

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Will NATO Intervene in Syria?

By: Doug Bandow - October 9, 2012

Turkey and Syria exchanged mortar and artillery fire last week. The dispute need not involve United States, yet NATO membership risks dragging America into yet another unnecessary war, this time in the guise of defending its Turkish allies.

Last week, several errant Syrian mortar shells fell in the Turkish border town of Akcakale, killing five residents. (Some Turks blamed the opposition Free Syrian Army, which may want to provoke Ankara into joining the conflict.) The Erdogan government responded to what it termed “this abominable attack” with artillery strikes in Syria. The Turkish parliament authorized cross-border military operations. The two nations’ militaries exchanged mortar fire for the next two days.

Nadim Shehadi of the London-based Chatham House suggested that “Turkey is using this to tell NATO, ‘Wake up, we are a member and we are being aggressed.’” The organization held an emergency meeting and criticized Syria’s “flagrant breach of international law and a clear and present danger to the security of one of its allies” and promised to “stand by Turkey.” A Pentagon spokesman denounced “the depraved behavior of the Syrian regime.”

Tensions similarly rose last June when the Syrian military downed a Turkish reconnaissance plane. The circumstances were unclear. Damascus said the aircraft was

hit in Syrian airspace; Ankara admitted that the plane had mistakenly entered Syrian territory but claimed the jet was in international airspace when shot down.

Ankara pushed for stronger allied action then. The Erdogan government requested that NATO develop contingency plans to establish a no-fly zone to “protect” Turkish territory. Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc advocated that NATO invoke Article 5 and treat the incident as an attack on all members. However, while the alliance criticized Syria, members made clear that they did not want a military conflict. For good reason.

Depraved the Syrian regime and its behavior are, but that’s no cause for war. There are many awful governments around the world. Nor, as the Bush administration found in Iraq, is it possible to ensure that good follows evil in war irrespective of Washington’s intentions. Americans are best served by remaining at peace, not joining someone else’s civil war. And while Turkey is technically in the right this time, Ankara’s claims of innocence ring hollow. For instance, the downed reconnaissance plane may have been on an official surveillance mission.

Moreover, while the Syrian conflict is “spilling over” the border, the Erdogan government, once allied with Syria, has invited the war into his nation. Ankara is hosting Syrian opposition activists, allowing the Syrian Free Army to operate, perhaps training SFA soldiers and likely serving as a conduit for weapons to regime opponents. Turkey also is urging UN creation of “safe zones” within Syria for the opposition to operate militarily against the Damascus government.

In short, Turkey has initiated a low-grade war with Syria. And Damascus has noticed. Information Minister Omran al-Zo’aby complained that the two nations’ border “is being used for smuggling weapons and terrorists.” The Turkish government has knowingly turned its people into targets. If Ankara wants to do so, it should do so at its own risk. And Turkey is capable of defending itself, says its government; “Turkey is a country which is capable of protecting its people and borders,” said Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

So it is. Even before fighting erupted in Syria early last year, Turkey's military was much larger and more capable than that of its neighbor. Since then Syria's military has been in almost constant action, with its most elite (typically the most trustworthy) units used the most. There would still be hard fighting in any conflict, but Damascus surely recognizes that it almost certainly would lose.

The fact that Ankara's greatest security threat is posed by a civil war next door (along with the long-standing Kurdish insurgency) demonstrates NATO's lack of modern relevance. Washington's security guarantee served a purpose during the Cold War, when Turkey faced a potentially hostile Soviet Union. With that threat removed there is no plausible justification for the U.S. promising to defend Turkey. Indeed, Washington long was embarrassed by Ankara's brutal anti-Kurdish operations, which relied on U.S.-supplied weapons. At least that campaign did not threaten to drag America into an unnecessary conflict.

Even though the Turkish people appear to oppose war with Syria, Prime Minister Erdogan declared that the two nations are "not far" from war. His government might decide that the public could be carried along in a burst of patriotism. Ankara also might consider provoking an incident in an attempt to force events and invocation of Article 5. Or war could be sparked by another incident, even if unintentional. A seemingly minor spark lit the fuse for World War I. In any case, having routinely intervened all over the world where few important U.S. interests were at stake, Washington could not easily remain aloof from a violent challenge to such a long-standing ally.

The original NATO was directed against a common outside threat, the USSR. The importance of confronting such a large, existential danger caused Washington to take on its allies' burdens. Indeed, the United States was even willing to back its friends when both sides' interests were not perfectly aligned. But none of the original circumstances survive today. There's certainly no reason to backstop Turkey if it decides to forcibly oust Assad.

This problem isn't limited to Ankara. Bringing Georgia and Ukraine into NATO would automatically make their serious problems, including poor relations with Moscow, America's problems. What could justify Washington promising to go to war for these states against a nuclear-armed Russia? Georgia actually shot first in its 2008 conflict with Russia but still expected American backing (which had been strong, despite Tbilisi's lack of NATO membership).

Syria's implosion is a humanitarian tragedy. But there's little Washington can do, other than expand the tragedy by turning Americans into combatants and casualties. So far the Obama administration has demonstrated restraint by staying out, but NATO risks pulling America in. In the short term, Washington should make clear to NATO's other members that the United States will not intervene in Syria, whether under the aegis of NATO or the United Nations. In the long term the United States should substitute ad hoc cooperation for permanent alliance membership, leaving Europe's defense to the Europeans. Syria demonstrates how NATO has become worse than useless. It is positively dangerous.

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