

MIDDLE EAST

In Russia-Turkey Pact, Putin Wields His Geopolitical Skills Anew

The Kremlin raises its profile as a power broker in the Mideast while weakening U.S. influence



A convoy of Russian military vehicles drove toward the northeastern Syrian city of Kobani on Wednesday to ensure Kurdish fighters pull back. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Ann M. Simmons

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SOCHI, Russia—President Vladimir Putin’s new pact with Turkey expands Moscow’s role as a power broker in the Middle East, again showing his skill at building up Russia’s sway while weakening U.S. influence.

This time, he secured a deal with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to shore up Turkey’s efforts to establish a buffer zone along the border with neighboring Syria, driving a wedge between Ankara and its allies in NATO and drawing the country closer to the Kremlin. Turkey on Wednesday said it permanently halted its offensive against the Kurds as part of the deal, prompting President Trump to drop sanctions against Turkey.

In a world increasingly dominated by a new wave of strongman leaders and big personalities, Mr. Putin has shown himself adept at managing difficult and volatile relationships to his own advantage.

“It’s a hallmark of Putin’s style,” said Alexei Malashenko, an independent political scientist based in Moscow.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met Tuesday in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia. PHOTO: KREMLIN

Mr. Putin has succeeded, for instance in developing close ties with both Israel’s leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, despite Russia’s history of anti-Semitism, and with Israel’s archenemy Iran.

He has strengthened his partnership with Egypt’s leader, Abdel Fattah Al Sisi, with whom he jointly hosted a Russia-Africa economic summit this week, developed closer strategic ties with China’s President Xi Jinping, and has repeatedly defended President Trump from his critics at home. At last year’s Group of 20 summit in Buenos Aires, Mr. Putin traded high-fives with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia.

The relationship with Mr. Erdogan was a complicated one to build, analysts say. Mr. Putin has had to persuade his counterpart that Russia served his interests better than the U.S., while emphasizing Russia’s importance to Turkey’s economy and Moscow’s ties to a Kurdish community that Mr. Erdogan sees as foes.

“It’s sort of a friendship of convenience, which has a leading partner—and that’s Vladimir Putin,” said Vladimir Yevseyev, a military expert at the Institute of CIS Countries in Moscow.

It was just four years ago that ties between Moscow and Ankara hit rock bottom after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in the Turkey-Syria border area.

But a failed coup in Turkey in 2016 allowed Mr. Putin to play on the Turkish leader’s insecurities over his relationship with the U.S., which was already arming Syrian Kurdish fighters, whom Turkey views as a terrorist threat.

Mr. Putin noticed that the West didn't come running to Mr. Erdogan's aid or defense after the putsch. Washington also refused to honor Ankara's request to deport Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Mr. Erdogan blames for the coup. Mr. Gulen denies any involvement.

"The coup left Erdogan completely traumatized," said Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute and author of "Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East."

"Putin grasped that opportunity," Mr. Cagaptay said. "Russia went from being the nemesis that bullies Turkey to the nemesis that courts Turkey."

Since then, Russia's leader has tried to drive Turkey and the U.S. further apart. Mr. Putin persuaded Mr. Erdogan to buy Russia's new S-400 defense system, valued at \$2.5 billion, irritating Washington, which regards the sale as security breach for the NATO alliance. Washington promptly barred Turkey from receiving the new F-35 fighters it had planned to purchase. Mr. Putin has already made Mr. Erdogan a sales pitch for Turkey to buy Russia's Su-57 fighters, buying him an ice-cream at an airshow in Moscow to help sweeten the offer.

Tuesday's pact brings the two countries into closer alignment. Mr. Putin could also keep the pressure on Turkey through Russia's Soviet-era connections to the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which has long been a thorn in Mr. Erdogan's side.

"The PKK remains a lever for Russian policy against Turkey given four-decade old ties between the Russian security elites and the PKK," Mr. Cagaptay said.

The Kremlin has other leverage, including the ability to ward off Russian tourists. Turkey was the most popular destination for Russian tourists last year, according to the Russian Association of Tour Operators. He could cut off Russian natural gas to Turkey, which relies on Russia for around 47% of its gas needs, according to data from the Turkish energy market regulatory authority.

And Mr. Putin could also unleash his propaganda and disinformation machine in Turkey, potentially inflaming speculation about another coup.

"The one who's forced to be the agreeable partner is Recep Erdogan," Mr. Yevseyev said.

—David Gauthier-Villars in Istanbul contributed to this article.

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