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Russian–Turkish Relations between Rivalry and Cooperation

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Abstract

Russian–Turkish relations have exhibited many contradictory features since summer 2016. Despite the two states' geopolitical alignment in Syria and ongoing energy cooperation, Russia and Turkey continue to favor opposing outcomes in regional crises. This friction prevents the two regional rivals from forging a closer form of partnership.

After a seven-month-long crisis in relations following the downing of a Russian combat aircraft by a Turkish fighter jet in November 2015, Russia and Turkey entered a period of rapprochement from summer 2016 onwards. The Kremlin offered support to Turkish President Erdoğan and his government after the attempted coup of July 2016. Since then, Russian President Putin and Erdoğan have met dozens of times. At the same time, the two states' ministries of foreign affairs and defense have developed a working relationship, mainly due to both states' involvement in developments on the ground in Syria. Ankara has even purchased Russian-made S-400 air defense missile systems, which has led to Turkey being excluded from the US-led F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program. However, Russia and Turkey have continued to support opposing sides in the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey has exported drones to Azerbaijan and Ukraine despite Moscow's displeasure, while the Polish and Latvian governments have expressed their interest in buying Turkish drones as well. What explains this seemingly contradictory web of relations? How does this regional rivalry shape Russian–Turkish relations?

While many observers tend to explain bilateral relationships with reference to a single variable, Russian–Turkish relations are too complex to be captured by such an assessment. The relationship can only be understood when the interaction between geopolitical, domestic and ideational factors are accounted for. A closer look at Moscow's and Ankara's motivations in seeking closer ties with each other is required. For Russia, a security partnership with Turkey, a NATO member, has served its long-standing goal of weakening the transatlantic alliance. Moreover, in the 21st century Turkey has been Gazprom's second biggest customer after Germany, thereby contributing to Russia's natural gas export revenues immensely. Thirdly, security cooperation with Turkey in Syria was instrumental in enabling Russia to exercise control over anti-Assad rebel forces. In return, Russia has had to partially accommodate Turkey's efforts to assert a sphere of influence in northern Syria.

Conversely, for Turkey, Russia represents a major power that it can turn to whenever it goes through a crisis in its relations with the West. Geopolitical alignment with Russia has served to support the Turkish government's quest to establish strategic autonomy over the past decade. In the aftermath of the failed coup of July 2016, this foreign policy alignment was coupled with growing anti-U.S. attitudes in public opinion and the increasing influence of Eurasianist (pro-Russia and pro-China) figures in the governing coalition (Erşen 2019). Economically, Russia has played a major role in providing security for Turkey's energy supply, with Russian natural gas dominating energy imports during the past two decades. In addition, Russian tourists have contributed much needed foreign exchange revenue to the Turkish economy. More importantly, in Syria, Ankara has had no choice but to cooperate with Russia, in order to stabilize its border and wage military campaigns against ISIS and Kurdish YPG forces. The parallel deterioration in Russia's and Turkey's ties with the West and growing authoritarianism in Turkey seem to have strengthened the bilateral relationship further.

From the perspective of the aforementioned security and economic dynamics, Russia would seem to hold the upper hand in the Russian–Turkish rapprochement. At the same time, Turkey had demonstrated that it is not Russia's junior partner. Moscow has come to learn that Ankara will act against its plans, be this in Syria, Libya, or Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite this, Turkey remains a valuable partner for accomplishing Russia's long-term geopolitical goals.

Geopolitical Alignment in Syria

Since summer 2016, the Syrian conflict has created the conditions for a Russian–Turkish geopolitical alignment. With Russian consent, the Turkish Armed Forces conducted three military operations in northern and north-western Syria between 2016 and 2019. Through the Astana Process and trilateral summits, Russia, Turkey and Iran have developed a practice of policy coordination towards Syria. At the same time, however, Russian–

Turkish cooperation in Syria has been severely tested. In February 2020, thirty-six Turkish soldiers were killed in Idlib Province in an airstrike conducted by Assad's forces, most likely in close coordination with the Russian air force. In response, Turkey started a retaliatory campaign, 'Operation Spring Shield', that halted the regime offensive in Idlib. The campaign also demonstrated the superiority of Turkish drones over Russian-made air defense systems. Russian–Turkish cooperation in Syria will continue to experience similar stress tests in the foreseeable future as the two governments are set to continue to disagree on developments in Idlib Province, the future of Bashar al-Assad, and the status of Syrian Kurds (Köstem 2020). It is also unclear for how much longer Russia will tolerate Turkey's growing military, economic and political footprint in the areas under Turkish control.

Enduring Regional Rivalry: Georgia, Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh

The regional rivalry between Russia and Turkey goes back to the early 1990s, when the latter embarked on a campaign to increase its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Over time, Russia consolidated itself as the regional hegemon in the post-Soviet space and Turkey's regional ambitions subsided. Yet, aspects of Russian–Turkish rivalry were also sustained, especially over Georgia, Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflicts in Syria and Libya have added a new dimension to this enduring rivalry.

In 2012, Turkey established a trilateral cooperation mechanism with Georgia and Azerbaijan, which targets closer cooperation in tourism, logistics, trade, customs and defense. Special forces from the three countries have conducted joint military exercises since 2015. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, Turkey has been more supportive of Georgia's bid for NATO membership. In the past few years, Ankara has also strengthened its defense cooperation with Tbilisi, leading to a military-financial cooperation agreement between the two states' defense ministries in December 2019.

The regional rivalry has taken on a sharper character over Ukraine. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 came as a shock to Turkish decision-makers, radically changing the balance of power in the Black Sea in favor of Russia (Aktürk 2014). Russia also exiled the top political elite of the Crimean Tatar population with which Turkey has deep cultural and ethnic ties. Turkey and Ukraine officially recognize each other as strategic partners, and Turkey has officially backed the Crimean Tatar political leaders, who now live in Kyiv. More importantly, Ankara and Kyiv have intensified defense cooperation. Ukraine started to purchase attack drones from the Turkish defense company Baykar in 2019. Baykar's Bayraktar TB-2 drone has been called 'the Pantsir

hunter', due to its success against Russian-made Pantsir air defense systems in Syria, Libya, and most recently in Nagorno-Karabakh (Kasapoğlu 2020). Turkish and Ukrainian defense officials have also announced plans to work on the joint production of drones, as well as to transfer drone technology. The two governments are also negotiating a free trade agreement, which they plan to sign soon.

Russian–Turkish regional rivalry intensified during the Second Karabakh War in the fall of 2020. While Russia chose to play a neutral negotiating role between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkey openly and decisively supported the latter. It is believed that Turkish military assistance played a crucial role in Azerbaijan's military advances during the conflict. Turkey's assistance included logistics and intelligence support, as well as guidance by Turkish officers. Nevertheless, it was Russia's political intervention that led to a settlement between Yerevan and Baku in November 2020. Moscow's diplomatic intervention effectively prevented Azerbaijani forces taking wholesale control of the disputed region, and ensured that the Lachin corridor that connects the capital of Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert, with Armenia would remain open. Despite Turkey's assertive role in Azerbaijan's victory, Moscow only symbolically accommodated Ankara's regional ambitions by agreeing to a joint monitoring center in Agdam. The Russian–Turkish monitoring center started its mission in January 2021. The Turkish military presence at the center is minuscule compared to Russia's. It includes a general and about forty other military personnel. Conversely, the Russian peacekeeping force consists of 2,000 peacekeepers. More recently, Russia has been accused of expanding the mandate of its troops in Nagorno-Karabakh to establish a military presence that goes beyond mere peacekeeping purposes. Russia has also prevented international media sources from visiting the region.

In the short term, both Russia and Turkey seem to have gained from the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the subsequent ceasefire agreement. In the long term, however, Turkey's role in Nagorno-Karabakh is rather uncertain, while Russia has consolidated its role in the Caucasus as the key security and regional order provider. It is important to note that, just like in Syria, Russia and Turkey were able to coordinate a ceasefire without intervention by the U.S. or the EU. This enables Moscow and Ankara to manage their tensions without directly targeting each other.

The Economic Dimension: Asymmetric Interdependence

Despite an enduring regional rivalry, Russia and Turkey have continued to expand their economic coop-

eration. This economic exchange is marked by a symmetric interdependence that favors Russia and leaves Turkey vulnerable to Russian economic coercion (Köstem 2018). In the 21st century, Russia has been among Turkey's top three trading partners, yet Turkey struggles to feature in Russia's top ten. In 2019, Russia was Turkey's top source of imports, while Turkey was Russia's 10th biggest import partner. The most important component of this economic cooperation is energy. In 2020, the TurkStream pipeline started providing natural gas to the Turkish market. The TurkStream pipeline is controversial. From the Turkish point of view, it enhances Turkey's goal of becoming an energy hub. For Russia, the pipeline's most important geopolitical upside is that it bypasses Ukraine in exporting natural gas to Turkey. Due to wider developments in global energy markets, the share of Russian natural gas in Turkey's exports fell from 52% in 2017 to 33% in 2019. Nonetheless, Russia remains the largest provider of natural gas to the Turkish domestic market. Beyond natural gas, the Russian Atomic Energy Agency (Rosatom) is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu. Upon completion, the power plant is expected to provide 7–10% of Turkey's annual energy needs. In return for these energy imports and investments, Turkey typically exports car parts, machinery, textiles and agricultural products to Russia.

Russian economic sanctions on the Turkish economy during the November 2015 – June 2016 jet crisis taught the Turkish government a big lesson about its economic vulnerability vis-a-vis Russia. In each geopolitical crisis that arises between the two states, the Turkish government's memory of the impact of Russian sanctions is revived. Due to its structural advantage, Russia has the power to weaponize its

economic ties with Turkey through investments, trade and tourism. And, it has used it. Most recently, in April 2021 the Russian government banned flights from Turkey, officially due to the increasing number of Covid-19 cases in Turkey. Moscow later extended this flight ban until 21 June 2021. While Covid-19 was the official excuse, it would not be far-fetched to argue that the decision came after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Istanbul in April 2021. During the visit, the Turkish and Ukrainian governments agreed to bolster defense cooperation and Erdoğan pledged support for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

The Rocky Road Ahead

Regional rivalry and economic cooperation will continue to shape Russian–Turkish relations in the years ahead. Beyond these regional and economic dynamics, however, Turkey's continued commitment to NATO should be considered an important factor impacting on future relations. Turkey's drone exports to Poland and Latvia will strengthen NATO's deterrence capacity vis-à-vis Russia in Eastern Europe. Moreover, Ankara is striving to convince the Biden administration that the Russian-made S-400 air defense missile systems on Turkish soil do not pose a threat to the transatlantic alliance. It is highly likely that the Turkish government will push for a middle ground on these defense issues with the U.S., whereby it seeks to gain U.S. support for its long-awaited F-16 modernization program, even if Turkey remains excluded from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program. Taken together, these factors suggest that a stronger form of cooperation, such as a strategic partnership, is unlikely, because Russia and Turkey will continue to pursue divergent foreign policy goals and geopolitical ambitions.

About the Author

Seçkin Köstem is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Bilkent University, Ankara.

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