

An Invisible US Hand Leading to War? Turkey's Downing of a Russian Jet was an Act of Madness

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In considering the terrifying but also sadly predictable news of a Russian fighter jet being downed by two Turkish fighters, let's start with one almost certain assumption — an assumption that no doubt is also being made by the Russian government: Turkey's action, using US-supplied F-16 planes, was taken with the full knowledge and advance support of the US. In fact, given Turkey's vassal status as a member of US-dominated NATO, it could well be that Ankara was put up to this act of brinkmanship by the US.

What makes the downing of the Russian jet, and the reported death of at least one of its two pilots (the other was reportedly captured alive by pro-turkish Turkmen fighters on the Syrian side of the Syria-Turkish border, and will presumably be returned to Russia) so dangerous is that as a member of NATO, supposedly a “mutual assistance” treaty that binds all members to come to the defense of one that is attacked, if Russia were to retaliate by downing a Turkish military plane, NATO countries including the US would be obligated to come to Turkey's defense.

Russia knows this, and that is why so far the Russian response to the downing has been muted. Had it been a Jordanian, Saudi or Kuwaiti jet that downed the Russian SU-24, Russia's response would have been instantaneous. The guilty party would have had some of its planes shot down, or perhaps even bombed on the ground. But President Putin so far has limited himself to demanding a meeting, to warning that Russian-Turkish economic relations would be threatened, etc.

This restraint is good, but clearly, Vladimir Putin will not stop there. Even putting aside domestic considerations (imaging the public clamor for a military response here in the US if some small country shot down a US plane!), he will have to respond or his whole project — so far stunningly successful — of restoring Russia to its pre-USSR-collapse position as a global power, would be a failure.

Putin's options are actually quite broad, though some carry considerably more risk for everyone, not just for Russia and Turkey. He could have his own air

force in Syria, where Russia is legally acting at the request of the Syrian government to defend it against rebel forces of ISIS and Al Nusra, some of which are backed by both Turkey and the US, calmly wait for a Turkish military jet to cross into Syrian airspace. At that point it could be downed by Russian planes or missiles. No doubt Turkey will be extraordinarily careful going forward to have its pilots keep well away from Syrian air space too avoid that, but it could happen. My guess is that Russian fighter pilots and anti-aircraft batteries in Syria already have their marching orders to take that action, which probably would not

activate NATO confrontation with Russia and lead to World War III, as long as there was reasonable evidence that Turkey's plane was in Syrian airspace.

But should no such opportunity present itself, Russia has plenty of other opportunities to counter Turkey. Remember, Russia is also defending Syria's coastline, and could sink or capture a Turkish ship that entered Syrian waters (or Russian waters in the Black Sea, which borders both countries).

Russia — knowing that this is really not about Turkey, but about push-back by the US against growing Russian power and influence, both globally and in the Middle East region — could also choose to respond in a venue where it has more of an advantage, for example in Ukraine, where it could amp up its support for the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, perhaps by downing a Ukrainian military plane, or more broadly, providing air cover to protect those regions. Russia could also, less directly, provide aid to Kurdish rebels in both Syria and in Turkey itself who are fighting against Turkish forces.

I'm sure there are plenty of other options available to Russia also to turn the screws against both Turkey and NATO, without openly pushing buttons that could lead to a direct confrontation with the US and its NATO fiction. Working in Russia's favor is that the US aside, the European nations of NATO have no desire to be at war with Russia. There are clearly hotheads in the US Congress, the Pentagon, and perhaps even within the neo-con-infested Obama administration, who are pushing for just such a mad showdown. But in Europe, where the actual fighting would mostly occur, and where memories are still strong of the destructive power of war, there is no taste for such insanity. It could, in fact, have been a big error in the long run for the US to push Turkey into such a deadly provocation, if it leads to more anti-American sentiment among the citizens of such key NATO countries as France, Germany, Italy and Britain.

It should be added that Russia and China have become much closer in recent years, economically, politically and militarily. This means there is also the possibility that the two countries could, in concert, step up pressure on the US in the western Pacific, for example by forcing down one of the provocative US flights near China's new island projects in the South China Sea. That would force an already stretched US military to shift more forces to Asia from Europe and the Middle East.

It is all terribly dangerous and it is hard to predict where things will lead. One thing seems certain, though. This outrageous shutdown of a Russian plane that was in no way posing a threat to Turkey or Turkish forces, will not end here, because Russia and President Putin cannot allow Turkey and NATO to so blatantly act against Russia and its pilots and go unpunished, particularly as it is Russia that is acting legally in Syria, while the US, Turkey and other nations backing rebel forces there are in all acting blatant violation of international law.

Unless saner heads start prevailing in Washington, this could all quickly spiral into the kind of situation in 1914, where a lot of ill-conceived treaties led to a minor incident in the Balkans turning inexorably into World War I.

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