

Turkey and Russia: Regional Rivals

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Brief Analysis

Russia and Turkey are partners as well as rivals. Bilateral trade (official and unofficial) amounts to \$14 billion. Turkey purchases major quantities of natural gas from Russia. There are 30,000 Turkish workers and some \$6 billion invested by the Turkish construction sector in Russia. There is also considerable tourism in both directions.

The Cold War provided a comfortable framework for bilateral relations, which were conducted largely by the respective alliances, the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Direct bilateral ties were limited to technical matters; for a time, the Soviet Union provided generous economic and technical assistance. The end of the cold war and the emergence of the post-Soviet Newly Independent States (NIS) changed the parameters of this relationship, leading Moscow and Ankara to deal more directly with one other. Although no longer sharing a border, Turkey and Russia remain neighbors, and their interdependence is assured by common, sometimes clashing, geopolitical interests, which is the source of their rivalry. These interests are political and economic relations with the NIS and free access to the Black Sea.

The NIS and Russian-Turkish Relations

Turkey's main goal with the NIS is normal economic relations. But Turkish diplomacy toward-and rhetoric about-the NIS in the early 1990's was very forceful. Turks were excited by the prospect of bonding with their newly liberated Turkic and Muslim "brothers" in Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and even the Russian Federation. Some Turkish circles thought the NIS could become a vehicle for larger Turkish/Turkic influence in the world. Russia viewed this approach as a challenge both to its position in the former Soviet Union-"the near abroad"-and to the Russian Federation itself, which is in effect a federation of Russian and Turkic peoples.

NATO's Impact on Russian-Turkish Relations

A major reason that Moscow sees Turkey as threatening is that Russia's power has declined in the post-Cold War world. Meanwhile, NATO expansion has increased Russia's sense of vulnerability, from the south as well as the west. The Black Sea fleet has been divided with Ukraine and no longer serves as an effective instrument of Russian power. NATO is extremely active in the Black Sea, holding exercises with neighboring NATO and non-NATO countries, which upsets Russia. Yet, the Russian media, and sometimes Russian officials, constantly talk about a "Turkish threat," rather than a NATO threat. The Russian Black Sea fleet commander frequently refers to Turkey's 2-to-1 advantage in Black Sea vessels. All of this is odd. By Turkish standards, Russia remains very powerful, and Turkey has no aggressive intentions toward Russia. For its part, Turkish perceptions are strongly affected by history. The Ottoman Empire fought thirteen wars with Czarist Russia and lost eleven of them. Turks are skeptical that today's weakened Russia will permanently accept the status quo. Expansionist desires won't die easily in Russia, as the Zhirinovskiy phenomenon suggests. Thus, current Russian troop deployments in neighboring Armenia and Georgia are a legitimate cause of concern for Turkey.

The Conflicts

There are five main points of contention in Russian-Turkish relations:

- **Caspian Sea Energy Routes:** If both sides truly accept the need for multiple routes-some traversing Russia, some not-this issue will be defused.
- **The Straits:** This is the most important issue from Turkey's perspective. The Straits are historically crucial to Turkish security; moreover, Turkey objects to Russian proposals that Caspian Sea oil be shipped through the Straits, since Istanbul's ten million-plus population would be vulnerable to accidents from the increased tanker traffic. Reflecting its environmental concerns, Turkey instituted a new Traffic Separation Scheme in July 1994, which has dramatically decreased the annual accident rate in the Straits from ten to two. Moscow claims this Turkish unilateral action contravenes the 1936 Montreux Convention; Russia seemingly refuses to acknowledge that the emergence of super-tankers, undreamt of in 1936, has necessitated new approaches that make the Straits safer for Istanbulites.
- **Chechen/Kurdish Separatism:** Moscow suspects Turkey of aiding Chechen separatism, and Ankara suspects Russia of backing Kurdish separatism in Turkey. In reality, both the Chechen and Kurdish movements are indigenous expressions of nationalism, mobilized by their own internal dynamics.
- **Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty:** This 1991 treaty limited Russia's troop presence in its southern flank, near Turkey. A 1996 modification, to which Turkey reluctantly agreed, eased these restrictions, giving Russia more military flexibility. Now a new CFE treaty is being negotiated, and Moscow seeks to eliminate all its southern flank restrictions. Turkey would see any further modification of the terms of the 1996 agreement as a major security threat.
- **Cyprus:** Russia's sale of S-300 anti-air missiles to the Greek Cypriots, due for delivery next year, has already harmed bilateral ties. This weapon will give Greek Cypriots the ability to hit Turkish aircraft flying over the Turkish mainland. Turks believe Russian press analyses that Moscow is trying to establish a strategic post on Cyprus in response to NATO expansion.

Helpful Role for the U.S.

There are three ways in which the United States could help ease tensions between Russia and Turkey. Washington should try to make each side understand the other's security perceptions; emphasize to each that regional cooperation should take precedence over bilateral competition; and continue to support the use of multiple export routes for Caspian Sea oil.

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Contrary to Turkish perceptions, Russian diplomacy in the region is motivated by strictly pragmatic, i.e., economic, considerations. Although Russia feels more vulnerable since the collapse of the Soviet Union, few Russians harbor imperialistic desires. For example, Russian diplomatic efforts with Ukraine, Belarus, and Central Asia are not done with domination in mind. Rather, Russia's valuable resources depend on pipelines passing through these areas, so Russian leaders must try to secure these passages. This should not be viewed as rivalry with Turkey but as standard diplomatic work.

Russia doesn't exaggerate the Turkish threat, but it is concerned about excessive military activities in the Black Sea, which some Russian nationalists have taken scornfully to calling a "NATO lake." Moscow also wonders why Turkey,

alone among NATO states, is increasing its military expenditures. Also, it is difficult to understand why Turks talk about having "brothers" among Muslims in the former Soviet Union, including in Russia itself, particularly when Russia is not concerned about its "Slavic brothers." Having played the role of "big brother" for long enough, Russia prefers not to have anymore "brothers."

Turkey has no reason to fear Russia; the charge of resurgent Russian imperialism is ridiculous. Russia has very few troops in the Caucasus, and those are merely involved in joint border patrols with the host nation in the framework of agreements of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which links most states of the former Soviet Union. Russia voluntarily withdrew from the Central Asian states, even though they weren't really asking for independence. Even preservation of cultural ties is a problem for Russia. In several of the new republics, Turkish schools outnumber Russian schools. In many cases, Russia lacks funds even to provide for the educational and cultural needs of the Russian minorities in the NIS states.

Russia's S-300 sale to Cyprus reflects only economic, not strategic, considerations. It is a straight-cash deal; no loans or credits are involved. In fact, Russia sees this as an important breakthrough sale for a weapon it hopes to market elsewhere in the Middle East.

Turkey and Russia have no seriously conflicting interests. There is a good compromise solution to every problem—for example, the multiple-pipeline approach to resolving conflicts over Caspian Sea oil. Bilateral tension results from the absence of real dialogue. In that regard, the U.S. can play a constructive role in bringing the two nations closer. Ultimately, Russian-Turkish mutual economic interests will overcome the misperceptions that now mar bilateral relations.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Hillary Ebenstein.

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