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Turkey Downs Russian Plane, Joins With Islamic State: U.S. Should Drop New Ottoman Empire As Ally

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Turkey's rash decision to shoot down a Russian plane for allegedly violating its airspace isn't likely to trigger World War III. But Ankara has demonstrated where it stands. With the Islamic State and against the West. The justification for Turkey's membership in NATO and America's defense guarantee for Ankara long ago passed. Turkey's irresponsible action proves that it is no U.S. ally.

The Obama administration's war against the Islamic State is turning into another interminable conflict that serves the interests of other nations far more than America. U.S. policy has been impossibly incoherent, attempting to do everything: oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, shove aside next door Iran, defeat vicious jihadist insurgents, promote ineffectual "moderate" forces, convince the Gulf States to act against the extremists they've been supporting, promote diplomacy without participation by Damascus and Tehran, and convince Turkey to serve U.S. rather than Islamic interests.

While Russia's September entry into the war outraged Washington, Moscow showed clarity and realism. Russia simply sought to bolster Syria's President Bashar al-Assad against insurgents dominated by radical Islamists. Ironically, this approach was far more likely than the administration's confused policy to advance America's core interest of defeating ISIL and al-Qaeda affiliates such as al-Nusra. The U.S. had little choice but to accommodate Moscow, despite nutty proposals from some Republican presidential candidates to shoot down Russian planes.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during a meeting at the presidential palace in Ankara, Turkey, Turkey shot down a Russian warplane. (AP Photo/Kayhan Ozer, Presidential Press Service, Pool)

However, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan played the fool when his military downed a Russian aircraft, involved in striking territory controlled by al-Nusra. The two governments' accounts conflict, but no one believes the Putin government had the slightest hostile intent against Ankara. Downing the plane was gratuitously provocative and not necessary for Turkey's defense. The objectives likely were to interfere with Moscow's operations against Islamic radicals and/or discourage future Russian strikes against Ankara-backed Islamists. The action obviously was contrary to Washington's interest, which would be caught in any escalation between Russia and Turkey. Yet NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that "we stand in solidarity with Turkey and support the territorial integrity of our NATO ally, Turkey."

It's not enough to "discourage any escalation," as President Barack Obama insisted. Washington should absorb the bitter lessons of Turkey's perfidy and drop the alliance relationship.

Turkey is a growing threat to Western interests and values. Ankara never has been a true friend of the West. Turkey was a useful ally during the Cold War, though it always seemed readier to go to war with Greece than the Soviet Union. (In 1974 Ankara seized 37 percent of the island of Cyprus and war with Athens was narrowly averted.) In those years Turkey was only vaguely democratic. The regime punished anyone whose liberal sentimentalities conflicted with the hyper-nationalist "Kemalist" philosophy of Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the founder of modern Turkey (later named Ataturk, or "Father of the Turks"). The public veneration of Ataturk mimicked the North Korean Kim dynasty's personality cult.

President Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, sweeping away a coalition of feckless, corrupt, and discredited parties. Initially then-Prime Minister Erdogan played the liberator. But once he pushed the military back in its barracks and won his third election he dropped the liberal gloss, sacrificing most of Turkey's human rights advances. He gained control of the police and judiciary; conducted multiple mass conspiracy trials; and attacked independent journalists, opposition politicians, and business critics. He has pushed, unsuccessfully so far, to establish an authoritarian presidency along the lines, ironically, of that created by Russia's Vladimir Putin.

President Erdogan also is moving Turkey in a more Islamist direction. Although no one expects him to turn his nation into another Iran or Saudi Arabia, he is doing more than end strict Kemalist secularism. Worse, his government has enabled the Islamic State, allowing relatively free transit of personnel and materiel for the most dangerous and destabilizing force in the Middle East. Moreover, there is evidence of more direct assistance—providing equipment, passports, training, medical care, and perhaps more to Islamist radicals. While refusing to take military action against the self-proclaimed caliphate on its border, Ankara has attempted to manipulate the U.S. into ousting Syrian president Assad, whose military is the most important ground force containing ISIL. Despite recently agreeing to assist Washington against the Islamic State, the Erdogan government appears to have played the U.S., directing most of Turkey's fire against America's Kurdish allies.

Shooting down the Russian aircraft was even more irresponsible. Whatever the circumstances of the alleged incursion, Ankara knew that no attack on Turkish forces was planned. President Putin stated the obvious when he declared: “our pilots, planes did not threaten Turkish territory in any way. It is quite clear.” Downing the plane was a direct attack on Moscow for supporting the Assad government against various insurgents, of whom the Turkish-supported radicals are the most important. Whether to punish Russia for opposing Ankara’s objectives or deter Moscow from taking further action, the attack raises tensions not only with Turkey but also NATO, including America, the alliance’s most important member. Striking nuclear-armed Russia for an alleged overflight lasting just a few seconds appears to be seeking war. The U.S. should shun Ankara for playing chicken with Moscow.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg addresses the media at NATO headquarters in Brussels on Tuesday, Nov. 24, 2015. NATO’s North Atlantic Council met in emergency session on Tuesday to discuss the downing of a Russian fighter jet. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

Turkey demonstrates that NATO is a bad deal for America. Military alliances should be based on circumstances and defense guarantees should serve U.S. interests. Any conceivable existential threat against Turkey ended along with the Cold War. Ankara and Russia had no conflicting issues likely to lead to war. Turkey’s large military far outclassed those of its neighbors, especially after the U.S. invaded Iraq and Syria collapsed into civil war.

At the same time, the shared interests between Turkey and the West dissipated. The Erdogan government has moved Turkey in a much more independent and even hostile direction. Doing so is Ankara’s prerogative, but eliminates any lingering justification for the West to guarantee Turkey’s security. The alliance should not be responsible for defending Ankara as the latter attempts to overthrow the Assad government and, even worse, commits a gratuitous act of war designed only to provoke Moscow.

Indeed, Turkey is merely the latest example of alliance members seeking to drag the U.S. into conflicts of no interest to America. Britain and France largely orchestrated the Libya war, in which Washington helped deconstruct yet another Muslim country without purpose. NATO members in Eastern Europe, most notably the Baltics, want American garrisons even though they were not viewed as vital U.S. security interest even during the height of the Cold War. Georgia and Ukraine are more distant and aren’t members of the alliance but they, too, want America to confront a nuclear-armed power on its border over interests at most peripheral for Washington. Turkey is more powerful than its neighbors and Europe is more powerful than Russia. The U.S. should disentangle itself from the defense of its free-riding “allies.”

Moscow is a better and more reliable partner than Turkey for America in the Middle East. Vladimir Putin is a nasty character. Under him Russia is acting like a traditional great power, focused on protecting security and winning respect, without the slightest concern for liberal

Western values. He has created an ugly autocracy at home, suppressing the civil liberties and political freedoms Americans and Europeans value.

But President Erdogan differs little from President Putin. The former profits from his position, jails journalists, seizes media companies, abuses presidential power, and triggers conflict for political gain. It should surprise no one that Ankara's chances of entering the European Union are nil. Indeed, after having squeezed all of the political benefit from formally seeking membership, President Erdogan probably doesn't want to join.

Where Presidents Putin and Erdogan dramatically diverge is their policies toward radical Islamists. As noted earlier, Ankara has consistently promoted the murderous jihadists of most concern to America. Turkey once was committed to maintaining a stable and moderate political environment in the region. Now the Erdogan government is aiding ISIL and al-Nusra, targeting Kurdish and Syrian government forces, and shooting down Russian aircraft bombing Islamic extremists.

Russian air force Tu-22M3 bombers drop bombs on a target in Syria as part of a Russian air campaign against targets in Syria. (AP Photo/ Russian Defense Ministry Press Service)

In contrast, in the Middle East U.S. and Russian interests broadly coincide. Exactly why the U.S. feels duty-bound to oust Assad—whom Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once described as a “reformer”—isn't clear. Both Iraq and Libya dramatically demonstrated that it's not enough to get rid of the bad guy. You need a good guy as successor. Washington has none in Syria. The Obama administration merely pretends that if Assad fled, or ended up hanging from a lamppost, that Syria's George Washington would magically emerge, unify the insurgents, protect the minorities, and get everyone to hold hands while singing Kumbaya and roasting marshmallows around a fire.

In fact, American policy in the Mideast has failed catastrophically: persistent intervention has triggered sectarian war in Iraq, turned religious minorities into refugees, spawned the Islamic State, empowered Iran, turned Libya into another failed state filled with conflict and terrorists, discouraged a negotiated settlement in Syria, backed the least effective Syrian insurgents, inadvertently armed the most dangerous combatants, and conducted a largely ineffectual campaign against ISIL without apparent end. Yet the Obama administration is committed to doing more of the same in the forlorn hope of achieving a different result.

Nor does President Putin's policy elsewhere challenge fundamental allied security interests. It's not fun being a onetime Soviet republic on his border. Just ask Georgia and Ukraine. However, contrary to claims of an imminent Russian blitzkrieg, in 15 years this supposed Hitler-lite has “gained,” if one can call it that, Abkhazia, Crimea, Donbass, and South Ossetia. That's a pitiful empire. Indeed, there is no evidence that Moscow has the slightest interest in conquering non-Russian areas. His bullying of his neighbors rightly offends the West's principles of justice, but is no cause for military conflict.

Cooperating with Russia against the Islamic State and other dangerous radicals doesn't require befriending President Putin or creating a formal alliance. Rather, such a policy would be simply transactional, with the two governments working together where and when doing so serves both nations' interests. That's more than occurs with Turkey today. It is difficult for the U.S. to articulate a single genuine shared interest with Ankara.

The Turkish shoot down of the Russian jet moves the Mideast conflict into a dangerous new phase. With some justification President Putin called the action "a stab in the back by the terrorists' accomplices." The chief lesson for Washington should be to abandon outdated alliances and stop covering for "the terrorists' accomplices," most importantly Turkey. Russia may not be an ally, but at least it is friendlier and less dangerous than Ankara today.

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