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Russia and Turkey: Between Partnership and Rivalry

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Abstract

What brings Russia and Turkey together and how sustainable is their partnership given the multiple points of friction between them? This essay argues that Moscow and Ankara have learned to keep competition within bounds and to maximize shared interests. Recent examples of competition, such as around the conflicts in Idlib, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and eastern Ukraine, suggest that the partnership forged by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will endure such frictions.

Russia and Turkey are both partners and competitors: in the Middle East, the Southern Caucasus, as well as in the Balkans. Yet, despite the legacy of wars waged between the Ottoman and the Tsarist Empire, Cold War-era divisions and current disagreements, Moscow and Ankara have managed to identify overlapping interests and build positive ties while containing conflicts. The two strongmen in charge of Russian and Turkey, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, engaged in outright confrontation after the downing of a Russian jet by a Turkish F-16 fighter aircraft in November 2015, only to restore ties and establish a condominium of sorts in Syria, together with Iran. Energy cooperation thrives, with the TurkStream natural gas pipeline complete and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant making headway. Russia and Turkey are furthermore developing defense ties. Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile systems have been delivered to Ankara, and are straining relations with the United States, Turkey's main international ally.

There are tensions, nonetheless. Starting from early 2020, the crises in Libya, Idlib in northwest Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine have served as reminders of the many issues dividing Turkey and Russia. In Idlib, the two militaries collided briefly. There is, therefore, no Russian–Turkish alliance in the making. Rather, Moscow and Ankara have been leveraging one another to improve their strategic position vis-à-vis the West. Russia benefits from Turkey's quarrels with the US and the rest of NATO. Turkey, for its part, uses Russia to balance against the US and, to a lesser extent, the EU. However, this cuts both ways. Erdoğan has no qualms about leaning on NATO in order to balance Russia on issues where interests diverge, for example with regard to security in the Black Sea region.

This essay looks at the drivers behind the Russian–Turkish relationship, including the issues where the two are at odds, and draws some conclusions about its future trajectory.

What Brings Russia and Turkey Together?

The rapprochement between Russia and Turkey has multiple causes: economic interdependence, convergent political cultures, and geopolitics.

Thanks to natural gas, Russia (a major exporter) and Turkey (a consumer) have seen their energy systems become increasingly intertwined. Traditionally, Turkey imports around half of its gas from Russia, a proportion which has been declining in recent years. After visas were abolished in 2011, Russians quickly became one of the largest groups of tourists visiting Turkey each year, surpassed only by German tourists. Tens of thousands of Russian Federation citizens own property along the Aegean and the Mediterranean coasts. Yet, in terms of turnover, Russia lags far behind the EU and the goal of reaching \$100 billion, touted by Erdoğan for years, remains a bridge too far. Turkey's policy of diversifying energy supplies—through the so-called Southern Gas Corridor linking it to the Caspian and deliveries of liquefied natural gas (LNG)—are eroding Gazprom's share of the Turkish energy market. The Russian authorities' recent decision to cancel charter flights to Turkey between April and June 2021, ostensibly because of COVID-19, will have a negative impact as well.

Shared political features also play a significant role in bringing Russia and Turkey together. Both countries share a political culture prioritizing the state's security and sovereignty over individual rights. In the 1990s, they started to accommodate one another over sensitive issues such as the Kurdish question and Chechnya. For instance, in early 1999, President Boris Yeltsin and Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov overruled the Duma with regard to the request by Abdullah Öcalan for political asylum. The leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) had sought refuge in Moscow, following his expulsion from Syria after Turkey threatened military action for harboring him.

A year later, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit declared the second war in Chechnya was Russia's domestic business, after meeting then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin,

who had already been anointed as Yeltsin's successor. Putin's strongman rule, defence of national interests against western encroachment and top-down modernization of society have always appealed to Turkish elites and society, transcending the secular/religious divide. In the 2000s, factions in the Turkish military and bureaucracy, who were opposed to the EU-promoted liberal reforms and resentful of US foreign policy, embraced Eurasianism and argued for an alliance with Russia, Iran and other revisionist powers. Originally at odds with Erdoğan, in the mid-2010s, these factions shifted their loyalties to him.

Geopolitics is also at play. Confronted with a resurgent Russia, Ankara has preferred to engage rather than pick fights. During the 2008 war in Georgia, for instance, it kept its allies at a distance, eager not to antagonize Moscow. Policymakers in Ankara assessed that, in case of an escalation, Turkey would be left by the US to fend for itself. The Turkish government sought to reassure the Kremlin and keep western powers at arm's length.

Similarly, even if it condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Turkey opposed western sanctions. Since then, Ankara has been pursuing an intricate balancing act between the West and Moscow, seeing itself as a third pole rather than an extension of the transatlantic alliance. With Russian military deployments in Syria, the South Caucasus and especially Crimea, Turkey finds itself encircled and vulnerable. Though Ankara contributes to NATO's 'tailored forward presence' in the Black Sea and supports the pact's enlargement to the Western Balkans, as well as to Ukraine and Georgia, it does so largely under the radar.

A final factor is Turkey's strained relations with the US and the EU, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan, coupled with Russia's intervention in Syria. Ties to the United States and Europe have deteriorated and are now largely transactional. As a consequence, Russia's appeal is on the rise. Erdoğan has been the main protagonist in this story. He blamed foreign powers for the Gezi protests (a failed 'coloured revolution' of sorts), resented the Obama administration's failure to enforce its 'red lines' after the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against civilians, and portrayed the Fethullah Gülen movement, linked to the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, as stooges of the United States and Israel.

The collapse of the Kurdish peace process in the summer of 2015 and the renewed fighting between the Turkish government and the PKK further poisoned relations with the United States. In 2014, the US aligned itself with Syrian Kurds fighting the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Turkey sees the former actor as a proxy of the PKK. Although Russia has its own links to the Syrian Kurds and, unlike the West, never listed either the PKK or its offshoots as a terrorist organization, it

signed off on Turkey's incursions into northern Syria in 2016 and 2018.

Russia has benefited handsomely too. Turkey has proved to be an essential interlocutor in the Middle East. In Syria, it acts as a bridge to various factions of the armed opposition and some of their backers across the region. The Russia–Turkey–Iran triangle co-sponsored the Astana talks on Syria helped Moscow and the Assad regime reconquer large swathes of territory across the embattled country.

Russian–Turkish Rivalry

Despite security cooperation, Russia and Turkey are not allies. Rather, they compete in the grey zone between war and peace, avoiding a head-on collision while trying to make gains at the other's expense.

A case in point is Idlib, the last remaining rebel-held enclave in northwest Syria. In September 2018, Putin and Erdoğan brokered a deal under the terms of which the Turks would demilitarize the area—meaning neutralization of radical militia—in exchange for a ceasefire. Home to some three million people, including internally displaced civilians, Idlib poses the threat of a massive refugee flow into neighbouring Turkey. The situation came to a head in late 2019 and in the early months of 2020. Russia's airforce gave full backing to a Syrian regime offensive aimed at recapturing the entire area. Fighting pushed Moscow and Ankara dangerously close to the brink, as Turkey ramped up its military presence and took on Assad's forces. On 27 February 2020, thirty-four Turkish soldiers were killed in an air strike that may have been carried out by Russian aircraft. However, Ankara lay the blame on the Assad regime and sought to engage Moscow.

Russia, meanwhile, stood on the sidelines as Turkish drones inflicted a heavy toll on Assad's forces. It also guaranteed the security of Turkish observation points that had remained behind front lines and were surrounded by regime forces. Yet another summit between Putin and Erdoğan (5 March 2020) produced a ceasefire, which essentially partitioned the Idlib area and led to the launching of joint patrols along the critically important M4 highway, linking Latakia and Aleppo. Turkey was spared a major influx of refugees, while Russia obtained Ankara's tacit agreement to transfer strategically located chunks of the enclave to the Assad regime. Still, the situation remains tense and could explode anew.

Russia and Turkey found themselves at odds in the conflict in Libya as well. While Erdoğan threw his weight behind the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, Russia has given tentative support to General Khalifa Haftar, based in the country's east. In late 2019, Ankara despatched heavy weaponry and drones, instructors and mercenaries (including at least

2,000 Syrian militiamen); it also deployed its navy off the coast of Libya and has been using intelligence-gathering capabilities to repel a rebel offensive against the capital. By May 2020, the pro-government forces had delivered a defeat to Haftar's Libyan National Army backed by Russian mercenaries from the Russian private military company Wagner. Russia doubled down on its support for the renegade general, who dug in within central Libya, including the city of Sirte that holds the key to the country's rich oil deposits. The stalemate paved the way to a ceasefire in August 2020 and the formation of a unity government under UN auspices. However, the situation is by no means stable and both Turkey and Russia remained entrenched.

Another flashpoint is Nagorno-Karabakh. The border conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in April 2016 coincided with the "jet crisis" in Syria. At the time, Russia and Turkey avoided being dragged into the fighting; but when even more vicious fighting started in September 2020, Turkey unprecedentedly deployed Syrian mercenaries, military instructors, drones and, allegedly, its airforce. Its intervention boosted Baku's military advantage, which translated into major territorial gains.

The war wrong-footed Russia, as it exposed its waning influence in its own backyard, including the limited relevance of its defensive alliance with Yerevan. Turkey, on the other hand, scored points at Russia's expense. A ceasefire brokered by Putin on 9 November 2020 led to the insertion of a 2,000-strong Russian peacekeeping force. Turkey, meanwhile, set up its own military monitoring point, floating plans for permanent bases

in Azerbaijan. Erdoğan attended the victory parade in Baku, a testament to the reinforced Turkish–Azeri security relationship.

Turkey and Russia do not see eye to eye on Ukraine either. Ankara does not recognize the annexation of Crimea and has invested in economic and strategic ties with Kyiv. The Ukrainian military has acquired Turkish drones and would like to develop joint military-industrial projects. Erdoğan seeks to balance Russia in the Black Sea through deepening cooperation with Ukraine. At his meeting with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky (12 April 2021), he called for the 'de-occupation of Crimea as well as the Donetsk and Lugansk regions'. The summit took place while Russia massed troops and heavy weaponry along the Ukrainian border. Turkey also doubled down on its support for the Tatar population, a kin ethnic group, displaced from Crimea after the Russian takeover in 2014. Though, thankfully, the April 2021 military build-up did not escalate into a military showdown, it put on display the close links developed between Ukraine and Turkey over the years.

Conclusion

Russia and Turkey are not allies, but neither are they adversaries. Theirs is a partnership of convenience developed under Putin and Erdoğan's stewardship. So long as either of the parties perceives the West as the main threat, which is more than certain in Russia's case, they will continue to work closely with each other and keep frictions and conflicts in check. In other words, the coupling will endure.

About the Author

Dr. Dimitar Bechev is a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, and Europe's Futures 2020/21 fellow at the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna. He is the author of *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (Yale, 2017) and *Turkey under Erdoğan* (Yale, forthcoming in 2022). This essay is based on a chapter in Dimitar Bechev, Stanislav Secieru and Nicu Popescu, eds., *Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).