

Analysis of Competing Hypotheses
Turkey: On Seeking a Closer Relationship with Russia

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Key Judgments

Increased political, economic, and military cooperation between Turkey and Russia in recent years indicates that Turkey seeks a closer relationship with Russia as part of a long-term strategy. Throughout history, Turkey's relationship with Russia has ebbed and flowed between competition and cooperation. Yet recently, Turkey has been turning to Russia to enhance its regional influence and to improve its economy and military. Though Turkey is a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, Turkey has felt isolated by the West and is seeking to strengthen its geopolitical influence by partnering with Russia instead.

- On 22 October 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a ten-point memorandum at the Black Sea resort of Sochi, which detailed how Turkey and Russia would jointly patrol parts of Syria previously controlled by Kurdish forces.
- Turkey is seeking to bolster its regional influence in Syria and the Black Sea by partnering with Russia, which has strategic influence in both areas.
- In 2016, Turkey approved the construction of Turk Stream, a Russian gas pipeline intended to cross the Black Sea into Turkey.
- Construction of a nuclear power plant in Turkey by the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation, Rosatom, began in 2018.
- Turkey purchased the S-400 Russian missile defense system in 2017, and Erdogan discussed purchasing other fighter jets and engines with Putin in September 2019.
- Turkey and Russia conducted a joint naval exercise in the Black Sea in March 2019.
- Turkey feels resentment towards the West due to the U.S.'s decision to ally with Kurdish forces in Syria in 2015, and due to the European Union's (EU) stance against Turkish accession.

Introduction

Turkey's recent improvement of relations with Russia is integral to Turkey's long-term strategy. Through political cooperation with Russia, Turkey is attempting to bolster its regional influence, especially in Syria. Turkey is also strengthening its economy by partnering with Russia in areas of trade, gas pipelines, nuclear energy, and tourism. Military cooperation between Turkey and Russia is also on the rise. The Sochi Deal, Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 missile system, and joint naval exercises in the Black Sea are examples of this.¹ Finally, Turkey's turn to Russia can also be explained by the resentment it feels towards the West as a result of its tensions with the U.S., NATO, and the EU.

Background

The recent Sochi Deal and the purchase of the S-400 missile system signal Turkey's increased political and military cooperation with Russia. On 22 October 2019, Erdogan and Putin signed a ten-point memorandum at the Black Sea resort of Sochi. The deal detailed that Turkey and Russia would jointly patrol parts of Syria previously controlled by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). It also declared that fighters from the Kurdish YPG would have to retreat from the Turkish-declared security zone in Northern Syria.² In July 2019, Turkey received its first shipment of the Russian S-400 air defense system despite U.S. and NATO objections. The S-400, or the SA-21 Growler, has the capability of taking down drones, fighter jets, and cruise missiles. As a result, the U.S. decided that Turkey would not receive the F-35, an advanced stealth fighter aircraft.³ Also, on 4 September 2019, Erdogan met with Putin and discussed purchasing the Sukhoi Su-34, a strike aircraft, and Su-57, a jet fighter that intends to use stealth technology.⁴

Analysis

Given Turkey's increased political, economic, and military cooperation with Russia, Turkey is seeking a closer relationship with Russia as part of a long-term strategy.

- **Turkey is pursuing a closer relationship with Russia to bolster its regional influence.** Developments in the Middle East between 2009 and 2016 transformed Turkey's foreign policy. Turkey's lost Ottoman past became an important framework and Turkey began turning to Russia as an avenue to regain influence in the region.⁵ Russia's influence over the South Caucasus and Black Sea, areas of importance to Turkey, also spurred Turkey's strategic choice. Further, Turkey's desire to rid the Turkish-Syrian border of the Kurds pushed it to form a closer relationship with Russia due to Russia's direct role in Syria.

¹ Berezhnyuk, Yurly. "Turkish warships leave Novorossiysk naval base after joint drills with Russian Navy." Tass, 2019.

² Booker, Brakkton. "Turkey, Russia Reach Deal to Control Syrian Areas Once Patrolled by the U.S." *NPR*, 2019.

³ Pitel, Laura and Ian Bott. "Why Turkey's S-400 missile purchase angers the US." *The Financial Times*, 2019.

⁴ Barkey, Henri J. "Putin Plays Erdogan like a Fiddle." *Foreign Policy*, 2019.

⁵ Balta, Evren. "From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after the Cold War." *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 63, 2019.

Rather than compete with Russia in these areas, Turkey is pursuing a strategic balance of power agenda.⁶

- **Turkey is turning to Russia for economic reasons, such as energy, trade, and tourism.** The Blue Stream pipeline has made Russia the primary source of natural gas for Turkey. Turkey also approved the construction of Turk Stream across Turkey's exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea. In addition, The Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation, Rosatom, has begun constructing a nuclear power plant in Mersin, Turkey.⁷ The trade volume between Turkey and Russia increased dramatically between 2000 and 2014, and Turkish construction companies have obtained massive construction projects across Russia. Also, between 2000 and 2015, the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey rose from 677 thousand to 4.5 million.⁸
- **Turkey wants to increase military cooperation with Russia through a close partnership.** Turkey and Russia signed a deal to jointly patrol the Turkish-Syrian border and have agreed on counterterrorism strategies in Idlib, where thousands of foreign fighters remain.⁹ Turkey purchased the S-400 missile system from Russia instead of the U.S.'s F-35 defense system. Erdogan and Putin also recently discussed Turkey's potential purchase of the Su-35 and Su-57 fighter jets, engines, as well as future cooperation on electronic warfare.¹⁰ Additionally, Turkey and Russia conducted a joint naval exercise at the port of Novorossiysk in the Black Sea in March 2019.¹¹
- **Turkey's resentment towards the West is pushing it towards a closer relationship with Russia.** Russia and Turkey both felt alienated by Western powers, which drew them closer together. Erdogan did not support the U.S.'s alliance with the Kurdish parties in the fight against the Islamic State.¹² Erdogan also accused the U.S. of being involved in the failed coup in Turkey since Fetullah Gulen, the leader of the coup, lived in Pennsylvania as a permanent resident. Further, U.S.-Turkish relations were damaged when Turkey refused to allow U.S. troops to pass through its territory during the 2003 Iraq War.¹³ In Europe, EU institutions and leaders criticized Erdogan's authoritarian tendencies and his way of dealing with post-coup affairs in Turkey.¹⁴ Additionally, the

⁶ Didic, Ajdin and Hasan Kosebalaban. "Turkey's Rapprochement with Russia: Assertive Bandwagoning." *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 2019.

⁷ Winrow, Gareth. "Turkey and Russia: The Importance of Energy Ties." *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2017.

⁸ Coskun, Bezen Balamir. "Turkey's Relations with Russia after the Failed Coup: A Friend in Need of a Friend Indeed?" *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 2019.

⁹ Booker, Brakkton. "Turkey, Russia Reach Deal to Control Syrian Areas Once Patrolled by the U.S." *NPR*, 2019.

¹⁰ Barkey, Henri J. "Putin Plays Erdogan like a Fiddle." *Foreign Policy*, 2019.

¹¹ Bereznyuk, Yurly. "Turkish warships leave Novorossiysk naval base after joint drills with Russian Navy." *Tass*, 2019.

¹² Balta, Evren. "From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after the Cold War." *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 63, 2019.

¹³ Didic, Ajdin and Hasan Kosebalaban. "Turkey's Rapprochement with Russia: Assertive Bandwagoning." *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 2019.

¹⁴ Coskun, Bezen Balamir. "Turkey's Relations with Russia after the Failed Coup: A Friend in Need of a Friend Indeed?" *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 2019.

European Parliament voted in favor of suspending EU accession talks with Turkey in March 2019.¹⁵

Context

In recent years, Turkey has increased its political, economic, and military cooperation with Russia. Shortly following U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement to withdraw American troops from Syria, Turkey invaded Kurdish-held territory on 9 October 2019. To halt the offensive, Russia brokered a deal with Turkey that gave both countries temporary control over Northern Syria and called for Kurdish YPG fighters to leave the area.¹⁶ Turkey intends to rid the area of the Kurdish YPG, which it considers a terroristic offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and has been working with Russia to ensure this removal. Prior to the Sochi Deal, Turkey and Russia had a stall in their relations after Turkey downed a Russian warplane on the Syrian border in 2015. However, Russia and Turkey became essential partners again after the 2016 failed coup in Turkey. This was not the first or only time that Turkey and Russia experienced a strain in their relationship. During the Cold War, Turkey was staunchly anti-Communist. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey and Russia competed economically and geopolitically, especially in the South Caucasus and Black Sea region. In the 2000s, Turkey's political and military cooperation with Russia flourished under a policy aimed at strengthening its relations with neighboring states. Both countries were also improving their relations with the West during this time. Post-2008, however, global economic and political developments began to change Turkey's relationship with the West. The EU's refusal to admit Turkey as a member and NATO's expansion into the former Soviet sphere allowed for Turkey's and Russia's paths to converge. Aside from the 2015 incident, Turkish-Russian rapprochement gained momentum, and cooperation between the two countries in the areas of regional influence, trade, energy, and militaristic developments increased.¹⁷

Conclusion

As global events continue to unfold and affect the international balance of power, Turkey's relationship with Russia may become stronger. Over the past decade, Turkey has sought a closer relationship with Russia. While the two countries' bond has strengthened and weakened over the course of history, recent cooperation in Syria, the energy sector, and military improvements have brought Turkey and Russia into a close partnership. At the same time, Turkey's relationship with the West, particularly with NATO and the EU, has deteriorated. As a result, Turkey's deepening ties with Russia is seen as part of a long-term strategy.

¹⁵ Reilhac, Gilbert. "EU parliament calls for freeze on Turkey's membership talks." *Reuters*, 2019.

¹⁶ Booker, Brakkton. "Turkey, Russia Reach Deal to Control Syrian Areas Once Patrolled by the U.S." *NPR*, 2019.

¹⁷ Balta, Evren. "From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after the Cold War." *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 63, 2019.