Russia and Turkey, friends or enemies?
Russia and Turkey alternate between geo-economic partnership with military-industrial cooperation, and jostling, even proxy warring, to see which has dominance from North Africa to the Caspian Sea.

After Syria and Libya, Russia and Turkey have fought yet another proxy war. This time it was in the Caucasus, through the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh plateau. Their relationship is all about spheres of influence and balances of power, and their ambitions have brought them into conflict from North Africa to the Caspian, via the Levant and the Black Sea.

The two countries have built a geo-economic partnership based on natural gas and nuclear energy projects. The Blue Stream pipeline, a section of which crosses the Black Sea, has supplied Russian gas to Turkey since 2003; and this January the smaller TurkStream began to supply southern and
southeastern Europe via the Turkish port of Kıyıköy. Russia’s Rosatom is building Turkey’s first nuclear power station at Akkuyu, at a cost of $25bn. Their trade partnership was worth $26.1bn in 2019 (1), and centres on tourism and agriculture: 6.7 million Russians visited Turkey in 2019 (2), and Turkey will be the world’s second largest importer of Russian agro-industrial products in 2020. And Turkey’s purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile batteries in 2017 shows that military-industrial cooperation is strong, greatly displeasing the US.

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Politically, the two countries have a similar reading of world affairs, based on suspicion of and frustration with the West; both have an interest in maintaining a multipolar world order that helps them pursue their respective ambitions. Their foreign policies have become more militarised in recent years. But this has once again highlighted areas of friction where their traditional spheres of influence overlap. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wants Turkey to regain its strategic role in North Africa and the Middle East, which were part of the Ottoman empire at the height of its power in the 17th century (see map).

Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey’s foreign minister from 2009 to 2014, then prime minister until he was forced to resign in 2016, saw his country as a regional power, yet capable of exerting cultural and political influence at a global level. With his doctrine of ‘zero problems with neighbours’, he launched a foreign policy that joined political Islam with pan-Turkism to draw in Turkic-speaking peoples from southern Russia to China’s Xinjiang province, via the Caucasus (Azerbaijan) and central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan).

‘One nation, two states’

Turkey’s involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh expresses the more bellicose side of this pan-Turkism, which came to the forefront after the unsuccessful Arab Springs in Egypt and Syria and the failed coup against Erdoğan in 2016. Erdoğan openly supports the revanchist objectives of Azerbaijan, a Turkish-speaking country whose population he regards as part of the Turkish nation, in line with the ‘one nation, two states’ concept which he often spoke of during the six-week conflict.

On the Russian side, Vladimir Putin has put sovereignty at the heart of his power project for Russia, which he wants to regain its status as a first-rank global actor. The success of Russia’s military campaign in Syria has helped to amplify its influence. Ultimately, Russia’s central concern is the post-Soviet space, which the Russian politico-military elite still see as a protective buffer. But Turkey’s stance on Nagorno-Karabakh suggests it is ready to challenge Russia in this area.
Erdoğan’s win in the Caucasus

Turkey has had some success in the Caucasus. Azerbaijan’s armed forces, with vigorous political support and military aid from Turkey, took back the southern part of territories that served as a buffer zone for the self-proclaimed republic of Artsakh, then captured the key city of Shusha in the heart of Nagorno-Karabakh. To avoid further humiliation, the Armenians agreed on 10 November to a ceasefire that required them to withdraw from areas they still controlled: the Agdam region, Azeri enclaves in Armenian territory in the Gazakh region by 20 November, and the strategic regions of Karvachar (Kalbajar in Azeri) by 25 November and Berdzor (Lachin) by 1 December. Only a 5km-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, as agreed by Putin and Erdoğan in a phone call the day it was signed. 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. Turkey will have direct access, via its border with Nakhichevan, 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. Although the agreement does not mention Turkey, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev has said that Turkish troops will be involved in the peacekeeping force (which Russia denies).

Turkey’s attempt to strike a balance of power—even in the post-Soviet space may be motivated by a desire to strengthen its position in relation to Russia in Syria, Libya and the eastern Mediterranean. It will also help to relieve Turkey’s sense of being surrounded due to Russia’s growing military presence in the immediate neighbourhood: the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Levant. This May, the Turkish air force refuelled US B-1B Lancer long-range strategic bombers over the Black Sea during a training mission simulating attacks on naval targets. Turkey may also be seeking a military base in Azerbaijan so as to rebalance its strategic relationship with Russia, after Russia in 2017 secured the use of the Tartus (naval) and Khmeimim (air) bases, on the Syrian coast, for another 49 years.
Russia and Turkey: partners and rivals

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Russia is worried by Turkey’s abandonment of the Kemalist secular republican model, illustrated again this July by the conversion of Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia, the great Greek Orthodox cathedral (then Ottoman mosque, then museum from 1934 under Atatürk), back into a mosque. Pan-Turkism is likely to revive Russian fears of Turkish ambitions in the post-Soviet space thought to be home to some 120 million Turkish language speakers, including inside Russia. By extension, Russia fears Turkey’s use of Islam as a political instrument will destabilise Russia, where 15% of the population are thought to be Sunni, especially considering the bloody conflicts in the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan) in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The Turkish security forces’ transfer of several hundred jihadists from Libya and Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh on 29 September justifies Moscow’s anxiety. In the Caspian and the Black Sea, Russia is enlisting the help of countries that have strained relations with Turkey: in September, Iranian ships took part in the naval element of Russia’s Kavkaz-2020 military exercises in the Caspian, and in November, Russia and Egypt’s Bridge of Friendship joint naval exercises were held in the Black Sea for the first time.

Turkey has another card up its sleeve: Ukraine. Although Turkey has not imposed sanctions on Russia, it has not recognised 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 Akıncı drones, which could eventually be assembled in Ukraine. Using these 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 in response to the threat from Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and Israeli-made Harop ‘kamikaze’ drones, which Azerbaijan has acquired.

Drone warfare is a factor in the new balance of power between Russia and Turkey, in local crises from the Mediterranean to the Caspian foothills of the Caucasus. 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, which it uses to deny sea and air access to the Levant and the Black Sea (3).

Drones proved their worth in Idlib this March, when there were bloody clashes between pro-Turkish jihadists and Syrian loyalist forces supported by Russia. Russia had difficulty in defending its protégés against the Turkish drones, and this put Turkey in a position to challenge Russia’s local air supremacy. Outside the US-occupied zone east of the Euphrates, this was a first in the Syrian conflict.

Will they avoid confrontation?

Since Putin and Erdoğan took office in the early 2000s, Russia and Turkey have chosen to compartmentalise 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 crisis, after a Turkish F-16 fighter downed a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M bomber in November 2015; normal relations were restored after Erdoğan sent a letter of apology to the Kremlin in June 2016.

During a meeting at Sochi, Putin and Erdoğan apparently agreed to support each other against 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

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 — as is how long it can remain unchanged. Could they take a broader approach, as they did in 2005? 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 (4). 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 give them extra room to manoeuvre and arrive at a solution that accommodates their respective
interests. After all, both are keen to avoid a direct confrontation.

Translated by Charles Goulden

(1) According to Russian Federal Customs Service data.
(2) According to Rostourism (Russian Federal Agency for Tourism).