G | M | F The German Marshall Fund of the United States
STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

On Turkey

2019 | No. 9

# Turkey's S400 vs. F35 Conundrum and its Deepening Strategic Partnership with Russia

*By Şaban Kardaş*

The discussion surrounding Turkey's impending choice with regard to the purchase of different weapons systems—namely the Russian S-400 air defense system and the U.S. F-35 Joint Strike Fighter—is strongly framed in terms of the recent warm relationship between it and Russia as a result of their marriage of convenience in Syria. However, the unfolding strategic convergence between the two countries predates the unique issues raised by the immediate context of the Syrian crisis.

The transformation of the relationship between Turkey and Russia in the post-Cold War era has been a remarkable development against the background of their historical enmity and strategic rivalry. A multidimensional partnership was already taking shape before the Justice and Development (AK) Party came to power in 2002. By then, the two countries had already moved past their bitter strategic rivalry in the Caucasus and Central Asia and reached a cohabitation. Economic rationality also started to kick in. The Blue Stream natural-gas pipeline was already constructed on the seabed of the Black Sea, gradually forging Turkey's structural energy dependence on Russia, while a complex economic interdependence was underway owing to trade, construction, and tourism ties among others. Pro-Russian business and interest groups had also become a factor in Turkish foreign policy, which, for instance, later played a crucial role in the resolution of the "fighter jet crisis" in 2015–2016.

Nonetheless, the new foreign policy line under the AK Party has been the main driver of the deepening of the partnership with Russia and extending it into strategic realm. To the extent that this flourishing partnership diverged from the agenda of Turkey's Western allies in the region, the new course of its relationship with Russia was thrust into the spotlight.

The initial years of the AK Party's rule coincided with President Vladimir Putin's consolidation of his domestic power and revamping of Russia's international standing. Both sides had ambitions to redefine their positioning within the U.S.-led liberal order. There was also a conducive international strategic environment to move forward with a multidimensional partnership. The post-Iraq war divisions in international politics had positive repercussions for the Turkish-Russian relationship, as both countries were opposed to the invasion. When the Black Sea region became a focal point in the new era of confrontation between Russia and the West with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to NATO in 2004, Turkey expressed reservations about further extension

> *"The transformation of the relationship between Turkey and Russia in the post-Cold War era has been a remarkable development against the background of their historical enmity and strategic rivalry.*

of the alliance's naval presence there. Moreover, it initiated regional cooperation projects with littoral states involving Russia, such as Operation Black Sea Harmony, intended to address maritime security challenges. The dissonance with the U.S. agenda was often defined as Ankara's search for an "axis of the excluded" or a "condominium" with Moscow in their shared neighborhood at the expense of transatlantic interests.

Essentially, Western criticism in this regard mirrored a parallel debate on "Middle Easternization of Turkey's foreign policy," which suggested that the country was shifting away from the transatlantic axis. Though some Eurasianist circles in Turkey called for an alliance with Russia, the AK Party government maintained the same Western disposition of its predecessors. For the most part, the relationship with Russia was not construed as an alternative to Euro-Atlantic commitments. The rapid pace of the improvement in relations was rather the result of a quest for strategic autonomy, which prioritized a multi-vector policy in an effort to reposition Turkey in the new regional and international geopolitical environment.

## Living with a Resurgent Russia

The revisionist turn in Russian foreign policy, whose start is symbolically attributed to Putin's speech at the Munich Security Forum in 2007, elevated the bilateral relationship to a new level. The new Russian assertiveness, starting with the 2008 war in Georgia and leading up to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine, altered the geopolitical calculations in Eastern Europe and Black Sea region. Russia also made inroads to the Middle East and Mediterranean, capitalizing on the collapse of the regional order in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011. All the while, it pursued a very aggressive energy policy to scuttle projects aiming to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian imports.

Those Russian actions, which arguably were "bringing geopolitics back" or "reviving the Cold War" in Europe, tested Turkish-Western ties to the extent that Ankara was forced to take sides. More importantly, Russia's assertiveness presented a direct challenge for Turkey's foreign and security policy: how to respond to direct encroachments on its vital strategic interests and partnerships? Far from balancing Russia, Ankara sought to accommodate itself to the new reality, at times pursuing acquiescent policies, if not appeasing Moscow. For instance, Turkey could not mount a strong reaction to the invasion of Georgia, a country that in many ways was the lynchpin of its policy in the Caucasus, and it adjusted to the radically altered strategic balance. Likewise, after having invested heavily in the Nabucco pipeline project that was expected to reduce Turkish and European dependence on Russian gas, Ankara watched it dying, as its initiatives to realize it were to no avail. Eventually Turkey joined Gazprom's rival project, Turkish Stream.

> *"Deepening of multidimensional partnership in all fields with an expansionist Russia while maintaining ties to the West was not an easy task.*

Proceeding with the deepening of the multidimensional partnership in all fields with an expansionist Russia while maintaining ties to the West was not an easy task. Turkey had to develop coping mechanisms to address the contradictions generated by this triangular situation. One was the compartmentalization of relations with Russia, which eased the management of tensions. More often than not the two countries agreed to disagree, focusing on areas of convergence and allowing, yet also containing, divergence in other issue areas. To the

extent that this compartmentalization allowed for a differentiated relationship with degrees of divergence with Russia, Turkey also was able to defuse criticism from the West.

The second mechanism was manipulating the cracks in the transatlantic alliance, which helped overcome pressure from the West. Since the alliance lacked unity as to how to deal with Russia, Turkey capitalized on such intra-alliance divergence to justify its Russia policy. To the extent these two mechanisms worked, Ankara managed to prevent the partnership with Russia from escalating into a major point of contention in its dealings with the United States.

## From Multidimensional Partnership to Strategic Coordination

The Syrian crisis has proven to be a real stress test for Turkey's relationship with Russia, and perhaps helped crystalize a third coping mechanism—strategic coordination—that also ushered a new phase. Despite their diametrically opposed political objectives, tactical positioning, and local partners in the crisis, Turkey and Russia initially managed to set aside differences there while their multidimensional partnership continued unabated elsewhere. The downing of a Russian fighter jet in 2015 and the following tensions between the two countries served as something of a wakeup call, however, as it alerted them to the grave risk of all-out escalation if compartmentalization were to fail.

The lesson drawn from Syria was simple: if the multidimensional partnership between Turkey and Russia was to survive in sensitive shared neighborhoods, it would have to be upgraded and have a solid strategic basis. This realization led to the deepening and further institutionalization of strategic coordination between the countries, as in the case of bilateral summits and the Astana process for solving the Syria conflict.

Not many relationships would have endured such a hard stress test as the fighter jet crisis. A mutual appreciation of the strategic imperative to coordinate enabled the two countries to move beyond it. Turkey's suspicions about U.S. intentions in Syria and beyond in the region, and the new threat perceptions of the political elite following the failed coup attempt of 2016 were also major factors driving normalization with Russia after the crisis.

## Toward Tactical or Long-term "Strategic Cooperation"?

The Turkish-Russian multidimensional partnership has not only gained an undeniable strategic character, it may also be taken to new heights. The apparently unending cycle of crises with the United States, over matters ranging from Syria to military procurement, could further transform the nature of the ongoing Turkish-Russian strategic dialogue. As has been argued forcefully by many seasoned observers, countering the perceived threat from the United States—given its aggressive posturing—has emerged as Turkey's chief strategic priority.

The Trump administration's wish to form or support new groupings in the region, which took a new turn with plans for an "Arab NATO" of sorts or the recent introduction of Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019 in the U.S. Senate, injected the concept of "double containment" in the lexicon of Turkey's strategic community. As the country feels it is gradually being subjected to a new U.S. double containment policy alongside Iran, or that it is being cornered as part of an "axis of the sanctioned," it will have to develop new coping mechanisms to manage those new pressures. The most likely scenario is for Turkey to further upgrade its partnership with Russia into a strategic cooperation whose main rationale will be to serve to balance against the United States.

Several factors on the Turkish side point to the durability of the current pattern. First, the strategic coupling with Russia has been undergirded by a favorable societal context. Skepticism toward the West has been a major feature of the powerful nationalist

currents in Turkish society, while the base of the AK party and Nationalist Action Party deeply harbor such feelings.

Second, the relationship has become institutionalized. The High Level Cooperation Council, established in 2010, and its subordinate mechanisms, including the Joint Strategic Planning Group (an economic committee and civic forum), complement summit diplomacy between the countries' leaders.

Third, concordance between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Putin has been the engine of the new strategic ties. A complex set of factors ranging from vested interests to similarities in leadership traits and strategic culture have enabled the deepening of the relationship. At the very least, they enable the two leaders to make credible commitments at their summits or through backchannel diplomacy.

Fourth, geoeconomic factors also complement the strategic coupling. Despite the asymmetrical nature of interdependence that is to Russia's advantage, the countries' relative economic complementarity, trade, foreign investments or energy interdependence embed Turkey deeper into the relationship.

Fifth, the prevailing security thinking in Turkey prioritizes a regionally oriented understanding of international relations, while placing a high value on the quest for strategic autonomy and struggle for survival. While this dynamic has worked to nurture a strategic decoupling with the United States, it has had a reverse effect on ties with Russia. Even if Ankara and Moscow harbor diverging views on specific regional issues, their overall foreign policy orientation, grounded in their skepticism toward the U.S.-led international order and their concern for upholding their priorities vis-a-vis the United States, has enabled them to find common ground for cooperation. This has been most clearly observed in the Black Sea region, where Turkey continues to object to any U.S. moves that may undermine the delicate balance centered around the Montreux Convention, even after Russia's annexation of Crimea dramatically altered the strategic setting there.

Last but not the least, Turkey's reading of Russian revisionism differs from that of its transatlantic partners, and especially East European ones. It views Russia's assertive moves as a strategic challenge rather than an existential threat. And it views Russia as constrained in terms of power capacity, and in many cases in need of accommodation with Turkey to reach its objectives. As naïve as it may sound to many in the transatlantic community, this benign reading of Russia in some of Turkey's political circles has served as the lubricant of the recent strategic coupling between the two countries. It is likely to last too, especially considering the Russian information and influence operations in Turkey.

## Implications for the Turkish-U.S. Alliance

What Turkey has been building with Russia is well beyond tactical maneuvering or angling for a better deal with the United States. Ankara and Moscow have forged a multidimensional partnership with an ever-thickening strategic component. The current S400 vs. F35 conundrum is a result of this strategic background. Resolving it will take more than tactical maneuvering on Turkey's part and will require all parties to make hard strategic choices, with long-term implications for Turkish-U.S. relations.

Through its acts of omission and commission, the United States has helped Turkish-Russian relationship reach its current state. It has to realize

this as well as to acknowledge that it now must deal with a new Turkey. While the old model of the Turkish-U.S. strategic partnership hardly provides the conceptual foundations to manage the relationship now, the current course of U.S. policy toward Turkey has not been helpful either. Steps that build up the impression of the United States as the ultimate source of threat to Turkey's vital interests are paving the way for strategic decoupling.

For its part, the new Turkey will have to recognize it cannot have it both ways, though. The continuation of the current trajectory of strategic cooperation with Russia will inevitably test its existing alliance relationships. This may involve having to forego some of the privileges that came with the membership to the "old club" of the transatlantic alliance. More significantly, perhaps, Turkey will have to live with the realization that achieving its holy grail of strategic autonomy and the rejection of an asymmetrical partnership with the United States does not come free. As it moves away from the United States and is drawn closer to Russia's orbit, laws of gravity rather than astronomy may prevail. Russia is now a force that has to be factored into most if not all vital issues on Turkey's regional and international agenda. It is far from certain that its realignment will expand Turkey's strategic autonomy, given that this has already placed the country's fate in the hands of Russia on many critical files, including the resolution of the S400 versus F35 conundrum. Short of Russia agreeing to alter the terms of S400 deal with Turkey, it will be hard for the latter to bridge its current differences with the United States.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

### About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, nonprofit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
http://www.gmfus.org/