



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Putin's Turkish Gambit

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The first-ever NATO member state to shoot down a Russian military jet has willingly fallen in line with Vladimir Putin's "Turkish Gambit," a strategy designed to drive a deep crack into the NATO alliance.

The Ottoman and Tsarist militaries fought several wars during their imperial histories, all of them ending in Russian victory – a pattern that created a persistent Russophobia among the modern-day rulers of Turkey.

A mutual antipathy is baked into both cultures. In Russian, the word "Turkey" is used to denote an uninvited guest, and the word "Turk" is used to mean "ignorant." The Turkish right wing, which comprises about 65-70% of the population, uses the phrase "*Moskof gavuru*" to mean "Russian." The phrase translates to "an infidel from Moscow."

In the summer of 2015, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan started to show public signs of frustration over Russia's protection of his nemesis, Syrian president Bashar Assad. Vladimir Putin responded by setting in motion a clever and effective game of political chess. Here, in chronological order, are the events that made up Putin's "Turkish Gambit:"

1. **Late summer and into the fourth quarter of 2015:** Russian military jets not only intensified their patrolling but deliberately violated Turkish airspace, provoking Ankara to retaliate militarily. Had Erdoğan declined to respond, he would have been embarrassed before a divided nation as it was heading into parliamentary elections for a second time in five months. In the June round, Erdoğan's party lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since it came to power in 2002.

In the face of Russian aggression, the always assertive and self-confident PM, Ahmet Davutoğlu, changed the military rules of engagement to permit the shooting down of any foreign aircraft violating Turkish airspace. In so doing, Davutoğlu thought he had cleared northern Syria of a hostile military presence and opened a path for Ankara-backed jihadists to march toward Damascus and defeat Assad. This was not his first major miscalculation.

2. **November 2015:** Putin deployed the ancient Russian military tactic of testing how far he could go, provided Russia's loss would be minimal. He sent an Su-24 to fly a controversial route along the Turkish-Syrian border. As he expected, Turkey shot it down, becoming the first NATO country to do such a thing after WWII.

Even before the cheers had faded away, Erdoğan and Davutoglu realized they were in trouble, and a price of some kind was going to have to be paid. Initial diplomatic efforts to mend ties failed. In a move designed to humiliate Ankara even further, Putin sent the more advanced Su-34 to the Turkish border for further airspace violations. Davutoğlu, who had pledged to shoot down more Russian planes if they came that way again, did nothing.

3. **Early 2016:** Russia unveiled a long list of economic and trade sanctions on Turkish companies and introduced a visa regime that was too difficult for ordinary Turks to bypass. Moscow banned Russian citizens from traveling to Turkish holiday resorts and threatened multi-billion dollar Turkish construction businesses in Russia. It threatened to expel thousands of Turkish workers from Russia, even mentioning the possibility of taking "military retaliatory action." Before Russia played its strongest card – its position as Turkey's biggest natural gas supplier – Erdoğan buckled. Poor economic management caused the Russian sanctions to have an impact on the Turkish economy estimated at around \$15 billion.
4. **June 2016:** The usually confrontational Erdoğan showed himself to be a pragmatist when necessary and sent Putin a written apology for the Su-24. It was not sufficient. If Erdoğan was to avoid Russian hostilities, he was going to have to align Turkey's Syria policy fully with Russia's. Belatedly, Erdoğan realized that what he once imagined to be a neo-Ottoman Syrian territory friendly to Turkey and Turkish interests, along with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, was now Russian-controlled territory, and Assad was regaining much of it despite the years of blood, tears, and expended resources.
5. **About face:** Erdoğan decided to make the best of this calamity by using Turkey's newfound love affair with Moscow against the West. Should the West decline to believe in the Turkish-Russian reconciliation, Ankara

always retained the “nuisance valve” option: the threat of opening the floodgates and sending millions of refugees to Europe.

6. **December 2017:** Turkish officials announced that Ankara would buy Russian-made surface-to-ground S-400 long-range air and anti-defense missiles (for an as-yet unofficial \$2.5 billion). Turkey knows the Americans and their NATO allies are unlikely to believe that the S-400s will work entirely as a stand-alone system; will pose no threat to the F-35 or other NATO systems; will be controlled exclusively by Turkish soldiers and not Russian; and will be entirely free of Russian hacking into NATO systems. But Turkey has no desire to be sanctioned by Russia once again.

In a sign of the effectiveness of Putin’s Turkish Gambit, there is now a wide crack in the NATO alliance as Ankara insists it will deploy both the S-400 and F-35 systems on its soil. The purchase of the S-400s is obviously Turkey’s sovereign decision, and its NATO allies cannot challenge it. But they can challenge Turkey’s participation in the F-35 program, and have the option of kicking Turkey out of the consortium that builds new-generation stealth aircraft.

7. **2019 or 2020:** Turkey opens negotiations with Moscow for a stopgap fighter solution that will address Ankara’s interim requirements. After all, the Turks cannot afford to compromise their firepower and aerial deterrence. If realized, the fighter jet program would push Turkey even further into Russia’s defense and security orbit and would further widen the crack within NATO, likely prompting campaigns calling for Turkey’s expulsion.
8. **2025:** Whether or not Turkey is still part of the NATO alliance, it will have established irrevocable defense ties with Russia, with one foot in Brussels and two arms clinging to Moscow.

The Turkish Gambit may or may not end well for Erdoğan, but it’s certainly good for Putin.

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