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Russia-Turkey Ties Fray Over Syria

By Howard Amos

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President Vladimir Putin is pictured during a joint news conference with his Turkish counterpart Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara on Dec. 1, 2014.

Growing Turkish anger over Russia's weeklong bombing campaign in Syria appeared Wednesday to be driving a wedge between the two Black Sea neighbors, who have become regional partners and enjoy a close economic relationship after a decade of growing political and business cooperation.

Repeated violations of Turkish airspace by Russian jets led to the Russian ambassador in Ankara being summoned by the government, while Turkish President Recep Erdogan warned Moscow it was in danger of jeopardizing bilateral ties.

"Turkey is reacting very negatively to the action Russia is taking in Syria," said Anna Glazova, an expert on the Middle East and deputy director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, a Moscow-based think tank that advises the government.

A worsening of relations between Russia and Turkey could signal a slide back toward Cold War

antagonism — when Moscow saw Ankara as the easternmost outpost of the West — that officials in both countries have worked to relegate to history.

Outrage in Ankara

Since it announced the beginning of air strikes in Syria against Islamic State targets last week, Moscow's new and increasingly assertive role in the Middle East has riled Turkey, which positions itself as a regional power broker and is vigorously opposed to Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Putin has repeatedly expressed his support for Assad, whom Russia has supplied with weapons and equipment since the start of the bloody four-year civil war.

Evidence from the ground in Syria suggests that Russian jets are not just targeting Islamic State, but also moderate insurgent groups in a bid to shore up the position of Assad and allow his army to go on the offensive.

Turkey is implacably opposed to Assad, whom it regards as a bloody dictator responsible for the rise of Islamic State.

"Our positive relationship with Russia is known. But if Russia loses a friend like Turkey, with whom it has been cooperating on many issues, it will lose a lot, and it should know that," Erdogan told reporters in Brussels on Tuesday, Reuters reported.

Syria Divide

Russian jets have repeatedly entered the airspace of Turkey — a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization — causing Turkey to summon the Russian ambassador three times in four days. Moscow blamed the incidents on navigation mistakes caused by bad weather.

The incursions were denounced by the head of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg as a dangerous and deliberate maneuver, and prompted Erdogan's words of caution.

Ankara has also dismissed Russia's public claims to be exclusively targeting Islamic State.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said Wednesday that only two of 57 Russian air strikes in Syria have hit Islamic State, while the rest were against moderate opposition forces fighting Islamic State and Assad in northwest Syria, Reuters reported.

The Hmeimim air base used by Russia to fly sorties over Syria is located just outside the coastal city of Latakia, less than 30 kilometers from the 900 kilometer Syria-Turkey border. Some bombing missions announced by the Russian Defense Ministry targeted sites as little as 15 kilometers away from Turkish territory.

Moscow's intervention has overshadowed a U.S.-led bombing campaign against Islamic State. Turkey opened its military bases to U.S. planes in July, and has also launched its own attacks on targets in northern Syria.

"Russia is hitting the ambitions of Turkey to be a regional or even international player," said Vladimir Avatkov, a Turkey expert at MGIMO university in Moscow where many of Russia's

diplomats and intelligence officers are trained.

Economic Pinch

Russia's trade turnover with Turkey has tripled during the last decade, according to expert Glazova, but growing political difficulties appear to have hit economic ties in recent years.

Data from the Russian Economic Development Ministry shows that growth in the trade turnover between Russia and Turkey has halted in recent years, dropping 3.8 percent in 2013 to $32 billion.

During a meeting with Erdogan in Moscow last month, Putin noted a "certain fall" in trade, but said Russia was still Turkey's second biggest trading partner.

Erdogan has also scaled back his expectations for Russian-Turkish economic links.

During a visit by Putin to Turkey last year, Erdogan said the two countries should have a trade turnover of $100 billion by 2020 — but last month he said such a target was only achievable in 2023.

"To reach a new stage of economic cooperation you need to resolve the political contradictions," said MGIMO expert Avatkov.

Gas Delays

A much-discussed $15 billion gas pipeline — TurkStream — slated to run almost 1,000 kilometers under the Black Sea bringing gas from Russia and transforming Turkey into a regional energy hub has hit delays because of price squabbles and uncertainty in Ankara ahead of parliamentary elections on Nov. 1.

TurkStream was selected by Moscow as an alternative to Russia's South Stream pipeline to supply gas to Europe, which was abandoned last year after objections from the European Commission.

State-owned gas giant Gazprom announced Tuesday that it was halving the capacity of the TurkStream pipeline, slashing it from 63 billion cubic meters a year to 32 bcm and Gazprom executives have said repeatedly that the project's deadlines are likely to be extended.

"As there is no inter-government agreement, the deadline is changing ... if it is moved by one year nothing terrible will happen," Gazprom deputy chief executive Alexander Medvedev said Wednesday, Interfax news agency reported.

'Tough Guy'

Experts contacted by The Moscow Times said that Moscow and Ankara have long tried to avoid open political clashes as a way of maintaining economic ties — but that this modus operandi appeared to have begun disintegrating in recent months, even before Russia's bombardment of Syria began.

Erdogan heavily criticized Moscow for its prominent role earlier this year in commemorations

of the Armenian genocide during World War I, which Turkey refuses to recognize as a genocide.

And while Ankara did not join in with Western sanctions against Moscow over its actions in Ukraine, Turkish officials have attacked Russia's treatment of Tatars in the Crimean Peninsula that Moscow seized from Kiev's control last year.

Experts said that one factor that could mitigate any fallout between the two countries is a close personal relationship and liking between Erdogan and Putin.

Putin last year described Erdogan as a “tough guy” after a meeting.

“They are both political heavyweights with a lot of political experience and charisma ... when it comes to a personal dialogue they probably have a lot in common,” said Glazova.

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