to Turkey's action, Russia wasted no time in curbing the import of Turkish fruits and vegetables, while Russia's foreign ministry has advised the country's tourists to avoid Turkish resorts.³ In addition, Moscow has deployed the S-400 air defense system at Latakia, moved the Moskva guided-missile cruiser off the airbase and has decided to escort its bombers with the Su-30SM Flankers.⁴ So far, energy ties between the two countries haven't been affected. Turkey is second only to Germany as the buyer of Russian natural gas, accounting for nearly one-fifth of Russia's gas exports outside the former Soviet Union. Russia is also building Turkey's first nuclear power station, a project estimated at more than \$20 billion that is largely financed by Moscow.⁵

Coming at a sensitive moment, the ties between Moscow and Ankara are headed into a deep freeze. Russia has called the act as a 'stab in the back' and that it was a 'planned provocation' by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member- Turkey.⁶ President Putin has indicated that things between the countries could get much worse. One such threat for Turkey would be — Russia using the 'Kurdish card'. Historically, both Turkey and Russian Federation do not have a good track record in addressing the issue of terrorism but instead have blamed each other for supporting the acts of terrorism in each other's territory. Turkey had claimed that Russia supported the Kurdistan Workers' Party- Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK) terrorism in its land while Russia claimed that the Chechen terrorists' active involvement in its territory was supported by Turkey. Due to this, Russia used the "Kurdish Problem" as a "counter attack" to challenge Turkish interests in the region. In view of the current crisis of Islamist fundamentalism in Syria, Russia has claimed that Turkey is one of the client nations to the Islamic State illegal oil trade from its rightful owners— Syria and Iraq. One should not forget that accessing oil facilities is ISIS objective as it is one of the main sources of funding. Unless regional or international forces are able to take back Syrian and Iraqi oil fields from ISIS control and, more importantly, dismantle its regional oil smuggling operations, it would be an onerous task for countries like Russia to dislodge ISIS including revival of the oil prices. If sources are

to be believed, Turkey has been accused of buying oil from the black market provided by ISIS in Syria and Iraq which is becoming a dangerous concern. Turkey's actions have thus antagonised Russia.

The shooting down incident is feared to further escalate tensions in the Middle East. In his first official reaction to the downing of the war plane, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that, "Everyone must respect the right of Turkey to protect its borders".⁷ However, one cannot ignore the confidence behind the decision by Erdogan to shoot down the Russian Su-24 aircraft. This is seen by many as no 'error of judgment' but a calculated move by the 'provocateur' Turkey also a member of NATO. As **Article 5**⁸ of NATO states that an attack on one ally shall be considered an attack on all Allies, it is widely speculated that this may be one of the reasons for Turkey's brazenness.

The broader intent of Turkey in Syria however, should also be mentioned as analysts are of the opinion that Mr. Erdogan has several calculated but nuanced reasons for his act to permit Turkish pilots to shoot down the Russian SU-24. Firstly, the spreading of nationalist fervor could help Mr. Erdogan gain the support in parliament for his plan to revamp the constitution and establish an executive presidency.⁹ Secondly, the joint Russian-Iranian military operation in Syria against the ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (the Syrian division of al-Qaeda), and other radical organizations¹⁰ is bearing fruit.

. Moreover, Russia and Iran have been a vital defender of Bashar al-Assad regime. This has virtually wrecked Ankara's desire of ousting the government of Assad and the defeat of Turkey-backed rebels so that they have a say in the future of Syria." ¹¹ Thirdly, Ankara has traditionally expressed solidarity with Syrian Turks, who are Syrians of Turkish descent. Friction between Ankara and Moscow has intensified over alleged Russian airstrikes on Syrian villages dominated by Turks.¹²

Russia's effective role throughout the Syrian conflict is guided by the following factors:

Preservation of Russian Interests in Syria: Russia has strong defence ties with Syria since the Soviet period. Russia operates a small naval base at Tartus on the Mediterranean Sea and is its only other warm water port apart from Sevastopol in Crimea. Russia absolved Syria of \$9.8 billion of its \$13.4 billion debt in exchange for making Tartus a permanent Russian military base.¹³ Russia's mammoth defence industrial complex needs flow of funds to remain in the global defence market competition. Moscow would want to continue as Syria's strong defence partner as it has nearly \$2 billion worth defence deals with Syria. Russia will continue to support the Assad regime- a pro-Russian government to preserve its interests and to establish its footprint in the geopolitics of the Middle East.

Foothold in Middle East Geopolitics: One of the reasons for Russia's ardent support to Assad

regime is to have a pro-Russian government and establish a strong foothold in the ongoing struggle for co-dominance and geopolitical competition in the Middle East. Fortunately for the Kremlin, its involvement in the conflict has been welcomed by many of the Middle Eastern countries. This has threatened America's influence in the regional geopolitical calculations. 'Anti- ISIS' operation in Syria has helped Russia emerge as a heavyweight while the miscalculations of the US and its support to 'moderate' rebels is widely criticised. The US and the coalition forces have been widely criticised for their alleged role in destabilising the security of the region by providing huge financial support and military equipments to anti-Assad forces.

Economic Growth and Image Building: Post Ukraine imbroglio, sanction politics has severely hit Russian economy and the oil prices. The country is desperate to revive its economy and international image. Russian economist Sergei Guriev estimated that by March this year, Russia had already spent half its 2015 military budget. Meanwhile, some of Russia's biggest companies are verging on default.¹⁴ Thus, removing of sanctions on Russian companies and the need for higher oil prices will eventually grant Russia the much needed boost to continue its hold on energy markets. Russia's military engagement to combat ISIS has helped in distracting the prying eyes of the world from Ukraine crisis and the world is gradually embracing Russia's resurgence in global affairs.

Boost to Russia's Military Industrial Complex and Defence Forces: In the post Cold War era, Russia's military sphere has often been under the scanner of Western countries as it had to a large extent failed to make any impact compared to that of the Soviet era. Despite tasting success in Chechnya war (1999) and Georgia War (2008), the military performance of Russia was largely criticised for its outdated and low efficient military equipment and weak armed forces. However, with a resurgent Russia and successful military modernisation process, good performance of Russian defence forces, military manoeuvres, air attacks and Russian convoy of game-changing missiles and precision strikes of its cruise missiles have bolstered Russian defence forces' morale and more importantly its position in global defence markets. Russia's military engagement in Syria has come as a blessing in disguise as the world has taken note of its modern weapons system. Many of the Middle Eastern countries have begun to show keen interest in buying Russian weapons systems including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁵ A development of this level can be seen as a payoff to Russian efforts to revive its military industrial complex and its global defence market position.

It is true that the shooting down of Russian Su-24 has further threatened the very security architecture of the volatile Middle East. But, leaders of the world including President Putin have been rational actors who have often

stressed the need for a stable and secure global environment. Despite the brewing tensions between Russia and Turkey, the need of the hour is a moratorium on action that will further destabilise the Middle East. In terms of security and stability of Europe and Eurasian region, much is needed from the emerging contours of Russia-Turkey relations which have been aiming for establishing new regional arrangements which could secure economic and energy markets. Hence, it is in this direction that Russia and Turkey strive towards de-escalation of tensions that is hovering in the Middle East. Any miscalculation from either side or from its coalition forces will have serious repercussions not only in the Middle East but also to the global security environment.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹Hugh Naylor and Andrew Roth, "NATO Faces New Mideast Crisis after Downing of Russian Jet by Turkey", *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-downs-russian-military-aircraft-near-syrias-border/2015/11/24/9e8e0c42-9288-11e5-8aa0-5d0946560a97_story.html accessed on November 26, 2015

² Bülent Gökay, "Soviet Eastern Policy and Turkey 1920-1991", Routledge Publishers, 2006. Pg.83

³ N.3

⁴ Ibid

⁵ N.3

⁶ Don Melvin, Jethro Mullen and Zeynep Bilginsoy, "Tensions Rise as Russia Says It's Deploying Anti-Aircraft

Missiles to Syria", CNN, November 26, 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/25/middleeast/syria-turkey-russia-warplane-shot-down/index.html?sr=fbcnni112515syria-turkey-russia-warplane-shot-down0950AMVODtopLink&linkId=19038719> accessed on November 28, 2015

⁷Liz Burke, "Why did Turkey shoot down Russian fighter jet?", NT News, November 25, 2015. <http://www.ntnews.com.au/news/world/why-did-turkey-shoot-down-russian-fighter-jet/story-fnjbobed-1227621942667> accessed on November 26, 2015

⁸ **NATO** invoked **Article 5** of the Washington Treaty for the first time in its history following the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States.

⁹ Keith Bradshar, "Range of Frustrations Reached Boil as Turkey Shot Down Russian Jet", *The NDTV*, November 26, 2015. <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/range-of-frustrations-reached-boil-as-turkey-shot-down-russian-jet-1247682?pfom=home-lateststories> accessed on November 26, 2015

¹⁰ Vladimir Evseev, "The real significance of Putin's visit to Tehran", Russia Direct, November 24, 2015. http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/real-significance-putins-visit-tehran?utm_source=Russia+Direct+free+weekly+newsletters&utm_campaign=02fcc94b18-RD_Newsletter_nov_26_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_cd2cf54b82-02fcc94b18-78576113 accessed on November 26, 2015

¹¹Bradshar, n.7

¹² NATO Faces New Mideast Crisis after Downing Of Russian Jet by Turkey", *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-downs-russian-military-aircraft-near-syrias-border/2015/11/24/9e8e0c42-9288-11e5-8aa0-5d0946560a97_story.html accessed on November 26, 2015

¹³ Daniel Tovrov, "Russia's Arms Deals with Syria: A Timeline", *International Business Times*, May 30, 2012. <http://www.ibtimes.com/russias-arms-deals-syriatimeline-705522> accessed on September 10, 2015

¹⁴ Halman W Jenkins, Jr, "Turkey Shoots Down a Paper Tiger", *The Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-shoots-down-a-paper-tiger-1448406008> accessed on November 26, 2015

¹⁵ Christopher Harress, "Saudi Arabia And Russia Military Teaming Up? Riyadh Wants Russian Weapons After Years Of Buying From The Pentagon", *International Business*

Times, August 10, 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.com/saudi-arabia-russia-military-teaming-riyadh-wants-russian-weapons-after-years-buying-2046488> accessed on November 28, 2015