



An ambiguous partnership

The serpentine trajectory of Turkish-Russian relations in the era of Erdoğan and Putin

PAVEL K. BAEV

KEMAL KIRIŞCI

Center on the
B United States
and Europe
at BROOKINGS



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INTRODUCTION

Russian-Turkish relations have experienced such sharp turns in the last couple of years that further volatility appears to be the only safe forecast. These two major European powers have a centuries-long history of competitive interactions, which should inform present-day decisionmaking; yet, mutual understanding and trust is hard to come by. The relationship has a solid economic foundation, and the flow of natural gas from Russia to Turkey has continued uninterrupted through recent crises. However, conflicting geopolitical ambitions clearly prevail over the economic rationale. There is a pronounced similarity in the way Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan conduct themselves, and the two autocratic leaders share mistrust of Western policies and resentment for being excluded from the European integration project. They remain, nevertheless, very different in their political experiences and worldviews, and only reluctantly make pledges of friendly cooperation.

Indeed, these two ambitious and opportunistic leaders will continue to swing from making pledges for strategic partnership to entering into quarrels that could lock them into a high-risk conflict.

At the start of this decade, they cultivated perfect rapport: Erdoğan, while unhappy about the Russian annexation of Crimea, opted not to join the Western sanctions regime (but also took care not to violate it). Turkey remains disappointed in the way the European Union (EU) has handled its accession process, and has entertained the idea of joining the Russia- and China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russian intervention in Syria, launched in late September 2015, clashed with Turkey's policy that was centered on removing Syrian President Bashar Assad from office. Two months later, the downing of a Russian Su-24M bomber by a Turkish F-16 fighter triggered an unprecedented quarrel. Moscow imposed economic sanctions on Turkey and unleashed a fierce propaganda campaign targeting Erdoğan and his family. Although Ankara requested and subsequently received support from NATO, Erdoğan nonetheless offered an ambivalent "apology" in June 2016. Putin found it opportune to accept it, and in contrast to EU and U.S. hesitation, instantly condemned the coup attempt by elements of the Turkish military in July 2016. Russian tourists returned to the beaches in Antalya in the summer of 2017, and except for the ban on Turkish tomato imports into Russia, sanctions were lifted step by step.¹

At the moment, Russia and Turkey, together with Iran, are spearheading a controversial peace/conflict manipulation process in Syria. Erdoğan first agreed to modify its stance vis-à-vis the regime in Syria, but then abandoned this shift in course, when the U.S. Navy delivered a massive missile strike on a Syrian airbase in April 2017. Moscow issued angry protestations, and when it became clear that there would be no follow-up to the “missiles of April,” Ankara once again scaled back its demand for Assad’s removal. This oscillation reveals a fundamental lack of stability in the partnership, in which Russia is keen to sell Turkey its most advanced S-400 surface-to-air missiles, while Turkey is urging the U.S. to double down on its missile strike on Assad’s forces. Turkey may spark emotional quarrels with the U.S. or Germany, but it remains committed to its NATO obligations, while Russia has a long history of confronting the West.² No amount of high-level, awkward bonhomie can remove the underlying mistrust.³

The purpose of this report is to examine the balance of incentives and contradictions that shape the trajectory of the Turkey-Russia partnership. It explores the main areas of interaction between the two states, and assesses the implications of uncertainty in each area for Turkey’s trans-Atlantic allies and particularly the U.S. The analysis starts by evaluating the differences between the worldviews of the Turkish and Russian political elites, and continues by identifying the key features of political economy and geopolitical interfaces, making a special case of conflict (mis)management in Syria. It then scrutinizes the role of the two autocratic leaders in shaping the relations between their respective countries, and puts forward a series of implications for the trans-Atlantic alliance and the U.S. The report argues that the possibility of upgrading the uneasy partnership

between Turkey and Russia into a strategic “axis of the excluded” is low, but the risks generated by both their rapprochements and quarrels are significant.⁴ Without downplaying the importance of U.S. leadership, this report suggests that the EU will have to perform the difficult and delicate task of both confronting Russia and managing its uneasy partnership with Turkey. The U.S. should deal with the implications of Turkey-Russia interactions through NATO, since the alliance is the only vehicle that could help the U.S. re-engage the Turkish military and reconstruct ties to their traditional, cooperative pattern. To encourage Turkey to remain a reliable NATO ally, the U.S. leadership needs to demonstrate attention to its trade and security interests, including those in Syria.

CONTRASTING WORLDVIEWS AND MUTUAL PERCEPTIONS

Turkey and Russia have interacted over centuries on various levels; yet, it is striking how differently they perceive one another and how fluid these perceptions are. That the two culturally and socially different powers have dissimilar worldviews is quite natural; what is remarkable is how little understanding of one another’s positions and aspirations there is among their political elites and societies. Both countries are intensely introverted, profoundly mistrustful of the West and especially the U.S., and tend to see one another through the prism of current domestic turmoil. History supplies many reference points and lessons for present-day policy-making in Ankara and Moscow, and it is often used instrumentally to justify dubious political causes.

Russia was absent from the European historical arena during the rise of the Ottoman Empire, but its defeat at Vienna in 1683 prompted Moscow to

push south, and opened a long period of contestation between the two empires. Peter the Great captured Azov in 1696, during his first campaign, and ensured that confrontation with the Ottoman Empire was a key part of Russia's newly-gained European identity. A series of defeats by Russia convinced the Ottomans of the need for modernization, which was understood as importing European organizational and technological achievements. The Crimean War (1853-56) marked a unique historical turn, in which the Ottoman Empire was allied with Britain and France against Russia, and the victory in the war of 1877-78 gave a strong boost to Russian nationalism.

The two empires clashed for the last time in World War I, and both suffered shattering defeats, which effectively excluded them from the peace talks that would establish a new European order.⁵ Soviet Russia and Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk experimented with political and military cooperation until the late 1930s, which left behind an important legacy. Turkey opted to remain neutral in World War II, whereas the war was a test of survival for the USSR, and its outcome is still the quintessential historical triumph for present-day Russia. Soviet withdrawal in 1945 from the non-aggression and neutrality pact of 1925 and demands for territorial concessions in the early days of the Cold War compelled Turkey to join the Western camp and become a NATO member-state in 1952. From this point onward, confrontation would become the dominant theme in Turkey's relations with the USSR. There were some economic and cultural ties, too, but the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 caused a deep alienation.

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika policy saw a revival of cooperation, including a peculiar barter agreement, in which Turkey paid for natural gas,

delivered from Russia via Bulgaria, with consumer goods. The collapse of the USSR necessitated a huge reconfiguration of Russia-Turkey relations. For the first time in many centuries, the two states were no longer immediate neighbors. Economic ties expanded quickly, as Turkish firms gained profitable entry into the Russian construction market and "shuttle trade" flourished. At the same time, the Russian foreign policy establishment (drastically reshuffled as it was) was alarmed by Turkey's ambitions to spread its influence across the former Soviet south. Some members of the Turkish political elite were talking about regaining leadership in the "Turkic world," allegedly stretching "from the Adriatic to the Chinese wall."⁶ These developments, as well as the First Chechen War of 1994-96, made Turkey once again a geopolitical competitor in Russia's eyes. Turkey's enthusiastic participation in U.S.-backed efforts to develop a Caspian energy corridor aggravated these concerns.⁷

At the start of 2000s, the pattern of bilateral relations and mutual perceptions started to shift again, as "Putin's era" began in Russia and "Erdoğan's era" dawned in Turkey. Initially, both leaders sought rapprochement with the West, and took steps to overcome the growing skepticism toward partnership with the EU. At the time, the shock of the Kosovo war, which Russia interpreted as a sign of NATO's hostility to Russia, intensified Russia's resentment of the West.⁸ Turkey was also frustrated with the deadlock in accession negotiations with the EU. This translated into angst spelled out by General Tuncer Kılınç, secretary-general of the National Security Council, who claimed that the EU was a "Christian club" and even a "neo-colonialist force determined to divide Turkey," and suggested instead that Turkey abandon its accession bid and build closer ties with Russia.⁹

This outburst was rooted in the “Eurasian” school of thought, an influential component of the conceptual foundation of Turkish foreign policy. It deviates from Turkey’s traditional Western orientation, arguing for a more independent stance as well as the pursuit of narrowly defined national interests.¹⁰ This nationalistic perspective was broadly compatible with the increasingly confrontational attitude toward the West, which was simultaneously also on the rise in Russia. Indeed, Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, in which he rebuked American domination of global affairs and accused the U.S. of destabilizing the Middle East through the Iraq war, resonated well in Turkey, particularly in military circles.¹¹ At the same time, this “Eurasianism” is very different from the Russian concept with the same name, which informed Putin’s plan for building the Eurasian Union, which he advanced at the start of his current presidential term. This plan proposes to consolidate Russia’s dominance over Central Asia and the Caucasus. In this regard, Erdoğan’s ideas about connecting with this drive and making Turkey a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization were received rather skeptically in Moscow.¹² Russian designs have now been subordinated to the Chinese “One Belt, One Road” initiative, while Turkey’s Eurasianism as a possible inspiration for reorientation away from the West is rather detached from this reality, and can therefore at best be considered an unfeasible, romantic idea.¹³

Furthermore, Erdoğan has never subscribed to the geopolitical perspectives of Eurasianism. His strategic vision is primarily shaped by political Islam, the core position of his Justice and Development Party (AKP). From this ideological Islamic perspective, nationalism is seen as an alien force encouraged by the hostile West in order to break the

unity of the Muslim *ummah* (community). This constitutes the most profound incompatibility between worldviews prevalent in Turkey and Russia, since political leadership in the latter is careful to show respect to Islam but is wary about its political manifestations. Islam is acknowledged as one of the “traditional religions” in Russia, where about 10 percent of the population are counted as Muslim, and Moscow has the largest Muslim community in Europe. The Russian public, nevertheless, is not only fearful of Islamic extremism but also concerned about Islam’s political influence. Even when relations were blossoming at the start of this decade, no more than 7 percent of respondents in an opinion poll named Turkey among five states most friendly to Russia, while as many as 24 percent named Germany.¹⁴

Given this fundamental divergence in political views, Russia and Turkey had different readouts on the character of the turmoil engulfing the Middle East since the 2011 Arab Spring. Turkish leadership hailed the popular uprisings as a “grand restoration” of Islamic civilization and expected the formation of a “Muslim Brotherhood belt,” stretching across Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria.¹⁵ Frustrated by the EU’s de facto rejection of its accession bid, Turkey was exuberant about the emerging “post-Western world” in the Middle East, in which it believed it was ideally positioned to take leadership. By contrast, Russian elites were astounded by the explosion of Arab unrest, and the messy outcome of the NATO-led intervention in Libya forged a consensus in Russia about siding with authoritarian regimes against the threat of Islamic extremism. Putin was shaken by the death of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi and championed the struggle against revolutions and chaos allegedly spread by the West.¹⁶

This counterrevolutionary stance was determined primarily by Putin's concerns over the stability of his own regime. Ready to suppress *Maidan*-type street protests, Putin was also eager to support the suppression of unrest in the "Arab street," for instance by assisting the military coup in Egypt in July 2013. Putin made a direct connection between Erdoğan's hostility to the Assad regime in Syria and his embrace of radical Islam. He described the 2015 shooting down of the Russian bomber as "a stab in the back delivered by the accomplices of terrorists" and then asserted that the problem was much deeper than an isolated incident: "We see, and not only we, but people all around the world see, that Turkey's current government has been following a domestic policy of quite conscious Islamicization throughout the country for a number of years now."¹⁷ Reaffirming his respect for Islam, he condemned its "more radical currents, which create an unfavorable environment that is not so evident at first glance." Ironically, this excoriation happened only two months after Putin had invited Erdoğan to attend the inauguration ceremony of a mosque in Moscow in September 2015.

Since Russia and Turkey set on a course of reconciliation in mid-2016, such criticism has been extinguished, but the irreconcilable discord—barely hidden by political correctness—makes it rather impossible to advance the Russia-Turkey partnership to the level where it could qualify as a strategic "axis" or proto-alliance. Indeed, even when engaged in high-risk confrontation with the West, Russia continues to see itself as a natural and even core part of the European civilization, aspiring to preserve its genuine values against the influence of post-modernist decadence.¹⁸ While Russia considers itself the "true Europe," Turkey has turned away from its traditional orientation to Europe and accepted the impossibility of joining the EU, and is

chasing opportunities to assert its leadership in the Muslim world. Political expediency could dictate some cooperative initiatives, and economic ties generate revenues and mutual benefits, but the incompatibility of worldviews limit the scope of potential cooperation.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EQUIVOCAL PARTNERSHIP

Political relations between Turkey and Russia are underpinned by deep and diverse economic ties; they produce a measure of stability in this relationship, but also generate tensions, and are generally not strong enough to ensure a steadily deepening partnership. The two countries have very dissimilar economic structures that are not quite complementary, and have experienced very different turns in their respective economic fortunes. Both states used to have rigid state-centric models, and went through radical economic reforms; yet, Turkey embarked on this track in the early 1980s, and avoided the painful economic contraction that Russia experienced immediately after the collapse of the USSR. The customs union signed with the EU in 1995 provided a crucially important boost for Turkey's reforms. The agreement stimulated further opening of its economy, so that the share of foreign trade in its GDP increased from 15.6 percent in 1975 to 45.4 percent in 2005.¹⁹

In political terms, the difference between the two economic trajectories was highly significant: Erdoğan came to power after 20 years of strong growth (even if interrupted by several spasms of crisis) that had made Turkey a middle-income country, whereas Putin inherited a severely degraded but liberalized economy, making econom-

ic growth his key political asset. When Erdoğan initiated an expansion of economic ties with Russia, Putin was glad to reciprocate. In 2010, the High-Level Cooperation Council was established in order to complement their summits with institutionalized cabinet-level meetings aimed at promoting trade and investments. Between 2002 and 2013, bilateral trade increased fivefold, and the two leaders committed to ensuring its further growth to the symbolic level of \$100 billion by 2020.²⁰ Besides trade, Turkish business investments in Russia expanded, and in 2015, the volume of Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI) into Russia reached \$420 million—a drastic increase from \$154 million in 2002.²¹ Much of this investment flow stemmed from construction projects contracted to Turkish firms, valued at \$6 billion in 2015.²² Following visa liberalization in 2011, Turkey became one of the top destinations for Russian travelers: More than 4 million Russian tourists visited Turkey in 2014 (against 950,000 in 2002), contributing close to \$3.5 billion to the Turkish economy.²³

These positive trends were abruptly disrupted when Moscow retaliated against the downing of the Russian bomber by introducing a range of sanctions, which undercut Turkish exports, affected the activities of Turkish firms in Russia, and reduced the flow of tourists to a trickle. These punishing measures cost Turkey at least \$10 billion in lost trade and tourism revenues.²⁴ In the mid-2016, however, a process of reconciliation was initiated and Moscow lifted most of the sanctions, so Russian tourists are again filling hotels in Antalya and visiting the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Yet, the activities of most Turkish businesses in Russia remain on hold.

One main takeaway from this sharp spasm of crisis is that the pledges to reach the \$100 billion level

in trade—now routinely recycled—do not appear to be realistic. One irreducible fact that has come into focus is the central importance of the EU for Turkey’s economy; indeed, despite all of the issues in their political interactions, the volume of Turkish-EU trade has been steadily growing for the last 15 years. This stability stands in contrast to the high volatility of trade with the Arab states, as well as Iran, which is set to continue against the backdrop of overlapping conflicts. Russia cannot possibly replace the EU as Turkey’s top trading partner and is in fact less important in this regard than the U.S. Turkey’s exports to the U.S. surpassed in value those to Russia in the last few years; also, while exports to Russia are mostly agricultural, it is manufactured goods with greater value-added that are exported to the United States.²⁵ Furthermore, Russian FDI into Turkey is miniscule, constituting only 3 percent of all FDI into Turkey between 2007 and 2015, while FDI originating from EU member-states during this period made up 73 percent.²⁶ Turkish investments are presently directed primarily to the EU, and the U.S. is also becoming an increasingly attractive destination.

The heaviest concentration of problems in Turkey-Russia relations exists in the energy sphere, which tends to be profoundly politicized and even securitized. With the opening of the Blue Stream pipeline in 2003, exports of Russian gas to Turkey have increased, with Turkey currently importing 50-55 percent of its gas needs from Russia. This is not unusual for the European market, where Germany also gets about a half of its gas from Russia. Struggling to sustain this export flow, Moscow has not used gas exports as an instrument of policy in the current confrontation, and for that matter, refrained from cutting deliveries for the sake of punishing Ankara in late 2015. Indeed, Turkey is the second most valuable market for Russian gas

after Germany, and Gazprom, Russia's state gas company, aims at further expansion. Most political and business elites in Ankara are not comfortable with this dependency, which accounts for most of Turkey's vast trade deficit with Russia.²⁷ Much like in the EU, one of the chief objectives of Turkey's energy policy is to diversify supplies, even if trade relations with its second key source of natural gas, Iran, are not exactly smooth.²⁸ The greater goal is to become a "gas hub," where the export flows from the Eastern Mediterranean, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Iran, and Turkmenistan would come together and flow along the "southern corridor" into the European market.

Russia is not thrilled with this plan and firmly opposes the realization of a trans-Caspian pipeline that would carry gas from Turkmenistan to the Turkish "hub." Russia's top priority is the Turk-Stream pipeline (a substitute for the abandoned South Stream project), which is planned to deliver 15.75 billion cubic meters of gas to Turkey by 2020, and the same amount to the markets in southeastern Europe.²⁹ Neither the declining demand in Europe nor the price forecasts justify Russia's investment of \$6 billion into this project, which is, in essence, entirely political and aimed at reducing to a minimum the Russian transit through Ukraine.³⁰ Despite Erdoğan's approval, many in Turkey are concerned that this project would set back Turkey's policy of diversification and aggravate its dependency by turning the "gas hub" design into a "transit avenue" for Russian gas.³¹

Another issue in Turkish-Russian energy relations is the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, which is now back on track after a political "pause" in 2016.³² Erdoğan's decision in 2010 to award this contract, worth \$20 billion, to the Russian state-owned Rosatom remains controver-

sial, even if Turkish firms have recently claimed a 49 percent stake in the project.³³ There are serious environmental concerns about the safety of the reactors, as well as worries about granting Russia control over a significant portion of Turkey's electricity production.

Turkey-Russia ties are also indirectly but seriously affected by the Western sanctions regime on Russia. Turkish firms and banks operating in Russia are careful not to bring in additional capital and prefer to postpone plans for further expansion into an uncertain Russian market. The particular issue of the ban on the import of Turkish tomatoes is seen as an indicator of Russian protectionism and discrimination against foreign competitors.³⁴ Construction companies, which used to be the most active pro-Russian lobbyists in Erdoğan's government, are now uncharacteristically circumspect. New legislation on tightening sanctions against Russia approved by the U.S. Congress in July 2017 is certain to curtail business plans further, even if the EU is not exactly enthusiastic about this move by Washington.³⁵

What is of particular importance here is that the sanctions regime is increasingly targeting the export of Russian corruption, which entails the blending of private and bureaucratic interests in Russia's foreign affairs. Similar developments are underway in Turkey, and its business environment, which, according to *The Economist*, "may gradually come to resemble Russia's, where political loyalty is the price for keeping a slice of the pie."³⁶ Erdoğan is keen to expand his control over the economy and places his cronies in key positions, but he is also aware of the imperative to sustain strong growth, so that Turkey would be able to break out of the "middle income trap."³⁷ Putin has essentially given up on modernizing Russia's econ-

omy. Much to Erdoğan's distaste, this means that only by strengthening ties with the EU could he realize his ambition of transforming Turkey into one of the 10 largest economies in the world by 2023.

DYNAMICS OF GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC INTERPLAY

The multitude of wars fought between Russia and Turkey over the past three centuries has certainly influenced their contemporary geopolitical contestation; yet, their rivalry has mainly been shaped by their experiences since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The traditional frontier with Russia receded to the north behind the Caucasus Mountains, the Russian economy spiraled into a deep recession, and its military might shrank, fueling aspirations in the Turkish elite to see a Turkic world comprised of "one nation and six states."³⁸ The first sign of emerging geopolitical competition appeared in the South Caucasus, when Russia sternly warned Turkey against interfering in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and then in mid-1994, unilaterally negotiated a ceasefire that left Azerbaijan at a humiliating disadvantage. Russian contributions to international peacekeeping operations in the Balkans were strictly neutral, but its ties with NATO sharply deteriorated following the Kosovo crisis in 1999. Moscow also took notice of the fact that Turkey contributed 18 fighters to the NATO air war against Yugoslavia, which Russia still characterizes as a major violation of international law.³⁹

Turkey used to be a firm supporter of NATO enlargement, but the Georgian war in August 2008 undercut that position and altered significantly the pattern of geopolitical interactions. For instance, it rendered the Organization of Black Sea Econom-

ic Cooperation (BSEC), which Turkey had carefully fostered, practically defunct. Ankara was so shocked by Russian power projection that it not only abstained from providing tangible support to Tbilisi, but also indicated a preference for limiting the NATO and U.S. naval presence in the Black Sea.⁴⁰ There was no real threat to Russia's security interests, but nonetheless Moscow proceeded with a massive program of naval modernization, strengthening its Black Sea Fleet.⁴¹ In contrast, the Turkish navy grew weaker after its naval headquarters was destroyed in a 1999 earthquake, and would grow even weaker a decade later, when a series of court cases against Turkish military officers left the Turkish navy without its top command.⁴² In addition, Turkey did not seem discouraged when its project, the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, failed to materialize, and Ankara made only a half-hearted effort at reconciliation with Armenia, despite the support from the Obama administration. This gradual geopolitical retreat from the wider Black Sea region coincided with the failure of the EU-supported Nabucco gas pipeline project. Given these favorable developments, Russia saw no need to rush its agenda to establish dominance.⁴³

The outbreak of the Ukraine conflict in spring 2014 intensified Russia-Turkey geopolitical interplay and widened its scope. Its main scene of conflict is the Black Sea region, which has been crudely reconfigured by Russia's annexation of Crimea. Moscow has quickly modernized several old Soviet airbases: the Black Sea Fleet was strengthened with four new diesel submarines and covered by the anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) "bubble" over Crimea, allowing Russia to dominate most of this space. As a countermeasure, NATO has also committed to strengthening its deterrence capabilities in Romania and Bulgaria, but Turkey shows no

interest in playing a significant role in this plan.⁴⁴ Russia is determined to counter and overtake NATO activities—focusing particularly on the U.S. missile defense base in Deveselu, Romania, that started operations in mid-2016—but has indicated that its confrontation against NATO should not be interpreted as being against Turkey.⁴⁵

Only in the aftermath of the November 2015 incident, when Ankara requested support from NATO allies, was Turkey confronted in its capacity as a NATO member.⁴⁶ According to a Russian poll, public opinion in Russia also turned against Turkey: 29 percent of respondents named Turkey as one of the five most hostile states in mid-2016, compared to 1 percent in 2015, and 8 percent in 2017.⁴⁷ Now that the crisis has been resolved, Moscow once again separates its relations with Turkey from its relations with NATO. Since Ankara shows readiness to play along, the discussions about Turkey's purchase of S-400 surface-to-air missile systems from Russia are politically convenient for both parties, even if NATO explicitly disapproves of this deal.⁴⁸ In terms of security considerations around the Black Sea, Turkey insists on its strict adherence to the Montreux convention (1936), even if the high intensity of Russian naval traffic through the Turkish Straits involves a serious risk of accidents, like the sinking of the Russian naval intelligence vessel *Liman* 20 miles north of the Bosphorus in April 2017.⁴⁹ Against the background of oscillating tensions in the wider Black Sea region, it is remarkable that the conflict-rich Caucasus remains relatively stable and causes little friction in Russia-Turkey relations.

Another region where Russia and Turkey are involved in dynamic geopolitical maneuvering is the Eastern Mediterranean, where Russia has some strategic reach, but cannot project power on a scale that could constitute a direct challenge to

NATO. Syria is certainly the prime focus in this region (this war zone is examined separately), but there are several other developing stories. Russia is, for instance, exploring opportunities for playing a low-cost spoiler game in Libya, relying primarily on its newly-strengthened ties with Egypt, while Turkey is at a loss in the Libyan turmoil and at a low point in relations with Egypt. Moscow is actively trying to sabotage any progress in negotiations on resolving the long-deadlocked conflict in Cyprus, seeing a change in the status quo—reunification of the island—as a threat to its influence on policymaking in Nicosia.⁵⁰ Turkey is certainly a major player in this complex conflict management, but Ankara's position in the recent and predictably unsuccessful diplomatic rounds has been rather passive, perhaps reflecting Erdoğan's lack of interest in, and enthusiasm for, a solution.

In the wider Middle East, Russian and Turkish geopolitical aspirations are rarely in sync, and the developing crisis in the Persian Gulf brings this poor compatibility into focus. Turkey has built close security ties with Qatar—which is why Saudi Arabia insisted that its neighbor ensure the withdrawal of Turkish troops in the first list of demands that Riyadh submitted to Qatari authorities. Ankara and Doha rejected that demand, and worked together on a compromise in order to de-escalate tensions without abandoning their support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, Russia was caught in an awkward position.⁵¹ There is no doubt in Moscow that the real cause of the crisis is Qatar's ties with Iran, which leaves Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov limited space for mediation, since he cannot be on board with the anti-Iranian stance in Riyadh. Iran is not only a valued partner for Russia, but also guarantees that Russia can sustain its intervention in Syria.

Overall, competition—not quite reaching the level of rivalry—has been the prevalent trend in Turkey-Russia geopolitical interactions, even if political leadership on both sides seek to gloss over this reality by repeating their commitment to cooperation. Russia has a significant advantage in this power play: this is not due to its sheer size or the strength of its military (which is under-reformed and over-committed), but because its leadership has successfully mobilized all elements of state machinery under central control. In Turkey, to the contrary, state bureaucracy and the military have been weakened through severe purges and are now disorganized, so the resources needed to execute policy are significantly depleted.⁵² This geopolitical discord and ambiguity hamper economic ties and increase Turkey's energy dependency, locking Ankara into a deeply asymmetric partnership.

TACTICAL COOPERATION AND STRATEGIC DISAGREEMENT IN SYRIA

Syria is the focal point of Turkish-Russian political and strategic interactions. Moscow and Ankara have significantly diverging interests in the region, and pursue goals that are barely compatible. From Turkey's point of view, this protracted war across from its southern border not only poses a direct security threat, but also generates a massive humanitarian problem to manage. For Russia, the military intervention launched in late September 2015 has become not only the prime vehicle of its policy in the Middle East, but also a key lever in its struggle against the so-called “color revolutions.” Furthermore, although Turkey is a member of the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State, it has serious reservations about U.S. operations in this space; and while Russia speaks of its readiness

to cooperate with Washington, its chief objective is to counter U.S. efforts and influence.

At the start of the Syrian civil war in mid-2011, Erdoğan stated, often perforce, that the Assad regime had to be removed, and predicted with his foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, that they would soon be able to pray at the famous Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.⁵³ Up until mid-2015, as the Syrian opposition was advancing, success appeared within reach. Yet, Russia's intervention at this juncture turned the tide of war in Assad's favor and debilitated opposition groups that Turkey was supporting. This left Erdoğan bitterly frustrated—and it was against this background that the Russian bomber was shot down, after which Moscow deployed to its Hmeimim airbase a battery of S-400 surface-to-air missiles in order to build an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability.⁵⁴ Tensions de-escalated with the partial withdrawal of the Russian forces in April 2016, and then Putin opted to accept Erdoğan's elliptical apology. When Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 to push ISIS away from the Turkish border and to check the advance of Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Moscow remained neutral. Russia's decisive offensive on Aleppo in December 2016, however, caused much distress in Turkey, and the assassination of the Russian Ambassador Andrey Karlov in Ankara was a consequence of that angst, which Erdoğan had to downplay.⁵⁵ He opted, therefore, for a low-key response to the odd Russian airstrike that killed three Turkish soldiers in February 2017.⁵⁶ When a rare case of cooperation between Russia and the U.S. in March 2017 effectively stopped Turkey's offensive toward the Kurdish-controlled city of Manbij, Erdoğan announced that the operation had been completed. However, the mission had, in fact, failed to achieve its objective.⁵⁷

Taking advantage of the uncertainty surrounding the U.S.' policy toward Syria under the new administration, Russia and Turkey, along with Iran, launched the "Astana format" of negotiations in early 2017. The talks started with a ceasefire between some parties to the Syrian war and progressed to establishing "de-escalation zones" in May.⁵⁸ The main sticking point, however, is that a large and expanding part of Syrian territory has come under the control of the SDF and YPG, which does not present a problem to Moscow, but is entirely unacceptable to Ankara and increasingly disagreeable to Iran.⁵⁹ Russia draws upon its long tradition of low-profile cooperation with various Kurdish factions, and cultivates ties with the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) through its bureau in Moscow, opened in early 2016.⁶⁰ Turkey's demands for closing this channel of communication have been ignored, and the Russian draft of a new Syrian constitution, granting significant autonomy to Kurds and ensuring a secular character of the state, introduced in the "Astana format," was also unpalatable to Erdoğan.

In fact, the three state-sponsors of this "peace process" see the struggle against ISIS as a second priority goal and instead focus on fragmenting Syria into areas controlled by their respective surrogates. This does not create any obstacles for the U.S.' immediate goal of defeating ISIS in Raqqa, but runs the risk of producing a major problem if Iran manages to consolidate its position in Syria.⁶¹ If, under such a scenario, Hezbollah acquires a solid base in Syria, this would also be unacceptable to Israel—which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has tried to demonstrate to Putin by disregarding the Astana provisions on "de-escalation zones" and continuing with its airstrikes.⁶² Turkey, the U.S., and most other stakeholders in Syria may have compromised on their demand for Assad's removal, but this does not

signify a major success for Russia. Putin and Donald Trump reached an agreement on a ceasefire in the southwest corner of Syria at their first meeting in Hamburg, on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit in July 2017, but the stability of that arrangement depends upon too many uncontrollable variables, including Assad's consent to leave the symbolically important city of Daraa in the hands of rebels of the Southern Front.⁶³

Erdoğan may have nothing against this U.S.-Russian deal, but he is aware that Tehran is concerned about Moscow's intrigues with the Americans. The sustainability of Russia's intervention depends crucially upon the tactical support from the Iran-controlled Shiite militia, while attempts to establish cooperation with Turkish forces are tenuous.⁶⁴ This military engagement remains a high-risk and far-from-popular enterprise for Russia, and many sudden shifts in the course of the complex war could turn the bold exercise in power projection into a costly self-made trap. For Turkey, the core issue in this war is to re-strengthen the alliance with the U.S. and channel it toward managing, and hopefully settling, the Kurdish question in Turkey's favor. Interactions with Russia are also meant to serve this very difficult end.⁶⁵ Without U.S. engagement, there could be no stable progress toward ending the Syrian calamity, and every step in advancing cooperation between the U.S. and Turkey signifies a setback in Russia's manipulation of this conflict. Yet, effective Turkey-U.S. cooperation has still not emerged.

TWO RULERS TEND TO MAKE IT PERSONAL

Russia-Turkey relations have developed since the early 2000s—and will continue to evolve—

under the firm personal control of two ambitious and increasingly autocratic leaders. Erdoğan and Putin understand the importance of maintaining a working relationship and see it as a strong lever for transforming their ties with Europe and the U.S. In the course of dozens of meetings and conversations, they have developed a personal relationship—one that is circumspect rather than trust-based—and despite constant misunderstandings, they presume to know each other well. Analysts point out many similarities in their authoritarian tendencies and styles, but that does not necessarily make them natural partners.⁶⁶

Putin sees Erdoğan as the master of Turkish politics, who knows how to mobilize his base and achieve the desired result. However, the coup attempt in July 2016 reminded Putin of a dangerous internal divide in Turkey as well as Erdoğan's vulnerability. What makes Erdoğan a very attractive partner for Putin is his rejection of Western values and readiness to challenge the policies of the EU and the U.S. Putin appreciates his mistrust of NATO, seeing in this attitude an opportunity to disrupt the workings of the alliance. The Kremlin, however, is suspicious of Erdoğan's promotion and exploitation of political Islam, which motivated his embrace of the Arab Spring and continues to inform his vision for post-war Syria.⁶⁷ This ideological incompatibility was evident in their opposing positions vis-à-vis regime change in Egypt, as Putin was solidly behind Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, while Erdoğan was loudly critical of the military coup against Mohammed Morsi.

Erdoğan sees Putin as an absolutist ruler of Russia, who faced a domestic legitimacy crisis, and in order to overcome it, pushed his country into a confrontation with the West. This helps Erdoğan advance his agenda, while the Turkish president

remains "neutral" in NATO's not-quite-united policy toward containing Russia. He may be sympathetic to Putin's attempts to widen divisions inside the EU, but he also knows that Europe's right-wing forces, which are often anti-Turkish, are now the Kremlin's allies. Erdoğan is aware that Putin is not particularly popular in Turkey, with only 20 percent of the public expressing confidence in his leadership, which is still more than the 11 percent that expressed their confidence in Trump.⁶⁸ Erdoğan has no problems with the Russian export of corruption and is presently not a target of Moscow's "black" propaganda or cyberattacks. What is crucially important for the Turkish leader is that the activities of his archenemy Fethullah Gülen were resolutely terminated in Russia, so that it was possible to blame the Gülenist networks for Ambassador Karlov's assassination.⁶⁹

The two leaders cultivated a personal rapport for many years, only to see it shattered when Putin held Erdoğan personally responsible for the destruction of the Russian bomber over Syria. Russia also accused Turkey of supporting terrorist networks and smuggling Syrian oil.⁷⁰ The Kremlin interpreted Erdoğan's refusal to respond in kind and his apology of sorts as a sign of weakness. Putin is now under the impression that he has the upper hand in the ongoing rebuilding of rapport.⁷¹ Yet, it is hardly possible to build anything that resembles trust in this relationship, as the two leaders are deeply suspicious of one another's intentions and motives on many crucial issues.

One such area of hidden disagreements is the gas business, which Putin keeps under tight control through such loyal minions as Alexei Miller, the CEO of Gazprom, and which Erdoğan seeks to control equally firmly by keeping his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, as the minister of energy. Erdoğan

sees gas transit as a means to gain leverage vis-à-vis the EU and still entertains the idea of turning Turkey into a “gas hub.” He cultivates “brotherly” relations with Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev, who is keen to increase the volume of Azerbaijan’s gas exports to Europe via Turkey.⁷² Putin has invested much effort in advancing the TurkStream pipeline project and found it opportune to call Erdoğan from the pipe-laying ship, only to hear a lengthy harangue about the importance of employing energy as an instrument to overcome conflicts.⁷³ Since the only purpose of TurkStream is to eliminate gas transit through Ukraine, Erdoğan’s message was not quite on Putin’s target.

Another area of profoundly diverging views is counterterrorism, which for Erdoğan is a major domestic issue, and for Putin, a trademark theme exploited since his first days in office. As discussed, Erdoğan is not enthusiastic about the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition and puts the main emphasis on countering the threat of Kurdish insurrection spilling over from Syria. Putin proposes to the West, and to Trump in particular, that they make counterterrorism a key avenue of cooperation, which would primarily target Islamic extremism.⁷⁴ In fact, he aims at securing Western consent for his agenda of suppressing extremism, interpreted as any sort of opposition to authoritarian regimes, including his own. There is, therefore, little common ground between Erdoğan’s domestic and cross-border struggle with the Kurdish rebels and Putin’s manipulations of the conflict in Syria for establishing his counterterrorist credentials. There is also lingering mutual resentment related to the Chechen community in Turkey, which has been targeted by Russian special services and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov’s hitmen.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the Qatar crisis has once again called attention to Erdoğan’s personal commitment to supporting the

Muslim Brotherhood, which Putin is adamant to treat as an extremist organization.⁷⁶

Another issue is the use of military force as an instrument of policy, as the two leaders have strikingly different relations with their respective militaries. Since the early days of his political career, Erdoğan has labeled the Turkish military—the guardian of Turkey’s traditional state establishment—as one of his main opponents. Questionable judicial proceedings against the military, police, and judiciary, known as the *Ergenekon* and the *Sledgehammer* cases, culminated in purges of many officers and officials, who were subsequently replaced by officers of the Gülen movement who were then in alliance with the AKP.⁷⁷ The failed coup attempt in July 2016 prompted another round of severe purges in the military command, degrading further the combat capabilities of the Turkish armed forces (with a total strength of 640,000 personnel).⁷⁸ Putin was elevated to the Kremlin by the successful war campaign in Chechnya and sought to cultivate ties with the top military brass, despite their objections against the military reforms he launched in 2008. Massive investments in military modernization made Putin once again popular, and the high command has been kept exempt from the reshuffling executed in the last couple of years in many state structures. Putin perceives his will to use military power as Russia’s major advantage in the international arena, while Erdoğan’s hand is much more constrained.⁷⁹

Overall, both leaders have treated foreign policy as an instrument to realize their personal aspirations, which do not often overlap or complement each other. Erdoğan is a true believer in the ideational power of political Islam, which leads him to surrender realpolitik in favor of ideologically driven policies. Putin does not take issue with Erdoğan’s

authoritarian style, but is deeply suspicious of his Islamic agenda. Putin fashions himself as a devoted Orthodox Christian, yet he is careful to keep religion out of politics, opting for a more pragmatic approach. He takes pride in the ability to maintain dialogue with all state actors in the Middle East, but this flexibility is challenged by the entanglement in the Syrian war on the side of a deeply delegitimized Assad regime. This makes Erdoğan wary of Putin's approach, but his own propensity to pick quarrels has turned Turkey's once acclaimed "zero problems with neighbors" policy into a chain of failed initiatives and embarrassing setbacks.⁸⁰ Both Putin and Erdoğan find it expedient to demonstrate mutual respect and friendliness, but the affinity is now gone and trust is very thin.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU, NATO, AND THE U.S.

Relations between Turkey and Russia may appear to be friendly, but they are loaded with contradictions and set to remain unstable in the near term. The economic foundation of these relations is not solid enough to prevent sharp political swings, and for both states trade ties with and investment flows from the European Union are far more important than interactions with one another. There is a deep-seated resentment against the West, and against the U.S. in particular, in both countries. Yet, their geopolitical interests from the Caucasus to Qatar to Libya contradict, more than complement, each other. This incompatibility comes most starkly to the fore in Syria. Contingent cooperation is not enough to have them set aside their disagreements over the course and the desired outcome of this devastating war. At the same time, personal relations between Erdoğan and Putin have crucial importance for rapprochement as

well as estrangement between these two increasingly authoritarian states, even if neither leader has a commitment to or a major stake in building a mature partnership.

This unstable pattern of high-intensity interactions between Turkey and Russia has impacted Western interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East in an unexpected yet significant way, and has also affected the course of confrontation between the West and Russia, in which Turkey, with all the particularities of its behavior, remains a part of the trans-Atlantic alliance. Typically, joint Turkish-Russian initiatives, like the nearly done deal on the S-400 surface-to-air missiles, are aimed at exploiting vulnerabilities in Western interests, and their quarrels, like the one over the downing of the Russian warplane, generate serious security risks. The tendency for sharp swings from cooperation to conflict in these bilateral relations aggravates regional instability, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, and constitutes a significant risk factor for the EU, NATO, and the U.S.

From the EU perspective, Turkey is an important but awkward partner, since its application for accession cannot be formally rejected—but no progress in this deadlocked process can possibly be achieved, and Russia is keen to exploit this ambiguity. Migration is set to remain the most difficult problem for the EU, and the refugee deal reached in March 2016 can fall apart any time, if Turkey decides that it is dissatisfied with the prospect of visa liberalization and the volume of payments from Brussels. Russia sought to put pressure on this problem to such a degree that it was accused of "weaponizing" the migration flows from Syria, and Moscow might look for opportunities to aggravate the issue again.⁸¹ The EU needs to preserve the efficacy and integrity of the sanctions regime against

Russia, and while it is content with Turkey not being a part of it, it needs to prevent possible circumventions. Violations of democratic freedoms and human rights in Turkey compel European institutions to consider possible sanctions against the Erdoğan regime (Germany, in particular, is unwilling to tolerate any foul play), but this risks pushing Turkey into a closer security partnership with Russia.⁸²

For NATO, it has become difficult to maintain its traditionally close relations with the Turkish military, severely downsized after the purges following the failed coup in July 2016, and Moscow is aware of this problem. The Black Sea theater is set to see a higher level of military confrontation with Russia, and NATO cannot fully rely on Turkey in strengthening its deterrence capabilities in this conflict-prone area. Romania's acquisition of Patriot missile defense systems from the U.S., while Turkey is finalizing the deal on purchasing Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles, exemplifies this strategic ambiguity.⁸³ This is especially made conspicuous as Turkey ironically seeks S-400s as making up for the loss of a large number of NATO-trained F-16 pilots that Turkey normally depends on for air defense.⁸⁴ NATO also has to take into account Russian military deployments in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸⁵ Turkey's position on this theater is pivotal, not least due to the fact that the main sea line of communications for the Russian navy goes through the Turkish Straits.

For the U.S., its conflict-ridden relationship with Russia is a matter of high strategic importance and political sensitivity, while the future of its relations with Turkey are lower on the list of priorities. It is the very uncertain situation in the Iraqi and Syrian warzones where the Russia-Turkey interaction is of significance for the Trump administration,

but neither state can be recruited into a coalition against Iran, which appears to be the main proposition for a post-ISIS policy. While the controversial issue of the future of the Assad regime can be temporarily bracketed out, the Kurdish issue is set to generate sharp tensions, and Ankara seeks to leverage Russia to demonstrate to Washington that tactical cooperation with YPG must not be transformed into a political commitment. Washington also cannot ignore the fact that Israel is wary about Turkey-Russia cooperation and is not in favor of ceasefire deals in Syria, which could secure the positions of Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian forces.⁸⁶ With the introduction of new sanctions, Russia will set itself on a more hostile course toward the U.S., and that could have dire consequences in Syria and even set the conditions for opportunistic cooperation with Turkey.

Assessing these implications and preparing countermeasures, key Western stakeholders face a difficult challenge of factoring in the profound and evolving internal instability in both states. The EU faces the difficult task of managing the confrontation with Russia and the uneasy partnership with Turkey, as well as dealing with the consequences of their rapprochement and possible new quarrels. Despite its disapproval of Erdoğan's authoritarian policies, Brussels needs to lift its relations with Turkey from this low point and find a way to engage it more constructively without necessarily giving any promises regarding accession. The EU-Turkey High Level Political Dialogue meeting in July 2017 has set guidelines for cooperation on a wide range of issues from security and counterterrorism to migration management and trade relations.⁸⁷ Confronting Russia is now a top priority on the EU's agenda, and the European Commission will have to focus political efforts on sustaining the integrity of the expanded sanctions regime, despite its

reservations toward unilateral U.S. moves, so consultations with Turkey on these matters could be useful.

For the U.S., one of the main vehicles for dealing with the implications of Turkey-Russia interactions is NATO, and the task of bringing the Turkish military back into the fold of traditional cooperative networks could be resolved only in the structures of the alliance. Confrontation with Russia is now the central part of NATO's activities, and the Black Sea theater is set to see many sharp turns in this confrontation, so ensuring a solid contribution from Turkey is an important yet delicate task. To encourage Turkey to remain a reliable NATO ally, the U.S. leadership needs to demonstrate that it takes Turkey's security interests seriously, particularly in Syria. The Kurdish issue will remain controversial and dynamic, and will acquire new urgency with the defeat of ISIS in Mosul and Raqqa, and new complexity with the scheduled referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. The strategic goals of the Trump administration remain vague, but it is essential to maintain the dialogue with Ankara, so that it would be motivat-

ed to play a role in various temporary solutions. Russia is determined to exploit incoherencies and weaknesses in the U.S.' stance, so it will be crucial to dissuade Turkey from joining this spoiler act. Demonstrating sensitivity for Turkish security concerns is important for the success of this combination of encouragement and dissuasion, and one particular issue in this high-level communication could be trade, and specifically the question of Turkish steel exports to the U.S., which should also fit well into Trump's agenda.

Overall, the possibility of a fast development of Turkey-Russia cooperation into a strategic partnership that could pose risks for Western interests is low, so EU and U.S. efforts could be usefully focused on reassuring Ankara's anxieties in the asymmetric relationship with moody Moscow. Confrontation with Russia is going to remain the central threat for the U.S. and Europe, and Turkey is tempted to remain "neutral" in this conflict and to preserve its freedom of maneuver. Against all challenges, engaging Turkey closer into NATO policies and activities is therefore a key task in managing the risks in the uncertain new strategic environment.

ENDNOTES

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THE AUTHORS

Pavel Baev is a nonresident senior fellow in the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution and a research professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). From 1995 to 2001 he was a co-editor of *Security Dialogue*, a quarterly policy-oriented journal produced at PRIO. From 2000 to 2004, Pavel was the head of the Foreign and Security Policies program. He held the NATO Democratic Institutions Fellowship from 1994 to 1996. Baev specializes in Russian military reform, Russia's conflict management in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and energy interests in Russia's foreign and security policies, as well as Russia's relations with Europe and NATO. He is the author of several books, including *The Russian Army in a Time of Troubles* (SAGE, 1996) and *Russian Energy Policy and Military Power: Putin's Quest for Greatness* (Routledge, 2008), and also has a weekly column published in the *Eurasia Daily Monitor* and is the author of the blog, *Arctic Politics and Russia's Ambitions*. Baev's publications can be accessed at <https://www.brookings.edu/experts/pavel-k-baev/>.

Kemal Kirişci is the TÜSİAD senior fellow and director of the Turkey Project at the Brookings Institution. Before joining Brookings, Kirişci was a professor of international relations and held the Jean Monnet chair in European integration in the department of political science and international relations at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. His areas of research interest include EU-Turkish relations, U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkish foreign and trade policies, European integration, immigration issues, ethnic conflicts and refugee movements. He is the co-author of the monograph, *The Consequences of Chaos: Syria's Humanitarian Crisis and the Failure to Protect* (Brookings Institution Press, April 2016), which considers the long-term economic, political, and social implications of Syria's displaced and offers policy recommendations to address the humanitarian crisis. His forthcoming book, *Turkey and the West: Faultlines in a Troubled Alliance*, will be published by the Brookings Institution Press in November 2017. His publications can be accessed at <https://www.brookings.edu/experts/kemal-kirisici/>.

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