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How would NATO respond to Syria shooting down a Turkish plane?

Posted By Uri Friedman
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This morning, Turkey made the startling announcement that it had lost contact with one of its F-4 military jets near the country's southern border with Syria, and that it had launched search-and-rescue efforts for the plane's two pilots.

Details about the incident are still fuzzy. Turkey's Hurriyet Daily News is reporting that Syrian authorities have apologized to their Turkish counterparts for downing the aircraft (and cooperated on the rescue mission), while the BBC notes that the Turkish government has called an emergency security meeting and that witnesses in the Syrian coastal city of Latakia have told BBC Arabic that Syrian air defenses shot down an aircraft. But none of the key details -- the plane's mission, the cause and location of the crash, the whereabouts of the pilots -- have been nailed down.

"We've lost a plane and as yet we don't know have any information as to what happened and whether it was brought down," Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in a press conference on Friday.

Even with the shifting facts, it's worth asking: Could this incident -- or an incident like it -- trigger more aggressive action against Syria by the international community? After all, Turkey is a member of NATO, and Article V of the Washington Treaty outlines the alliance's commitment to collective security:

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

A day after 9/11, NATO invoked this very provision for the first (and, to date, only) time, pledging to support U.S. military retaliation if it were determined that the terrorist attacks had been perpetrated by foreign nationals. The United States soon satisfied this condition in briefings with NATO members, but ultimately chose to topple the Taliban government in Afghanistan outside the NATO framework. (It's also worth noting that NATO forces are involved in plenty of operations that don't involve Article V.)

If Turkey has reason to believe that Syria shot down its plane, might NATO respond in a similar fashion? It's not an entirely unreasonable question. The bloody and protracted crisis in Syria has poisoned relations between Ankara and Damascus, and Turkey suggested in April that it might turn to NATO under Article V to help protect its border in response to incursions by Syrian forces -- a threat Syria condemned as "provocative."

But Kurt Volker, the executive director of the McCain Institute for International Leadership and a former U.S. ambassador to NATO, points out that Article V simply offers NATO allies an opportunity to consult with one another and does not necessarily entail a military response. If Turkey wanted to bring today's incident to the alliance, it would most likely instruct the Turkish ambassador in Brussels to work with NATO's secretary-general on calling a formal meeting to discuss the episode and formulate an appropriate response.

"A response could be anything from a statement reiterating the inviolability of security guarantees to members coordinating activities so that they can respond to further attacks on Turkish interests," Volker says.

He doesn't believe today's incident alone will alter the international community's response to the Syrian conflict, but he does think a NATO meeting on the matter could nurture a broader discussion about how to intervene militarily in Syria outside the U.N. Security Council, where Russia and China have repeatedly opposed such action. One scenario, he adds, could be Western and Arab countries joining forces to create "safe zones" in Syria, support the Syrian opposition, and conduct aerial strikes against Syria's offensive military assets.

"I do get the feeling that the patience of the international community is growing thinner," Volker explains. "With the recent village-by-village slaughter [in Syria] and brazenness of the Russians in trying to arm the Syrians, I think we may be approaching a point at which this kind of coalition intervention is more thinkable than it was a couple months ago."

James Joyner, the managing editor of the Atlantic Council, points out that if Syria shot down the lost Turkish plane in Syrian air space, it would not be considered an attack under NATO's

charter. Even if NATO determines that Syria attacked Turkey, he adds, he doesn't think the alliance has any appetite for going to war with Syria.

"It would be one thing if Syria sent ground troops into Turkey and started shooting," he says, "but shooting down a plane that might have been surveilling Syrian air space is just a different animal than that. This is more of a harsh words and sanctions kind of thing, and frankly there's not much more of that that we can do in terms of Syria."

Update: After an emergency security meeting, Prime Minister Erdogan's has issued a statement indicating that Turkey believes it was indeed Syria that shot down its fighter jet and that the pilots have yet to be found. Most ominously, the statement added that Turkey would respond decisively once it had established exactly what took place today, according to the BBC.

A Syrian military spokesman also issued a statement on the Turkish jet, noting that "an unidentified aerial target" had "violated Syrian airspace" on Friday morning and that "the Syrian anti-air defenses counteracted with anti-aircraft artillery, hitting it directly as it was 1 kilometer away from land, causing it to crash into Syrian territorial waters west of Om al-Tuyour village in Lattakia province, 10 kilometers from the beach." The aircraft, the spokesman added, "was dealt with according to laws observed in such cases."