

NATO Provokes Russia, Turkey makes hay

by M.K. Bhadrakumar via darcy - Asia Times *Sunday, Dec 6 2015, 3:13am*

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China is no longer able to stay on sidelines

The week has ended appropriately with the Russian President Vladimir Putin signing in the Kremlin on Friday the Executive Order on Immortalizing the Memory of Yevgeniy Primakov. In the name of Primakov, the great statesman from the Soviet era who played a seminal role in the state formation of the Russian Federation in myriad capacities, Putin decreed that ten scholarships will be established in higher learning in two of Russia's most elite universities in the field of economics and international relations and that a Russian naval ship under construction will be named after him.



ALL eyes are on Xi

Primakov was a brilliant academician and a master tactician in the cold-war era bipolar politics and diplomacy and his great legacy lies in standing up for Russia's interests and for turning around 'post-Soviet' Russia to embrace the idea of a multipolar world order, purging it of any lingering illusions of equal partnership with the West.

Russia has an old tradition of naming warships after historical figures, which goes back to the end of the reign of Peter the Great. But the decision to name a warship after Primakov will not be lost on Washington, coming as it does within 48 hours of the move by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on Wednesday at the alliance's foreign ministers meeting in Brussels to admit Montenegro as a new member.

Moscow views the NATO expansion (first such move since 2009) as a provocation, which, according to the Russian foreign ministry, "has the real potential to bring about confrontation... (and) will only further complicate relations between Russia and NATO".

Indeed, this is an untimely moment for NATO to expand "eastward" when one of its member countries just shot down a Russian warplane. The point is, all major decisions and most minor decisions are taken by NATO at Washington's behest.

Moscow would be justified in seeing the NATO decision as part of a broader pattern that includes

Britain's decision to join the US-led coalition in Syria, recrudescence of tensions on the Turkish-Syrian border, Washington's likely move to dispatch an "expeditionary force" to Iraq and the sudden rush of the US' pacifist European allies to join the war in Syria and Iraq.

In fact, the entry of Britain, France and Germany as active participants in the war – and the use of Incirlik base in Turkey as their "base camp" – all but signals that the NATO itself cannot be far behind. The US-led coalition is inexorably transforming as a NATO enterprise in the region. Washington has effectively slammed the door shut on the Russian proposal for an international coalition with the mandate of the UN to conduct the war in Syria and Iraq.

Significantly, the NATO meeting on Wednesday also discussed a new "southern strategy" for the alliance in response to Russia's growing military presence south of the Bosphorous, focusing on, according to the alliance's secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg, a range of measures including increased surveillance and reconnaissance activities across the Mediterranean by NATO forces, deployment of NATO troops in advisory roles in the Middle East and reinforced permanent NATO military deployments in the region.

The NATO's supreme deputy commander General Adrian Bradshaw was frank about the alliance's objective when he said recently, "Freedom of navigation (in the Mediterranean) is fundamentally important to NATO. As we observe the deployment of more sophisticated (Russian) capabilities with considerable reach, it becomes more and more important that we refresh our deterrence".

Clearly, the Russian-Turkish tensions have provided the alibi for the NATO to boost its military presence in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean even as the alliance counsels Moscow and Ankara to "deescalate". The NATO meeting on Wednesday stated that Turkey is on the frontlines of regional stability to the south, and, therefore, the alliance will beef up its maritime and missile defences as well as send more surveillance drones to its "highly unstable" border with Syria.

In Stoltenberg's words, "We (NATO) have approved a new strategy on hybrid warfare. We are also improving our intelligence and early warning mechanisms to help us better understand the region and increase our situational awareness".

Suffice it to say, NATO has decided to send a stark message to Moscow that it cannot hope to dominate Syria (or Iraq), and if it persists on the present path, Turkey will resist Russia (and Iran) on the ground under NATO protection. Thus, in rapid moves, British, French and German warplanes are being deployed in Incirlik; hundreds of German military personnel are arriving in Incirlik; Italy has decided to deploy Patriot missiles in Turkey (a similar move by Spain is expected); Denmark is dispatching frigates to protect Turkey from Russia's S-400 missiles and to provide electronic intelligence through jammers; US has decided to keep the USS Donald Cook in the region (equipped with Aegis missile defence systems and Tomahawk missiles that can protect Turkey from ballistic missile attacks).

Interestingly, alongside the above deployments and the provocative decision on Montenegro's admission as NATO member, the meeting in Brussels on Wednesday also brushed up the Ukraine file, affirming the alliance's continued political and "practical support" to that country.

All things taken into account, Moscow's disclosure last week that it has delivered S-300 missile system to Iran should be seen in perspective. Moscow anticipates that a showdown over Syria and Iraq may be nearing what with the West inciting Turkey to challenge the current Russian and Iranian thrust in the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

Moscow's assessment is borne out by the latest news that Turkey has made a stunning move to rush a battalion of crack troops with tanks and heavy artillery in Mosul [Iraq] in the night of Thursday. At a stroke, the great game tensions have assumed dangerous proportions. Turkey did not take permission from the Iraqi government. Baghdad has reacted furiously calling the "incursion" a gross violation of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity and demanding that Ankara should withdraw the troops from Iraqi soil, while Ankara maintains, funnily, that its troops hope to provide "training" to the Iraqi forces.

The big question is why Turkey has acted like this. The Turkish incursion closely follows the NATO meeting in Brussels just a day earlier, which decided to strengthen Turkey's defences. Typically, the US and NATO will now maintain that they have had nothing to do with the Turkish incursion into Iraq, but it doesn't need any ingenuity to figure out what is afoot.

Ankara knows jolly well that Iran has special interests in Iraq. The return of Turkish troops to Mosul after nearly a century becomes a poignant moment in Middle East's modern history. Turkey had never reconciled itself with the loss of the great oil fields in the region to the north of Mosul (under the settlement following the so-called "Arab Revolt" and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.) The great difference today, of course, is that Britain and France are Turkey's allies and Turkey itself can take shelter under NATO wings.

To be sure, Syria and Iraq are fast becoming the setting of a first rate showdown between Turkey, a NATO member country, on one side and Russia and Iran on the other. There is no need to second guess where the allegiance of the US or the NATO will lie if the push comes to shove.

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