

7. Turkey's Russian Roulette

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Despite repeated warnings from the United States, the first shipment of the Russian-made S-400 air defense missile system landed in Turkey amid great fanfare in July 2019. Turkish TV channels live-streamed the landing of the missile parts. Turkey's Defense Ministry announced via twitter that the first component had arrived at the Murted Air Base in Ankara. Columnnists, analysts, and TV commentators – pro- and anti-Erdoğan alike – hailed the delivery of the missile system as the “country's liberation from the West”.

The US response followed several days later, when it officially expelled Turkey from the F-35 stealth fighter jet program in retaliation. Turkey, one of the largest F-35 export customers, had planned to buy one hundred jets. It was also involved in the F-35's production as one of eight partner countries that joined the program in 2002, manufacturing some nine hundred parts for the plane. But Turkey's missile defense agreement with Russia turned into a deal-breaker for the US Department of Defense, which argued that the introduction of the S-400 in Turkey provides Russia an intelligence collection platform that could compromise the F-35's sophisticated stealth technology. The delivery could also prompt sanctions under the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (CAATSA) passed in Congress in 2017 to punish countries that make large purchases of Russian military hardware.

The delivery of S-400, a system designed to shoot down NATO airplanes, marks the most significant rupture in Turkey-US ties

in many decades. It comes at a time when Washington's concerns over Russian influence at home and abroad run high. Many in the US capital think that the sale of the S-400 to a NATO ally is the latest in a long saga of Russian efforts to chip away at the United States' preponderance of power. Others fear that the worst is yet to come, warning that Russia will strike the biggest blow when Turkey pulls out of NATO, which is seen as more likely today than ever before.

Given the complete breakdown of trust in Turkey-US relations in recent years over a number of problems and the potential for new ones on the horizon, a Turkish decision to leave NATO or a NATO decision to officially downgrade its military partnership with Ankara are now well within the realm of possibility¹. But Ankara and NATO are not there yet. The Turkey-Russia alliance is still fragile and results primarily from these countries' alienation from the West. As such, Russia and Turkey's respective relationships with the Western world will determine the future course of their own cooperation.

Turkey's Relations with the West

Turkey has historically had a complicated relationship with the West. The founders of the modern Turkish Republic anchored Turkey in Europe and the wider West after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the eyes of Turkey's first President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, civilization meant Western civilization and under his leadership the newly proclaimed Turkish Republic embarked on the most ambitious cultural westernization project ever witnessed by the Muslim world. Turkey became one of the first countries, in 1959, to seek close cooperation with the European Economic Community (EEC), the forerunner of the

¹ Turkish President Erdoğan has reportedly threatened to leave NATO in his discussions with Trump on the margin of the G-20 Summit in Osaka during their meeting on July 24, 2019. Source: C. Lee, L. Caldwell, and C. Kube, "[Trump asks GOP senators for 'flexibility' on Turkey sanctions](#)", *NBC News*, 24 July 2019.

European Union. In 1987, Turkey applied to join the EEC. Yet, Turkey's relations with the West remained ambiguous. Even as the new nation-state endeavored to erase its Ottoman past, a certain level of distrust of the West remained in the collective memory of Turkish leaders. Turkey, like Russia, was never colonized by the West. Yet, unlike Tsarist Russia, the death of the Turkish Empire had not been an internal affair. It was a product of military defeat and humiliation by Western powers – an agonizingly slow expiration culminating with the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 partitioning what was left of the empire among the victors of World War I.

Today's Turkey is often described as a country deeply polarized between Islamists and secularists. What is often overlooked in this misleading, binary representation is the fact that powerful historical symbols like Sevres still unite Islamists and secularists around the main driver of Turkish politics: nationalism. That Turkish nationalism often takes an anti-Western form should not come as a surprise. While Kemalists are disappointed with an EU that never rewarded Turkey's secularization and westernization, Islamists never nurtured high hopes about joining an entity they always considered as an anti-Turkish Christian club. What has remained a constant in modern Turkish history has therefore been a sense of righteous indignation *vis-à-vis* the West.

Turkey's anger with the West, however, seldom gained a clear anti-Russian dimension for three important reasons rooted in history as well as in current strategic dynamics. First, there is the important historical fact that the Turkish war of national independence in the early 1920s was partly waged with Russian support. Second comes the favorable image of the Soviet Union (USSR) in the eyes of the Turkish left and even within Kemalist military circles during the Cold War – particularly in times of crisis in Turkish-American relations. And third is, the recent dynamics of rapprochement. Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey's growing frustration with both the European Union and the United States has fueled the current

nationalist-secularist strategic vision known as Eurasianism; an anti-American, Russophile movement with roots that date back to the 1930s.

For anyone who takes history seriously, it is important to remember that Atatürk received military and financial support from the Bolsheviks during Turkey's war of national independence against Western imperialist forces. In fact, until Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin's territorial demands in 1945, Ankara tried hard to avoid picking sides between the West and the USSR. Neutrality was no longer an option during the Cold War as the bipolar balance of power took shape in the international system. Turkey was simply too geographically close for comfort to the USSR and had no alternative but to join the transatlantic alliance and benefit from collective defense.

Turkey lobbied hard to become a member of NATO and valued its place in the alliance, but by the 1960s and 1970s the extreme ideological polarization of Turkish politics resulted in important foreign policy ramifications. As the Turkish right became strongly anticommunist, Turkey's Kemalists slowly gravitated toward the center-left. In time, some within the left-wing spectrum of the Kemalist establishment even developed a soft spot for Moscow. In fact, each time Turkey came to be disappointed with Washington, as happened most famously in 1964 in the wake of the Johnson letter², Ankara flirted with the idea of realigning its grand strategy. The idea of Turkey joining the Non-Aligned Movement had a romantic appeal in the eyes of the Kemalists even if it was outside the realm of *realpolitik*. In practice, this meant Turkey's frequent frustrations with the West

² US President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 letter delivered an ultimatum to then Prime Minister İsmet İnönü: if Ankara launched an operation to defend Cypriot Turks in Cyprus, Turkey would not be allowed to use US weapons and would not be defended by the United States in the event of a possible Russian intervention – breaching the commitment to collective defense. The ultimatum was not well-received in Turkey, and a subsequent CIA cable stated that "Johnson's letter has done more to set back United States Turkish relations than any other single act".

never gained a blatantly anti-Russian dimension. From socialist intellectuals nurturing revolutionary dreams to Kemalist generals harking back to Atatürk's legacy of "full independence", the USSR represented to Turkey a necessary pole of resistance to American imperialism.

With the end of the Cold War, Turkey entered a new phase in its relations with the West as the strategic center of gravity shifted to the Middle East. There was now even more room for frustration with the West and particularly Washington because of Turkey's unresolved and rapidly deteriorating Kurdish problem. The 1990-91 Gulf War exacerbated this problem. Ankara led the initiative to establish a safe zone in northern Iraq to send back the five hundred thousand Iraqi Kurds who had fled the war into southeastern Turkey and convinced its allies to join the effort. Ironically, the UN-established no-fly-zone in northern Iraq ultimately undermined Turkey's security. The lack of central authority in northern Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf War enabled the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had been waging a war against the Turkish state since the 1980s, to establish training grounds in and stage operations against Turkey from the region. US support for the Iraqi Kurds frustrated the Turks, who believed that their concerns about Kurdish separatism fell on deaf ears. These concerns became one of the main drivers of Turkey's decision not to grant the US military access to Turkish airspace and bases in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which in turn led to a breakdown of trust between the two allies.

In the meantime, Turkey's frustration with the EU grew as well. The biggest shock came when the EU included the former Warsaw Pact countries, as well as Cyprus and Malta, in the enlargement process launched in the 1990s while excluding Turkey. The European Union cited Turkey's deteriorating human rights record and the country's faltering democracy, often referring to the human rights abuses by Turkey in its fight against the Kurdish militants, which reached new heights in the 1990s. Ankara saw the EU decision to extend membership to

former Warsaw Pact countries, which in Ankara's view were in no better place in terms of democracy than Turkey, as a double standard and accused the transatlantic alliance of turning a blind eye to Turkey's security concerns stemming from the Kurdish question.

This anti-Western resentment, along with several domestic dynamics, led to the rise of Eurasianism, a Euroskeptic, anti-American, and Russophile movement that included among its ranks socialists, nationalists, and Kemalists in the 1990s³. Eurasianists called for a pro-Russian orientation in Turkey's foreign policy, arguing that Turkey had to abandon its pro-Western foreign policy and make Russia its most important ally. In 2002, General Tuncer Kılınç, then Secretary General of the National Security Council, declared that Turkey should work with Russia and Iran against the EU⁴. In the mid-2000s, despite relative improvement in Turkey-EU relations with the beginning of negotiations over Turkey's accession as an EU member state, Eurasianism within the Kemalist establishment did not disappear. To the contrary, it reached new heights. Ultra-secularists opposed to the rising Justice and Development Party (AKP) within the military and judiciary considered American and European support for "moderate Islam" and a "Turkish model" for the greater Middle East as an attempt to erode Kemalist secularism and national unity in favor of Kurdish rights and political Islam. Ongoing resentment with Washington over the Kurdish question in Iraq and at home coupled with domestic polarization over secular and nationalist identity fueled the search for an anti-American and anti-EU alternative in foreign policy.

Eurasianism has made a comeback in Turkey as frustration with the West has reached new heights in the last few years.

³ Ş. Aktürk, "The Fourth Style of Politics: Eurasianism as a Pro-Russian Rethinking of Turkey's Geopolitical Identity", *Turkish Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 54-79.

⁴ S. Kınıklıoğlu, "The Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations", *Insight Turkey*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2006, pp. 81-96.

The US decision in 2014 to airdrop weapons to the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), considered to be a PKK-affiliated terrorist organization by Turkey, proved to be a turning point in Turkey-US ties. From the US perspective, the US action came after months of failed efforts to convince the Turks to do more in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). President Barack Obama's administration grew increasingly frustrated over Turkey's turning a blind eye to ISIS's activities within its borders. To Washington, supporting the YPG's fight against ISIS in the northern Syrian town of Kobane became a necessity. Ankara, for its part, felt betrayed by its NATO ally's decision to arm its arch-enemy.

The conflict in Syria posed further complications for Turkey-US ties. Ankara felt neglected by Washington when Russia vowed to retaliate after Turkey downed a Russian jet for violating its airspace in 2015. Shortly after the incident, Russia announced an end to charter flights between the two countries, a ban on Russian businesses hiring any new Turkish nationals, import restrictions on certain Turkish goods, and restrictions on Russian tourists' travel to Turkey⁵. Turkey, worried about a Russian military retaliation, urgently called a NATO meeting to discuss contingency plans in preparation for collective defense. Ankara asked its NATO allies to maintain their Patriot missile defense systems along the Turkish-Syrian border, as Germany and the United States had planned to withdraw their own Patriot batteries deployed in Turkey. Washington and Berlin went ahead with the withdrawal despite Turkish appeals, strengthening views in Ankara that the US-led alliance was not committed to Turkey's defense.

Another key moment in Turkey-US relations came in 2016 when a clique within the Turkish military led a coup attempt against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In Ankara's view, the United States was neither fast nor clear enough in

⁵ “Russia Slaps Economic Sanctions on Turkey Over Jet Downing”, *Defense News*, 28 November 2015.

condemning the coup attempt, while Russian President Vladimir Putin called Erdoğan immediately and offered the support of Russian Special Forces deployed in a nearby Greek island⁶. Turkey blames the US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen for orchestrating the coup and has demanded his extradition ever since. The United States has refused the request so far, arguing that the decision is up to the courts and that Turkey has failed to produce hard evidence tying Gülen to the coup attempt. To Turks, the US stance on Gülen has proved what has seemed evident to them all along: that the United States was behind the coup.

By the time anti-Americanism reached new heights in Ankara, Turkish policymakers had also resigned themselves to the fact Turkey would not become an EU member anytime soon. The accession talks that started in 2005 stalled shortly thereafter when Germany and France started circulating the idea of a “privileged partnership” for Turkey instead of full membership. The 2004 EU decision to grant membership to Cyprus, despite the fact that Greek Cypriots voted against unification the same year in a UN-sponsored referendum, proved to be another strategic blunder in the eyes of Turkey. The island has been divided between the Greek Cypriot south and Turkish north since a Greek *coup d'état* followed by a Turkish intervention in 1974. Rewarding the Greek side with EU membership further complicated Turkey's accession talks as Cyprus now holds veto power over the issue. In addition to talks of “privileged partnership”, the Cyprus question thus remains a major source of nationalist backlash against the EU in Turkey.

All this frustration over the West's approach has built up and greatly emboldened the Eurasianist view in Turkey to the degree that a growing section of the population came to support the government's decision to purchase Russian S-400 missile defense system despite repeated warnings from the United

⁶ P. Stewart, “U.S. officials wonder: Did Turkish leader's coup memories drive Russia arms deal?”, *Reuters*, 18 July 2019.

States that the system is not interoperable with NATO systems and that Turkey would face sanctions if it moved ahead with the delivery. In a recent survey by an Istanbul university, 44 percent of respondents supported Turkey's decision to purchase the S-400, while only 24 percent said otherwise⁷. Beyond the popular backlash, there is also a clear trend toward Eurasianism at the level of the political elites and establishment. More and more people within the Turkish military, opposition parties, and government circles make the argument that Turkey should not rely on the United States entirely for its security needs and instead turn to Russia.

Russia's Complicated Relations with the West

Russia has felt equally alienated from the West. Like Turkey, Russia saw itself as part of Europe⁸. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, ordinary Russians longed to be recognized as fellow Europeans and some viewed Russia as more European than the former Warsaw pact countries⁹. The Russian leaders aspired to join all major European institutions including NATO and the EU. The first President of post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin, made joining these European institutions his country's main goal. After becoming President in 2000, Vladimir Putin pursued a similar approach *vis-à-vis* Europe. He saw the EU as a key partner for Moscow.

From the European perspective, Russia was eligible to join the continent's second-tier bodies but not NATO or the EU. Western officials thought that problems with Russia's economic and democratic transition disqualified Moscow from

⁷ M. Aydın et al., *Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Algıları Araştırması 2019 Sonuçları Açıklandı* (Turkish Foreign Policy Public Opinion Perceptions Survey 2019 Results Announced), Kadir Has University, 4 July 2019 [in Turkish].

⁸ A. Foxall, "Russia used to see itself as part of Europe. Here's why that changed", *Washington Post*, 18 June 2018.

⁹ D. Trenin, "Russia's Post-Soviet Journey", *Foreign Affairs*, 25 December 2016.

membership in these institutions. Thus, the 1990s came to be regarded by many Russians as a “period of national humiliation” before Europeans, which in turn boosted Russian nationalism¹⁰. The decision in 2004 to include the Baltic States and several former Warsaw Pact countries in the EU and NATO heightened Russia’s sense of encirclement and added to its frustration. Many within the Kremlin felt betrayed, since they believed Washington had made promises not to expand NATO after Moscow agreed to German reunification.

The US-led invasion of Iraq also played a significant role in Russia’s relations with the West. Moscow’s opposition to the war marked a dramatic departure from the rapprochement between the United States and Russia following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. Moscow, vulnerable to international terrorism itself, became one of the strongest supporters of the US-led war on terror. Russia not only endorsed the war in Afghanistan but also accepted US involvement in antiterrorist activities in the Caucasus. Russia-US rapprochement reached such heights that US Senator Joseph Biden, former Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, argued that “No Russian leader since Peter the Great has cast his lot as much with the West as Putin has”¹¹. The invasion of Iraq, however, changed everything. By electing to act unilaterally, the United States was interpreted as asserting its position as the center of a unipolar world. Russia, once again, felt its voice – and its veto at the UN Security Council – did not count, and was determined to stand up to this display of unilateralism.

Thus, to the surprise of many in Washington, Russia under Putin’s leadership began to reassert its right to ensure that the countries in its immediate neighborhood remained out of the Western orbit¹². When, shortly after the invasion of Iraq, the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ T. Ambrosio, “The Russo-American dispute over the invasion of Iraq: international status and the role of positional goods”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 57, no. 8, 2005, pp. 1189-1210.

¹² A. Foxall (2018).

“color revolutions” – a series of popular uprisings that toppled governments in former Soviet republics including Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan – replaced pro-Kremlin leaders with pro-Western ones, Russia accused the West of plotting these anti-regime protests¹³.

Russia's shift away from the EU became more visible after conflict erupted between Georgia and Russia over the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. The EU suspended negotiations with Russia on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and launched a program to cultivate closer economic and political ties with six former Soviet republics¹⁴. EU-Russia relations degraded further after protesters toppled the pro-Russian government of President Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine in 2014 and Russia responded by annexing Crimea. In retaliation, the EU imposed economic sanctions on Russia. Many people in Russia believed the sanctions were aimed at “weakening and humiliating Russia” and rallied around the Kremlin's foreign policy¹⁵.

The events of 2014 hastened Russia's Eurasian turn in search of strategic influence in a geography stretching from Ireland to Japan. Moscow dropped its official policy of identifying Russia as part of a “global Europe” and embraced the view that Russia constitutes a civilization in its own right, apart from Europe¹⁶. Like Turkish Eurasianism, the revived Russian Eurasianism had its roots in the early XX century. It originated among the Russian emigrant community after the Bolshevik revolution in the 1920s and promoted the idea that Russia has a unique identity with Slavic and Turkic roots¹⁷. In post-Soviet Russia, Eurasianists supported the cultivation of close alliances with India, Iran, and Japan, and enlisting Turkey in the struggle

¹³ N. Bouchet, “Russia's “militarization” of colour revolutions”, *CSS Policy Perspectives*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1-4.

¹⁴ A. Foxall (2018).

¹⁵ D. Trenin (2016).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ş. Aktürk (2015).

against the US-led Atlanticist bloc. Russia's growing frustration and disappointment with the West, following similar Turkish dynamics, gave Russian Eurasianism a much more assertive vision. The time seemed ripe for further rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow, two disgruntled powers expecting more respect from the West.

Putin's Turkey Opening

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided a golden opportunity for the Eurasianists and proved to be a turning point in Turkey-Russia ties. The Turkish Parliament's decision not to allow the United States to use Turkish territory in the war showed Russia that Turkey was a weak link in the Western alliance, which would pursue an independent policy if necessary. Russia started to court Turkey's Euroskeptics. A conference titled "Turkey's Relations with Russia, China, and Iran at the Eurasia Axis" was held at Istanbul University in 2005. The event brought together retired Turkish General Tuncer Kılınç, who advocated closer ties between Turkey and Russia against the EU, Turkey's anti-Western Labor Party leader Doğu Perinçek, the Deputy Chairman of Turkey's main opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), and the former Russian Ambassador, Albert Chernishev.

In the meantime, an attack in the Russian republic of North Ossetia removed a major irritant in Turkey-Russia ties. On 1 September 2004, Beslan School in North Ossetia was taken over by dozens of militants demanding freedom for nearby Chechnya. They held over 1,100 people as hostage, more than half of them children. After a three-day siege, 330 people were killed¹⁸.

This traumatizing terrorist attack changed the dynamics of Turkish-Russian relations. The two countries agreed to work

¹⁸ B. Chappell, "'Serious Failings' By Russia In Deadly Beslan School Siege, European Court Says", *NPR*, 13 April 2017.

more closely in the “fight against terrorism”. Russia promised to rein in PKK activities within its borders, while Turkey pledged not to support Chechen organizations¹⁹. This was a significant shift in policy for both parties. The Kurds had historically played an important role in Russian efforts to exert its influence in the Middle East and restrain Turkey’s influence, and during the Cold War, the USSR established close relations with Turkey’s Kurds in particular. In the 1970s, the PKK was established as a Kurdish nationalist organization with Marxist-Leninist roots with Soviet help. In response, Turkey turned a blind eye to Moscow’s own struggles against separatists when, after the Cold War, Chechnya launched a coordinated campaign for independence leading to two bloody wars. Russia opposed Chechen independence on the grounds that Chechnya was part of Russia, but the Chechen separatists enjoyed strong support in Turkey. The Beslan school attack, however, turned a new page and paved the way for much stronger counterterrorism cooperation between Ankara and Moscow.

At the time, Turkey still saw its relations with Russia as a tool to exert pressure on its Western allies to extract concessions in various areas. Eurasianism, and its promotion of pro-Russian foreign policy as the country’s new geopolitical outlook, was still a relatively marginal vision in early 2000s. By 2015, however, Eurasianism became a significant political force due to accumulating tensions in relations with the EU and United States. After a ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK broke down and tensions between Turkey and the United States peaked due to the latter’s cooperation with the YPG in Syria in 2015, nationalists led by Labor Party leader Doğu Perinçek, who had long promoted closer ties to Russia, threw their support behind President Erdoğan²⁰. From 2015 onwards, Eurasianism was adopted as the strategic vision of the ruling coalition. This shift

¹⁹ M. Yetkin, “Rusya ile sıkı işbirliği” (“Close cooperation with Russia”), *Radikal*, 21 July 2005 [In Turkish].

²⁰ Ö. Temena, “Ergenekon’dan Erdoğan’a: Kızıl Elmal” (“From Ergenekon to Erdogan: Red Apple!”), *Gazete Duvar*, 23 October 2017.

coincided with Russia's turn to Eurasia. In the official Foreign Policy Concept adopted by the Kremlin in 2016, Russia promotes "Eurasian integration process" at the expense of the EU²¹.

Joint frustration with the West has been the main driver behind Turkey-Russia partnership. What started as a modest trade cooperation in the 1980s acquired a political and strategic dimension as tensions with the West grew. Despite their competing military and political interests in Syria, Russia and Turkey have been cooperating diplomatically over the conflict. Moscow and Ankara, along with Tehran, launched the Astana process in order to negotiate a ceasefire and implement de-escalation zones throughout the war-torn country. In another sign of burgeoning cooperation between Ankara and Moscow, the two countries marked the completion of the offshore phase of construction of a gas pipeline underneath the Black Sea, which aims to pump some 31.1 billion cubic meters of gas from Russia to Turkey annually²². Trade between Turkey and Russia in 2018 increased 37 percent from 2017, reaching \$13.3 billion and making Turkey Russia's fifth biggest trading partner in the first half of 2018²³. Russia is also building Turkey's first nuclear reactor²⁴. The two countries are cultivating close defense ties as well, as demonstrated by the aforementioned delivery of the S-400 missile defense system to Turkey, prompting the US decision to kick Turkey out of the F-35 program. The S-400 purchase has triggered a debate in Western capitals over whether Turkey is abandoning its seven-decade strategic alliance with the West.

²¹ A. Foxall (2018).

²² "Erdogan, Putin celebrate key step in Russia-Turkey gas pipeline", *France 24*, 19 November 2018.

²³ "Turkey becomes Russia's 5th biggest trading partner in H1 2018", *Daily Sabah*, 8 August 2018.

²⁴ T. Karadeniz, "Erdogan, Putin mark start of work on Turkey's first nuclear power plant", *Reuters*, 3 April 2018.

A Turkey-Russia Strategic Alliance? Not Yet

Delivery of the S-400 missiles is indeed a watershed in Turkey's relations with NATO. Turkey-Russia relations could evolve into a strategic partnership in the future if Turkey's relations with the West strain further. But Turkey is not there yet. Turkey-Russia relations remain fragile. Despite their diplomatic cooperation in Syria, Turkey and Russia are on opposing military fronts, with Russia backing Bashar al-Assad's regime and Turkey supporting the opposition. The Syrian province of Idlib, the last remaining opposition stronghold, remains a flashpoint for Turkey-Russia relations over Syria.

Russia wants the Assad regime to eventually take control of Idlib and remove what it sees as extremist Islamist militants from the region. Turkey insists that Idlib must remain under rebel control in order to prevent further flows of refugees into Turkey and give the Syrian opposition more leverage in a peace settlement²⁵. As part of a deal struck with Moscow in 2018, Turkey pledged to remove extremist factions from a 15-20 km buffer zone around Idlib, temporarily averting a Russia-led invasion by regime forces. But Ankara has failed to uphold its end of the deal. A hard-line Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham shattered the agreement by gaining control of key crossing points in the region. Russia and Turkey blame each other for the failed agreement: Moscow urges Turkey to deliver on its promise, while Ankara accuses Moscow of failing to prevent a regime offensive²⁶.

The two countries are at loggerheads in Libya as well. Turkey backs the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya's capital Tripoli and provides military aid to Islamist groups aligned with the GNA in the current conflict. Meanwhile, Russia backs the GNA's opponent, General

²⁵ C. Gall and H. Saad, "Huge Wave of Syrians Flee Intensified Bombing on Last Rebel-Held Province", *New York Times*, 30 May 2019.

²⁶ H. Foy and L. Pitel, "Russia and Iran take Turkey to task on Syria terror groups", *Financial Times*, 14 February 2019.

Khalifa Haftar, who has waged war against the Islamists as well and threatened to attack Turkish interests. Haftar accused Ankara of backing his rivals after he suffered a major setback in his offensive to seize Tripoli in April 2019²⁷.

The dispute over oil and gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean is another point of conflict between Turkey and Russia. Cyprus has discovered natural gas in areas off the south of the island. Turkey argues that Cyprus, an EU member, does not have rights to unilaterally explore for gas and must share gas revenue with the Turkish Cypriots. At the same time, Ankara has been carrying out oil exploration missions itself. Russia has historically supported the Greek Cypriots and developed close defense ties. In the recent flare-up, Moscow sided with the Greek Cypriots and asked Turkey to respect the sovereignty of Cyprus²⁸.

The two countries differ in their approach to Crimea as well. Russia's annexation of Crimea shifted the military balance in the Black Sea to Turkey's disadvantage and increased Ankara's reliance on NATO. President Erdoğan criticized Russian intervention in Ukraine, with which Ankara is seeking closer defense ties, and said that Turkey does not recognize Russian annexation of Crimea, which hosts Turkic-speaking Tatars opposed to Russian annexation²⁹.

Russia-Turkey rivalry is also evident in the Caucasus. Turkey has longstanding ethnic and historical links to the region. The defeat of the Ottomans in much of the region and the Russian campaign against its Circassian population led to the mass migration of Caucasus Muslims to Turkey. These communities and their descendants, who still live in Turkey, influenced Turkey's policy *vis-à-vis* the conflicts in the Caucasus in the 1990s. The conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh pitted Turkey's

²⁷ "Haftar vows attacks on Turkish assets in Libya", *France 24*, 29 June 2019.

²⁸ A. Zaman, "Eastern Mediterranean crisis balloons as Turkish drill ships multiply", *Al-Monitor*, 9 July 2019.

²⁹ "Turkey won't recognize Russia's unlawful annexation of Crimea: President Erdoğan", *Daily Sabah*, 9 March 2016.

age-old Armenian enemies against the ethnically Turkic state of Azerbaijan. Armenia remains Russia's most staunch ally in the Caucasus, although Russia seeks to retain its influence in Azerbaijan as well, making the region vulnerable to competition between Russia and Turkey.

Finally, Russia and Turkey remain at odds on in the Balkans as well, where the two countries historically supported opposite sides of region's ethnic and religious divide. All these dynamics clearly illustrate that Moscow and Ankara disagree on almost all issues of regional and strategic significance. In other words, a Eurasianist Turkey may very well be frustrated with both Washington and Brussels, but its military arrangement with Moscow does not automatically translate into harmony based on shared national interests in relations with Russia.

Where Do We Go from Here?

As a corollary, Washington still has considerable leverage in relations with Turkey. In fact, one can argue that the future of Turkish-Russian relations in great part will depend on how President Donald Trump's administration handles the S-400 crisis with Ankara. It is now up to the White House and its relations with Congress to determine the path to follow. On the day the S-400 shipment arrived in Ankara, both Republican and Democrat leaders of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee declared the purchase "a troubling signal of strategic alignment with Putin's Russia"³⁰.

Under CAATSA, individuals or entities that engage in a "significant transaction" with the Russian defense or intelligence sectors will face a broad array of sanctions. The most severe of these would involve cutting off Turkish entities from US financial institutions, effectively making it impossible for

³⁰ United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "[Bipartisan Leadership of Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees Condemn Turkey S-400 Acquisition](#)", Press Release, 12 July 2019.

Ankara to raise money through international lenders or investors. Milder steps would target individuals by denying them US visas, freezing their assets, and banning all banking and foreign exchange transactions with them. While no final decisions have been made at the time of writing, Congress appears to be ready for a middle-of-the-road approach with specific sanctions targeting Turkey's defense industry.

President Trump has conditional veto power over CAATSA and appears determined to appease both Congress and Erdoğan by pursuing a path of negotiation rather than sanctions. It seems Trump's mercantilist instincts are driving him to revive the F-35 sale to Turkey in order to avoid a \$10 billion loss and sell the Patriot missile system to Ankara in return for a pledge that it not activate the S-400s. To reach a deal, Trump even seems willing to include sweeteners such as a free-trade agreement with Turkey.

This might indeed be the constructive and rational path for Washington to follow. Punishing Turkey too severely could bring about precisely what is feared in NATO circles and turn a tactical military arrangement between Ankara and Moscow into a potential strategic realignment. Yet, a constructive and pragmatic approach from Washington requires a constructive and rational partner in Ankara. So far Erdoğan has not budged. He has shown no flexibility on the activation of S-400s scheduled for February 2020. In the case that reports of his threats to withdraw from NATO and to close the Incirlik airbase are true, this further illustrates his plan to play hardball with Washington. His growing nationalist rhetoric about a military operation in northeast Syria, where YPG militants are still actively cooperating with US special operations forces, also does not bode well for Turkish-American relations.

His last meeting with President Trump in Osaka seems to have left Erdoğan reassured that the United States will not impose CAATSA sanctions and that even if it does, the US President has the power to suspend or waive them altogether. But relying on a demonstrably impulsive President Trump to

save Turkey from the judgement of US Congress is a highly risky strategy. In any case, if President Trump is to waive sanctions mandated by Congress, he will need a face-saving excuse. So far Washington seems to have wisely reached the conclusion that there is room for negotiations with Turkey. However, this should create no complacency. Ankara needs to strike a more constructive tone. Turkish-American relations are on the brink of a historic crisis. Erdoğan, Trump, and the US Congress have a choice: escalation or damage control. With some rational thinking, there is still time for the latter.