

The sweet-bitter relationship of Russia and Turkey

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The two countries have built a geoeconomic relationship based on natural gas and energy projects. The Blue Stream pipeline has supplied gas to Turkey since 2003, and since the beginning of 2020 the Turkstream began to supply south-eastern Europe.

The first nuclear power station in Akkuyu is being built by Rosatom of Russia at the price of \$25.0 bn. The trade partnership was worth \$26.1 bn. last year and 6.7 Russian tourists visited Turkey in 2019. In 2020 Turkey was the world's second largest importer of Russian agro-industrial products.

Further, the military – industrial co-operation as evidenced by the purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile batteries in 2017 is strong.

Politically, the two countries have a similar understanding of world affairs. A multi-polar world order helps them pursue their respective ambitions. Their foreign policies have become militarised in recent years.

There are areas of friction where their traditional spheres of influence overlap. Erdoğan wants Turkey to regain its strategic role in North Africa and the Middle East which were part of the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, foreign minister between 2009 and 2014, and prime minister until 2016, saw his country as a regional power, capable of exerting cultural and political influence at a global level.

His doctrine of “zero problems with neighbors” joined political Islam with pan-Turkism to draw in Turkic peoples from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan to Xinjiang province of China.

After the unsuccessful Arab Spring in Egypt and Syria, Erdoğan openly supported the revanchist objectives of Azerbaijan, whose population he considers as part of the same nation.

Vladimir Putin wants Russia to regain the status of a first-rank global actor. The success of Russia's military campaign in Syria helped to increase its influence in the ex-Soviet space which its rulers continue to regard as a protective buffer. Turkish stance on Nagorno-Karabakh shows that it is ready to challenge Russia in the area.

Azerbaijan's armed forces supported by Turkey, took back territory that served as buffer zone for the republic of Artsakh, then captured the key city of Shusha in the heart of the enclave.

The Armenians agreed on November 10 to a ceasefire that provided for their phased withdrawal from areas they still controlled. Only a 5 km.-wide corridor, under Russian control, guarantees safe passage to Armenia. The ceasefire agreement, signed under Russian auspices, includes the establishment of a joint Russian – Turkish monitoring centre on Azeri territory. This forward base in Azerbaijan will allow Turkey to project its influence in Turkish – speaking central Asia more effectively.

There will also be a new corridor linking the Azeri republic of Nakhichevan, an enclave in Armenian territory adjoining Turkey, to Azerbaijan. This will give Turkey direct access to the Caspian Sea's valuable offshore gas reserves.

The ceasefire agreement is for five years, and will be renewable, but it is uncertain if Turkey will be satisfied with its gains.

The desire of Turkey to strike a balance of power in the post-soviet space is motivated by a desire to strengthen its position in relation to Russia in Syria, Libya, and the eastern Mediterranean, and help to relieve Turkey's sense of being surrounded, due to Russia's growing military presence in the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Levant.

Turkey is seeking a military base in Azerbaijan so as to rebalance its strategic relationship with Russia, after Russia in 2017 secured the use of Tartus as a naval and Khmeimin as an air base, on the Syrian coast for another 49 years.

The transfer by Turkey of several hundred jihadists from Libya and Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh justifies Moscow's anxiety. In the Caspian and the Black Sea, Russia is enlisting the help of countries that have strained relations with Turkey (Iran and Egypt).

Turkey has not recognized the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and has expanded its military technical cooperation with Ukraine. In 2018 Ukraine ordered six Turkish Bayraktar TB2 tactical drones, as used at Idlib (Syria), in Libya and in Nagorno-Karabakh. Apart from this deal, Ukraine and Turkey are reported to be cooperating on the development of the new Bayraktar Akinci drones, which could eventually be assembled in Ukraine. This could lead Russia to deploy anti-aircraft systems such as the Pantsir-S1, which proved effective against Turkish drones in Syria and Libya. Russia could also use mobile electronic warfare systems such as the Krasukha-4, deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Drone warfare is a factor in the new balance of power between Russia and Turkey. Having tactical drones gives Turkey an advantage over Russia, which does not yet have any. Drones are Turkey's response to Russia's superiority in missile technology.

Will they avoid confrontation?

Since Putin and Erdoğan took office in the early 2000s, Russia and Turkey have chosen to compartmentalize issues, in line with their usual *realpolitik*. Their differences over Ukraine have not affected their partnership in other areas, as differences over Ukraine have affected relations between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. The only brief exception was during the Syrian crises, after a Turkish F-16 fighter downed a Russian Sukhoi SU24M bomber in November 2015; normal relations were restored after Erdoğan sent a letter of apology to the Kremlin in June 2016.

Given their differences on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kurdish question, Cyprus, the Donbass, natural gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean, and ongoing crises on which they have conflicting stances, the future of Russia and Turkey's relationship is uncertain. During a meeting at Sochi in July that year, Putin and Erdoğan apparently agreed to support each other against perceived separatist and terrorist threats, posed to Russia by Chechen fighters and to Turkey by Kurdish armed militants. In other words, they formed a non-interference pact on security issues in two areas where they were at odds.

The two countries have the necessary experience to strike a bargain based on compromises and compensation. Their acceptance of the

principle of spheres of influence, the EU's sluggishness on strategic issues in the Mediterranean, and the US's reluctance to embark on new military adventures gives them extra room to maneuver and arrive at a solution that accommodates their respective interests. After all, both are keen to avoid a direct confrontation.