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Showdown on the Syrian Border

By Vijay Prashad
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Impossible to ignore the grave implications of this event – a Russian jet shot down by the Turks around the Syrian-Turkish border.

Stern faces all round as NATO’s military council meets to discuss the first time in decades that a member nation has shot down a Russian plane.

Russia’s President Putin calls the Turkish government “accomplices of terrorism”.

Tensions mount and uncertainty prevails. Will the Russians retaliate? If so, how?

Further clashes between Turkey and Russia would not be wise. Even NATO called for calm. Such tensions would play directly into the hands of the Islamic State group. The more distractions in its compass, the easier for IS to regroup for its next assault in Iraq-Syria.

Too many great powers are now involved in Iraq and Syria, with far too little coordination.

The French flagship aircraft carrier –*Charles De Gaulle* – is in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. It has launched missile strikes on IS-held regions in Iraq. US airstrikes have been launched from Turkey, from the Gulf states and from the Indian Ocean.

The Russians have been hitting IS and regional proxies from their Syrian bases and from naval vessels in the Caspian Sea.

The flight path of these deadly weapons and their aircraft crisscross in the skies above Iraq and Syria. The fate of the Sukhoi SU-24 had been sealed earlier, not merely by Turkish warnings, but by congestion. De-escalation talks between the US and the Russians have been useful, but not foolproof.

The great powers might not agree on the fate of Assad, but they are in agreement about the problem of IS. During Obama and Putin's 35-minute powwow at the G20 summit in Antalya, Turkey, they agreed that the threat of IS united them – but they disagreed on tactics.

“Tactics” has come to mean Assad – what is the assessment of his role in the near term? Russia and Iran insist that Assad's regime must have a place in the political process. The US, with its Gulf partners and Turkey, say that this should not be the case.

The question of Assad is only part of the problem. Even more grave is the planetary conflict between the West and Eurasia.

This is exemplified in the eastward march of NATO and the tension in the South China Sea between the US and China.

The way the Chinese and the Russians see it, the West is committed to an encirclement of Eurasia. This is seen in Beijing and Moscow as a provocation. Tension over that encirclement deters any easy management of the problem in Syria. Anti-Russian, or at least anti-Putin, sentiment is high in the West.

Syria has become the battleground of these ambitions. It is a reminder of the Cold War era, when hot wars took place in the darker nations – against the wider interests of the people in the region. No Syrian has gained from this conflict. It has spiralled out of the ledger of Syrian history and into that of great power history.

Turkey's imbroglio

Turkey, meanwhile, remains ambivalent in its commitment to the war against IS. It too has fighter aircraft in the air, but not to bomb IS.

Turkey has been bombing the bases of the Kurdish militias which have had the most battlefield success against IS. The Turkish border, now closed to Syrian refugees – as reported by Human Rights Watch – is not closed to IS fighters or to fighters of the extremist proxy armies, some overtly supported by Turkey and the Gulf states.

Turkey had taken the most extreme position on the Syrian conflict in 2011 – calling very early for Assad to go. Turkish intelligence knew then that it would not be easy for the rebels – however well armed – to break the Syrian military and its political apparatus.

Defections had been few from both the army and the political side. US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford's presence at the rallies, including in Hama, sent a message that the US would back the rebellion to the hilt.

It was, however, clear – after the NATO bombing of Libya – that such a US campaign was not to happen. Without massive US bombing, the Syrian government would not be defeated. At that time, the sensible option – in terms of loss of life – would have been to seek an immediate political solution.

But Turkey went to the next level with support to armed extremist proxies. It has not been able to back down since.

On Turkish television, the new term of art is “moderate jihadist” (*ilimli cihatcilar*). In the Turkish-Syrian borderlands, where the Sukhoi was brought down, operates the Sultan Abdülhamit Brigade.

This Brigade is a Turkmen detachment, trained by the Turkish Special Forces. It is known for its collaboration with the Army of Conquest and with al-Qaeda's Nusra Front. This is one of the Turkish proxies.

Syria's army has advanced with Russian airstrikes on their redoubts in northwestern Syria. The Brigade has called upon Turkey to help them. The Russian pilots parachuted into the arms of these fighters, who reportedly shot them dead as they drifted down. Could it be that Turkey indeed tried to come to their aid? This will need further investigation.

It is feasible to suggest that Turkey's threats to Russian aircraft and its warning at October's NATO council meeting set the stage for an ultimatum to the United States.

If Turkey calls for the implementation of a Chapter V resolution based on the NATO Charter, then the US has to come to its defence. In 1961, the CIA – under Allen Dulles – sent a ragtag bunch of Cuban rebels to the Bay of Pigs.

The CIA knew that the rebels would be defeated. The point was to use the rebels as a mean to pressure President John F Kennedy to launch a full-scale aerial assault and marine landing on Cuba.

Kennedy held fast against the pressure. He refused to start World War III.

Turkey might be reckless enough to try a Bay of Pigs on its border. Obama – as sober as Kennedy – would likely not be drawn in once again. He had stayed away after the chemical weapon attack; he will stay away now. In his brief statement, he backed Turkey's right to defend itself, but then asked for calm.

Putin called for a UN Security Council meeting. Jordan is the only Arab country on the council. Jordan's King Abdullah met with Putin at Sochi on Tuesday. The UNSC will wade into this dispute. It needs to counsel peace.