

Modelling Escalation of the Russia-Turkey Conflict

Written by Vidya Sagar Reddy

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VIDYA SAGAR REDDY, MAR 16 2016

The Syrian crisis took a dangerous turn with Turkey shooting down a Russian warplane. This incident put Russia and Turkey on the path of direct confrontation, although they had thus far been able to maintain cordial relations despite clashing interests in the Syrian crisis. Turkey has been posing a geographical and geostrategic problem for Russia by bolstering its political and military objectives in Syria. This incident offered Russia an reason to engage and possibly limit Turkey's influence in shaping the regional dynamics. In this context, Russia's pursuit of an apology from Turkey for shooting down its warplane being helped latter escalate the already fragile situation.

The escalation process is complex and can lead to military responses as the opposing parties increasingly tend to cease diplomatic communication and operate unilaterally. Conflict escalation models offer a framework to comprehend political objectives, the nature and evolving dynamics of the conflict between competing parties to help them create a strategic environment favourable to de-escalation, preferably before the onset of military activities. As such, conflict escalation models represent only the process of escalation while de-escalation depends upon the strategic environment, intentions and capabilities of conflicting and mediating parties.

In the current context, the nine stage model of conflict escalation offered by Friedrich Glasl is appropriate as this model highlights images, standpoints and perceptions of antagonistic parties as leading factors for escalation, rather than military manoeuvres. Glasl produced his model after a thorough review of contemporary escalation models and his personal experience in handling conflicts between various organizations. This model was originally published in German but an English summary has also been published after his review.

The stages of this model are presented here along with associated examples of verbal and non-verbal communication between Russia and Turkey in an attempt to prove the applicability of this model to the current context as well as arriving at the current stage of escalation.

Stage 1: Hardening

In the initial stage, the situation at hand proves itself resilient to resolution, pushing the antagonistic parties into fixed positions on how resolution can be reached. As these fixed positions attract more adherents, they harden into standpoints that are "mutually incompatible." The parties selectively identify and promote information surrounding the situation that forwards their own standpoints. This process only results in furthering differences between the parties. Nevertheless, opposing parties may try to reconcile and resolve the situation in order not to jeopardize mutual dependencies. Failure in this effort generates suspicion of ulterior motives and doubts regarding the sincerity of other. As mutual faith recedes, the conflict escalates.

The foremost point Turkey and Russia differed on is whether the former's airspace had been violated. This is a critical point since it determines which party was primarily responsible for the situation which resulted in the shot down plane. Adding confusion is the claim that the Russian warplane Su-24 was well within the Syrian airspace when the shooting occurred. It means either the Turkish F-16 warplanes intentionally crossed the Syrian border to attack the Su-24 or the latter did violated Turkish airspace, but was able to manoeuvre back into the Syrian airspace as F-16s chased and engaged.

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Two Belgian astrophysicists analyzing the day's events realized Russian warplanes would cross the Turkish territory in question in less than seventeen seconds and therefore refuted Turkey's claim of serving ten warnings in five minutes. This analysis also brought into question Russia's claim that the Su-24 made a ninety degree turn after it was hit trying to avoid Turkish airspace. Another account found a broadcast of a warning to an unidentified plane that day not from F-16s but from a Turkish ground station. Therefore, Turkey is both honest in saying a warning was broadcast and at the same time dishonest, wrongly claiming the number and source of that broadcast.

The ground situation in this region is highly complex and it appears both Russia and Turkey committed errors in operating cooperatively around an already contentious border. Both parties have carefully identified and highlighted parts of the event that are mutually incompatible but solidify their own standpoints. Nevertheless, Turkey showed willingness to discuss and resolve the issue. This optimism evaporated with Putin assuming an aggressive stance and vowing to escalate the situation.

Stage 2: Debates and Polemics

In this stage, the antagonistic parties are concerned more about their general position around the situation at hand. Resources are spent to appear strong and skilful as reputation is at stake. Verbal confrontations appear on the scene, trying to avoid blame and exaggerate the consequences if the opponent does not change position. Emotions and relative power issues dominate these verbal confrontations.

Emphasis is placed upon a strong and righteous self image, while conciliatory actions or statements are avoided as acts of weakness. Outbursts that serve as vents for accumulated tension are common. The relationship oscillates between cooperation and competition with a probability for resolving the issue. The conflict escalates when a party or both parties decide to act independently.

Putin laid the blame squarely on Turkey calling the shooting "a treacherous stab in the back," and accusing its leadership of driving the bilateral relations into a deadlock. Turkey responded accusing Russia of violating its airspace in an attempt to establish that action as the root cause of the problem and therefore shifting the total responsibility onto Turkey. Putin took advantage of the state of the nation address saying Russia "was showing its confidence as a strong, independent state, with a 1,000 year old history" to emphasize strength and resourcefulness in carrying out threats and uphold its reputation.

Although Putin did not respond positively to Erdogan's phone call, as well as an offer of a meeting on the sidelines of Paris climate change conference, although the respective foreign ministries had been open to communication since the situation escalated. Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu met on the sidelines of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe meeting.

With further hardening, the only outcome of this meeting would be an exchange of respective positions with no possibility of yielding, as did indeed occur. The situation escalated when Russia acted unilaterally.

Stage 3: Actions, Not Words

In this stage, opposing parties favour action as verbal communication no longer yields results. The opponent is perceived as a competitor with common interests and prospects for cooperation subsiding. Parties resolve to replace mutual dependencies with unilateral dependency enabling coercion. However, these actions are reported as necessary responses to the attitude of the opposing party. Glasl notes "deniable punishment behaviour" as a characteristic sign of the situation escalating into the next stage. These punishments merely serve as vents for frustration and are therefore less critical than the threats posed at stage six.

Russia actively severed relations in economic and military domains in an attempt to coerce Turkey. On the economic front, measures were initiated to freeze joint investment projects, restrict food imports and curtail tourism. High profile projects like the TurkStream gas pipeline, preparations for a joint free trade zone and construction of \$20 billion nuclear power plant by Russia were threatened.

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On the military front, Russia decided to arm its warplanes with air to air missiles, deployed advanced S-400 air defence missiles to Syria, cut a hotline set up to share information on its air strikes in Syria and intensified strikes on rebel held areas near the Turkish border.

Such intensified unilateral economic and military actions as a means of inflicting punishment on the other party easily move the situation into the next stage.

Stage 4: Images and Coalitions

The actions of the previous stage consolidate the change perception of the other party into highly fixed stereotypical images. These images are resilient to change even with the flow of new information to the contrary. Individuals are perceived to showcase a certain set of characteristics by virtue of the side they belong to. A party forces the other to recognize its image while rejecting the image of the other. The parties are incapable of remembering any positive qualities of the other. The counterpart is provoked, insulted and criticized. Verbal attacks focus on the opponent's identity, attitude, behaviour and relationships. The parties also seek supporters for their standpoint.

Putin delivered denigrating remarks about Turkey's leadership saying, "Only Allah knows why they did this. And it seems that Allah decided to punish the ruling gang in Turkey by stripping it of common sense and reason." Putin had also blamed Turkey's leadership as "accomplices of terrorists." His objective is to smear and instil doubt about the leadership potential of Erdogan not only in handling the affairs of a state but also implicating his status as a defender of Islamic faith.

Both parties found political and diplomatic support for their standpoints directly or indirectly. While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) professed its support for Turkey, Russia is backed by Iran. Interestingly, the timing and emphasis of "communication" regarding the statement of Israel's defence minister on the handling of a recent airspace violation by Russia undercuts Turkey's standpoint. Putin also tried to spin the United States' (US) support for reconciliation to his favour by accusing it of leaking the flight path of Su-24s as well as failing in its responsibility to control the coalition.

Stage 5: Loss of Face

"Loss of face" is defined by Glasl as the perception of a party about its ability to see through the mask of the opponent to discover an underlying immoral and criminal character. This transformation occurs radically and the whole history of conflict is reinterpreted with a party feeling the opponent followed an immoral strategy from the beginning. Any cooperative acts by the opponent were interpreted as cover for forwarding such criminal intentions. The conflict turns into a competition about the prevalence of holy values. This situation is vexing for mediating parties trying to establish trust.

In this incident, the conflicting interests of Russia and Turkey over Bashar al-Assad staying in power and fighting the Islamic State (IS) were engulfed by the downing of the Su-24. Russia accused Turkey of benefiting from the trade of oil and gas with IS while the latter responded by accusing Moscow of being the real source of IS' financial and military power. Framing the opponent as being associated with IS renders it morally inferior to the other, and hence the accusations. Putin calling Turkey's leadership "ruling gang" is also an attempt to morph the image of his opponents as harbouring criminal intentions.

Stage 6: Strategies of Threats

In this stage, the conflicting parties resort to threats of damage which are more critical and strategic than the deniable punishment actions at stage four. Threats are issued to shape the agenda and force the counterpart to agree to a specific demand. This demand takes the shape of "either-or", constraining the counterpart's response. The threatening parties might be compelled to carry out these threats initially on a smaller scale to signal capability, credibility and intention.

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It would be tantamount to losing reputation to withdraw these threats once they are made credible. As the opponent is constrained and biding their time, the threatening party is forced to intensify their threats. This situation might not only force the counterpart to respond in kind, but it escalates the conflict further as alternative courses of action become less likely. When the parties disintegrate into smaller units acting autonomously, no binding agreement between the parties can prevent destruction.

Various departments within the Russian administration have announced their specific punitive measures, for instance civil nuclear cooperation, food and tourism, trade and commerce etc. In this case, these decisions cannot be seen as autonomous, they are rather centralized under Putin. The “either-or” condition is the demand for an apology from Turkey for downing the Russian warplane.

Nevertheless, Russia has yet to be seen to formulate or issue threats on the strategic level, like disrupting Turkey’s trade with other countries, fuelling domestic discord, an armed incursion into Turkish territory etc. Basically, any threat formulated or perceived as damaging to Turkey’s territorial integrity, sovereignty, trade and overall security surely will escalate the conflict beyond these two countries and render it unmanageable by political and diplomatic recourses.

This stage is more or less intermingled with the next stage where such threats are executed.

Stage 7: Limited Destructive Blows

Since possible strategic threats undermine basic security, survival becomes the primary objective for the counterpart. No possible solution involving the opponent is welcomed as they turn into “enemies”. The enemy seeks to disrupt their counterpart’s basic functions through crippling sanctions and/or military incursions. The antagonists are prepared to take some damage in the prospect of dealing more losses to the counterpart. Suppressing the enemy’s firepower and achieving superiority on the battlefield becomes necessary. Enemies set aside all rules and norms in this “lose-lose struggle”.

Stage 8: Fragmentation of the Enemy

The conflict slips into this stage when vital systems are attacked. Fragmentation of the counterpart is desired to cripple decision-making and destroy basic elements of power. The very basis of counterpart’s existence is attacked, but to ensure one’s own some restraint is imposed on the intensity of such attacks. Elements keeping the opposition coherent will be targeted so as to fuel internal contradictions and discord. An inability to defend oneself from such attacks shatters morale and therefore battlefield plans.

Stage 9: Together into the Abyss

In the last stage, the motive for annihilation of the enemy becomes so powerful that even the instinct of self preservation is neglected. A total war is declared that will eventually destroy the bases of existence on either side. Glasl terms this situation “the race towards the abyss.” This is the final stage in Glasl’s model.

Analysis

Putin and Erdogan possess similar personalities, which are now at odds. These personalities are leading the camps on their respective sides. Internal discussions, media as well as open source analyses have now fused this incident into the larger framework of tenuous Russia-Turkey relations. Images, perceptions and standpoints have been solidified on either side owing to both selective analysis of facts and historical prejudices. The conflict is, however, yet to escalate beyond stage five where military responses are preferred for shaping and dominating the conflict scene. Such hot-headed responses against Turkey would ultimately lead to an engagement between Russia and NATO.

Russia is adept at swiftly executing sub-conventional threats exemplified by the Georgian and Crimean crises. In this

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particular situation, Russia would deemphasize military action in order to obstruct NATO from influencing or engaging this conflict. Other vectors of Russia's hybrid style of warfare would remain open, however. On the diplomatic side, Russia is banking upon responses from Israel, France, and others, who have indirectly accused Turkey of acting rash. Especially the US has blamed Turkey for not initiating steps to seal its porous border with Syria. This porous nature legitimizes Russia's attacks on areas along the border from which the whole conflict situation emerged.

The threshold to later stages of escalation is dependent upon the seriousness of Russia's ultimatum for an "apology" and Turkey's to it. An apology would seriously harm Erdogan's status and consolidation of power within the country as well as Turkey's reputation in the Islamic world. In this scenario, Russia will possibly seek an alteration in the behaviour of Turkey towards Syria in lieu of an apology. Turkey, on the other hand, could choose to await the boomerang effect of various sanctions imposed by Russia, but not without further jeopardizing its own economy. This is the strategic gap for the international community to step into, aiding negotiations towards conflict resolution which should be taken advantage of before conditions worsen along this geopolitical fault line.

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