How Putin is Exploiting NATOâ€™s Support for Turkey against Syria

Contributed by Publius X
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You probably wouldn’t know it from reading U.S. media today, but a major diplomatic incident erupted on Wednesday between Turkey and Russia. Russia’s Foreign Ministry is warning of measures it may take in retaliation for Turkish F-16 jets forcing a Syrian airliner bound from Moscow to Damascus to land in Turkey with 16 Russian passengers on board. The Turks are insisting that the plane was carrying military equipment and ammunition for the besieged forces of Syrian President Bashir Assad to use against Syrian rebels. But the Russians are dismissing this allegation, claiming that if they wanted to send weapons to Assad they would’ve used their ships and existing port facility at Tartus as with recent arms shipments. Russia also says its 16 citizens on board the plane were traumatized by the experience and were not allowed to contact the Russian consulate for help within the first eight hours of the plane landing in Turkey, in violation of diplomatic accords with Turkey. The Syrian government claims the plane was carrying only what was listed on its cargo manifest and that the Turkish action constitutes ‘air piracy’ in contempt of international civilian aviation treaties.

Turkish businesses to pay dearly for poking the Russian Bear

Russian President Vladimir Putin has no shortage of options he may use to punish Turkey for turning up the heat on the Assad government in Syria. Turkey sells over a billion dollars of fruits and vegetables and other agricultural goods to Russia per year. The Russian government could easily block those imports -- and, to further humiliate the Islamist government of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Russians will likely buy their winter produce from Israel instead. Russia could also cancel authorization for tourist charter flights that take thousands of tourists from Russia to Turkish Mediterranean resorts like Antalya or Izmir every month. For Turkish businessmen, the risks that they could soon feel pain in their wallets over their government’s aggressive support of the Syrian rebels are very real, and that is motivating a growing opposition within the Turkish parliament to Erdogan’s interventions in neighboring Syria.
But in addition to embarrassment ahead for Erdogan, there are also larger repercussions -- and ironies -- looming for Washington’s eternal Cold Warriors, including the advisors to Mitt Romney who told their man to describe Russia as America’s number one geopolitical adversary. In addition to being a wily veteran of the KGB, the 60-year-old Putin is also a practicioner of judo. The Japanese martial art involves grappling with an opponent and using an adversary’s own momentum to throw him. It is also a concept familiar to Chinese students of The Art of War -- exploiting an opponent’s arrogance and allowing him to blunder onto the terrain of one’s own choosing. By allowing Washington egg Turkey on into a confrontation with Russia it cannot win, Putin is also “creating daylight” (to use Mitt Romney’s phrase) between the U.S. and once close American allies in the Near East, ranging from Greece to Iraq to (in the biggest shocker of all for the Romney camp) -- Israel.

Rocking the Crumbling Cradle of Civilizations -- Russia Woos Greece Away from EU/NATO

First Greece. While many neocon advocates for U.S. intervention in Syria were fixated on the action in Damascus and a looming confrontation with Assad’s ally Iran, a growing opposition chorus in Greece is calling for the bankrupt country to leave the eurozone and turn toward Russia, China and Israel for economic support. While the Greek government insists it has no choice but to agree to European Union austerity measures, unemployment in the cradle of democracy has risen for 35 consecutive months, to the U.S. Great Depression level of over 25%. Hunger has become a very real problem in Athens and other Greek cities, and the opposition is starting to ask what Greece has left to lose by dumping the euro and adopting a devalued drachma to revive the economy. While all of this is taking place in Greece, the Russian government has shrewdly extended a multi-billion euro loan to the Greek-aligned government of Cyprus, which shares a border with Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus. The island in the eastern Mediterranean has also become one of the single largest ‘foreign investors’ in the Russian Federation -- thanks to Nicosia being a major banking center for Russian companies, in industries ranging from shipping to mining to oil and gas. And the Russian investment in Cyprus is likely to grow thanks to the recently discovered Leviathian natural gas field nearby that Israel plans to tap.

While some Western media mindlessly parrots a line about ‘massive’ capital flight from Russia, what is in fact happening is Russian companies are recycling billions in profits through European and Cypriot banks, and then

repatriating the capital to Russia. Given Russian support for the Cypriots and a shared Orthodox Christian religion, it is quite possible that a bankrupt Greece will turn to Russia for investment when it finally defaults on its bad euro-denominated debts. What that likely means, in practice, is that Washington neocon efforts to push the Russians out of their base at the Syrian port of Tartus will backfire, leading to an even better Russian naval base in Greece. A twenty-year lease for the Russian navy at Athens’ port of the Pireaus, for example, could probably be negotiated right now for less than 10 billion euros.

Given the historic enmity between Greece and Turkey which almost resulted in war during the 1970s while both countries were members of NATO, there is no sympathy for a Turkish invasion of Syria in Athens. Any NATO support for such an invasion could find itself undermined by leaks from Greek military officers or other NATO militaries sympathetic to the Greeks at the alliance’s headquarters in Brussels, Belgium (such leaks purportedly happened during NATO’s offensive war against the Serbs over Kosovo in 1999). As it is, Syria’s pro-Assad journalists as well as the Russia media have already pointed to the persecution of Orthodox Christians and Eastern rite Catholics by the Syrian rebels to win the sympathies of those not subject to an Anglo-American media blackout on that topic.

Iraq turns to Saddam’s old patron, Moscow

Meanwhile in Iraq the U.S.-installed government of Nouri al-Maliki has turned on Washington by signing a multi-billion dollar arms deal with Russia this week. Instead of flying new or used Lockheed F-16s like Turkey, the Iraqi Air Force will fly Russian MiG-29 jets instead, and will also be buying Russian helicopters. After staying somewhat neutral on the Syrian civil war, Maliki has come out against any Turkish intervention in the conflict that has already claimed thousands of lives. The Maliki government has also started pushing U.S. oil major ExxonMobil out of a field in southern Iraq near Kuwait in favor of Russian oil companies. Iraq has also allowed overflights of Iranian planes carrying troops and weapons for the Assad government to use in its fight against Saudi, Qatari, and Turkish-backed rebels. The fact that Iraq is refusing to support the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in their plans to install a Sunni-Islamist government in Damascus after the minority Allawite-Shi’a government of Assad is overthrown must be infuriating to the Saudis. On top of that the Iraqis are pumping more oil which cuts into Saudi Arabia’s profits, which have been artificially boosted by all the Western sanctions against rival oil producer Iran.

Dobre pozhalavut Jerusalem, Mr. Putin!

In what should be the most troubling development for the neocons that surround Mitt Romney who presume to be Israel’s strongest supporters, even the Israelis may no longer be on board with a U.S. or NATO-led intervention in Syria. Israel may prefer the ‘devil it knows’ in Bashir Assad, who has kept its Golan Heights border quiet, to the ‘devils it does not know’ in the opposition, many of whom have ties to Al-Qaeda and have sworn to reconquer the Golan or even destroy Israel. Even the members of the so-called Free Syrian Army who are not card carrying members of Al-Qaeda are aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, a transnational Arab movement that recently captured the government of Egypt. While it’s quite easy to blame Obama for the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood across North Africa and the Middle East, it would be a great irony if Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, who both support arming Syria’s rebels, would facilitate the creation of Muslim Brotherhood-dominated governments on two of Israel’s three borders. For Israel, such an alignment would recreate the nightmare of a two-front war like the 1973 Yom Kippur War that claimed hundreds of Israeli lives and pushed the Jewish state’s armies to the brink of exhausting their ammunition.

Into this breach between Washington’s hawks and Israel has stepped one Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. In a story downplayed by most of the Anglo-American media (with the honorable exceptions of Breitbart.com and The Daily Beast) the Russian President was feted this summer at Israel’s historic King David Hotel. The Russian delegation in June included so many businessmen that it booked 233 rooms at the hotel in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Post reported that the Russian leader pushed all the right buttons with his hosts, telling a Jewish man that he prayed the Jews would one day rebuild their ancient Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Putin also described Israel as a country with close ties to Russia, as more than one fifth of the population speaks Russian. What Putin said to Benjamin Netanyahu behind closed doors we can only speculate about, but it’s likely he told Netanyahu he may prefer Assad to his likely hardline-Islamist successors. Putin may also have told the Israelis the 2009 Gaza flotilla incident

provoked by Islamist elements in Turkey (the same elements that have a history of supporting jihadists in Russia’s troubled Caucuses region) was unfortunate.

Moscow will be denouncing an Israeli strike on Iran all the way to the bank

Looking at the recent leaks by the Obama Administration to Foreign Policy magazine that many Israeli security thinkers complained about this summer, it’s also possible that Russia has agreed to turn a blind eye to Israeli moves into Azerbaijan in preparation for a war with Iran. After all, any Israeli strike on Iran would be much more effective if Israeli Air Force jets and drones could refuel in or over Azerbaijan, which borders Iran to the north. Without refueling, it is doubtful that any strike by Israel going to alone would accomplish much against Iran’s dispersed network of hardened bunkers. Furthermore, Russia maintains a very powerful radar station inside Azerbaijan at Gabala and could effectively control Azeri air space via a fighter base in neighboring Armenia (this is the part of the story embarrassing to both Washington and Jerusalem that Foreign Policy’s editors left out). For the neocons to claim if Israel strikes Iran that Russia via Azeri air space that Russia was not in on it would defy all bounds of credibility, and permanently damage their eternal Cold War narrative that Russia is an implacable enemy of the West allied with Iran. And naturally, since Russia maintains one of the most ruthlessly pragmatic foreign policies on Earth, Moscow could denounce the Israeli aggression all the way to the bank as oil prices spiked (Russia is the world’s largest oil producer). Netanyahu likely wouldn’t care, so long as Israeli vegetables and technologies would continue to flow due north to Russia. Perhaps in that scenario the neocons would simply flip their script and shamelessly claim that Iran after years of being America’s worst enemy was now simply a victim of Russian aggression.

All of these contradictions between what neoconservative hawks claim about the Middle East, Israel, and the postures of American allies towards “America’s number one geopolitical adversary” are coming to a head. In his speech at the Virginia Military Institute this week, Mitt Romney vowed that there would be “no daylight” between Israel and the United States during his Administration. Whether Romney was referring to the daylight that Moscow has shrewdly exploited in recent months is unknown. But what is clear is that the policies advocated by Mitt Romney, including support for Turkey’s aggressive moves and arming of the Syrian rebels, will push the Jewish State into more friendly consultations with Moscow. Thus while D.C. elites obsessed over failed outreach to the Muslim Brotherhood (Obama) or spending money the U.S. doesn’t have to maintain raw military power (Romney), Moscow like Beijing is shrewdly playing the long game with clever diplomacy and investment.

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