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## Ankara's Belligerent Gamble

By Binoy Kampmark  
December 25, 2015



“If you invite a bear to dance, it’s not you who decides when the dance is over.”

— Cengiz Bandar

So much has been put into it, and one can only imagine that some of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s officials are troubled by what is becoming something they can barely handle. That is the dilemma with miscalculating power, a dangerous possession to have at the best of times.

Students of Turkish-Russian history will hardly be taken aback at the recent jousting that has taken place between Moscow and Ankara. Relations between the states in their respective forms since the 1600s have often been frosty. Wars have been fought, and regional power plays engineered. But both have also shown periods of accord, notably during the Cold War when Turkey started feeling less accommodating to its Western allies.

The shooting down of the Russian Su-24 fighter jet, the first time a Russian warplane has been downed by a NATO member since November 1952, was bound to unleash a range of consequences, and these have tended to conform to the historical set: threats, sanctions, cutting off ties.

Accounts from both sides differ, with Moscow insisting it was an intentional hostile act by the Turkish air force, and Ankara begging to differ. On Wednesday, Russian Defence Ministry spokesman, Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov insisted that the November 24 incident was planned, claiming Turkish sources as good authority. President Vladimir Putin has been typically more colourful, insisting that the act was occasioned by Ankara's desire to lick "the Americans in a certain place."

Turkey's response made via an unnamed government official? "The Russians originally complained that Turkey had involved NATO in a bilateral dispute. Now they're saying we conspired with Washington to shoot down their aircraft. To be honest, we don't understand why they would make contradictory remarks." [1]

In a broader sense, they have ignited fears of a great power standoff, notably centred on Syria. It is frequent these days to hear statements such as those of Turkey's Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu: "Syrian lands are not, and will not be, a part of Russia's imperialist goals." [2]

The action is, however, calamitous for the future regional requirements in the region. Russia has shown that it will be a member of any agreement dealing with Syria. The Turkish regime has shown itself to be distinctly opposed to any situation where the Assad regime might feature, suggesting that Moscow has no business to insist otherwise.

Friendships are being strained; enemies are being riled. But there is a fundamental double stance here. Ankara persists in its determination to attack the PKK or the Kurdistan Worker's Party, even as it attempts to overthrow Assad while providing token resistance against Islamic State. The result, as Sputnik News put it, was the "waging of war on two fronts", one being "cold war" with Moscow, and an ever persistent hot war with the PKK. [3]

The ploy is something that is bound to backfire. For one, it makes the backing of the PKK ever more inviting from those who wish to see its support bolstered. Russia, inserting itself into the situation, naturally takes a more sympathetic view to the Kurds, who are doing something invaluable to the broader cause against such enemies of Moscow as Islamic State.

The consequences for Turkey in this regard could be significant. On December 23, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was welcoming Selahattin Demirtaş, co-chairman of the foremost Kurdish political party in Turkey, the HDP. The announcement for the meeting was

made by Demirtaş deep in Diyarbakir, a southeastern province in Turkey which has borne witness to battles between Turkish and Kurdish forces. Rather cleverly, he has managed to hitch the case for Kurdish autonomy to the anti-authoritarian cause, much to the consternation of such figures as Davutoğlu.[4]

The Chairman of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, was even less diplomatic, suggesting that the HDP “is working with Turkey’s enemies and does not see a drawback to leaning its back on countries whose aims are clear, so as to garner their support for autonomy and Kurdistan.”

Moscow also sees a chance for some tactical snorting in the face of Ankara. It was only recently that Russia decided to openly support the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party’s militia, otherwise known as the People’s Protection Units, in its battle against Islamic State, though Syrian Kurds have been very wary to openly endorse this support.[5] Within Turkey, the PYD, which controls much of the north and northeast of Syria at this point in time, are considered PKK affiliates.

The internal issue for Ankara will be far more destabilising. In seeking a broader Middle Eastern agenda that pushes Moscow out, the result may well be an unintentional empowerment of local forces within the country on the one hand, and the bolstering of its external enemies. Continued belligerence over the jet fighter incident has scented the world wind.

#### **Notes.**

[1] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-suggests-turkey-planned-downing-of-warplane-1450899609>

[2] <http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2015/12/23/hdps-demirtas-meets-russian-fm-lavrov-despite-harsh-criticism>

[3] <http://sputniknews.com/politics/20151222/1032163871/erdogan-humiliating-defeat-ankara-moscow.html>

[4] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/hdp-co-leader-justifies-declarations-of-autonomy-as-fight-against-the-dictatorship.aspx?PageID=238&NID=92890&NewsCatID=338>

[5] <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/why-pro-kurdish-russia-infuriates-turkey-320615>