

Analysis

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Summary: Perhaps the most profound strategic movement in Turkey's foreign policy has been engineered toward Russia. This paradigm shift has occurred relatively quietly, but in the end may prove to be among the most momentous. Russia and Turkey are post-imperial rivals who find themselves in a new era of linkages and transformation. Given the deep ambivalence and treatment felt by Russia and Turkey towards Europe and the West more broadly, recent warm relations between Ankara and Moscow have ensured a more multipolar and Eurasian world order. By minimizing its rivalry with Russia in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia, Turkey has neutralized its greatest threat while creating a historic opportunity. The antagonistic tones of Turkish-Russian relations in the past have been replaced by pragmatic dealings between the two countries.

Turkey and Russia Growing Closer Despite Cool History

by *Hasan Ali Karasar*

The tectonic plates of Turkey's strategic position are shifting, presenting Turkish policymakers with a variety of challenges and opportunities to advance Turkey's interests, consolidate its positions, or mitigate its weaknesses that did not exist even a few years ago. A newly restive Middle East is consuming Turkey's attention, punctuated by an aggressively defensive Syria on its southern border and a transforming Iraq on its eastern one. Europe, to which Turkey has aspired for decades, is fast receding of its own volition, fueling growing Turkish disinterest and strong resentments. Smaller proximate actors — Greece, Cyprus, the Balkans, the Caucasus — and more distant ones like Central Asia compete for attention, and for the most part are receiving it. But perhaps the most profound strategic movement in Turkey's foreign policy, and in many respects the most counter-intuitive, has been engineered toward Turkey's large northern neighbor, Russia. This paradigm shift has occurred relatively quietly, but in the end may prove to be among the most momentous.

The history of Russian-Turkish relations predate the modern republics by several centuries. As the two largest powers in the region, Russia and

Turkey are post-imperial rivals who find themselves in a new era of linkages and transformation. Given the deep ambivalence and treatment felt by Russia and Turkey towards Europe and the West more broadly, recent warm relations between Ankara and Moscow have ensured a more multipolar and Eurasian world order. Why this has happened, against a background that suggests it could not, requires a brief excursion into history.

From a historical perspective, the central question of Turkish-Russian relations is about the acquisition of power by all means on both sides. From 1568 until 1914, Ottomans and Russians fought 13 different wars, including WWI, at the end of which both the Russian and the Ottoman empires collapsed, although in two different ways. Within these 350 years of constant warfare, the Russians repeatedly defeated the Ottomans. During the 1877-1878 war, Russian armies even almost entered İstanbul, only stopping at Ayastefanos, what is now near İstanbul's international airport on the European side. That is why, by the beginning of the 20th century, there was a well-established negative image of the *Moskof* (Muscovite/Russian) in Turkish language as

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the ultimate enemy. During WWI, Turks stopped the British and the French at Gallipoli. As a result, ironically, the allies were not able to help the Tsar, who was overthrown by the German-supported revolutionaries within two years.

The Russian Revolutions of 1917 were followed by a bloody civil war, and the emergence of a modern Bolshevik state, the Soviet Union. The Turkish War of Liberation against the allied invasion of the Ottoman lands (1919-1922) culminated in the establishment of a sort of Turkish nation state in 1923. During this period, the two countries developed a special relationship. Bolsheviks were not only the best available allies to the Turkish nationalists during this time but also a source of technology and diplomatic support during the interwar period as well. The 1925 Friendship and Cooperation Treaty and its renewal in 1929 demonstrated the approval that both countries sought from each other, even in joining the League of Nations in 1930s. Things started to cool down after the 1936 Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of Turkish Straits gave Turkey sovereign rights over the Bosphorus Straits region, an arrangement that Stalin did not like. In addition, Turkey had concerns over fascist Italy's Balkan and Mediterranean ambitions. This was probably the moment Turkey started to turn toward the Atlantic world.

Although Turkey concluded pre-war treaties with Britain and France as early as 1939, all sides failed to honor their commitments and Turkey did not join the war against Germany and her allies. Turkey was not a neutral state, but not a belligerent one either until the last moment.

Following the war, frightened by the crude Russian treatment of their country in international conferences, Turks continued their pro-Western stand and desired to become a part of "the West." Between 1945 and 1947, Turks felt

terribly alone. Being threatened by Moscow and not accepted by the West made Turkish diplomats feel weak and fragile. The 1947 Truman Doctrine, stating that the United States would support Greece and Turkey with economic and military aid to prevent their falling into the Soviet sphere, was a relief, but not enough. But Turks were disappointed by the 1948 Marshall Plan because Turkey and Greece both were seen only as the supplier of raw-materials for Europe. This was a real blow to the Turkish Revolution and intelligentsia, which planned to develop Turkey into an industrial power.

NATO membership in 1952 provided a security umbrella but failed to provide any economic support. When economic difficulties started to appear toward the end of 1950s, the military responded with a coup in 1960. Turkey felt abandoned by Europe, so the country turned to the Soviets once more as a source of technology and industrialization, particularly after Khrushchev claimed that Stalin's overwhelming ambitions regarding Turkey forced that country to join to the Western camp.

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Construction of the İzmir Aliğa Refinery, the İskenderun steel works factory, and the Seydişehir aluminum works facility during the early 1970s were the major Soviet-supported projects that ensued. Turkey paid for these, essentially, with nuts and grapes. This took place while Turkey was considered a loyal NATO ally. However, especially after 1974 Cyprus War and the arms embargo that followed, Turkish diplomats started to believe that the West would favor the Greeks in all circumstances. This perception resulted in arms deals with the Soviets.

Turkish anti-communists remember those years with regret and fear. Because an important part of the Turkish



bureaucracy and intelligentsia was so left-leaning, they were nervous about the possibility of a Soviet-friendly take-over of the country. That was one reason for 1971 military intervention that “liquidated” the leftist factions in the armed forces. The military was then regarded as the main pillar of anti-communism throughout the 1970s. Still, when left- and right-wing activists killed each other in scores in the late 1970s, the armed forces waited to intervene.

This period ended with the September 1980 coup d'état, which was compared with the 1973 coup in Chile. Although it was much less bloody and aggressive than the Chilean coup, the 1980 coup caused great political trauma. The military was indifferent toward both the left and the right. Show trials, executions, and torture continued for at least three years, and intellectuals from the both ends of the spectrum were under great pressure, if not actually in jail. The Turkish public and bureaucracy became overwhelmingly anti-communist under the influence of Özalism and Reaganism-Thatcherism. Nonetheless the initiation of the first natural gas pipeline from the Soviet Union to Turkey took place during this time.

The Iranian Revolution and Afghan Jihad were the two important foreign events for Turkey in the 1980s. Turkey was the first destination of Iranians escaping the revolution, which provided a good opportunity for the former left-wing intelligentsia, then staunchly Kemalist, to point out to “the rising threat from the East.” On the other hand, the Afghan Mujahedeen who appeared in İstanbul or Ankara helped resurrect the *Moskof* image in the Turkish media during the 1980s, and the major threat perception once again shifted toward the Soviet Union. It is not surprising that many young people of this time became the famous Islamic activists and then the politicians of the 1990s.

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The 1991 disintegration of the Soviet Union opened up two new chapters in Turco-Russian relations. Turkey suddenly encountered five new independent “brotherly” Turkic states: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Additionally, a number of Autonomous Turkic Republics within the Russian Federation were all establishing contacts with Turkey, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, even far away Yakutia. Turkey initiated thousands of projects in these countries, all of which created serious concerns in Moscow, if not embarrassment.

Turkey and Russia have much to cooperate on.

In the first part of 1990s, four regional conflicts shaped Turkish policy: the Karabagh War (1988-1994), the Bosnian War (1992-1995), the Abkhazian War (1992-1993), and the First Chechen War (1994-1996). With the exception of the Abkhazian War, Turkey and Russia were on different sides of the conflicts, at least diplomatically.

The second half of the 1990s was a period of stalemate. A number of generous Russian arms technology-transfer offers, such as S-300 missiles and KA-52 attack helicopters made Turks rethink their stance. This is probably why Turks appeared to care so little about the Second Chechen War in 1999.

The 2000s, the decade of Putin, was a time of flourishing cooperation between the two states. The construction of the 1,200 km long Blue Stream natural gas pipeline made Turkey more than 60 percent dependent on Russia for energy by 2005. Competition in Central Asia was no longer on the agenda, and the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits now became a cooperation topic with Russia when Turkey resisted U.S. and NATO efforts to establish a presence in the Black Sea region. The 2008 Georgian-Russian conflict was the point when Russians really started to trust Turks since Turkey took a “neutral” attitude.

History teaches Turks that even during times of cooperation and close relations, Russians have difficulties engaging with Turks on a basis of mutual interest without any imperial and/or post-imperial preconceptions. Still, Turkey and Russia have much to cooperate on. Although Turkish



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foreign policy has always been seen as Western-oriented, that does not preclude other perspectives. Many Turks think the EU is a sinking ship. The Russian-led Eurasian Union with Kazakhstan and Belarus is an attractive option for Turks to study further, given the complementary natures of those countries' economies with Turkey. Turkey definitely does not want to become another Greece.

By minimizing its rivalry with Russia in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia, Turkey has neutralized its greatest threat while creating a historic opportunity. The antagonistic tones of Turkish-Russian relations in the past have been replaced by pragmatic dealings between the two countries. The post-Arab Spring environment that Prime Ministers (likely to soon to be presidents) Erdoğan and Putin have inherited forces the two leaders to focus on points of common strategic interest, while quietly negotiating on their existing points of contention. Therefore, unlike the recent struggles in Turkey's reorientation towards its immediate southeastern neighborhood, Ankara's future with its northwest remains far more optimistic. Yet ethnic ties, frozen conflicts, and secessionist movements all represent flashpoints for domestic politics that will continue to dictate a cautious embrace of Russia.

About the Author

Dr. Hasan Ali Karasar is the general secretary of the Bilkent Centre for Russian Studies. Previously, he has served as the chair of the Central Asian Studies department of the Ankara-based Centre for Eurasian Studies. He has also served as an observer for the OSCE election monitoring missions in the former Soviet republics regularly since 1996. Dr. Karasar has published articles in numerous journals including *Central Asian Survey*, *Europe Asia Studies*, and *Cornucopia*. Apart from his native language Turkish, Dr. Karasar speaks English and Russian along with Turkic dialects.

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