

Improving Turkish-Russian Relations: Turkey's New Foreign Policy and Its Implications for the United States

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Jan 12, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan finished his three-day visit to Moscow today. This trip follows Russian president Vladimir Putin's December 2004 Turkey trip, the first by a Russian head of state since Russia and the Ottoman Empire established relations in the fifteenth century -- excluding a 1972 sojourn by Nikolai Podgorny, the titular head of state of the former Soviet Union. Although Erdogan's visit fell short of finalizing a number of pipeline construction and gas export deals, twin Putin-Erdogan visits herald a new era of improved Turkish-Russian relations. What is the background of this development, and what are its implications for the U.S.?

Background: Conflictual Relations

During the Cold War and in the 1990s, Turkish-Russian relations were characterized by tension. Throughout the Cold War, Turkey, which was on NATO's southern flank against the Soviet Union, was suspicious of Moscow, which asked for control of the Turkish Straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles) in 1946. In the early 1990s, as the Soviet Union fell apart, Turkey acted to fill the power vacuum in Central Asia and the Caucasus by developing close ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan. Russia, on the other hand, supported Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict against Azerbaijan while backing separatist movements in Georgia. These policies put the two countries at odds. Along the same pattern, Turkey's sympathy for Chechen rebels in the 1990s coincided with Russia becoming a safe haven for the Kurdish terrorist group the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Cooperation in the Present Decade: Booming Economic Ties

Over the last few years, however, Russia and Turkey have shifted their mutual foreign policy, paving the way to the twin visits. Booming trade is a sign of improved relations between the two countries. For the first eleven months of 2004, Russian-Turkish trade was worth \$9.4 billion, 50 percent more than in 2003.

Gas and oil deals: Natural gas constitutes around 68 percent of Russian exports to Turkey, which imports 70 percent of its gas from Russia and is the second largest consumer of Russian gas after Germany. In December 1997, Turkey and Russia signed an agreement establishing the Blue Stream Pipeline to operate between the two countries and transfer 565 billion cubic feet per year of Russian natural gas. The Blue Stream pipeline started operating in 2003; however, a disagreement between the two countries about the exact price of gas remains.

Pillars of the New Turkish-Russian Relationship: the View from Ankara

During Putin's visit to Turkey, Ankara and Moscow signed six agreements for cooperation in the defense and energy industries. In addition, the two countries issued a declaration for "deepening friendship and multidimensional partnership." From Ankara's perspective, together with the personal relationship between Erdogan and Putin, the following factors are facilitating better relations with Russia.

North-south axis on the energy corridor: With the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which will start operating this year, Turkey is now a key country on the east-west axis of the energy corridor between Central Asia and the Mediterranean. Ankara now aspires to become a player on the north-south energy axis from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. A major Turkish concern regarding the transfer of oil from the Black Sea is the bottleneck in the Bosphorus, a narrow zigzagging waterway half a mile wide. Increased tanker traffic through the Bosphorus may lead to catastrophic accidents and environmental disasters for downtown Istanbul on this waterway. Accordingly, the following pipelines bypassing the Bosphorus are now being discussed:

- Trans-Thrace pipeline -- would transfer oil from Kiyikoy, on the Black Sea coast of Turkish Thrace, to Kibrikbaba on the Saros Gulf in the northern Aegean. The pipeline, with the ability to transport 60 million tons per year, would be approximately 193 kilometers long. Together with loading facilities it would cost around \$900 million. Russia supports this project despite concerns from Turkey over potential tanker traffic in the environmentally sensitive Saros Gulf.
- Samsun-Kirikkale-Ceyhan pipeline -- would transfer Russian oil across Turkey, from Samsun on the Black Sea coast to Yumurtalik (Ceyhan) on the Mediterranean. The project, favored by Ankara, would cost an estimated \$1 billion and would be 510 kilometers long.

Business lobbies' interest in Russia: Many business groups benefiting from booming bilateral trade, including those in the construction, retail, banking, telecommunications, food and beverage, glass, and machinery industries are pushing for stronger political ties with Moscow -- with more than 600 businessmen accompanying Erdogan -- to increase their access to the Russian market, and take advantage of the awaiting energy deals.

Cooperation in the War on Terror in Chechnya: In the 1990s, Russia often accused Ankara of ignoring the activities of Chechen activists who used Turkey, home to large immigrant communities from the north Caucasus, including Chechnya, as a safe haven. In a gesture before Putin's visit, the Istanbul police detained twelve people believed to be Chechen militants. In return, Russia is now examining Turkish demands to put the PKK on its list of terrorist groups.

Concrete Progress?

Despite the latest developments, including closer ties on Black Sea security issues (See [PolicyWatch no. 924 \(templateC05.php?CID=2201\)](#)) and the announcement that the two countries will conduct joint naval exercises in the Black Sea this year -- the litmus test of the improved relationship will be the answers to the following questions: Will Turkey and Russia build genuine cooperation in the war on terror? Will Putin's rhetoric espousing the Turkish position in Cyprus turn into actual support? Less likely, will Ankara switch to Russian arms in place of Western and U.S. arms? On the energy front, will the two countries finally agree on the price of Blue Stream gas, and will Russia opt for an east-west trans-Balkan pipeline, bypassing the Bosphorus and pipelines in Turkey?

Improved Ties with Russia: Ankara's New Foreign Policy

There would need to be concrete foreign policy steps before the improvement in Turkish-Russian relations constituted a full-fledged rapprochement. The following factors behind this development are, nevertheless, important as the leitmotifs of current Turkish foreign policy:

- "Neighborhood policy": Since 1999, when the European Union (EU) declared Turkey's candidacy for membership,

Ankara has strived to establish better relations with its neighbors based on the EU notion of a "neighborhood policy." After significantly improving ties with Syria, Iran (see [PolicyWatch no. 825 \(templateC05.php?CID=1703\)](#)), and Greece -- with which it had mostly poor relations in the 1990s -- Ankara is now intent on developing good ties with Russia.

- Foreign policy portfolio diversification: Most circles in Ankara believe that unlike the EU or the United States, Russia treats Turkey as an equal partner. They see enhanced relations with Russia as a counterweight to ties with the EU and the United States, should Ankara run into problems with Washington with regard to the war in Iraq or with Brussels during EU accession talks.
- "Strategic depth": Based on the "strategic depth" concept favored by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, which states that Turkey will become more powerful only if it develops better relations with its non-Western neighbors (including Iran, Syria, and Russia), Ankara sees improved ties with Russia in its interest.

Implications for the United States

As Washington becomes more engaged in Turkey's Middle Eastern and Eurasian neighborhoods, Turkey seems increasingly eager to diversify its foreign policy portfolio while acting independently from the United States. This orientation is likely to persist so long as the Iraq issue separates Ankara and Washington, a factor that leads Turkey to look for ways of complementing its relationship with the United States.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. Nazli Gencsoy, a Dr. Marcia Robbins-Wilf young scholar, is a research assistant at the Institute. ❖

Policy #942

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)