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Turkey and Russia: A Relationship of Convenience, or a New Strategic Alliance?

By Dr. Sinan Ciddi

The Turkish-Russian relationship is a complicated one, fraught with historical rivalry, bitter enmity, and in recent times, typified by geostrategic opportunism and mercantilist entrepreneurialism. In the waning decades of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire lost vast amounts of territory and no less than twelve wars at the hands of the Russian armies. During the early years of the founding of the Turkish republic (1923-39), Turkey's leaders maintained a precarious distance from the nascent Soviet Union, wanting on the one hand to establish cordial diplomatic ties and constantly living in fear of Soviet desires for ideological and territorial expansion.

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Convenience... (CONTINUED ON PG 2)

No End in Sight: Russia and Turkey Battle for Syria

By Dr. Yuval Weber

The war in Syria is approaching its ninth anniversary. A local, Arab Spring-inspired protest in Damascus in March 2011 exploded into a civil war, then internationalized into a multilateral war against a transnational terror group, and is now a proxy battle between local clients of great powers directly against regional actors. The latest phase of the war – Turkey and Syria directly confronting each other over the fate of Idlib, the last major opposition-held area outside of Syrian government control with Russia backing its local client against its regional ally – demonstrates just how wide the range of outcomes the Syria War can be. A successful resolution of the war with a peaceful postwar reconstruction, direct confrontation between large states, or a regional conflict where great power patrons battle through proxy clients all appear plausible. The disposition of the war runs several risks, one where the war as understood today—the Syrian government's *reconquista* of its own territory combined with a battle against of the Islamic State (ISIS)—fails to resolve the question of distribution of power in the Middle East and raises the specter of wider international conflict, a scenario that repeats the strategic follies of the period between the world wars.

No End...(CONTINUED ON PG 4)

Despite Turkey's established credentials as a NATO country, its relationship with both Russia and the US is not clearly defined. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Turkey experienced a variety of diplomatic crises with the United States, forcing its leaders to question whether relations with the Soviet Union should be reevaluated. The Cuban Missile crisis in 1963 revealed that under conditions of duress, the United States was willing to sell out an ally under the table-albeit to avoid a major military catastrophe between the two superpowers. Additionally, in 1974, the US took a clear stance against Turkey in relation to Turkey's military intervention in Cyprus, by imposing a crippling arms embargo on the Turkish military until 1980. In both of these cases, Turkish governments considered forging closer ties with the USSR, but ultimately chose to remain embedded in the western alliance.

The post-Cold War era has not only tested the limits of Turkey's position in and commitment to the western alliance, but also provided Turkey's leaders the opportunity to forge a closer, albeit timid relationship with the nascent Russian federation. During the 1980s and 1990s, under the tutelage of Turgut Ozal, both countries laid the foundation of a mutually beneficial commercial relationship. This was subsequently capitalized upon by the conclusion of energy deals, resulting in Turkey becoming one of the most dependent and reliable purchasers of Russian natural gas. In the very recent past, Turkey has contracted Russia to build four nuclear power stations- a reflection of Turkey's continuously growing energy needs. This is now being crowned by an increasing defense and security cooperation, whereby Turkey in 2019, to the chagrin of its NATO partners and allies, purchased Russian-made S-400 missile defense system. This is one of the most immediate reasons watchers of Turkey have questioned the viability of Turkey as strategic partner of the United States and a committed member of NATO. By purchasing a weapon system that is fundamentally incompatible with NATO systems that could collect and pass on sensitive information belonging to allied offensive and defensive capabilities, some leaders have actively begun to question Turkey's bona fides as an ally. Furthermore, in the field of regional politics, and particularly in the Syrian arena, since 2015 Turkey has visibly pursued policies that are diametrically opposed to the interests of the United States and the West and simultaneously coordinated with and agreed upon by Vladimir Putin.

Many of these developments have come at the expense of Turkey's lengthy and deep relationship with the European Union, the United States and NATO. On the opposite side, Turkey's seemingly enhanced dialogue with Russia has been precariously fostered by Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin. Since 2018, both leaders have made a point of regularly speaking with one another to coordinate policy on a variety of issues. Turkey's ambivalence towards the United States is not an isolated or recent phenomenon. Since Erdogan came to power in 2003, his distrust of the United States has increased incrementally, beginning with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Despite a rekindled relationship with the Obama administration, a visible degradation in US-Turkey ties once again became apparent following the onset of the Arab uprisings, especially in the case of Syria, which has driven a wedge between the two allies. This is due to several factors: Ankara's biggest miscalculation was to buy into the notion that the United States was committed to the overthrow of the Assad regime-a preference which Erdogan came to

MES Notes

8 January 2020

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Iranian Maritime Capabilities and Limitations" to the Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS).

16 January 2020

Amin Tarzi presented a Faculty Development session at MCU entitled "Iran's Political Culture and Threat Perceptions: Containment or Confrontation?"

6 February 2020

Amin Tarzi taught a class entitled "Evolution of US Geopolitics in the Middle East" at the University of Southern California's Washington DC Program.

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espouse. This played into the policy preferences of Ankara, which came to believe that a new leadership in Syria, one that was more aligned to the Muslim Brotherhood, was preferable. This preference pitted Ankara against Russia and Iran's preferences to prop up the Assad regime, and resulted in incidents that carried the potential to bring the two sides into hot conflict. Turkey's shooting down of the SU-24 Russian bomber for violating Turkish airspace was an expression by Erdogan to demonstrate that not only was Turkey a major player in the region, but that it could invoke the support of NATO if the Russians decided to retaliate. Washington's cool response in supporting Turkey during this incident was a reflection of the Obama administration's reticence to enter into a major conflict with Russia. Following this, a downward spiral and loss of trust between the United States and Turkish governments became an observable phenomenon. The US's backing of the Syrian People's Protection Units (YPG) as the main force to help defeat the Islamic State was a red flag to President Erdogan, who quickly pointed out that the United States had chosen to work with a terrorist organization to defeat another terrorist organization. This signaled to observers that the threat perception and policy priorities of the two NATO allies in the region were far apart. While the US was clearly interested in defeating the Islamic State by working with an on-the-ground proxy that its ally abhorred, Turkey's main priority was focused on regime change in Syria. The tensions further escalated following the coup attempt experienced by Turkey in July 2016. This was due to both a lukewarm pledge of support by the US government and a failure to extradite Fetullah Gulen by the United States, which Turkey believes masterminded and carried out the coup. In contrast, Vladimir Putin was one of the first world leaders to call Mr. Erdogan and condemn the coup—a gesture that didn't go unnoticed by Erdogan. There are other ancillary grievances which plague the bilateral relationship, however, it can be said with certainty that the US's partnership with the YPG and its perceived unwillingness to extradite Gulen form the backbone of the Turkish government's loss of trust in the United States.

Notes:

¹ In October 1963, the de-escalation of the Cuban missile crisis hinged upon the US' willingness to withdraw a whole series of Jupiter missiles stationed in Turkey, in exchange for the Soviet Union's willingness to dismantle nuclear missiles stationed in Cuba. This was interpreted as the US selling out an ally under duress, by compromising its security.

² Henri Barkey, Turkey and the Arab Spring, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2011

³ Michael Reynolds, 'Turkey and Russia: A Remarkable Rapprochement', War on the Rocks, October 2019

⁴ Michael Jansen, 'Turkey Deserves the Blame for What Happened in Syria', Irish Times, December 6, 2019

⁵ Gareth Porter, 'The Real Reason for Turkey's Shoot-Down of the Russian Jet', Middle East Eye, December 7, 2015

⁶ NATO Urges Calm After Turkey Shoots Down Russian Plane', CBS News, November 24, 2015

⁷ Turkey considers the YPG and its political part parent, the PYD as a terrorist organization, owing to the organic link that connects both organizations to Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey. The latter is recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US and the EU. Lisel Hintz, 'No One Lost Turkey: Erdogan's Foreign Policy Quest for Agency with Russia and Beyond', <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-turkeys-foreign-policy/>

⁸ The Process of Extraditing Fetullah Gulen, Bipartisan Policy Center, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPC-Gulen-Extradition.pdf>

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Whatever the outcome, the shape and distribution of power in the larger Middle East region will be far different at the conclusion of the war compared to its beginning. Central among those changes is the Russian-Turkish relationship. How the war ends will determine the power and fates of its personalist leaders, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Both leaders have sought great personal political power at home and have also staked projecting state power abroad as a component of political strength and personal prestige. Their countries, Russia and Turkey, have reached a current *détente* in their relations by finding a common policy on Syria—support Bashar al-Assad as the best option for stability—but the leaders have differed quite greatly in the past on the distribution of power in Syria, a recipe for the revival of hostility later on. As both leaders have wanted Syria as a client state, the superiority of Russia in the current iteration of the war sets the stage for Turkish revanchism later to recover lost influence, prestige, and potentially other material goods. The long-term incompatibility between personalist leaders wanting to use Syria for their own ends and the short-term stability they seek now means that the current alliance of convenience will pose serious challenges for Putin and Erdoğan in shaping the distribution of power in the Middle East.

The tactical cooperation between Russia and Turkey emerged from a unique set of factors. In Turkey, an attempted coup d'état in July 2016 failed to dislodge Erdoğan but nevertheless created a tenuous domestic political environment and reduced aims abroad. Putin, for his part, has opened relations with all regional players to normalize Russia's expanded physical presence in the region. Syria is a generation-defining diplomatic opportunity for both states. Russia sees Syria as the venue to become a great power acknowledged by the United States and other leading states. This status would help Russia favorably resolve its many issues: ongoing conflict in Ukraine and with the West broadly, economic difficulties resulting from volatile oil prices and international sanctions, the growing gulf between Putin's foreign interests and the domestic needs of the Russian state, and the logistical challenges of projecting power beyond its own borders to an extent unseen since the end of the Soviet Union. And for Turkey, Syria could become the vehicle by which it projects power into the Middle East at levels unseen since the Ottoman Empire period, diversifies its diplomatic attention following the likely end of European Union accession efforts, or even resolves its problem of Kurdish separatism by clearing out cross-border Syrian Kurdish support. Yet so far it has produced a serious humanitarian crisis of fleeing refugees and terrorist attacks from ISIS within its own country, while emboldening Kurdish actors who potentially pose a threat to the Turkish state and generating serious disagreements with NATO allies over the strategy and conduct of the war.

Revenge for 1989: Syrian Intervention and Great Power Politics

Russia's entry into the Syrian war in 2015 represents one of its most serious attempts to revise what its leaders consider a fundamentally unjust international order that has shut them out of meaningful international and European decision-making and thus the top echelon of states. From the Russian perspective, the current iteration of the international order should have started in late 1989 with the end of the Cold War, where the Soviet Union acknowledged the United States as clearly the world's leading power because of its material capabilities and in return the United States acknowledged the Soviet Union as Europe's other leading power. The collapse of the Soviet Union should not have voided that deal, but that is the reality of what happened in 1991: Russia could not enforce a deal struck by the Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin has subsequently organized the entire grand strategy of Russia during his twenty years in power around the idea of restoring Russia's "lost" international status of being indispensable to international and European security issues.

The purpose of "being" a great power for Putin is the ability to set the rules of international political and economic interaction or carve out exceptions for Russia. This emerged over the past decade

following several attempts to partner with the United States, most notably cooperating in the anti-Taliban war in Afghanistan. The lack of reciprocity from the American side to revise the results of the post-Soviet collapse (and either restore bipolarity or permit multipolarity) pushed Putin to pursue a unilateral strategy. The expansive security policy over the past decade has seen Putin explicitly challenge the Euro-Atlantic alliance in a fiery 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, defeat Georgia in a brief 2008 war and gain Abkhazia and South Ossetia as quasi-protectorates, annex Crimea from Ukrainian control, and sponsor an anti-government insurgency in eastern Ukraine as well as myriad other actions.

Yet those events were all on Russia's borders; a great power, by contrast, can project force well beyond its own borders. Intervention into Syria is therefore evidence and demonstration of Russia's own great power status, and, by simply existing as a player in the war, it also demonstrates evidence for its narrative of America's relative decline. That combination allows Russia to argue that multipolarity (and hence the shift away from unipolarity) is gaining ground, permitting Russia to seek and build its own alliance network by showcasing the benefits it provides to potential subordinate allies. These include protecting a client (Bashar al-Assad's Syria) no matter how unpopular that client may be, in contrast to the United States; shaping how other states or sub-state groups use power in the region; becoming an "off-shore balancer" at the expense of the United States; and showing off military hardware while gaining battlefield experience for the use of others. Russia is also providing a diplomatic path for other states without the United States, with Putin remarking in Ankara when meeting with Erdoğan: "Along with Turkey and Iran, we are creating a zone of de-escalation in Syria and we are creating the conditions for the conclusion of the war and the return of the refugees."¹ Russia seeks to revise the post-Soviet international order into something resembling the post-Cold War international order, and by shaping the conduct of war in the Middle East, it buttresses its claim of being a great power able to shape events.

The Foreign Policy of a "Central Power"

Contemporary Turkish foreign policy has shifted away from the longstanding and singular Kemalist focus on relations with Europe and the West and towards a modern interpretation of an older tradition when the Ottoman Empire extended in all directions from the home territory. Yet for Erdoğan and his long-time associate Ahmet Davutoğlu, the so-called "neo-Ottomanism" does not refer to direct colonial annexation of territories into the Balkans and across the Middle East to the Red Sea and Gulf. Rather, the same post-Cold War relaxation of tension with Russia that allowed Europeans to create a new political framework that integrated former communist states – allowing the states of Central and Eastern Europe to move ahead of Turkey in the queue – pushed Erdoğan and Davutoğlu to reconsider how Turkey might otherwise exist in the wider region.

The end of the Cold War and relaxation of geopolitical struggles reduced some of the pressure placed on Turkey and allowed its leaders to conceive of a wider role in geopolitical affairs beyond the ongoing quest to join the European Economic Community or its successor, the European Union. These resulted in formulations such as "zero problems with neighbors" to resolve longstanding disputes on a bilateral basis and "strategic depth," an idea promulgated by Davutoğlu for the country to perceive itself as a "central power." Davutoğlu argued that Turkey exists simultaneously in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the Black Sea region, so exercising influence in these diverse areas affords Turkey the opportunity to be a global power and not merely a bridge or tool between Islam and the West. Davutoğlu's vision of Turkey as a core member of a multipolar order culminated in the "2023 vision":

First, Turkey aims to achieve all EU membership conditions and become an influential EU member state by 2023. Second, it will continue to strive for regional integration, in the form of security and economic cooperation. Third, it will seek to play an influential role in regional conflict resolution. Fourth, it will vigorously participate in all global arenas. Fifth, it will play a determining role in international organizations and become one of the top 10 largest economies in the world. To achieve them, Turkey must make progress in all directions and in every field, take an interest in every issue related to global stability, and contribute accordingly.²

Whatever the formulation, the direction was clear for Turkey's moving towards greater engagement in its immediate neighborhood, and especially to the east and south. This setting provides the context for Erdoğan's vision for a post-Assad Syria. Relations between the two countries had warmed through Erdoğan's tenure with a free trade agreement in 2004, Turkey's moderation of peace talks between Syria and Israel over 2008-2009, joint military exercises in 2009, and mutual visits by both country's heads of state. However, the onset of civil war in Syria soured relations. Not only did Erdoğan prefer an Islamic-oriented government in Damascus to mirror his own, the brutality of the Assad government's response to the opposition also angered the Turkish leader, who said: "They [Syria] are not acting in a humane manner. This is savagery."³ The combination of an imploding neighbor, the opportunity to project influence into a key vector for a self-declared "central power," and the prospect of burnishing Turkey's international reputation all pushed Erdoğan to see the strategic value of stronger action in Syria.

Looking Inside the State: Putinism and Erdoğanism

For both Putin in Russia and Erdoğan in Turkey, the motivation to keep the conflict going in Syria is not merely the international goals described above but also is to avoid the domestic political consequences of not achieving their goals – an outcome worse in personalist states than in democratic ones. For that it is necessary to look inside of the state, and particularly Russia and Turkey, to explain the political motivations that lead to the war's continuation. On the surface, Syria represents for Putin the chance to revise the international order, and abandoning Syria without any significant political victory would mark the apex of his informal power and signal the beginning of the end. By acknowledging the limits of what Russia, and by extent what he personally, can accomplish through foreign policy, leaving Syria without revising the international order would be a personal loss. For Erdoğan, Syria represented many similar opportunities and a test of his personal power, even if his aims are broadly regional if not global. Yet the 2016 coup d'état demonstrated the limits of Erdoğan's power and subsequent curtailing of external aims.

What both Putin and Erdoğan share are highly personalized political systems. Electoral campaigns are defined less by specific policy debate and more by obliging the electorate to approve or disapprove the leader and his entire apparatus of governing. Numerous mechanisms are then put in place to shape the outcome in favor of the leader, his subordinates, or the parties that support them. Economic arrangements are designed to favor clients of the patron, including distribution of welfare benefits to supporters and redistribution of rents to elite supporters. The relations between the leader and the rest of society are divided into rivalry and tension between "the people" and "outsiders" for which the leader is the paragon of the former against the latter, and the leader and the people jointly share conservative social and religious values unshared by foreign-supported outsiders. The leader is the man of the nation who understands the national will and seeks out enemies and traitors.

The similarities of the political systems indicate that success for both leaders will be in their abilities to shape the politics of their countries towards themselves and to maintain them when external conditions change. This means keeping up their images as masterminds who singularly understand the direction their countries need to go, including how to provide economic growth and international legitimacy.

Both have had to substitute greater international legitimacy and projections of power when domestic economic growth has slowed or stopped. In Russia, slow economic growth emerged from a combination of low average energy prices over the past decade alongside limited economic diversification, a punishing sanctions regime, and the increased political risk associated with Russian business. In turn, Putin needs to put greater weight on international success, hence the investment of personal legitimacy in a successful adventure in Syria. Over the twenty years of Putin's rule in Russia, countervailing political and economic institutions in Russia have been nearly eliminated. This is likely to worsen/continue for another six years due to Putin's winning the 2018 presidential elections. This has permitted Putin maximal flexibility in foreign affairs but has also made foreign policy a reflection of personal legitimacy because there are relatively few domestic sources of legitimacy. Turkey may not be an oil-exporting state, but the same basic reality faces Erdoğan. Slowing growth from softness in the construction sector, money-laundering scandals, and difficulties with international financial markets challenging the lira have put Erdoğan in the same position as Putin, that of needing to rely on improvements in security to overshadow economic news. Foremost, this means pushing the Syrian Kurds as far from the Turkey-Syria border to prevent cross-border collusion between the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

All told, anything but victory in Syria would force debates about Putin's and Erdoğan's political longevity, potentially alert rivals and allies that succession might be coming and to start preparing themselves for battle, and signal to the bureaucracy that doing anything for one patron might lead to negative consequences later on if that patron fails to win. In those terms, the failure to win would create a self-fulfilling prophecy by discouraging the bureaucracy from doing anything to create the conditions for success.

Pursuit of legitimacy through external adventure also carries tremendous risk. If the war continues without a favorable outcome, such as a formal alliance with the United States or withdrawing from Syria in exchange for favorable dispositions of Ukraine and Crimea, then the question for Russian political and economic elites is how long the status quo can continue. Without enough money to make everybody happy on the back of declining oil prices, the sanctions regime, and the business risk resulting from Russia's geopolitical course, Putin will find himself in a familiar dilemma: spend too much energy and money on the demands of the security state and an aggressive stance abroad, and the economy will suffer, and regular people will become dissatisfied. Spend too much energy and money on the economy, and the security state will resent being ignored, and any geopolitical reverse will become the sole responsibility of the leader. Those political and economic elites, all the people who are individually far weaker than Putin but collectively able to bring his tenure to an end, will have to be satisfied that he will continue to be the person who will adjudicate their problems and keep the present looking like the past. But he also needs to be person who inspires the people at large that he is also the only person who can solve society's problems and make the future look even better than the present. It is a difficult balance because the elite and the people are pulling the president in two different directions.

The style of Erdoğanism differs from Putinism, but the fundamental political demands upon Erdoğan resemble those on Putin. Erdoğan must generate general economic growth at a time when the structural inefficiencies of numerous years of construction-led growth are emerging and international confidence in the sustainability of Turkish political economy is low. Removal of individuals and groups associated with the coup attempt has extended into the low hundreds of thousands and created an actual parallel state. Personalized disputes with the United States and the European Union have limited the diplomatic outlets. This context of structural changes to international politics and the ever-increasing demands of domestic political survival and success shapes Erdoğan's needs for success in Syria. Unlike Russia that is physically detached from Syria, instability in that country directly threatens its neighbor Turkey via refugee flows, fighting along the border, encouragement to Kurdish groups to articulate territorial ambitions, and the inability to shape regional relations. Like Putin, Erdoğan needs to influence the outcome of the war in Syria to prevent importing the problems of that country into Turkey.

Where Does This End?

The previous several weeks of fighting between Syrian government forces, anti-Assad rebels, and the Turkish military have escalated tensions to dangerous levels. The deaths of dozens of Turkish soldiers at the hands of Syrian forces using Russian-supplied weapons raise the political costs to Erdoğan for continued public friendship with Putin. News reports from the region suggest that Turkey has denied Russian military airplanes access to its airspace, and Turkey could always close the Bosphorus Straits to Russia under its Montreux Convention prerogative to deny access to states it believes pose an imminent military threat. That action would end Russia's "Syria Express" supply route from the Black Sea, putting one of the jewels of its foreign policy at risk.

The personalized foreign policies of both states mean that Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan need each other both to remain strong and to show weakness in the face of the other's demands, a paradox that can continue to bloody effect for potentially years to come.

Notes:

¹ Putin, Vladimir. "Russia Concludes Game-Changing Talks With Turkey, Iran to Decide Future of Syria," Vesti.ru. November 23, 2017. Available online at <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2957746>.

² Davutoglu, Ahmet. "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," Foreign Policy. May 20, 2010. Available online at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>.

³ "Turkish PM warns Syria against second Hama massacre," Dünya Bülteni. 2 May 2011. <http://www.dunyatimes.com/en/?p=12662>

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