

PEACE AND SECURITY

RUSSIA AND TURKEY – PARTNERS OR ADVERSARIES?

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The rapid growth of political, trade, and economic contacts between Russia and Turkey over the past 15 years shows that there are common interests to be found between the countries. However, their national interests have often diverged on topics ranging from the Caucasus to the Middle East and the Black Sea.



Following the jet crisis, what motivated Ankara and Moscow to seek a normalization of ties was not shared interests and common ideas regarding developments in Syria, but rather the need to work together.



It is very likely the factors bringing Ankara and Moscow together will remain in the short and medium terms. However, the lack of institutionalization still represents a weak spot for bilateral relations.

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RUSSIA AND TURKEY – PARTNERS OR ADVERSARIES?

Dr. Habibe Ozdal

INTRODUCTION

Turkey's relations with Russia has a centuries-long history dominated mainly by wars and rivalry. The end of Cold War has not automatically changed the structure of bilateral relations. With the political initiative of both Turkey and Russia started to focus on cooperation at the beginning of the 2000s. Since then, Ankara and Moscow have cooperated closely in different areas. However, Russian and Turkish national interests have diverged often from the Caucasus to the Middle East and the Black Sea. It is important to analyse what shapes bilateral relations and how the cooperation continues despite significant conflicting interests since this cooperation has not only regional but also global repercussions. Moreover, current dynamics in bilateral relations may help to provide perspectives on future trends.

TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS AT A GLANCE: CURRENT DYNAMICS & FUTURE PROSPECTS

Since the early 2000s, political leaders have successfully transformed mutual perceptions of rivalry into a multi-faceted cooperation. The rapprochement has worked well in specific areas, such as economics, energy, and trade, even though there have been certain limits when it comes to security-related political agendas. For almost a decade 'compartmentalisation' has been the main characteristic of Turkish-Russian relations. From the early 2000s until November 2015, Ankara and Moscow focused on cooperation in every area possible with a spill over effect expectation and agreed to disagree in specific cases, ranging from Syria to Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabagh to Cyprus.

Turkey's downing a Russian jet due to an airspace violation in November 2015 put an end to that compartmentalisation and began a new era in bilateral relations, in which the defining characteristics have also changed. Relations were normalized once Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sent an apology

letter in 2016 to Russian President Vladimir Putin but it is hard to say that bilateral relations got 'back on track'. The most striking example of this assumption is the visa-free regime between the two countries, which was applied prior to the warplane incident. Currently, visa-free travel is valid on a reciprocal basis for official and service passport holders as well as for international transport drivers only. While there is clear evidence of a continuation in bilateral relations, Moscow and Ankara still face certain challenges. In other words, there seems to be intensive cooperation along with irreversible differences.

What brings Ankara and Moscow together in light of those differences is worth discussing. First of all, political leaders in both states heavily invested in good relations with one another over a very long time. Secondly, Moscow has been carrying out a very active foreign policy in the Turkey's neighbourhood while Ankara's Western allies have been reluctant to get directly involved where Turkey's threat perceptions are high. Following the jet crisis, what motivated Ankara and Moscow to seek normalization was not shared interests and common ideas regarding developments in Syria, but rather the need to work together.

Currently, Turkey-Russia relations are mostly defined as a 'cooperative rivalry' (Bechev 2021) or an 'adversarial collaboration' (Yıldız 2021). This shows that not only is the compartmentalisation over, but also that differences and challenges are far from being ignored. On the contrary, a lack of shared ideas and interests do cast a shadow on cooperation. It is very likely the same path will be followed in terms of bilateral relations in the short and medium terms since the factors bringing Ankara and Moscow together are still at play, in addition to the challenges. The lack of institutionalisation still represents a weak spot for bilateral relations. Close relations at the leadership level work efficiently when direct dialogue is needed. However, the aforementioned structure has shortcomings, especially in times of crisis, as was experienced during the warplane incident.

COMMON WORLDVIEWS & CONFLICTING INTERESTS

At the beginning of the 2000s, Putin became a president in Russia, and Erdoğan prime minister in Turkey. During the first years of their rule, due to different reasons, both leaders sought rapprochement with the West. However, the Kosovo war was interpreted as a sign of NATO's hostility towards Russia, and intensified Russia's resentment of the West. On the other hand, Turkey was frustrated by the mid-2000s with the deadlock in accession negotiations with the European Union (EU) (Baev & Kirişçi 2017: 3). A rising anti-Westernism has since become common ground for Putin and Erdoğan.

Presidents Erdogan and Putin share a similar worldview regarding the structure of the international system. They both object American unilateralism and are quick to counter any criticism from Western powers, perceiving them as interference in their domestic affairs. "Both leaders preach 'traditional values', defend their positions on the international stage and have no qualms about challenging their many external critics and, where necessary, going against the dominant global attitudes and trends" (Kortunov 2020). It is clear that countering Western dominance in the international sphere is one of the common interests for Ankara and Moscow. To bear in mind, Turkey and Russia were first elaborated as an 'axis of the excluded' in 2006 by Fiona Hill and Ömer Taşpınar. Since then, this argument has been raised occasionally.

Turkey and Russia are also two ambitious powers and this motivates the two sides to work together closely. Moscow, with its active participation in regional affairs, gives the message it is a great power capable of defending its idea of justice on a global scale (Bordachev 2021). Moreover, President Putin is keen on preserving a peaceful relationship with Turkey, a rising regional power, cooperating where interests are sufficiently close, and managing differences, preventing them from degenerating into conflicts (Trenin 2020). From this standpoint, the common interests of Ankara and Moscow have been to build cooperative relations, strengthen ties and to intensify dialogue on various regional developments. Therefore, a close cooperation despite diverging interests is seen as serving the national interests of both. Still, with this intense dialogue and strong economic ties, including energy cooperation, it is worth mentioning in many of those areas an 'asymmetrical interdependence' exists that favourable to Russia.

Syria is currently an area of cooperation, however we must not forget Ankara and Moscow followed completely different policies at the beginning of the Arab Uprisings and up until the jet crisis. Cooperation became possible once Ankara changed its Syria policy. With its new approach, Turkey aimed to push back the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is a sister organization of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) for Ankara, away from its border. With President Putin's sensitivity to Turkey's security concerns, Ankara carried out military operations to northeast Syria. Yet developments in Syria consist of certain risks for both states. As Kortunov (2021) says Russia is the main external actor in the region, but it is hard to see a comprehensive exit strategy. Another question is to what extent the regime is under Russian control? On the other hand, establishing buffer zones in Idlib and in Syria's northern provinces are important achievements for Turkey. However, whether there is total Turkish control in Idlib, is yet another question. Developments near Turkey's border could burst any moment and spill over into the neighbouring Turkish regions (Kortunov 2021).

When it comes to foreign and security issues, such as Libya, Ukraine and the Black Sea region, rather than cooperation, conflicts of interests are present. This is the reason why characteristic of the relations have recently includes the terms, 'cooperation' and 'rivalry', 'adversary' and 'cooperation' together.

Libya is another case where Ankara and Moscow support opposing forces. Russia supports Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army and Turkey militarily supports Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj's internationally-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). For Russia, Fyodor Lukyanov says the West's intervention in Libya became a turning point and shaped the Kremlin's approach on how local conflicts should be settled in the 21st century. In Russia's view, the West is wrong to pursue regime change to settle problems. The correct path is to support existing regimes – even bad regimes. (Yinanç 2020) Currently, Russia and Turkey are seeking a sustained ceasefire, however Libya is different from Syria in many aspects. Most importantly, Ankara and Moscow are not the only actors as many regional and global actors are already involved.

The Ukraine crisis, from the very beginning, has been a topic of confrontation between Turkey and Russia as Crimea was annexed by Russia in 2014. Turkey criticized the annexation and has not recognized Crimea as a Russian territory. However, the Ukraine

crisis emerged when the ‘compartmentalisation’ approach was in implementation. Therefore, it has not created an important crisis in bilateral relations. Turkey-Ukraine relations have intensified to include the military aspect recently. In 2019, Ukraine purchased Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from Turkey which was a weapons system used by Azerbaijan during the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, Ankara and Kiev have been negotiating joint defence production (Yavuz 2021). This cooperation is observed closely by Moscow. Since the end of March 2021, Moscow enhanced its military mobility on Ukraine-Russia border. Due to increasing tension between Russia and the Ukraine, Turkey’s stance in case of direct Kiev-Moscow confrontation started to be discussed. As a reaction to the increasing military cooperation of Turkey and Ukraine, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov stated that if Ankara continues to supply UAVs, Moscow may revise its military cooperation with Ankara (TASS 2021). Therefore, it seems strengthening cooperation with Kiev should have certain limitations, according to Moscow. This is a relatively new area of confrontation between Ankara and Moscow.

Though it has not yet been raised loudly in a critical manner, the Black Sea is another area where Turkey’s and Russia’s interests are competing. Russia started to significantly increase its naval presence in the Black Sea after the annexation of Crimea. The military balance has changed in favour of Moscow with the Russian navy dominating the Black Sea. This may not pose a direct threat to Ankara when bilateral relations are at the current level. However, once Ankara and Moscow face a crisis similar to that of the warplane incident, the changing military balance in the Black Sea might be alarming for Turkey.

Some argue bilateral relations are vulnerable due to the lack of trust between political elites in both countries and growing threats to regional security could cause serious damage to Turkey-Russia ties (Kudryashova, 2021). Therefore, the role of political elites is also worthy of discussion.

PERSPECTIVES OF POLITICAL ELITES IN TURKEY AND RUSSIA: SIMILARITIES OR DIFFERENCES?

Historically, Russia has been perceived as a potential threat to Turkey. Turkish modernization, which was mainly relying on the West, further fuelled this approach during the Cold War era. Anti-Communism became a core pillar of the Turkish state’s identity and a major motivation for Turkey to join NATO in 1952 (Balta 2019: 73). However, even during the Cold War

period there have been specific periods in which economic cooperation intensified and energy relations were initiated between Russia and Turkey. Having said that, political elite in Turkey were mostly unified on the idea Turkey belonged to West.

With the beginning of 2000s, in line with multilateralism, relations with Russia were to be readdressed in a more cooperative manner. Russia started to be elaborated as a key regional actor with whom Turkey should cooperate in different areas. Moscow’s ambitious foreign policy choices strengthened this idea among the Turkish political elite. While rapprochement with Russia started as one of many columns in Turkish foreign policy, as time passed Turkey’s relations with Russia started to be discussed in line with whether or not Turkey was shifting away from the West.

Turkey’s relations with Russia used to be a balancing factor (in its relations with the West). Lately, especially after the coup attempt in July 2016, amid rising scepticism towards the US and European partners, relations with Russia have been prioritized and close relations with Moscow were suggested as an alternative for Turkey by the political elite. Turkey’s perception of unequal and unfair treatment by its Western allies has led to an increasing Eurasianism in Turkey. Turkish Eurasianism is mostly the instrumentalization of the concept of Eurasia by Turkey’s political elite with which they could reach out to the Turkic Republics, be pro-Russian, create a sphere of influence in former Ottoman lands, or cloak anti-Western trends in Turkey. With the increasing influence of Eurasianists and nationalists in the political elite who advocated for Turkey to distance itself from Western allies, relations with Russia have been prioritised despite conflictual interests (Yanik, 2019: 49-50).

When it comes to political elites in Russia and their perceptions and relations with Turkey, there are some commonalities and also certain differences. In terms of commonalities, Russian and Turkish elites tend to view Eurasianism as a suitable ideological tool to express their common desire to put their relations on an ideational base. The shared idea that Eurasian powers are destined to unite in order to challenge the West or at least to resist pressure from Western liberal democracies unites political elites in two countries (Akhmedov 2019).¹

¹ Although here Eurasianism is mentioned as a common ground that unites political elites in Turkey and Russia, when it comes to ideological and philosophical bases, Turkish and Russian Eurasianism differs significantly. For a detailed analysis, see Lerna Yanik (2019): *Debating Eurasia: Political Travels of a Geographical Concept in Turkey*, Uluslararası İlişkiler, 16 (63), pp. 33-50.

As for differences in the perspectives of the elites, first of all, from very beginning even when bilateral relations were at their best level, Russian political elite cautiously addressed bilateral relations not as an alliance but rather as a partnership. As Maxim Suchkov says, “for Russia, Turkey is a partner but not an ally. It is essential to maintain a balance between the two sides’ interests.” (Suchkov, 2020). In Russia, Turkey is seen as a rising regional power and bilateral are limited by *realpolitik* (Trenin 2020). Moreover, close relations with a NATO member is said to serve Russia’s interests: “The more Turkey becomes involved in regional security issues and plays an independent role in them, the better it is for Russia’s interests” (Bordachev 2021).

Political elites in Russia are more ‘realist’ in mentioning fragilities and potential crisis in bilateral relations. Andrey Kortunov for instance says, “Turkey-Russia relations could easily veer off at any time: A direct Turkish intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh, an escalation in Libya, complications with the Sunni Islamist militant group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib or with Kurds in Northern Syria, a Turkish confrontation with Greece, an upgrade in the security cooperation between Ankara and Kyiv, an aggressive promotion of Pan-Turkism in Russia, the list goes on” (Kortunov 2020). Meanwhile, the Syrian crisis brought to the forefront the problem of a trust deficit between political elites of the two countries (Shlykov 2018: p. 94).

TURKEY’S DETERIORATING RELATIONS WITH THE WEST AND ITS EFFECTS ON RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

After the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, Ankara’s decision to purchase S-400 missile defence systems from Russia despite strong US and NATO opposition did not only symbolize a deepening rift between Turkey and its Western allies but also represented a change in threat perceptions by Turkey. With the delivery of the S-400s, Turkey was excluded from F-35 program and became subject to sanctions imposed with the US Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Turkey’s decision to recruit a defensive strategic weapon system from the organization’s main rival – especially when relations between Russia and the Alliance was going through tense times after the annexation of Crimea – gave rise to criticism within the Alliance. Can Kasapoğlu (2019) says Turkey has opted for non-NATO options before. However, those actors were attached to the Western security architecture. In the eyes of the transatlantic

community, Ankara’s defence partnership with Moscow is not a usual non-NATO option, but rather an anti-NATO one. The mutual failure to understand one another led to a dialogue of the deaf in Turkey’s transatlantic relations. This is why the S-400 is not only a surface-to-air (SAM) system procurement, but a geopolitical test between NATO, Russia, and Turkey even if Ankara did not mean so at the outset (Kasapoğlu 2019). The challenge for Turkey and NATO in their relations with Russia is that “Russians can deal with anyone on the basis of *Realpolitik*. But NATO is not well designed to deal with a country that seriously pursues what is known in the post-Soviet world as a multi-vector foreign and security policy” (Trenin, 2020).

On the other hand, creating such a rift within NATO is an important achievement for Moscow. However, it is important to bear in mind that rather than being a joint military program, Turkey’s S-400 purchase does not include a technology transfer. Still, the missile defence system is not only an arm deal, but a matter of political relations.

Although Ankara values its membership in NATO, it is frustrated by its Western allies. Turkey has been confronting a serious crisis of confidence with NATO. Relations have had started to deteriorate with the developments in Syria. According to the Sinan Ülgen, “NATO has had a harder time managing the diverging national-security priorities of its members.” Each NATO nation now has a different perception of the salience of various asymmetric threats – such as violent radicalization and terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and state failure in neighbouring regions (Ülgen 2019). Moreover, NATO allies started to be regarded as ‘unreliable’ by Ankara due to their late reaction to condemn the July 15, 2016, coup attempt.

The lack of understanding between NATO members pushes Turkey closer to Russia as Ankara seeks to eliminate urgent threats. Despite strong relations in different areas, foreign and security issues are the weakest link in Turkey-Russia relations. Assessing the future of Turkish-Russian defence partnerships is not easy as there are many interrelated parameters at the political, military-strategic, defence planning, and diplomatic levels (Kasapoğlu 2019). Turkey and Russia will most likely try to maintain close relations and cooperation in different areas. However, military cooperation at the industrial level is not a problem-free zone. Russian-Turkish military and intelligence cooperation is currently limited to and gradually focused on Syria. There is still a high degree of mutual

distrust, and the two countries' militaries often find themselves on different sides of the barricades in the Syrian conflict (Kudryashova 2021).

Considering the fragilities with Russia and lack of institutionalization, it is very likely that Turkey will not put the deterrence provided by NATO at risk. Despite intense cooperation between Turkey and Russia, there is very limited cooperation in the military area, therefore it is difficult to expect intense military cooperation, especially at the level Turkey maintains with the NATO alliance due to a lack of shared threat perceptions. Despite a recent confidence crisis between Ankara and its Western allies, NATO membership and cooperation with the alliance is still key for the security of Turkey.

Therefore, Turkey may feel the need to balance close relations with Russia and re-strengthen its Alliance spirit with NATO. NATO membership has always been an important asset for Turkey, even in its relations with Moscow. It is important to bear in mind that right after the jet crisis with Russia, Turkey asked to invoke Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty and for an extraordinary meeting of the Alliance was organized. As for NATO, Turkey is an important and also loyal ally, whose membership is critical especially in terms of developments in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

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RUSSIA AND TURKEY – PARTNERS OR RIVALS?

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Russian-Turkish relations are currently developing in a unique political climate. The activities of regional powers are the result of a transition period of the system of international relations, that allows for medium-sized and even small countries to have greater maneuvering possibilities. But even against this backdrop, Turkey clearly stands out with its willingness to firmly defend its interests in various parts of the world.

The rapid growth of political, trade, and economic contacts along with humanitarian ties between Russia and Turkey over the past 15 years shows that there are indeed common interests to be found between the two countries. However, Russian-Turkish relations have not been able to avoid hitting stumbling blocks, given the various strategic goals and geopolitical ambitions both powers have and also the possibilities with which they can realize those aims.

Their relationship has gone through a series of serious tests of its strength in recent years. The murder of the Russian Ambassador Andrei Karlov in Ankara in December 2016 remains a tragic page in the history of the countries bilateral relations.

The close dialogue maintained by the political elites of the two countries plays an important role in rapprochement and settling of disagreements. Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan are regularly in direct contact, communicating with one another more often than with the leaders of other countries¹. In addition to that, the Russian-Turkish High Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) was established in 2010². This mechanism facilitates the meeting of both countries' cabinet ministers annually during which Russian-Turkish ties are discussed and dozens of different agreements on collaboration are signed. All of this

promotes a positive image of the political elites and also the weakening of historical stereotypes associated with the numerous Russian-Turkish wars in the history of the two empires.

ECONOMIC PARTNERS

The driving force behind Russian-Turkish cooperation is the economic sphere. Russia is Turkey's third largest trading partner, coming after Germany and China. Turkey ranks seventh in line of Russia's biggest trading partners. In 2019, the volume of bilateral trade between the two reached \$26.5 billion³. In 2020, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic hitting the whole world, the volume of trade was reduced to \$20.8 billion. Russian exports to Turkey accounted for \$15.7 billion of that and \$5.1 billion was Turkish exports to Russia⁴. The strategic goal of increasing trade turnover to the level of \$100 billion remains on the agenda.

Large scale projects in the energy sphere are an important factor in bilateral relations. Take, for examples, the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline that has a capacity of 16 billion cubic meters a year, the TurkStream gas pipeline with a capacity of 31.5 billion cubic meters per year, and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant which is still under construction. Russia is the largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey. In fact, 47% of the gas that was imported to Turkey in December of 2020 was Russian⁵.

TurkStream, a new gas pipeline, was launched in January 2020. This project not only fulfills Turkey's domestic demand for natural gas, it also brings Russian-Turkish energy cooperation to a new, international level. Russian gas travels through Turkish territory and is then exported to Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Northern Macedonia. Additionally, deliveries to

¹ Despite the pandemic, three face to face meetings and 18 telephone conversations were held between the presidents of Russia and Turkey in 2020. Such extensive dialogue between leaders of the two states has never been seen in the history of Russian-Turkish relations.

² Joint Statement by Russian President Dmitry A. Medvedev and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the Establishment of the High Level Cooperation Council Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey URL: http://www.turkey.mid.ru/hron/hronika248_07.html (accessed 3.05.2021)

³ Turkey-Russia: Accounting for 2020 URL: <https://www.turkrus.com/1512632-rusya-ile-2020nin-muhasebesi-turkiye-kacinciticaret-partneri-oldu-xh.aspx> (accessed 3.30.2021)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Natural Gas Market Sector Report. URL: <https://www.epdk.gov.tr/Detay/Icerik/3-0-95/dogal-gazaylik-sektor-raporu> (accessed 4.03.2021)

Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina began in January of 2021. Plus, work is under way to connect to a Hungarian gas pipeline.

The Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, which Russia is building near the Mediterranean city of Mersin, will be Turkey's first nuclear power plant. The creation of the plant will strengthen the country's energy security and accelerate its economic growth. In that regard, the Russian project is both of strategic importance to Ankara and significantly strengthens bilateral relations. Once it reaches its full power capabilities, the nuclear power plant will cover 10% of Turkey's electricity needs and lower the country's reliance on gas and coal. Construction on the fourth and final unit is set to begin in 2022 and the nuclear power plant is scheduled to start operations in 2023, the year the country will be celebrating the centenary of the founding of the Turkish Republic.

Russia's assistance in the creation of a new industry for Turkey also includes the preparation of a national workforce for the Turkish nuclear sector. Currently there are more than one hundred students studying in Russian universities who will eventually be able to work at the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant⁶. In this way, Russia is making a significant contribution to the strengthening of Turkey's scientific and industrial potential.

Russia accounts for roughly 20% of the foreign construction activities of Turkish contractors. Turkish revenue from Russian projects comes to 5-6 billion dollars a year. In 2020, the overall volume of Turkey's revenue from contracting work abroad shrunk to \$12 billion, \$3 billion of which was generated in Russia⁷.

Turkey remains one of the most popular tourist destinations for Russians. In 2019, a record-breaking number of Russian tourists visited Turkey – their numbers surpassing 7 billion, putting Russians in first place for numbers of tourists in the country. Germany came in second with 5 million tourists⁸. In 2020, due to the pandemic, only 2.1 million Russian tourists visited Turkey, which was still enough for

Russians to maintain first place in relation to other foreigners⁹.

A new facet of Russian-Turkish relations has become regional cooperation. This started in Syria and showed the capabilities of the two countries to maintain dialogue and find points of coinciding interests even under the circumstances of a difference in approaches to acute international problems.

THE MIDDLE EAST AS AN ARENA FOR COLLABORATION

The conflict in Syria became a deciding factor in Russia's relationship with Turkey, there ties have evolved to include cooperation under the Astana Format which was created to ensure the de-escalation process in Syria. Despite the fact that tension occasionally arose between the two countries, both sides made efforts in order to maintain interaction.

The political crisis that erupted in Syria in the spring of 2011, made it possible for Turkey to play a more active role in the Middle East. Turkey attempted to take advantage of the turmoil in the Arab world and strengthen its influence by spreading "Turkish experience" and hoping to take on the role of the coordinator of reform in Syria. In this context, the Turkish leadership moved to support opposition groups in the country and began to exert increasing pressure on the government of Bashar al-Assad. In effect, Ankara essentially sacrificed its relationship with Damascus, which was sufficiently developed and friendly, in order to achieve broader regional goals.

Under these conditions, Russian-Turkish ties began to experience tension, the evidence of which was the conflict in 2015-2016. In November 2015, a Turkish Air Force fighter jet shot down a Russian SU-24M attack aircraft on the border with Syria. President Putin described the incident as "a stab in the back" carried out by "accomplices of terrorists"¹⁰. High level political dialogue was suspended for almost six months. Subsequently, Russia imposed a partial freeze on economic ties between the two countries, which led to a drop in bilateral trade.

A deciding factor in overcoming this crisis was the failed military coup in Turkey. No one can know for certain that Russian intelligence shared the radio

6 Putin: Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant Strengthens Turkey's Energy Security. Rossiyskaya Gazeta. 10 марта 2021. URL: <https://rg.ru/2021/03/10/putin-proekt-aes-akkuyu-ukrepit-energeticheskuiu-bezopasnost-turcii.html> (accessed 4.02.2021)

7 Business Professionals are Hopeful for Economic Relations Between Turkey and Russia in 2021. URL: <https://tr.sputniknews.com/columnists/202012311043485976-is-insanlari-2021-de-turkiye-ve-rusya-arasindaki-ekonomik-iliskilerden-umutlu/> (accessed 4.06.2021)

8 How Many Tourists Came From Which Country to Turkey in 2019? URL: <https://www.turizmuncel.com/haber/turkiyeye-2019-yilinda-kac-turist-geldi> (accessed 4.05.2021)

9 Russians Became the Leaders in Numbers of Tourists in Turkey in 2020. URL: <https://ria.ru/20210129/turtsiya-1595152723.html#:~:text=январь%20-%20РМАН%20Новости.> (accessed 4.05.2021)

10 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34907983> (accessed 5.05.2020)

transmissions of the conspirators that they intercepted with Erdogan, but Moscow's sympathies were without question on his side. Since then, bilateral ties have been improving and any remaining disagreements haven't had a serious effect on them.

One of the main goals of the Turkish leadership in Syria consisted of preventing the formation on its borders of a powerful Kurdish enclave, linked, according to their estimations, ideologically, politically, and militarily to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The Kurdish fight for self-determination and independence has turned the Kurdish organization into an important international player. Ankara's opposition on that front reflects their concerns over the possibility of internal destabilization due to the actions of the PKK. The party is outlawed in Turkey, though it has positions outside the country as well, and it is recognized by a number of states as a terrorist organization.

In Turkey, it's believed that militants who are currently fighting in Syria were, in the past, pushed out of Turkish territory. Ankara sought to prevent the furthering of autonomy in Kurdish regions or their strengthening,¹¹ taking into account the autonomy already enjoyed by Kurds in Rojava.

Ankara's transition to independent military action on Syrian territory represented serious adjustments both to Turkish policies and to the overall situation. The implementation of the Turkish military campaign Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016, represented just one example of Ankara's readiness to resort to extreme measures to achieve their goals. The Turkish authorities demanded that Kurdish forces withdraw to the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, threatening further intervention in northern Syria. The Turkish Defence Minister stated that the Turkish military operation in Syria had two goals: to secure the safety of the Syrian-Turkish border and to make sure the Kurds "are not there"¹². Operation Olive Branch, launched by Turkey at the end of January 2018, was aimed at pushing the Kurds out of Afrin and creating a so-called buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian Border¹³. Ankara was also interested in a change of the ethnic composition of the Kurdish areas. Monitor groups and Kurdish media noted with alarm that the Turkish-backed Syrian opposi-

tion moved thousands of families from Ghouta to Turkish Afrin¹⁴.

Turkish armed action in Kurdish areas has put Russia in a difficult position. On the one hand, the Russian Federation has consistently advocated for Kurdish autonomy (provided that Syria remains a single state) and for a separate Kurdish delegation to be formed and be allowed to participate in the negotiations on the Syrian settlement, two things which were unacceptable to Turkey. On the other hand, Russia could not stand in the way of a Turkish offensive without risking another severe bilateral relations crisis. In addition to that, having become one of the most influential players in the Syrian conflict, Russia could not allow itself to get pulled into an endless cycle of intra-regional contradictions, clashes, and offenses that have nothing to do with Moscow, but could end up threatening Russian military personnel.

Another area of conflict between Turkey and the Russian-supported Assad regime would be Idlib. According to Russian-Turkish agreements reached in March of 2020, Turkey pledged to create a de-escalation zone in the area between representatives of terrorist organizations, namely Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and opposition elements cooperating with Ankara.

This would act to ensure the safety of the civilian population in the area and increase the possibility of integrating Idlib into the group of territories already under the control of the government. Along with that, another goal is to open the M4 highway and to establish joint patrols around it to keep armed groups several miles away from both sides of it¹⁵. Turkey has not abandoned its commitments to achieve all this but the process is moving slowly.

Under the conditions as they stand now, when HTS militants shelled other areas of Syria and even Russia's Khmeimim Air Base, Russian forces launched a subsequent attack on the militant's camps at a truck stop near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. According to Russian media, the militants attempted to disguise their equipment as humanitarian aid¹⁶. That incident was met with displeasure by Turkey.

It is clear that while the situation in Idlib, where large numbers of militants have gathered, remains un-

11 Gallia Lindenstrauss Turkey and Iran: Two Regional Powers and the Relations Pendulum/ Iran in a Changing Strategic Environment (eds) Meir Litvak, Emily B.Landau and Ephraim Kam /Memorandum 173.INSS :March 2018 -- P.57

12 Turkey Warns Syrian Kurds to Withdraw East of Euphrates. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37184848>. (accessed 4.04.2021)

13 Syrian Militias Enter Afrin <https://ria.ru/syria/20180220/1515012231.html>. (accessed 3.25.2021)

14 Helbast Shekhani, Syrian Kurdish Enclave of Afrin: From Forced Conversions to Demographic Change. April 27, 2018 . <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/bede54d2-ac08-44e2-ba0c-744f793b5d1b> (accessed 3.25.2021)

15 Lavrov Speaks a Valdai Discussion Club Meeting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvFnoZTpNqk> (accessed 4.06.2020)

16 Zhelenin A. The Turks Also "Can Repeat" <https://www.rosbalt.ru/blogs/2021/03/25/1893897.html> (accessed 3.30.2021)

changed, there will continue to be room for differences between Russia and Turkey to arise. Moreover, the indefinite retention of Turkish military contingents in Syria could possibly lead to the appearance of a Turkish protectorate on Syrian territory in the future, which has the means to complicate Ankara's relations with the Syrian government even further and present difficulties for Russia.

The Libyan conflict became the second area where Russia and Turkey are looking for possibilities for cooperation under the conditions of differing approaches. Turkey's support of the Government of National Accord was determined by Ankara's desire to use the situation in the country to achieve specific goals. Turkey and Libya signed a memorandum on the understanding of the demarcation of maritime zones in the eastern Mediterranean, something of particular significance for Turkey who is expanding geological exploration in the eastern Mediterranean. The coast of Cyprus and the Greek islands are also places where Turkey is conducting geological exploration. Both Athens and Nicosia claim that Turkey is violating international law in doing so. Ankara does not consider its actions to be unlawful and the situation remains tense, despite, after a five year pause, the resumption in January 2021 of direct negotiations between Turkey and Greece on maritime borders.

Turkey intends to defend its rights to the sea shelf. In June 2020, Reuters reported that Turkey planned to build two permanent military bases on Libya's territory – a naval base and an air base. Starting in 2020, Ankara began providing official military assistance to Tripoli.

Overall, Turkish policies in Libya have caused concern not only among regional players like Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, but also for France and Italy. According to a number of media outlets, Italy is ready to work with France, who takes a tough stance on Turkish policies in Libya, in order to contain Ankara's influence, which is beginning to threaten Italy's interests in Libya and neighboring Algeria¹⁷.

In early 2021, the parties of the armed conflict in Libya agreed to an interim unity government at a UN-brokered meeting on Libya in Geneva. It will lead Libya until national elections, scheduled for December 24, 2021, take place. However, the situation on the ground is only seeing slow changes - there are still 20 thousand foreign mercenaries in Libya, that includes mercenaries from Syria who are on the side

of Turkey and Tripoli, despite the fact that there is a separate clause in the current ceasefire that requires their withdrawal¹⁸.

From Russia's perspective, who is interested in participating in international efforts to resolve the conflict in Libya and in the quick stabilization of the situation in the country, Turkey could become a part of the solution to the problems there. This is evidenced in the joint Russia-Turkish mediation attempts for the settlement of the Libyan conflict. In January 2020, presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed to seek de-escalation "on the ground" and to advance the political process in Libya. Since then, the topic of Libya has been firmly on the agenda for bilateral dialogue and of the joint initiatives of the two countries.

TURKEY AS A STRENGTHENING PLAYER: A CHALLENGE OR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RUSSIA?

Turkey is conducting itself rather aggressively in various region, which serves as eloquent evidence not only of its growing regional ambitions but also of its claims of being a player on the global stage. Recep Tayyip Erdogan possesses significant internal resources which support an active foreign policy. An internal request for activity on the international arena lends a credit of trust to a political leader who is aiming to strengthen the international position of his country. Despite existing contradictions to it, all the political forces in Turkey wish to strengthen its role in the world¹⁹.

An example of the effects of domestic factors on the international level would be the question of the construction of the Istanbul Canal, which will run parallel to the Bosphorus between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. The canal is one of President Erdogan's "mega-projects" and it should boost the Turkish leader's prestige and allow his country to make a leap in its economic development. But the ambiguity of the application of international legal regulations to this new sea route and, consequently, the inviolability of the Montreux Convention cannot but cause Russia concern.

The armed conflict in Nargono-Karabakh, where in 2020 Turkey provided significant military and technical support to Azerbaijan, has also become a difficult

¹⁷ <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20201124/248592996.html> (accessed 12.10.2020)

¹⁸ <https://expert.ru/2021/02/8/liviya/> 4514617 (accessed 3.25.2021)

¹⁹ Russia and the World. Session 2. Turkey Under Erdogan <http://www.interfax.ru/world/738925> (accessed 11.25.2020)

problem for Russian-Turkish relations. With the joint membership of Russia and Armenia in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) on one side and the military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan on the other, the risk for a potential clash between Moscow and Ankara arose. Russia has repeatedly brought serious concerns about the movement of foreign mercenaries to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone to the attention of their Turkish colleagues²⁰.

Nevertheless, the two sides were able to avoid a conflict and agree on a new format of interaction. On January 31, 2021, a joint Russian-Turkish center to monitor the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh began operating in Azerbaijan. Within the framework of this mission, 60 officers from both the Russian and Turkish side will collectively monitor the implementation of the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

At the present stage, relations between Russia and Turkey, which have a fairly solid foundation in the form of developed bilateral cooperation in various spheres, have moved to a new level of interaction. They are, as before, balanced between areas of competition and cooperation which are determined by the divergence of interests on a number of issues and simultaneously the need to rely on a partner for support. At the same time, both countries have formed a firm understanding of the importance of preserving and developing Russian-Turkish ties. The positive results from cooperation, primarily economically, allow the two powers to find a way out of difficult situations through compromise and even find new means for interaction.

The determination of Moscow and Ankara to seek further fronts of mutual understanding and cooperation is supported by the existing tensions in the relations of both sides with western countries. And it should be noted that Turkey is trying to use that to its advantage. While it remains the southern flank of NATO, at the same time Turkey is also trying to encourage the United States and European powers to take its interests into account more often. And in this regard, ties with Russia represent an additional tool with which to balance and integrate Turkey into the global agenda. Turkey became the first NATO country to acquire Russian S-400 missile systems.

The first batch was delivered to Turkey in August 2019 and were tested in October 2020, despite pressure from the U.S. in the form of sanctions against Ankara. A contract has been signed for the delivery of a second batch of S-400s. Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 systems has expanded the long-term military technical cooperation opportunities for the two countries. As a part of that, Ankara is depending on a partial transfer of production technologies which will allow Turkey to move forward in their work on creating their own air defense systems.

In general, Russian-Turkish relations have withstood the test of a number of crises which the two parties found ways to overcome. Their mutual interests in one another, formed under the influence of both internal factors and external challenges, has transformed Russia and Turkey from situational partners into a considerable political tandem in the global balance of powers who demonstrate stability despite the contractions between the two.

²⁰ Comments by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry on Sergey Lavrov's Participation in the Eighth Meeting of the Russian-Turkish Joint Strategic Planning Group. 28-12-2020. URL: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonk-JE02Bw/content/id/4514617 (accessed 4.06.2021)

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SUMMARY



The history of Russian-Turkish relations was long dominated by wars and rivalry but thanks to the political initiative of both countries, the two started to focus on cooperation at the beginning of the 21st century. Since then, both powers have cooperated closely in various areas and the rapid growth of political, trade, and economic contacts between Russia and Turkey over the past 15 years shows that there are indeed common interests to be found between the countries. However, their national interests have often diverged on topics ranging from the Caucasus to the Middle East and the Black Sea. In other words, close cooperation somehow continues despite their undeniable differences.



One thing that keeps ties strong between Ankara and Moscow is the continued investment by both leaders to maintain them. Moreover, Russia has a very active foreign policy when it comes to the regions around Turkey, especially compared to Ankara's Western allies. Following the jet crisis, what motivated Ankara and Moscow to seek a normalization of ties was not shared interests and common ideas regarding developments in Syria, but rather the need to work together. Cooperation only became possible once Turkey changed its Syria policy. Both presidents share a similar worldview regarding the structure of the international political system and both object American unilateralism. Creating a rift within NATO is an important achievement for Moscow, although NATO membership is still an important asset for Turkey, even in its relations with Moscow.



When it comes to topics such as Libya, Ukraine, and the Black Sea region, conflicts of interests are present. Russia supports the Libyan National Army while Turkey militarily supports the internationally recognized Government of National Accord. Ankara criticized the annexation of Crimea and has not recognized it as a Russian territory. In 2019, Ukraine purchased Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from Turkey, which was a weapons system used by Azerbaijan during the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. It is very likely the same path will be followed in terms of bilateral relations in the short and medium terms since the factors bringing Ankara and Moscow together have not significantly changed. The lack of institutionalization still represents a weak spot for bilateral relations, especially in times of crisis, as was experienced during the warplane incident.