The Downing of the Russian Warplane by Turkey

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Since 2011, civil war has beset Syria whilst the spectre of a spillover effect that would directly entangle more countries in the conflict has been haunting the whole region. The recent incident of the downing of the Russian bomber Su-24 by the Turkish Airforce on 24 November 2015\(^1\) that allegedly violated for 17 seconds the Turkish national airspace\(^2\) has added more fuel in the flames of the war-torn area. The breaking news of the shooting down of the Russian warplane rattled the international community that nervously followed a series of stern pronouncements by both sides.

Russian airstrikes in Syria – since late September 2015\(^3\) – have been hailed by the Syrian President Bashar-al-Assad whilst the U.S. has officially castigated Moscow’s intervention.\(^4\) Russian officials announced that the raids have diminished the military capabilities of the Islamic State (IS)\(^5\) whereas various states claim that these are mostly against Assad’s opponents.\(^6\) Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the sanguinary terrorist attack in Paris, French President Hollande agreed with his Russian counterpart to cooperate more closely in their fight against the Islamic State.\(^7\) On the other hand, Turkey officially participates in the western coalition against IS by launching airstrikes in Syria since August 2015.\(^8\) Thus, despite their dispute about the fate of the Syrian President, both countries – Russia and Turkey – ostensibly fight against a common enemy, IS.

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\(^2\) The details of the alleged violation of the Turkish national airspace are described in detail in the official letter dated 24 November 2015 (2015/10165510, New York) of the Permanent Representative, Mr Halit Cevik to the UN.
In this context, some basic questions are raised. Why Turkey shot down the Russian warplane? Is their acute disagreement over the succession of the Syrian President strong enough to induce this incident? Or worse, does the violation of the Turkish national airspace per se, occurred in a parallel trajectory to the Turkish borders\(^9\) – a fact that itself manifested the intentions of the Russian bombers\(^10\) – and only for 17 seconds, in accordance to the Turkish officials, legitimise the Turkish authorities to proceed to such an aggressive military act? In this framework, I have to bring to mind the double standards of the Turkish foreign policy. Admittedly – by Turkish officials as well – the Turkish fighter jets violate almost every day the Greek national airspace over the Aegean Sea; however the Greek air defence has never reacted in the same way as Turks did regarding the Russian bomber.\(^11\) Moreover, in 2012 when Syrian air defence shot down a Turkish fighter that violated the Syrian national airspace the then Turkish President Abdullah Gul claimed there was no excuse for such an outrageous act as this type of short-time violations are considered as “routine”(sic).\(^12\)


\(^10\) There are some indications in the Airforce world that combined signify the intentions of unknown even foe fighters such as trajectory, velocity (speed) and altitude.


Taking into account the aforementioned, the violation of the Turkish airspace seems to be just a pretext, whilst there are other profound reasons for the downing of the Russian warplane. Ankara sought the active involvement of NATO in the Syrian conflict and in her dispute with Russia. NATO’s intervention would have strengthened Turkish position to the detriment of Russia and the Assad’s regime. Thus, the establishment of a friendly to Turkey Syrian regime would have easily materialised. Furthermore, this development would have possibly legitimised Turkey to actively intervene in Syria with ground troops in order to secure a safe buffer zone in her southern borders. This action would have aimed at a twofold objective: firstly it would have more decisively protected and supported the Turkmen minority that is considered to be ethnically related to Turkey whilst at the same time remains a sworn foe of the Assad regime; concomitantly Ankara would have thwarted Kurdish attempts to gain overall control of the Syrian northern borderland. Turkey’s vehement opposition to a likely Kurdish state has to do with the territorial integrity and the national security of the country. Furthermore and in the long-term, Turkey could use the Turkmen minority to legitimise any territorial claims in Syria and a likely annexation of Syrian soil as it did in the case of Alexandretta, that has been annexed by Turkey since 1939. The exploitation of minorities for its own ends and especially for territorial expansion constitutes a common phenomenon of the Turkish foreign policy; the Cyprus case is another striking example. Thus, the downing of the Russian warplane was a conscious act of the Turkish state in order to serve and promote its interests.

Russia did not rise to the bait and refrained from military retaliations. In that way, NATO’s active involvement has been instrumentally evaded. President Putin’s reaction, albeit a vehement one, proved once again his cold-blooded strategic thinking, meaning the ability to focus on his primary objectives without being distracted as he exactly did during the Crimea crisis. Additionally, Moscow exploited the most the unexpected downing of its bomber. Apart from legitimately reinforcing its contingent in Syria and thus further strengthening its foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean, she has deployed the S-400 air defence system, the extremely long range of which covers the airspace of Israel, the Eastern Mediterranean (including Cyprus British airbase at Akrotiri in Cyprus), and large part of southeastern Turkey beyond the Syrian border.

However, this is considered as an adverse development for the whole US-coalition against IS. Close coordination and cooperation with Russia is now considered a dire necessity for the avoidance of any type of air-accidents, either collisions or unintentional downing. In fact Turkey, in an attempt to overturn the situation to her benefit, achieved exactly the opposite.

The power game in Syria apart from being territorial and a matter of national security comprises also the control of the regional energy resources along with the southern corridors of energy supply. Turkey aims to be an energy hub whilst Russia strives to protect its hegemonic position. The latter has established a strong foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean for the first time in the recent history, whereas the former has proved unpredictable and unreliable partner for her allies. A number of American strategists re-evaluated in the past the strategic role of Turkey by

characterizing her as a partly rogue state.\textsuperscript{19} Recent facts have just amplified the foregoing assessment.