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**Dimitar BECHEV**

Lecturer, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford & Visiting Scholar, Carnegie Europe, Brussels

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**E-mail: [uidergisi@gmail.com](mailto:uidergisi@gmail.com)**

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# Worst of Friends, Best of Rivals: Agency vs Structure in Turkey-Russia Relations

Dimitar BECHEV

Lecturer, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford & Visiting Scholar, Carnegie Europe, Brussels

E-Mail: [dimitar.bechev@area.ox.ac.uk](mailto:dimitar.bechev@area.ox.ac.uk)

Orcid: 0000-0001-9267-7841

## ABSTRACT

The article studies the dynamics behind the unprecedented rapprochement between Turkey and Russia since the 2000s. It explains the growing degree of co-operation between Ankara and Moscow through the role of political leadership as well as to Turkey's adjustment to the changing balance of power at the regional and global level. At the same time, the article highlights the competitive aspects of the relationship. It does so with reference to a series of case studies: the war in Syria, Turkey's intervention in Libya since 2019, the purchase of S-400 surface to air missiles, energy security in the Black Sea the Southern Caucasus, and Turkey's response to Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

**Keywords:** theory, history, security, regional conflict, energy

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## Introduction

In the 2010s, Turkish-Russian relations began a roller coaster ride that continues to this day. Ankara and Moscow started the decade as economic and diplomatic partners. Then the war in Syria put them on opposing sides, with tensions boiling over after the Turkish air force downed a Russian Su-24 in November 2015. Following the failed coup in Turkey on July 15, 2016, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin relaunched ties, championing joint diplomatic initiatives and promoting multi-billion energy projects.<sup>1</sup> Cooperation at the institutional level has been advancing as well. Members of Erdoğan's inner circle such as former Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and Head of the National Intelligence Service (MIT) Hakan Fidan, who was appointed foreign minister in June 2023, are often in Moscow to

<sup>1</sup> The frequency of meetings and telephone calls picked up after the summer of 2016 overtaking the number of personal interactions between the Turkish and the US president. Selim Koru, "The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2018, p.15.

coordinate actions on flashpoints such as Syria or Libya.<sup>2</sup> The Russian connection has put a strain on Turkey's ties with the United States (US), e.g., over the purchase of S-400 missiles. However, the recent crises in Libya, Idlib, northwest Syria, as well as in Nagorno-Karabakh came as a reminder of the issues dividing Turkey and Russia. Despite these tumultuous conditions, Erdoğan and Putin have thus far been successful in managing conflicts and maximizing shared interests. In the words of the Turkish president himself, 'like hot steel quenched in water, our bilateral relationship has hardened and strengthened with every failed provocation.'<sup>3</sup> Similarly, then Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu referred to Russia in 2018 as a 'strategic partner'.<sup>4</sup>

The Russian-Turkish relationship came into the spotlight with Russia's invasion of Ukraine starting on February 24, 2022. On the one hand, Turkey offered material support to Ukraine and condemned the aggression. On the other, it refused to join its NATO allies in imposing economic sanctions on Russia. Instead, President Erdoğan sought to mediate between the two parties, playing a key role in the so-called "grain deal" brokered by the United Nations (UN) in July 2022. As Galip Dalay put it, "Turkey is trying to be pro-Kyiv without being overtly anti-Moscow."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Turkey has leveraged the war to assert its role as a leading international actor in its immediate neighborhood and beyond.<sup>6</sup>

This article tackles the question of why Turkey and Russia, so long divided, came to their contemporary accommodation manifested as foreign policy coordination. Russia posed an existential threat to the Ottoman Empire while the Soviet Union challenged the Republic of Turkey's security during the Cold War. Mutual suspicions lingered on into the 1990s as Turkey ventured into the post-Soviet space.<sup>7</sup> More recently, observers expected that Russia's intervention in Syria would reignite an ancient conflict between the two former imperial adversaries that have fought no less than 12 wars between 1568 and 1918.<sup>8</sup> The outcome – a partnership, however tenuous and contradiction-ridden – has defied such predictions.

2 "High-ranking Turkish Delegation to Visit Russia on December 29", TASS, 26 December 2018; "Turkish Intelligence Chief Holds Meeting with Syrian Counterpart in Moscow", *Daily Sabah*, 14 January 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2020/01/14/turkish-intelligence-chief-holds-meeting-with-syrian-counterpart-in-moscow> (Accessed 24 August 2023)..

3 Speech delivered during the launch of the construction site for the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. Fazlı Şahan, "Oyunun Kuralları Değişiyor", *Yeni Şafak*, 4 April 2018, [www.yenisafak.com/gundem/oyunun-kurallari-degisiyor-3192649](http://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/oyunun-kurallari-degisiyor-3192649), Quoted in Koru, "The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations", p. 6

4 "Turkey Upgrades Russia to 'Strategic Partner'", *Ahval*, 24 August 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/russia-turkey/turkey-upgrades-russia-strategic-partner> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

5 Galip Dalay, "Ukraine's Wider Impact on Turkey's International Future", *Chatham House*, 2022.

6 Dimitar Bechev, "Sailing Through the Storm: Türkiye's Black Sea Strategy Amidst the Russian-Ukrainian War", *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 2023, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/sailing-through-storm> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

7 See William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774-2000*, London, Frank Cass, 2000, Chapters 8 and 9.

8 Of those, Turkey prevailed in three, including the Crimean War (1853-56) and the First World War (1914-8) where it acted in alliance with major European powers. For the predictions of renewed conflict: Aslı Altuntaşbaşı, "With Friends Like These: Turkey, Russia and the End of an Unlikely Alliance", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2016,

Academics and policy experts have advanced a variety of explanations accounting for Turkey's tilt towards Russia.<sup>9</sup> The default view underscores Erdoğan's affinity with Vladimir Putin, a fellow strongman.<sup>10</sup> There are also authors who emphasize Turkey's de-democratization in the 2010s and the supposed attraction of Russia as an authoritarian alternative to the Western liberal model.<sup>11</sup> The dalliance with the Kremlin, it is also claimed, formed part of Erdoğan's power grab.<sup>12</sup> Analyses also invoke economic interdependence as a factor in conditioning and sustaining rapprochement.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, there are accounts highlighting geopolitical determinants: the end of Cold War-era bipolarity<sup>14</sup>, frictions between Turkey and the US over the past decade<sup>15</sup>, or the West's declining power in the international system.<sup>16</sup>

This article posits an explanation combining structural change and leadership/agency. This sets it apart from other accounts stressing the centrality of Erdoğan and Putin, avoiding at the same time the structuralist determinism that characterizes some strands of International Relations (IR) scholarship. In brief, the end of the Cold War decreased the intensity of the threat that Turkey faced from the Russian Federation, the Soviet Union's primary successor state, while also eroding the utility of the Turkish-US alliance. Economic and eventually political cooperation with Moscow took off as a result in the 2000s and continued through the Arab Spring. In the mid-2010s, Russia's intervention in Syria compelled Erdoğan to turn to Moscow to address cross-border security challenges such as the resurgent Kurdish nationalism.<sup>17</sup>

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- 9 For an overview of Turkey's relations with Russia, see Evren Balta and Mitat Çelikpala, "Turkey and Russia: Historical Patterns and Contemporary Trends in Bilateral Relations", Güneş Murat Tezcür (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021; Pavel Baev, "Turkey and Russia", Alparslan Özerdem and Matthew Whiting (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Turkish Politics*, London, Routledge, 2019; Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta and Burç Beşgül (eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk: Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkilerinde Değişen Dinamikler*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2017; Soner Çagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2019.
- 10 In the words of Altıntaşbaş, "The connection between the two leaders was the linchpin for the burgeoning new alliance., "With friends like these", p. 1; See also Çagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire*, p. 141; Nathalie Nougarede, "The Two Angry Men on Europe's Borders: Loud, Proud and Impossible to Ignore", *The Guardian*, 29 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/29/europe-two-angry-men-west-vladimir-putin-recep-tayyip-erdogan-russia-turkey> (Accessed 24 August 2023).
- 11 Paul Kubicek, "Strictly Pragmatism?: Prospects for Russian-Turkish Partnership", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23, No 2, 2021; Torrey Taussig, "The Serpentine Trajectory of Turkish-Russian Relations", *Brookings Institution*, 4 October 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/10/04/the-serpentine-trajectory-of-turkish-russian-relations/> (Accessed 24 August 2023.); Dmitri Trenin, "The Astonishing Likeness of Turkey and Russia", *Carnegie Endowment*, 14 June 2013.
- 12 Suat Kınıklıoğlu, "Turkey's Russia Affair", *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, 23 September 2018, <https://isdpu.eu/publication/turkeys-russia-affair/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).
- 13 Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No 1, 2016, p. 71-95; Oktay Tanrısever, "Turkey and Russia in Eurasia", Dimitris Keridis and Lenore Martin (eds.), *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2004, p. 127-155.
- 14 Şener Aktürk, "Turkish-Russian Relations After the End of the Cold War (1992-2002)", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 7, No 3, 2006, p. 337-364.
- 15 See Koru, "The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations", p. 6; Aaron Stein, "Why Russia Turned Its Back on the West and Embraced Russia?", *Foreign Affairs*, 6 July 2019; For an earlier version of this argument, Fiona Hill and Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?", *Survival*, Vol. 48, No 1, 2006, p. 81-92.
- 16 Balta and Çelikpala, "Turkey and Russia".
- 17 Şener Aktürk, "Relations Between Russia and Turkey Before, During, and After the Failed Coup of 2016", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 21, No 4, Fall, 2016, p. 97-113.

Ultimately, restructuring at the regional level – the changing balance of power in the Middle East and Syria’s implosion – led to a partial realignment in Turkish policy. While relevant, shared authoritarian features or economic interests play a secondary part in the Russo-Turkish coupling. In addition, contrary to the assertions about the emergence of a Russian-Turkish axis, the article argues that cooperation between Russia and Turkey, though resilient, is not deeply rooted. As Köstem observes, what we witness is “a geopolitical alignment with limits,” rather than a *bona fide* alliance or a genuine partnership.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, Aydın has characterized the dynamic as one defined by “competitive cooperation.”<sup>19</sup>

The article is divided into four sections. The first one briefly sketches the theoretical issue of structure and agency. The second section examines the economic and diplomatic rapprochement between Russia and Turkey in the 1990s and 2000s, while the third section explores factors shaping the relationship in the 2010s. The fourth section traces Turkish-Russian interaction through several case studies: Syria, Libya, the S-400 deal, energy, and security in the Black Sea, the Southern Caucasus, and, last but not least, Turkey’s response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

## Structure and Agency in the Study of International Politics

The dialectic between structure and agency is central to social sciences and to the academic discipline of IR in particular. Mainstream perspectives tend to privilege structure. That is certainly the case of neo-realism but also liberal institutionalism, which developed in the 1980s as a critique of the former, and in a sense of constructivism.<sup>20</sup> Since all three schools are primarily concerned with the systemic level of analysis, they tend to consider how the international system shapes the behavior of its individual units (states). Where the three schools differ is the definition of structure, the mechanism whereby it impacts on state preferences and conduct and the chances of the latter to overcome the dilemmas posed by international anarchy. Without being deterministic, neo-realism, institutionalism and constructivism look at agents as both constrained and enabled by structural determinants such as the distribution of power and material resources, the design of global rules or institutions or, in the case of constructivism, constitutive ideas and practices of statehood and international action.

The subfield of foreign policy analysis has a more flexible understanding of the role of agency. This is partly to do with the laxer commitment to parsimony, that is insistence on single-variable explanations characteristic of ‘grand theorizing’, and is well accepted by systemic theorists. Waltz is explicit on the point that a theory of international politics is not a theory of foreign policy, with the latter being driven by a variety of factors including domestic politics, leadership, ideas, cognitions, etc., rather than system-level features such as polarity or anarchy.

18 Seçkin Köstem, “Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 34, No 6, 2020, p. 1.

19 Mustafa Aydın, “The Long View on Russian-Turkish Rivalry and Cooperation”, *German Marshall Fund*, 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/long-view-turkish-russian-rivalry-and-cooperation> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

20 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, Addison-Wesley, 1979; Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Thus, a small N-study involving the relationship between two countries, however significant as Russia and Turkey may be, will not easily lend itself to parsimonious, single-factor accounts but will have to take into consideration a variety of factors. Put differently, explanations centered on leaders or, by contrast, on the balance of power (regional, global) will be by definition reductionist. There is an inherent trade-off between theoretical elegance and in-depth analysis which implies, to a large degree, description.

In thinking about Russia and Turkey since the end of the Cold War, the article takes this latter route. Instead of making a decisive choice, it seeks to illuminate the role played by both structure and agency/leadership. At the same time, as a contribution to theory-driven research, it rules out other potential explanations, in particular those relating foreign policy to the nature of domestic political regimes.

## Origins of the Rapprochement in the 1990s and the 2000s

Turkish-Russian relations are usually thought of as the story of two larger-than-life individuals. This view is warranted given the outsized power Putin and Erdoğan wield as well as their imprint on landmark decisions such as the reconciliation in July 2016. Yet such emphasis on leaders as well as on the present ignores historical precedents. Kemalists and the would-be Soviet Union aligned in the early 1920s and maintained links through the interwar period.<sup>21</sup> Turkish governments in the 1960s and 1970s re-engaged with Moscow, receiving financial and industrial assistance on a considerable scale. Trade ties picked up in the late Cold War period thanks to a natural gas contract signed by Prime Minister Turgut Özal in 1984 and into the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, apart from the 1950s, selective cooperation has been the norm in bilateral relations.<sup>23</sup>

Past episodes aside, the aftermath of the Cold War saw a deepening of ties theretofore unwitnessed. Turkey and post-Soviet Russia entered the 1990s as competitors. Ankara sought to fill the gap left by the Soviet Union's disintegration and portrayed itself as a big brother to newly independent Turkic nations in Central Asia, to Azerbaijan, and to millions of Muslims across Russia, including in Chechnya and oil-rich Tatarstan, which were both striving for statehood at the time. The Russian security establishment saw Turkey as a rival and favored closer links to countries like Greece, Cyprus, Syria, and Iran, in addition to Armenia, feeding into Turkish fears of encirclement. As late as 2011, while cooperation between Ankara and Moscow was thriving, Russian foreign policy analyst Dmitri Trenin remarked that Turkey had been a supporter of Chechen independence in the 1990s.<sup>24</sup> On the positive side, Russia joined

21 Turkey kept neutrality during the Second World War, complicating German actions in the Black Sea. See Onur İşçi, *Turkey and the Soviet Union During World War II: Diplomacy, Discord and International Relations*, London, Bloomsbury, 2019.

22 Balta and Çelikpala, "Turkey and Russia".

23 Onur İşçi and Behlül Özkan quoted by Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, Evren Balta and Andrew O'Donohue, "Turkey, Russia, and the West: Reassessing Persistent Volatility, Asymmetric Interdependence, and the Syria Conflict", *Istanbul Policy Centre*, 2020, p. 8. See also William Hale, "The Turkey-Russia Relationship in Historical Perspective: Patterns, Change and Contrast", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 20, No 78, 2023.

24 Dmitri Trenin, "Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story", *Carnegie Endowment*, 2011, p. 97. However, Trenin took note of Turkey's transformation into a partner too. *Ibid.*, p. 123-124.



the Ankara-sponsored Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization, and Turkish construction firms made inroads into the Russian Federation market as well as in other post-Soviet countries. Towards the end of the decade, mutual suspicions gave way to engagement. The 1997 agreement to build the Blue Stream pipeline, the Kremlin's decision not to grant asylum to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan in January 1999, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's policy of non-intervention in the Second Chechen War later that year, and the 2001 partnership declaration signed by Foreign Ministers Igor Ivanov and İsmail Cem were all milestones along the way. The two parties recognized each other's interests. Turkey accepted Russian primacy in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia distanced itself from the PKK, as Ankara withdrew support for the Chechens.

Vladimir Putin and Tayyip Erdoğan inherited a relationship that was already on an upswing by the time they entered office in 2000 and 2002, respectively. Cooperation between Moscow and Ankara spilled over from trade to security, even if there was no meeting of minds on core issues such as NATO enlargement. This early chapter did not go unnoticed by commentators and scholars at the time.<sup>25</sup> Improved links to Russia were a foremost example of Turkey's shift to engagement with neighbors in the late 1990s personified by Foreign Minister İsmail Cem. Two consecutive coalition cabinets in Ankara – headed by Mesut Yılmaz from the center-right Motherland Party (ANAP) and the veteran leftist leader Ecevit – had their contributions. This record informs the observation by Aktürk that the rapprochement 'transcends the idiosyncratic choices or contingent preferences of a specific political party or political leader.'<sup>26</sup> The secular governments of the late 1990s and the Justice and Development (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) Party after 2002 converged on Russia, as they did with regard to EU membership. There was buy-in on the Russian side as well. Both economic lobbies (Gazprom) and hardliners (or 'statists', *gosudarstvenniki*) such as Yevgeny Primakov<sup>27</sup>, first diplomat and subsequently prime minister, or indeed Vladimir Putin, head of the Federal Security Service before his promotion by Yeltsin in August 1999, opted for cooperation with the Turks.<sup>28</sup>

Ties deepened even further during the 2000s. Putin received a warm welcome during his first visit to Turkey in December 2004 that was followed by a trip by Erdoğan to Moscow in January 2005.<sup>29</sup> The same year, the Blue Stream pipeline started pumping gas across the Black Sea. In 2010, Moscow and Ankara launched a High-Level Cooperation Council, a joint body bringing together the two cabinets. Russia came into the focus of the so-called 'zero-problems with neighbors' policy. Credited to Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, the policy advanced economic integration and diplomatic engagement with all countries

25 Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, "Turkish-Russian Relations: the Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No 1, 2000, p. 59-82; Tanrısever, "Turkey and Russia in Eurasia"; Oleg Kolobov, Fatih Özbay and Aleksandr Kornilov, *Sovremennyye rossiysko-turetskie otnosheniya: problem sotrudnichestva i perspektivy razvitiya*, Nizhni Novgorod, Nizhni Novgorod University, 2004.

26 Aktürk, "Relations Between Russia and Turkey", p. 97

27 On Primakov's lasting influence, see Mark Katz, "Primakov Redux? Putin's Pursuit of 'Multipolarism' in Asia", *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 14, No 1, 2006, p. 144-152.

28 Even though negative stereotypes of Turkey and especially political Islamists in the country persisted. See Baev, "Turkey and Russia".

29 This was the first official visit by a Russian head of state to Turkey, not counting Boris Yeltsin's attendance at the BSEC summit in 1992 and the 1998 OSCE gathering in Istanbul.

around Turkey's borders, notably historic adversaries, to build stability and co-prosperity in the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Black Sea region.<sup>30</sup> Turkey's approach to Russia was hardly unique; it mirrored the policy of other major states in Europe such as Germany or Italy, both leading commercial partners at a time that the Russian economy was booming.<sup>31</sup>

When Russia's security relations with the US and NATO soured in the mid-2000s, Turkey's preference was for accommodation rather than containment. The Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 furnishes a vivid example. As Russian troops invaded Georgia in response to Tbilisi's attempt to recover control over the breakaway province of South Ossetia, Ankara tried its best to defuse tensions. In a clear gesture to Russia, Turkey implemented scrupulously the clauses of the Montreux Convention, which delayed the passage of US medical vessels delivering aid to the Georgians. Having invested in the Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR), a regional alternative to NATO, in 2008 Turkish launched a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, which aimed at reassuring Moscow and keeping the US at an arm's length. Russia appreciated Turkey's scrupulous enforcement of the Montreux Convention governing navigation through the Straits and limiting the naval presence of outside powers in the Black Sea. This came as a shock to the Bush administration, following Turkey's refusal to support the Iraq war in 2003. The talk of a budding Russo-Turkish axis caused concern on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>32</sup> In hindsight, Erdoğan's choice was consistent with Ankara's cautious policy aimed at preserving the status quo in the Black Sea as a Russian-Turkish condominium.<sup>33</sup>

## Factors Shaping Russian-Turkish Relations in the 2010s

Avoiding confrontation with Russia remained Turkey's priority into the 2010s. During the Ukraine crisis of 2014, the Turkish government rebuffed Western sanctions, though it also denounced Crimea's annexation and supported rhetorically the Tatar community on the peninsula.<sup>34</sup> As Syria descended into war, Russia and Turkey, which sided with the EU and US, initially agreed to disagree and keep the conflict separate from other state-to-state business.<sup>35</sup> The brief standoff between November 2015-July 2016 proved an aberration. Erdoğan and

30 Kemal Kirişçi, "Turkey's Engagement with Its Neighborhood: a 'Synthetic and Multidimensional Look at Turkey's Foreign Policy Transformation", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 13, No 3, 2012, p. 319-341; Ayşe Kadioğlu, Kerem Öktem and Mehmet Karlı (eds.), *Another Empire?: A Decade of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party*, Istanbul, Bilgi University Press, 2012.

31 Italy's ENI was the third partner in the Blue Stream pipeline which was launched by Erdogan, Putin and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

32 For an overview of Turkey's response to the war: Igor Torbakov, "The Georgia Crisis and Russia-Turkey Relations", *Jamestown Foundation*, 2008.

33 Mustafa Aydın, "Turkish Policy towards the Wider Black Sea and the EU Connection", *Journal of Balkan and Near East Studies*, Vol. 16, No 3, 2014, p. 383-397.

34 Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017, Chapter 5.

35 In December 2014, for instance, Putin proposed the plan for the TurkStream pipeline during a visit to Ankara. Alan Makovsky, "Turkey's Growing Energy Ties to Russia", *Center for American Progress*, 6 May 2015, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2015/05/06/112511/turkeys-growing-energy-ties-with-moscow/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).



Putin normalized ties at a summit in St. Petersburg (August 9, 2016), the Turkish leader's first foreign visit after the failed coup.<sup>36</sup> Since that turning point, the two presidents have been coordinating actions and avoiding a head-on collision.

Why did Turkey tilt to Russia? There were several factors at play: (1) Turkey's shifting geopolitics; (2) the change in the balance of power in Syria and the wider Middle East resulting from Russia's intervention; (3) anti-Western attitudes in Turkish society; (4) shared authoritarian features; and (5) economic interdependence. Though all five factors mattered, (1) and (2) bore more heavily and directly on Erdoğan's choice to engage with Russia. Ideational, domestic political, and economic variables condition the relationship, allowing leaders to sell their policies internally or providing symbolic and material resources to manage the latter, but ultimately have more limited explanatory power.

### *Turkey's Shifting Geopolitical Posture*

In both Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014, Turkish policymakers saw the risk of their country being left alone facing the Russians.<sup>37</sup> Russia benefitted from its escalatory dominance, as NATO was reluctant to counter a military challenge beyond its bounds. The war in Syria reinforced such fears. Western allies' guarded response to Russia's violations of Turkish airspace culminating with the shooting down of the Su-24 at the Syrian border in November 2015, and especially the perceived unwillingness to take Turkey's side in the aftermath, raised alarm.<sup>38</sup> "Washington's cool attitude toward Ankara in its wake signaled that Turkey would be on its own in managing Russia," as Reynolds put it.<sup>39</sup> Erdoğan was outspoken at the time too. "The Black Sea has almost become a Russian lake," he pointed out to NATO's Secretary-General. "If we don't act now, history will not forgive us."<sup>40</sup>

The above perception reflects the asymmetry of capabilities. With the militarization of Crimea and Russian deployments in Syria and Armenia, Turkey had a reason to be circumspect about Moscow.<sup>41</sup> Moscow's 2007 withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) agreement and, more recently, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty mattered too. Russia has proven readier to project force than the West too. Turkish decision-makers point at the weakness of the Western responses to these regional crises. In a TV interview aired on 21 November 2020, for instance, Erdoğan's advisor İbrahim Kalın berated the West for allowing

36 The meeting at the Constantine Palace, built by Catherine the Great, yielded deals on the TurkStream pipeline, the Akkuyu nuclear power station, and the purchase of S-400 surface-to-air missiles. The Turkish government had already established a backchannel to the Kremlin, through the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and the businessman Cavit Çağlar, to explore the restoration of ties.

37 Interviews with Turkish diplomats, June 2014; Interviews with Turkish foreign policy experts, March-April 2018.

38 The North Atlantic Council held an extraordinary meeting under Article 4 but pleaded to both Russia and Turkey to resort to 'diplomacy and de-escalation'; Statement by Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, 24 November 2015. Available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_125052.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_125052.htm) (Accessed 24 August 2023).

39 Michael Reynolds, "Turkey and Russia: a Remarkable Rapprochement", *War on the Rocks*, 24 October 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/turkey-and-russia-a-remarkable-rapprochement/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

40 Sam Jones and Kathrin Hille, "Russia's Military Ambitions Make Waves in the Black Sea", *Financial Times*, 13 May 2016.

41 "Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus", *International Crisis Group*, Europe and Central Asia Report, No 250, 28 June 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/250-russia-and-turkey-black-sea-and-south-caucasus> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

Russia's expansion into Georgia (2008) and subsequently into Ukraine, Syria, and Libya.<sup>42</sup> Turkey, therefore, felt vulnerable vis-à-vis Russia.

Tensions with the US add to Turkish anxiety. Ankara has been critical of *both* Bush-era interventionism and Obama's hands-off approach to the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Bush was acting unilaterally and, from Turkey's perspective, unduly provoked Russia in the Black Sea. Obama's aversion to foreign interventions, demonstrated by the failure to enforce 'red lines' over the use of chemical weapons in Syria in August 2013, emboldened Moscow.<sup>43</sup> The bottom line is that the US would act without regard to Turkish preferences, failing to respond credibly to the Russian threat in the Black Sea and Syria and aiding Syrian Kurds. Turkey's alliance with the US has long been beset by discord. The secular establishment in the 1990s and 2000s begrudged US involvement in the Middle East culminating in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In its assessment, the United States was sowing disorder next to Turkey's borders and abetting, whether unwittingly or on purpose, separatism.<sup>44</sup> AKP gradually shifted to this view, with the collapse of the Kurdish peace process in 2015 and the territorial gains made by Syrian Kurds after teaming up with the US against the self-styled Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIS) completing the turnaround. To quote Aaron Stein, "Turkey has viewed the US as a destabilizing force in the Middle East."<sup>45</sup> Russia is the antidote. In the words of Evren Balta, "Turkey uses Russia to balance the United States and uses NATO to balance Russia."<sup>46</sup>

At its most fundamental, Turkey's connection to Russia reflects its changing self-definition. It has recast itself from a peripheral member of the Western alliance into a self-standing power in a multipolar world.<sup>47</sup> The current governing elite shares the notion that the country should build up independent capabilities to be able to fend for itself.<sup>48</sup> Turkish interventions in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh along with gunboat diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean illustrate this attitude. Erdoğan's claim to leadership over (Sunni) Muslims worldwide or Ankara's outreach to sub-Saharan Africa furnish further examples. The ability to transact on equal footing with non-Western actors such as Russia or China is part and parcel Turkey's quest for status and influence at the global and regional level.

42 İbrahim Kalın interviewed by NTV, "Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü İbrahim Kalın NTV'de", 21 November 2020, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/video/turkiye/cumhurbaskanligi-sozcusu-ibrahim-kalin-ntvde,jN7pBkGBBE6PPVRO37g05Q> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

43 Interviews at the Turkish MFA, June 2014.

44 See Ioannis Grigoriadis, "Friends no More? The Rise of anti-American Nationalism in Turkey", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No 1, 2010, p. 51-66.

45 Stein, "Why Turkey Turned Its Back on the US".

46 Remark at a discussion hosted by the Heinrich Boell Foundation, 10 December 2020.

47 See the essays by Turkish foreign policy experts and practitioners in Dimitar Bechev (ed.), *What does Turkey Think*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2011.

48 Sinan Ülgen, "A Weak Economy Won't Stop Turkey's Activist Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy*, 6 October 2020.; Hugh Pope and Nigar Göksel, "Turkey Does Its Own Thing", *Chatham House*, 1 December 2020.

## Russia's Return to the Middle East

In the 2010s, Turkey made the Middle East the centerpiece of its foreign policy. With the Arab awakening, it pushed for the overthrow of the incumbent regimes and their replacement with AKP-like actors. Russia by contrast became a foremost backer of the status quo. Putin's intervention in Syria (September 2015) was a transformative event. Having salvaged the Assad regime, Moscow emerged as a principal powerbroker capable of thwarting Ankara's ambitions.<sup>49</sup> During the 'jet crisis', Russia applied soft coercion – in the form of commercial sanctions,<sup>50</sup> an information campaign portraying Ankara as an accomplice of jihadi terrorists but also strikes against Turkish allies on the ground – to alter Turkey's preferences. Eventually, Erdoğan sued for peace, opting for co-ordination rather than confrontation with Moscow.

The decision paid off. The Kremlin green-lighted Turkey's intervention in Syria, while Erdoğan brokered the handover of Eastern Aleppo to Assad.<sup>51</sup> The Astana Forum was born at the beginning of 2017 enabling Russia to co-manage Syria along with Turkey and Iran, while excluding the US. The enclaves that Turkish armed forces carved out welcomed internally displaced persons (IDPs) and therefore provided an alternative to settlement in Turkey, where society had turned against cross-border arrivals.<sup>52</sup> Beyond Syria, friendship with Russia has provided Ankara with extra leverage vis-a-vis its regional competitors like Iran or Saudi Arabia.<sup>53</sup> Turkey furthermore appreciates Russia's not taking sides in the maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>54</sup> In short, the benefits of working with Russia outweigh the costs associated with its presence in Turkey's 'near abroad'.

## Surging Anti-Western Sentiment in Turkey

Erdoğan's clash with the US and Europe, accelerating after the July 15, 2016, coup attempt, has brought him closer to Putin. As Özel observes, "[i]n contrast to the West's passivity as the coup unfolded, Russia stood by Ankara. Many Turks were deeply disappointed with the West's lack of solidarity at the time."<sup>55</sup> Putin sided with Erdoğan early on. In a call on July 17, he expressed condolences for the coup's victims and urged a return to order and stability.<sup>56</sup> Obama called two days later, even though he had rejected the putsch on July 15.<sup>57</sup>

49 Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East*, Cambridge, Polity, 2018, Chapter 2.

50 Russian authorities discouraged tourists from vacationing in Turkey, reimposed visas, barred Turkish construction companies and agricultural imports from the market.

51 At the time, Turkey saw mass street protests before the Russian Consulate in central Istanbul. Ire culminated in the assassination of Ambassador Andrei Karlov by a disgruntled former policeman in Ankara on 19 December 2016. This blood-chilling act, captured on camera, did not derail the rapprochement which had normalized ties mere months beforehand.

52 "Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions", *International Crisis Group*, Report 248, 29 January 2018, .

53 See the chapters by Julien Barnes Dacey and Dmitriy Frolovskiy in Stanislav Secrieru, Dimitar Bechev and Nicu Popescu, eds., *Resurgent Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021.

54 Personal communication by an expert on Russian-Turkish relations, December 2020.

55 Soli Özel, "Whiter Turkey-Russia Relations?", *Robert Bosch Academy*.

56 "Putin Calls Erdogan to Express Condolences for the Victims of the Coup Attempt", *Daily Sabah*, 17 July 2016. <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/07/17/putin-calls-erdogan-express-condolences-for-the-victims-of-coup-attempt> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

57 "Obama Rejects Attempted Military Coup in Turkey", *Politico*, 15 July 2016. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/barack-obama-turkey-coup-225642> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

Shared fears of Western meddling explain why Russia took most credit. In Turkey, the pro-government media linked both the Gezi protests of 2013, a ‘color revolution’ of sorts, and the failed military coup to US security agencies.<sup>58</sup> Turkish public opinion became convinced that the US was behind the conspiracy to topple Erdoğan.<sup>59</sup> Russia won praise for clamping down on Fethullah Gülen’s movement, the principal suspect for the putsch residing in the US, in the mid-2000s. While the West has been sabotaging Turkey, pro-AKP opinion-makers asserted, the Russians had proven trustworthy and supportive.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, Erdoğan has drawn a contrast between Russia’s positive treatment of its own Muslim citizens to alleged Islamophobia in the West. On September 23, 2015, he delivered a speech at the opening of the renovated Cathedral Mosque (*Sobornaya Mechet*) in Moscow, in the presence of Putin and Russia’s Chief Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin (a Kazan Tatar). He called the place of worship “a symbol of Muslims’ peaceful future in Russia.”<sup>61</sup>

To be sure, Russia-friendly rhetoric in Turkey is a symptom of the animosity towards the West rather than a token of genuine attraction. Moscow’s image has gone through ups and downs, which suggests that the public takes cues from its leaders.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, multiple surveys capture the entrenched belief that Turkey is on its own in a threatening world.<sup>63</sup> The ‘lone wolf’ narrative, rooted in Turkish nationalism, resonates with Turkey’s self-understanding as an independent power equidistant from both Russia and the West.<sup>64</sup>

### **Converging Attitudes to State Power**

Both Russia and Turkey share a political culture prioritizing state sovereignty over individual rights. Russia’s loss of international status after the Soviet collapse, reminiscent of the Ottoman disintegration that was blamed on European imperialism, and a love-hate relationship with the West are common themes.<sup>65</sup> Putin’s strongman rule delivering modernization and willingness to stand up to the West has appealed to segments of Turkish society spanning the secular/pious divide. “A Kemalist in the Kremlin,” the Turkish press lauded the Russian president during his

58 A good example is furnished by İbrahim Karagül, “US Terrorists are Attacking Turkey”, *Yeni Şafak*, 21 July 2016. See also Koru, “The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations”, p. 14.

59 Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, “Turks Can Agree on One Thing: US is Behind Failed Coup”, *New York Times*, 3 August 2016.

60 At the same time, it is true that Russian state media such as the Turkish-language version of the Sputnik agency often take an anti-government line in their coverage of domestic affairs and Turkey’s foreign policy. “Russian Propaganda Outlets Prosper in Turkey”, *Economist*, 28 February 2019. In May 2020, Turkey’s state-owned international channel, TRT World, unveiled a service in Russian.

61 “President Erdoğan Attends Moscow Central Mosque Opening Ceremony”, *Turkish Presidency*, 23 September 2015, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/35424/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-moskova-merkez-camisinin-acilis-torenine-katildi> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

62 Aydın-Düzgüt, Balta and O’Donohue, “Turkey, Russia, and the West”, p. 7.

63 See the annual survey of foreign policy perceptions carried out by Kadir Has University in Istanbul. “Research on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy”, 7 May 2019, <https://www.khas.edu.tr/en/haberler/research-public-perceptions-turkish-foreign-policy-2019-0> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

64 Galip Dalay, “After the S-400 Purchase: Where are Turkish-Russian Relations Heading?”, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, 3 September 2019.

65 Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

first visit to the country in 2004.<sup>66</sup> Then, hardline secularists in the military and the bureaucracy opposed to EU-promoted liberal reforms and resentful of US foreign policy argued for an alliance with Russia.<sup>67</sup> Originally at odds with AKP, the so-called Eurasianists transferred their loyalties to Erdoğan following the rift with the Gülenists in the mid-2010s. That does not mean that Russophilia drives Ankara's policy. The Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) – historically opposed to Moscow – wields greater influence in the pro-Erdoğan bloc than the Eurasianists.<sup>68</sup>

There is scant empirical evidence that regime likeness drives Turkish-Russian cooperation, beyond the obvious fact that the absence of institutional checks and balances gives leaders flexibility to make mutual commitments.<sup>69</sup> As discussed, Turkey cooperated intensely with the Russian Federation during the liberal era in the 2000s. In addition, Erdoğan's personalistic regime, categorized by scholars as competitive authoritarianism,<sup>70</sup> differs from the Russian political system defined by a lower level of contestation, shorter history of free and fair elections, and an economy based on natural resources. Convergence between Russia and Turkey is only partial, in that they share characteristics generic to all (semi-)authoritarian regimes.<sup>71</sup>

### **Economic Interdependence**

Thanks to energy, Russia and Turkey have seen their economies increasingly intertwined. The Blue Stream gas pipeline in 2005 turned Turkey into Gazprom's second-largest market for Russian gas after Germany. TurkStream, replacing the Trans-Balkan Pipeline that supplied western Turkey, has now added a new layer to the relationship. Yet the Russian share of the Turkish gas market, traditionally hovering around 50%, has been in decline of late.<sup>72</sup> After visas were abolished in 2011, Russians quickly became one of the largest groups of foreign visitors to the country, usually surpassed only by Germans. Tens of thousands of Russians own vacation property along the Aegean and the Mediterranean coasts. In 2018, a record 5.9 million Russian citizens visited Turkey, an increase of 25% compared to the previous year.<sup>73</sup> The depreciation of the Turkish lira amidst economic turmoil over the past year or

66 Suat Kınıklıoğlu and Valeriy Morkva, "An Anatomy of Russian-Turkish Relations", *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 7, No 1, 2007, p. 533.

67 Şener Aktürk, "The Fourth Style of Politics: Eurasianism as a pro-Russian Rethinking of Turkey's Geopolitical Identity", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 16, No 1, 2015, p. 54-79; Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "The Rise of Eurasianism in Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle East Institute*, 2019.

68 For the different articulations of Turkish nationalism, both secular and religious conservative, see Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014.

69 Aydın-Düzgüç, Balta and O'Donohue, "Turkey, Russia, and the West", p. 7-8.

70 Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No 9, 2016, p. 1581-160; Stephen Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

71 Dimitar Bechev and Suat Kınıklıoğlu, "Turkey and Russia: no Birds of the Same Feather", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, SWP Comment 24/2020, 24 May 2020.

72 Turkey imported about 23.96 bcm in 2018. That compared to 7.86 bcm from Iran and 7.52 bcm from Azerbaijan 7.52 bcm in 2018. Data from Gazprom Export and the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) <http://www.gazpromexport.ru> <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/>.

73 By comparison, 3.5 million arrived in 2014. Numbers went down in 2015 because of terrorist attacks and in 2016 as a result of Russian sanctions. Turkish 2015 tourism revenues fall 8.3 pct to \$31.46 bln. *Hürriyet Daily News*, 29 January 2016.



so has made the country even more attractive. At the same time, it has raised the price of dollar-denominated imports from Russia. That exacerbates the structural trade deficit that has been a sore spot in bilateral relations since the 1990s. Thanks to hydrocarbons as well as other commodities such as wheat, Russia is a top source of imports to Turkey, right after the EU and China. But Russia has been far below in the list of Turkish export destinations, behind the likes of Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Israel and even Romania and Bulgaria. Of a total turnover of some \$26.5 bn in 2019, imports from Russia stand at nearly \$23.1 bn. The war in Ukraine and Western sanctions have changed the dynamics to a degree, with turnover doubling from \$34.73 bn in 2021 to \$68.19 bn in 2022.<sup>74</sup> Imports from Russia surged from \$28.96 bn to \$58.85 bn, mostly on account of discounted Russian crude oil but also on account of record-high natural gas prices through 2021-2022. Russia became Turkey's largest trading partner, overtaking China.<sup>75</sup> In addition, Turkey has left the door open to nearly 200,000 middle-class Russians who have found refuge in Istanbul, Antalya, and other coastal towns. The increase of trade has raised concerns about Turkey providing a backdoor for Russia to bypass Western sanctions.<sup>76</sup> However, in late September 2022, Turkish banks withdrew from the Mir payment system set up by Moscow, fearing secondary sanctions by the United States.<sup>77</sup>

All in all, economic linkages between Russia and Turkey both limit competition but also provide each party with strategic leverage.

## Russia and Turkey in Action

Turkey's turn to Russia is a product of necessity and therefore tentative. This is demonstrated by Turkey's interaction with Russia on several critical issues: Syria, Libya, the S-400 missile acquisition, energy, and security in the Black Sea and the Southern Caucasus. Each of those examples demonstrates that policy coordination has not eliminated Russian-Turkish rivalry, much less produced a durable alignment.

### Syria

In the initial stages of the Syrian war, Russia and Turkey avoided a frontal collision. The 'jet crisis', however, brought them into a direct conflict, which damaged the Turkish economy. According to early estimates by Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek in late 2015, Turkey was to lose more than \$9 billion, over 1% of its GDP, because of Russian sanctions.<sup>78</sup> Moscow's airstrikes assisted Turkey's adversaries, the Assad regime, and the Syrian Kurds, in making territorial gains at the expense of its allies such as the Salafist

74 Data from the Turkish Statistical Institute.

75 Turkey's share in Russia's exports rose from 2% to 7%.

76 FT Reporters, "Surge in Turkish Exports to Russia Raises Western Fears of Closer Ties", *The Financial Times*, 16 August 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/caee1ae3-41c5-4c85-8d66-a8d3eea3112d> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

77 Can Sezer, "Turkey's State Banks Suspend Use of Russian Mir Payment System – Finance Minister", 29 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/turkeys-ziraat-bank-suspends-use-russian-mir-payment-system-ceo-2022-09-29/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

78 "Mehmet Şimşek'ten Rusya İtirafı: ,9 milyar dolar", *Cumhuriyet*, 7 December 2015.



force Ahrar al-Sham and the various factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), including Turkmen militias.

The relaunch of relations allowed Turkey to regain ground. With air support from Russia that targeted ISIS, the Turkish Armed Forces and the FSA carried out operation ‘Euphrates Shield’ (August 2016-March 2017), carving out a buffer zone north of Aleppo and pushing out ISIS. In effect, Turkey stemmed the People Protection Forces (YPG)<sup>79</sup> westwards advance which was threatening to seal off the entire 900-km length of the Turkish-Syrian border. In early 2018, Russia allowed Turks to capture the Afrin enclave from YPG by opening Syrian airspace and withdrawing its military police hitherto embedded with the Kurdish militia. Russia hammered out a deal with Turkey after the Trump administration allowed the Turkish military and its Arab proxies to clear YPG from parts of northeast Syria between the border towns of Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad (Operation ‘Peace Spring’) in October 2019. Meeting in Sochi, Putin and Erdoğan initiated joint Russian-Turkish patrols to separate Turkey’s forces from the Kurds. In parallel, Moscow brokered an arrangement between the Kurdish militants and Assad, enabling the regime to move into parts of the northeast. Turkey and Russia thus divided the spoils, as the US pulled out most of its troops.<sup>80</sup>

Russia has profited from working with Turkey as well. The Astana talks co-hosted with the Turks and the Iranians have empowered Moscow to act as peacemaker reaching out to ‘the moderate opposition’, i.e., more or less anyone apart from ISIS and the al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Moscow championed de-escalation zones across Syria, including the city of Idlib and the surrounding region. Over time, however, Astana turned into a diplomatic fig leaf, allowing the regime and the Russians to retake, step by step, insurgent territories across the country. Moscow has played a double game vis-a-vis the Kurdish issue too: never fully cutting its political and military links to the Syrian Kurds nor listing the PKK as a terrorist organization, unlike the US and Europe, which Turks casually blame for abetting separatism.<sup>81</sup> The Kremlin also hopes Turkey could contribute to post-conflict reconstruction. In October 2018, Erdoğan discussed the issue with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Vladimir Putin. The Turkish-held enclaves in the north, where the Turkish lira is now legal tender, have benefited from financial transfers from Ankara at a time when the Syrian economy is in free fall.<sup>82</sup> The areas in question have turned into a conduit of badly needed foreign currency in regime-controlled parts.<sup>83</sup> In addition, in January 2019, Putin pushed for a reconciliation between Turkey and the Assad regime, going back to the so-called Adana Agreement of October 1998.<sup>84</sup>

79 YPG, the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) established under PKK auspices in 2003, formed the core of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US-supported militia including also local Arab tribes and other ethnic elements.

80 About 500 U.S. troops remain deployed in the Deir ez Zor Governorate, with a mission to fight ISIS and protect oil wells. See Luke Morgelson, “America’s Abandonment of Syria”, *New Yorker*, 20 April 2020.

81 Gönül Tol, “Why is Turkey Silent on Russia’s with the Syrian Kurds?”, *War on the Rocks*, 19 December 2017.

82 Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, “A New Gaza: Turkey’s Border Policy in Northern Syria”, Policy Brief, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2020.

83 “Where Does the Syrian Regime Get Foreign Currency From?”, *Enab Baladi*, 8 July 2020, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/07/where-does-the-syrian-regime-get-foreign-currency-from/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

84 The protocol foresaw cooperation between Ankara and Damascus in fighting the PKK previously hosted by the Assad regime. Köstem, “Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria”, p. 14.

Idlib, the last remaining rebel-held enclave in northwest Syria, put on display the fragility of the Russian-Turkish partnership. In September 2018, Putin and Erdoğan brokered a deal under whose terms the Turks agreed to disarm HTS in exchange for a ceasefire and permission for the Turkish army to deploy in the area. The deal floundered right from the outset. HTS entrenched itself and Assad resumed his onslaught in late 2019 backed by the Russian air force.<sup>85</sup> A regime takeover of Idlib threatened to unleash a refugee wave, with 3.6 million Syrians, including a great number of IDPs, camping out right at the Turkish border. Moscow and Ankara came dangerously close to the brink, as Turkey ramped up its military presence and took on Assad's forces. On February 27, 2020, 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in an air raid attributable to Russia. However, Ankara laid the blame on the regime and kept talking to Moscow. Russia meanwhile stood on the sidelines as the Turkish military delivered heavy blows on Assad. The Russians also guaranteed the security of Turkish observation posts surrounded by the regime. In the end, yet another summit by Putin and Erdoğan (March 5, 2020) yielded a ceasefire, which in effect partitioned the Idlib area, while Russia and Turkey launched joint patrols along the M4 highway linking Latakia and Aleppo. Turkey was spared from a major influx of refugees. Russia meanwhile transferred strategically located territory to the regime, with tacit approval by Ankara.

The ceasefire has largely held since then, which Russia has used as a steppingstone to encourage a rapprochement between Turkey and the Assad regime. In December 2022 and April 2023, the Turkish and Syrian defense ministers held talks in Moscow hosted by the Russians.<sup>86</sup>

Overall, Syria turned from a bone of contention to an area of cooperation between Moscow and Ankara. Turkey needs Russian support to keep Kurdish militants at bay and possibly repatriate part of the estimated 3.9 million Syrian refugees present in Turkey. Russia, on the other hand, wants Turkish support to rehabilitate Assad.

## Libya

Russia and Turkey find themselves on the opposing sides of Libya's civil war as well. While Erdoğan has thrown his weight behind the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, Russia supports General Khalifa Haftar based in the east. Ankara has sent heavy weaponry and UAVs,<sup>87</sup> instructors, mercenaries (including at least 2000 Syrian militiamen),<sup>88</sup> deployed its navy off the coast of Libya and has been using intelligence-gathering capabilities to aid Tripoli – emulating the Russian example from Syria. At the same time, Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group (probably backed by operatives of Russia's Military Intelligence, GRU) have

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85 Charles Lister, "Assad Hasn't Won Anything", *Foreign Policy*, 11 July 2019.

86 In April 2023, Iran attended as well.

87 The Libyan campaign has tested and showcased to potential customers weapon systems developed by the Turkish defence industry, such as the Bayraktar T2 drone (also used in Idlib and, in the autumn of 2020, in Nagorno-Karabakh), the same way Syria did for Russian arms exporters.

88 Bethan McKernan and Hussein Akoush, "2000 Syrian Fighters Deployed to Libya to Support Government", *Guardian*, 15 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/exclusive-2000-syrian-troops-deployed-to-libya-to-support-regime> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

been fighting alongside Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).<sup>89</sup> Russia is part of a broader coalition backing Haftar along with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Yet, it enjoys diplomatic and commercial ties to Tripoli too.

Erdoğan and Putin have tried to use the momentum from Syria to co-ordinate on Libya. In January 2020, for instance, they called for a ceasefire and took part in an international conference on the Libyan conflict in Berlin. The conference's failure led to Turkey doubling down on its political and military support for GNA.<sup>90</sup> GNA repelled Haftar from Tripoli and moved the frontline to Sirte, the gateway to the eastern oilfields, and the Jufrah airbase, LNA's operational hub in central Libya. Still, in a gesture to Russia, Turkish armed forces allowed Wagner mercenaries to withdraw from the Tripoli area.<sup>91</sup> However, Moscow beefed up its support for Haftar, deploying warplanes and possibly air-defense systems to Jufrah and Khadima.<sup>92</sup> The Kremlin, replacing UAE as LNA's leading patron,<sup>93</sup> drew a red line, though Turkey entertained the idea of an Astana-like forum with Russia to deal with Syria. Still, the fighting subsided, UN-led talks gathered momentum, and eventually GNA's head Fayeze al-Sarraj and the speaker of the Benghazi-based parliament Aguila Saleh agreed on a ceasefire in October 2020. Russia and Turkey, which kept pushing for LNA's withdrawal from Sirte, watched with skepticism from the sidelines and continued building up their clients' capabilities.<sup>94</sup> Attempts to build a unity government under Abdul Hamid al-Dbeibeh, appointed in February 2021, have not yielded fruit, nor has the Wagner group withdrawn from Libya, a core Turkish demand. That suggests that the proxy conflict could easily be reignited, putting pressure on Moscow and Ankara.

### **The S-400 Issue**

The 2017 deal to purchase an S-400 air-defense system exemplifies the Russian-Turkish partnership's depth as well as its limits. Paid by a \$2.5 billion loan from Moscow, the missiles reached Turkey in July 2019.<sup>95</sup> The sale of advanced weaponry to a pivotal NATO member has given the Russians a key political win. Tensions between Turkey and the US have risen dramatically, leading to sanctions under the Countering Americas Adversaries

89 Jalel Harchaoui, "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya", *War on the Rocks*, 7 January 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/> (Accessed 24 August 2023); Erdoğan has repeatedly called out the Wagner Group. "Erdoğan Says Turkey Won't Be Silent Over Mercenaries in Libya", *Reuters*, 20 December 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-turkey-russia-idUSKBN1YO1GD> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

90 "Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters", *International Crisis Group*, Report 257, Europe and Central Asia, 30 April 2020.

91 Harchaoui, "The Pendulum".

92 Brian Katz and Joseph Bermudez Jr., "Moscow's Next Front: Russia's Expanding Footprint in Libya", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 17 June 2020.

93 Harchaoui, "The Pendulum".

94 Erdoğan expressed scepticism whether the ceasefire would last. "Libyan Factions Sign 'Permanent' Ceasefire, Erdoğan Casts Doubt", *The Arab Weekly*, 23 October 2020.

95 Can Kasapoğlu, "Turkey's S-400 Dilemma", *EDAM*, 31 July 2017, <https://edam.org.tr/en/turkeys-s-400-dilemma/>; Aaron Stein, "The Russian Missile that Could End the U.S.-Turkish Alliance", *War on the Rocks*, 12 March 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/the-russian-missile-that-could-end-the-u-s-turkish-alliance/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Washington has been concerned about the S-400s being able to gather and transmit data about its state-of-the-art fighter F-35. That is why eventually Turkey was removed from the international consortium behind the fifth-generation jet, while some of its adversaries – Israel and perhaps Greece and UAE – can acquire it. By way of compensation, Putin offered to the Turks Russia’s top-shelf Su-57 as well as the Su-35.<sup>96</sup>

Erdoğan justified the S-400 acquisition with potential technology transfer promising to boost the Turkish defense industry. Yet, like US and Western European suppliers, Russia was unwilling to share technology. Analysts have interpreted the purchase as payback to Putin for the normalization of ties<sup>97</sup> or as ‘coup-proofing’<sup>98</sup>, that is insurance against a future takeover attempt as in 2016. Erdoğan has hinted at the possibility of not operationalizing the S-400s or even acquiring U.S.-manufactured Patriot missiles, suggesting he still sees the Russian weapons as a bargaining chip. During the Idlib crisis in February 2020, he asked the US to deploy Patriots to the adjacent Turkish province of Hatay, presumably to deter Russia.<sup>99</sup> The political cost of the S-400 initially looked bearable too. Erdoğan’s personal rapport with President Donald Trump spared Turkey from CAATSA penalties.<sup>100</sup> However, on December 14, 2020, the outgoing administration imposed asset freezes on the Turkish defense procurement agency (SBB) and some of its senior officials. These are minor sanctions, sparing the economy at large, and therefore will not cause a breakup with Washington. If Ankara procures a second batch of S-400s, as agreed with Moscow, the Biden administration will probably trigger additional punitive measures. Thus, Turkey’s balancing act between Russia and the West has been more complicated. Indeed, Ankara has struggled to procure F-16 jets and modernization packages from the United States, a replacement for the cancelled F-35 order.<sup>101</sup>

## Energy

Energy also illustrates the complexity of bilateral relations. Since the 1990s, Turkey has been a major market for Russian gas. Once the nuclear power plant at Akkuyu is completed in the 2024-25,<sup>102</sup> the Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom will have a stake in the electricity

96 Aaron Stein and Robert Hamilton, “How America’s Experience with Pakistan Can Help It Deal with Turkey”, *War on the Rocks*, 25 August 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/how-americas-experience-with-pakistan-can-help-it-deal-with-turkey/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

97 See comments by Ragıp Soylu, of the Middle East Eye, 12 July 2019.

98 Tom Karako, “Coup-proofing? Making Sense of Turkey’s S-400 Decision”, *CSIS*, 15 July 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/coup-proofing-making-sense-turkeys-s-400-decision> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

99 Selcan Hacaoglu, “Turkey Seeks U.S. Patriot Missiles to Deter Russia in Syria”, *Bloomberg*, 20 February 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-20/turkey-asks-u-s-for-patriot-missiles-to-deter-russia-in-idlib>. (Accessed 24 August 2023).

100 Turkey has been probing US’ limits. For more than a year it did not deploy the S-400s but then, in October 2020, conducted a test. Alex Gatopoulos, “What Could Turkey’s Latest S-400 Missile Tests Mean?”, *Al Jazeera*, 12 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/12/what-could-turkeys-latest-s-400-missile-tests-mean> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

101 Alper Coşkun, “Turkey’s F-16 Gambit Is a Chance to Revive Turkish-U.S. Defense Cooperation”, *Carnegie Endowment*, 27 October 2021.

102 The launch ceremony took place on 27 April 2023, with Putin and Erdogan delivering speeches over video link.

market as well. With 1,114 MW, Akkuyu's first (out of four in total) unit corresponds to roughly 1.6% of the country's current generation capacity. Turkey hopes to partly replace Ukraine as an export route for Russian gas bound for Europe in the 2020s, a prospect that may come true in 2024 in the likely event of the non-renewal of the transit agreement between Gazprom and Naftogaz. TurkStream launched by Putin and Erdoğan in January 2020 consists of two parallel strings with a combined capacity of 31.5 billion cubic meters (bcm) bound for Turkey and the Balkans/the EU respectively.<sup>103</sup>

Turkish policymakers and experts single out diversification away from Russia as a strategic objective. The much-discussed Southern Gas Corridor, tapping into deposits off Azerbaijan's Caspian coast, is becoming a reality with the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and its extension into the EU, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).<sup>104</sup> Notably, Turkey has expanded its purchases of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Algeria, Qatar, Nigeria, and the US.<sup>105</sup> As a result, gas imports from Russia shrank by over a third in 2019.<sup>106</sup> The bulk of long-term contracts with Gazprom are set to expire by 2025, and Ankara will no doubt use LNG and Azerbaijani gas as a bargaining chip to extract concessions.<sup>107</sup> The discovery of natural gas deposits initially estimated at 320 bcm in Turkey's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Black Sea gives it extra leverage vis-à-vis Russia as well. Ankara's goal is to capitalize on geography and enhance its independence, reducing Moscow's advantage.

The war in Ukraine and the breakdown of Russian gas deliveries to much of the EU has given Turkey additional leverage. Indeed, in October 2022, Vladimir Putin pitched the idea of Turkey becoming a 'gas hub' for Russian gas – a long-term priority for Ankara.<sup>108</sup> This opens the opportunity for the state company BOTAŞ to buy additional volumes from Gazprom and resell to customers in the EU and the Middle East. What remains to be seen are the commercial and technical aspects of a prospective deal, especially given that BOTAŞ' long-term contracts with Gazprom will be expiring at the end of 2025. The Europeans' outreach to Azerbaijan has furthermore enhanced Turkey's significance as a transit country.<sup>109</sup>

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However, the plant will come online the following year.

103 With the stoppage of shipments through the Nordstream pipeline in 2022, TurkStream remains the main shipping route to customers in Central Europe.

104 TAP came online in November 2020, while TANAP has been operational since 2018.

105 Turkey has invested heavily in capacity. A new floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) entered into service in July 2019. It is located close to Izmir, on the Turkish Aegean coast. That is added to an FSRU off the coast of the Hatay province, which began operating in February 2018. Turkey now has five LNG import facilities. "Turkey's New LNG Storage, Regasification Unit to Dock in Izmir Today", *Daily Sabah*, 5 July 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2019/07/05/turkeys-new-lng-storage-regasification-unit-to-dock-in-izmir-today> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

106 Purchases from Azerbaijan rose by a third and reached 9.2 bcm while LNG, from a variety of suppliers including the US, went up to 11 bcm or about a quarter of all natural gas imports. Brenda Shaffer, "Turkey's Westward Energy Shift", *Middle East Institute*, 15 January 2020. See TÜİK's website for up-to-date data.

107 Eser Özdil, "How Turkey Benefits from the Global LNG Glut", *Atlantic Council*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/how-turkey-benefits-from-global-lng-glut/>

108 Gabriel Gavin, "Erdoğan Plays Energy Card in Turkish Election – with Putin's Help", *Politico*, 4 May 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-election-energy-recep-tayyip-erdogan-nuclear-gas-russia/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

109 Turkey may have received budgetary support from the Kremlin too, amounting to €30 billion in direct transfers and another €20 billion in deferred payments from the state-owned utility company BOTAŞ to Gazprom.



## Security in the Black Sea and the Southern Caucasus

Turkey has been hedging against Russia in the post-Soviet space. First, it contributes to NATO's 'tailored forward presence' designed to reassure allies and set red lines for Moscow through regular exercises, rotation of naval ships from outside the Black Sea area, and a multinational brigade based in Romania.<sup>110</sup> Second, Turkey has been cultivating a three-way economic and military alliance with Georgia and Azerbaijan. Its accomplishments include the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway inaugurated in 2017 as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (gas) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (oil) pipelines. Third, Turkey nurtures ties with Ukraine. Turnover stands at around \$4 bn and a free-trade deal is near conclusion, as the one Turks have with Georgia and Moldova. Relations are steered by a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council, as is the case with Russia. Kyiv is eager to develop defense industry links as well.<sup>111</sup> Significantly, Turkey officially opposes the annexation of Crimea and favors NATO's expansion to Georgia, Ukraine etc.

Nagorno-Karabakh, disputed between Armenia and Azerbaijan, showcases the cooperation/competition dynamic shaping Russian-Turkish relations. Putin and Erdoğan avoided being dragged into the conflict as fighting resumed around the breakaway enclave in April 2016, i.e., during the 'jet crisis'. During the escalation in September-November 2020, Turkey aided Azerbaijan by dispatching military instructors, UAVs, and reportedly its own air force.<sup>112</sup> The war wrongfooted Russia as it exposed its waning influence in its own backyard, inability to restrain Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the irrelevance of the defensive alliance with Yerevan. Ceasefires brokered by the Kremlin did not hold. Turkey scored points at Russia's expense as the Azeris recovered territory that Armenians had controlled since the early 1990s, including Shusha/Shushi, Karabakh's historic center. In effect, Erdoğan inserted Turkey into Moscow's claimed privileged sphere of influence, much like Putin did in 2015 with Syria. A Kremlin-mediated deal (November 9, 2020) led to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers, something Baku had previously opposed. Though Moscow seemingly gained the upper hand, Erdoğan declared victory too. The agreement foresaw the opening of a transport corridor between Azerbaijan proper and Turkey through the Nakhichevan exclave. Ankara also set up a military observation point, claiming a stake in the Russian-led peacekeeping operation.<sup>113</sup>

The war opened an opportunity for Turkey and Armenia to resume the normalization process abandoned in 2010. In October 2022, Erdoğan met President Nikol Pashinyan at the

110 "Boosting NATO's Presence in the East and the Southeast", *NATO.int*.

111 In October 2020, President Volodymyr Zelensky discussed joint aircraft production during a talk with Erdoğan in Ankara. "Turkish, Ukrainian Cooperation Deepens: Erdoğan", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 October 2020, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-ukrainian-cooperation-deepens-erdogan-159215> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

112 Ragıp Soylu, "Turkish F-16s Kept in Azerbaijan 'as Deterrent against Armenian Attacks'", *Middle East Eye*, 8 October 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-armenia-azerbaijan-f16-deterrent-against-attacks>. (Accessed 24 August 2023). There were stories of Syrian fighters sent to Azerbaijan too, though Turkish authorities denied them at the time. Ed Butler, "Syrian Mercenaries Used as Cannon Fodder in Nagorno-Karabakh", *BBC*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-55238803> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

113 The Grand National Assembly authorized the deployment on November 17, 2020. Erdoğan attended a victory parade in Baku the following month.



inaugural summit of the European Political Community in Prague.<sup>114</sup> Armenia offered aid and rescue teams to Turkey following the devastating earthquake in February 2023. Progress in the talks, however, is contingent on whether Azerbaijan and Armenia are able to sign a peace treaty, possibly bringing Karabakh under Baku's full control. In case there is a settlement, Turkey will be able to establish an even greater presence in the Southern Caucasus at Russia's expense.

### **Turkey's Response to the Ukraine Invasion**

The Turkish response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine echoed its reaction to the crisis of 2014-5. Like then, Erdoğan opposed any attempt to change the territorial *status quo*. As happened after the annexation of Crimea, Turkey denounced the 'referendums' in September 2022 aimed at legalizing the occupation of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk by Russia. Turkey voted alongside the West in the UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the war, and Erdoğan visited Lviv to meet President Zelensky on August 18, 2022.

Turkey has been trying to tip the balance of power against Russia in various ways. Ankara has been providing Ukrainians with arms, including the TB2 Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which became the stuff of legend during the defense of Kyiv in the first stage of the war, and laser-guided missiles.<sup>115</sup> Ukraine has been cooperating with Turkey's national naval program (MILGEM). In October, the *Hetman Ivan Mazepa* corvette was launched in Istanbul, which will be further equipped before being delivered to Ukraine<sup>116</sup>. In March, Turkish authorities closed the Straits to naval ships, as prescribed by the Montreux Convention. That made it impossible for Russia to reinforce its Black Sea fleet whose flagship, the *Moskva*, was sunk by the Ukrainians on April 14, 2022.

At the same time, Turkey has refused to confront Russia and burn its bridges with Putin. Indeed, Erdoğan has continued to engage with Putin and to act as a go-between with both Kyiv and the West, starting with a visit to Ukraine's capital on February 3, 2022 – weeks before the Russian assault. On March 10, 2022, foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu hosted a meeting between Sergei Lavrov and Dmytro Kuleba, his counterparts from Ukraine and Russia, on the margins of a conference in Antalya. Then, David Arakhamia and Vladimir Medinsky, appointed as mediators by Kyiv and Moscow, met in Istanbul on March 29. Neither of those meetings yielded any tangible result, such as a ceasefire in Ukraine. After the discovery of the Bucha massacre, negotiations were suspended.

114 Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "Turkey and Armenia just Gave the World a Welcome Bit of Good News", *The Washington Post*, 7 October 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/07/turkey-armenia-erdogan-pashinyan-meeting/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

115 Ragıp Soylu, "Turkey Supplied Laser-guided Missiles to Ukraine", *Middle East Eye*, 23 November 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-supplied-laser-guided-missiles-ukraine> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

116 Tayfun Ozberk, "Turkish Shipyard Launches Ukraine's 1st MILGEM Corvette", *Naval News*, 3 October 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/10/turkish-shipyard-launches-hetman-ivan-mazepa/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

Turkey's efforts to broker a deal on grain exports from Ukraine led to a breakthrough. On July 22, Sergey Shoigu, the Russian defense minister, and Oleksandr Kubrakov, Ukraine's transport and infrastructure minister, agreed to establish 'a grain corridor' from the ports of Chornomorsk, Odesa, and Yuzhny/Pivdennyi for a period of three months, subject to renewal. In the presence of Erdoğan and the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, the two sides signed two parallel documents. Under their terms, officials from Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, and the UN were to inspect ships crossing the Bosphorus en route to Odesa at a Joint Command Centre (JCC) in Istanbul to verify they were not carrying any weapons. Both sides committed not to attack commercial ships. The Ukrainians agreed to remove sea mines in the waters around Odesa, laid there to prevent an amphibious assault.

Turkey attaches great value to the grain corridor.<sup>117</sup> It is essential for its own food security but also enhances the country's international prestige. The notion of Turkey as a leader exerting influence among Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and Africa looms large in the AKP and Erdoğan's foreign policy rhetoric. Those countries have been particularly vulnerable to food inflation driven by the disruption of grain supplies from Ukraine and Russia, two leading exporters. Thus far, the deal has defied sceptics and remained in place, with up to 10 million tons of grain shipped out of Ukraine in its first three months.<sup>118</sup> On October 29, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that Moscow was withdrawing from the deal in response to Ukrainian drone strikes against the Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol. However, on November 2, the agreement was renewed after talks between Turkish and Russian defense ministers Hulusi Akar and Shoigu. Ukraine failed to obtain a counter-concession to add Mykolaiv as a fourth port from which grain could be safely shipped.<sup>119</sup> The deal was extended once more, for two month-period, in May 2023.

## Conclusion

Turkey's partial alignment with Russia is a function of power shifts at the global and regional levels. In the 1990s, Moscow and Ankara profited from the end of the Cold War to upgrade their economic ties and engage in ad hoc cooperation on security. When Russia began asserting itself in the post-Soviet space and the Black Sea in the mid-2000s, Turkey opted for a mix of accommodation and balancing, in stark contrast with the U.S. policy that the Kremlin saw

117 Turkey has also mediated in prisoner swaps between the US and Russia and Ukraine and Russia. It hosted a meeting between CIA head William Burns and the director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin on 14 November. Most recently, Ankara tried to mediate a temporary ceasefire during Christmas according to the Julian Calendar observed by Orthodox Russians and Ukrainians (7 January). <https://www.reuters.com/world/erdogan-tells-putin-ceasefire-needed-ukraine-peace-efforts-presidency-2023-01-05/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

118 Betül Yuruk, "UN Says 10 Million Tons of Grain Shipped in 3 Months as It Urges Renewal of Ukraine Deal", *Anadolu Agency*, 3 November 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/un-says-10-million-tons-of-grain-shipped-in-3-months-as-it-urges-renewal-of-ukraine-deal/2728965> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

119 The UN has been trying to negotiate a concession by Kyiv allowing Russian ammonia to be exported through a pipeline running from the Volga region to Odesa. Yet the Ukrainian authorities appear not to have opened the route at the moment. Guy Faulconbridge and Michelle Nichols, "UN Trying to Get Russian Ammonia to World through Ukraine", *Reuters*, 14 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/un-proposed-ammonia-deal-ukraine-would-stabilise-grain-deal-diplomat-2022-09-13/> (Accessed 24 August 2023).

as a paramount challenge. Ankara's choice was dictated primarily by mistrust of the West and perceived vulnerability vis-à-vis Moscow, with economic and domestic political factors playing a secondary role. The Arab Spring and the Ukraine crisis strengthened such views. The showdown over Syria in 2015-6 exposed the Turkish inability to fight off Russia single-handedly. In response, Ankara reached back to Moscow hoping to recuperate lost influence and roll back its adversaries on the ground.

The same structural logic has been reproduced during the Ukraine invasion. Facing strong push-back from the West as well as stiff resistance from the Ukrainian forces, Russia has been compelled to strengthen ties with other players such as China, India, and, of course, Turkey. The Turkish leadership has hedged its bets – helping Kyiv to fight back the aggression but not burning bridges to Moscow in order to ward off possible negative blowback on their country. Furthermore, Ankara saw the conflict as a means to enhance its geopolitical standing – both in European and Eurasian affairs but also more widely – given the importance of food exports to Africa and other parts of the global South.

To be sure, agency matters as much as structural incentives. Erdoğan has gone further than any Turkish leader since the 1920s in fostering security ties to Russia. In 2016, he turned to Russia to advance what he – along with large swathes of Turkish public opinion – defined as vital national interests: curbing Kurdish militants associated with the PKK and establishing a haven for IDPs to stop them from crossing into Turkey. His relationship with Putin was also instrumental in managing the subsequent crisis in Idlib. With the absence of institutional checks and balances, the Turkish president has had a freer hand to take and implement joint decisions with the Russians. Lastly, another decisionmaker in Erdoğan's place would have probably sought conciliation with Moscow but would likely have avoided antagonizing the United States and NATO to such an extent.

At the same time, the focus on structural conditions reveals a fundamental feature of Russian-Turkish relations. With or without Erdoğan, Turkey is not an ally of Russia but rather an aspiring power with links to *both* the West and Moscow. The interventions in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh have laid bare the rivalry with Russia and provided a sobering reminder as to the limits of foreign policy coordination. Ankara is also taking steps to reduce dependence on Russian natural gas and asserting its role in regional energy diplomacy as well. The challenge the two states are grappling with therefore has remained constant since the 1990s: how to maximize the benefits of cooperation without losing a competitive edge against one another.

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