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The Russian-Turkish “Co-opetition” in Times of Regional Crisis

Abstract

Modern Russian-Turkish relations have been characterized as one of the most complex relations in our region. Both countries have sought to maximize their interests in the region either through cooperation or competition. The complexity of this relationship can be described by the term “co-opetition”, usually used in international trade.

Through three case studies from Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh we will explain in this analysis how and where “co-opetition” succeeded and where it failed. We will also show how countries have successfully compartmentalized their trade relations from geopolitical clashes. One of the crucial components in this relation is the energy security factor, where Turkey is seeking to diversify its energy import markets and transfer this dependency, while Moscow favors an asymmetric relation over a codependent relation where it would have the upper hand and turn Turkey dependent on Russia’s energy sector. However, the more Turkey is seeking to diversify its energy resources and become an autonomous player in the MENAC (Middle East, North Africa, and Caucasus) region, the further it will try to expand to Russia’s backyard.

In this analysis, we will assess this cooperative rivalry, highlight its future constraints, and analyze how “co-opetition” between Russia and Turkey is shaping the geopolitical developments in our region. This analysis is also useful to understand the dynamics in the bilateral ties between both countries and their limitations when it comes to defining their position towards the crisis of Ukraine.

Introduction

“Co-opetition” is a term coined by Adam M. Brandenburger and Barry Nalebuff in 1996 to describe a paradoxical strategy of cooperation among competitors, enabling them to collectively achieve mutual gains. The term is used in business strategy that deploys insights gained from game theory to understand when competitors should work together. It is a relatively new term in international relations and is used occasionally in international trade.¹ Nevertheless, we will use this term to explain the current nature of Russian-Turkish relations in the MENAC region.

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In foreign policymaking and geopolitical self-perception, Russia and Turkey resemble each other in many ways. Throughout the course of events in MENAC, and as the West failed to engage with regional developments to resolve conflicts, other regional states such as Iran, Turkey, and Russia filled the political vacuum. Hence, the Turkish-Russian interaction in the region has been partially facilitated by the military and political withdrawal of the US and the European Union’s absence from the region.²

Interestingly, both Turkey and Russia started redefining their regional and international objectives almost at the same time. From Libya to Syria, from Nagorno-Karabakh and beyond, Turkey is pursuing a proactive interventionist foreign policy. While Russia is trying to consolidate its presence in the area and pushing for the creation of new Eurasian security and economic architecture alongside China and Iran. Turkey’s rapprochement with Russia has tended to coincide with Ankara’s tense relations with the West; in this sense, Russia and Turkey are forming an “axis of the excluded”- a kind of tactical cooperation to reshape the Western rule-based global order.³

However, given the weakness of the institutional agency and the highly personalized decision-making processes in Moscow and Ankara, it is questionable whether this partnership is strategic, or a temporary tactical rapprochement largely underpinned by the personal ambitious interests of both leaders, who have a track record in keeping this relationship manageable against many crises and challenges. Nevertheless, the lack of institutionalization still represents a weak spot for the bilateral relations, especially in times of crisis, as was experienced during

¹ Yeghia Tashjian, “The Russian-Turkish “Co-opetition” in Eurasia and Beyond”, *Armenian Weekly*, November 21, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/11/23/the-russian-turkish-co-opetition-in-eurasia-and-beyond/>, last accessed 25/12/2021.

² “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of a U.S. Pullout From Syria”, *Stratfor*, April 4, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/trump-syria-united-states-withdrawal-soon-turkey-russia-iran>, last accessed 25/12/2021.

³ Daria Isachenko, “Turkey and Russia: The Logic of Conflictual Cooperation”, *German Institute for International Studies*, October 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2021RP07_TurkeyAndRussia.pdf, last accessed 25/12/2021.

the downing of the Russian jet near the Turkish border with Syria in 2015.⁴ A major issue in this relationship is the thin line between the asymmetric and hierarchical nature of this interaction where for now, Ankara is geopolitically and economically (energy security and trade) dependent on Moscow.

Domestically, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan tend to consolidate power and decision-making. Foreign policymaking in both countries is a highly personalized and centralized affair. Both leaders make anti-Western nationalist rhetoric as part of their domestic consumption campaign. Moreover, both countries are seeking greater autonomy from the US dominant world order and are seeking a privileged role in their post-imperial space. Such ambitions motivate both leaders to portray themselves as bridges connecting Europe with Asia and rising powers that use civilizational discourse to buttress their claims to great power status.⁵ Interestingly, both countries use their history and religion to legitimize their foreign policy actions. However, both leaders—despite often employing idealist (ideology-oriented such as Pan-Turkish/Neo-Ottomanist or Pan-Slavist/Eurasianist) claims to achieve their goals—are practical realists who believe in the balance of power as an organizing element of international relations.

According to Dr. Igor Matveev, Senior Researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies, the Russian Academy of Sciences, after the 2016 unsuccessful coup d'état in Turkey, President Erdogan, regardless of harsh public rhetoric, “has been showing readiness for more systematic and less ideological foreign policy (i.e. a local version of *Realpolitik*)”. According to the scholar, “in practical terms, it means that Turkey will stick to a multi-vector policy not closing doors for cooperation neither with the West nor with Russia in short- and middle-term perspectives”.⁶ Both leaders have been successful in deploying “power politics” and understanding the balance of power of the regional system.

"The Russian war in Ukraine will be a crucial test to see the limits of the Russian-Turkish relations"

For now, Russia and Turkey view one another as indispensable partners in managing conflicts in a fragile region.⁷ They are able to maximize shared interests while keeping conflicts in check. Despite the mutually beneficial nature of this relation, the future may bring disruptive change as any change of leadership in either country would bring a high degree of uncertainty into the bilateral relations. The Russian war in Ukraine will be a crucial test to see the limits of the Russian-Turkish relations. Where Turkey has to make difficult choices in balancing its interests between its NATO allies and its neighbor, Russia. To highlight this cooperative

⁴ Implications of Downed Russian Jet on Turkey-Russia Relations, *Al Jazeera*, December 2, 2015, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/positionpapers/2015/12/201512211923765212.html>, last accessed 28/12/2021.

⁵ Stanislav Secrieru, Sinikukka Saari and Dimitar Bechev, “Fire and Ice; The Russian-Turkish partnership”, *European Union, Institute for Security Studies*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/fire-and-ice>, last accessed 26/12/2021.

⁶ Interview with Dr. Igor Matveev, March 6, 2022.

⁷ Stanislav Secrieru, Sinikukka Saari and Dimitar Bechev, “Fire and Ice; The Russian-Turkish partnership”, *European Union, Institute for Security Studies*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/fire-and-ice>, last accessed 26/12/2021.

rivalry, or “co-opetition” it is interesting to analyze how both countries have used tit-for-tat tactics and a divide-and-rule approach to contain or manage conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Libya: Geopolitics and Energy Security in the Eastern Mediterranean

Before the ousting of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, Turkish and Russian companies were highly active in Libya. After the toppling of Qaddafi’s regime, many contracts and payments were frozen, making the question of who controls the Libyan capital of Tripoli decisive.⁸

Starting in 2014, Turkey and Russia took opposite sides in Libya. Ankara supported the Tripoli-based government, the Government of National Accord (GNA), while Russia, alongside France, Egypt, Greece, and the UAE, supported the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Turkey viewed the Libyan conflict as part of a broader power play and geopolitical and energy security rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara realized that a new regional order based on energy security was emerging in the Eastern Mediterranean with the support of France, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, from which Turkey was excluded. Hence, with its Libyan policy, Turkey sought to undermine this emerging axis and establish its own.

In April 2019, Haftar launched an offensive to capture Tripoli and topple the GNA. Faced with being abandoned by its Western allies and the possible fall of the GNA which would remove Turkey from the Libyan scene and threaten Turkish interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara directly intervened in the conflict.⁹ Many analysts argue that the Turkish military intervention in Libya was an attempt to secure access to resources and maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean as part of its Blue Homeland Doctrine, especially following the ratification of the Libya–Turkey maritime deal in December 2019.¹⁰ Secondary Turkish objectives are believed to include countering French, Egyptian, Emirati, and Greek influence in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹¹

⁸ Nicholas Morgan and Ivan Bocharov, “Turkey and Russia Remain at Odds as Libya Edges Towards Political Settlement”, *Russian International Affairs Council*, March 31, 2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/middle-east-policy/turkey-and-russia-remain-at-odds-as-libya-edges-towards-political-settlement/>, last accessed 1/1/2022.

⁹ Tolga Demiryol, “Beyond Energy: The Geopolitical Determinants of Turkey’s Mediterranean Policy”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/11/beyond-energy-geopolitical-determinants-turkey-mediterranean-policy/>, last accessed 25/12/2021.

¹⁰ Aurélien Denizeau, “Mavi Vatan, the “Blue Homeland”: the Origins, Influences and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey”, *French Institute for International Relation*, April 2021, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/mavi-vatan-blue-homeland-origins-influences-and-limits-ambitious>, accessed 30/12/2021.

¹¹ Jalel Harchaoui, “Why Turkey Intervened in Libya”, December 7, 2020, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/why-turkey-intervened-in-libya/>, last accessed 25/12/2021.

To ensure a decisive victory, Turkey deployed its Bayraktar TB2 combat drones against the Russian defense structures and hammered Haftar’s supply lines.¹² As Turkey stepped in, the military and logistic balance of power on the ground shifted towards the GNA.¹³ This was a major victory for Turkey, as General Haftar was significantly weakened and all hopes to capture Tripoli by the LNA were dashed. The tide on the ground had turned and now it was the GNA advancing forward. Fearing Haftar’s complete defeat, Moscow deployed MiG29s and Su24s to deter any Turkish advancement toward LNA’s stronghold.¹⁴ Realizing it would not be able to solve the Libyan crisis militarily, Moscow was clever enough to come to terms in August 2020 with Turkey and agree on a ceasefire agreement between GNA and LNA, which is still in place for now.¹⁵

However, Turkey’s military gain were not translated into political gains as the Turkish-backed Libyan government doesn’t enjoy enough regional and international support. Although the possibility for a direct clash between Moscow and Ankara is low on the Libyan soil, the outcome of the Libyan presidential elections will determine in which direction the country is heading and whether Turkey and Russia will continue cooperating or clashing again in Libya.

Syria: Conflict Management and the Difficult Roads Towards Astana

Syria is vital to the shaping of Turkish-Russian relations in the Levant. It exemplifies partnership and conflict management in a situation where their interests compete and often clash. The Syrian context is also unique and unlikely to be replicated elsewhere due to the structural constraints and geopolitical situation in the Middle East.

After the downing of the Russian Su-24 jet near the Turkish border in 2015 with a Turkish missile, Moscow slapped Turkey with economic sanctions and forced Erdogan to publicly apologize to Putin.¹⁶ According to economist Erhan Aslanogluto, Turkey lost around \$3.5 billion annually in income from Russian tourists and another \$4.5 billion a year through the

¹² Alex Gatopoulos, “‘Largest drone war in the world’: How airpower saved Tripoli”, *Al Jazeera*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/28/largest-drone-war-in-the-world-how-airpower-saved-tripoli>, last accessed 30/12/2021.

¹³ Jason Pack and Wolfgang Puszta, “Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli”, November 10, 2020, *Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turning-tide-how-turkey-won-war-tripoli>, 25/12/2021.

¹⁴ “Russia flew 14 MiG 29s and Su-24s to Libya: US army”, *Al Jazeera*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/27/russia-flew-14-mig-29s-and-su-24s-to-libya-us-army>, last accessed 30/12/2021.

¹⁵ “Fleshing Out the Libya Ceasefire Agreement”, *International Crisis Group*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/b80-fleshing-out-libya-ceasefire-agreement>, last accessed 28/12/2021.

¹⁶ Alec Luhn, and Ian Black, “Erdogan has apologised for downing of Russian jet, Kremlin says”, *The Guardian*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/27/kremlin-says-erdogan-apologises-russian-jet-turkish>, last accessed 24/12/2021.

cancellation of construction projects until 2017 when the sanctions were finally lifted.¹⁷ The “jet crisis” was a lesson for Turkey to test its limits against Russia.

With the direct Russian military intervention in Syria on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad in September 2015, the military tide on the ground changed in favor of the Syrian regime. The Syrian army with its allies kept advancing and with the capture of Aleppo (2016), continued pushing the pro-Turkish rebels toward the north, mainly Idlib. The battle for Idlib is the best illustration of how Turkey and Russia engaged in proxy and sometimes direct confrontation with each other on Syrian soil until 2020 when they reached a common ceasefire agreement.

In December 2019, the Syrian army with its local, regional, and international allies launched the Northwestern offensive to retake Idlib. This operation was partially successful until the Turkish side once again deployed the Bayraktar drones, and the Turkish armed forces together with its Syrian armed opposition fighters clashed with the Syrian army and its allies.¹⁸

"The outcome of the war in Ukraine and the geopolitical developments around it may ultimately push the Russians or the Turks to revise their strategy in Syria."

In late February 2020, after intermittent deadly clashes between Turkish and Syrian forces, Turkey formally intervened in the offensive and announced the beginning of “Operation Spring Shield” intending to push Syrian government forces back to pre-offensive frontlines.¹⁹ To stop further Syrian losses and prevent Turkish advancement, on March 5, 2020, a meeting took place between Presidents Erdogan and Putin in which they agreed on a ceasefire that established a six-kilometer secure corridor along the strategic M4 Highway.²⁰ The ceasefire also called for joint Turkish–Russian patrols along the highway. However, this didn’t prevent the Russian side from bombing the pro-Turkish militias around the Turkish-occupied zones.

In time, the Syrian crisis became a model for both countries to cooperate and confront their main opponent. Russia’s facilitation of Turkey’s re-entry into the Syrian scene, thereby enabling Ankara to accomplish its operational and strategic goals by weakening and eliminating the Kurdish forces in northern Syria, helped achieve its objectives and incentivized Turkey to take part in the Russian-engineered diplomatic process in Syria. As both countries aimed to decrease the American influence in Syria by targeting the Kurds, US’ main ally in the

¹⁷ Selin Girit, “Turkey faces big losses as Russia sanctions bite”, *BBC News*, January 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

¹⁸ Can Kasapoglu, “Turkey’s Drone Blitz Over Idlib”, *Jamestown Foundation*, April 17, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/turkeys-drone-blitz-over-idlib/>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

¹⁹ Amberin Zaman, “Turkey launches Operation Spring Shield against Syrian forces”, *Al-Monitor*, March 1, 2020 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/03/operation-spring-shield-clash-turkey-syrian-arab-army-idlib.html>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

²⁰ “Erdogan, Putin announce Idlib ceasefire after Moscow meeting”, *Al Jazeera*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/6/erdogan-putin-announce-idlib-ceasefire-after-moscow-meeting>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

region, it was clear that Moscow indirectly facilitated Turkey’s two military operations (Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 and Olive Branch in 2018) against the Kurdish forces in Syria.

For now, Turkey attained some of its major goals, particularly vis-à-vis the Syrian Kurds, and Russia emerged as the primary power broker in Syria. This “co-opetition” helped both sides achieve some of their goals. In return, this cooperative rivalry decreased the western (mainly US) influence in Syria. Moreover, the Russian-led Astana peace process to find a political resolution to the Syrian crisis, alongside Turkey and Iran, has replaced the Geneva process, which was a western initiative to resolve the Syrian crisis.²¹

Viewed from Moscow, Turkey’s participation in the Russian-led diplomatic and military initiatives in Syria also reduced the diplomatic and military burden of the Syrian war from Moscow’s shoulders. However, the main questions are: To what extent will the status of Idlib be frozen? And what happens if the Kurds engage with Damascus to settle their scores and move toward the Syrian-occupied territories controlled by the Turkish forces and its proxies? This could be a scenario Russia might be preparing against Turkey if the latter tried to pressure Moscow elsewhere. However, for now, both Moscow and Ankara have to cooperate and force the Americans to leave northeastern Syria, and the outcome of the war in Ukraine and the geopolitical developments around it may ultimately push the Russians or the Turks to revise their strategy in Syria.

Nagorno-Karabakh: A Confrontation in Russia’s Backyard

While both countries “understand” each other over Libya and Syria, Turkey’s aspiration to play a greater role in the South Caucasus puts this relationship to the test. With the outbreak of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war (September 27 - November 9, 2020), Turkey saw a historical opportunity to exert its influence in its immediate neighborhood—the South Caucasus. Unlike Syria and Libya, this region has been Russia’s backyard and within Moscow’s sphere of influence. To challenge Russia, Turkey threw its full active military and diplomatic support behind Azerbaijan in its war against the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Turkey’s direct military support in the war caught the surprise of many parties. Turkey not only used its Bayraktar TB2 drones, but also the F-16 warplanes stationed in Ganja and transferred

²¹ Alexey Khlebnikov, “Russia Need Astana to Succeed”, *Middle East Institute*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-needs-astana-succeed>, last accessed 30/12/2021.

hundreds of Syrian mercenaries to fight alongside the Azerbaijani army.^{22 23} These two factors were a threat to Russia’s national security in the region. To preserve its interests in the

Caucasus, Moscow tried to stick to its traditional stance of a “fair and forceful arbiter,” but this neutrality prevented Armenia, Russia’s only ally in the region, to resist the Azerbaijani invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁴

On a diplomatic level, Turkey tried to launch an “Astana style” diplomatic track to gain primacy on the OSCE Minsk Group; whose task was to find a diplomatic solution for the conflict. Ankara’s initiative was welcomed by its ally Azerbaijan who noted the failure of the traditional diplomatic track processed by the OSCE. However, given the fact that the conflict was taking place in post-Soviet space, Russia was not very encouraged to engage in a bilateral track with Turkey in the form of a new “Astana style” process where Turkey and Russia were going to be equal partners arranging a conflict in Russia’s backyard.²⁵ An “Astana style” scenario would have legitimized Turkey’s intervention and presence in the region. Hence, Moscow preferred to play the “big brother” role and forced a ceasefire on both sides.

Maxim Suchkov, a Moscow-based expert in the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), explained Russia’s policy as follows: If Russia took a backseat while Azerbaijan continued advancing, Turkey’s gambit would pay off as Baku would be forever grateful for Ankara, and Turkey’s influence in the region would grow.²⁶ Moreover, if Baku took control over Stepanakert (capital of Nagorno-Karabakh) and the entire region was annexed to Azerbaijan, Armenians would have blamed their failure on Russia and anti-Russian sentiments would have risen in Yerevan. By losing its only ally, Russia would have lost the region.

However, what would have happened if Moscow had directly intervened? Galip Dalay, an associate fellow from Chatham House, argued that if Russia had stepped in and supported its ally, then it would have risked alienating Azerbaijan and pushing Baku further into Turkish hands.²⁷ For Moscow, the best-case scenario was a limited victory for Azerbaijan, once again freezing the conflict to have leverage on both Yerevan and Baku. But Turkey’s efforts to unfreeze the conflict and tarnish the status-quo pushed Russia on the defensive and secured its

²² “Armenia says its fighter jet ‘shot down by Turkey’”, *BBC News*, September 29, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54345622>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

²³ Liz Cookman, “Syrians Make Up Turkey’s Proxy Army in Nagorno-Karabakh”, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, October 5, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/05/nagorno-karabakh-syrians-turkey-armenia-azerbaijan/>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

²⁴ Nicu Popescu, “A captive ally: Why Russia isn’t rushing to Armenia’s aid”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, https://ecfr.eu/article/a_captive_ally_why_russia_isnt_rushing_to_armenias_aid/, last accessed 31/12/2021.

²⁵ Maxim A. Suchkov, ““Diplomacy of attrition”: How will the Russia-Turkey stand-off in Nagorno-Karabakh play out?”, *Middle East Institute*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/diplomacy-attrition-how-will-russia-turkey-stand-nagorno-karabakh-play-out>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

²⁶ Maxim Suchkov, “In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia Faces an Unenviable Task”, *Moscow Times*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/16/in-nagorno-karabakh-russia-faces-an-unenviable-task-a71778>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

²⁷ Galip Dalay, “Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh”, *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021RP05/>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

interests at the expense of the Armenians who were the weaker side. For Dalay, this conflict put Turkish-Russian relations to the test and placed Russia in an uncomfortable position. For Turkey, this was not a complete victory, as Ankara was pushing for complete Azerbaijani victory, forcing Russia out of the region by instigating enmity between Yerevan and Moscow, or at least asking for the deployment of Turkish “peacekeepers” in Nagorno-Karabakh alongside Russian forces.²⁸ It is worth mentioning that Turkey has not been a signatory to the November 9, 2020, trilateral statement which ended the war. As it was clear that Turkey’s direct military support for Azerbaijan and its insistence that Turkish troops be part of the peacekeeping force in Nagorno-Karabakh certainly challenged Kremlin’s position in the region. Hence, Moscow rejected the Turkish proposal of deploying Turkish peacekeepers alongside the Russians and agreed only to deploy Turkish observers in a peacekeeping force headquarters in a region outside but close to Nagorno-Karabakh.

It is worth mentioning that Turkey has not been a signatory to the November 9, 2020, trilateral statement which ended the war.

During the war, both Moscow and Ankara played tit-for-tat against each other. Many observers didn’t notice that while Russia was defensive in its backyard, it was inoffensive in Syria and the Russian air force was bombing Turkish positions in Idlib. By putting pressure on Ankara through Syria, Russia was trying to balance its vulnerabilities with Turkey. Turkey too had another plan in the South Caucasus where in November 2020, the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) was inaugurated and connected to the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), which allowed for bringing the Caspian gas to South Europe through Turkey.²⁹ This project is crucial for Turkey as it transforms the country from an importer to a transit route for gas. The geopolitical nature of this project was to decrease Europe’s gas dependency from Moscow. However, as Azerbaijan expressed its readiness to increase its gas supplies to Europe through this pipeline, President Putin just two days before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, invited his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev to Moscow to coordinate Baku’s gas supplies to Europe and signed an “alliance agreement” between both countries.³⁰ Hence, even though Russia has shown dissatisfaction with Turkish intervention in its area of the traditional sphere of influence and drew “red lines,” Russia has recognized Turkey as a junior player in the region, but it doesn’t tend to share parity in the post-conflict regional order.

Thus, the relationship between both countries in the South Caucasus has been hierarchical. Both sides succeeded in sidelining the Western influence from the diplomatic process in the

²⁸ “Turkey seeks approval to deploy peacekeepers in Azerbaijan”, *al Jazeera*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/16/turkey-seeks-approval-to-deploy-peacekeepers-in-azerbaijan>, last accessed 3/12/2021.

²⁹ Dimitar Bechev, “The Trans Adriatic Pipeline: Why it Matters and What Comes Next? ”, *Middle East Institute*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/trans-adriatic-pipeline-why-it-matters-and-what-comes-next>, last accessed 1/1/2022.

³⁰ David O’Byrne, “Azerbaijan and Russia could coordinate gas supplies to Europe – Aliyev”, *Eurasianet*, February 28, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-and-russia-could-coordinate-gas-supplies-to-europe-aliyev>, last accessed 10/3/2022.

region, especially the Americans and French (co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group alongside Russia). Within this context, it is worth mentioning that Turkey’s growing influence in the South Caucasus didn’t come only at the expense of the West, but also at the cost of Russia’s influence as well. This is why Russia resisted any further diplomatic attempts by Turkey. Turkey, unhappy with the diplomatic outcome and its modest role as an ordinary member of OSCE, initiated the “3+3 regional security platform” in the Caucasus.³¹ This security format in the Caucasus comprises the three Caucasian states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – and their three “big neighbors” – Russia, Turkey, and Iran.³² For now, Russia is pushing this format as it sidelines the West. Hence, the future of Turkish-Russian relations in the South Caucasus is shaped by current relations between Russia and the West. The tenser these relations, the more Moscow will need Ankara to contain the western influence. This process is making Turkey a regional power but also increasing its dependency on Russia.

Russia’s Strategy with Turkey: Long-lasting (Inter)/dependency?

What makes this relationship special is that one side is dependent on the other, at least for now. For example, when it comes to trade, Turkey exports Russian vegetables, textiles, and other goods. But in return, Russia provides Turkey with natural gas, oil, nuclear reactors, military equipment, and millions of tourists. The trade relations between them are asymmetrical as there is inequality in trade volumes in favor of Russia. Hence, in the event of a breakdown of relations, Russia can easily replace Turkey, and Turkish interests would be harmed. For this reason, unlike its Western allies, Turkey refused to impose economic sanctions on Russia.³³

Over the years, Moscow has used its energy policy to win leverage over Turkey. In December 2014, six months after the start of the war in eastern Ukraine, Russia announced its new Turkstream pipeline deal to deliver gas from Russia to the Balkans through Turkey, bypassing the pre-existing pipelines that flow through Ukraine to Central Europe.³⁴ TurkStream became operational in 2020 and has given Turkey and Russia greater influence over Europe as they have a direct route into southern Europe and control over the

³¹ “Russian, Turkish top diplomats discuss 3+3 mechanism for South Caucasus — foreign ministry”, *TASS Agency*, October 30, 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1356093>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

³² Note: In November 2021, Georgia officially refused to participate in “3+3” format out of concern of increase of Russian influence on its domestic and regional politics. For more information, read: Nino Samkharadze, “Georgia’s 3+3 Dilemma: Regional Leadership or Falling into the Aggressor Neighbor’s Trap?”, *Georgian Institute of Politics*, November 3, 2021, <https://gip.ge/georgias-33-dilemma-regional-leadership-or-falling-into-the-aggressor-neighbors-trap/>, last accessed 1/1/2022.

³³ “Turkey does not plan to impose sanctions on Russia”, *TASS Russian News Agency*, March 1, 2022, https://tass.com/world/1414535?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com, last accessed 10/3/2022.

³⁴ Jasmin Bauomy, “TurkStream: Europe needs gas and Russia has it - the story behind that new pipeline”, *Euronews*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/08/turkstream-europe-needs-gas-and-russia-has-it-the-story-behind-that-new-pipeline>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

flow of gas into the region.³⁵ However, Turkey fearing of Russian energy trap, took steps to diversify its energy resources.

In line with this trend, during the first half of 2020, Turkey’s natural gas imports from Iran and Russia declined by 44.8 percent and 41.5 percent respectively, compared to the same period in 2019.³⁶ In contrast, Azerbaijan’s gas exports to Turkey increased by 23.4 percent during that same period. Azerbaijan now occupies the largest share of Turkey’s natural gas market. This also explains Baku’s leverage over Ankara when it comes to Armenian-Turkish relations. Meanwhile, as long-term gas contracts between Turkey and Russia are due for renewal towards the end of 2021, with Turkey’s decreasing dependency on Russian gas, coupled with the diversification of its gas import sources and the availability of competitive prices, Turkey will have a better negotiation position than before.³⁷ Hence Turkey’s “dependency reduction” on Russia would have implications on the future of Russian-Turkish relations. As Ankara is trying to reduce its strategic vulnerabilities and energy dependency on Russia, it is becoming an autonomous power in the region. Meanwhile, this relationship is becoming more interdependent as Russia’s need for Turkey is increasing to build new transit pipelines bypassing Ukraine.

Thus, the more Turkey seeks to become an independent player in the region, the more it will test Russia’s “red lines” in its backyard. For this reason, Russia is trying its best to increase its influence on Turkey and bring Ankara closer to its orbit. Russia’s selling of the S-400 missile system and talks with Turkey to design its fifth-generation fighter jets should be viewed within



Source: Euronews

³⁵ “Putin says Turkey safe from gas crisis thanks to TurkStream pipeline”, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/putin-says-turkey-safe-gas-crisis-thanks-turkstream-pipeline-2021-09-29/>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

³⁶ Nuran Erkul Kaya, “Turkey’s gas imports from Russia and Iran fall sharply”, *Anadolu Agency*, August 24, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-s-gas-imports-from-russia-and-iran-fall-sharply/1951397>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

³⁷ Dimitar Bechev, “Liquefied Natural Gas: A Game Changer for Turkey?”, *Middle East Institute*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/liquefied-natural-gas-game-changer-turkey>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

this context.³⁸ From Moscow’s perspective, these arms sales would deepen splits between Turkey and its NATO allies and weaken the internal cohesion of the alliance. Moreover, weapons trading establishes a long-term relationship between the producer and the client. Thus for Moscow, these trades would make Turkey more dependent on Russia, endowing Moscow with additional leverage.³⁹ For Turkey, such partnerships will be very costly in the future as Moscow will not lose any opportunity to exploit them.

What makes this relationship so exceptional is that, after the “jet crisis, both sides” continue to be able to compartmentalize their economic relations and keep them separate from geopolitical incompatibility. Seems both leaders have agreed to ignore issues on which they diverge while striving to foster economic relations. According to Arif Asalioglu, general director of the International Institute of the Development of Science Cooperation (MIRNAS), Turkey and Russia have developed a creative cooperation model. That is both “countries have divided their relations into compartments. Thus, things that go wrong in one compartment should not adversely affect good relationships in the other compartment where the relationships are successfully occurring.”⁴⁰ This model has been successful so far. The events in Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, have not or had limited effect on the developments in Libya and Syria or on their trade and energy relations. Thus, both sides have understood that compartmentalizing economic issues and geopolitical rivalries is necessary to avoid the negative spillover of certain disagreements into areas of bilateral cooperation.⁴¹ However, this may change if Turkey continues provoking Russia in areas traditionally under the Russian sphere of influence.

What we can realize is that despite the fact that both sides will be more interdependent on each other in the future, for now, both economically and geopolitically, Turkish-Russian relations are asymmetric in favor of Moscow. Ankara, conscious of this asymmetry and the unbalanced power structure, is trying to reduce its dependency on Moscow and carefully challenge her. As Moscow wants to maintain the political “status quo” in the region and prevent Ankara from taking any revisionist actions, the interest of both countries may clash again. It seems that the economic interaction between them may have the capacity to act as a “shock absorber”, that is decreasing the possibility of a direct military clash between them.⁴² Hence, unlike 2015, this

"Turkish-Russian relations are asymmetric in favor of Moscow"

³⁸ Tim Lister, “Turkey bought Russian S-400 missiles designed to down NATO planes. For the US, that’s a problem”, *CNN*, July 13, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/13/europe/turkey-russia-missiles-nato-analysis-intl/index.html>, last accessed 31/12/2021.

³⁹ Stanislav Secieru, Sinikukka Saari and Dimitar Bechev, “Fire and Ice; The Russian-Turkish partnership”, *European Union, Institute for Security Studies*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/fire-and-ice>, last accessed 26/12/2021.

⁴⁰ Interview with Mr. Arif Asalioglu. August 17, 2021.

⁴¹ Cemil Doğan İpek, Mehmet Çağatay Güler, “Turkey and Russia in Syrian War: Hostile Friendship”, *Security and Defence Quarterly*, July 27, 2021, <https://securityanddefence.pl/Turkey-and-Russia-in-Syrian-war-Hostile-friendship,138949,0,2.html>, last accessed 27/12/2021.

⁴² Robert E. Hamilton and Anna Mikulska, “Cooperation, Competition and Compartmentalization: Russian-Turkish Relations and Their Implications for the West”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute, Black Sea Initiative*, April 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/04/cooperation-competition-and-compartmentalization-russian-turkish-relations-and-their-implications-for-the-west/>, last accessed 30/12/2021.

clash may not take a direct form, but rather indirect and in the form of proxy wars so that the economic cooperation would not have a major effect.

Assessment: The limits of Russian-Turkish “Co-opetition”

- ⇒ Despite the growing areas of cooperation and “conflict management” between the two states, whenever a disagreement emerged, Moscow has been able to secure its interests and push Turkey slowly back. Unlike many who believe that Moscow and Ankara have “brotherly relations,” these relations are characterized by mistrust and geopolitical rivalries. What makes this relationship unique is that both sides have tried to minimize the Western influence. The biggest challenge for their “co-opetitive” relationship will be the war in Ukraine and the impact of its outcome on the region.
- ⇒ Is there a strategic alliance between them? Moscow does not view Turkey as a “strategic ally” but, as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said “a very close partner”.⁴³ Meanwhile, Russia regards alliances as an attribute of great power. Russia’s alliances are asymmetric in nature and provide Russia with a bigger regional role where Moscow can speak on behalf of its allies (such as the CSTO).⁴⁴ For this reason, Russia does not engage in formal alliances with rising international and regional powers such as China, Iran, and Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey—a NATO member—relies on its security guarantees and cannot abandon its duties and obligations as it would risk exposing its vulnerabilities and becoming marginalized. Turkey’s membership in NATO gives it important room to maneuver in its relations with Russia.
- ⇒ The divergence of interests between Turkey and its NATO allies is crucial to Russia; this is why Moscow praises Ankara’s independent foreign policy.⁴⁵ Moscow views Turkey’s autonomy from NATO as a positive development. However, Turkey has another perspective, as it believes that by cooperating with Russia on various issues, its standing in NATO will increase as it will be the only NATO member to deal with Moscow and keep the Russian influence in check throughout NATO’s eastern and southern neighborhoods. Furthermore, NATO needs Turkey to contain the Russian influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Ukraine. For NATO, Turkey is the only backchannel left to engage with Russia in many regional conflicts, including the crisis in Ukraine. Moreover, Russia’s growing influence in the Eastern Mediterranean is reducing Turkey’s strategic autonomy and room for maneuver there. Turkey will inevitably be disturbed by Russia’s strong military presence in its neighborhood;

⁴³ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with radio stations Sputnik, Komsomolskaya Pravda and Govorit Moskva, Moscow”, *The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, October 14, 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xlEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/4381977, last accessed 1/1/2021.

⁴⁴ Dmitry Gorenburg, “Russia and Collective Security: Why CSTO Is No Match for Warsaw Pact”, *Russia Matters*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/russia-and-collective-security-why-csto-no-match-warsaw-pact>, last accessed 1/1/2022.

⁴⁵ Daria Isachenko, “Turkey and Russia: The Logic of Conflictual Cooperation”, German Institute for International Studies, October 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2021RP07_TurkeyAndRussia.pdf, accessed 25/12/2021.

Turkey feels surrounded militarily by Russia from three different directions; north (Crimea), east (Armenia), and south (Syria).

- ⇒ In Libya, both countries are guided by geo-economic, primarily energy security, motives. One of the thorniest issues facing Libya’s interim government is the agreed October 2020 deadline for foreign forces (Russian and Turkish forces and their mercenaries) to withdraw from the country. It is unclear how the withdrawal will take place, and in what conditions. However, the Turkish President has made his intentions clear that he will not pull his troops out until others do so first. With the success of the political track, differences between the two countries are unlikely to escalate into a larger conflict again but the outcome of the Libyan Presidential elections is still a cause for concern in Moscow.
- ⇒ If thanks to Russia, Turkey was now able to contain the Kurdish autonomy aspirations in North-Eastern Syria, the greatest advantage for Russia in cooperating with Turkey was the establishment of the Astana Process. This was seen as a major diplomatic victory for Russia towards the Syrian crisis. Turkey’s involvement was important to provide legitimacy for the negotiations as a great deal is at stake for Russia in the Astana Process to boost its image and credibility as a regional conflict manager. If the cooperation over Syria fails, then the alternative is direct confrontation and the increase of Western influence in Syria. Something that would jeopardize Russia’s interests in the Levant.⁴⁶
- ⇒ The Russian broken ceasefire and the November 9, 2020, trilateral statement over Nagorno-Karabakh and the developments that proceeded will not diminish the Turkish influence in South Caucasus. Turkey and Azerbaijan have established military alliance and energy interdependency which are going to receive a further boost from the opening of the rail connection between Nakhichevan and Baku, as stipulated by the trilateral statement and secured by instant investment. The possible opening of the border from the Turkish side in front of Armenia, may not be a positive development for Moscow. After the war, Ankara and Moscow are translating their economic power to invest in railways, roads, and other infrastructural developments in the region. Turkey, together with Azerbaijan are pushing the “West-East” trade route known as “Zangezour Corridor” passing through Southern Armenia, bypassing Iran and Russia and connecting Turkey directly to Azerbaijan and Central Asia, thus further expanding Turkey’s influence in the region.⁴⁷ The fact that Russia’s dominance over the South Caucasus is being challenged– not by NATO enlargement policy, but by Turkish

⁴⁶ Yeghia Tashjian, “The Great Game in the Levant: Russia’s Interests in Lebanon”, *AUB Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/news/Pages/20210831-russias-interests-in-lebanon.aspx>, last accessed 1/1/2022.

⁴⁷ Pietro Shakarian and Benyamin Poghosyan, “Moscow’s Caucasian Conundrum: Turkish-Russian Relations and the Limits of “Strategic Competition””, *Russian International Affairs Council*, November 30, 2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/eurasian-policy/moscow-s-caucasian-conundrum-turkish-russian-relations-and-the-limits-of-strategic-competition/>, last accessed 2/1/2022.

interference – is hard to consume for Moscow, where many mainstream experts keep arguing about Erdogan’s arrogance and Turkey’s expansion in the Caucasus and Central Asia at the expense of Russia’s influence.⁴⁸ However, this argument turned out to be wrong, as Russian-led CSTO “peacekeeping” forces quickly intervened and resolved the crisis in Kazakhstan (January 2-11, 2022) in a matter of days.⁴⁹

⇒ Energy security is a crucial component of Russian-Turkish relations. Turkey is energy-dependent through the extended gas imports from Russia, and Russia is dependent on Turkey for its geopolitical position, which makes Turkey an energy transit hub.⁵⁰ Turkey also is the second most valuable market for Russian gas after Germany and Gazprom aims for further expansions even by connecting the Levantine gas fields to pipelines passing through Turkey. However, Ankara is playing on two strings, on the one hand allowing Russian pipelines to pass from its territories and increasing its leverage over Europe, and on the other hand, seeking to expand Azerbaijan’s share in its gas market and decrease its energy dependency from Moscow. This factor will have a crucial impact on the geopolitical nature of the future of Russian-Turkish relations.

⇒ The Ukrainian crisis may be the biggest challenge in testing the waters between President Erdogan and Putin. Erdogan will continue sitting on the fence for a while. Over the past years, both Presidents Erdogan and Putin invested politically and economically to consolidate and raise their bilateral relations to a new level. As highlighted in this paper, Turkey is dependent in many ways on Russia. Hence, President Erdogan will aim to continue cooperation with Russia in the region; but he would also step up engagement with NATO to improve his global standing and reduce international criticism on his domestic conduct. Erdogan knows that standing against Russia and directly confronting Moscow is very risky as, excluding the ongoing war in Ukraine, he would open a three-front war in the region: In Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Hence, Turkey would continue supplying Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukraine but would not cross the “red lines” and directly challenge Russia.⁵¹ For this reason, President Erdogan cannot antagonize

"The Ukrainian crisis may be the biggest challenge in testing the waters between President Erdogan and Putin"

⁴⁸ Pavel Baev, "Russia and Turkey Strategic Partners and Rivals", *French Institute of International Relations*, Report No. 35, 2021, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/baev_turkey_russia_2021.pdf, p. 23, last accessed 25/12/2021.

⁴⁹ Yeghia Tashjian, "Have the events in Kazakhstan exposed the limits of Turkey's regional aspirations in Central Asia?", *Armenian Weekly*, January 18, 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/01/18/have-the-events-in-kazakhstan-exposed-the-limits-of-turkeys-regional-aspirations-in-central-asia/>, last accessed 11/3/2022.

⁵⁰ John Koutroumpis, "Russia and Turkey: An Ambiguous Energy Partnership", *E-International Relations*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/09/11/russia-and-turkey-an-ambiguous-energy-partnership/>, last accessed 1/1/2022.

⁵¹ Yeghia Tashjian, "Will Turkey gamble with Ukraine against Russia?", *Armenian Weekly*, December 15, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/12/15/will-turkey-gamble-with-ukraine-against-russia/>, last accessed 11/3/2022.

Russia and risk full-scale war since domestically, the implications of this war will be heavy on the Turkish government.

- ⇒ If the war in Ukraine is prolonged, Moscow may need Ankara to arrange a temporary settlement in Ukraine. Will the Syrian and Nagorno-Karabakh scenario be repeated where both sides sidelined the Western influence and Russia accepted a Turkish role in the region? If Ukraine is divided into two zones, will Russia accept a Turkish “peacekeeping force” in the Western part of Ukraine? Will the Americans give a “green light” for Turkey to enter in such a game? What will Turkey gain in return? Is such military adventure within Turkey’s capabilities? Coming up with such scenarios some would think will be unrealistic for the time being, but developments on the ground may tell us to what extent “co-opetition” between both countries may also extend towards Ukraine.
- ⇒ Finally, any sudden change in political leadership in either country might disrupt this balance and allow their competing geopolitical ambitions to clash with each other. Western media and some intelligence sources claim that if the outcome of the military operation in Ukraine may not favor Russia, President Putin’s leadership will be challenged, and the new leader may be harsher than Putin. There are also Russian concerns that in 2023, President Erdogan and AKP may lose grip over power and the new administration may shift its policy toward the West to challenge Russia’s influence. Moscow has fears that any change of leadership in Turkey would shift the regional status quo and interrupt Russia’s policies in the MENAC region. Thus, the current “co-opetition” between both countries is very much dependent on the personal relations of both leaders.

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