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Turkish-Russian Relations: A Puzzle that Shakes the Middle East

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As Russia and Turkey celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the signature of the treaty of Moscow that established their modern relations,¹ the power struggles of the wider regional and global context continue to challenge the bonds between them.

After centuries of rivalry and hostility – first as the competition between the Russian and the Ottoman Empires raged and then when Turkey chose to side with the West during the Cold War – the 1990s finally witnessed the first steps towards a timid rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara. However, a radically new phenomenon and unprecedented dynamic began in 2016 between Russia and Turkey, or more precisely, between the respective presidents of these two countries, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Since 2016, there has been increased engagement between Turkey and Moscow, which has become crucially important in various theaters of war and because of its significance for regional and global balances of power. Researchers have tried to assess it on numerous occasions. However, Turkish-Russian relations remain a puzzle for many. They have not led to a complete realignment of the two countries, as some of their most enthusiastic supporters and their most worried critics had foreseen, but on the other hand, they overcame crises that many observers at the time predicted would sever the relationship altogether. Onlookers used variety of expressions to qualify these relations and show the difficulty of defining them and their profound ambiguity, among others: “uneasy alliance,”² “fragile friendship,”³ “partnership of convenience,”⁴ “adversarial cooperation,”⁵ “cooperative competition,”⁶ and “brutal entente.”⁷

Moreover, just in the last few months, a series of events occurred that impact, directly or indirectly, Turkish-Russian ties:⁸ the implementation of the ceasefire in Nagorno Karabakh, new

developments in Libya, the tensions surrounding Idlib, the election of Joe Biden, and changes in the Ukrainian conflict, as well as with Belarus. Each of these parts has emphasized some of the determining factors involved in the links between Moscow and Ankara. This article is an attempt to assess Turkish-Russian relations based on what emerged during these recent events.

Converging interests

Since the dismantling of the Soviet Union, Turkey and Russia have developed relations in different fields. Trade has been an important one of them⁹ and Russia is one of Turkey's top providers.¹⁰ Energy occupies a central position in the exchanges between the two countries. Turkey relies heavily on Russia for natural gas, and at the same time it would like to serve as an energy hub between Western consumers and Eastern providers. Together with Russia's attempts to create new streams for its production, this has served as a basis for common projects between the two countries, the latest of which being the Turkstream pipeline running from Russia to Turkey through the Black Sea.¹¹ Moscow also succeeded in being a partner in Turkey's efforts to diversify its energy sources by building a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu.¹² Other significant fields of exchange between Turkey and Russia include tourism, with an important flow of Russian tourists to enjoy Turkish resorts, and construction.

Beyond these long-term economic factors, the last few years have seen a new series of common political interests emerging between the two countries, or more precisely between their presidents. Erdoğan's growing authoritarian tendencies have echoed Putin's own political system.¹³ The Russian president also played his cards very smartly when Turkey felt insufficiently supported by the West while facing of international and domestic threats, following, paradoxically, the downing of a Russian jet by the Turkish army in 2015 and in the context of the 2016 failed coup in Turkey. While, in both cases, Western leaders were hesitant in expressing support for Erdoğan, Putin saw an opportunity in the coup attempt and was among the first to call the Turkish president following the event.¹⁴ Both leaders' suspicion towards the US and European countries brought them closer to each other and these developments created a wider, more personal, basis for Turkish-Russian cooperation.

Common successes

While the economic relations between Russia and Turkey continued to grow slowly, Putin and Erdoğan developed a strong personal relationship. Starting in 2016, the two leaders met on a regular basis, which led to a new partnership between the two countries. This partnership found its most striking expression in Syria, where Moscow and Ankara understood that they had common interests. Russian support for Assad, Turkish worries that the Kurdish YPG, considered by many to be the Syrian branch of the PKK, could establish permanent control over a zone bordering Turkey led both countries to feel that the West, and more particularly the US, was retreating from Syria, which gave both Russia and Turkey the opportunity to coordinate some of their actions in the Syrian conflict. While, together with Iran, Turkey and Russia created their own platform to manage the Syrian civil war, the Astana process,¹⁵ both countries also transformed the situation on the ground. Russian support enabled Assad to make important victories over insurgents and to restore his control over a large part of Syria. Turkey supported

Islamist groups that fought the Kurdish militias and launched direct military interventions to create a buffer zone at its border.

On the diplomatic scene, Putin and Erdoğan reached a series of *ad hoc* agreements to try and solve their different problems in Syria. Facing tensions in Idlib, where Turkey supports Islamist rebels, both as part of its strategy in Northern Syria and to avoid a new wave of Syrian refugees to its territory, whereas Russia supports Assad's efforts to take over the city, the two leaders decided to turn the city into a "de-escalation zone" in 2018.¹⁶ Similarly, Turkey's advances in North-East Syria were inscribed in the Sochi agreement reached in October 2019 between Erdoğan and Putin.¹⁷ It created a "safe zone" without Kurdish fighters and controlled by Syrian and Russian forces, while Turkish troops remained in the territories they had seized. Following the agreement, Turkish-Russian joint patrols started in the buffer zone, which embodied both countries' cooperation in Syria.

All this was made without consideration for Western positions on the conflict and was considered as a success for Erdoğan and Putin, who, by "putting boots on the ground" and creating *faits accomplis*, imposed their own agendas in Syria based on national interests and hard power,¹⁸ against the more liberal Western plans for the country.

Another important mutually beneficial move was the decision by the Turkish government to buy Russian S-400 missiles.¹⁹ This was a way for Turkey to express its disappointment towards Washington and an attempt to free itself from its dependence on Western providers for its defense. For Putin, the sale was a blow to NATO. The introduction of Russian material into a NATO member's military system, contrary to the alliance's rules, created tensions between Turkey and its allies and weakened the organization's internal cohesion.

Growing tensions

These successes hid the various frictions existing between Russia and Turkey, whose intensity grew in time. While seemingly cooperating in Syria, the two countries found themselves on opposed sides in Libya. Turkey, both because of ideological motives and strategic calculus, provided an important help to the Government of National Accord (GNA), sending Syrian mercenaries, troops, and military equipment to the Libyan front. On the opposite side, General Khalifa Haftar enjoyed the support of Russian mercenaries. In the last political process launched in Libya in late 2020, Moscow and Ankara remain in competition to each other in their attempts to keep their influence on the country, including in terms of military presence on Libyan soil.²⁰

Moreover, after a period in which Erdoğan and Putin had succeeded in cooperating in Syria while ignoring their opposition in Libya, the Syrian conflict gradually became a point of tensions, as well.²¹ Following Turkey's victories against the YPG and Assad's victories over insurgent groups, the situation in Syria transformed into a zero-sum game, where both countries have conflicting interests and are now in opposition to each other, as they had been prior to 2016. Frictions appeared in the implementation of the Sochi agreement and, more importantly, the ceasefire in Idlib was a failure, which turned the province into the core problem for Russia and Turkey's strategy in Syria.

The tensions between Moscow and Ankara reached a peak in February 2020, when Assad forces killed 34 Turkish soldiers stationed around the city, using Russian military arms. Erdoğan and Putin reached an agreement on March 5 in an effort to deescalate the crisis. It included an attempt to replicate in Idlib part of what had been tried in North-Eastern Syria, establishing Turkish-Russian joint patrols on the strategically important M4 highway.²² However, the implementation of the agreement has been challenging and tensions between the two sides remain.²³

The Ukrainian conflict created additional frictions between Moscow and Ankara in the spring of 2021. The Turkish government expressed its renewed support for Ukraine and sold six Bayraktar UAVs and three ground command centers to operate them.²⁴ Russia reacted by stopping all flights to Turkey.²⁵ The move was officially linked to the health crisis in the country, but was interpreted as a sanction against Turkey's tourism sector.²⁶ These moves came as a reminder that, despite some cooperation in the region, the Black Sea could quickly become another point of showdown between the two countries.

Asymmetry and ad hoc transactions: Russian-Turkish crisis management and its limits

These events underline the relative fragility of Russian-Turkish relations. Despite a number of common interests, several points of frictions prevent them from aligning with each other. On the other hand, Putin and Erdoğan have found at personal level, a *modus vivendi* and a way to deal with these frictions without directly attacking each other. Their perceptions of national interest and a shared will to solve their problems without Western intervention have made them adopt a compartmentalized transactional management of the various crises.²⁷ This management has led to settlements that avoid overly violent showdowns but do not offer long-term solutions to the different military and political problems. Their sustainability is thus questionable.²⁸

The latest developments have demonstrated the asymmetry between the two sides of this relationship. Over time, Turkey has appeared as the weak partner. It has some strengths against Russia, for instance, a technical superiority in drone manufacture, with Turkish drones being very efficient against Russian anti-aircraft systems like Pantsir in Libya, Syria, and Azerbaijan.²⁹ Putin has nevertheless emerged as the strong man of the relationship. Russia has been the side sanctioning Turkey when unhappy, in 2015 and in 2021, Turkey has been the only side apologizing. In 2016, and with respect to the Sochi and March 5th agreements on Syria, the Russian side has shown itself to be a strong player with the most direct control over the Syrian situation.³⁰

This asymmetry has structural roots. In the main sectors of trade between their economies, energy and tourism, Turkey is dependent on Russian imports.³¹ During the tensions between the two countries in 2015, a study had assessed that one year of Russian sanctions could cost Turkey up to 0.88 points of economic growth and 8.3 billion dollars.³² Although Turkey has tried to limit the possible impact of Russian sanctions, by reaching out to Azerbaijan as a gas provider for example, it has no means to deal an equally painful blow on the Russian economy. This structural asymmetry has been aggravated by the backfire of Turkey's strategy of East-West balancing. Ankara's independent policy and its insistence in keeping the S-400 have created

resentment in Western countries. Whereas the European states could not strongly retaliate because of the use by Erdoğan of the refugee issue as leverage, the US has been freer, especially since the election of Joe Biden.³³ Washington has imposed sanctions on Turkey and expelled the country from the F-35 program. Turkey is now isolated on the international scene, especially in front of Russia, thus worsening Erdoğan's weakness vis à vis Putin.

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict may be the clearest example of the complex dynamics shaping Turkish Russian relations, revealing how Russia's advantage makes Moscow benefit from Ankara's moves.³⁴ Turkey's support for Azerbaijan positioned it against Russia's ally, Armenia. Its tactical strength has made Baku's victory possible, which helped Turkey put a foot in the Caucasus, a region that Moscow sees at its preserve. Nevertheless, Russia knew how to appear flexible, to use Turkey's desire to resolve the issue without Western intervention, and the balance of power between them to "ride" on Turkish success. Putin acted moderately, avoided a direct opposition with Turkey and finally imposed himself to take responsibility for implementing the peace agreement, thus reaffirming Russia's role in the Caucasus, without having taken part in the conflict, except by "vampirizing" part of Turkey's victory.

Conclusion

The price of these relations has not been the same for Moscow as it has been for Ankara. If Turkey made (sometimes significant) tactical gains from its new relations with Russia, mostly in Syria, they are reaching their limits and have been costing Ankara its links with the West, which has been a central part of the country's strategic positioning for decades. Russia, on the contrary, not only made important tactical gains in every theater of war³⁵ and had the last word in all the negotiations between both countries. It also achieved a strategic victory by striking NATO through one of its most important members.³⁶ As such, Russia seems to be the main beneficiary of the Turkish-Russian adventure.

However, although the asymmetry existing between the two sides has widened during the time of their partnership, making Russia the final arbiter of the different processes, the last events have also shown that this asymmetry is not strong enough to completely deter Turkey from initiating problematic moves or creating new tensions. As such, Turkish-Russian relations continue to be a product of today's international relations that is difficult to predict, with potentially destructive consequences for both countries and for the theatres they are involved in.

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