

Turkey, the Balance of Power, and the Risks of Article V

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, OCT 11 2012

Throughout the last months, scholars and policymakers have debated the virtues of intervention in Syria. The ongoing humanitarian crisis, which has seen the Syrian government openly and unapologetically use the nation's military forces against its own people, has grown substantially worse by the day and little has been done by the international community to halt the atrocities. Diplomatic solutions have failed, economic sanctions have done little to deter the Assad regime and the UN Security Council has shown a clear disinterest in launching any sort of military intervention. With no clear end in sight and the human costs rising, observers have been left to ponder exactly what might impact the Syrian government's reckless behaviour.

Oddly enough, the crisis in Syria has gone from solely intrastate to now being simultaneously interstate. In the midst of its ongoing attacks on civilians, the Syrian military forces shot down a Turkish F-4 and shortly thereafter, inadvertently sent an artillery shell into Turkey. Syria's claim was that these incidents were not intended to be aggressive in any way and that its military was targeting rebels groups inside the country. Turkey's initial reactions were stern, though did not involve any direct response at first. Turkey's government was content to admonish the Syrian government for its recklessness and deployed troops along the Turkey-Syria border. Tensions between the two countries were rising, and finally reached a boiling point last week that a second Syrian artillery shell was launched into Turkey, killing 5 civilians.

The Turkish reaction since has been swift – Turkey immediately returned fire into Syria after the second shell hit, and the Turkish parliament approved the Prime Minister's request to conduct cross-border military operations if necessary. Subsequently, more Syrian shells have struck Turkey and the Turks have responded to each attack by shelling targets inside Syria. Even so, Turkey's government has been clear that its actions are purely retaliatory and are not meant to represent acts of warfare. Today, another chapter in the ongoing drama unfolded when the Turks forcibly landed a Syrian plane en route from Moscow to Damascus that is suspected to have been carrying weapons from the Russians to the Syrians.

What is becoming clearer by the moment is that the situation in Syria is no longer comparable to Libya or other examples of the Arab Spring movement. Instead, a civil conflict has quite evidently evolved into an interstate problem, pitting Syria and Turkey against one another, and as is always the case in international affairs, the allies of each country are now involved as well (whether they like it or not). Today's seizure of the Syrian aircraft may prove Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war, but more, Turkey's response and participation now leads to questions about a possible role for NATO.

Turkey is playing a dangerous game with Syria, in that Turkey's military capabilities are not strong and so it is content to respond proportionality to Syria's artillery attacks. However, as the situation seems destined to escalate, Turkey is left with relatively few options beyond asking NATO for assistance. The Turkish government has already invoked Article IV of the North Atlantic Treaty which saw a joint statement released by NATO members condemning Syria's behaviour. The question now becomes whether Turkey will attempt to use Article V of the Treaty, which requires that all members of the alliance come to the defence of a member under attack:

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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-defence recognised 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.

It is obvious at this point that no members of NATO have any appetite for an intervention or military mission in Syria and they have been trying very hard to avoid such an eventuality. Now, the situation is different and NATO members may be obliged to take action if one of their own invokes Article V. So what does this all mean moving forward?

The absolute worst outcome in this matter would be for Turkey to use Article V as a means to attack Syria. To this point, the actions along the border between the two nations have been minor and escalation is completely unnecessary. While Turkey would love to have its NATO allies enter the fray, Syria would be equally as willing to call in its favours to Russia and Iran if provoked in such a way. Some pro-intervention advocates see Turkey's ability to invoke Article V as a perfect way to achieve the goal of overthrowing the Assad regime and ending the civil war without states having to commit to a formal humanitarian intervention. Such thinking, as is mostly the case in intervention discussions, demonstrates a clear disregard for the realities of capabilities and balance of power dynamics in the international system.

For now, Turkey has responded to the attacks on its border and is exercising its legal rights under international law to defend its interests. Unless there is some sort of extraordinary aggression taken by the Assad regime towards Turkey, NATO's role should remain focused on harshly worded joint statements and nothing more. Article V invocation would be a stark overreaction to a precarious situation in an unstable region.

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About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.