



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

TURKISH ROULETTE

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Introduction

On the morning of 24 November 2015 at about 09:25 to 09:30 A.M. local time a Russian Air Force Sukhoi Su-24 tactical bomber engaged in air-to-ground attacks against anti-Government armed irregular forces in northern Syria, close to the border with Turkey was shot down by an AIM-120 Advanced Medium Range Air to Air Missile (AMRAAM) fired by one of a pair of Turkish Air Force F-16s¹. The missile hit on the Su-24 was filmed as was the stricken aircraft's crash into the ground. Both crew members of the aircraft were able to eject successfully from the stricken machine. However, armed anti-government militants on the ground fired at the crewmen in the air and killed one, the pilot, whose body they captured. The other crew member, the navigator/ weapons system operator, was rescued by a Syrian Special Forces team in a Mi-24/25 "Hind" assault helicopter in conjunction with a Mi-8 utility helicopter. The rescue operation was conducted under heavy anti-government force fire that led to the loss of

the Mi-8 and also a Russian Marine². This incident understandably made its way to the 'top story' of news reporting organisations all over the world. The fact that Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Russia is the successor state of the second superpower of the earlier bipolar world order, the Soviet Union, makes this incident amongst the most dangerous ever since 1991. The events surrounding the shooting down of the Su-24 merit analysis. Such analysis perforce relies upon publicly available information from the media as access to classified military data from both sides is unlikely to be possible.

Background and Analysis of the Episode

Soon after the shooting down of the Russian Su-24 Turkey announced the event and released what it claimed was a record of the radar plot of the Russian aircraft involved. Turkey claimed that two aircraft of "unknown nationality" had entered a thin tongue of land that extends southwards from Turkey into Syria for 17 seconds. Turkey further claimed that their

air force had warned the Russian aircraft about the violation of Turkish airspace and instructions to turn southward to vacate the incursion as many as ten times within five minutes³. On observing no remedial action by the intruders one of them was shot down on direct orders of the Turkish President. The information on the incident release was followed by the Turkish President seeking assistance from NATO while filing a report on the incident with the UN. The incident raises many intriguing questions and observations. Russia meanwhile declared that as per its 'objective technical means' the two aircraft involved had not entered Turkish airspace at all⁴. The flight path released by Russia showed their aircraft at closest about 1-2 kilometers from the Turkish border within Syrian airspace, but operating close to the Syria-Turkey border and bombing militants who were fighting against the legal government, led by President Bashar Al Assad, of Syria⁵. Examination of the data supplied by Turkey in addition to its own resources led the US to finally state that the Su-24 was hit while within Syrian airspace⁶. Other reports including from the rescued navigator of the ill-fated aircraft stated that the aircraft had been carrying out bombing attacks against Turkmen militias in northern Syria close to the border with Turkey and the aircraft was hit after completing delivery of one attack and while positioning for a follow on dive bombing attack.

From the Turkish side several points emerge. Firstly, at most the Su-24s spent 17 seconds within Turkish airspace in the tongue of land jutting into Syria, if the Turkish version is fully accepted at face value. That too on a flight path towards the west parallel to the general orientation of the border and not on a path penetrating further into Turkey and hence were no threat to Turkish national security. The warnings given to the 'intruders' were in English and no time stamps are reported to be available to verify the time of these purported warnings that the Russian crew claim did not take place. So these warnings are based upon the Turkish version with no independent verification possible. The missile firing took place against an aircraft flying parallel to the border, even if for a very few seconds within the border and no threat. The US and Russian inputs suggest that the aircraft was shot while within Syria, even if it had earlier, for a few seconds, been across the border. The US Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) flights in proximity of Chinese and other countries' airspace are supported by 'the path not aligned to enter airspace but parallel to borders' argument. Moreover a NATO SOP, albeit dating back to the early 1950s⁷, for intercept states that use of force is not to be carried out against aircraft that are carrying out hostile acts against the defending nation. Moreover, it states for that for this purpose the "Allied Territorial Border, will be an aerial zone 10 miles in depth parallel to, *and on the inside of(emphasis intended)*, the Allied

Territorial border on the ground.” As per this statement in the NATO document, the Turkish claim of territorial aggression by the Russian or as stated by Turkey “aircraft of unknown nationality” would fall flat; as it is likely that this or a very similar NATO Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is in force even today. It has also been reported in the media, albeit the, possibly, more trustworthy (they have never pushed malicious creative fiction like Iraq’s weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) down the world’s throat) Russian media that the Turkish F-16 aircraft involved in the incident were on station in the region for over one hour prior to the incident⁸. Reading between the lines this could indicate a pre-planned intention to shoot down the Russian aircraft. It has been stated by President Putin that as part of coordination with US airstrikes against IS in Syria, the flight plan of the Russian missions was shared with the US, Turkey’s NATO ally. Hence it is possible that Turkey had advance information of the expected path of the Su-24s involved in this incident⁹. The theory that the shooting down of the Su-24 was an intentional and planned event gains ground on the basis of these otherwise isolated pieces of information. The fact that Turkey called for a meeting of the highest NATO decision making body immediately after the incident also points in this direction. It is apparent that Turkey knew that the intruders of “unknown nationality” were Russian Air Force bombers involved in air-to-ground attack missions against anti-Syrian government militants. Turkish motivations for

this form the body of other studies on the larger power play in the region.

Russian aspects in this event also merit a look. Russia has known since it commenced its intervention that this move was not popular with the West and its allies. The Turkish involvement with elements of the IS to further its larger national need to counter the Kurds, especially the PKK, has been well publicised in the media. The Russian aircraft appear not to have followed even minimal defensive methods to prevent the loss of an aircraft. The Su-24 was designed in the Soviet era to penetrate heavily defended NATO airspace. Hence it is equipped with a reliable radar warning receiver (RWR) to warn its crew of illumination by radars. The launch of an AMRAAM requires radar cueing by the launch aircraft till the missile reaches its self-lock on range and then on basis of a single target track lock on its target guides itself till impact. Illumination of the Su-24s by F-16 radars in track while scan (TWS) mode would have shown up on the Russian RWRs and later the AMRAAM transition to single target track lock on would have generated further visual and audio warnings. At each of these stages the crew of the Su-24s could have initiated electronic warfare (EW) counter measures to defeat the missile attack. These EW counter measures would logically have been conducted in conjunction with defensive tactical manoeuvres. These actions do not appear to have been executed. The reasons for this are not known, but they defy

logic. Even when operating in a relatively benign air environment most air forces take the elementary precautions of carrying self-defense equipment on board aircraft and even providing air defence escorts. The Indian air Force (IAF) is known to have done this during its operations in the 1999 Kargil War for instance¹⁰. The US is reported to be utilizing F-22 “Raptors” to escort other aircraft in anti-IS strikes in the Middle East¹¹. Why the Russian Air Force did not provide air defence escorts to its strike missions in Syria is a point of conjecture for those not in the inner circles of the Russian forces’ decision making process.

Since the incident Russia has taken precautions of moving the guided missile destroyer *Moskva* closer to the coast to provide the umbrella of its S-300 based on board air defence system to Russian Air Force missions over Syria¹². It has also moved one S-400 air defence system to Syria while deciding to provide air defence escorts to its strike missions hereafter¹³. The presence and deployment of these weapons has served to convey a strong message to Turkey and other forces operating in the region of Russia’s intention to take no more. Turkey has responded nervously in the knowledge that deployment of more potent Russian weapons in the background of the recent shooting down of the Su-24 by them makes for a volatile situation and practically rules out any more willful violation of Syrian airspace by Turkey. US led strikes also are unsettled by the

presence of the latest and most potent Russian SAMs in the area¹⁴. The human aspect of Russian SAM crews being on hair trigger alert to prevent a reoccurrence of the earlier Su-24 incident should make non-Russian aircrew operating in Syria even more nervous.

Ideally, from the Russian point of view the SAMs and air defence escorts should prevent any non-Russian aircraft from coming within missile range of Russian aircraft. This places the onus of preventing more incidents squarely on the west, especially in view of the shooting down of the Su-24.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Kareem Shaheen et al., “Putin Condemns Turkey after Russian warplane Downed near Syria Border”, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/24/turkey-shoots-down-jet-near-border-with-syria>, accessed on December 03, 2015.

² Rt.com, “Russian Su-24 pilots shot dead while parachuting over Syria - Turkmen militia”, <https://www.rt.com/news/323281-russian-pilots-killed-turkmen/>, accessed on December 01, 2015.

³ Syrian Free Press, “Russia “Violated” Turkish Airspace Because Turkey “Moved” Its Border”, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/russia-violated-turkish-airspace-because-turkey-moved-its-border/5480430>, accessed on December 02, 2015.

⁴ Rt.com, “‘Allah took their sanity’: Putin accuses Turkish leadership of ‘aiding terror’”, <http://www.redicecreations.com/article.php?id=34867>, accessed on December 03, 2015.

⁵ N-3. Ibid.

⁶ Cctv.com, “Anonymous US official: Russian jet hit inside Syria”,

<http://english.cntv.cn/2015/11/25/VIDE1448421002700528.shtml>, accessed on December 01, 2015.

⁷ Gruenther, A. M., General U.S. Army Chief of Staff, "Rules for Engagement of Unidentified Hostile or Suspected Hostile Aircraft by Allied Fighters in the SHAPE , Area of Responsibility in Peacetime", http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_archives/20121128_19530312_NU_SHAPE-282-53_Rules_for_Engagement_of_Unidentifie.pdf, accessed on December 01, 2015.

⁸ Sputniknews.com, "Turkish Jets Ambushed Russian Su-24 - Russian Air Force Commander", <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20151127/1030863563/turkish-jets-ambush-russian-su-24.html>, accessed on November 30, 2015.

⁹ Atimes.com, "US leaked flight path of downed jet to Turkey, says Putin", <http://atimes.com/2015/11/three-reasons-behind-turkeys-downing-of-russian-bomber/>, accessed on November 30, 2015.

¹⁰ Benjamin Lambeth, "Airpower at 18,000': The Indian Air Force in the Kargil War", <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/20/airpower-at-18-000-indian-air-force-in-kargil-war>, accessed on November, 29, 2015.

¹¹ Mitch Shaw, "F-22 Raptors being used as high-tech escort in Iraq, Syria", <http://www.hilltopnews.com/content/f-22-raptors-being-used-high-tech-escort-iraq-syria>, accessed on November 29, 2015.

¹² David Cenciotti, "Russia deploys S-400 and moves guided-missile cruiser off Latakia to protect its jets near Turkish border", <http://theaviationist.com/2015/11/25/all-the-weapons-sensors-moskva/>, accessed on December 01, 2015.

¹³ Andrew Tilghman, "New Russian surface-to-air missiles in Syria, DoD confirms", <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/11/30/new-russian-surface--air-missiles-syria-dod-confirms/76567120/>, accessed on December 03, 2015.

¹⁴ Andrew Tilghman, "New Russian surface-to-air missiles in Syria, DoD confirms", <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/11/30/new-russian-surface--air-missiles-syria-dod-confirms/76567120/>, accessed on December 03, 2015.