



Relationship between Turkey and Russia: 'Political Dualism'

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Political scientist Igor Torbakov aptly described the present juncture in the Turkish-Russian relations as 'political dualism' meaning that they contain elements of both cooperation and rivalry.¹ The phase of cooperation between the two countries began after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Tsarist Empire. During the monarchical times, both the empires tried to dominate the respective regions in Europe and Asia² and also influence the neighbouring countries.

With the collapse of the empires and the emergence of the Soviet Union under Vladimir Lenin and modern Turkey founded by the Turkish General Kemal Mustaffa (later Attaturk), relations between Turkey and Russia became cordial. However, growing ambitions of both the countries and also the complexities of the two World Wars and the Cold War, saw the re-emergence of cracks in the relationship. The complexity of the relationship was further compounded by Russia's position in the Cyprus conflict, a sensitive issue to Turkey. As for Russia, Turkey's membership in NATO, along with disagreements over the Caucasus and Turkey's interest in Central Asia, became a bone of contention between the two countries. The beneficiaries of this strained relationship between Turkey and Russia were the US and Europe. The rivalry between Turkey and Russia was one of the major catalysts for the US to imprint its power in West Asia and the Mediterranean region.

Construction of the Relationship

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the visit of the then Turkish Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel to Russia in 1992, serious efforts were made to mend the relationship between the two countries. Prime Minister Demirel initiated “Treaty on the Principles of Relations between the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation” in 1992, which is the foundation of the new era of Turkish-Russian relations. It sets forth the principles of respect for political independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, equality of rights and mutual interests, refraining from using force and threat to use force in solving problems.³ This trend was carried forward by Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin since 2000. In 2004, both the countries signed “Joint Declaration on the Intensification of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership” that deepened their ties by signing a raft of agreements on various sectors such as gas and oil pipelines and nuclear power plants. Turkey and Russia, through the signing of the partnership, also sought closer security cooperation in the Caucasus. In 2010, both the countries further signed agreements on trade, agriculture, customs, transportation, industry and tourism,⁴ further deepening their relationship.

With the architecture of a new world order of multipolarity, both the countries have moved beyond their past and have stepped into a constructive relationship. However, the Syrian crisis and the recent Ukrainian crisis have become a litmus test for the burgeoning relationship between Turkey and Russia. Will these two countries allow the crises to affect their relationship or will they continue to strengthen their bilateral relations?

The relationship between Turkey and Russia has been built on pragmatism, astuteness as well as on the grievances both the countries felt towards the West. Whilst Russia endured a decade of severe economic and political instability in the 1990s along with isolation from the West, Turkey was beset by successive setbacks and disappointments in its relations with both the US and the European Union, leading to the conducive environment for a holistic reformation in the Turkish-Russian relations, underpinned by common regional interests and energy politics.

Russia, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has tried to regain its lost ‘great power’ status as stated in the current foreign policy of Russia titled ‘Concept of the Foreign Policy of the

Russian Federation' that was published in February 2013 under President Vladimir Putin. To regain its influence in the world, Russia has developed its foreign policy through a realistic assessment of the world order of multipolarity by following a 'multi-dimensional/multi-vector' policy. This approach has helped Russia steadily expand its influence beyond the 'near abroad' sector with emphasis on developing mutually beneficial and equal bilateral and multilateral partnerships with all countries, showcasing Russia's astuteness and objective. An important objective behind this ambition of Russia can be to contain US and balancing China. To achieve this, Russia's willingness to strengthen its partnership with Turkey seems a natural step, given Turkey's strong relationship with the US and a growing one with China.

Similarly, Turkey under Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan has witnessed a major shift in its foreign policy through the concept of 'strategic depth' and 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. This multi-dimensional foreign policy of Turkey is pre-emptive rather than being reactive, based on pragmatism, realism and outcome.⁵ The 'multidimensional' foreign policy is a shift from its West-oriented policy, as Turkey has consciously diversified its engagements from West to other countries. Hence, this 'zero problems' policy is also extended to Russia, once an arch rival. This shift in the policy is to cater to Turkey's ambition of becoming a major regional power in West Asia and a key decision maker in global matters. In January 2013, Prime Minister Erdogan expressed keen interest in the membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) for further development of Turkey's national interest. Turkey understands the need to have a constructive engagement with Russia, a major stakeholder of the organisation.

Convergences

Turkey and Russia are trying to find common grounds of mutual cooperation, sometime creating insecurity within the West. One such example is the joint Turkish-Russian naval defence program called BLACKSEAFOR that holds exercises in the Black Sea since 2001.⁶ The defence engagements between Turkey and Russia have improved the relationship between military officials. Despite Turkey being the second-largest NATO member, defence officers and intellectuals are calling for stronger military relations with Russia, China and Iran as a counterweight to growing US and EU power. Another instance of strengthening of bilateral cooperation between Turkey and Russia was the resistance expressed by Turkey and Russia when the US requested observer status in

the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.⁷ It was a bold step on Turkey's part given the weightage of its relationship with the US.

Apart from defence, another factor binding Turkey and Russia is the energy sector. Turkey purchases coal from Russia and is contemplating establishing a nuclear power program that would rely on Russian-made reactor fuel.⁸ Turkey also has significant energy agreements with Russia and constitutes a very lucrative market for Moscow. For example, the Blue Stream project that runs across the Black Sea strengthens the bilateral ties between both the countries. This pipeline supplements the gas transmission corridor running from Russia to Turkey via Ukraine, Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria.⁹ However, this strong reliance on Russian energy has the potential to become a constraint between the two countries.

Dissonance between Turkey and Russia

Turkey wants to become a transit hub and play the role of a key energy broker, given its geographical location between the Caspian region and consumer markets in Europe. This ambition was well illustrated by the completion of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline in 2005 connecting Azerbaijan and Turkey. The Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline contains the seed of contention between Turkey and Russia. This pipeline stretches from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli oil field in the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, connecting Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan and Ceyhan, a port on the south-eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey, via Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Russia and Georgia continues to have a strained relationship since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which also led to an armed intervention by Russia in to Georgia in 2008. Meanwhile, Turkey shares a strong relationship with Georgia that may be exploited by the West (US and the EU) to contain Russia.

Europe is trying to lessen its dependency on Russian energy and is looking for diversification of its markets. Therefore, Turkey can become a centre of energy transport for Europe through the Baku Ceyhan pipeline and the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP)¹⁰, bypassing Russia. However, this ambition of Europe's diversification and Turkey's ambition to be an energy transit centre in the region is questionable. Russia till 2020 is predicted to remain as Europe's chief natural gas supplier, despite the anticipated growth of diversified gas shipments to Europe, including liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the vast US shale-gas resources.¹¹ Also the success rate of

TANAP is at a nascent stage and the capacity to deliver 10 billion cubic metres of gas per year, which equates to just 1 percent of Europe's total demand of energy¹² is minuscule.

Apart from energy sector, areas of divergences between Turkey and Russia are the Syrian crisis and the Ukrainian crisis. On the Syrian issue, Turkey and Russia have differing positions, based on their respective strategic interests and security perspectives. Turkey and Syria share a relationship of 'political dualism' like the association shared between Ankara and Russia.

Turkey and Syria have serious conflict of interests including border issues, questions pertaining to water and riparian rights (Tigris and Euphrates are a major source of irrigation¹³ for Turkey), religious outlook, political-military orientation, drug-trafficking, smuggling, terrorism (Kurdish insurgency), and espionage.¹⁴ Although both the countries have maintained friendly relationship, the crisis has put a dent in it. For example, the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan in 2012 called on the Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad to step down as the President. Turkey also served as a staging ground for the Syrian opposition during the crisis. Russia, on the other hand, has emerged as the Assad regime's most significant international backer.¹⁵ Syria and Russia share a strong economic partnership. Syria is a major consumer of Russian weaponry. The arms trade has intensified after President Assad and President Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000. Both the countries have other economic interests such as in the energy sector. On December 25, 2013 an accord was signed between Syria and Russia that allows the latter for exploration and drilling in the Levant Basin, an area off the Syrian coast. If oil or natural gas is discovered, the state-controlled Russian group Soyuzneftegaz will have a controlling interest for twenty-five years.¹⁶ Russia has invested around \$20 billion in Syria and if President Assad loses power, these contracts would be forfeited,¹⁷ a huge loss for Moscow. Hence, Russia and Turkey's reaction to the crisis were different based on their national interests.

On the Ukrainian crisis, especially after the secession of Crimea, Turkey is treading a cautious line by balancing its position between the West and Russia. During the Crimea secession on March 12, while the West condemned Russia, Turkey's reaction was mute; the reasons for which can be found in its energy dependence on Russia, deep-rooted fears of the Russian military, and Black Sea navigation policy of Russia.¹⁸ Turkey finds itself in a dilemma for three specific reasons:-

its commitments to the Western allies as a NATO member, its cultural ties with the Crimean Tatars, and its economic and political relationship with Moscow.¹⁹ On March 27, during the United Nations General Assembly vote in response to the 2014 Crimean crisis, Turkey voted against Russia. The reason behind Turkey's action was because of its kinship ties with the Crimean Tatars. However, Russia has not allowed it to affect its partnership with Turkey that highlights the willingness of strengthening their bilateral relationship.

Approaches on Strengthening the Relationship

Turkey, with its experiences, wants to balance its relationship between Russia and the West. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said: "We also keep the door to diplomacy open with Russia, and this is to do with our geographical location."²⁰ It is because Turkey has too many factors at stake and would like to play safe with Russia, given the treatment Turkey has received from the West, especially with the EU regarding its membership issue. For Turkey, Russia is and will remain crucial because of its dependence for energy, like Europe.

Turkey buys about half of its natural gas and nearly 10 percent of its oil from Russia. Its military actions in Crimea have heavily damaged Turkey's exports to Russia as they were through Ukraine. Turkish exporters are using the Kazbegi-Verkhny Lars border gate, between Georgia and Russia, as that is the only legally functioning border-crossing to trade with Russia after diplomatic reactions and the lurking danger of war between Russia and Ukraine.²¹ With pro-Russian separatists active in the Eastern regions of Ukraine, Turkey is cautious with Russia.

During April 2014, tension between Turkey and Russia was averted as Ankara was criticized for allowing American vessels to stay in the Black Sea longer than the stipulated time (21 days) as outlined in the 1936-dated treaty, which is a violation of the Montreux Convention. The situation had become tense because of the Ukrainian crisis as the US and Europe were trying to contain Russia and any move such as military exercises of countries like Turkey with NATO during such scenario would produce distrust and insecurity between Ankara and Moscow. Turkey assured Russia of its commitment to the Convention, which was welcomed by the latter.²²

In the case of Russia, the West imposed economic sanctions on it for alleged fomenting of unrest in Ukraine. It affected Russia's weak economy. On March 26, the World Bank warned that

the Russian economy could contract this year with its GDP shrinking by 1.8 percent in 2014.²³ With the pro-Russian separatists declaring ‘self-rule’ in Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv by holding a referendum on May 12 and the crackdown by the Ukrainian military troops on them, especially after the election of the new Ukrainian President Petro O. Poroshenko on May 25, the situation for Russia is delicate. Although Russia has finalised a 30-year energy deal with China and Turkey is emerging as an alternative destination to Bulgaria and Italy for Russia's new natural gas South Stream pipeline project, Moscow would not want to be isolated in the international arena as it does not want to lose its influence in its neighbourhood. Hence, Turkey can facilitate negotiations between Russia and the West.

Conclusion

International relations are unpredictable and uncertain; however, they need to be worked upon despite trust deficit and competition amongst countries. In this era of neo-realism, the competition to secure one's national interest and keeping its status intact leads to construction and deconstruction of partnerships. The same holds good for Turkey and Russia as well. Turkey will be careful with Russia, given the latter's lucrative energy reservoirs in Far East, Siberia and in the Arctic, and Moscow's relationship with China.

Despite the challenges, Turkey and Russia respect each other's views in the international decision-making process. For instance, regardless of Turkey's vote in the UN against Russia's move on accepting Crimea as a part of the Russian Federation, Turkey might overtake Italy as Gazprom's second-largest customer in Europe.²⁴ If Russia makes Turkey its largest customer, then it will exhibit seriousness about further strengthening the bilateral relationship with Turkey and giving priority to each other's national interest. With the evolution of a new world order of multipolarity where new powers along with major powers like the US and Russia are taking their place in global governance, both Russia and Turkey will try to cooperate, even despite certain differences in interests. Both evince a possibility of convergence in national interests, regardless of their differences. Hence, focus will be on cooperation based on their domestic needs and containing other emerging powers in the region.

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