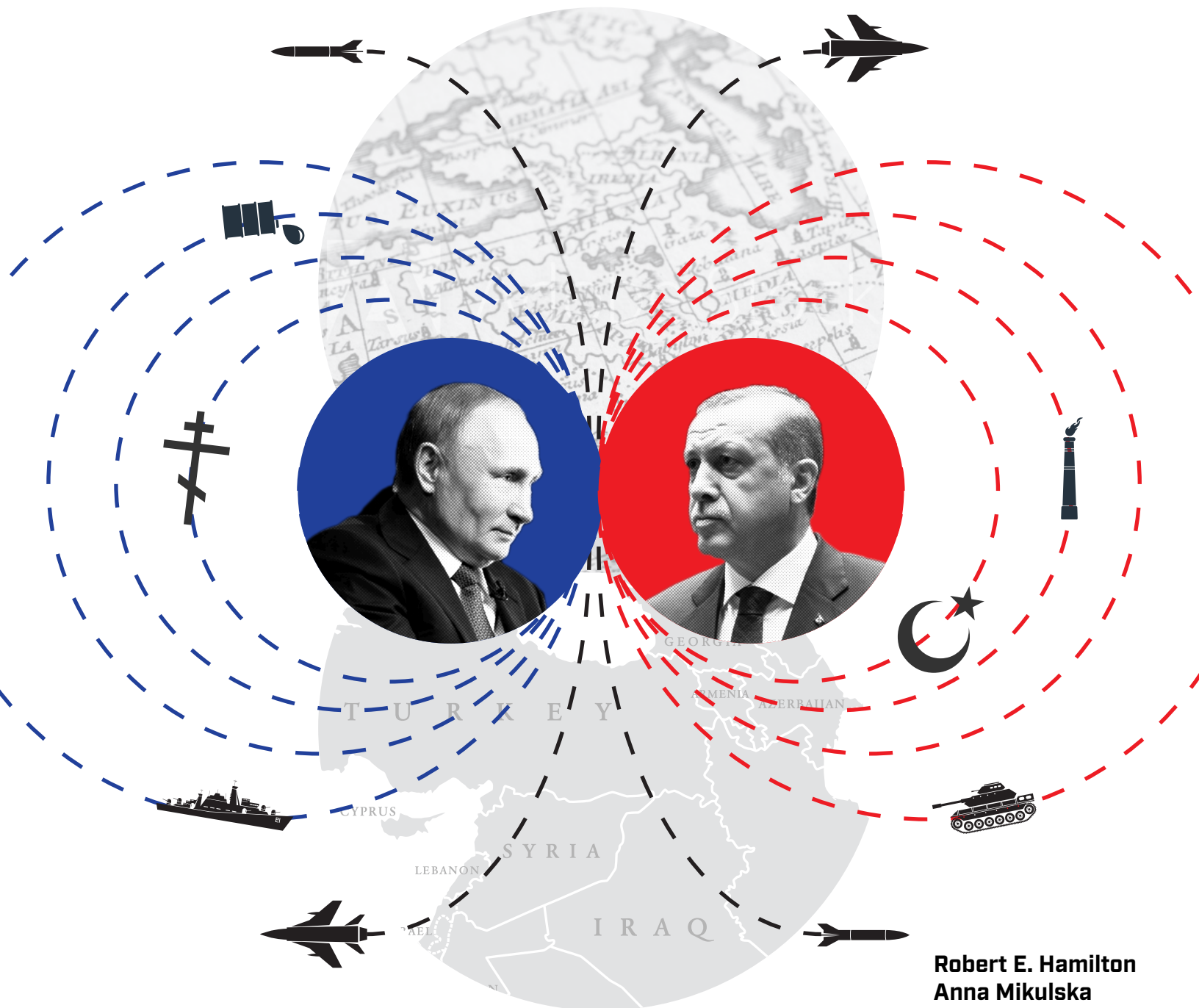




COOPERATION, COMPETITION, AND COMPARTMENTALIZATION:

RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST



Robert E. Hamilton
Anna Mikulska

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Authors: Robert E. Hamilton & Anna Mikulska

The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a non-partisan organization that seeks to publish well-argued, policy-oriented articles on American foreign policy and national security priorities.

Editing: Thomas J. Shattuck

Design: Natalia Kopytnik

© 2021 by the Foreign Policy Research Institute

April 2021



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A nation must think before it acts

ABOUT US

The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) is a non-partisan think tank based in Philadelphia. Its founding principle is that a nation must think before it acts. FPRI is dedicated to producing the highest quality scholarship and nonpartisan policy analysis focused on crucial foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. We educate those who make and influence policy, as well as the public at large, through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

OFFERING IDEAS

In an increasingly polarized world, we pride ourselves on our tradition of nonpartisan scholarship. We count among our ranks over 100 affiliated scholars located throughout the nation and the world who appear regularly in national and international media, testify on Capitol Hill, and are consulted by U.S. government agencies.

EDUCATING THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

FPRI was founded on the premise that an informed and educated citizenry is paramount for the U.S. to conduct a coherent foreign policy. Through in-depth research and extensive public programming, FPRI offers insights to help the public understand our volatile world.

CHAMPIONING CIVIC LITERACY

We believe that a robust civic education is a national imperative. FPRI aims to provide teachers with the tools they need in developing civic literacy, and works to enrich young people's understanding of the institutions and ideas that shape American political life and our role in the world.

www.fpri.org

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION	3
A SHORT HISTORY OF RUSSIAN- TURKISH RELATIONS AND INFORMATIONAL INTERACTION	7
DIPLOMATIC INTERACTION	17
MILITARY INTERACTION	29
ECONOMIC INTERACTION	49
CONCLUSION	59

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The relationship between the Russian Federation and Republic of Turkey is one of the most important bilateral relationships in Eurasia today. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) original adversary and one of its earliest members have in recent times veered sharply between cooperation—often against NATO's interests—and competition so intense that it seemed war between them was possible. Politically, their leaders and their systems of government share a basic compatibility predicated on authoritarianism and resistance to what they claim is Western meddling in internal affairs. Militarily, Moscow and Ankara have at times cooperated closely. For instance, the two have worked to marginalize the U.S. military's influence in Syria, and Turkey has purchased and deployed Russian S-400 air defense systems, putting its defense relationship with the United States in jeopardy. At other times, such as in the military escalation in Idlib (Syria), the Libyan Civil War, and the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict, the two have found themselves backing different sides and had to work assiduously to prevent a direct military clash. Economically, the relationship has been historically unbalanced in Russia's favor, but Turkey's increasing trade in services and emergence as an important energy storage and transport hub may change this. The two economies share a basic complementarity, with few areas where they compete in the production of

goods and services. This dynamic may increase the ability of their economic relationship to act as a “shock absorber” and minimize the impact of disruptions in other facets of their ties. Overall, Moscow and Ankara have worked to emphasize areas of cooperation and “compartmentalize” areas of difference. Policymakers in Western capitals will need to develop an understanding of the drivers of the Russian-Turkish relationship and their effects on Western interests.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Russian Federation and Republic of Turkey is dynamic, complex, and high stakes. In recent years, military tensions between Moscow and Ankara have risen to the point that war looked possible. At other times, the two seemed so close that Turkey's exit from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and an alliance with Russia seemed conceivable. Whatever direction they take, ties between Moscow and Ankara will have a significant impact on the geopolitical, military, and economic state of the region that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to Central Asia and from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. The relationship moves quickly between cooperation and confrontation, often in the span of only months. The dynamism and complexity of ties between Moscow and Ankara have demanded flexibility and an ability to "compartmentalize" from both capitals—cooperating in one area while competing in another. For all these reasons, the Russia-Turkey relationship deserves serious scholarly examination.

It also deserves attention from policymakers in Western capitals. NATO's original adversary and one of its oldest

members were at the brink of war after Turkey shot down a Russian jet along the Syria-Turkish border in November 2015. Less than a year later—in the aftermath of the July 2016 coup attempt against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which he accused the United States of supporting¹—Russia and Turkey reconciled and began cooperating in Syria. When that cooperation later expanded to a Turkish purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system, Washington expelled Ankara from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program. By summer 2020, when Turkey found itself embroiled in a naval standoff with France² over arms shipments to Libya, Ankara threatened to leave NATO.³ More recently, an escalation of violence between Armenia, a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and host of a Russian military base, and Azerbaijan, which enjoys strong Turkish support, again raised the specter of a Russian-Turkish confrontation.

The prospect of a Russian-Turkish clash or of a Turkey increasingly distant from NATO should cause alarm in Western capitals. Although an often-troublesome

1 Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Turks Can Agree on One Thing: U.S. Was Behind Failed Coup," *New York Times*, August 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/world/europe/turkey-coup-erdogan-fethullah-gulen-united-states.html>, accessed September 29, 2020.

2 Lorne Cook, "France-Turkey spat over Libya arms exposes NATO's limits," *Associated Press*, July 5, 2020, <https://apnews.com/045a9b8eb0f7eb5adc33d1303fafa95d>, accessed September 28, 2020.

3 Jack Beyrer, "Turkey Escalates Threats to Leave NATO," *Washington Free Beacon*, July 8, 2020, <https://freebeacon.com/national-security/turkey-escalates-threats-to-leave-nato/>, accessed September 28, 2020.

ally, Turkey is an important geopolitical, military, and economic actor. Keeping Ankara anchored in Europe and a wider Western world continues to be an important U.S. interest. In addition, Turkey has recently advanced in its energy relations with Russia, in particular as a crucial transit corridor for Russian gas flowing to Europe. This has resulted in a significant shift from a traditionally dominant Russia to a more balanced relationship of mutual dependence that could enhance stability in other policy areas.

This report aims to comprehensively analyze Russian-Turkish relations with the objective of uncovering the major drivers of those relations, testing the resilience of the bilateral relationship, and drawing tentative conclusions about its likely future trajectory. It will do this through an analytical framework focusing on four instruments of power: diplomatic, informational, military, and economic, often referred to as “the DIME” in U.S. policymaking circles. These instruments are by necessity employed together. Effective statecraft requires ensuring efforts in all four domains are mutually supporting, or at least do not contradict

each other. In statecraft, as international relations theorist E.H. Carr notes, “Power is an indivisible whole; one instrument cannot exist for long in the absence of the others.”⁴

In this report, we define the instruments of power as follows. The *Diplomatic Instrument*, also sometimes called the political instrument, represents the power of persuasion. Narrowly defined, diplomacy includes negotiations pursued either bilaterally or through international institutions, which result in treaties or lesser agreements.⁵ More broadly defined for the purposes of this report, diplomacy also includes the general domestic and foreign policy systems and trajectories of states, including the extent to which their domestic political regime-types and geopolitical identities align. The assertion here is that the more regime-types and geopolitical identities align, the easier the task of persuasion will be.⁶

4 Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 1964), pp. 1-21.

5 D. Robert Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), p. 286.

6 Theoretical and empirical support for this assertion can be found in Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789-1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

The *Informational Instrument* encompasses the efforts of governments to disseminate and collect information.⁷ The target of an information campaign can be either a domestic or a foreign audience, but the intent is always to tell a government's story to an audience with the hope of building support. In the context of this report, what is important in analyzing the informational instrument is understanding how the Russian and Turkish governments and government-friendly media outlets portray their bilateral relations to their own publics and the publics of the other. The informational instrument can also be used to gain information on the attitudes of foreign populations, often in order to increase the appeal of one's own message to that foreign population.

The *Military Instrument* includes, but is not limited to, the capabilities inherent in the armed forces and other security services of a state. One taxonomy that is useful in understanding military capabilities is the distinction among high-intensity, mid-intensity, and low-intensity conflict. In his book on instruments of power, policy analyst D. Robert Worley says these are "roughly equivalent to strategic nuclear warfare, force-on-force interstate warfare with conventional weapons, and

unconventional warfare."⁸ This report will not only examine the relative military capabilities of Russia and Turkey in these areas, but it also will survey how their military forces interact in theaters where both are present.

Finally, the *Economic Instrument* entails leveraging a nation's wealth to influence others.⁹ Narrow definitions of this instrument focus on actions by governments such as the imposition of economic sanctions or the provision of economic aid. More broadly defined, the economic instrument includes how a government influences access to its domestic market, how directly it controls the major sectors of its domestic economy, and how directly it employs its economic power in support of its foreign policy goals.

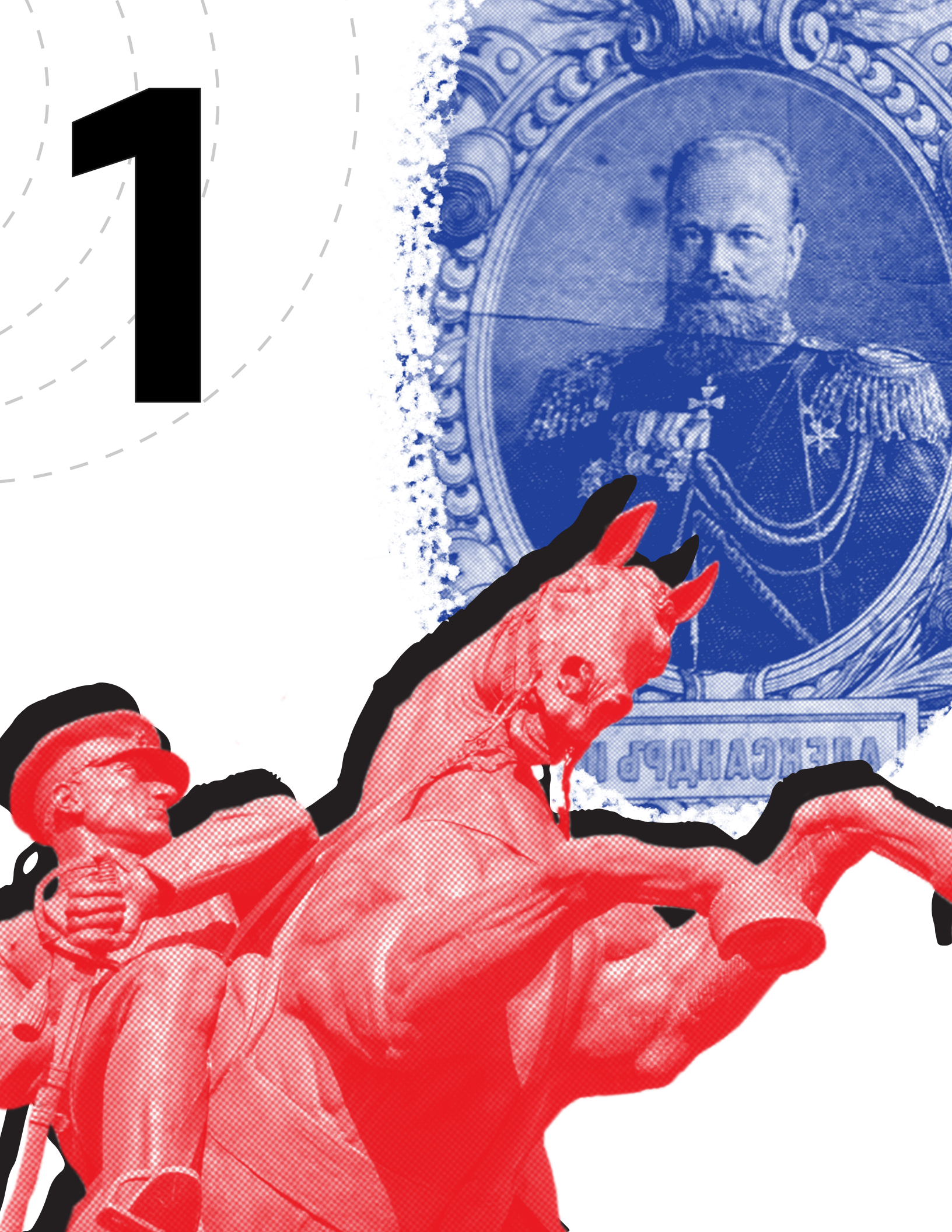
This report begins with a short history of Russian-Turkish relations and an overview of their interaction in the area of information and discourse. It then proceeds to examine their diplomatic, military, and economic interaction. It concludes by highlighting areas of convergence and divergence in the relationship and making inferences about its likely future development.

⁷ Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power*, p. 278.

⁸ Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power*, p. 277.

⁹ Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power*, p. 281.

1



A SHORT HISTORY OF RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS AND INFORMATIONAL INTERACTION

There has been little English language scholarly literature that explores the discourse—official, unofficial, societal, etc.—between Russia and Turkey. Admittedly, this is quite an undertaking as any comprehensive work needs to look at a large amount of material in varied sources and in at least three different languages: Turkish, Russian, and English. As we point to this notable absence in the scholarship, we acknowledge that such an endeavor goes far beyond the scope of this study. However, we also feel that there is something to be said about the underlying trends and patterns in the discourse that can be derived from a careful reading of the existing literature on the history of Russo-Turkish relations.

Today's complex and volatile relationship between Russia and Turkey continues a long historical trend. In an early period of bilateral relations (15th-16th century), the Ottoman Empire was the dominant power in the region, with Crimean Khans even governing Russian affairs. Over the next several centuries, however, Russia grew and expanded into a competing empire, including extending its reign into the Caucasus, providing Russia access to the Black Sea and enabling subsequent control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. Competition, distrust, and conflict were the predominant features of Russo-Turkish relations between the mid-16th century and the end of the First World War as the two fought each other 12 times in the Balkans, Caucasus, and northern Black Sea region. Though periods of cooperation also existed, they were usually short and based on a common

enemy rather than a common goal. For example, they worked together against Napoleon in the early 19th century, and Russia sent an army to force the retreat of an Egyptian force invading the Ottoman Empire in 1831.¹⁰

The struggle between competing empires has been exemplified in the discourse, which featured negative coloring of the “Muscovite” image in Turkish historical literature and public discourse with Russia portrayed as a threat, whose expansionism is geared toward “access to warm waters” of the Black Sea, Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean. The perception of Turkey in Russian discourse with respect to the Ottoman Empire has been tinted with similar notions of expansionism, tyranny, and oppressiveness. Based on such a description, Russia would frame its own expansion into the Black Sea as a way of saving the region from the Turks. Religious enmity only added to the distrust and lack of basis for collaboration.¹¹

The collapse of the Russian and Ottoman Empires and their replacement by a communist regime in Moscow and a nationalist one in Ankara seemed to deal

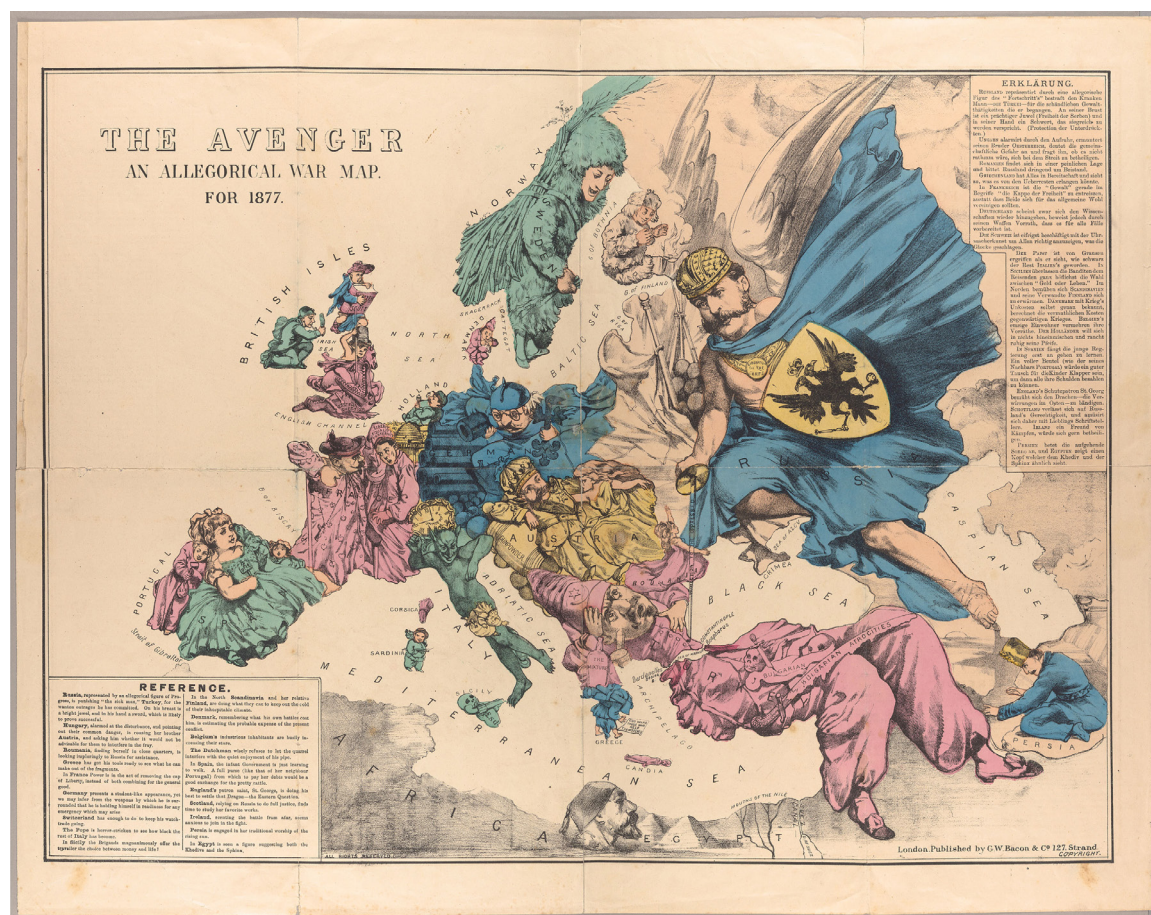
another blow to the bilateral relationship. However, the two new states initially got along well: The Bolsheviks rendered critical assistance to Turkish nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal (later, Atatürk) in the 1919-1922 Turkish War of Independence and remained an ally of Turkey until the end of the 1930s.¹² Collaboration and solidarity between the two nations were motivated by the priorities of the regimes; both were working on gaining international recognition, focusing on territorial integrity, and ensuring order in the economic and political arenas. During this period, the countries even signed treaties to secure their common borders and express common views on world politics, including the Treaty of Moscow, Treaty of Kars, and Friendship and Neutrality Treaty.

While important for creating a cooperation framework, the treaties underscored the fleeting nature of such cooperation, which was rooted in those countries’ relations to the world’s great powers, such as France or the United Kingdom. Their purpose—rather than creating deep and substantive ties between two nations—was to ensure that Turkey and Russia did not pose problems for each

10 Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017), p. 142.

11 Mitat Celikpala, “Viewing Present as History: The State and Future of Turkey-Russia Relations,” *Foreign Policy and Security*, Center for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies, EDAM, 2019/6, pp. 3-5.

12 Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 143.



The Avenger: An Allegorical War Map for 1877 by Fred. W. Rose, 1872: This map reflects the "Great Eastern Crisis" and the subsequent Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. (Fred W. Rose/Cornell University PJ Mode Collection/Wikimedia)

other. The cooperation was not action, but rather inaction, ensuring that no conflicts occurred. The “*Peace At Home, Peace in the World*” mantra of the time was more about ignoring differences and staying away from each other rather than building a common understanding and long-term strategy.¹³ The notable exception that began to develop at the time was economic cooperation,¹⁴ which—over time—has become a norm in relations between the two countries and, as such, has often been a catalyst for re-engaging

after political fallouts.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the countries turned once again into adversaries and remained so for much of the Cold War. Turkey turned toward the West, joining NATO in 1952. There were multiple reasons for Ankara’s decision, among them U.S. support for Turkey’s financial system and the emergence of a multiparty system in Turkish politics. However, as scholar of Turkey Kemal Beyoghlou notes, national security

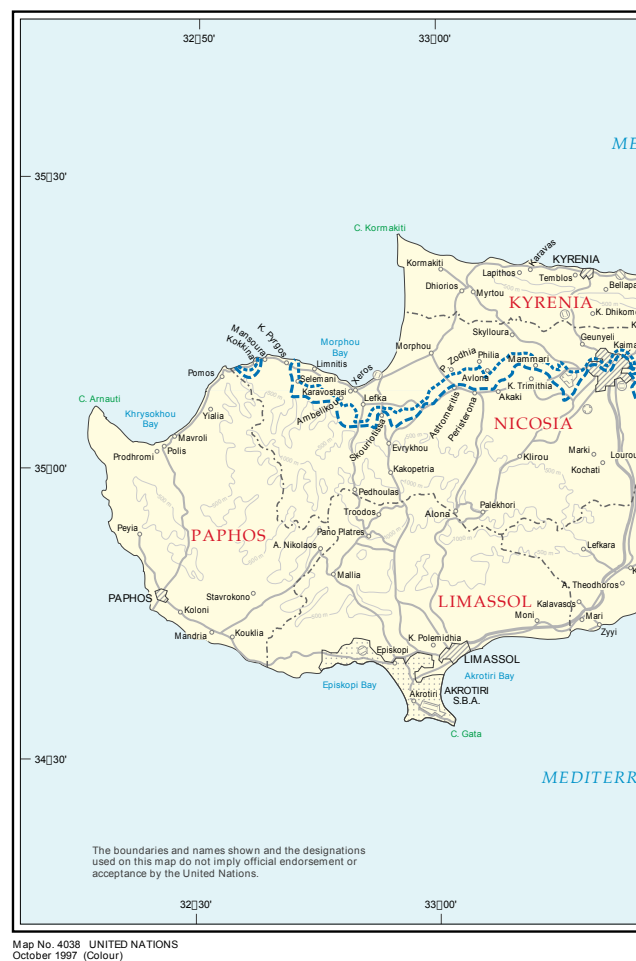
13 Celikpala, “Viewing Present as History,” p. 4.

14 Samuel J. Hirst and Onur Isci, “Smokestacks and Pipelines: Russian-Turkish Relations and the Persistence of Economic Development,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 44, no. 5, (November 2020), pp. 834-859.

interests loomed large, “Turkish-US relations were based on this military-to-military foundation as a result of the Cold War and fear of the communist domino effect in the Greater Middle East, including Iran, Greece, and Turkey.”¹⁵ This was enough to redefine Turkish perceptions of Russia as a threat and enemy with Russia returning the favor.

Even during the Cold War, Turkey and the Soviet Union found ways to coexist, and even cooperated in certain areas. In the 1960s, Moscow took advantage of a Turkish-American disagreement over Cyprus to forge a pragmatic re-engagement with Ankara. By the end of that decade, Turkey was the largest recipient of Soviet assistance in the developing world, and this assistance increased further after the United States sanctioned Turkey for its 1974 invasion of Cyprus.¹⁶ By 1978, Turkey’s tilt toward the Soviet Union was pronounced enough that Washington lifted the sanctions imposed in 1974 in an attempt to entice Ankara away from its cooperation with Moscow. In 1980, a military coup in Turkey unleashed a wave of repression against suspected communist subversion, and Turkish-Soviet ties again waned. The

main rift between the countries at the time was not as much geopolitical as ideological because the anti-religious mantra of the communist Soviet Union clashed with Turkey’s religious Islamism and pan-Turkic nationalism. Hence, the return of civilian rule in Ankara in 1983 saw a rebound in the relationship, again focused on economic ties—often related to energy—which continued to expand for the rest of the decade.¹⁷ With



15 Kemal A. Beyoglu, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the U.S.-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2020), p. 6.

16 Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 144.

17 Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 145.



the exception of economic relations, it is important to note that the periods of rapprochement were usually based on reactions to other world powers rather than common interest and were quick to wane when conflicts between Turkey and its Western allies dissipated.

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union left an apparent great power vacuum in the Caucasus and Central Asia, which Turkey tried to exploit. The sudden independence

of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan enabled a vision of pan-Turkism that foresaw uniting the peoples of these Turkic-speaking nations under Ankara's cultural and political leadership. Turkey was quick to frame itself within the new discourse as an "older brother to the new nations while portraying Russia as a threat, a prospect supported vigorously by the West"¹⁸ and one that deeply troubled leaders in the Kremlin.¹⁹ As a result, the predominant notion of this period's discourse was competition. By 1995, the durability of Russia's sway over the region became apparent. The ubiquity of the Russian language, the region's centuries-long cultural and historical ties to Russia, and Moscow's ability to provide security to the new governments there all but ended the "notion of Turkey as the leader of an imaginary Turkic World."²⁰

Interestingly, realizing how little it had gained from competition with Russia, Turkey turned toward a more cooperative attitude based on the pragmatism that had in the past been a defining feature of relations. The focus on economic growth through bilateral trade and the expansion of economic relations point to their pragmatic nature with energy cooperation being probably the highlight, especially

18 Celikpala, "Viewing Present as History," p. 6.

19 Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 146.

20 Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 148.



A Georgian police officer guards the administrative boundary line with the South Ossetia province. (OSCE)

when it comes to natural gas. Russia has been keen on appearing as a reliable energy provider as it valued access to a large and developing market for its gas. Building new pipelines, such as the Blue Stream, underscored the collaboration of the two parties and, one could argue, helped to smooth out relations in other areas.

A discourse based on an idea of Eurasianism—though not well developed or specific when it comes to a vision—was introduced with the goal to replace the nationalistic notions of Russian and Turkish heritage. The new approach has been notably based in disappointments that both countries have experienced with their allies and neighbors. Russia watched as countries from the former Soviet bloc joined NATO and have joined the European Union. On the other hand,

Turkey's prospects of accession to the EU have not been as straightforward with some of the most prominent Turkish voices expressing a notion of Turkey binding with Russia and Iran against the EU.

The idea of strategic cooperation was expressed in the 2002 *Action Plan on Cooperation in Eurasia: From Bilateral Cooperation to Multidimensional Partnership*. This was followed by a military agreement signed in the same year and a general focus on collaboration that would be conducive to the economic growth that both countries so desperately needed after experiencing economic crises in the late 1990s. As we point out in the diplomatic relations section, the rise of a new, much more authoritarian-leaning leadership contributed to increasing closeness between the countries. At the

same time, however, old disagreements and grievances have not been resolved. Instead, they've been swiped under the proverbial rug. Contentious discourse was discouraged, and communication fostered, possibly more than ever before contributing to the period's nickname of "*anni mirabiles*." In this spirit, for example, though Turkey rejected Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, it did not impose sanctions on Moscow as Western states did. The justification was, traditionally, pragmatic and rooted in the economic hardship that both sanctions and Russian retaliation could cause.

However, ignoring differences is rarely, if ever, an effective and long-term strategy. Limits to Turkish-Russian cooperation became apparent after the 2008 war in Georgia when Turkey went back to describing Russia as a threat. Later, after the annexation of Crimea, Russia's expansion into the Black Sea unnerved Ankara as it saw its naval superiority there evaporate. The events of the Arab Spring and the subsequent war in Syria exposed the weakness of Russian-Turkish ties even further as the countries found themselves, at least initially, backing opposing sides. It became increasingly difficult for Erdogan, for example, to remain silent when Russian jets violated Turkish airspace. Turkey turned away from Russia to prioritize its ties with Western allies once again.

The downing of a Russian jet that entered

Turkish airspace on November 24, 2015, became the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. We describe the event in more detail later during the discussion of military and economic interactions. With Russian President Vladimir Putin describing the events as "stab in the back," the discourse between the countries changed immensely with no more ignoring of the differences, at least temporarily. The economic sanctions that Russia imposed as retribution saw the old grievances, distrust, and animosities re-emerge on the governmental and societal levels with some Turks declaring they were prepared to "burn turf" if Russia were to cut off the supply of natural gas. It was remarkable how quickly *anni mirabiles* in the Russo-Turkish relationship transformed into *annus horribilis*. Probably even more remarkable is that the conflict persisted less than a year with Turkey reaching out first and Erdogan sending a letter to Russia taking responsibility for the downing of the plane and promising financial compensation to the family of the pilot killed in the incident.

After the 2016 coup attempt, rapprochement accelerated with Putin quickly expressing support for Erdogan, a reaction opposite to that of Turkey's Western allies, especially the United States, which has been seen as supporting the Gülen movement. The coup attempt may have been a catalyst, but the drivers of the rapprochement were deeper-seated, including "economic links, normative



Recep Tayyip Erdogan with Ilham Aliyev on a 2020 visit to Baku. (presiden.az)

convergence, Turkey's geopolitical posture and domestic evolution, and Russia's growing ambitions in the Middle East."²¹ Their growing differences with the West have added a degree of importance for closer cooperation with each other. The fact that Turkey—a NATO member—decided to buy the Russian S-400 air defense system has been an astonishing development that confirms these closer ties.

The durability of the rapprochement remains to be seen and will doubtlessly be tested, especially since we see similar features of the new cooperative

relationship. Once again, they are based on a pragmatic approach and compartmentalization: While Moscow and Ankara have forged pragmatic cooperation in Syria, the two differ on the fate of Bashar al-Assad and the role for the Kurds in a post-war Syrian state. They also found themselves on opposite sides of a festering civil war in Libya and the recent military confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As previous experiences show, the fact that both countries have rocky relations with the West provides an incentive for their cooperation, but may not provide a foundation for longer-term, strategic partnership.

²¹ Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 96.



President Putin held a meeting on the Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, November 2020. (kremlin.ru)


Most recently, possibly encouraged by its relative success in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Turkey has, for example, come back to the idea of the Turkic world that would involve military cooperation between Turkey and Turkish-speaking countries in the region. In October 2020, Turkey and Uzbekistan signed a military cooperation agreement, and Turkish weapons and equipment are being successfully marketed in the region.²² For now, Russia is busy with other domestic and world developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic, reshuffles in the U.S. government, falling prices of

energy (its main export), and its growing collaboration with the People's Republic of China. How long Putin will be willing to turn a blind eye to those developments is unclear. The remainder of this report will focus on whether the two countries can negotiate these geopolitical rapids and find calmer waters on the other side. The chances of them doing so will largely depend on how each uses the three remaining instruments of power.

²² "Having won in Karabakh, Turkey announced the creation of a new military bloc," *MKRU*, https://www.mk.ru/amp/politics/2020/12/26/pobediv-v-karabakhe-turciya-anonsirovala-sozdanie-novogo-voennogo-bloka.html?__twitter_impression=true&s=03, accessed March 10, 2021.



DIPLOMATIC INTERACTION



One way to frame the political and diplomatic interaction between Russia and Turkey is through the use of levels of analysis. Political scientists often examine foreign policymaking from the individual level, state level, and level of the international system. In the Russia-Turkey relationship, this leads to three sets of questions. First, how similar are Putin and Erdogan as political leaders, and how well do they get along personally? Next, how similar are the political regimes they lead, and how do those governments interact with one another? Finally, how and where do Russia and Turkey encounter each other outside their borders, and how have they managed these interactions? Interaction between Russia and Turkey is framed by the similar worldviews of their respective leaders and the increasingly comparable political regimes in Moscow

and Ankara. However, when Russia and Turkey encounter each other “out in the world,” their interaction has contained elements of both cooperation and competition. Although to this point they have successfully “compartmentalized” their disagreements to avoid them impacting the overall relationship, this may be increasingly difficult to manage in a world that seems to be more dynamic and disordered.

Interaction at the Individual Level

Political scientist Dimitar Bechev sees Putin and Erdogan as “political twins: men of the people, straight-talking, tough on opponents, never shrinking from a punch-up with the West in the name of their nations’ honor.” Bechev also notes that although the groundwork for the Russian-Turkish partnership was laid in the 1990s,

after the collapse of the pan-Turkic project in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the rise of Putin and Erdogan and the highly personalized ties between them allowed the partnership to blossom.²³

Despite their political kinship, Putin and Erdogan have differing political origins and power bases. Putin's time in government began in the Soviet KGB and continued in the rough-and-tumble politics of 1990s St. Petersburg under the tutelage of then-Mayor Anatoly Sobchak. After Sobchak lost his 1996 bid for re-election to a candidate backed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Yeltsin brought Putin to Moscow. Once there, he served in positions of increasing responsibility in the presidential administration, Foreign Intelligence Service, and National Security Council before being named prime minister by Yeltsin in August 1999.²⁴ Yeltsin named Putin interim president upon his resignation in December 1999, and Putin was elected to his first presidential term in March 2000.

While Putin rose with the elite of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, Erdogan rose outside of and largely in opposition to the Turkish elite. Putin's power base consists of the military

and intelligence services (the so-called *siloviki*), the St. Petersburg political tribe, and, more recently, Kremlin-linked oligarchs. Erdogan has more humble origins, from which he rose to power with the help of "conservative, Muslim, grassroots, Anatolian-based farmers and lower- and lower-middle-class city dwellers"²⁵ who had been disenfranchised by the traditional secularist military and economic elite. Given the personalization of the bilateral relationship and the resulting importance of Putin and Erdogan to maintaining it, their different political origins and power bases are worth noting as a potential source of divergent views and preferences between them. To this point, however, their worldviews have proven remarkably stable and compatible.

Interaction at the Governmental Level

Putin and Erdogan preside over political regimes that increasingly resemble one another. Both men have consolidated their power, extended their rule through constitutional changes, and become increasingly intolerant of political opposition. In 2008, Putin stepped down as president in accordance with the Russian constitution. He served four

²³ Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 157.

²⁴ For an excellent summary of Putin's political origins, see, Allen C. Lynch, *Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft*, (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2011).

²⁵ Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink*, p. 29.



President Putin holds a teleconference with President Erdogan. (kremlin.ru)

years as prime minister under President Dmitry Medvedev, during which Putin was widely thought to be calling the shots on the most important issues. Putin re-emerged as a presidential candidate in 2012. Upon winning that election and re-election in 2018, he again confronted the two consecutive term limit. His response this time was to push through an array of constitutional changes in a 2020 referendum, one of which allows him to remain president until 2036.

Erdogan came to power as prime minister in 2003 after his Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the Turkish parliamentary elections. AKP won subsequent elections

in 2007 and 2011, allowing Erdogan to remain prime minister until he ran for president in 2014. After winning that election in the first round, Erdogan set about expanding the powers of the Turkish presidency. This process culminated in an April 2017 referendum, which made permanent some of the sweeping new powers that Erdogan had granted himself in the state of emergency after the July 2016 coup attempt.²⁶ The referendum created a super-executive presidential regime, transferring to Erdogan many of the powers previously residing with the prime minister and the parliament.²⁷ Turkish analyst Selim Kuru argues that this process has culminated in an “Erdogan-

26 Beyoglow, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink*, p. 27.

27 Marc Pierini, “Turkey’s Labyrinthine Relationship With the West: Seeking a Way Forward,” Carnegie Europe, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/09/14/turkey-s-labyrinthine-relationship-with-west-seeking-way-forward-pub-82685>, accessed October 12, 2020.



Euromaidan, Ukraine, December 2013. (Ivan Bandura/Wikimedia)

sized” presidency, with new institutions created and run by the president alone.²⁸

As Bechev notes, “Both Russia and Turkey share a political culture that prioritises national security and sovereignty over liberal values.”²⁹ The steady erosion of civil and political rights in both countries is reflected in the decline in international assessments: Both were considered “Partly Free” by Freedom House when

Putin and Erdogan took power, but they are classified as “Not Free” now.³⁰ Not surprisingly, both men have come under increasing criticism from Western governments, especially the United States. Putin and Erdogan respond to these criticisms in similar ways by using scare tactics to mobilize their supporters against the alleged American threat.³¹

28 Selim Koru, “The Institutional Structure of ‘New Turkey,’” Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/the-institutional-structure-of-new-turkey.pdf>, accessed March 19, 2021.

29 Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 96.

30 Freedom House scores are found in the organization’s annual “Freedom in the World” report: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>.

31 Beyoglow, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink*, p. 29.

Despite being “political twins” who preside over increasingly similar political regimes, Putin and Erdogan lead states that interact with each other diplomatically and geopolitically in a volatile, unpredictable part of the world. Moscow and Ankara must manage a series of complex and often conflicting diplomatic relationships. These relationships are governed by two major factors, which interact with each other: the countries’ national identities and geopolitical doctrines.

Putin and Erdogan have chosen similar methods of reframing national identities in their countries, weaving together elements of historical/imperial and religious identities and updating them for the modern world. In Russia, Putin has drawn on the great power traditions of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, while leveraging Russian Orthodoxy’s social and political conservatism to resist what he claims is encroachment by a secular and decadent West. In Turkey, Erdogan has attempted to “fuse Kemalist, secular, nationalist ideas with Islamic and Ottoman ones, drawing heavily on Ottoman history and culture.”³² Both national identities contain a heavy dose of estrangement from the West and a feeling of being rejected by it. Analysts Fiona Hill and

Omer Taspinar have called Russia and Turkey the “Axis of the Excluded,” noting that they are part of a challenge to the liberal model rooted in the rule of law, accountable government, free media, and a pluralist civil society.³³

Having identified the West as “the other,” Moscow and Ankara are ever vigilant for signs of the enemy’s approach. For Putin, this comes primarily in the form of “color revolutions.” When the Kremlin looks at the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, 2004-2005 Orange and 2013-14 Maidan Revolutions in Ukraine, and Arab Spring revolutions, it does not see popular movements that overthrew corrupt, authoritarian regimes. On the contrary, it sees coups, backed by Western intelligence services, designed to install pro-Western governments in countries important to Russia. For Putin, the West’s ultimate goal is to bring about a color revolution in Russia itself. After Russians took to the streets in 2011 to protest Duma elections widely seen as fraudulent, Putin blamed the United States, claiming that opposition leaders “heard the signal and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work.” He concluded that Russia must hold more responsible “those who carry

32 Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink*, p. 30.

33 Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 158.

out the task of a foreign government to influence internal political processes.”³⁴

Erdogan’s Turkey has also been fixated on uncovering collusion between foreign and domestic enemies, and the West has usually topped the list of foreign enemies. The 2016 coup attempt only intensified this fixation and gave Erdogan an excuse to centralize control and increase the pressure on domestic groups that he claimed were in collusion with the West. In a 2017 speech, Erdogan claimed that events over the previous five years proved that Turkey faced foreign- and domestic-hatched “conspiracies using terror organizations and threats to strike at the heart of the Turkish state and pride.”³⁵ In case the author of the “foreign-hatched conspiracies” wasn’t clear enough, Erdogan made it so in 2018 when he accused Washington of mounting a “political coup attempt” after its failed “military coup attempt” of 2016.³⁶



Interaction at the International Level

The geopolitical doctrines of Russia and Turkey also frame their diplomatic interaction. Russia’s latest estrangement from the West—part of pattern of attraction and repulsion going back centuries—accelerated after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, which severely damaged Russia’s

34 Miriam Elder, “Vladimir Putin accuses Hillary Clinton of encouraging Russian protests,” *The Guardian*, December 8, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/08/vladimir-putin-hillary-clinton-russia>, accessed October 13, 2020.

35 Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink*, p. 31.

36 Dorian Jones, “Erdogan Accuses US of ‘Political Coup Attempt,’” *Voice of America*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/erdogan-accuses-us-political-coup-attempt>, accessed October 13, 2020.



Left: Demonstration of President Erdogan supporters following the 2016 coup attempt. (Mstyslav Chernov/Wikimedia)

The geopolitical doctrine that underpins much of Russia's turn away from the West is Eurasianism, articulated most clearly by Russian scholar Alexander Dugin. Although Dugin's personal influence on the Russian government has varied over time, the influence of his ideas, which draw on themes long popular in Russia, has remained steady and forms the foundation for most Russian geopolitical and strategic thinking. Marlene Laruelle, a political scientist and author of a 2008 book on the subject, sees the following as the main tenets of Russian Eurasianism:

(1) a rejection of Europe, the West, and capitalism through criticism of 'Atlanticist' domination, considered disastrous for the rest of mankind; (2) an assertion of the cultural unity and common historical destiny of Russians and non-Russian peoples of Russia, the former Soviet Union, and parts of Asia; (3) the idea that the central geographical position of this Eurasian space naturally and inevitably entails an imperial form of political organization, and that any secession is destined to fail, leaving newly independent states no choice but to revert to a unified political entity; and (4) a belief in the existence of cultural constants that explain the deeper meaning of contemporary

European future and dealt a mortal blow to the idea of a Russian national community that included Ukrainians.³⁷ Moscow responded to this rupture by seeking to intensify its declared "pivot to the East" and launching the "Greater Eurasia" initiative, which "officially seeks to promote pan-Eurasian integration without sacrificing Russia's sovereign decision-making or notional equality in international affairs."³⁸

37 Elena Korosteleva and Zachary Paikin, "Russia between east and west, and the future of Eurasian Order," *International Politics*, July 14, 2020, p. 2, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057%2Fs41311-020-00261-5>, accessed October 15, 2020.

38 Korosteleva and Paikin, "Russia between east and west, and the future of Eurasian Order," p. 2.

political events.³⁹

Russia is not the only power in the region that has settled on a Eurasian path. Turkish foreign policy has undergone several revisions during Erdogan's rule; it has settled on a geopolitical doctrine with a focus similar to Russia's. In the earlier years of Erdogan's rule, the guiding principle of Turkish foreign policy was "strategic depth." Based on the academic work of then-Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu, strategic depth envisioned moving Turkey from the periphery to the center of international politics by leveraging its position as an actor sitting at the intersection of regions.⁴⁰ Among the tenets of strategic depth were "zero problems with neighbors" and "proactive and preventive diplomacy." By 2015, Ankara had largely abandoned the doctrine of strategic depth, which fell victim to three trends: "The Islamization of Turkish foreign policy, the Arab Spring, and the increasing discrepancy between Turkey's domestic politics and the image

Turkey's leaders wanted to present to the outside world."⁴¹

In its place, Turkey settled on its own version of Eurasianism, which the government refers to as "Asia Anew." Turkish scholar Emre Ersen defines three distinct forms of Eurasianism in Turkish geopolitical discourse. The first imagines Eurasia as the Turkic world, and places special importance on Turkey's role in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The second sees Eurasia as an alternative to the West and is most closely aligned with the Dugin-influenced version of Eurasianism prevalent in Russia. The third form of Eurasianism is the one most closely affiliated with Erdogan's AKP; it sees Eurasia as a Muslim geocultural realm that encompasses the territory of the former Ottoman Empire.⁴² Despite their differences, all of these traditions highlight the "exceptional geopolitical importance" of Turkey and define it as "the real centre of Eurasia," an idea that Ersen says demonstrates the limitations of

39 Sarah Dixon Klump, "Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/russian-eurasianism-ideology-empire>, accessed October 15, 2020

40 Binnur Ozkececi-Taner, "Disintegration of the 'strategic depth' doctrine and Turkey's troubles in the Middle East," *Contemporary Islam*, vol. 11 (2017), pp. 201-214, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11562-017-0387-5>, accessed October 15, 2020.

41 Ozkececi-Taner, "Disintegration of the 'strategic depth' doctrine and Turkey's troubles in the Middle East," p. 201.

42 Emre Ersen, "Geopolitical Traditions in Turkey: Turkish Eurasianism," in Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (eds.), *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), p. 276.



Speech at a ceremony consecrating the Church of the Resurrection of Christ and the New Martyrs and Confessors of the Russian Church at the Sretensky Monastery in Moscow, May 2017. (kremlin.ru)

a genuine strategic partnership between Turkey and Russia.⁴³

Turkey's definition of Eurasia as a Muslim geocultural realm could cause friction with Russia. Despite their common fixation on power and security and a rejection of Western influence, the infusion of religion into the modern Russian and Turkish national identities and geopolitical traditions could complicate relations. The deployment of two distinct, dogmatic, and historically adversarial religious

traditions could set the stage for future discord. This is especially true after the Russian military and the Orthodox Church forged an alliance and the erosion of the military's traditional role as the guardian of secularism in an increasingly Islamist Turkey.⁴⁴

Discord is not certain. Despite differences in many areas, Moscow and Ankara have so far managed to prevent these issues from causing a permanent rupture in their relationship. And both countries have

43 Ersen, "Geopolitical Traditions in Turkey," p. 276.

44 For an examination of the military-church alliance in Russia, see, Dmitry Adamsky, *Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019). In Turkey, purges of senior military officers and an erosion of secularism in the military accelerated after the 2016 coup attempt.



Top: President Erdogan at a rally in 2018. (Facebook)

Bottom: President Putin at a rally on Manezhnaya Square in Moscow, 2018. (kremlin.ru)

reasons to continue a pragmatic course with respect to the other since each is useful to the other. Former diplomat Marc Pierini believes that Turkey may not be inclining toward Russia as much as it is attempting to gain equal distance from all major powers.⁴⁵ And Russian scholar Dmitri Trenin believes, “Turkey’s ascendancy and independence fit well into the general Moscow concept of a multipolar world in which U.S. dominance is reduced.”⁴⁶ In other words, their respective tilting toward each other may be instrumental and not a case of a suddenly discovered affinity.

under threat by a cabal of colluding Western and domestic enemies. At the level of the international system, there is more space for competition between Moscow and Ankara. Both countries have national identities that draw heavily on their histories as great powers, and they share a sense of estrangement from the West and the idea of charting a “Eurasian” geopolitical course. However, each sees itself as the natural leader and focal point of a Eurasian geopolitical bloc, a subject of potential discord.

Summary

The picture of Russia’s and Turkey’s diplomatic interaction is a complex one, but the general theme that emerges is one of pragmatic cooperation and the compartmentalization of differences. At the level of individual political leaders, Putin and Erdogan have been described as political twins. Despite the differences in their personal backgrounds, both are tough-talking populists who are intolerant of political opposition and see the West as the primary threat to their hold on power. At the level of the state, Russia and Turkey share a political regime-type that focuses on security and the preservation of sovereignty, which is seen as permanently

⁴⁵ Marc Pierini, “Turkey’s Labyrinthine Relationship With the West: Seeking a Way Forward.”

⁴⁶ Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 139.

3



MILITARY INTERACTION



The last decade-plus has seen a dramatic rise in Russian and Turkish military activity. Russia intervened militarily in Georgia in 2008 and still maintains some 10,000 troops in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴⁷ It also maintains a military base in Armenia, where it plans to "double the combat potential" of the base by deploying more sophisticated aircraft and missiles, according to

Russian Ambassador to Armenia Sergey Kopyrkin.⁴⁸ Both Georgia and Armenia share borders with Turkey. Russia also seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and fomented a civil war in the east of the country. Moscow then sent forces to Syria in 2015 to prevent the fall of the Assad regime to a number of opposition groups, some of which were backed by Turkey. Russia has deployed mercenaries from the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group to fight in Libya, and in May 2020, it sent 14 fighter jets from the Russian Aerospace Forces

47 Giorgi Menabde, "Russia Boosts Its Military Contingent in Georgia's Occupied Territories," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 17, no. 22, February 19, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-boosts-its-military-contingent-in-georgias-occupied-territories/>, accessed October 20, 2020.

48 Artak Khulian and Sargis Hurutyunyan, "Russia to Beef Up Military Presence in Armenia," *RFE/RL Armenian Service*, December 24, 2019, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30342769.html>, accessed October 20, 2020.

there to support them.⁴⁹ Russia supports the Libyan National Army under Khalifa Haftar, while Turkey supports the United Nations-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli. Finally, after it brokered a ceasefire in the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia deployed some 2,000 soldiers to the conflict zone, meaning it now has military forces in all three South Caucasus countries.

Turkey's spike in military activities outside its borders started later than Russia's, but has accelerated quickly. Concerned about the strength of Syria's Kurds and hoping to establish a safe zone to allow the return of Syrian refugees sheltering in Turkey, Ankara launched a ground offensive into northwestern Syria in 2016. Turkish forces expanded their offensive to north-central and northeastern Syria after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from that area in late 2019. In 2017, in the midst of Qatar's spat with other Arab states over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey built a base in Qatar and stationed troops there. Also in 2017, Turkey built a base in Somalia, where it trains Somali forces to fight the terrorist group Al Shabaab. Finally, and perhaps most ominously, Turkey maintains forces

at an army base in Azerbaijan and has access to an air base there,⁵⁰ and Ankara strongly supported Baku in its recent war with Yerevan.

Despite encroaching on each other's borders and backing opposing sides in several proxy wars, Russia and Turkey have so far prevented incidents between their forces from escalating to more serious clashes. The rest of this section seeks to understand why this is and to reach tentative conclusions about the future of Russian-Turkish military interactions. The framework it will use to analyze how Moscow and Ankara interact militarily consists of three areas, two of which are geographic and one of which is issue-based. The geographic areas are the Black Sea region and the region comprising the eastern Mediterranean and Levant. The issue area is how military interaction between Russia and Turkey has impacted Turkey's relationship with NATO.

The Black Sea Region

In the Black Sea region, there are three main areas where Russia and Turkey might interact militarily: the Caucasus, Ukraine,

49 Eric Schmitt, "Russian Attack Jets Back Mercenaries Fighting in Libya," *New York Times*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/us/politics/russian-jets-mercenaries-libya.html>, accessed October 20, 2020.

50 Selcan Hacaoglu, "Mapping the Turkish Military's Expanding Footprint," *Washington Post*, August 31, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/mapping-the-turkish-militarys-expanding-footprint/2020/08/28/0ac8a114-e8e3-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html, accessed October 20, 2020.



Russian Navy Day, Sevastopol. (George Chernilevsky/Wikimedia)

and on the surface of the Black Sea itself. Of these, the Caucasus presents the greatest potential for military escalation. The recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan highlighted the divergent military interests of Moscow and Ankara in this region. Armenia is a member of the CSTO. Russia maintained that the mutual defense obligations of the CSTO treaty did not apply to the recent fighting, which was centered around the breakaway Azerbaijani region of Nagorno-Karabakh and other territories legally part of Azerbaijan.⁵¹ If the fighting were to re-start

and spread to Armenian territory, then Russia would almost certainly intervene to prevent an outright Azeri victory since such an outcome would severely weaken Russia's only ally in the region and damage Russian credibility.

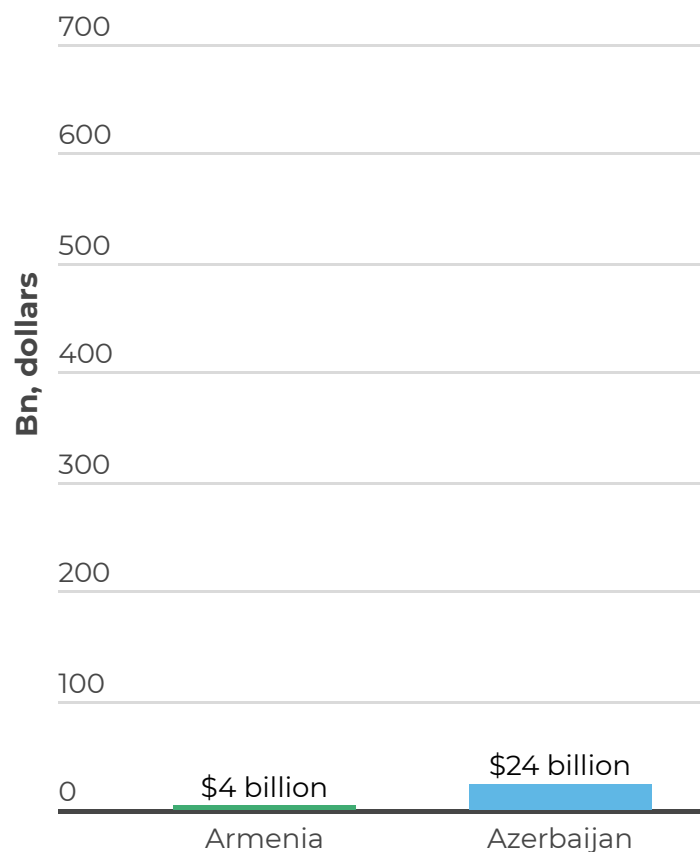
Turkey has long rhetorically supported Azerbaijan in the conflict. In the recent escalation, which began in late September 2020, Ankara's support was unprecedented and pivotal in securing Baku's gains. There are persistent reports that Turkey deployed some

⁵¹ Dmitri Chirciu, "Russia says defense pact does not apply to Karabakh," *Anadolu Agency*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-says-defense-pact-does-not-apply-to-karabakh/1999169#>, accessed October 20, 2020.

Military Expenditure by Country, Estimated

1,500 of its Syrian proxy forces to fight on Azerbaijan's side,⁵² and Armenia even claimed that a Turkish F-16, flying from a base in Azerbaijan, shot down an Armenian fighter jet.⁵³ In addition, Turkish-supplied Bayraktar TB-2 armed drones and Harop "suicide drones" purchased from Israel exacted a devastating toll. In the first three weeks of the war, Azerbaijan destroyed some 140 tanks⁵⁴ from the armed forces of Armenia and Armenian-supported Nagorno-Karabakh—many of these destroyed by drones—out of a total force of 400-500.⁵⁵ Azeri drones also effectively targeted the artillery and air defense systems of their enemies.

Over the past decade, Azerbaijan has spent a total of \$24 billion on its military, compared to just \$4 billion for Armenia.⁵⁶ It was this combination of a



Source: SIPRI

52 Liz Cookman, "Syrians Make Up Turkey's Proxy Army in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Foreign Policy*, October 5, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/05/nagorno-karabakh-syrians-turkey-armenia-azerbaijan/>, accessed October 20, 2020.

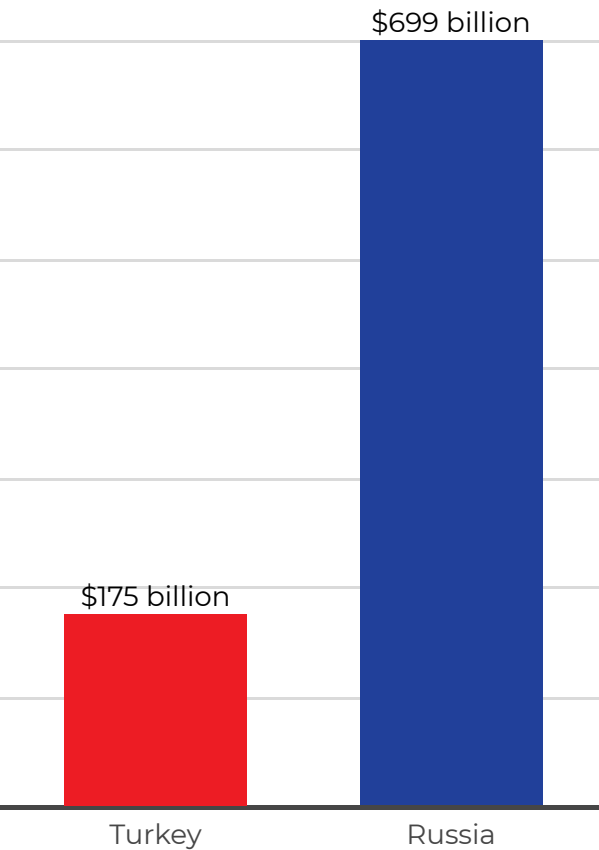
53 "Armenia says its fighter jet 'shot down' by Turkey," *BBC*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54345622>, accessed October 20, 2020.

54 Stijn Mitzer, "The Fight for Nagorno-Karabakh: Documenting the Losses on the Sides of Armenia and Azerbaijan," *Oryx Blog*, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2020/09/the-fight-for-nagorno-karabakh.html>, accessed October 22, 2020.

55 Reliable numbers of tanks and other equipment are difficult to find, especially for the "Artsakh Defense Army," the Armenian-supported armed forces of separatist Nagorno-Karabakh. For a comparison of Armenian and Azeri forces, see, Niall McCarthy, "Armenian & Azerbaijani Military Strength Compared," *Statista*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/chart/23056/estimated-military-strength-of-armenia-and-azerbaijan/>, accessed 21 October, 2020. For a listing of equipment of the "Artsakh Defense Army," see, Hans-Joachim Schmidt, "Military Confidence Building and Arms Control in Unresolved Territorial Conflicts," Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, PRIF-Reports No. 89, 2009, https://www.hsfrk.de/fileadmin/HSFK/hsfk_downloads/prif89.pdf, accessed October 21, 2020.

56 Sam Bhutia, "Armenia-Azerbaijan: Who's the big defense spender?," *Eurasianet*, October 28, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-azerbaijan-whos-the-big-defense-spender>, accessed October 22, 2020.

ted Spending bln, dollars 2008-2019



decade of uneven investment in military power and the revolutionary effect of Azerbaijan's drones—for which Armenia has no effective countermeasure—that threatened Armenia with comprehensive military defeat, forcing Russia to intervene and craft a ceasefire that ratified Azerbaijan's territorial gains but prevented Armenia from losing control of all of Nagorno-Karabakh. The deployment of some 2,000 Russian peacekeeping forces to the conflict zone—and Turkey's insistence that it, too, will be part of the

peacekeeping force—could be a source of tension between Moscow and Ankara.

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not the only place in the Caucasus where Russia and Turkey have divergent interests. Ankara has long been one of the largest providers of military assistance to Georgia and a vocal champion of Tbilisi's membership in NATO. When Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, Turkey took a pragmatic, low-key stance. Erdogan's response to the invasion clearly conveyed that he was weighing the military and economic interests at stake and that he understood the invasion as a challenge to the United States from Russia. "It would not be right for Turkey to be pushed toward any side," he remarked, "One of the sides is our closest ally, the United States. The other side is Russia, with which we have an important trade volume."⁵⁷

Turkey's reaction to Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea and fomenting of war in eastern Ukraine was also muted. Despite the fact that Ukraine was one of only two militaries in the region with which Turkey had conducted bilateral military exercises (Azerbaijan was the other)⁵⁸ and despite its deep historical and ethnic links to Crimea's Tatars, Turkey conceded

⁵⁷ Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 161.

⁵⁸ Ozlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, "Turkish Approaches to the EU's eastern neighborhood," in Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru (eds.), *Third Powers in Europe's East*, Chaillot Papers 144 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2017), p. 33.

to Russia's intervention with little resistance. Although it pledged never to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea, it also declined to join Western sanctions against Moscow. Ankara likely concluded that Moscow had higher-order interests at stake than it did and that the economic relationship with Russia was too important to destroy in a crusade for Ukraine. Behind the scenes though, Turkey was growing nervous. Russia's intervention in Ukraine convinced Ankara to join NATO's missile defense program by hosting a radar in southeastern Turkey and to begin to accept the idea that the alliance could play a larger role in Black Sea naval security.⁵⁹ This marked the beginning of the reversal of Turkey's traditional policy of "regional ownership," which had held that Black Sea access and security should be managed solely by littoral states.

The final area where Russia and Turkey interact militarily in the Black Sea region is on the surface of the Black Sea itself. Here, the lesson for Turkey is best summarized by the maxim "be careful what you wish for." For most of the post-Cold War period, Turkey's approach to the Black Sea privileged relations with regional states over those of its NATO

Allies. For example, Turkey opposed the extension of NATO's Operation Active Endeavor from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, instead teaming with Russia in 2004 to launch Operation Black Sea Harmony under the auspices of Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR), a naval arrangement that Russia had joined in 2001 and which conducted search and rescue and maritime security operations.⁶⁰ In 2008, Turkey used the Montreux Convention to resist a U.S. request to use warships to deliver humanitarian assistance to Georgia after its war with Russia. In 2014, when Russia expressed concern about the presence of U.S. warships in the Black Sea during the Ukraine crisis, Turkey assured Russia that it was scrupulously adhering to the stipulations of the Montreux Convention.⁶¹ This "regional ownership" approach brought Turkey's position closer to Russia's and limited NATO's Black Sea presence.⁶²

As Ankara pursued its policy of regional ownership, Moscow was busy building its naval power in the Black Sea. Russia's goal was to establish its dominance there and use its Black Sea fleet as the foundation for a multi-regional naval

⁵⁹ Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 172.

⁶⁰ Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 160.

⁶¹ Mitat Celikpala and Emre Ersen, "Turkey's Black Sea Predicament: Challenging or Accommodating Russia?," *Perceptions Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 2, (Summer 2018) p. 76.

⁶² Celikpala and Ersen, "Turkey's Black Sea Predicament," p. 74.



NATO ships exercise in the Black Sea, July 2019. (NATO)

force that would be capable of projecting power to the Mediterranean and Middle East.⁶³ From the end of the Cold War until 2014, Turkey was the preeminent naval power on the Black Sea, with 44 surface ships to Russia's 26.⁶⁴ But Russia's seizure of Crimea radically altered the military balance. Russia deployed 10 Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers, patrol and

anti-submarine aircraft, K-300P Bastion anti-ship missiles, and S-400 air and missile defense systems.⁶⁵ Moscow also deployed to Crimea over-the-horizon sensor systems that cover nearly the entire surface of the Black Sea, giving it an excellent real-time picture of foreign surface ships operating there.⁶⁶ By 2019, Russia had eclipsed Turkey on the surface

63 Celikpala and Ersen, "Turkey's Black Sea Predicament," p. 76.

64 Pavel Shlykov, "Russian-Turkish Relations in the Wider Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Competition," *Perceptions Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 2, (Summer 2018), p. 98.

65 Celikpala and Ersen, "Turkey's Black Sea Predicament," p. 81.

66 Michael Petersen, "The Naval Power Shift in the Black Sea," *War on the Rocks*, January 8, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea/>, accessed October 22, 2020.

of the Black Sea, boasting 49 surface ships, many of them newly-built.⁶⁷ All of this was part of a strategy to establish Russia as the preeminent naval power on the Black Sea and hinder NATO's ability to defend current and prospective member-states there.

For Erdogan, Russia's buildup marked a turning point. After years of making it hard for NATO to operate in the Black Sea, he began admonishing the Alliance for its failure to do more there. Speaking before a conference of Balkan Chiefs of Defense, Erdogan said he told NATO's Secretary General, "You are not visible in the Black Sea. And your invisibility in the Black Sea turns it into a Russian lake, so to speak." He continued, "As NATO members, we should take all required steps in all spheres, including the sea, air and ground. Otherwise, history shall not forgive us."⁶⁸ He repeated this admonition at the July 2016 NATO Summit and the October ministerial meeting.⁶⁹ While Erdogan's comments seem directed at NATO, he likely also had another audience: Russia. Since these comments came after the Turkish shootdown of the Russian jet in Syria, they might have been as much about motivating Putin to mend fences with Turkey than about encouraging a

greater NATO Black Sea presence.

The altered military balance caused Turkey to re-examine its regional ownership policy in the Black Sea. While still skeptical about its relationship with NATO, Ankara is also concerned about Russia's stronger military presence. Turkey is revising its approach to the role of the Black Sea in its security in three ways. First, Ankara is considering the development of anti-access/area denial capabilities to protect its territory and reinforce the security of allies. Next, it is coming to grips with the fact that it has lost its naval superiority to Russia in the Black Sea, altering the delicate Montreux balance it hoped to maintain. One way that Erdogan seems to be dealing with this situation is re-energizing discussion of the Istanbul Canal, a planned 45-km passage between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, just west of the current Bosphorus. The Istanbul Canal could enable Turkey to sidestep Montreux Convention restrictions on warships entering the Black Sea through the Bosphorus, allowing Ankara to be the sole arbiter of the naval balance of power there. This would give it leverage over both its NATO Allies and Russia. Finally, Turkey's concern is growing about Russia's stronger

67 Yuri Lapaiev, "Russia's Black Sea Dominance Strategy—A Blend of Military and Civilian Assets," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 16, no. 163, November 19, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-black-sea-dominance-strategy-a-blend-of-military-and-civilian-assets/>, accessed October 22, 2020.

68 Celikpala and Ersen, "Turkey's Black Sea Predicament," p. 81.

69 Kemal Kirisci, *Turkey and the West: Faultlines in a Troubled Alliance*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2017), p. 170.

relationship with Armenia (including deployment of Iskander-M missiles there).⁷⁰ While a Russian-Turkish military clash on the Black Sea is still unlikely, Ankara increasingly views Moscow as a competitor there, and not a partner in a strategy of regional ownership.

The Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant

Unsurprisingly, Syria is the place in the eastern Mediterranean and Levant where Russian-Turkish military interaction is most intense. In Syria, Russia and Turkey are present in the air and on the ground, and the two have interests that converge and conflict. Managing the conflicts to prevent them from escalating to a direct military clash is in the interest of both, but has not always been possible. The first such clash occurred within months of Russia's intervention—on November 24, 2015, a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24 that had crossed into Turkish airspace while making a bombing run along the Syrian-Turkish border. Russia's reaction was swift and harsh. Putin called the incident “a stab in the back by terrorist

accomplices,”⁷¹ and Moscow broke off all contact with the Turkish military, including withdrawing from joint naval patrols on the Black Sea. The Russian Ministry of Defense deployed the guided missile cruiser *Moskva* off the Syrian coast, sent S-400 surface-to-air missiles to its base in Khmeimim, Syria, and announced it would shoot down any aircraft threatening its forces.⁷²

Moscow also used diplomatic and economic instruments to punish Ankara. Despite Erdogan's attempt to de-escalate the situation by saying he was “saddened” by the incident and saying he wished it had not happened, the Kremlin cancelled a planned visit of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Turkey.⁷³ Only hours after Erdogan spoke, Russia announced a list of economic sanctions that included banning the import of Turkish fruit, vegetables, poultry, and salt; banning package vacations in Turkey for Russian citizens; and severely limiting the ability of Turkish construction firms to operate in Russia. As the sanctions began to bite, the incentive for Turkey to pursue a rapprochement with Russia increased.

70 Celikpala and Ersen, “Turkey's Black Sea Predicament,” p. 85.

71 “Turkey downing of Russia jet ‘stab in the back’ – Putin,” *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34913173>, accessed October 23, 2020.

72 Doug Stanglin, “Kremlin hits Turkey with sanctions over shoot down of Russian warplane,” *USA Today*, November 28, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/11/28/turkish-president-says-wishes-plane-downing-had-not-happened/76491142/>, accessed October 23, 2020.

73 Stanglin, “Kremlin hits Turkey with sanctions over shoot down of Russian warplane.”



Two events combined to allow the sides to put the issue behind them. In late June 2016, Erdogan sent a carefully worded letter to Putin saying he was “sorry” for the incident and offering condolences to the family of the Russian pilot who died in it.⁷⁴ Just over two weeks later, strong Russian support for Erdogan after the coup attempt against him by the Turkish military ended the dispute and put Russian-Turkish military interaction on a more stable footing. The two sides still disagreed over the fate of Assad and the role of the Kurds in a post-war Syria—Russia wanted to keep Assad in power and envisioned a zone of Kurdish influence, both ideas that

Turkey opposed—but they agreed to put those issues aside for the moment.

U.S. policy also played a role in inducing Turkey to mend ties with Russia and cooperate with it in Syria. Washington’s lukewarm support for Erdogan during the coup attempt and its criticism of his broad crackdown in the coup’s aftermath infuriated the Turkish leader. The U.S. refusal to hand over Turkish dissident Fethullah Gülen, who lives in the United States and whom Erdogan accused of masterminding the coup, further strained ties between Washington and Ankara. In Syria, the U.S. military partnership

⁷⁴ “Erdogan ‘sorry’ for downing of Russian jet,” *Al Jazeera*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/27/erdogan-sorry-for-downing-of-russian-jet/>, accessed October 23, 2020.

with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Washington saw as its best ally against the Islamic State but Ankara accuses of having ties to Kurdish insurgent groups in Turkey, led Erdogan to hedge his bets. Kemal Beyoghlou summarizes Turkish thinking this way, “As Turkey realized the Assad regime could not be toppled because of Russia’s military support and as a result of the US shift in strategy toward defeating ISIS, a tactical realignment between Russia and Turkey became more attractive.”⁷⁵

Despite their divergence over Assad and the Kurds, Russia and Turkey had one important thing in common in Syria: the lack of focus on groups other than ISIS as the greatest military threat. In the early days of Russia’s intervention, it largely ignored ISIS, instead focusing on Western-backed opposition groups that it saw as the greatest threat to Assad. As analyst Anna Borshchevskaya notes, Russian airstrikes not only avoided targeting ISIS, but “at times indirectly strengthened it. The moderate anti-Assad opposition that the Kremlin bombed also opposed ISIS, so, in effect, Moscow helped eliminate ISIS opponents or reduce their ability to operate.”⁷⁶ For Turkey, too, ISIS was a

secondary enemy in Syria. While Russia primarily targeted the Western-backed opposition, the Kurdish groups, including those aligned with the U.S. coalition of which Turkey was a member, were enemy number one for Ankara. Beyoghlou frames Turkey’s strategy this way, “Defeating ISIS is not and has never been a priority for Erdogan or his ruling AKP. President Erdogan, for instance, waited until September 25, 2014, to finally brand ISIS a terrorist group.”⁷⁷

From mid-2016 until early 2020, Russia and Turkey were partners in the Astana Process diplomatic negotiations to end the war. Their military interaction on the ground was limited to staying out of each other’s way, targeting roughly the same groups, and compartmentalizing their differences. In early 2020, those differences became impossible to ignore and nearly caused another direct military clash. The theater for the collision of interests was again—as it had been in the Turkish shootdown of the Su-24—northwestern Syria. This time, the clash was not limited to a single incident, but was broader and bloodier.

In late 2019, Assad regime forces, backed by Russian airpower, launched a major

⁷⁵ Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink*, p. 32.

⁷⁶ Anna Borshchevskaya, “The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism,” in Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, Aaron Stein (eds.), *Russia’s War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), p. 22.

⁷⁷ Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink*, p. 19.

offensive against Idlib, the last remaining opposition-held region in western Syria. Among the opposition groups in Idlib were several backed by Turkey, and the Turkish military had established observation posts around the border of opposition-held areas as part of an earlier de-escalation agreement. As the pro-regime forces advanced in southern Idlib, they surrounded several of these Turkish observation posts. The fighting continued into early 2020, with pro-regime forces making slow but steady gains, and Russia and Turkey becoming increasingly involved on opposite sides, with both suffering casualties. By late February, Russian and Turkish air and artillery strikes were widespread and intense, but both were careful not to directly target the other, leaving that to their proxy forces.

On February 27, the situation deteriorated further when a pro-regime airstrike targeted a Turkish infantry battalion in Idlib, killing at least 34 Turkish soldiers. Russia denied being involved in the attack, claiming that “Turkish servicemen inside the combat units of terrorist groups”

had come under fire when the Syrian Air Force targeted those groups. The Russian Defense Ministry further claimed that Turkey had not informed it of the presence of Turkish troops in the area. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar responded that Turkey had provided Russia with the location of its forces, and witnesses on the ground claimed that two Russian Su-24s were involved in the airstrike.⁷⁸ Probably to avoid a direct escalation with Russia, the Turkish government accepted Moscow’s story and held the Syrian government responsible for the airstrike.

Turkey’s response to the strike was devastating. Over the next six days, attacks by Turkish aircraft, drones, and artillery killed hundreds of pro-regime forces; destroyed some 45 tanks, 33 artillery pieces, over 60 other vehicles; and shot down three Syrian aircraft.⁷⁹ Turkey claimed to have lost 59 soldiers, including those killed in the February 27 attack.⁸⁰ With the escalation threatening to spiral out of control, Putin and Erdogan met in Moscow on March 5 and agreed to a renewed ceasefire. While this ceasefire

78 Fatima Tils, “The Strike: Did Russia Knowingly Target Turkish Troops?,” *Polygraphinfo*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.polygraph.info/a/turkey-russia-syria-fact-check/30460458.html>, accessed October 23, 2020.

79 “Military escalation in ‘De-escalation zone’ 51 days on: 1,200,000 people displaced...2,640 killed...276 areas fall to regime forces,” Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 5, 2020, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=156424>, accessed October 23, 2020.

80 “Two Turkish soldiers killed, six wounded in Syria’s Idlib – ministry,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-toll/two-turkish-soldiers-killed-six-wounded-in-syrias-idlib-ministry-idUSKBN20R0YU>, accessed October 23, 2020.



President Bashar al-Assad of Syria meets with President Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu in 2020. (kremlin.ru)

has held to this point, Russia and Turkey continue to have conflicting interests in Idlib, and each partners with proxy forces who do not share the restraint of their sponsors. A renewed escalation in Idlib is therefore likely.

While Syria is the most dangerous place in the region where Russia and Syria interact militarily, it is not the only place. Both navies have increased their presence and activities in the eastern Mediterranean, and they routinely encounter each other there. Russia resurrected its Mediterranean Squadron in 2013, but after 2015, the squadron became more capable, with

many of its older, larger Soviet platforms replaced by modern “green water” ships more appropriate to the mainly littoral missions conducted by navies in the Mediterranean. The squadron’s missions are to support the Russian contingent in Syria, “locally counterbalance navies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and protect Russia’s southern flank from perceived instability emanating from the Mediterranean’s southern shore, in the context of the Arab Spring.”⁸¹

Russia’s naval presence in the Mediterranean is set to grow and will probably consist of around a dozen

81 Igor Delanoe, “Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War,” in Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, Aaron Stein (eds.), *Russia’s War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), pp. 111-112.



President Erdogan waves at the *Oruç Reis*, a Turkish research vessel. (Facebook)

surface ships, primarily of the “green water,” littoral warfare type, augmented by two submarines permanently stationed in the region and another one or two submarines on a rotational basis. This squadron will not only provide a maritime presence in the Mediterranean, but it also will provide the capability to deliver long-range precision strikes with the *Kalibr* cruise missiles aboard some of its vessels. The 2017 agreement with the Syrian government that gives Russia a 49-year lease on the naval base at Tartus will provide the squadron a home

base. Ongoing improvements to the base, scheduled to be complete in the mid-2020s, will ensure that it meets the squadron’s maintenance and logistical needs.⁸²

As noted in the Diplomacy section, under its emerging “Blue Homeland” maritime strategy, Turkey has also become much more active in the eastern Mediterranean. Parts of Blue Homeland, like the “shared disdain for the United States and what they often term the ‘Atlantic framework’”⁸³ prevalent among

82 Delanoë, “Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War,” p. 123.

83 Ryan Gingeras, “Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey’s New Maritime Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>, accessed October 23, 2020.

its most ardent proponents, will doubtless appeal to Russia. Other parts, including the strategy's aggressive stance toward Greece and its assertion of Turkey's right to a large exclusive economic zone in the Mediterranean, will not be well received in Moscow. Russia will likely be ambivalent about how Turkey is operationalizing the strategy, enjoying the run-in between the Turkish and French navies in June 2020, for example, but uneasy about the strategy's goal to "break up existing maritime arrangements and establish Turkey as the predominant regional power."⁸⁴ As in so many other places, Russian-Turkish interaction in the eastern Mediterranean is framed by a mixture of converging and conflicting interests. Its future trajectory will be determined by how Moscow and Ankara manage this volatile mixture.

Russia, Turkey and NATO

The 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan was a critical juncture in how Turkey sees its role in NATO and its relationship with Russia for two reasons. First, the perceived ambivalence of the West, which denounced both the coup attempt and Erdogan's subsequent crackdown,

contrasted starkly with the immediate, strong support Putin voiced during the coup and his refusal to criticize the subsequent crackdown. In fact, Putin had long been hostile to the Gülenist movement, expelling it from Russia even before Gülen fell out with Erdogan in 2013. This doubtless boosted Putin's credentials as a staunch opponent of Gülen in Erdogan's eyes. Less than a month after the coup attempt, Putin and Erdogan met at a summit in St. Petersburg, Erdogan's first foreign trip after almost being toppled. At the summit, Erdogan thanked Putin for his phone call—made as Erdogan was fighting for his political life—saying it "meant a lot psychologically." The Turkish leader then pledged that the "Moscow-Ankara friendship axis will be restored."⁸⁵ Unsurprisingly, since 2016, a "Russia lobby" has emerged in Turkish national security circles, advocating for a rupture of Turkey's relationship with the EU and a distancing from NATO.⁸⁶

The second way in which the coup attempt affected Turkey's view of its role in NATO and its relationship with Russia is less direct, but may have farther-reaching consequences. Among the consequences of Erdogan's purge of the military after the coup was a shortage of

84 Jonathan Gorvett, "Game plan disruption: Turkey and the East Med," *Cyprus Mail*, August 22, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/08/22/game-plan-disruption-turkey-and-the-east-med/>, accessed October 23, 2020.

85 "Putin mends broken relations with Turkey's Erdogan," *BBC*, August 9, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37018562>, accessed October 25, 2020.

86 Kirisci, *Turkey and the West*, p. 170.

trained pilots for its U.S.-made F-16s.⁸⁷ Turkey's F-16s are its premier defensive counter-air platform, and the shortage of pilots for these aircraft severely degraded Turkey's ability to protect itself against threats from the air. To plug this gap, Ankara decided to upgrade its ground-based air defense capability as it trained new pilots and awaited delivery of new F-35 aircraft. It first turned to the United States, asking Washington to agree to joint production of the Patriot air defense missile system. Since this would have meant "transferring highly guarded technical secrets and special codes associated with manufacturing the American Patriot missile platform system to Turkey," the United States refused.⁸⁸

Turkey then turned to Russia, concluding a deal to buy the Russian-made S-400 air defense system in 2017. Russia delivered the first components of the S-400 system in July 2019, at which time the United States announced that Turkey's purchase of the S-400 "render[ed] its continued involvement with the F-35 impossible."⁸⁹ Turkey had been a major participant in the F-35 program, producing some 900 parts for the aircraft and planning to buy 100 of them. Washington's concern was that



Ankara's deployment of the S-400 could "expose at least some of the F-35 highly-classified features to Russian intelligence gathering"⁹⁰ since the F-35 would be flying in the same Turkish airspace that the S-400 was defending. Until October 2020, though, Turkey had not activated the S-400, and the possibility of a compromise remained, under which Turkey would not deploy the S-400 and the United States would consider ways to keep Ankara inside the F-35 program. But on October 23, Erdogan announced that Turkey had been testing the S-400 and would continue to do so, concluding, "If

⁸⁷ Kirisci, *Turkey and the West*, p. 177.

⁸⁸ Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink*, p. 39.

⁸⁹ "Turkey, the S-400 and the F-35," *IJSS Strategic Comment*, <https://www.ijss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2019/turkey-the-s400-and-the-f35>, accessed October 25, 2020.

⁹⁰ "Turkey, the S-400 and the F-35."



Left: S-400 Triumph launch vehicle. (Wikimedia)

we are not going to test these capabilities at our disposal, then what are we going to do?”⁹¹ Washington condemned the test in “the strongest possible terms,” and the Pentagon made clear that “an operational S-400 system is not consistent with Turkey’s commitments as a U.S. and NATO ally.”⁹²

This impasse looks unlikely to be broken anytime soon. The United States

has warned that Turkey risks “serious consequences” in its security relationship for the test. Among Turkey watchers, this is widely thought to be code for a threat to punish Ankara under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which mandates sanctions for any significant weapons purchases from Russia.⁹³ Erdogan remained defiant, saying, “You told us to send back the S-400s. We are not a tribal state, we are Turkey,” and “Whatever your sanctions are, don’t hesitate to apply them.”⁹⁴ The S-400 case is one of several where the lack of trust between the United States and Turkey makes compromise difficult. According to Selim Koru, the Turkish government and its supporters believe that the United States is using technical issues about the S-400 to disguise a political agenda that aims to subjugate Turkey and restrict its freedom of action.⁹⁵ Former U.S. government officials familiar with both the technical and policy aspects of the S-400 issue counter that the threat to U.S. technology by having both the F-35 and the S-400 operating in Turkey

91 Jeff Seldin, “US Slams Turkey for S-400 Tests, Warns of ‘Serious Consequences,’” *Voice of America*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/us-slams-turkey-s-400-tests-warns-serious-consequences>, accessed October 25, 2020.

92 Seldin, “US Slams Turkey for S-400 Tests, Warns of ‘Serious Consequences.’”

93 Agence France Presse, “Erdogan Defies Threatened US Sanctions Over Missiles,” *Barron’s*, October 25, 2020, <https://www.barrons.com/news/erdogan-defies-threatened-us-sanctions-over-missiles-01603636506?refsec=afp-news>, accessed October 25, 2020.

94 Agence France Presse, “Erdogan Defies Threatened US Sanctions Over Missiles.”

95 Selim Koru, email exchange with authors, January 25, 2021.



Mevlut Cavusoglu, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Nurettin Canikli arrive at the 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels. (NATO)

are essentially insurmountable—and are not a fig leaf for a political agenda.⁹⁶ The fact that suspicion is so prevalent on both sides reveals the almost complete erosion of trust between Washington and Ankara.

Despite the tough rhetoric on both sides, and the difficulty that this issue will continue to cause in both Washington and Ankara, it is unlikely to result in a complete rupture of the U.S.-Turkey relationship or cause Turkey to distance itself significantly from NATO because NATO needs Turkey and Turkey needs NATO. Turkey is a major contributor to NATO missions and its strategic location

at the crossroads of Europe, Eurasia, and the Middle East enhances NATO's strategic reach. As Turkish scholar Kemal Kirisci notes, most Turkish officials “are conscious of the danger of getting too close to Russia,” realizing that without the protection of NATO “the Russians would be able to intimidate Ankara at will.”⁹⁷

Turkey's dalliance with Russia is driven more by Washington's perceived “insensitivity toward Turkey's national security concerns” than by any real sense in Ankara that Moscow could be a reliable security partner. To again quote Kirisci, “The United States taking Turkey's security concerns seriously and finding a

⁹⁶ Former U.S. government officials, conversation with one of the authors, February 5, 2021.

⁹⁷ Kirisci, *Turkey and the West*, p. 22.

way to mitigate its feeling of abandonment will be as critical as reminding Erdogan that NATO members are expected to adhere to the democratic standard of its membership.”⁹⁸

Summary

The increased military assertiveness of Russia and Turkey has brought them into closer military contact with each other over the last decade-plus. In the Black Sea region, the Caucasus is the place where their interaction could go badly wrong, and it could do so with little warning. The recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was an unwelcome development for Russia. Moscow had been cultivating relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan and hoped to keep their conflict frozen in order to preserve its own influence as the sole arbiter in the region. Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan and its insistence that Turkish troops be part of the peace-keeping force in the region certainly rattle the Kremlin. Russia and Turkey also disagree over Georgia. Turkey has been a major provider of military assistance to Tbilisi and a strong advocate for Georgian membership in NATO, but was forced to swallow Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia and diplomatic recognition of its separatist regions.

In the eastern Mediterranean and Levant, Syria is the focal point for Russian-Turkish

military interaction. After an almost-disastrous start, when a Turkish jet shot down a Russian one, Moscow and Ankara put their relationship on a more solid footing. They continue to disagree about the fate of Assad and what role the Kurds will have in post-war Syria, but those are issues unlikely to spark a direct military clash. Idlib is the most likely place for such a clash to occur. Russia and Turkey were very close to fighting each other there in early 2020, and the ceasefire in place since March of that year has only frozen the situation in place.

⁹⁸ Kirisci, *Turkey and the West*, p. 195.

4



ECONOMIC INTERACTION

Economic collaboration has been probably one of the steadiest elements of the Russian-Turkish relationship. This should not be surprising given the elements that characterize that relationship in general, especially the pragmatic and contractual approach accompanied by the ability to compartmentalize.⁹⁹ Though not without hiccups along the way, those relations have been generally well maintained and are often seen as a building block for common undertakings in other arenas.

Here, we will look at major trade and investment patterns between Russia

and Turkey and assess their viability, endurance, and potential. We will particularly underscore the economic ties that are related to energy transfers, especially natural gas, as fundamentals of those have been changing significantly and as they escape strictly economic measures and venture into the realm of geopolitics.

Russia, Turkey, and Their Economies

In 2019, Russia and Turkey placed in the top 20 of world economies for gross domestic product (GDP). Their economic growth (Figure 1) trajectories are generally similar and have been

⁹⁹ Evren Balta, "From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after The Cold War," *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, vol. 16, no. 63, (2019), p. 72.

growing together since the early 2000s. Such a setup could lead to two distinct outcomes: 1) competition if both countries' economies are similarly endowed and contend for access to other markets; or 2) collaboration if the countries' economies are complementary, i.e., they can benefit from access to each other's markets.

In contrast to foreign policy considerations, where periods of collaboration and competition have often intertwined, in economic relations, collaboration has been the typical expectation—unless military and geopolitical factors intervened.

Though we describe Russia and Turkey's economies as complementary, they are obviously not equal. Figure 1 shows a substantial gap between the two. The Russian economy is larger though Turkey's economy performs better per capita, ~\$15,000 in Turkey vs. ~\$12,000 in Russia. When purchasing power parity (PPP) is considered per capita, both countries' performance is similar though now Russia seems to be a slightly better performer (~\$27,000 for Turkey vs. ~\$28,000 for Russia in 2019).¹⁰⁰ Russia's most valued exports, including

exports to Turkey, are related to energy. In particular, oil and gas exports constitute a sizable portion of the country's budget. For example, in 2019, fuel and energy product exports constituted over 60% of Russia's export revenues. Oil accounted for almost 29%, and natural gas, including liquefied natural gas (LNG), accounted for almost 12% of all exports (see, Figure 2 for actual dollar amounts).

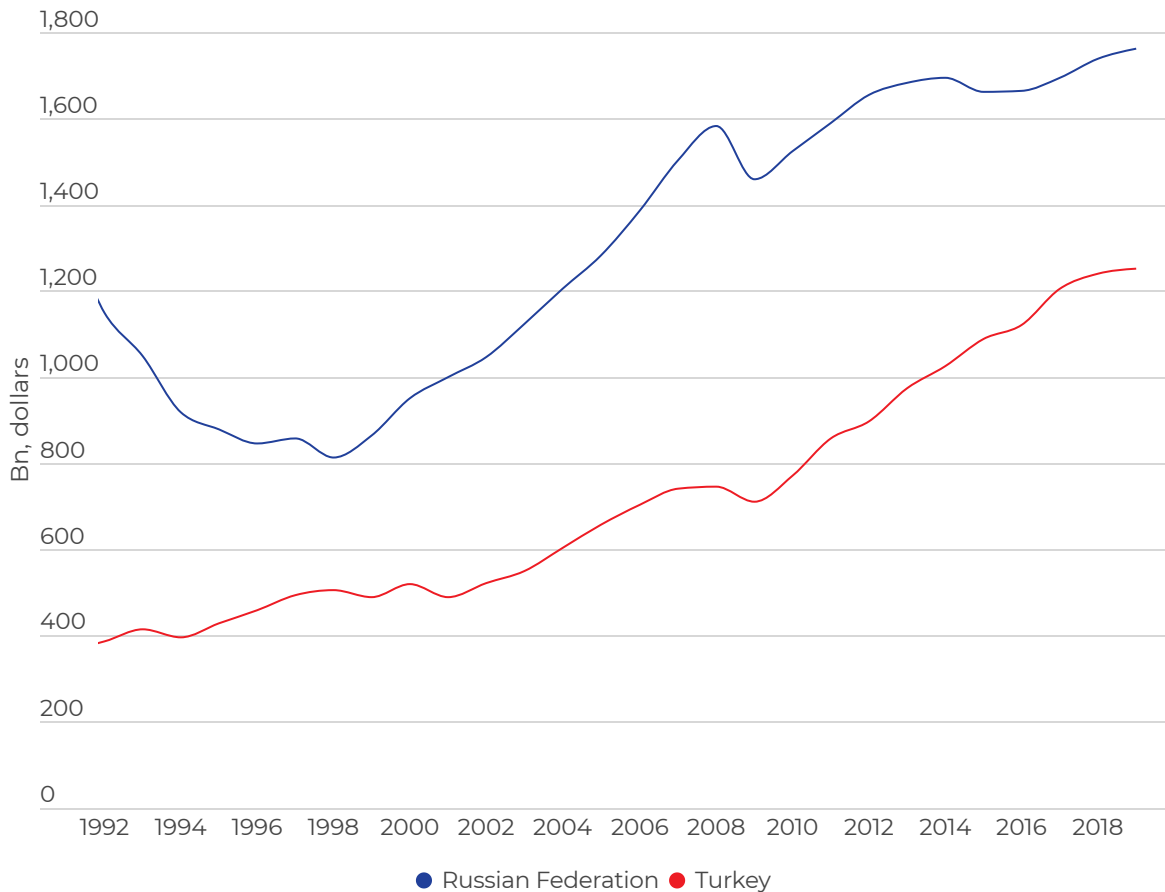
Oil exports have been particularly lucrative as oil prices rose precipitously since the late 1990s (for Europe, Brent Spot prices rose from a low of ~\$12 in 1998 to highs over ~\$111 in 2014 and 2015)¹⁰¹ expanding profit margins. That being said, significantly lower crude prices that have continued since 2015 have created a challenge for the Russian budget and exposed the issues of overreliance on a single economic sector.

Even though trade in natural gas is less profitable than trade in crude oil, Russian natural gas exports have been a source of geopolitical influence, especially in Central and Eastern Europe where, depending on the country, Russia has been either the dominant or exclusive gas supplier.¹⁰²

100 "Data Bank: World Development Indicators," World Bank <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=NY.GDP.MKTP.KD&country=>, accessed February 10, 2021.

101 Energy Information Administration, Europe Brent Spot Price FOB (Dollars per Barrel), <https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=RB RTE&f=A>, accessed March 14, 2021.

102 Gabriel Collins, "Russia's Use of the 'Energy Weapon' in Europe," Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2017, accessed March 5, 2021.

Figure 1. Gross Domestic Product of Russia and Turkey, 1989-2019 (in billions USD)

Data Source: The World Bank

In contrast to oil, prices of natural gas have held relatively stable over the years. They have dropped significantly, however, in 2020 due to three factors: 1) the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) consecutive (2018-2019 & 2019-2020) warm winters; and 3) new supplies of LNG flooding global markets. In early 2021, the cold winter pushed the prices to the opposite side of the spectrum only to languish again as milder, spring weather entered the picture.¹⁰³

While seasonal variations in gas are nothing new and the COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious aberration, the new supply entering global gas markets via LNG flows is a recent

¹⁰³ Jamison Cocklin, "Global Prices Slip, but European Natural Gas Inventories Continue Falling – LNG Recap," NGI, <https://www.naturalgasintel.com/global-gas-prices-slip-but-european-natural-gas-inventories-continue-falling-lng-recap/>, accessed March 19, 2021.

Figure 2. Russia's Exports to All Countries, 2019 (in billions USD)

All	422.8
Food Products and agricultural raw materials (excluding textiles)	24.8
Mineral Products	267.7
Fuel and energy products, including:	262.5
Crude oil	121.4
Natural gas	49.6
Chemical industry products, rubber	27.0
Raw hides, furs, and their products	0.2
Wood and pulp and paper products	12.8
Textiles, textile products, and footwear	1.4
Precious stones, precious metals, and products from them	15.3
Metals and metal products	37.5
Machinery, equipment, and vehicles	27.7
Other goods	8.5

Source: Federal Customs Service, "Commodity Structure of Exports, January-December 2019," <https://customs.gov.ru/folder/519>.

element of natural gas trade. Not only is it here to stay, but it is also expected to expand even further in the near future to include more providers and more centers of demand. This could prove problematic for Russia, which until now has reigned over the European market given limited competition. New sources of liquid gas are not only available to a wider range of sources and consumers (as long as they are able to invest in LNG infrastructure), but they also feature more flexible contract terms or are often available on a spot basis. More competition to pipeline exports means that Russia needed to adjust to new rules making its contracts more flexible and its gas cheaper.¹⁰⁴ Even these changes, however, probably won't preserve Moscow's ability to exert geopolitical influence based on its dominance over natural gas supply. As we will discuss later, these changes make Russia's dominance over Turkey with respect to trade somewhat less pronounced.

Turkey-Russia Trade

Trade relations between Russia and Turkey are characterized by a high level of asymmetry. Russia is Turkey's largest trading partner, contributing

approximately 10% of all trade in 2018, with a value of ~\$22 billion. Meanwhile, in 2018 (and 2019), Turkey contributed about 5% of total Russian trade value. Turkey's main exports to Russia in 2018 included fruits and nuts (over \$600 million), machinery and boilers (\$400 million), and vehicles (\$335 million). Only apparel (\$300 million), electronic and electric equipment (\$164 million), and plastics (\$131 million) passed the \$100 million mark. Given the type of Turkish imports as well as Russia's access to some 190 other trading partners, it is easier for Russia to replace some/any of those imports, while similar actions are more difficult for Turkey, which imports predominantly from Russia.¹⁰⁵

Turkey's largest imports from Russia are mineral fuels, oil, and distillation products (value of \$8.53 billion in 2019) as well as iron and steel, aluminum, organic and inorganic chemicals, precious metal compounds and isotope as well as other commodities (altogether over \$8.5 billion), and cereals (about \$1.5 billion), with no other export reaching over \$1 million.

The disparity in the value of traded goods has grown over the years. While Turkish imports and exports have grown since 1990s, exports have grown at a significantly higher pace, particularly in the early-to-mid-2000s after which the

104 Nathalie Hinchey and Anna Mikulska, "LNG Versus Russian Gas in Central and Eastern Europe: Playing Poker on a Continental Scale," *Forbes*, August 24, 2017, accessed March 19, 2021.

105 "World Integrated Trade Solutions," World Bank, <https://wits.worldbank.org/>, accessed February 11, 2021.

spread stabilized at a high level with some fluctuations in value of the exports/imports following each other.

However, trade in goods constitutes only a portion of total trade between countries. Another one, which often remains unmentioned, is trade in services. In services, the roles are flipped with Turkey registering a higher level of services exports than Russia. All in all, trade in services somewhat decreases the size of the negative trade balance for Turkey, in 2018 from \$18.6 to about \$14 billion. Turkey's performance is strongly related to tourism. In 2019, the number reached its highest level with more than 6.6 million Russians visiting Turkey.¹⁰⁶

While Turkish citizens do not seem to be as keen to visit Russia, they like to invest there, especially in the construction business. In 2018, Turkish construction companies earned \$4.2 billion in Russia. Russia's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Turkey has been rather small (6% of total FDI in 2016 and less than 1% of outbound investment). This has changed somewhat, however, with Russia's decision to invest in a nuclear power plant in Turkey, which ensconces Russia even more firmly within the Turkish energy sector.

Turkey-Russia Energy Relations

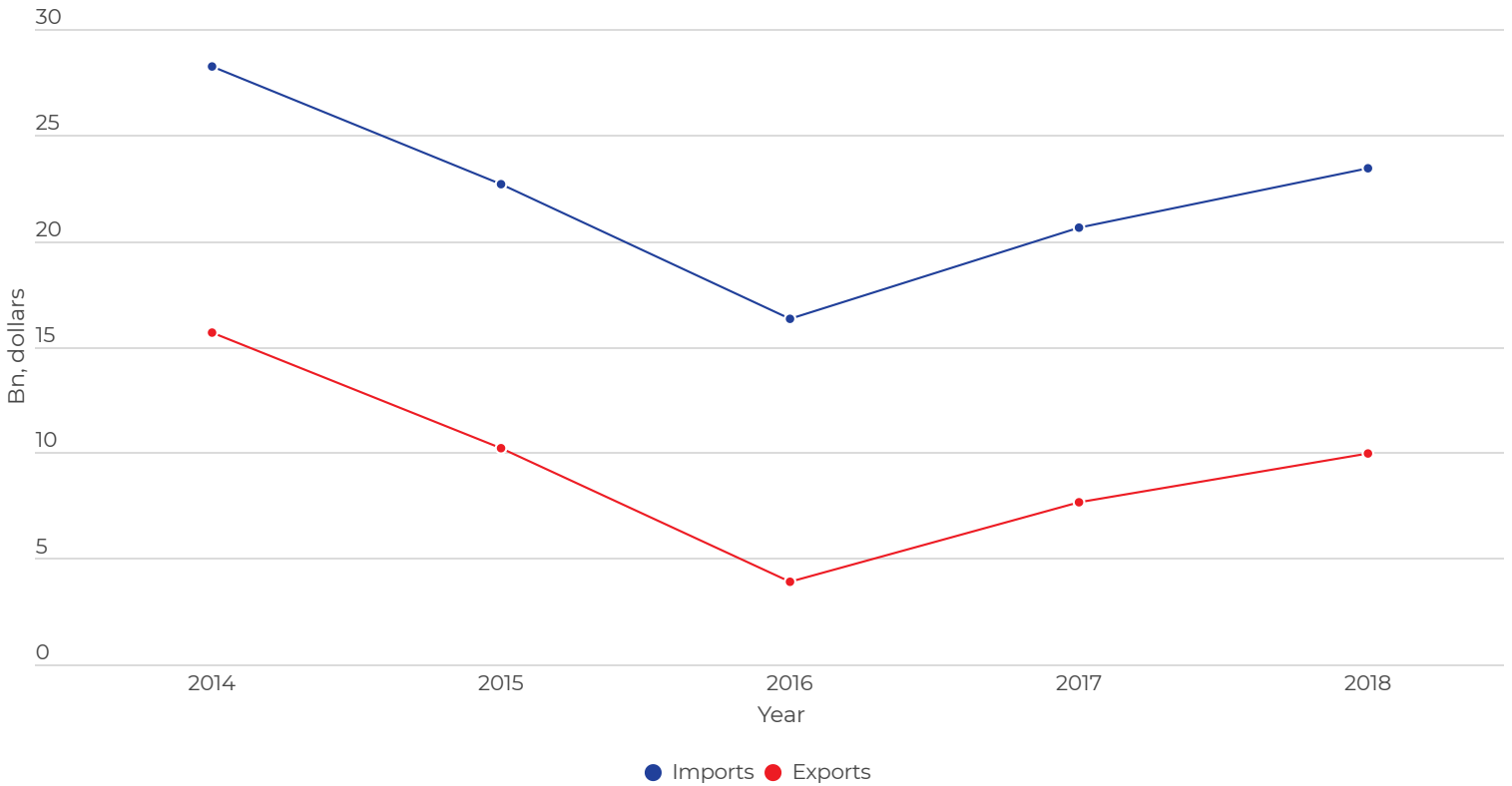
The data on trade between Turkey and Russia points to the fact that energy-related trade constitutes one of the most, if not the most, important elements of this relationship. This dynamic is visible in terms of volume and value of energy exports from Russia, in particular oil and gas as well as in terms of investment in nuclear power.

Russia is Turkey's second largest source of oil supply after Iraq. However, when it comes to oil Turkey has rather high level of supply security given: 1) a wide variety of suppliers (besides Iraq and Russia, also Iran, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Libya, Kuwait, Norway, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan); 2) fungibility of oil as a commodity; and 3) relative ease of shipment.

In contrast, natural gas has been traditionally much more difficult to distribute and required expensive pipeline infrastructure, which—as in the case of Turkey—resulted in a limited number of potential suppliers to the market. Russia has been the major supplier of gas to Turkey, but recently, the dynamic changed somewhat. New, unconventional gas finds, mostly in the United States but also in Australia, and cost reductions in liquefaction technology have allowed natural gas to be increasingly traded in its

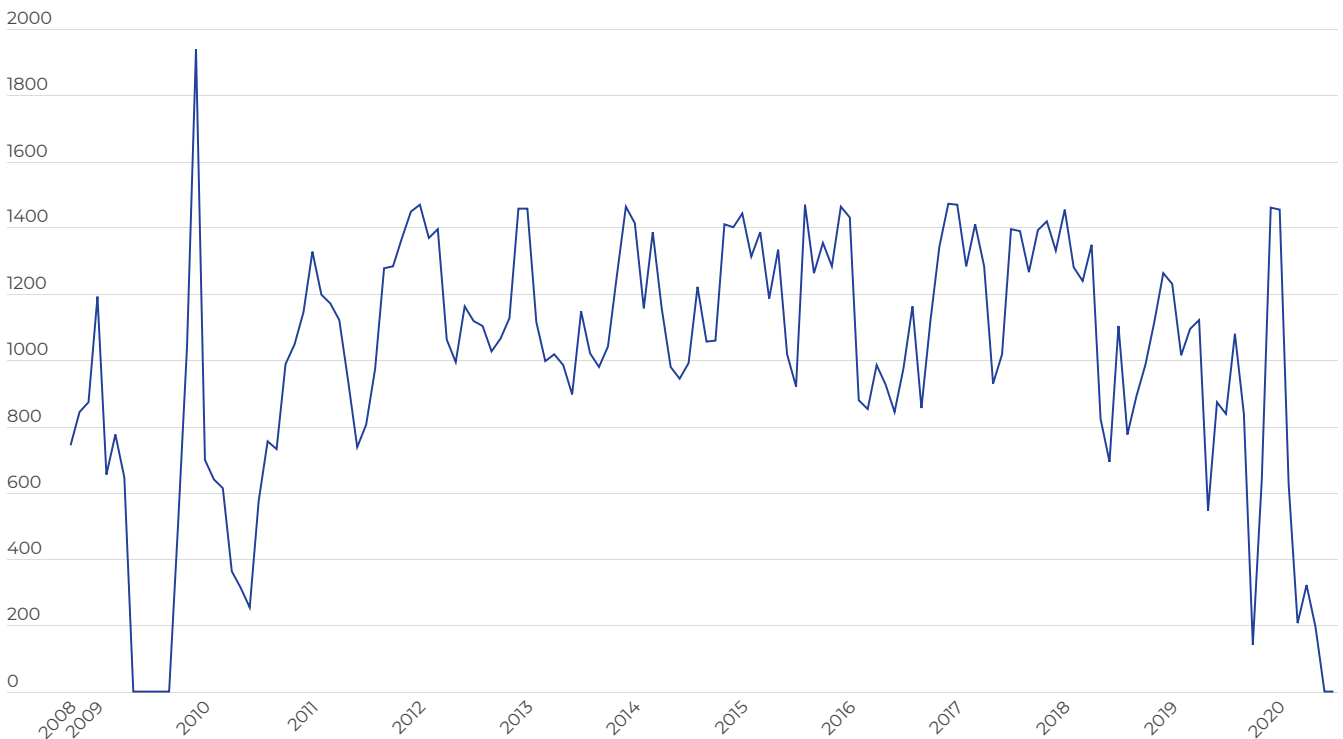
¹⁰⁶ "OECD Statistics on International Trade in Services," Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, vol. 2019, no. 2, accessed February 11, 2021.

Figure 3. Turkey's Total Imports from and Exports to Russia, 2014-2018 (in billions USD)



Source: "World Integrated Trade Solutions," World Bank, <https://wits.worldbank.org>, accessed February 11, 2021.

Figure 4. Russian Exports of Natural Gas to Turkey, 2008-2020 (monthly, billion cubic meters (bcm))



Source: IEA

liquid form. This began to transform the natural gas trade from a rigid relationship based on pipeline connection and long-term contracts to one that is increasingly flexible, with shorter contracts and purchases on a gas-on-gas pricing.

These changes allowed Turkey to begin redefining its energy relationship with Russia. To start, Turkey began a buildup of natural gas infrastructure, including pipelines, LNG import terminals, and storage. This allowed for new, more flexible supplies not only to access Turkey's market, but also for the country to move toward a goal to become a hub for the distribution of natural gas to the EU, especially to its southeast portion, which has limited natural gas infrastructure and limited access to non-Russian supplies. Over last decade or so, Turkey has built new pipelines from Russia (Blue Stream and Turkish Stream) and from Azerbaijan (TANAP) as well as new LNG infrastructure that can bring natural gas from the United States, Australia, Qatar, and the many more new LNG suppliers that have emerged in recent years and that will emerge in the future (e.g., in Africa).

Meanwhile, the same forces that increase Turkey's position as a potential natural gas hub weaken Russia's position as the dominant gas supplier and decrease the asymmetry in the economic relationship. The former becomes increasingly important for Russia not only as a consumer of its gas, but also as a transit

territory and potential hub.

It is also important to mention that the energy trade in general but natural gas in particular has been quite resistant to the effects of conflicts between the countries. Most significantly, after Turkey shot down the Russian jet and Russia imposed sanctions on Turkey's imports of goods and services (see, dip in trade reflected in Figure 3), Russian natural gas destined for Turkey not only did not stop flowing (Figure 4), but the volumes also remained untouched by the spat. In addition, already within a year, the countries were able to repair the relationship and go back to a high level of collaboration, even on previously thorny issues related to Syria.

Summary

Russia's natural gas exception and the relatively quick end to tensions underscore the pragmatic nature of Russia-Turkey relations as well as the ability of the countries to compartmentalize them. This compartmentalization is especially visible for trade relations and particularly for energy trade given its strategic importance. Hence, we see fewer economic conflicts emerging over the years. As large, neighboring economies, which trade in noncompeting goods, Turkey and Russia do better collaborating rather than isolating themselves from each other. They have become important partners, though there is an asymmetry to the relationship with Russia being

the dominant partner with less to lose and more to offer. That being said, the asymmetry—while still clear in trade balances—has been decreasing in recent years thanks to an increase in trade in services that is skewed toward Turkey.

In addition, energy trade, especially that in natural gas, has transformed globally with significant implications for Russia's standing not only as a dominant supplier to Europe and/or Turkey, but also for Turkey's position as one of Russia's major demand centers and transit territories for natural gas. The decrease in asymmetry in trade is likely to influence the countries' relations in general as Russia is decreasingly able to derive geopolitical benefits from supplying natural gas to markets that it has traditionally dominated are now opening to non-Russian and more flexible supplies. Difficult energy relations between Russia and Ukraine and Russia's desire to abandon Ukraine as a gas transit route are increasing the relevance of Turkey as a transit route to southeastern Europe.

Over time, the economic relationship has become more of a norm than an exception, which has often helped Moscow and Ankara re-engage after

diplomatic, military, and/or informational hiatus.¹⁰⁷ The very changes in the structure of trade as well as the importance of Turkey for Russian gas trade can create a more stable and more cooperative environment based on the idea of mutual dependence.¹⁰⁸ This increase in trade relations could lead to a higher level of trust between the two nations, which could be helpful in de-escalating any potential conflicts in the future.

107 Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines: Russian-Turkish Relations and the Persistence of Economic Development," pp. 834–859.

108 Randall Newnham, "Oil, Carrots, and Sticks: Russia's Energy Resources as a Foreign Policy Tool," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2011): pp. 134-143.



CONCLUSION

The relationship between Russia and Turkey is characterized by a complex mixture of cooperation and competition across the instruments of power. Both have been careful not to let competition escalate to conflict; pragmatism and compartmentalization of differences have been their watchwords. When attempting to predict the likely future trajectory of the relationship—a fraught endeavor even in less complex sets of ties—we need to look for areas of convergence and divergence in how their instruments of power interact.

In the diplomatic and political sphere, there is a high level of congruence and personal trust between Putin and

Erdogan, both of whom are authoritarian populists who see Western promotion of liberal democracy as a major threat to their hold on power.¹⁰⁹ Both men lead political regimes focused on security and the preservation of their nations' sovereignty, which they see as permanently under threat from the West. At the level of the international system, there is more room for competition. First, each has a historical mythology that emphasizes its great power status, and each has often been "the other" in these narratives. Next, both Moscow and Ankara are currently pursuing a "Eurasian" path, which stands in contrast to the so-called West, but, at the same time, each country defines itself as the natural leader of the Eurasian region, leaving room for competition between

109 Bechev, *Rival Power*, p. 157.

them.¹¹⁰ Whether the convergence at the levels of individual leader and political regime can create enough stability to allow Russia and Turkey to successfully manage their differences at the geopolitical level remains to be seen. So far, they have managed to do so, and the personal trust between similar men who lead similar regimes has been a major reason. A sudden change in political leadership in either country might disrupt this balance and allow their competing geopolitical visions to play a greater role in their interaction.

The information instrument of power has been the most difficult to examine in this report. The data and frameworks available for analyzing how governments deploy information and discourse are less developed than those available for analyzing other instruments. Addressing this gap should be a focus of future political science research. Nevertheless, there is enough available to make inferences about how Russia and Turkey deploy information to advance their interests and what this means for their overall relationship. First, since both are authoritarian regimes, they exercise a higher level of control over their information environments than do democratic governments. Since the media in Russia and Turkey is less



free than in advanced democracies, information in Russian and Turkish media is more likely to reflect government attitudes rather than shape them, as can be the case in advanced democracies. This characteristic endows Moscow and Ankara with an informational agility that Western governments often lack.

The Turkish shutdown of the Russian jet along the Syrian-Turkish border provides an example. Almost immediately after the incident, the rhetoric in government statements escalated quickly, and media in both countries followed suit. Each blamed the other for the incident and

¹¹⁰ Russia's aspirations are grander here. It sees itself as the leader of all of Eurasia as it defines the region, while Turkey sees itself as the leader of the region's Muslim states.



President Putin and President Erdogan attend the MAKS-2019 air show in the Moscow. (kremlin.ru)

promised grave consequences. Less than a year later, discourse between the two governments experienced another about-face, with Erdogan apologizing for the incident and Putin reciprocating by expressing his support for Erdogan in the July 2016 coup attempt. Media in both countries again followed along and began emphasizing their friendship. Will the Russian and Turkish people continue to support the narrative propagated by the two governments and their allies in the media? This question is especially important if there are future incidents, and the narrative again shifts in a negative direction, then suddenly shifts back to a

positive one. There is also the question of the personal effect of both leaders. To what extent does the current media attitude reflect the friendly relations between Putin and Erdogan? Would it change if relations between them soured?

A further possible complication in the information environment between Russia and Turkey is the role of religion. Religion is playing a larger role in the geopolitical identities of both countries, with Orthodoxy and its values becoming a major theme in how the Kremlin views the world¹¹¹ and with Ankara increasingly moving in the direction of Islamism. Currently, the move toward greater religiosity in both countries is a factor that distinguishes them from the “secular and decadent” West. However, religious enmity between the two has often increased distrust and exacerbated the adversarial nature of the relationship. Since Orthodoxy and Islam have a long history of negative rhetoric toward the other, scholars and policymakers should be on the lookout for a rise in religious zeal and religious intolerance in the official discourse. While religion may not be the cause of a rupture in the relationship, it can be used to amplify differences and stoke passions if the relationship ruptures for other reasons.

111 For an examination of the role of Orthodoxy in the Russian military, and especially the strategic nuclear forces, see, Dmitry Adamsky, *Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

Russian and Turkish deployment of the military instrument of power is the area where a rupture in Russian-Turkish relations is most possible. Even though Moscow and Ankara have found themselves on different sides in multiple conflicts recently, including Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, they have managed to prevent the inevitable incidents from escalating to a general clash. But this is not a given going forward. After all, contingencies can happen on the ground (and in the air and at sea) where military forces are operating near one another. Contingencies can play an even larger role when professional military forces are working with and through local partners and proxies, who often have different goals than their sponsors and can be more risk tolerant.

Syria and the South Caucasus are the two areas where the risk of a military clash is highest. In Syria's Idlib Province, which is controlled by a number of anti-government groups, some of which are backed by Turkey, presents the highest risk. The Syrian regime—and possibly Russia—targeted Turkish forces in Idlib in early 2020, provoking a furious Turkish response that severely damaged the ground offensive power of the Syrian Army but carefully avoided targeting Russian troops. An early March summit between Putin and Erdogan de-escalated the situation and resulted in a fragile ceasefire that still holds.

In the South Caucasus, the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan also raised military tensions between Moscow and Ankara, primarily because of the latter's overt support for Azerbaijan. Turkey had long provided rhetorical support and sold weapons to Baku, but, in this round of the conflict, there is substantial evidence that it sent fighters from Syria and probably provided targeting support for the Azeri drones that inflicted huge damage to Armenia's ground forces. Russia was forced to broker a ceasefire that acknowledged Azerbaijan's military victory by returning to it much of the territory lost in the original war of 1989-1994. Some 2,000 Russian forces now keep a fragile peace in the region. Russia and Turkey have also disagreed over Ankara's participation in the peacekeeping operation, with Turkey insisting it will deploy peacekeeping forces there and Russia responding that Turkish forces are only welcome as observers in the peacekeeping force headquarters, not as peacekeepers on the ground.

Economic interaction between Russia and Turkey has played a largely positive role and may have the capacity to act as a "shock absorber," cushioning the impact of inevitable diplomatic and military incidents. Even in times of rising diplomatic and military tension, with the accompanying escalatory rhetoric between the governments, they have been careful to preserve some key elements of



their economic interaction. As two large, neighboring states whose trade largely consists of noncompeting goods, they are well positioned for further expansion of economic collaboration. Russia has historically held the dominant position in bilateral trade, but its dominance may be eroding as Turkey becomes a rising power in trade in services and an important energy storage and transport hub. The development of a more balanced economic relationship between Moscow and Ankara could increase the capacity of the relationship to absorb shocks caused by clashes in other areas since each side would have much to lose. Still, we are careful not to overestimate the ability of the trade relationship to prevent war as the historical record offers only qualified support here.

Overall, Russia and Turkey appear poised to continue their recent trend of pragmatic cooperation and compartmentalization of their differences. Barring a sudden change in leadership in either country or a military clash that escalates too quickly for the two capitals to control, Western countries need to get used to dealing with a Turkey that remains a NATO member but cooperates with NATO's original adversary. Managing the effects of the Russia-Turkey relationship on NATO and on stability in the wider Eurasian region will require patient and nuanced policy from Western governments. Policymakers in the West should understand that both Moscow and Ankara are ever-vigilant for supposed collusion between external and internal "enemies." Both are obsessively prickly about guarding their sovereignty

against alleged interference from the West. To avoid activating fears of Western interference in Russian and Turkish internal politics, Western governments should moderate their rhetoric on these issues. This does not mean abandoning support for democracy and human rights, but it does mean taking Russian and Turkish expressions of concern for their sovereignty seriously, and not doing or saying things likely to exacerbate fears in Moscow and Ankara unless there is an important Western interest at stake.

Washington should look for a compromise with Turkey on Syria and the S-400 issue, which have been two of the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship. In Syria, the United States should acknowledge Turkey's fears about Kurdish militias along the Syrian-Turkish border, while preserving its support for the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish and Sunni Arab militia that liberated most of northern and eastern Syria from ISIS control. The United States should not allow its relationship with the SDF to rupture its relationship with Turkey, or abandon the SDF to more Turkish military attacks. A complete rupture with Turkey would be disastrous for NATO cohesion and the stability of the Black Sea region. Complete abandonment of the SDF would not only invite more fighting in northern and eastern Syria, but would

also perhaps fatally undermine the model of using local ground forces supported by U.S. airpower, special forces, and other assets in conflicts where important—but not vital—interests are at stake. This would present the United States with the options of abandoning its interests to other actors in these conflicts or deploying U.S. ground forces in a fighting role, which would make it much more difficult for Washington to extricate itself.

The S-400 issue is marked by distrust on both sides. As noted earlier, many in Turkish government circles believe the United States is using the argument about the danger that the S-400 poses to the technology behind the F-35 as a fig leaf to disguise Washington's political agenda. The real aim, they claim, is to keep Turkey under the U.S. thumb. U.S. experts, meanwhile, claim—even in private—that the technological issues of having both systems operating in Turkey are essentially insurmountable.¹¹² Given these positions, it is in the U.S. interest to explain the technological challenges to the Turkish military and look for ways to overcome them while meeting Turkey's air defense needs and keeping it in the F-35 program. This will not be easy; again, patience and nuance are required. One idea is a stringent, on-the-ground U.S. presence where Turkey's F-35s and S-400s are based to ensure the two

¹¹² Former U.S. government officials, conversation with one of the authors, February 5, 2021.

systems don't interact.¹¹³ Another is a U.S. purchase of the S-400 from Turkey and its replacement with the U.S. Patriot missile system. Washington has floated versions of this idea before, but has always insisted that Ankara give up the S-400s without compensation.¹¹⁴ A U.S. purchase of the missile system might present a way forward that would prevent Ankara from feeling coerced and allow the United States to test the S-400 against the latest Western aircraft to better understand its strengths and its weaknesses.

What the West should not do is make “driving a wedge” between Russia and Turkey a policy objective. Attempts to do this would be transparent and would likely backfire. By treating both Moscow and Ankara as objects of Western policy instead of actors in their own right, the effect would likely drive them closer together. Instead, the West should focus on positive—not negative—policy objectives. The question should be how to advance Western relationships with key states in pursuit of well-defined policy objectives, not how to damage other states' relationships with each other. The goal should be to stabilize Eurasia, not further destabilize it by setting two of its

largest states against each other. Here, the focus should be on Turkey. Although Ankara has long been an unpredictable and sometimes troublesome ally, it is still an ally. NATO states have treaty commitments to Turkey and vice versa. If NATO is to continue to be the bulwark of stability and security that it has been for over 70 years, keeping Turkey as a committed member of the Alliance is critical. Its dalliances with Russia may be exasperating but are not likely to significantly undermine the security of NATO states or the cohesion of the Alliance. In contrast, Turkey's exit from NATO or a formal alliance with Russia would certainly do so. 


¹¹³ See, Aaron Stein and Robert Hamilton, “How America's Experience With Pakistan Can Help it Deal With Turkey,” *War on the Rocks*, August 25, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/how-americas-experience-with-pakistan-can-help-it-deal-with-turkey/>, accessed March 9, 2021.

¹¹⁴ Tuvan Gumrukcu and Orhan Coskun, “Turkey says U.S. offering Patriot missiles if S-400 not operated,” *Reuters*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa-idUSKBN20X118>, accessed March 9, 2021.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Colonel (Retired) Robert E. Hamilton, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Eurasian Studies at the U.S. Army War College and a Black Sea Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. In a 30-year career in the U.S. Army, spent primarily as a Eurasian Foreign Area Officer, he served overseas in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Germany, Belarus, Qatar, Afghanistan, the Republic of Georgia, Pakistan and Kuwait. He is the author of numerous articles and monographs on conflict and security issues, focusing principally on the former Soviet Union and the Balkans. He is a graduate of the German Armed Forces Staff College and the U.S. Army War College and holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the United States Military Academy, a Master's Degree in Contemporary Russian Studies and a Ph.D. in Political Science, both from the University of Virginia.

 @bobham88



Anna Mikulska, Ph.D., is a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and nonresident fellow in energy studies at the Baker Institute. She has written on the interplay between energy markets and policy and has a particular interest in U.S. and European energy policy. She also teaches graduate-level seminars on energy policy and geopolitics of energy at the University of Pennsylvania as a senior fellow for the Kleinman Center for Energy Policy. Mikulska holds a law degree from Adam Mickiewicz University, a master's degree in international relations from the University of Windsor in Canada, and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Houston.

 @anna_b_mikulska

FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



The Foreign Policy Research Institute is dedicated to producing the highest quality scholarship and nonpartisan policy analysis focused on crucial foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. We educate those who make and influence policy, as well as the public at large, through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

Foreign Policy Research Institute

1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610
Philadelphia, PA 19102

215-732-3774 www.fpri.org

Follow us @FPRI