

The Course of Turkey-Russia Relations in the Regional Perspective

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Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan came into power, in Turkey, in 2002. The avowed foreign policy goals of the new Turkish government were to have “zero problems with neighbours”, aiming at minimizing political conflicts with the immediate neighbours and regional actors, and a drive toward economic progress. Syria, which had been considered as the poster child of Turkey’s zero-problem strategy, remained the focus of this policy until the end of the decade. Their mutual relations were driven and upheld mainly by economic incentives and kept intact via active diplomacy. However, when the Arab Spring in the region reached Syria and Turkey’s efforts to curtail the bubbling violence in the country failed, Ankara’s relations with Damascus came under immense stress, and in 2011, Turkey officially cut ties with Syria.

The war within Syria, which continues to this day and has gone on longer than anyone had initially anticipated, also attracted foreign actors and players, which prolonged the conflict. By 2014-2015, the Islamic State became active in Syria and Iraq. In due course, Iran’s nuclear deal with the six world powers and its reemergence as an active regional player has had an impact on the regional security structure of the Middle East. These developments had strategic consequences for the region. The formation of alliances with regional actors and the presence of numerous non-state groups combating inside Syria, some acting as states’ proxies, drew in the world powers. Thus, the Syrian conflict, which started out as a civil war limited to its domestic boundaries, became an international conflict.

The US policy in the emerging security and political situation in Syria generally has been restrained and, perhaps, ambivalent. As a result of the power vacuum in the region, Russia emerged as an important and influential player in dealing with the Syrian Crisis. With Russia’s involvement in Syria, the Middle Eastern power structure also changed. The formation of an inter-regime Iran-Syria-Iraq-Russia nexus came into existence and caused concerns in Saudi Arabia as well as Turkey.

By the end of 2015, Russia's alignment with the Bashar al Assad administration in Syria put formerly amenable Ankara-Moscow relationship under stress, pushing it to an almost-breaking point. The escalation of tensions between the two states resulted in sanctions imposed by Russia on a number of Turkish products, and a ban on flights to Turkey. Hostile statements on both sides were also made, indicating the tension between the two states.

This paper aims to outline the historical significance of the Russia-Turkey relationship with an analysis of events that led to the tensions between them, and the factors that ultimately led to the thaw in their relations. The paper will also explore the dynamics of their relationship and what trajectory their relations have taken over the past year, following the breakdown that was caused during the Syrian Conflict in 2015.

Contours of Turkey-Russia Relations

Russia and Turkey share a common neighborhood, although they don't have common borders, which impacts both countries' foreign policies. Geopolitical features, security threats and regional interests shape their relationship that overlap their larger domestic and foreign policy objectives. Despite the bad blood created between them during the Cold War, when the two countries were pitted against each other, both Turkey and Russia reviewed their policies at the end of the Cold War. In early 2000s, both, the Turkish establishment under AKP and Russia under Putin, began an unprecedented but not inexplicable move toward rapprochement. The reasons for their alignment were grounded in not only political factors but also in the more intrinsic aspects of identity. The first signs of the reformed position of AKP were apparent in the party program, where it is stated: "The relations established with the Russian Federation, Central Asia and the Caucasus will be based not on competition but friendly cooperation."¹

Russia and Turkey, both, have long histories of imperial rule. Both countries, although at different times, have been involved in the struggle to craft the nation-state, and have faced the issue of multi-ethnicity on the domestic level. Each has gone, albeit on its own course, through the process of democratization and modernization. Turkey and Russia have since been viewed as significant accompaniments of the United Europe, but at the same time, are eyed by the European community with suspicion, forming an "axis of the excluded" according

to research analyst Torbakov (2011) owing to their domestic political and social circumstances and concepts of their own identities. Turkey under Erdogan and Russia under Putin have also experienced increasingly autocratic policies at the domestic level, reminiscent of the past practices of their empires. Furthermore, religion has become an important factor in both countries in the current phase of their histories. Turkey is predominantly Sunni Muslim and Russian society is Orthodox Christian. Religion has played a defining role in the political narrative and policy direction in both Turkey and Russia in the last 20 years²

On account of their identical world views, they also perceive common regional threats emanating from the Middle East. Growing terrorism from the Israel-Palestine issue prompted Russia to join the Middle East Quartet in 2001 (other members being the United States, United Nations, and European Union), where it basically supports US' efforts to bring peace to the region. Turkey, too, has maintained an active role in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Both countries share a common stance for a peace process in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Prior to 2014, Turkey and Russia were both committed to having a nuclear free Iran and actively sought to play a mediatory role between Iran and the West.³ Their interests in Iran were grounded, to a great extent, in economic benefits as well. In April 2016, Erdogan and Iranian President Rouhani held a joint press conference, declaring renewed efforts to eradicate terrorism in the region and focus on economic and trade incentives to strengthen their ties.⁴ In December 2015, following Russia's breaking off of relations with Turkey, according to Iranian Press TV, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak attended the event and referred to Tehran as Moscow's "most important economic and trade partner," adding that the two countries have formulated a new trade agreement worth \$35 to \$40 billion.⁵

However, Russia and Turkey have viewed the Arab Spring through significantly different perspectives. Initially, for the Turkish leadership, the uprising was a sign of a resurgent Islamic society against autocratic regimes and perhaps dawn of a new political order in the political culture of the Middle East, but Russia's perception of the Awakening was more skeptical; for Russia, this wasn't a route to new beginnings. Moscow's view of the collapse of Mubarak's regime was rather cautious as it seemed to Russian leadership as a manifestation of the triumph of political Islam with the potential to spill over to the rest of the region. Similarly, the ouster of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 plunged Libya into chaos, leading to proliferation of weapons and radical fighters. That is why, in the Syrian conflict,

Moscow has been opposed to the idea of intervention by external actors against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Moscow's strategy has been to provide military assistance to the Syrian establishment against the rebels and civilian opposition, which has been a source of consternation for NATO, including Turkey.⁶

Increasing Tensions

Economic interests formed the major pillar of Russia-Turkey relations since the 2000s. During the Cold War, the two countries were political rivals, positioned on opposite sides of the bipolar world. With the dissolution of the USSR, they were quick to see each other as potential partners in trade and economic matters and worked to leave those differences aside. Turkey and Russia did not allow political factors to come in the way of their strategy of selective cooperation, when the two sought to coordinate in economic matters. The relations developed rapidly in the economic sphere and tourism and succeeded in creating institutional mechanisms, such as the High-Level Cooperation Council, the Civic Forum, and the Joint Strategic Forum, to regulate them.⁷

The first major political disagreement between the two countries during their post-Cold War relations was the Ukrainian Crisis and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. Russia's moves were dictated, it claimed, by the Eastward expansion of NATO, but Turkey's concern was caused by the diaspora of Crimean Tatars with whom Turkey has long historical ties. They comprised 12% of the population of the Crimean Peninsula.⁸ However, Turkey and Russia together adopted an approach of "agree to disagree"⁹ to preserve the other channels of their bilateral relationship. Russia showed leniency towards the Crimean Tatars in order to placate Turkey, including recognition of Tatar as one of the official languages in the region. Turkey responded in kind by choosing not to escalate, preserving their bilateral ties (although it never officially recognized the annexation of Crimea into Russian territory).

The source of a breakdown in relations between Turkey and Russia however was Russia's involvement in the Syrian Crisis, after which their prior underlying political differences also came to the fore; In November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter plane which it claimed was violating its airspace. Russian authorities, on the contrary, maintained that the Russian jet did not cross the Turkey-Syria border and the attack was therefore illegal. While this was not an

isolated case but one of many Russian violations of NATO airspace over the past 18 months¹⁰, this incident led to a dirty exchange of rhetorical blows between the two countries, with Putin calling Turkey's actions "a stab in the back by the accomplices of terrorists,"¹¹ and demanded an apology. Erdogan responded by declaring, "I think if there is a party that needs to apologize, it is not us. Those who violated our airspace are the ones who need to apologize."¹² In March 2016, the Turkish Foreign Ministry reiterated its stance regarding the issue, in light of the heightened tensions between the two countries: "We declare this once again, on the second anniversary of Crimea's illegal and illegitimate 'referendum' held on March 16, 2014, that we do not recognize it and the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation due to this 'referendum'."¹³ This was followed by each country accusing the other of supporting terrorism in Syria. Moscow eventually responded by terminating military cooperation with Turkey and imposing economic sanctions and travel restrictions.¹⁴

While the two countries share a common interest in eradicating terrorism from the region, their approaches to the matter have been entirely different. In Syria's case, their wavering relations were exacerbated by their opposing and strident stances regarding the civil war in the country and their perceptions of the situation inside Syria. Russia has firmly stood behind Bashar al-Assad during the Civil War in his country, while Turkey maintained a resolve to overthrow the regime and provide support to the rebel groups that act within Syria. Turkey claims that the presence of Turkmens on the Syria-Turkey border was the key stimulus for its involvement in the country. The fact that the Syrian Kurds are also pitted against the Islamic State and the rebels too are fighting against the Assad government reinforces that motivation. Turkey has, in the past, been involved in a lengthy war with the Kurdish community, the focal group of which is PKK. Over the course of the past year, terrorist incidents are believed to have been the handiwork of both Kurds within Turkey and neighbouring Syria as well as the Islamic State. Since mid-2015, there have been many incidents of suicide attacks and bombings at the hands of Islamic State and the Kurds. In 2016 alone, there has been a string of major terrorist incidents in various parts of the country, including Ankara and Istanbul. In February, March and June, three attacks carried out by the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, a Kurdish group which is believed to be linked with PKK and essentially a proxy of the PKK, resulting in a cumulative death toll of about 70.¹⁵ Dozens of other attacks have also been reportedly perpetrated by the IS, with the violence toll having increased considerably in 2016. The latest incident occurred on June 29 in

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Istanbul's Ataturk Airport, where three terrorists linked to IS, opened fire and carried out a suicide attack, killing at least 43 people, and wounding another 239.¹⁶

The table below depicts major terrorist incidents in Turkey since June 2015.

Date	Location		Dead	Group responsible
Jun. 5, 2015	Diyarbakir	Political rally	2	Unknown
Jul. 20	Suruc	Cultural center	32	ISIS
Oct. 10	Ankara	Peace rally	100+	ISIS
Jan. 12, 2016	Istanbul	Tourist area	10	ISIS
Jan. 13	Diyarbakir	Police headquarters	6	Kurdish militants
Feb. 17	Ankara	Military convoy	28	Kurdish militants
Mar. 13	Ankara	Public square	37	Kurdish militants
Mar. 18	Nusaybin		1	Kurdish militants
Mar. 19	Istanbul	Tourist area	4	ISIS
Mar. 21	Nusaybin	Military operation	3	Kurdish militants
Mar. 31	Diyarbakir	Police convoy	7	Kurdish militants
Jun. 7	Istanbul	Tourist area	11	Kurdish militants
Jun. 23	Omerli	Military outpost	1	Kurdish militants
Jun. 28	Istanbul	Airport	43	ISIS

The group responsible is based on statements by officials and claims of responsibility. Source: NY Times¹⁷

The Syrian Kurds in the form of PYD and YPG, as per Turkish assessment, are an extension of the PKK. While Putin has accused Erdogan of being in cahoots with Islamic State and having implicit economic relations with them, Turkey has rebuffed the accusation and criticized Russia for not targeting Islamic State strongholds in Syria while claiming to be fighting against them. Turkey has also accused Russia of bombing moderate rebels' locations, including Turkmen, fighting against the forces of Bashar al Assad.¹⁸ Russia has charged Erdogan with housing terrorists inside Turkey, allowing them to cross the Syria-Turkey border. In April this year, Putin proposed to Obama to consider the situation. He pressed "the need to close Syria's border with Turkey, from which a flow of fighters and arms to the extremists continues."¹⁹

Carnegie Moscow Center Director Dmitri Trenin said of the Turkey Russia relations following the November downing of Russian fighter plane, "For the foreseeable

future, Moscow and Ankara are likely to be rivals or even adversaries. The Russian intervention in Syria, which was the actual cause of the rupture — the air incident was a pretext — has undercut Turkey's policies in its near neighborhood and materially damaged its interests in Syria. As long as Recep Tayyip Erdogan remains in charge and Russia stays on its present course, the Russian-Turkish relationship will be an exercise in conflict management, at best."²⁰ Leadership in both countries, in this case, had been a driving factor for aggravating the conflict, restraining where cooperation can be achieved and preventing prospects for future cooperation.

Turkey's NATO membership may have given Erdogan confidence to shoot down the Russian jet but Russia's strong reaction may have, in part, been due to the factor of Turkey's NATO membership. It had added insult to the injury for the Russian leadership. Erdogan's opposition to the Bashar al Assad government and his inability to take effective measures against him because of Russian and Iranian support to Assad pushed him to make such an audacious move. For Turkey, having been occupied both at home with the refugee crisis and terrorism and the insecurity emanating from the Syrian Kurds, this was as much of an instinctive move as a logical one that showed its frustration with the situation in Syria.

On February 27, 2016, Russia announced its decision to halt its airstrikes in regions where conflicting armed groups in Syria, including the main opposition group Free Syrian Army agreed to a partial ceasefire brokered by the Syrian government and the US.²¹ The Geneva Peace talks, facilitated by the US and Russia, ensued shortly after. These talks also brought Bashar al Assad representation to the negotiating table, much to Turkey's chagrin. This has in fact been a major cause of ill feeling among Turkish leadership. The major powers involved in Turkey had realized that the peace process could not succeed without the involvement of the Syrian government. This process also amounted to the recognition of Bashar al-Assad as a legitimate stakeholder in the solution to the Syrian Crisis and peace and stability in Syria and the region. After the Geneva Peace Agreement, Turkey's sense of insecurity increased. It initiated a bombing campaign of the Kurdish and other opposition groups in Syria, disturbing the fragile state of ceasefire leading to multiple skirmishes in the country.

Incentives and challenges

The economic and trade relations of Turkey and Russia are built on tourism, food, energy and joint projects on trade and nuclear energy.²² Turkey and Russia have a number of mutual economic, strategic and security interests that are sustained by their various infrastructure and energy trade deals. Prior to their political standoff, Russia and Turkey were vigorously involved in a gas pipeline and a nuclear project, with Russia's plans to construct a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, Turkey. Turkey is also strategically significant for Russia because of the Strait of Bosphorus, which is the main conduit for trade of goods between Russia and Middle East and North and East Africa and Europe.²³

In December 2014, Putin and Erdogan had signed an agreement to construct the Turkish Stream, or TurkStream, a gas supply pipeline, intended to be the sole supplier of 63 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to the European consumers.²⁴ After relations soured between the two countries negotiations regarding the TurkStream were halted. This was a source of concern for both states as Turkey depends greatly on Russian oil for its energy needs and is Russia's second largest buyer of natural gas after Germany. It imports 55 percent of its natural gas and 30 percent of its oil from Russia.²⁵ Russia, whose economy is driven mainly by its energy exports, it has also been a cause for concern. It provided 26.97 billion cubic meters of gas to Turkey in 2014, or 54.8% of the total import of 49.26 billion cubic meters.²⁶ Following the November 2015 incident, there has been talk of halting all such bilateral energy projects which is detrimental for both Russia and Turkey.

In order to reduce its dependence on Russian gas, Turkey has been exploring other options. Iran is an obvious choice, which is not only the world's second largest producer of natural gas, but also shares a border with the country. However, political differences exist between the two countries as well. With the lifting of US sanctions against the Iranian regime, imports of gas from Iran may become easier, but a 2013 research showed that Iran's domestic political dynamics have been the ultimate cause for its inability to become a major exporter of gas in the past.²⁷ However, Iran's current reformist leadership is likely to be an enabling factor for improving economic measures on the domestic front. The other alternative is Azerbaijan, with which Turkey is currently building TANAP (Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline), which is aimed at bringing Azeri gas to Europe. But this

project is not expected to complete until 2018. Hence, neither Iran nor Azerbaijan can fulfill Turkey's immediate gas needs.²⁸

Relations between Turkey and Russia are also driven by their interests in the Caucasus region, bound together by a Turkey-Russia-Iran nexus. These countries mutually share the need to keep extra-regional actors away from the South Caucasus and the Black Sea. The presence of the US or the EU undermines Russian influence in the Middle East in the same way that was perceived by Moscow in the case of Ukraine in 2014. The presence of the EU or US could pose a security threat by fostering an asymmetrical regional status quo, as was done in Putin's perception of US involvement in the Ukraine Crisis and a bid for NATO's expansion. Putin, at the time of the Crimean annexation by Russia, claimed his moves as defensive reactions to US expansion toward Georgia. His defensive posture was internalized and served as the official state narrative. Turkey, as a member of NATO is also a cause for concern, but Turkey's opposition to outside powers in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea is reassuring for Russia. Turkey has shared the same assessment as Russia, that the presence of outside powers would directly undermine Turkish influence in the region.²⁹

Significance of Bosphorus

The Bosphorus Strait, which divides Turkey into its European and Asian parts, connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. It is a natural, 32 km channel and a prime transit route for trade between Russia and the CARs with Europe. It is a major transitway for oil exports from Russia. Around 4800 ships pass through this strait annually and approximately 55 million tonnes of oil is shipped through the strait each year. The US Department of Energy classifies the Bosphorus as one of "World Oil Transit Chokepoints." In 2009, 2.5 million barrels a day of crude oil passed through the strait, thus proving a significant trade route for Russia and other Central Asian states that produce oil.³⁰ Although Turkey is currently under legal obligation to provide free transit for civilian vessels under the 1936 Montreux Convention, it can threaten to stop passage to Russian vessels in case of a conflict, as it did in 2014 following the Ukraine Crisis.³¹ Similarly, in the hypothetical event of a war, Turkey has the legal right to refuse Russian warships entrance in the Bosphorus. Therefore, the cutting off of economic cooperation between both countries would be mutually destructive.

The Black Sea region is known as the global wheat supplier, Russia being the top exporter of wheat from the region.³² This supply, which caters to Middle East and North Africa, countries in the Gulf area and East Africa, also relies on the Bosphorus Strait for shipping this essential food commodity. Risks linked with the Russia and Turkey hostilities are also seen as harmful for global wheat supplies.

Repairing Damaged Relations

Turkey is tied down with problems both at home and in Syria, at the hands of the Kurds as well as the IS. Therefore, it would have been imprudent for Turkey to make any moves with the potential to cause irreparable damage to its relations with Russia. Russia, besides being a major military and economic power, has the capacity to provide Turkey help in tackling its terrorist related problems. In addition it has enjoyed robust economic ties and mutually beneficial relations with Turkey in the past. Erdogan realized the danger of antagonizing an important partner. In order to improve relations, he sent a letter of congratulations to Putin on May 12 2016, the Russian Independence Day, of which the Turkish Prime Minister Numan Kurtumulus said in a statement, "I hope that with the letters of Mr. President and Mr. Prime Minister, a major step will be taken in this normalization process."³³The letter was considered by foreign policy experts to be an important step toward breaking the endless spiral of antagonism between the two countries following Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015, bringing a new break in the prevailing situation between the two countries at the time.³⁴

However, Erdogan went a step further and sent an apology letter to Putin, on June 27, in light of the recent turmoil in the international political order in Europe. In response to Erdogan's letter, which was confirmed by the Kremlin, Putin normalized trade and economic ties with Turkey and lifted travel restrictions. As per the official Presidential website, he assured, in a phone call to the Turkish President, "to enter into negotiations with the relevant Turkish authorities to restore the mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation in trade, economic and other spheres."³⁵

With Brexit, the prospects of accession of Turkey in the EU have become even bleaker. First, because Europe's intrinsic misgivings about the identity of Turkey as a huge Muslim country has, in a way, been proved true with UK's departure. One of the most important reasons for the popular exit vote is believed to be because of a

widespread xenophobia within the European community,³⁶ echoes of which were also felt last year at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe in several EU countries, like Hungary, whose Prime Minister Viktor Orban ran a long anti-Muslim and anti-refugee campaign in opposition to Angela Merkel's plan for refugee resettlement in EU. Another reason is that the economic repercussions of Turkey's accession, which were already part of the problem of Turkey's bid for membership, have augmented with UK exiting. EU's economy has been seriously affected and cannot support a smaller economy, such as Turkey's, which will have less to offer in return. Thirdly, Turkey's size now has become an even more relevant problem to EU's reservations about Turkey's membership. Now that EU's size has decreased, in event of Turkey becoming part of EU, a bulk of the decision making power in many political spheres would shift in Turkey's favor owing to its population (74.93 million³⁷, second largest after Germany's 80.62 million in 2016³⁸).

Erdogan's realization of Ankara's estrangement from EU and Russia as well as other countries within the Middle East was most likely a key cause for the steps he undertook to make amends with Putin. Although his apology letter was not taken favorably by the Turkish public, it is a mark of remarkable statesmanship on Erdogan's part, which broke the seven-month long stalemate in their relations. In a bid to strengthen regional ties, on June 27, Turkey also reached a deal with Israel to end a six-year long dispute. The deal includes plans to build a pipeline to Turkey for the export of Israeli gas and Israel's agreement to pay \$20m to families of activists killed in a raid by Israeli commandos on a six ship flotilla, which killed 10 Turks in 2010. Turkey will also be allowed to provide aid to Palestinians in Gaza under the deal.³⁹ It is evident that, with these steps, Turkey is committed to pulling itself out of the isolation that it has been in since a long time now.

The Syrian Crisis has also resulted in the biggest refugee crisis since WWII, resulting in an exodus of people from the war-torn country. Turkey has by far been the recipient of the largest number of refugees, about 1.7 million by March 2015⁴⁰ and 2.5 million by April 2016, while its refugee camps have the capacity to house only about 200,000.⁴¹ This, coupled with the humanitarian aspect, is a huge incentive for Turkey to ensure a quick solution and conclusion to the crisis in Syria. Since it is obvious that Russia has the upper hand as far as this situation is concerned, it is clear that Turkey will have to relent its position regarding the Assad regime and adopt a more open approach to the crisis.

Conclusion

Syria has proved to be a tough test for Russia-Turkey relations, a matter wherein both leaders have perceived their stakes to be too high to relent and let go of their personal stances. What began as a promising bilateral relationship between Russia and Turkey following the Cold War turned rather sour in the months following Russia's involvement in Syria, a former close ally of Turkey. It damaged greatly Turkey's interests. But in June, Turkey made very swift, rather drastic moves for normalization with Russia. In addition to Erdogan's apology letter to Putin and the ensuing normalization process with Moscow as well as the promising deal with Israel, perceived by both Erdogan and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu to be mutually beneficial.⁴²

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Endnotes

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