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How to Crush Erdoğan's Expansionism

By Joshua Tartakovsky
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Erdoğan's Turkey is angry. It feels repressed and hated unjustly. It is hungry for respect but insatiable in its demands. It brought down a Russian jet unwarrantedly and militiamen fired on its parachuting pilot, but Erdoğan's Turkey believed it was protecting itself. Despite its supposed sensitivity to questions of sovereignty, it sent troops across the border to Iraq against the wishes of the Iraqi government, supposedly to train anti-ISIS fighters. No one believes this. It is engaged in a bloody crackdown against the Kurdish Workers Party guerrilla group (PKK) inside Turkey resulting in a bloodbath, which may very well be only the beginning. Erdoğan's Turkey views itself as a victim of Russia, the "killer of Sunnis." But it is Erdoğan's Turkey which is aiding and trading with the Islamic State while presenting itself as a victim of false accusations. To view the invasion of Iraq in isolation is to miss the point. Erdoğan's Turkey is hoping to regain the pre-1917 Ottoman lands across the border and/or to reunite with its brothers the Turkmen in Syria. It is only a question of time before Erdoğan's Turkey invades Syrian territory illegally, just as it did in Iraq, under the full protection of NATO. It is expansionist by nature.

Many prefer to view Erdoğan's actions as whimsical or as contrary to the wishes of the United States or NATO. According to this narrative, Erdoğan is a madman but he is acting on his own. This is a mistake. Let one who claims so answer candidly the following questions:

Did the United States or NATO denounce the toppling of the Russian Jet? -No. On the contrary. It was claimed Turkey has the right to "defend itself."

Did the United States or NATO demand an immediate withdrawal of Turkish forces from northern Iraq following the illegal invasion on December 4? Did it denounce it at once? -No. Only two weeks later did the US ask Turkey to withdraw its forces from Iraq. There was no condemnation.

Did the United States or NATO hold Erdoğan accountable for his trading with and support for ISIS? -No. In fact, NATO-Turkish cooperation and EU-Turkish collaboration has only intensified.

Did the United States condemn Erdoğan for his bloody campaign against the Kurds in Turkey? -No.

Erdoğan's Turkey is very convenient for NATO. It serves as the tool by which to assert both Turkish and NATO's strategic objectives. Both NATO and Turkey wish to bring down the government of Bashar al Assad. Both NATO and Turkey seek to confront Russia. Both the US and Turkey have been working to weaken the Iraqi state, even by a direct attack. Erdoğan's Turkey is the spearhead of NATO's campaign and strategic objectives. If Russia attacks Turkey or responds to a Turkish provocation, NATO will intervene. It is obligated to do so under NATO's Article 5. Turkey is both the provocateur and the bait. If Turkish actions were whimsical and undesirable, would the US and NATO not condemn them at once rather than offer Erdoğan their backing?

Erdoğan has been enriching himself from ISIL's oil and keeping the revenues in his pocket while leaving his people in poverty. He has served his own interests and the interests of NATO, not of the Turkish people. All under the banner of "Neo-Ottomanism." As I wrote earlier, Erdoğan enjoys popular support by a impoverished public who sees him as a genuine representative. He has been intentionally stirring resentment and feelings of national humiliation and Russia should have therefore sought to drive a wedge between Erdoğan and the people.

How did Russia respond to Erdoğan's trap? It fell straight into it.

First, it declared a boycott against Turkey and Turkish goods which will now send the Turkish people into Erdoğan's willing arms and blind them to his corruption.

Second, it took the knee-jerk reaction of aligning itself closer with Armenia, which will only reinforce popular Turkish suspicions and increase tensions between Russia and the people of Turkey, precisely what Russia does not want nor need.

Third, Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov met with the co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) of Turkey, Selahattin Demirtaş, and said he will support Kurdish fighters in Syria and Iraq. Lavrov made at least three mistakes here:

He met with a pro-Kurdish political party alone rather than meeting with other Turkish oppositional figures who oppose Erdoğan. Therefore, he increased popular Turkish suspicions of Russia. He did not mention supporting Kurds in Turkey and providing them weapons to protect themselves from the onslaught of the NATO-armed Turkish army. He confused between the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. The Kurds of Syria, as the People's Defense Units (YPG) in Syria, oppose ISIL and Turkey. The Kurds in autonomous Kurdistan in Iraq, at least those under Masoud Barzani, work with Turkey and trade with it. The Kurds in Turkey, are facing an onslaught. Either way, not everyone wants Russian help and not everyone is against Erdoğan. But Lavrov mistakenly assumed the deeply divided Kurdish people are a single entity with a common goal. His blunders did not end here. To make matters worse, Lavrov added that help for YPG will be provided only via the Syrian government. By saying this, he did not win points with the Syrian Kurds who have long been suspicious of central governments and believed in local autonomy as a matter of ideology. The US had no inhibitions supporting local groups. Assad will be likely to accept this as he already said he is willing to give limited sovereignty to the Kurds in Syria and laws cannot be kept perfectly in times of war. If Russia one day decides to arm the Kurds in Turkey, Lavrov will probably suggest arming them via the Turkish government.

To respond properly to Erdoğan and contain his future inevitable expansion, Russia must realize that Erdoğan thrives on friction, is supported by a majority of the people, and is acting with the full support of NATO. There should be no illusions about Erdoğan. He has to be crushed, and as quickly as possible, before he brings his country and the entire region down, under NATO's auspices.

How to contain Erdoğan?

First, the Kurds in Turkey need to be supported. Supporting them is not only a moral cause, it also will entangle Erdoğan at home and will impede his meddling in Syria and Iraq. It will drain his army. It may eventually cause the public to turn away from him as it becomes clear that his path leads to destruction and war. Either way, it will draw international attention to the Kurdish issue, will allow the Kurds to defend themselves from slaughter and will move the ball to Erdoğan's court. One who supported terrorists in Syria should not be surprised when other countries support rebels in his territory.

Second, when and where a future Turkish invasion is expected to occur on Syrian territory, an invading Turkish army should meet Hezbollah and YPG fighters on the other side of the border, rather than Russian soldiers or the Syrian Army. This would serve several goals: It would create a united Sunni-Shiite front against Erdoğan's expansionism, therefore making it more difficult for him to say that Turkey is fighting "Assad, killer of the Sunnis." It would prevent a direct clash between Russian and Turkish soldiers, which would inevitably draw in NATO against Russia and allow Erdoğan to present the Russians as the killers of Muslims once again while using his tried and true divide and conquer method. It would create a precedent of collaboration across sectarian and ethnic lines therefore opening the space for broader collaboration between

Iran and Sunni states against Saudi-supported terrorism. Of course, forming such a common front is far from easy, but due to the necessity of the hour and with Russia's generous military support, it is more than possible. Both the Syrian Kurds and Hezbollah are known to be pragmatic. If Turkmen fighters in northern Syria are to be killed in fighting, it would be far better if they are to be killed by Muslim fighters rather than by Russian Orthodox soldiers.

Third, Russia should seek to slowly gain Iraqi Kurdistan to its side. If it manages to win over the YPG in Syria and the PKK in Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds may have to eventually form a closer alliance with Russia too, especially as Erdoğan continues his massacre of Kurds inside Turkey. The Soviet Union supported the short-lived Kurdish republic in Iran following World War II, and it can go back to forming a more vibrant relationship with the Kurds, despite its tendency to work only with state actors. In addition, where possible, better ties should be made both with the Turkish people and with Turkish political parties while circumventing Erdoğan.

Erdoğan thrives on conflict and will seek to expand. A viable response then would be to bring the conflict to his own backyard, work with the Syrian and Turkish Kurds, prevent a direct Russian-Turkish collusion and create a common Hezbollah-YPG defense on the border. The more his hands are full at home, the less he can meddle abroad. Erdoğan's expansionism should meet resistance by Muslim fighters — both Sunni and Shiites — not by a Russian army who will be portrayed in Turkish media as the enemy from Chechnya.