



The Long View on Turkish-Russian Rivalry and Cooperation

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The sudden growth in Turkish-Russian relations in recent years has baffled many observers, who have struggled to explain this change. One has to consider the long history of competition between the two countries to understand their current relationship and its limitations. Rivalry mixed with hostility has defined their relations since the 17th century, and this still informs their current views of each other with historical stereotypes.

Turkey and Russia also have similarities in their dealings with the wider world. Since its emergence, the Russian state has swung between an east-west pendulum and moved in a north-to-south trajectory, which brought it into conflict with peoples standing in their way. The inability to overcome Ottoman Turkey on the north-south axis contributed to Russia's periodic swings between Europeanism and Eurasianism. Boris Yeltsin's Europeanism and then Vladimir Putin's version of Eurasianism mixed with Russian nationalism are the latest incarnation of that phenomenon.

In Turkey, the late Ottoman debate between the "eastern ideal" and the "western ideal," and its incarnation during the republican era between the Westernization of the elite and the eastern character of the wider population represent a similar oscillation. The uncertainty between Europe and Eurasia in the early 1990s, the Europeanization of the late 1990s as EU membership looked within reach, and the easternization of society and politics when this hope was disappointed are recent manifestations of this debate. As in Russia, Eurasianism mixed with nationalism has also been present in Turkey, usually behind the scenes though sometimes also leading the political discourse.

For Ottoman and then republican Turkey, Russia's Czarist and later Soviet moves toward the south were seen as "existential" threats, inevitably connected to territorial contraction. Thus, though punctuated by periods of cooperation (in the 1920s, 1930s, and late 1960s), Turkey and the Soviet Union remained adversaries for most of the 20th century, having defined their relationship within the context of the superpower rivalry in the aftermath of the Second World War. When the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the Cold War, Turkey found relief in the fact that it no longer shared a land border with its troubling neighbor. This short-lived respite came to an end with the emergence of a "circle of conflict" around Turkey and the inten-

sifying competition with Russia for regional dominance in Eurasia—the former Soviet hinterland that had been closed to the outside world for centuries—for most of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Rules of Engagement in the Post-Cold War Era

During the Cold War, Turkey was aligned with the United States' containment policy toward the Soviet Union. As the Cold War international system was swept away at the end of the 1980s, a period of intense competition—dubbed the second “great game”—emerged in Eurasia. As the world's attention turned to the region and Turkey leaped into this competition with enthusiasm, Russia gradually realized that a geopolitical reorientation of the newly independent states there would undermine its great-power status, and that disengagement from the region was not acceptable. While Western interest focused on Eurasia's natural resources, Turkey became an important conduit for the West and was seen as an important actor because of its presumed historical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic bonds with the region's people.

Seeing this as a “historical opportunity,” Turkey launched policy initiatives to expand its political, economic, and cultural connections to Eurasia. While overblown expectations were soon tamed by reality, its moves induced Russia to question whether Turkey was aiming for a pan-Turkic union. While Moscow initially welcomed Turkish influence in the region as a counterweight to Iranian-dominated pan-Islamism, this changed rapidly as the country was perceived as supplanting Russia.

The conflict in Chechnya particularly became a sore point, with Russia claiming that the Chechens were obtaining assistance from Turkey and in response extending support to Turkey's separatist Kurdish group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Russia's increasing attention to its “near abroad” brought the two countries head to head in the South Caucasus. For Turkey, the independence of the countries there was a strategic priority as this eliminated a land border with Russia. Moscow increased pressure on these countries to regain its regional status, which Turkey unavoidably opposed. The West, and the United States in particular, supported Turkey at this time against Russia.

Turkey and Russia managed to get their energy outlets from the Caspian Basin, lessening their rivalry by the early 2000s. At the same time, the increased U.S. attention to the region following the 9/11 attacks prompted them to reassess their policies. While Russia reacted violently to the U.S. presence in the South Caucasus when an opportunity arose in 2008 by invading Georgia, Turkey was sidelined by the overwhelming presence of its ally. The expansion of the EU had also reached the shores of the Black Sea by this time with the membership of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Some Europeans even started to refer to the South Caucasus as the new southeastern Europe, annoying Turkey as much as Russia, since EU policy in the region did not always align but compete with Turkey's on many occasions.

This “overcrowding” of the region led to a realization in Turkey that the benefits of cooperation with Russia might be greater than the advantages derived from competition. The arrival of the West in the Black Sea and the Caucasus in terms of EU expansion and U.S. military advisors encouraged Turkey to move closer to Russia. The logic for Turkey's position was that an increased Western presence would unsettle the equilibrium that had emerged in the region. While Turkey preferred containing Russia by drawing it into multilateral regional frameworks, with an emphasis on economic and technical cooperation, Western expansion brought security issues and military perspectives into play.

Compartmentalization in the Black Sea

While Turkish-Russian economic relations had been bolstered by the late 2000s with energy, construction, and tourism as their backbone, what underpinned the expanding cooperation was the common understanding of the benefits derived from compartmentalization. The decision to separate economic issues from political ones, including security concerns, was evident in the two countries' cooperation through the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization. Their similar positions against the presence of non-littoral countries in the Black Sea reflected compatible understandings, helping to create a condominium in the region with an equilibrium between the two biggest navies on the Black Sea.

From the Turkish perspective, the delicate balance that emerged at the end of the Cold War was precious and needed to be protected as it enabled the two countries to cooperate on non-political issues, pulling Russia into multilateral frameworks instead of bilateral dealings where it inevitably had an advantage. Turkey wished to avoid alienating Russia and making it feel cornered by the presence of extra-regional powers. Its most utilized way to do this was strict adherence to the Montreux Convention of 1936, which had stabilized the Black Sea after centuries of international confrontation.

This meant that at times Turkey diverged from other NATO members. The acrimony between Turkey and its Western allies and regional partners became so intense, especially after 9/11, that it was accused of being one of the obstacles to democratization of the region—the other being presumably Russia.

When Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, Turkey condemned this mildly as the geopolitical landscape had changed in the previous decade and its rivalry with Russia over energy resources had come to an end. While the West was struggling to respond to the crisis, Turkey seemed to distance itself from its allies when it asserted the primacy of the Montreux Convention. Under similar circumstances, Turkey's response was again cautious when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, though its displeasure was more evident. While it has not recognized the annexation, Turkey chooses occasions to raise its objections in accordance with the ups and downs of its relations with Russia.

Turkey was also experiencing problems in its EU membership bid at this time and a disconnect in its relations with the West in general. Thus, Turkey and Russia seemed to be creating an "axis of the excluded" on the periphery of Europe. However, since the annexation of Crimea, Russia went beyond most expectations in restoring its Black Sea Fleet and the fortification of Crimea. From a strategic point of view, Russian advances in and militarization of the Black Sea disturb Turkey as, after the annexation of Crimea, the two countries have almost the same sea-border as during the Cold War, and the Russian navy has surpassed the Turkish navy in its power projection.

As Russia has become a revisionist power in the Black Sea, Turkey is yet to develop an appropriate response to the changing geopolitical equation. While an imperfect balance emerged in the Caucasus after 2008, the new lines drawn as a result of the annexation of Crimea required a reassessment of its position at a time when its focus was shifting to the Levant.

Russia in Warm Waters

The Ottoman empire prevented Russia from reaching the warm waters of the Mediterranean after Peter the Great defined this as his strategic ambition. One of the important battles of the First World War was fought over the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits to establish a sea connection between Russia and its allies. Soviet demands at the end of the Second World War for the joint control of the straits was one of the reasons for Turkey deciding to join the emerging Western alliance system.

Moscow's connections to the Mediterranean and the Levant during the Cold War remained sporadic and contracted after the end of the Cold War. The war in Syria, however, provided an opportunity for Russia to return to the region and has substantially affected its relations with Turkey. The developments leading to Russia's hegemonic presence started in the Black Sea with the annexation of Crimea, but it now controls several anti access/area-denial zones around Turkey, including the eastern Mediterranean.

Russia also established a permanent Mediterranean naval task force in 2012, which has expanded with additional ships from its Black Sea Fleet, conducted various exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean, and given support to Russian operations in Syria. The fact that the Black Sea Fleet has been playing a key role in logistical support for Russia's presence in Syria clearly links both regions into a unique geopolitical structure.

With the port of Tartus in Syria upgraded to a maritime base and as it acquired a permanent airbase in Khmeimim, Russia is for the first time able to deploy permanent forces on three sides of Turkey—in the north, northeast, and the south. The differences of opinion between the two countries regarding the presence of Russian forces in Syria were clearly reflected in the downing of a Russian plane by the Turkish Air Force in 2015 and was still visible earlier this year when they came close to direct conflict over Russia's support for Syrian regime forces in Idlib.

Yet, Turkey's annoyance with U.S. policies in Syria vis-à-vis the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD) still conditions it to close cooperation with Russia. Focusing exclusively on the emergence of the Kurds as players in Syria, it has yet to consider the possible long-term effects of Russian presence in the region. While Russia appears a useful counterweight to the United States east of the Euphrates river and allows Turkey to claim a greater place in the Syrian debate, it is not certain whether their cooperation would survive if Turkey and the United States could patch up their differences over the future of Syria and of the Kurds in general.

Competitive Cooperation

After centuries of confrontation, Turkey and Russia have managed to develop a closer relationship since the end of the Cold War. The peculiar model for the relationship has been driven by mutual economic benefits and the emergence of a political interdependence, however asymmetric. The expanded geography of their interaction has not eliminated competition though they have stepped away from their historical antagonism. The two countries seem to manage well their single-issue cooperation in Syria, with occasional strains, keeping it separate from other problematic aspects of the relationship.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, both countries value their connections with the West. While their estrangement from the West drive them to each other, their relationship would be tested if one of them substantially were to improve its relations with the West. Nevertheless, for the first time in a long time, they see each

other from a positive perspective. What is not certain is whether the relationship could withstand another sustained crisis like the aftermath of the 2015 downing of the Russian fighter plane.

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