

CHAPTER 7

THREAT AND COOPERATION: SYRIA IN RUSSO-TURKISH RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In the early part of the 21st century, Turkey and Russia emerged as natural allies united around a few important issues of bilateral interest, namely, security and military navigation in the Black Sea, export of natural gas, cooperation in the energy sector, and combatting extremism. However, bilateral troubles have increased between Turkey and Russia since Moscow introduced combat troops to Syria in September 2015 and engaged in action to support the Syrian regime. Although Turkey expressed bewilderment as to the reasons of the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war, Moscow underlined several very good reasons to side with the Assad government. The most important cause for Russian involvement is to become an important player in the Middle East and to influence the future balance of threats in the region.

The current chapter seeks to explain contemporary relations between Turkey and Russia, with specific attention to the key stages in the bilateral ties that have recently oscillated between close cooperation and violent conflict. The analysis presented here is guided by the balance of threat theory. In other words, we pay attention to certain epistemological aspects of the theory in explaining foreign policy behavior of both the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation in matters of bilateral interests. The main argument of this chapter is that the processes in contemporary Russo-Turkish bilateral relations have been informed by threats, real or perceived, emanating from the civil war in Syria.

Keywords: International Relations, Turkey, Russia, Syrian Civil War

Introduction

The current chapter seeks to explain contemporary relations between Turkey and Russia, with specific attention paid to the key stages in the bilateral ties that have recently oscillated between close cooperation and violent conflict. The analysis presented here is guided by the balance of threat theory, namely, we pay attention to certain epistemological aspects of the theory in explaining the foreign policy behavior of both Turkey and the Russian Federation in matters of bilateral interests. The main argument of this chapter is that the processes in contemporary Russo-Turkish bilateral relations have been informed by threats, real or perceived, emanating from the civil war in Syria. The bilateral troubles between Turkey and Russia started after Moscow introduced combat troops to Syria in September 2015 and engaged in action in support of the Syrian regime. Although the Turkish leadership expressed bewilderment as to the reasons of the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war, Moscow had a number of very good reasons to side with the Assad government. Most important among them, however, was the Russian calculation of becoming an important player in the Middle East and of influencing the future balance of threats in the region. In the opening years of the 21st century, Turkey and Russia emerged as natural allies united around a few important issues of bilateral interest: security and military navigation in the Black Sea, export of natural gas, cooperation in the energy sector, and combatting extremism. The Russian intervention in Syria subjected this partnership to significant stress, in part due to the involvement of other actors in the conflict, namely the United States and its allies.

For decades, Turkey and Syria have had several long-standing problems that include the Hatay Province question, Syria's support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) instigated terrorism, and water-related issues. None of these problems has been as challenging as the security problems that emerged with the Syrian Civil War, an outcome of the Arab Spring of 2011. The Syrian Civil War has been damaging for Turkey due to the overwhelming refugee waves flowing from Syria that have caused social, economic, and security problems. The events surrounding the war in Syria have been fast moving and requiring quick and effective policies to handle the problems in order to avoid escalations of sensitive socio-economic and political issues in Turkey. Unsurprisingly, Ankara initially struggled to stay ahead of the fast-changing events in Syria, and to produce consistent policies to deal with important developments stemming from the raging civil war in its neighbor. In 2012, Ankara moved against the Assad government in Damascus to bring about regime change in Syria as a remedy. This approach appeared to be contrary to Russia's Syrian policy, as from the very beginning the Kremlin has supported the Assad regime. Moscow has had its own political and economic

interests in Syria since the Soviet times that have been transformed into the Kremlin's new pro-Assad stance. The contending Syrian policies of Turkey and Russia have caused serious problems for Ankara and Moscow, restricting their abilities to manage relations constructively for some time. The disagreements between these two states escalated rapidly causing their economic relations to halt in 2015-2017, requiring the top political leaders to develop new policies of reconciliation. The subsequent de-escalation process brought about some signs of convergence in the Syrian policies of Russia and Turkey.

Originally articulated by Stephen Walt toward the end of the Cold War, the balance of threat theory was derived from the more traditional balance of power discourse in international politics. Walt's key contribution was to disentangle threat from power and propose threat as a better independent variable influencing state behavior (Walt, 1987). Indeed, this distinction has become even more relevant since the Cold War, and the rise of massive international terrorist organizations and asymmetric threats confirmed its validity. In foreign policy, states react to threats, modify their behavior accordingly, and try to balance foreign sources of threat. At the same time, states may completely ignore a material aggregation of power in other states that are not perceived in an adversarial light (Walt, 2004). In terms of the applicability of Cold War notions to contemporary international politics, some assumptions and conclusions can be viewed as outmoded in Walt's original analysis. For instance, the assumed dichotomy between balancing and bandwagoning is too simplistic, especially for a globalized world, in which some states, like Russia, pursue expansionist policies (Schweller, 2006). Whatever bandwagoning states may be engaged in, balancing against external threats should be the foremost in a list of priorities for any state. There is no logical contradiction between balancing and bandwagoning, states engaged in one could also engage in the other, with a various degree of intensity. Moreover, external threats can emanate not only from state actors, but non-state entities as well, e.g. international terrorist organizations or national liberation movements. Interestingly, Walt's theory was first developed for a case study addressing security issues in the Middle East. In this review of the evolution of threat in contemporary Russo – Turkish relations, we address the three phases of bilateral ties that developed around the Syria question. First, we discuss the relations between Turkey and Syria prior to the Syrian Civil War. Then, the relations between Russia and Turkey are examined briefly, as they were developing prior to the bilateral crisis triggered by the shooting down of a Russian military jet by the Turkish Air Force in November 2015. We conclude by addressing the events surrounding the dramatic deterioration of bilateral ties between Russia and Turkey, the efforts to remedy the crisis, and its implications.

1. Ankara and Damascus before the Syrian Civil War

Within the general foreign policy philosophy of the *zero problems with neighbors* developed by Ahmet Davutoglu (Davutoglu, 2012), a former minister of foreign affairs and later prime minister of Turkey, Erdogan's government, after coming to power in 2002, pursued a policy to improve the traditional unfavorable relations between Turkey and Syria (Askerov, 2017). Erdogan's charismatic personality, manifested in his uncompromising approach to Israel (Bennhold, 2009), made him very popular in the Arab world. Invigorated with this fame, Erdogan was initially very eager to develop Turkish relations with all the Arab countries, including Syria. The so-called *democratic initiative* policies of the Turkish government included the resolution of the most intractable conflicts such as the Kurdish problem, the Syrian issue, and even the century-long crisis with Armenia. Improving relations with Damascus was among Ankara's top priorities, and its positive signs were not late to appear. Part of the Ottoman Empire since the early sixteenth century, Syria became independent after World War II stripping itself off the French mandate. In 1938, while under the French mandate, Syria lost its Hatay region to Turkey by peaceful means: Hatay Province first became a nominally independent republic, and soon after, it joined Turkey through a referendum. Although the League of Nations played the key role in managing the process, according to the established international rules, ever since the Hatay issue has been one of the major sources of tension between Turkey and Syria. For decades, Syria allowed the Kurdish terrorists to establish bases on its territory to carry out their clandestine actions in Turkey and used this as a deterrence strategy against Ankara's minority policies. Even the notorious leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan, remained in Damascus until 1998 when Ankara's diplomatic pressure finally ousted him from Syria.

Soon after that, when Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current ruler of Syria died in 2000, Turkey and Syria had a remarkable opportunity to open a new chapter in their history, and they did not miss it. Bashar al-Assad, the new president of Syria, visited Turkey in 2004 and a year later, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer of Turkey visited Syria, ignoring the pressures and protests by both domestic and international opposition. Relations developed rapidly due to the responsive policies of the Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad, who seemed to have desired positive change in his country. Shortly thereafter, President Assad and Prime Minister Erdogan initiated new efforts to advance Turkish-Syrian relations, the warmth of which was also reflected in their personal interactions. Assad made informal visits to Turkey, where his meetings with Erdogan were reflected in the media. However, the favorable process of improving their relations did not last long: it started to slow down and then deteriorate with

the Arab Spring hitting Syria in 2011. This was a turning point in Syria's public and political life entailing serious decisions about the future of the country. Naturally, Assad decided to resist the uprising brought about by the 2011 protest movement to preserve the national unity and territorial integrity of his country. Soon, international powers started to intervene in the Syrian conflict either by opposing or supporting the Assad regime.

It took some time for Turkey to define its new position within the meaningfully regional circumstances. The dramatic change of the Turkish policy vis-à-vis Syria was partially a result of Syria's antagonistic policy toward Turkey, as the official Damascus started to view all moves at Syria's border with great suspicion. The first hostile act by Syria was shooting down a Turkish military jet in June 2012 that reportedly slightly violated Syria's air space (*Telegraph*, June 24, 2012). Ankara, on the other hand, started to repeatedly express its concern for civilian casualties in Syria, and came out in general opposition to the policies of Assad's regime. However, the ambiguities of Turkey's Syrian policy have persisted for a long time as Ankara needed more time to examine how Syria was being altered by the warring factions to formulate its policy to serve its national interests in the best way. New challenges emerged for Turkey that not only threatened its security, but also put its territorial integrity in danger. Partially under the influence of US policies, Ankara started to support the Free Syrian Army (FSA) trying to topple the Assad regime. This meant that Ankara severed diplomatic relations with Damascus and put itself in opposition to Russia and Iran who supported the Assad regime. For some reason, Ankara believed in a rapid and decisive victory of the FSA over the regime, and possibly made plans to exercise its influence to shape the new administration in Damascus. Later, when the Obama administration shifted its priorities in Syria and began to cooperate with the Kurdish insurgent group PYD/YPG, Ankara understood that it had miscalculated and made hasty decisions to cut off ties with Syria (Selvi, 2017). Ankara sees PYD/YPG as an extension of the PKK in Syria, a Kurdish terrorist organization that threatens Turkey's territorial integrity. Needless to say, a well-organized Kurdish military force funded and armed by the United States would pose a significant threat to Turkey if it were to decide to pursue an armed struggle against the Turkish Republic.

By severing the diplomatic ties with and withdrawing its ambassador from Damascus, Ankara disabled itself from reaching the Syrian leadership through diplomatic channels, which is a necessary means for managing conflicts peacefully. For a country that has claimed to have zero problems with its neighbors, having leverage is important to manage conflicts peacefully. Ankara's voluntary deprivation itself of this opportunity explained by the circumstances of the time has limited its capacity to produce alternative foreign policy approaches towards

Syria. Moreover, Turkey's new Syrian policy affected its own economy more adversely than that of any other country in the region because of the myriad trade restrictions emerged out of the conflict. Currently, Turkey hosts more than three million refugees from Syria, which is extremely costly. In such circumstances, no political leverage over the Syrian issue was a serious loss for Ankara. Ostensibly, Turkey, as a regional power, weakened its own influence in Syria, and the entire region, by removing itself out of the main stage of the power game. Over time, it has become clear that other powers such as Iran, not to mention Russia and China, started to exercise more power and influence in Syria than Turkey. Erdogan defended this policy by appealing to the themes of justice and human rights, rather valid issues, but Damascus viewed these with some sarcasm since similar allegations were levelled against Turkey itself.

The reality is that Turkey has established itself in a position of gaining more influence in Syria since it abandoned its old *zero problems with neighbors* policy, which helped neither peace, nor war. By rejecting Damascus, Ankara missed the historical opportunity of forging close relationships with the Assad government, which it needed to exercise leverage for a peaceful or relatively less violent transformation of the conflict. Instead, the Turkish government blamed the Syrian government for violating human rights, and called upon the Assad government to resign, which was a move made in line with Western policies (Burch, 2011). Erdogan's government miscalculated the events in Syria thinking that the Syrian government would suffer the fate of the other Arab regimes that had been toppled by the Arab Spring. But it was not only Ankara that failed to weigh the consequences of Russia's presence in Syria, the Western allies remained surprisingly passive in preventing Russia from establishing its dominance in Syria. The shooting down of the Russian military jet by the Turkish Air Force in November 2015 was an attempt to deter Moscow's active and aggressive actions in Syria, which in the end did not yield any positive change for Turkey and its allies. Russia, having imposed economic sanctions on Turkey, managed to masterfully use the incident in its own favor by making Ankara proceed in line with Moscow's design of the reconciliation process.

2. Ankara and Moscow before the Deployment of Russian Troops to Syria

It is important to highlight certain points of strategic importance that would help describe the situation before the Syrian crisis emerged and explain the gap between the pre-crisis and post-crisis situations. One of the most prominent signs of strategic cooperation between Russia and Turkey was the joint project of the Akkuyu Nuclear Plant, which was to be built

in cooperation with the Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom per a contract signed in 2010, over which President Erdogan and President Putin met three times. Each time they met, the leaders stressed that despite the disagreements in their foreign policies, the two countries would promote economic cooperation. Turkey's economic relations with Russia helped Erdogan develop the sense of high tolerance so that he did not react seriously to Putin's statements made during the anniversary of the tragic 1915 events of the Ottoman Empire, which Putin identified as the Armenian genocide, a designation that is normally strongly condemned by Ankara. Undoubtedly, one of the most significant projects between Russia and Turkey was the Turkish Stream project, a pipeline development offered to Ankara by Putin in 2014. The agreement was signed by Moscow and Ankara in Istanbul in the presence of both Putin and Erdogan on 10 October 2016 (*RT*, October 10, 2016). An exciting project for both states, which started to materialize in the early 2015, it envisioned carrying Russian natural gas to Europe through Turkey. Interestingly and strangely enough, the signing and implementation of the project was delayed by the sides. It is generally believed that the primary reason was that the sides could not agree on the price of gas supplies (Holodny, 2015). According to some media claims in Russia, however, Ankara deliberately delayed it to guarantee the discount on natural gas it would buy from Russia (*Sputnik*, December 31, 2015). Eventually, the project halted long enough without being signed by the parties, and the blast of the jet crisis in November of 2015 delayed it further.

Putin's participation in the memorial ceremonies for the alleged 1915 Armenian genocide organized in Yerevan on 24 April 2015, did not anger Erdogan, contrary to expectations. In Yerevan, unlike his earlier written statement, Putin was reluctant to use the word 'genocide' which could have been interpreted as one of the first signs of the mutually satisfactory cooperation between Ankara and Moscow on the Akkuyu project, the foundation for which was laid only ten days earlier. Putin and Erdogan met on 13 June 2015, during their joint visit to Baku for the purpose of participating in the opening ceremonies of the European Games (*Fox News*, June 13, 2015). This summit removed all doubts about the cooling off of relations between Russia and Turkey that started when Erdogan did not honor Moscow's invitation to participate in the 70th anniversary of Russia's victory over Nazi Germany in May of 2015 (*Sputnik*, May 7, 2015). Shortly thereafter, the Kremlin's statements about the past meeting appeared publicly; they stressed that President Putin and President Erdogan discussed the joint projects of their countries, in addition to the situations in Syria and Ukraine. The prognosis about the future of the Russo-Turkish relations was positive; the partners envisioned increasing the trade volume to USD 100 billion by 2020. Erdogan's

visit to Moscow in September of the same year consolidated the cooperation, but both presidents confessed that they had different foreign policy worldviews; the main source of stress was the developments and the involvement of both Russia and Turkey in Syria (Idiz, 2015). Erdogan's serious criticism of Russia's policies in Syria started with the use of force by Russia in Syria in late September 2015, even though it was used against terrorists.

Before that, many remarkable events occurred in the region with Russia's direct involvement. Russia's attack of Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the initiation of war with Ukraine are among the gravest events that took place in Turkey's proximity to the north to which it did not react severely, although both Ukraine and Georgia are of significant geostrategic importance to Ankara, let alone the historical ties between them and Turkey. Moscow's antagonism towards Georgia and Ukraine grew consistently with the progress of Tbilisi's and Kiev's pro-Western policies. Those policies of Ukraine and Georgia, developed under their respective presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Mikhail Saakashvili, were perceived by the Kremlin as hostile and incompatible with Russia's interests. Before taking any serious steps in Ukraine – which Russia had seen as its little brother – Moscow wanted to tame what it regarded as an “unruly” Georgia, which geographically separates it from Turkey.

The October 2006 live fire exercise conducted by Russia's Black Sea Fleet in the vicinity of Georgia's main seaport Poti, followed the Tbilisi-Moscow spy row and signaled a sharp deterioration of Russo-Georgian relations. After imposing a comprehensive economic embargo on Georgia, and organizing mass deportations of ethnic Georgians from Russia, the Kremlin highlighted the vulnerabilities of Georgia's defenses – its Black Sea coast has been virtually undefended from a potential sea invasion since the breakup of the Soviet Union. The small Georgian navy and the coast guard could not do much to deter Russia's hostile acts let alone repel a full-scale invasion. Moscow fully utilized this advantage during the August 2008 war with Georgia – although the Georgian ground forces managed to hold off the Russian ground forces advancing through the mountain passes from Russia's North Caucasus, they had little choice but to sue for peace when the Russians deployed the Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol, Crimea, and landed on Georgian soil virtually unopposed. The Georgian ground troops fighting in central Georgia would have been surrounded and destroyed – their enemy did falter in the mountains, but once gaining control over Georgian lowlands the Russians acquired a huge strategic advantage.

Curiously, Ankara's official reaction to the invasion of Georgia was rather muted despite the fact that Moscow was demonstrating its readiness to wage an unlimited war in Georgia seeking to overthrow its government. As the French-brokered ceasefire took shape, the Turkish

leadership praised President Medvedev of Russia (The Kremlin, August 13, 2008), and then Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan visited Moscow on August 14 2008 to confer with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin (Mynet, August 13, 2008). Similarly, Ankara's reaction to Russia's takeover of Crimea and the invasion of southeast Ukraine in 2014 was reserved as if Russia was dealing with its internal affairs. Ankara issued alarms regarding Moscow's militaristic foreign policy pursuits only after the Russian military deployments in Syria in the fall of 2015 and tried to reverse the changed strategic balance. After disregarding Russia's aggressive moves on its northern borders, Ankara grew alarmed when it found similar Russian actions on its southern borders, essentially surrounding Turkey by Russian combat troops. It is possible that Ankara perceived the Russian invasions of Georgia and Ukraine as a settling of some post-Soviet squabbles, but it did miss important warning signs of how far Moscow was willing to go to settle similar scores elsewhere, including Syria.

Ankara reacted to Russia's involvement in Syria on 30 September 2015, as Russian forces commenced bombing so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other anti-Assad rebels. The first reactions came from Feridun Sinirlioglu, Turkey's foreign minister; but before long, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu accused Russia of hitting the moderate opposition forces in Syria, which Moscow rejected (*RFE/RL*, October 7, 2015). On 3 October 2015, President Erdogan stressed that he had some difficulties understanding Russia's involvement in Syria, as Russia and Syria shared no borders (*BirGun*, October 3, 2015). Erdogan's surprising and rather naïve comment explained a lot why Ankara was so passive on the Georgian and Ukrainian issue.

Despite Ankara's official declarations of not understanding Russia's true motives in Syria, Moscow intended to reach several important goals by giving military assistance to the Assad regime. First, by acting decisively, Moscow hoped to counter and reverse Western involvement in Syria – the United States and its allies openly supported and armed the Assad opposition. In Moscow's quest to restore the global power balance with the United States, Syria presented yet another opportunity to demonstrate Russia's newly rediscovered confidence and resolve. Second, Moscow scored very important points with Iran – an important Assad ally and an enemy of the United States. Tehran was desperate to save the Assad regime, which was targeted not only by Western powers, but by Saudi Arabia as well – Iran's other traditional regional rival. Third, by establishing long-term presence in Syria and becoming an important ally to Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, Assad's military ally and an enemy of Israel, Moscow has acquired bargaining chips potentially tradable with Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states that see Iran as a threat. Also, America's powerful Israel lobby must be mindful not

to alienate Moscow by pushing anti-Russian policies in Washington (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). Fourth, by outmaneuvering the United States and obtaining more influence in the region, Moscow has become an important destination for Israeli politicians and diplomats, who have to seek Kremlin's good will if they want to avoid unprofitable military engagements with Iran or militant groups supported by Iran. Fifth, by aiding Assad in Syria, Moscow offered a nod to both Azerbaijan and Armenia – still unreconciled enemies in the Caucasus, but each of them a potential long-term ally of Russia. Azerbaijanis are a fellow Shia nation, a religious relative of the ruling Alawite sect of Syria. Armenians represent a minority group in Syria allied with the Assad regime. An eastern Syrian town Deir ez-Zor (Der Zor in Armenian), besieged by Daesh (ISIS) for three years (2014-2017), and relieved through the Russian military involvement, is home to a significant Armenian minority population and houses a monument and memorial complex to the victims of the 1915 Armenian genocide. Sixth, Russia has sought to maintain access to Syria's military naval base – the only naval base available to Russia in the Mediterranean. Finally, the ruling class in Russia could not let Damascus fall to Daesh for very significant domestic considerations. Damascus is home to an ancient Christian church, the Patriarchate of Antioch, the second oldest Christian church in the world after Jerusalem. The Church of Antioch (the modern city of Antakya in Turkey), is the community where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, relocated to Damascus in the 14th century, where its headquarters have been located since then on the old Roman *via recta*, the only street mentioned in the Christian Bible. Since the 19th century, the Patriarchate of Antioch, the predominant Arab speaking church in the world, has enjoyed very cordial relations with the Patriarchate of Moscow, the largest of the Orthodox churches. The Moscow Patriarchate is also the most significant national institution in Russia, and no Russian political figure wants to alienate the church if they can help it.

Regardless, the Russian forces started to operate in Syria without always taking into consideration the interests of Syria's neighbors. Specifically, Russian military aircraft occasionally violated Turkish airspace. The first and second violations of the Turkish airspace by Russian jets took place on 3 October and 5 October 2015, respectively. Ankara's concerns expressed through diplomatic channels pushed the Kremlin to make statements that the violations were related to inclement weather conditions (*Radio Free Europe*, October 6, 2015). According to the statements of the Turkish Ministry of Defense made on 6 October 2015, eight Turkish F-16 jets performing reconnaissance flights over the Turkish-Syrian border were put on radar lock (which enables missile systems to automatically follow a target) by an unidentified MIG-29 aircraft for several minutes (*CBS/AP*, October 6, 2015). Alongside

President Erdogan's objections, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg expressed his doubts about Russia's violations of Turkish airspace being unintentional (*CBS/AP*, October 6, 2015). This was indirect support for Turkey from NATO, which encouraged Ankara to oppose Russia's increasingly aggressive involvement in the Syrian quagmire. Although Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, claimed that Putin called Erdogan and apologized for the violations, things continued to deteriorate rapidly, putting the Russian and Turkish militaries on a collision course (*Sputnik*, December 31, 2015).

The last meeting between Erdogan and Putin before the crisis took place on 15 November 2015, at the G20 Summit in Antalya, Turkey, where they discussed the issues of fighting Daesh, and finding a political solution to the Syrian Civil War. The details of the meeting were not publicized. However, the leaders reached an agreement on meeting in Russia on December 15 for the sixth summit of the High-Level Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council. This never materialized due to the crisis that began on November 24. At the G20 Summit in Antalya, Putin implied that Turkey was one of the countries financing ISIS, at least through illegal oil trade. However, Erdogan chose not to react due to the rules of Turkish hospitality (*RT*, November 16, 2015). Just a few hours after Turkey downed the Russian jet on November 24, Putin accused Turkey of protecting ISIS at a press conference organized in the Kremlin. Claiming that Russia's plane was downed over Syrian territory by an air-to-air missile from a Turkish F-16 jet, Putin accused Turkey of supporting terrorists and smuggling oil from the areas controlled by the ISIS (Melvin, Martinez, & Bilginsoy, 2015). This was the beginning of the crisis between Russia and Turkey that would last for about eight months.

3. Conflicting Priorities and a Need to Cooperate

In Syria, Russia has waded into more dangerous and uncharted waters, but by moving smartly, Moscow has managed to force the West to make another step back after the Crimean crisis, now in the Middle East. Russian actions in Syria have also addressed the strategic rivalry with the United States, by forcefully demonstrating Moscow's advantages in this area that remained unanswered by the United States until the April 2017 Tomahawk cruise missile attack on the Russian-protected Syrian airfield in reaction to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad government.

As discussed above, Ankara strongly objected to Russian Air Force combat missions so close to its borders, demanded that Russian pilots cease violating Turkish air space, and threatened Moscow with sanctions. Among other things, Turkey promised that it would stop purchasing Russian gas – about 60% of Turkey's natural gas came from Russia in late

November 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian ground attack jet in Syria for reportedly violating Turkish airspace, relations between them deteriorated to their lowest point in a very long time (*lenta ru*, October 8, 2015). The Russian pilots survived the attack, but as they parachuted from the doomed jet, one of them was killed in the air by pro-Turkish Syrian rebels. Another Russian serviceman died in the rescue mission for the other downed pilot (*BBC*, December 1, 2015). Presumably, Ankara had a very good reason to pursue a Russian jet. Armed Russian fighter jets on combat missions violated Turkish airspace – the first ever such incident in NATO’s history (*The Washington Post*, October 5, 2015). In response, protests against Russia were issued in Ankara and Brussels, and Moscow responded that they would look into the claims (*Reuters*, October 6, 2015). Ankara found subsequent Russian explanations unsatisfactory and expressed its deep dissatisfaction with Moscow (*The Guardian*, October 6, 2015). President Erdogan had threatened to stop purchasing Russian gas (*lenta ru*, October 8, 2015), and in the end, Ankara took this decisive measure as no other solution seemed to be viable.

The Russians were very bitter about the downed jet, but not because of the fatalities – Moscow has never believed in tears when it comes to war casualties. The Turkish attack on a Russian jet highlighted the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Russian operations in Syria. It took the Turks only a few minutes to register the jet, track it, and shoot it down without the Russians realizing that they were threatened. The Russian ground attack SU-24 jet was vulnerable to aerial attacks, but it was not accompanied by jet fighters, and no electronic measures were taken by the Russians to protect it. The Russians have suffered similarly embarrassing military setbacks during their war adventures from 2008 on, exposing weaknesses in their military forces. In the August 2008 invasion of Georgia, the Russians lost a number of jets, including their famed long-range Tu-22M3 bomber. Additionally, Russia was not confident it had air superiority in Georgia during the five days of war (*Reuters*, July 8, 2009), and its ground force advance was stalled by the Georgian side. The Black Sea Fleet was very slow to deploy, but once it did, Georgia had to sue for peace as it was lacking a viable naval force and coastal defenses. In Ukraine, only the indecisiveness and incompetence of the Ukrainian side allowed Russia to avoid heavy casualties – the rapid-action light infantry Russian troops deployed in Crimea were essentially defenseless sitting ducks for at least two weeks, as their support was late to show up in numbers.

None of the above-mentioned shortcomings resulted in a major setback for the Russians due to timidity, incompetence or self-imposed moderation by their opponents. However, the April 2017 missile attack on a Syrian airbase by the US Navy turned out to be a serious

warning message to the Russians, and the first credible response to Moscow by the United States since August 2008. More directly, the American Tomahawk cruise missiles countered the spectacular October 2015 Russian cruise missile attack on various targets in Syria aimed at Daesh and other militant groups. The Russian air and missile attacks in Syria posed a significant threat to Turkey, a NATO member with the second largest standing force, especially since the Russian action there went uncontested for almost eighteen months. As Russia entered the Syria war in fall 2015, it undertook the first of a series of impressive cruise missile attacks on ISIS and other targets. The first round was fired by Russia's Caspian Sea Flotilla in a dramatic demonstration of Russia's military capabilities, and its newly found confidence. The attacks were launched by four Russian warships on 7 October 2015, on President Putin's 63rd birthday, from neutral waters off the coast of Azerbaijan with 26 nuclear warhead-capable sophisticated cruise missiles (*BBC News*, October 7, 2015). The Caspian cruise missile attack went as expected and it appeared to be a complete surprise to NATO – always an unpleasant combination of words when 'missile attack' and 'surprise' are used in the same sentence. More, the *Kalibr* (*Klub*) missile system used by Russia to carry out this attack can carry nuclear warheads. Four Russian warships participated in the launch of the missiles, meaning that Russia has a significant and very dangerous strategic force in the Caspian Sea, capable of reaching far beyond what had been previously believed. The maximum range of the *Kalibr* missiles is 2,500 kilometers – the Caspian flotilla with these missiles covers the entire Caucasus, the Black Sea, most of the Middle East including the Persian Gulf, major parts of the Red and Arabian Seas, eastern parts of the Mediterranean Sea, parts of NATO members of southeastern Europe, and can reach any part of Turkey, Central Asian states, including Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Most importantly, the Caspian Sea flotilla can easily support in combat Russia's Black Sea fleet – a unique situation given that the Caspian Sea is landlocked and separated from the Black Sea by three states and a series of mountain ranges. This is noteworthy considering the strategic importance of the Black Sea for Russia. The Russian cruise missiles launched from the Caspian Sea entered Iranian airspace and then crossed into Iraq before hitting targets inside Syria (*BBC*, October 8, 2015). Moscow had permission to fly over the airspace from both Iran and Iraq; a good indication of the close cooperation among these three, which should be worrisome news for Washington and Ankara, as Iran is their strategic foe, while Iraq is supposed to be a close ally. Russia has used the war in Syria for an effective demonstration of its conventional and strategic military capabilities – a very useful method of deterring potential adversaries contemplating conventional military operations – but the *Kalibr* missile attack had a far-reaching message.

As it was mentioned above, the *Kalibr/Klub* cruise missiles are capable of delivering nuclear payloads. This missile system is the most sophisticated in its class as it reportedly has two stages, the final stage initiating in as the missile approaches its target. The *Kalibr* missiles, and cruise missiles in general fly very low to the surface and their long-range detection by radar is impossible. They can be detected at about 24-26 kilometers from their target, and it is possible, in theory, to intercept and destroy them, but at this point a *Kalibr* missile's second stage engages and gives it a supersonic speed making it nearly impossible to shoot it down. The message the Russians sent to Washington, Ankara, and all other allied capitals implied in no uncertain terms that Moscow possessed devastating weapons against which the allies had no defense. In other words, the strategic balance between Russia and NATO was now demonstrably in Russia's favor. The cruise missile deployments have been limited since the late 1980s following the US-USSR treaty restricting the intermediate nuclear forces in Europe, the so-called INF Treaty. The Russian advances in the area of intermediate missile technology became very evident through the cruise missile application in Syria. Perhaps, this was the main reason for America's February 1, 2019 withdrawal from the 1987 INF treaty (Nichols, 2019).

The April 2017 American attack on the Al Shayrat air base in Syria was designed to deter Russia from pursuing the path of escalating the conflict. The pretext for the American cruise missile attack was the alleged chemical attack by the Assad regime on al-Qaeda affiliated rebels near the Turkish border few days prior. The 'chemical attack' looked like a false flag operation, but it gave an excuse to the United States to demonstrate its cruise missile capabilities to the Russian leadership. American warships in the Mediterranean launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles that perform in a similar fashion to the Russian *Kalibr* missiles, but they do not have a supersonic stage. These missiles can be shot down, but instead of making it a surprise, the American military warned its Russian counterparts of the upcoming missile attack. Despite the advance warning, all missiles reportedly reached their targets inside the air base, in other words, even though the Russians knew about the incoming Tomahawks, and theoretically they were able to intercept and destroy them, the Russian forces could not manage to destroy even a single Tomahawk. The Tomahawks, just like the *Kalibr* missiles, can be detected by radar when they are about 24-26 kilometers from their targets, at which point the tracking device will follow them and aid the ground-based computerized missile interceptors to shoot them down. Each Tomahawk missile will need at least two Russian anti-missile systems firing simultaneously, and if successful, the incoming missile can be brought down at about 8 kilometers from its intended target – an insignificant distance when it comes

to nuclear explosions. In other words, to repel the American attack with 59 cruise missiles, the Russians had to have at least 59 radars and 118 advanced missiles interceptors at the Al Shayrat base. No Russian air base, let alone an expeditionary one in Syria, can ever have this much defense from cruise missiles, and even if they had enough radars and interceptors, nothing prevents the US Navy from launching twice as many Tomahawks in the following round. The same logic applies to other Russian military installations and to everything else with strategic importance. In short, the United States made sure the Russians and everyone else involved in the Middle East understood that they were back in the balance of intimidation game with the Russians, the engagement which they had abstained from since August 2008.

The 2019 developments in Syria have witnessed the fall of the last Daesh strongholds, but national peace in Syria is likely to remain an elusive concept for a long time. The Russian-supported Assad regime continues to face resistance not only from extremist terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, but also from groups backed by Turkey and its NATO allies, such as the so-called Free Syrian Army. Iran remains actively engaged in both Iraq and Syria, a matter of some concern for other regional states. Russia's active support of Damascus will have negative effects on American positions in the Middle East itself, and Russia's long-term military presence in the region will make Washington's future attempts of assembling a NATO coalition for regional engagements all but impossible. If Moscow manages to weaken US influence in the Middle East by waging a successful military campaign in Syria, it will be the biggest achievement in this region by any Russian regime in Russia's history.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that due to this new military expedition in the Middle East, the Russians should not be able to afford fresh military troubles elsewhere. Although geographically not far from Syria, the Caucasus has no direct links or relations with the Syrian War. It can, however, become a support region to the front in Syria, especially if things do not go according to Moscow's overall plans. Spillovers from Syria can reignite the Azerbaijani-Armenian stand-off over the Nagorno Karabakh region and its surrounding areas that are controlled by Armenia, but formally belong to Azerbaijan. If Russia's Syria gamble succeeds and ends quickly, Baku will find its positions even more weakened, as Russia's increased influence will embolden Armenia and Iran, Russia's traditional allies and historical rivals of Azerbaijan. If Baku were to elicit any concession from Armenia regarding the issue of its occupied territories in the foreseeable future, it may decide to act militarily while Russia is tied up in Syria.

Ostensibly, Moscow's entry into the Syrian war is another step in Russia's deliberate and well-planned quest to reassert itself as a major world power and to restore a balance of power

with the United States. The Syrian case is an opportunity for Moscow to outmaneuver the United States, and it seems, the Kremlin has successfully used it. The American plans in Syria to bomb ISIS, arm ‘moderate opposition’ to the Assad regime, and force Assad’s resignation have failed – none of these objectives were achieved by the summer of 2017, neither could the United States muster credible support for any of it (*The Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2015). Moscow’s objective, on the other hand, is much clearer and straightforward: keep the Assad regime in power. Moscow sees only Assad as capable of fighting ISIS (alongside with the Kurdish forces), maintaining state institutions in Syria, and guaranteeing Russia’s military presence in the country, at its Tartus naval base. Therefore, the Russian Air Force in Syria targets all who threaten the Assad regime, including those ‘moderate’ groups armed and supported by the United States (*CBS News*, October 1, 2015), and occasionally those supported by Turkey (not because of the fear of upsetting the Turks, but due to a simple fact that pro-Turkish groups in Syria tend to be numerically inferior and strategically less significant). At the same time, Kurdish groups, allied with Russia and/or the United States, have been targeted by Ankara. By the end of the Obama administration in January 2017, the US was seen in no position to protect its people it supported in Syria from the Russian attacks and this further undermined Washington’s credibility in the region (Hayes, 2015). Moreover, unlike the US, Russia possesses clearly defined and credible allies in the Syrian War – primarily, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah – both of whom are crucial for Russia’s long-term military influence in the Middle East. This fact, more than anything else, has encouraged the Erdogan government to overcome its hatred of the Assad regime and its suspicions of Iran’s true intentions in the region, and to seek an accommodation with the other two. By the end of 2016, Russia, Turkey, and Iran had agreed on trilateral talks on Syria, and by May 2017, they found common ground on some key issues, including establishing the so-called safe zones in Syria to promote a de-escalation of the civil war (*CNN*, May 4, 2017). Such agreements may not solve much initially, as the warring parties tend to ignore them, especially those affiliated with Daesh and al Qaeda, but the process of bringing Russia, Turkey, and Iran together for a common solution is very significant in post-Cold War Middle East politics.

Being engaged in the Syrian question promises major rewards for Moscow, and its stakes there are not as high as they are in Ukraine. Russia’s long-term gains include establishing a stronghold in the Middle East, and for this Assad must prevail in the war. This is the reason why Moscow has mobilized its diplomatic and military capabilities to reach the outcomes it seeks in the region. Russia also makes its neighbors take notes on how Moscow develops its strategic arms policies. Moscow has been diligently rebuilding its nuclear-capable platforms

as was evidenced by the October 2015 performance of the four Caspian warships. This new Russian military doctrine makes a 'preemptive' nuclear strike against non-nuclear weapon nations an explicit policy of the Russian state (*The Other Russia*, November 24, 2009). This is a worrisome development that would have been regarded with great alarm in the United States only three decades ago: low flying, very fast, long range and accurate cruise missiles tip the strategic balance in favor of Russia. Soviet/Russian military doctrines have always allowed for preemptive nuclear strikes, but only in cases of an imminent nuclear attack by the enemy or a conventional attack by an enemy aimed at crippling Russia's strategic forces (Podvig, 2001). The new strategy of the preemptive nuclear strike has been emphasized by Russian officials to give additional weight to Moscow's threats to defend Russia's territorial integrity and that of its allies. Although Moscow's implicit threats are currently chiefly directed at former members of the Soviet Union, especially Ukraine and Georgia, its new policies indicate to the West its being a potential military threat as well. If Russia's military escapades in the last decade teach its neighbors anything, it is that Moscow will not hesitate to pursue further military campaigns in the areas of its stated vital interests. Lesser former Soviet states will do well to avoid such conflicts and keep Russia's attention directed toward the West or the Middle East, where it rightfully belongs.

Conclusion

By reviewing the November 2015 crisis between Russia and Turkey, we have demonstrated the hazards of two powerful and generally friendly states becoming involved in a regional war on opposing sides. The crisis, which resulted from the downing of a Russian ground attack jet by the Turkish Air Force on 24 November 2015, has been subsequently resolved; despite its injured pride, the Russian leadership left a door open for Ankara to make amends, and the Turkish leadership slowly realized that they alone were powerless to alter the balance of threat with Russia. Soon after the military incident involving a Russian jet, President Putin said that Russia did not see Turkey as an enemy despite the military jet crisis, but it was Ankara who should make the first step for reconciliation (*Sputnik*, December 18, 2015). President Erdogan, who initially said that if there was a party that needed to apologize, it was Russia, also gradually changed his approach to restore good relations with Russia. In fact, shortly after the incident, he also stated that if they had known that the jet was Russian, they would have acted differently, although Putin did not immediately accept these words as credible (*BBC*, November 26, 2015). Nonetheless, Ankara developed deep feelings of remorse over time due to the economic price it had paid. Further, the increasing cooperation of the United States with the Kurdish PYD/YPG forces, despite Ankara's objections, made the latter reconsider

its policy vis-à-vis Russia: the militant Kurdish forces represent a more immediate threat to Turkish security than errant Russian jets. Although Russia's approach to the Kurds of Syria is not much different from that of the US, Ankara found maneuvering its strategy to a balanced policy between the US and Russia more advantageous for its interests. Currently, despite their conflicting interests in Syria, Russia and Turkey are convinced that cooperation would serve their mutual interests much better than hostility involving a power struggle that normally makes the competing parties pursue zero-sum objectives. At the same time, the recently restored cooperation was possible due to the heavy costs paid by both sides. Many ambiguities remain in Russo-Turkish relations, but as the dust settles in Syria, they are more likely to be clarified through diplomacy rather than conflict.

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