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PolicyWatch 2855

Is Turkey's Rapprochement with Iran and Russia Sustainable?

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Aug 30, 2017

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Brief Analysis

A lasting Turkish shift toward Tehran and Moscow would require a perfect storm, but anti-U.S. sentiments in the country offer reason for concern.

Recent news stories suggesting that Ankara, Tehran, and Moscow are agreeing to cooperate in Syria's northern Idlib province and to bury the hatchet in Syria's civil war have brought to the foreground a key question: can Turkey become good friends, or even allies, with Iran and Russia in Syria and beyond? History suggests that any "handshake" between Ankara and its two neighbors will be difficult to sustain -- unless a rupture occurs in Turkey-NATO ties.

How the Turks View Their Neighbors

Turkey has a dozen neighbors, distributed in groups of three, in the Middle East (Iran, Iraq, and Syria), the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), Europe (Cyprus, Greece, and Bulgaria), and maritime neighbors across the Black Sea (Russia, Romania, and Ukraine) whose access to international waters goes through the Turkish Straits. Ankara's relations with these neighbors help explain its current orientation:

Ignoring the larger lot. During six centuries of Ottoman rule (1299-1923), the Turks defeated and ruled over all their neighbors, with the exception of Russia and Iran. This resilience elevates the two populous countries in contemporary Turkish views and also in the Turkish foreign policy *weltanschauung*.

Whereas Ankara can be patronizing in its foreign policy toward its other neighbors, dismissing their concerns and

even interfering in their internal affairs -- as has been the case in Iraq, Bulgaria, and Syria recently -- historically speaking, Turkey neither confronts nor ignores the Russians or the Iranians.

...but fearing the Russians. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia not only evaded conquest by the Ottomans but defeated them numerous times, often instigating such wars. Furthermore, Russian policies contributed in many ways to the decline of the Ottoman Empire from the nineteenth century onward. As a result of the wars, Russia took vast, and often solidly Turkish and Muslim, territories around the Black Sea from the Ottomans, including the Crimean Khanate (including what is now southern Russia and Ukraine) and large parts of the northern and southern Caucasus. In the Balkans, the Russian czars supported nationalist movements among the Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Romanians, helping them split away from the Ottoman Empire and eventually leading to near complete Ottoman withdrawal from Europe.

All this explains Turkey's deep-rooted historical fear of Russia -- and the speed with which Ankara pivoted to become a NATO member at the beginning of the Cold War, following Joseph Stalin's 1946 demand for territory from Turkey. Since Turkey's accession to the alliance in 1952, NATO has been the bedrock of Turkish security against Russia.

The fear of Russia also prevails in Turkey for personal, historic reasons. When the czars captured Ottoman territory, they would often ethnically cleanse the Turkish and Muslim inhabitants, thereby forcing the survivors to flee to Turkey over several decades. In the nineteenth century, for instance, when the Russians took over the northern Caucasus region from the Ottomans, they expelled the native Circassian population -- around one million people -- to lands still under Ottoman control. At the time, the Turkish Muslim population of modern Turkey was around ten million. Many other Turkish and Muslim groups, such as Chechens from the northern Caucasus and Tatars from Crimea, were forcibly driven to the Ottoman Empire by Russia. Turkish citizens who descend from those expelled by the Russians form a large constituency, adding to the Turks' historic trauma and resulting fear of -- and animosity toward -- Russia.

...and taking the Iranians seriously. Historically speaking, Turkish ties with Iran have differed substantially from Turkey-Russia ties. The Ottoman and Persian Empires became neighbors in the fifteenth century, at which point they started to push against each other for control of what is now eastern Turkey and western Iran. After fighting 166 years of debilitating and inconclusive wars (between 1473 and 1639), and ending up with bankrupt treasuries -- the seventeenth-century version of mutually assured destruction -- the Turks and Iranians settled on historic power parity, agreeing to avoid future conflict at any cost.

This power parity still guides Ankara's ties with Tehran. Accordingly, with the exception of some wars across Iraq in the nineteenth century between the Ottomans and the Qajar Dynasty and twentieth-century land swaps, the Turkey-Iran border has been the most stable in the Middle East, running quite close to its original 1639 contours.

Conclusions

As the previous discussion shows, Ankara's foreign policy toward Moscow and Tehran has been driven by fear and caution, respectively. The Russians hold the inverse position, viewing Turkey as a "small, irritating" neighbor that has often, and "rightfully," been at the receiving end of Russia's might and punishment. Simply put, Moscow looks down on Ankara. Accordingly, Russia regards Turkish policies in Syria, where Ankara has been trying to oust the Moscow-backed Assad regime, with contempt, and will do everything to ensure Turkey does not emerge a winner from the Syrian civil war. Russian president Vladimir Putin's ultimate goal in Syria is to humiliate Ankara and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan in order to remind the Turks why they should continue to fear the Russians. This explains, among other Russian policies, why Moscow has established a relationship with the Syria-based Kurdish Peoples Defense Units (YPG), a group closely aligned with the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party

(PKK), against which Ankara has fought over the last several years.

While Washington, too, has formed a relationship with the YPG against the Islamic State, U.S. cooperation with the Kurdish group is strictly limited to areas of Syria, such as Raqqa, with an IS presence. On the other hand, and contrary to U.S. policy, Russian cooperation with the YPG takes place in areas of Syria where the Islamic State is not present, such as the YPG-controlled Afrin enclave, which is flanked by Turkey to the west and north and by Turkey-backed rebels to the east and south. Russia's engagement with the YPG is clearly anti-Turkish. Whatever temporary arrangements it reaches with Turkey in Syria, in the long term Moscow will use its many allies and proxies there to undermine Ankara's interests.

While Iran has not adopted an openly hostile stance toward Turkey in Syria, Tehran views Ankara's support to rebels fighting the Iran-backed regime as a violation of the two countries' historic power parity accord. Indeed, the support given by each side to opposing proxy forces in Syria renders this instance the closest in recent memory to outright conflict between Ankara and Tehran. At this stage, Tehran, whose fortunes and allies are ascendant in Syria, will attempt to restore its historic power parity with Ankara -- on its own terms. From Iran's perspective, however, such a restoration would necessitate a complete cessation of Turkish support to anti-Assad rebels. In this context, every step Iran takes in Syria with respect to Turkey -- including the aforementioned "handshake" over Idlib province -- serves the broader Iranian goal of reestablishing power parity, wherein Turkey recognizes Iranian (and, even more overtly, Russian) control over Syria.

The only scenario in which Turkey would shift its historic view of Russia and Iran involves a rupture with NATO. At the moment, such a far-fetched possibility would require a perfect storm. Still, since taking power in Ankara in 2002, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has mainstreamed anti-Americanism. At the same time, U.S. policies in Iraq and Syria, including cooperation with the YPG, have led to a strong anti-American backlash in Turkey that extends beyond the AKP's core Islamist constituencies. Unpredictable incidents in Syria, such as friendly fire between Turkish and U.S. troops or their proxies, or PKK use against Turkey of U.S. arms somehow acquired from the PYD, could precipitate a bilateral crisis. A potentially insurmountable anti-American and anti-NATO furor could ensue, eventually even forcing Ankara to make the historic choice to adopt a more benign view of both Iran and Russia.

Soner Cagaptay, the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, is the author of [The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey](#). ❖



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