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Russia Recalibrates Its Aims in Strategic Partnership with Turkey

Pavel K. Baev

**Peace Research Institute Oslo, PRIO
The Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE)
Brookings Institution
The French International Affairs Institute (IFRI)**

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The format and content of strategic partnership between Russia and Turkey is significantly different from the patterns of ties that Moscow cultivates with other partners, from China and India to Iran and North Korea. The unique character of this relationship was shaped by the two leaders – Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan – since the start of their respective “eras” in the early 2000s and was evolving unsteadily for two decades, acquiring ambivalent new features since Russia’s invasion into Ukraine in February 2022.¹ In the course of the 37 months (and counting) long war, Turkey has performed a complex balancing political act vis-à-vis Russia, while Moscow has sought to exploit available opportunities for advancing various war-centered aims, so that Turkey is the only NATO member-state not included in Russian long list of “hostile states”.² This analysis examines the shifts in these aims and the effectiveness of actions undertaken by Russia for achieving those, seeking to take a measure of the range of options available for Moscow in the near future.

Economic cooperation distorted by sanctions

The solid foundation of economic ties ensured stability of political partnership, which recovered after multiple crises, such as the bitter quarrel caused by the Turkish intercept of a Russian Su-24M bomber in November 2015. The variety of these ties goes from the export of Turkish food products to millions of Russian tourists and to the Akkuyu nuclear power plant constructed by the Rosatom corporation, with the first reactor due to become operational in 2025, after many delays.³ The main dimension of economic interactions, however, is formed by Russian export of oil and natural gas, and this long-developed connection has acquired new importance in the context of profound alteration in the European energy market.

Ankara has long cherished the ambition of becoming a “gas hub” that would channel the energy flows from the Caspian area and the Eastern Mediterranean toward South-Eastern Europe, but this vision was in conflict with the reality of irreducible dependency upon the supplies from Russia. The drastic reduction of European import of Russian gas has turned this dependency into a position of privileged customer as the revenue-starved Gazprom is desperate to sell.⁴ Besides gaining discounts on gas supplies, Turkey has also found nice profits on importing Russian oil, which is banned from Europe and is transported by a fleet of “shadow tankers”.⁵ There is no shortage of customers in the EU who are eager to buy Russian oil products, particularly diesel, using Turkish intermediaries for cover-up.⁶ Preserving and protecting this partly legitimate and partly clandestine “corridor” for energy export is not just an economic interest but in fact a major Russian foreign policy goal focused on Turkey.

Many smaller channels for circumventing particular sanctions – from smuggling spare parts to Mercedes cars and Airbus planes to providing safe harbor for yachts of grounded oligarchs – have emerged and are reappearing after every official effort at shutting them down. Russian import of nitrocellulose, a key ingredient for producing artillery ammunition, has attracted particular attention of sanctions-watchers, but the supply chains keep reconnecting with the insatiable demand.⁷ Moscow now aims for more than just finding new ways of breaching the sanctions regime and aspires for the role of a trail-blazer in changing the whole environment of international trade, undermining the rules enforced by Western institutions and defying the financial regulations based on the centrality of US dollar. Turkey is perceived as a key accomplice in achieving this ambition.

Politics is personal

The inescapable basic fact in Russian political designs toward Turkey is that this strategic partner is a member-state of NATO, and as such belongs to the hostile coalition with which Russia has opted to engage in irreconcilable confrontation. Moscow seeks to downplay this fact, and the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept mentions Turkey in the section on relations with the Islamic world, rather than the European region or the US and “other Anglo-Saxon states”.⁸ This ambiguity is intended to provide camouflage for the attempts to exploit ties



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with Turkey for fostering disagreements and deepening divisions in NATO, and this traditional aim has gained new urgency in the context of aggression against Ukraine.

The deal on exporting to Turkey the S-400 surface-to-air missile system, made in 2016 as a part of “reconciliation” after the bitter quarrel in late 2015, was instrumental for this aim, and the consequences are yet to be sorted out.⁹ Moscow expected Turkey to oppose a firm NATO stance on supporting Ukraine, but Ankara didn’t perform its “balancing act” in the strategy-making in the Alliance and played constructive role in both the 2023 Vilnius summit and the 2024 Washington summit, never expressing any reservation against Ukraine’s desire to join NATO. The only issue actually was about Sweden’s accession to NATO, but hopes in Moscow for a protracted deadlock were disappointed.¹⁰

This pronounced “Atlanticism” in Turkey’s policy has inevitably affected the particular personal relations between Putin and Erdogan cultivated over many years and rehabilitated after the spat in November 2015.¹¹ Erdogan sought to utilize this relationship for influencing Russia’s position on ending the war in Ukraine, but Putin never reciprocated.¹² He dodged the invitation to pay a visit to Ankara in 2024, and the bilateral meeting on the fringes of the pompous October 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan was neither friendly nor productive.¹³ Putin called Erdogan after that meeting, returning the earlier call made for birthday congratulations, but scant detail were released, and the difference with the year 2021, when the two leaders had ten phone conversations and a meeting in Sochi, is rather apparent.¹⁴

Strong performance of the opposition at the regional elections in Turkey in March 2024 was interpreted by many Moscow experts as a sign of weakening of Erdogan’s grasp on power.¹⁵ No signs of Russian attempts at interfering in these elections were reported, while some interference was suspected in the more consequential presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023.¹⁶ Russia refrained from expressing any position on the explosion of street protests in Istanbul after the arrest of mayor Ekrem Imamogly, and the official readout of the phone conversation between the two leaders didn’t mention them at all.¹⁷ Putin has apparently concluded that cultivation of “friendship” with Erdogan, who is so obviously keen to upgrade ties with USA, yields too few political dividends.



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The Ukrainian conundrum

Erdogan may think that he is performing a balancing act in the protracted Ukraine war, but from the Russian perspective, he is standing on the enemy side of the proverbial fence, rather than sitting on it. The main evidence of this choice, besides supporting all NATO decisions on sustaining support “for as long as it takes”, is the expanding military-technical cooperation, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed the irritation with these ties in no uncertain terms.¹⁸ Opportunities for circumventing Western sanctions via Turkey may be much appreciated and eagerly exploited by Moscow, but the nearly-completed construction of an industrial facility near Kyiv for building modern Bayraktar-class long-distance drones by the Baykar company (widely perceived as Erdogan’s family business) is a project of an entirely different significance.¹⁹

Putin’s resolute rejection in July 2023 of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which Erdogan counted (and still does) as a major foreign policy achievement, was intended as a demonstration of Russian dominance over the maritime interface between Turkey and Ukraine.²⁰ In fact, however, a pattern of deconflicting regarding the commercial shipping in the Black Sea has been gradually established, so that Ukrainian naval drones target only Russian naval assets, while the Black Sea Fleet refrains from interceptions of the grain ships in international waters. This pattern is far from solid, so that oil tankers departing from Novorossiysk are perfectly safe without any convoys, but ships in the Odesa port have been targeted multiple times.²¹ The US proposal for negotiating a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea appeared an easy option to negotiate in March 2025, but Russia still put forward conditions that were clearly unfeasible – and Turkey had no part in the talks in Saudi Arabia.²² Moscow opted to ignore the deployment of the Mine Countermeasures Task Group, comprised of minesweepers from Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, presuming it to be a pro-forma enterprise with no real task.²³

This uncharacteristic neglect is determined by the irreplaceable losses of assets and capabilities by the Black Sea Fleet, which is compelled to retreat to the Novorossiysk base and cannot perform any combat missions in the western part of the theatre.²⁴ This new strategic reality is so incompatible with the vision of Russia’s command over the adjacent seas and projection of power by the “blue water” navy that the High Command in Moscow

prefers to bracket it out.²⁵ Nikolai Patrushev, former secretary of the Security Council and the chairman of the presidential Maritime Commission, spelled out these denials asserting that the Black Sea Fleet was fully operational and capable of countering any threats from Western encroachments into the theatre.²⁶ Russian strategic guidelines cannot take into account the profound shift of naval balance in the Black Sea, where Turkey has become and is set to remain a predominant maritime power.

Multi-regional discord

Ukraine is set to remain the center of gravity in Russia-Turkey interactions, but they are spread over many regions – and are more often in conflict than in harmony. Syria has been a major focus of these interactions since the launch of Russian military intervention in September 2015, and presently Moscow is struggling to preserve its positions eroded by the acute shortage of resources.²⁷ The main format of managing the conflict of interest with Turkey was the Astana process, which is effectively moribund, so that Moscow is reduced to monitoring Turkish pressure on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in Rojava and manipulation of the rebels in the Idlib province.²⁸ Russia had hoped that the status quo remained acceptable for Ankara, but the swift rebel offensive and the capture of Damascus in late November 2024 shattered those expectations. The vulnerability of Russian military presence was suddenly exposed, and Moscow has few doubts that it is Ankara that has found an opportune moment to exploit this vulnerability by unleashing its proxies.²⁹ Russia has no leverage to influence the complex relations between Turkey and Iran, which has suffered many setbacks in the region since the explosion of the Gaza war in October 2023, and the collapse of the al-Assad regime has left it with no useful proxies in Syria, where Moscow still clings to the remnants of its military presence.³⁰

Another region where Russia is worried about the erosion of its traditional dominance and uneasy about Turkey's growing influence is the South Caucasus. It was the explosion of the long-frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in September 2020 that revealed to Moscow the new strength of Erdogan's alliance with Ilham Aliyev's regime, and the deployment of a peacekeeping force in Nagorno Karabakh was intended to counter-balance

this connection – until the new spasm this conflict in September 2023 compelled the withdrawal of Russian troops.³¹ Armenia has good reasons to feel betrayed by Moscow and seeks to normalize relations with Turkey effectively curtailing its traditional strategic alliance with Russia.³² The consolidation of illiberal regime in Georgia may be seen in the Kremlin as a useful development that can check the trend of erosion of its positions in the Caucasus, but anti-Russian sentiments run very deep in the Georgian polity, so it is Turkey that can find new opportunities for expanding its reach in the region.³³ Reflections on the geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus exacerbate concerns in Moscow about the spread of Turkish influence in Central Asia, and these worries are shared by China, which keeps building its investments in this neighbourhood – and lacks means to ensure them against security risks.³⁴

The conflict where Russian and Turkish interests came into a direct clash is Libya, as Marshal Khalifa Haftar's spring 2019 offensive on Tripoli spearheaded by the Wagner Group was defeated by motley forces of the Government of National Accord supported by Turkey.³⁵ Hostilities have mostly ceased, but the country remains divided, and Russia's ability to sustain its engagement is in doubt – and closely monitored by Ankara.³⁶ While Africa has become one of the key priorities in Russian foreign policy, the resource base for projecting influence has significantly shrunk (in contrast to Turkey's better-targeted policy), and the sequence of setbacks experienced by the Africa Corps (formed from the remnants of the Wagner Group) illuminates this underfunded ambition.

Conclusions

Russia's current intentions and longer-term aims in developing the strategic partnership with Turkey are constantly revised and remain incoherent. The consequences of the new dependency upon exporting hydrocarbons and circumventing sanctions on import are as difficult to internalize for the Kremlin as is the fact of Turkey's military superiority on the Black Sea maritime theatre. The imperative to expand legitimate as well as clandestine economic ties with Turkey clashes with the assumption of Ankara's firm commitment to NATO presumed strategy on inflicting Russia a strategic defeat in the Ukraine war. Personal connections between Putin and Erdogan, which used to be a major compensator of tensions

caused by regional conflicts and a driver of upgrading the partnership, have visibly slackened due to mutual irritation.

These frictions generate opportunities for the EU and, particularly, for the US to target and undermine those aspect of Russia-Turkey strategic partnership that contribute to Moscow's capacity to sustain the long war of attrition. Closing the loopholes in the sanctions regime and punishing the violations is the most obvious course of action, and encouraging Turkey's military-technical cooperation with Ukraine is also a useful proposition. Both Moscow and Ankara presently cherish hopes for positive prospects of relations with the assertive but mercurial Trump administration, albeit very different ones. Erdogan expects the disappearance of the agenda of democracy promotion and softening of criticism for violations of human rights, as well as a closure on the issue of purchase of the S-400 missile system. Putin counts on the growth of discord in the Western coalition and curtailing of aid to Ukraine, and envisages escalation of confrontation between USA and China, which would increase his value in Beijing as a reliable ally.

In the new US plans for ending the war in Ukraine, Turkey may feature as an important supporting asset, and Erdogan obviously hopes for the role of a key mediator. Moscow, however, sticks to its maximalist demands and perceives a ceasefire as a negative option, which would allow Ukraine to rebuild its army and rehabilitate the economic base for a new surge of hostilities. Turkey, as a NATO member-state with newly strengthened ties with USA, cannot be acceptable for Moscow as a neutral mediator, and the experience of the failed talks in March 2022 and the broken "grain deal" in 2023 reinforces the preference for direct deal-making with the Trump administration and a second channel in the UAE. A probable failure of the US-led efforts at terminating the war might lead to a further erosion of the Russia-Turkey partnership and even, particularly if the new regime Syria will enforce the withdrawal of Russian bases in Khmeimim and Tartus, to a new low in the ambiguous relations.

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