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Between NATO and Russia: The Pieces of Turkey's Puzzle

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It was one of the rare weeks since the outbreak of the Arab awakening that went well for Turkey. Between what was seen as a successful visit by Vladimir Putin to Istanbul on December 3, 2012 and NATO's approval the following day of the deployment of Patriot missiles in Turkey, it seemed as if Turkey was currently playing its cards right. Unlike in previous cases, (1991, 2003) NATO responded rather swiftly to the Turkish request that Patriot batteries be deployed on its territory. This time it not only accepted Turkey's request, but also managed to make Turkey feel that its membership in the alliance is not taken for granted, and that Turkey is a respected member. This is not a trivial matter when considering the degree of suspicion that exists between Turkey and some of its Western allies.

There is a certain zero-sum game between Russia and NATO, and Russia has clearly voiced its objection to Turkey's request from NATO for Patriot deployments. Be it the general Russian objection to the deployment of missile defense systems in adjunct territories, the Russian fear that this is a prelude to larger NATO involvement in Syria, or even the Russian economic interest to sell Turkey missile defense systems of its own, the Patriot issue is one that is not just related to Turkish-Russian bilateral relations. But precisely because of this situation, it also allows the two states to present a "business as usual" attitude.

Putin's one-day visit to Istanbul is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, after the incident in October 2012 in which Turkey forced the landing in Ankara of a civilian airplane en route from Moscow to Damascus (on suspicion that it was carrying military materials), some predicted that this meeting would not take place at all. Indeed, the visit that had been scheduled for October was postponed (although in general, Putin did not undertake substantial international travel over the last two months due to an injury, according to his spokesperson). That the visit has now taken place does not mean that the

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plane incident has been forgotten, rather that the two sides have other important issues that warrant strong cooperation. Trade and energy seem to drive this relationship at the current time, but geo-strategic issues are not far behind.

Second, the visit is an indication that both sides are thinking in a rather pragmatic manner on how to stabilize Syria. Turkey has basically despaired of trying to push the West to become more actively involved in Syria. Erdoğan's recent statement that Russia holds the key to solving the crisis in Syria should be seen as genuine and reflective of Turkey's current position. Any solution that will somehow seem to be acceptable by the majority of Syrians will be supported by Turkey. If Russia will be able to deliver this solution, it will earn Turkey's endorsement.

Third, that Turkey is dependent on Russia for energy imports is clear, and that with harsher international sanctions on Iran Turkey must find ways to compensate for some of the loss of trade and energy imports from Iran is also evident. Of greater interest is how much more diverse Turkish-Russian economic relations have become, ranging from tourism to construction to investments to cooperation on nuclear energy. Current calls to bring mutual trade up to \$100 billion in the coming years might seem overly ambitious, but even half this figure (compared to the current bilateral trade of around \$30 billion) will be impressive.

Fourth, Turkey is also keen on improving its ties with states of the former Soviet Union. If sanctions on Iran become harsher, Turkey will need to find additional reliable energy suppliers, and some of the former Soviet republics could be part of the solution. At present time, Turkey wishes to do this with Russian approval. A visit from Putin was exactly what the Erdoğan's government was looking for in order to strengthen its ties with states that would never disobey Putin. Putin's visit may also increase Turkey's potential to play a more significant role as mediator in the Caucasus.

While Turkey puts much emphasis on its relations with Russia, it still sees NATO as its main partner with regard to the security realm. NATO's swift decision to deploy Patriot batteries on Turkish soil can be characterized as wise, in the sense that it is preparing the ground for the future reassurances Turkey will need in light of the growing volatile nature of the Middle East. This is important beyond the current threat from Syria's chemical weapons, and has implications with regard to the threat from Iran and how much Turkey will continue to be satisfied with the extended deterrence provided by NATO. For Turkey, the best scenario is exactly the one that manifested itself in the previous week – a solid base in NATO coupled with good relations with Russia. Whether this is sustainable in the long run is questionable, but Turkey will pursue this arrangement as long as it can.