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## PUTIN AND ERDOGAN: TOO ALIKE TO GET ALONG?

BY MATTHEW BRYZA

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The shooting down of a Russian Su-24 bomber by a Turkish F-16 fighter jet last November 24 has triggered a potentially profound shift in relations between Russia and Turkey. This interstate conflict has become personalized, with Russian President Vladimir Putin demanding an apology from Turkey, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan refusing to budge. Similarities

between the two presidents will likely prolong this titanic blinking contest for several months. Ultimately, however, Erdogan sits in a stronger position as the commander-in-chief of NATO's second-largest army.

Presidents Putin and Erdogan have both demonstrated iron will in building their personal power. Neither will countenance personal insult or take any step that might make them look politically weak. But, despite these similarities, it is the underlying differences between their countries that will convey the two leaders toward resolution of their standoff, eventually.

First, Russia is an authoritarian state, where politics are defined by a presidential personality cult that Putin cranked up following a fraudulent election that prompted mass protests in 2012. Turkey, in contrast, is a democracy, even if flawed. President Erdogan led his AKP party to a decisive victory in legitimate parliamentary elections in November 7, 2015, gaining over 50 percent of the vote and reversing the loss of its parliamentary majority six months earlier.

As President Erdogan tries to build on this political momentum to transform Turkey from a parliamentary into a presidential republic, he must convince, rather than command, opposition parliamentarians to go along. This is a constraint that President Putin does not face. And, while the Turkish government uses pressure against the media to shape the political space, including its recent takeover of Zaman newspaper and arrests of journalists, the latter need not fear assassinations, which have terrorized their Russian counterparts.

Second, as is the norm in democracies, Turkish voters expect their elected leaders to pursue peace. They are therefore unlikely to accept an extended period of tension with Russia, the country against which Turkey has fought more wars than any other, and which has recently invaded two of its neighbors, Georgia and Ukraine.

President Putin is trying to exploit Turkish voters' aversion to conflict with Russia by stoking bilateral tensions. His weapon of choice has been economic sanctions, such as disqualifying Turkish firms from mega-construction projects; blocking Turkish imports of agricultural products; and pressuring the 2 million Russian tourists who had been visiting Turkey to spend their holidays elsewhere. Though painful for these specific business sectors, these measures have

not harmed the Turkish economy in a broader sense (though they have hurt Russian consumers).

Putin is therefore turning to the energy sector to ratchet up pressure, hoping to exploit Turkey's dependence on Russia for over 50 percent of its natural gas supplies. Until now, Russia's state-owned natural gas company, Gazprom, has honored its supply contracts with Turkey, which has grown into Gazprom's second-largest export market (after Germany). Moreover, Turkey had been central to Putin's scheme to undercut the EU's quest for non-Russian gas supplies via the "Southern Corridor", a series of pipelines that begin in Azerbaijan and transit Georgia and Turkey. Key to Putin's plan was a mammoth gas pipeline to connect Russia and Turkey under the Black Sea, known as Turkish Stream. In mid-February, however, Gazprom seemed to shift course, cutting gas supplies in violation of contracts with Turkey and announcing the cancellation of Turkish Stream.

Though this latest attempt by Putin to politicize natural gas exports would inflict immediate economic pain on Turkey, it is Russia that would suffer more in the long run. Turkey would intensify efforts to replace Gazprom with alternative supplies (from northern Iraq, Turkmenistan, Iran, and even Israel and Cyprus) via the Southern Corridor that Putin has been so eager to block.

Echoing its self-defeating approach on natural gas, the Russian government has threatened to cancel the contract won by Rosatom, the Russian state nuclear agency, to build Turkey's Akkuyu nuclear power station. If it carries out this threat, Moscow will shoot itself in the foot by denying Rosatom a \$20 billion contract, which Ankara will then offer to one of Rosatom's American or European competitors.

Moscow has also tried to apply political and security pressure on Ankara, increasing refugee flows into Turkey through aerial bombardment of rebels and civilians in northern Syria. This brutal tactic has backfired strategically, driving Turkey and the EU toward a landmark agreement to deepen their ties if Ankara stems refugee flows into Greece.

President Putin thus faces a dilemma: He must remain the macho leader Russians crave by punishing Turkey, but his available tactics threaten to inflict strategic penalties on Russia. This helps explain why Putin has restrained his rhetoric even while ratcheting up the above actions. Though he disingenuously claims Turkey shot down the Russian aircraft without provocation, he has been careful to avoid accusing Turkey of committing an act of war. He realizes such a declaration would require a tough, perhaps military response, which could place Russia in direct conflict with NATO. Putin and his military spokesmen have therefore instead dubbed the downing of the Turkish jet “an unfriendly act” and a “stab in the back,” while Putin seeks a face-saving apology from Erdogan.

President Erdogan is unlikely to offer an apology any time soon. For now, he seems content to speak softly about Russia while carrying a big diplomatic stick by bolstering Turkey’s relations with Ukraine, the EU, and non-Russian natural gas suppliers.

Ultimately, however, Erdogan probably seeks a dignified way to de-escalate, as evidenced by his repeated requests to meet Putin immediately after the November 24 incident. By accepting such a meeting, Putin could portray Erdogan’s invitation as a form of apology. The two leaders’ similarities could then evolve back into a source of cooperation, as before the shooting of the jet, when the two leaders forged a political and economic partnership between their countries. The immediate road ahead, however, will be rocky, with Putin and Erdogan both refusing to blink first.