

Partnership of Contrarians

Russia connects with Turkey seeking opportunities in the Middle East

Violent conflicts in the Middle East gained new momentum in 2014, and the forceful multilateral efforts to contain them yielded far from satisfactory results. Both Russia and Turkey have remained aloof from these efforts, and often oppose US-led endeavors but they have major stakes in the overlapping regional conflicts and so are exploring opportunities to claim a key role in pro-active conflict management.

Brief Points

- Russia's best opportunity to boost its role in the Middle East is by launching joint initiatives with Turkey.
- Energy ties are a less solid foundation for this partnership because of the drop in oil prices.
- Personal chemistry between Putin and Erdoğan is a major asset for the joint initiatives.
- Positions on the Syrian war remain far apart, but both states aim to undermine US leadership.

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Introduction

President Vladimir Putin's visit to Ankara on 1 December 2014 demonstrated that the Russian-Turkish special partnership remains on track, despite heavy resonance from the Ukraine crisis and notwithstanding deep disagreements on the Syrian civil war. Turkey is the only NATO member-state that has not introduced sanctions against Russia and it even seeks to take advantage of trade disruptions caused by this regime for expanding bilateral economic ties. Russia needs to establish that Western efforts at isolating it are futile, and the Middle East is perhaps the only region in the world where Russia could possibly score a high-profile achievement, particularly if a joint initiative with ambitious Turkey is launched.

Background

It was the outstanding success of the September 2013 initiative on eliminating the stockpiles of Syrian chemical weapons that granted Moscow the long-coveted key role in Middle Eastern power play. As a controversial US missile strike on some military assets of the Bashar al-Assad regime was prevented, the Kremlin got carried away with the impression that Western propensity to interventionism could be effectively checked. The assumption that the US leadership was weak and the EU was divided encouraged Putin's courtiers to plan and execute the annexation of Crimea in blatant violation of international law and Russia's own legal obligations. The ensuing conflict with Ukraine and the deepening confrontation with the West - which turned out to be a far more united front than the Kremlin budgeted for - demanded full concentration of political resources available to Moscow, so Russia paid scant attention to the developments in the Middle East.

Turkey was generally more positive than Russia towards the turmoil of the 'Arab Spring' focusing particularly on the revolutionary changes in Egypt. The military coup in July 2013 was a serious setback to Erdoğan's embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood cause, particularly as it coincided with the wave of public protests inside Turkey (spearheaded by the Occupy Gezi Park movement). Putin, to the contrary, supported the enforcement of



Putin arriving in Ankara on 1 December 2014. Photo: The Presidential Press and Information Office

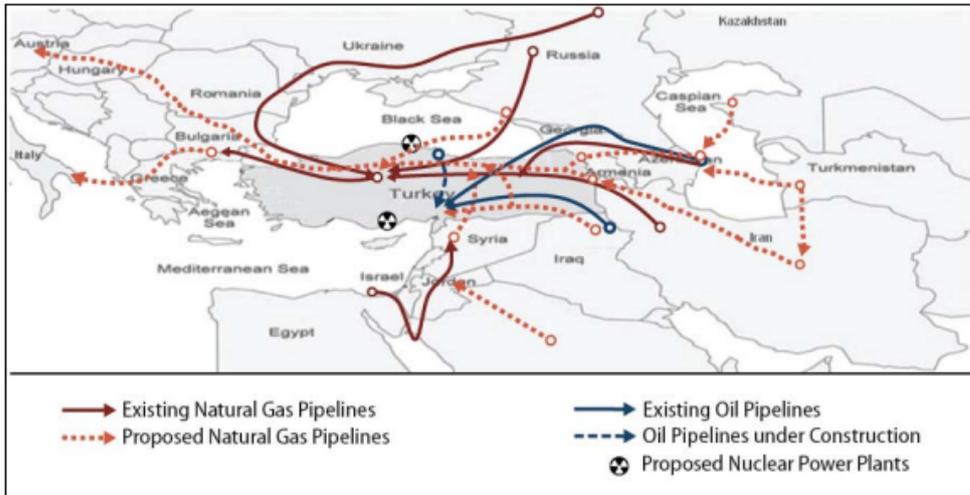
political order by Field Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi (who paid two visits to Russia in February and August 2014) but expressed unreserved approval of Erdoğan's repressions against the opposition and warmly welcomed his victory in the presidential elections on 10 August 2014. The bitter estrangement between Turkey and the EU (which still counts it as a candidate for accession) and the accumulating tensions in Turkey-US relations are seen by Moscow as possibilities for deepening the partnership supervised by the High Level Cooperation Council (established in 2010).

The energy geopolitics

Russia supplies more than half of Turkey's needs in natural gas, and this energy trade has constituted a foundation of political partnership, particularly as Gazprom's reputation in the market is impeccable. Putin's visit to Ankara upgraded these ties as he announced the cancellation of the South Stream pipeline project, across the length of the Black Sea. The project had faced strong opposition in the EU, reluctant consent in Turkey and in fact, never made economic sense. Instead, Russia plans to expand the capacity of the Blue Stream pipeline in order to channel the volumes of gas for southeastern Europe through Turkey. This would constitute a big step in

implementing Ankara's ambitious design for making Turkey a 'gas hub' for Europe.

While for Moscow the key goal in this maneuver is to minimize gas transit through Ukraine, Turkey aims rather at collecting several in-flows of gas and building several distribution pipelines in addition to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) that will bring 10 bcm of gas from Azerbaijan to Italy by 2018. A key feature of the 'gas hub' design is to provide an answer to the EU diversification guideline by tapping into new sources in Turkmenistan, Iraq and Iran. Russia is firmly set to disallow the construction of the long-proposed Trans-Caspian Pipeline, but bringing new gas to Europe from Iraqi Kurdistan, and then from Iran are workable options for the near future. Turkey is generally not interested in becoming an alternative route for Russian gas to the EU instead of Ukraine, but Moscow is pressing its case and seeking to take advantage of the politically important project for building the first nuclear power plant in Turkey (the Akkuyu project, scheduled for completion in 2020).



Major pipelines traversing Turkey and possible nuclear power plants. Map from Zanotti, J. (2014) 'Turkey: Background and US Relations' CRS Report, 1 August 2014, pp. 32. Available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R41368.pdf>.

The meeting of minds

The energy business provides a useful backdrop for the development of personal rapport between Putin and Erdoğan, who indeed have a lot in common in terms of autocratic political instincts and low tolerance to criticism from opposition. The Turkish leader got plenty of negative publicity in 2014, particularly with his statements regarding the equality of women as 'against nature'. However, Putin had no problem with Erdoğan's views or for that matter with the corruption scandals. In his annual press conference (December 18), he praised Erdoğan as 'krepky muzhik' (the official translation is 'strong character', which doesn't convey the rich machismo of this characteristic). The chemistry between these two leaders is obviously very strong, but it doesn't involve other key figures in the leadership; what is of particular importance is that the Turkish military are traditionally socialized in the NATO community and have very little in common with Putin's siloviki.

The personal idiosyncrasies of both leaders have a serious impact on key political matters, and Erdoğan's intense animosity toward Bashar al-Assad (with whom he had perfectly friendly relations until late 2011) is a major issue preventing constructive discussions on Syria with Putin. The Russian leader tends to see Islamic extremism as an acute security challenge, which doesn't sit well with Erdoğan's self-perception as a standard-bearer

of political Islam. The mix of populism and authoritarianism is also different: Putin's approval rating may presently be sky-high, but Erdoğan has a more solid support base and the proven ability to win competitive elections.

The Syrian desolation

For the last couple of years, Putin and Erdoğan have managed to bracket out the Syrian issue in their discussions on advancing bilateral cooperation. The evolving Syrian war remains, nevertheless, a crucial matter in which both states have big stakes – and pursue far diverging if not clashing courses of action. It was possible to agree-to-disagree when Moscow was a key ally of the al-Assad regime and Ankara aimed at its dismantling, but the arrival of the Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) since mid-2014 as a new and powerful party to the wars in Syria and Iraq has brought the conflict (mis-) management to a new level of complexity – and demands commitment to countervailing.

Russia recognizes the rise of ISIS as a major security threat, particularly as hundreds of volunteers from the North Caucasus have arrived to join the ranks under the black banner. It is very convenient for Moscow to blame the USA for creating conditions that have generated this threat, and Russia resolutely refuses to join the US-led anti-ISIS coalition even condemning the air strikes. Turkey insists that the struggle against the al-Assad

regime should remain the top priority in international efforts, and also refuses to contribute to the joint military operations against ISIS. At the same time, Ankara adamantly rejects the accusations regarding its clandestine support to the Islamic extremists or consent to ISIS recruitment in the Syrian refugee camps on its territory.

Turkey may be interested in executing a limited military operation against ISIS forces in order to assert its anti-extremist stance, but it certainly doesn't want to do it alone. Russia may also be interested in partaking in a small-scale peace-enforcement endeavor in order to boost its profile in the Middle East but it needs a reliable ally that would provide a safe base for such a not-quite-legitimate operation. The overlap of these interests is expanded with the mutual desire to curtail US interventionism and to expose the fault of the course taken by the Obama administration. Northern Syria is the most convenient destination for a symbolic rather than forceful joint operation, and while Moscow could probably secure consent from Damascus for a limited cross-border offensive, for instance towards Aleppo, the most complicated aspect of security in this area is the Kurdish question.

The Kurdish conundrum

Turkey has been waging military operations in its eastern provinces against Kurdish rebels (mobilized primarily by the Kurdistan Workers' Party – PKK) since the late 1970s, and the legacy of this bitter struggle impacts on current Turkish policy-making in the war zone along its southeastern borders. Ankara used to be resolutely against the emergence of any sort of Kurdish proto-state in Northern Iraq assuming that it would give a boost to the PKK cause and increase the supply of weapons. In 2013-2014, that attitude started to shift particularly as the flow of oil from Kirkuk to Ceyhan through a new pipeline reached 250,000 barrels a day. The ISIS offensive in mid-2014 reduced Baghdad's authority over the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and brought a mobilization and increase of combat capabilities of the Peshmerga forces. Turkish leadership found it opportune to engage in talks with the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani aimed at building direct ties, including training for the Peshmerga units. At the same time, Turkey has refused to engage with the Kurdish groups in Syria and abstained



Putin headed to Erdoğan on 3 December 2012. Photo: The Presidential Press and Information Office

from taking any part in the battle for Kobani, which continued for months in the gun-sights of Turkish army deployed along the border. This ‘neutrality’ towards the ISIS brutal attacks triggered a wave of violent Kurdish protests inside Turkey, so that the ceasefire with the PKK (established in spring 2013) was broken by Turkish air strikes in mid-October 2014.

Russia has remained deliberately disengaged from Kurdish problems and maintains minimal relations with the Baghdad government despite having major stakes in oil projects both in Southern (Qurna-2 project developed by Lukoil) and Eastern Iraq (Badra project developed by Gazprom Neft). Russia is certainly not going to take any initiative in solv-

ing the intractable Kurdish question, but it could play an important supporting role for Turkey if Erdoğan opts for a major reconfiguration of the long-challenged geopolitical realities. The Turkish armed forces are capable of executing the necessary deployment for securing such a state-rebuilding but a participation of a couple of Russian battalions (perhaps from the Chechen ‘army’ raised by Ramzan Kadyrov) could add to the legitimacy of this operation.

The vanity bazaar

While it is obvious that Russian policy-making is massively and increasingly deformed by the impact of the Ukraine crisis, it can also be said that Turkish policy-making has been

profoundly affected by the violent turmoil in the Middle East in the last three years. It is remarkable that this turmoil has had relatively little resonance in the region of South Caucasus, which makes a natural interface between Russian and Turkish policies. Georgia has been preoccupied with domestic political intrigues (and has not, for that matter, joined the sanctions regime against Russia, while signing the association agreement with the EU); and the hostile relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have not escalated to a new spasm of conflict (despite the shooting down of an Armenian helicopter over Nagorno Karabakh in mid-November 2014).

Moscow and Ankara can, therefore, put aside their different concerns over the Caucasus and try to find a common agenda in the Middle East, which is the arena where both countries could claim a lead in managing a major conflict. What increases the propensity for making such a claim is the urge of the two leaders to repair their respective reputations, which took some painful hits in 2014. Neither can take domestic support for granted and both see a need to bolster it by scoring foreign policy victories; the question of making a difference for the global affairs is no less important for Putin (who is expelled from the G8) than for Erdoğan (who is irked by the stalled application to the EU). Both leaders excel at playing on anti-American sentiments and enjoy playing the role of a contrarian or even a spoiler. In the hyper-centralized political systems, vanity is a factor no less important than risk analysis for key geopolitical interests, so extravagant gestures and pretentious initiatives are quite probably in the making.

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