

Analysis

October 31, 2012

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Sailing in Uncharted Waters: Turkish and Russian Divergence in Syria

by Şaban Kardaş

The recent developments in the Middle East are arguably drawing a wedge between Turkey and Russia. Ankara's forced landing of a Syrian passenger airplane en route from Moscow to Damascus and publicizing of some Russian military equipment intercepted aboard the airplane, for many analysts, was the final blow in the already strained relationship. The question at this juncture is whether the recent troubles in the Middle East may be so destructive that they might eventually undermine the Turkish-Russian relationship at its core. The two countries are confronted with a novel challenge in their bilateral relationship, as they are so firmly positioned on opposite ends of the deepening civil war in Syria. How they handle this new challenge might mark a new turning point in the evolution of the relationship. Nonetheless, bilateral Turkish-Russian ties are unlikely to easily fall victim to recent events, despite the severity of their differences over Syria.

Turkish-Russian Multi-Dimensional Partnership

The transformation of the Turkish-Russian relationship in the post-Cold War era, especially under the rule of

the ruling Justice and Development Party in the last decade, has been an exemplary case. It has evolved away from its traditional pattern of enmity and confrontation and has instead been characterized by cooperative dynamics and mutual expression of friendship by respective state leaders. The most remarkable dimension of the burgeoning bilateral ties was in the realm of economics, as Russia emerged as a top trade partner for Turkey. Of the US\$30 billion bilateral trade volume, \$24 billion is accounted for by Turkey's energy imports from Russia, which continues to be a headache given Turkey's current account deficit problems. The Russian market has been, however, a major destination for Turkish exports, investments, and construction projects, and Turkey is a frequent destination for Russian tourists, all of which generate significant revenue and partly correct the imbalances created by the unhealthy trade pattern.

The deepening economic interactions had a pacifying effect on strategic rivalry. Defying the prophecies of conflict from the early post-Cold War era, Turkey and Russia also have managed to avoid confrontation over

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contentious geopolitical issues in the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Central Asia. The apparent convergence of their positions on some neighborhood issues and Turkey's occasional difference, if not outright divergence, from the U.S./Western position on issues involving Russia, did ring alarm bells during the Bush administration. Cases in point included Turkey's reserved position in the early phases of the U.S. missile shield project, U.S. efforts to gain a NATO foothold in the Black Sea, the South Stream pipeline project, or the Russian-Georgian war of 2008. Ankara worked to develop mechanisms to jointly address neighborhood security issues, such as attempts to develop naval cooperation with Moscow in the Black Sea and a proposal for a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform in the wake of the 2008 war. However, partly as a result of Turkey's frustration with Russia's lack of support for Turkey's ill-fated normalization efforts with Armenia and the failure of energy cooperation to produce concrete results, Ankara had already begun rethinking its relationship with Moscow.

Granted, the parameters of the multidimensional Turkish-Russian relationship, laid out over the past two decades, were clearly in place as the Arab Spring started. Close economic exchanges that centered on energy cooperation formed the backbone of the partnership, and enhanced political dialogue facilitated by the chemistry between the countries' leaders ensured trust and credible commitments. Since the nations were mutually dependent in complex ways, neither would risk alienating the other. The initiation of the Turkey-Russia High Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2010 was an expression of their determination to maintain political dialogue. A remarkable feature of the relationship, though, was that it was one of convenience in the shared neighborhoods, and had little if any direct extensions in other regions.

Middle Eastern Challenges to the Bilateral Relationship

The most apparent case of divergence has been Turkey and Russia's opposing alignments in the Syrian conflict. While Turkey has been at the forefront of the countries supporting the political and military opposition, Russia, with its diplomatic backing and supply of military equipment, has been the most important actor to shelter the Syrian regime internationally. Turkey declared its objective to accelerate the fall of the regime, both through backing the opposition

and efforts to undercut the regime's external assistance. Initially, Turkey tried to reach out to Russia and Iran, hoping that it could capitalize on the collegial ties fostered with these two powers in the past decade, to convince them to drop their support. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's visits to Tehran and Moscow in January 2012 were significant efforts in that direction, but they were of no avail and exposed the limits of Turkey's power. As the regime of Bashar al-Assad continued to enjoy unwavering Iranian and Russian support, Turkey increasingly coordinated its Syria policy with the West and Gulf countries, and also adopted a progressively more critical tone toward Tehran and Moscow.

Russia's two vetoes against the UN Security Council resolutions targeting the Assad regime invited Turkey's ire. Ankara described them as irresponsible acts incompatible with the responsibilities expected from a permanent member of the Security Council. Later, echoing the growing criticism of Russian policy by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a Friends of Syria meeting in Paris in July 2012, Davutoğlu also maintained that the backers of the regime needed to be isolated, while the regime was being brought under pressure. In response to reactions from the opposition parties that such statements would draw Turkey toward a major confrontation with Russia, the foreign ministry issued a statement clarifying that Davutoğlu did not name any specific country. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Moscow later that month, however, did little to change Russian policy on Syria.

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In early October, Erdoğan maintained that as soon as Assad lost his supporters, he would fall. In mid-October, as part of his broader criticism of the international inaction on the Syria crisis, Erdoğan criticized the vetoes exercised by the permanent members of the Security Council. Davutoğlu had also developed a similar line of criticism against the international order, questioning the very foundations from which Russia derives its clout, namely the permanent membership. By that time, Turkey's stakes in Syria had increased dramatically, and it undertook retaliatory shelling of Syrian positions in response to the killing of its citizens by Syrian mortar fire. The government received an authorization from parliament to dispatch troops to Syria if needed.

The forced landing of the Syrian airplane added credence to the argument that a Turkish-Russian rift over Syria was underway. Many took Turkey's publicity of the event, including Erdoğan's press briefing about the cargo and Russia's involvement in it, as strong signals that Turkey might eventually confront Russia for its support to the regime. Initially, strong reactions from Russia and the announcement of Russian President Vladimir Putin's postponement of his trip to Turkey slated for mid-October further raised questions about the direction of the bilateral relationship.

Interestingly, Russia also increasingly factored in the ongoing tensions in Turkey's bilateral ties with other Middle Eastern neighbors, namely Iran and to a lesser extent Iraq into its foreign policy calculus. The unfolding Turkish-Iranian row, since Turkey gave its approval to the basing of U.S. early warning radar systems as part of NATO's missile defense project in the fall of 2010, was paralleled by Russian officials' criticism of Turkey's decision. Similarly, Russia appears bent on improving ties with Iraq, as the recent multi-billion-dollar arms deal signed in Moscow between Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and his Russian counterpart Dimitri Medvedev, and their willingness to deepen energy cooperation attest. When this is taken together with the recent rift between Ankara and Baghdad and Iraq's vocal criticism of Ankara's "violation of Iraqi sovereignty," the affects of the insertion of Russia on Turkey's regional role remains to be seen.

Turkey, obviously, made deliberate choices as it formulated these controversial policies toward its neighbors. However, these cases together form a pattern, showing that Turkey's relationships with its neighbors are increasingly deteriorating. Seen in that light, the alleged Russian-Turkish rift further deepens Turkey's isolation from its neighbors, as its policies are seen in alignment with those of the United States. It is this reshuffling of positions that also fuels the current debates on Turkish foreign policy, including the famous debate on whether Turkey abandoned its "zero problems with neighbors" policy.

Where will the Turkish-Russian Relationship Go from Here?

In the case of Syria, a divergence of policy is real: as Russia continuously calls for negotiations with Assad and criticizes the Western powers and Turkey for one-sidedly supporting the opposition, Turkey seems adamant to facilitate a solution without Assad. The forced landing of the Syrian jet and interception of its cargo clearly indicated Turkey's determination to continue its policy of undercutting the international support for the Syrian regime. Though Turkey lacks the wherewithal to directly confront Russia over its Syria policy — a task better suited for the United States — this dispute underscores that it will not turn a blind eye to Russia's ongoing backing of the Assad regime, and will do what it can to limit Russian involvement in the conflict.

Despite their obvious differences in the Middle East, however, there is reason to expect that fallout from the Syrian conflict is hardly a game changer to the overall relationship. First, Turkish-Russian economic cooperation is strong and is unlikely to be altered by the Syrian crisis. Short of Turkey drastically restructuring its energy

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mix and supply options, energy ties will continue to bind the two nations. Second, it is important to recall that the Turkish-Russian relationship evolved mainly in the shared neighborhood. Given the presence of many other potential flashpoints in the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Central Asia, Turkey will hardly want to import out of area troubles into the bilateral relationship.

Certainly the Syrian conflict will remain a difficult learning experience for Turkey and Russia. Even so, the policy differences will hardly lead to direct confrontation. Both sides have called for common sense to prevail, and Russian officials have also downplayed the tensions. For his part, Erdoğan has so far been adept at managing such crises. After investing so much in this relationship, Erdoğan is unlikely to let Turkish-Russian tensions escalate into a bilateral crisis. Moreover, despite their seemingly dug-in positions, they might yet need each other for a less than desirable but still acceptable final settlement in Syria. Russia is seen as a key actor in finding a negotiated settlement to the Syrian crisis, as it exerts influence over the regime. If the costs generated by a delay in regime change become intolerable, Turkey may eventually need to coordinate its policies with Russia. Ankara will work to decouple Syria from the overall relationship.

The critical test will be Putin's visit to Turkey, reportedly rescheduled for early December. Even if it eventually takes place, however, it is far from clear what concrete items will be on the leaders' agenda. On economic relations and energy issues, the two sides have already reached the limits of cooperation through mutual compromises. If both fail to come up with new incentives to end the current stalemate in Syria by then, the visit could be no more than a face-saving effort, with which neither side will be content.

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