Collusion or Collision?
Turkey-Russia Relations Under Erdogan and Putin

Foreword by Ambassador Eric S. Edelman
By Aykan Erdemir, Sinan Ciddi, and John Hardie
December 2021
Collusion or Collision?
Turkey-Russia Relations Under Erdogan and Putin

Foreword by
Ambassador Eric S. Edelman

Aykan Erdemir
Sinan Ciddi
John Hardie

December 2021
# Table of Contents

FOREWORD .......................................................................................................................................................5  
INTRODUCTION ..............................................................................................................................................7  

PART I: TURKEY’S DRIFT FROM THE WESTERN WORLD .................................................................9  
    Centuries of Rivalry......................................................................................................................................................9  
    From the End of the Cold War to the Arab Spring .................................................................................................. 10  
    Russia, Turkey, and the War in Syria ..........................................................................................................................13  

PART II: ENDURING GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION WITH RUSSIA .................................................17  
    Syria ................................................................................................................................................................................ 18  
    Libya ............................................................................................................................................................................... 22  
    South Caucasus ............................................................................................................................................................. 26  
    Black Sea Region ...........................................................................................................................................................29  

PART III: A NEW PARTNERSHIP? ...................................................................................................................32  
    Military-Technical Cooperation: Turkey’s Quest for the S-400 .................................................................32  
    Economic Cooperation ................................................................................................................................................36  
        Tourism ..................................................................................................................................................................... 37  
        Trade ..................................................................................................................................................................... 37  
        Investment and Construction .................................................................................................................................39  
    Energy Cooperation .................................................................................................................................................40  
        Natural Gas............................................................................................................................................................40  
    Nuclear ...................................................................................................................................................................43  
    Turkey's Pursuit of Alternative International Institutions .......................................................................................44  
        Shanghai Cooperation Organization ....................................................................................................................44  
        Eurasian Economic Union ......................................................................................................................................45  
        BRICS ..................................................................................................................................................................46  
    Countering U.S. Sanctions ...........................................................................................................................................47  
    Russian Information Operations in Turkey: Complicity and Conflict ..........................................................48  

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS .....................................................................................................................51  
    Making the Most of the Current Situation ................................................................................................................ 51  
    Carrots and Sticks .........................................................................................................................................................52  
    Mitigating Risks ............................................................................................................................................................ 53  
    Preparing for a Post-Erdogan Era .................................................................................................................................53  

CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................................................................54
Foreword

U.S. relations with Turkey and Russia have soured over the last two decades. Once a staunch ally anchoring NATO’s southern flank, Turkey has increasingly drifted from the West. With Russia, post-Cold War hopes for strategic partnership between Moscow and the West have given way to renewed strategic competition and confrontation.

Meanwhile, despite a long history of fraught relations dating back to the 16th century, Turkey and Russia have moved closer. This report serves as an indispensable guide to the relationship between Ankara and Moscow.

To be sure, their differences are many, and mutual suspicion still runs deep. Yet the authors carefully document how the regimes of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin have managed to compartmentalize their relationship, mixing competition with substantial — if transactional — cooperation across a range of areas. Many in Washington continue to see Turkey as a bulwark against Russia, yet this report capably demonstrates that such notions are fanciful, at least for as long as Erdogan remains in charge.

Economic ties, particularly in the energy sector, drove Russian-Turkish rapprochement following the Soviet Union’s collapse. These ties remain a key pillar of their relationship, helping to buffer against growing Russian-Turkish geopolitical competition across multiple regions.

But there are also broader and deeper forces at play. Erdogan and Putin both reject the post-Cold War liberal international order and view Turkish-Russian cooperation as a means of advancing their revisionist geopolitical agendas. Cultivating ties with Moscow helps Ankara achieve independence from the West. For the Kremlin, Turkey’s drift from the West supports Moscow’s longstanding efforts to undermine NATO, as seen with Ankara’s purchase of the Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile system.

Turkey and Russia’s alignment also reflects domestic factors. Neither strongman chastises the other for his democratic shortcomings or kleptocracy. In both countries, large swathes of the elite reject liberalism and associated visions that root their country’s national identity and strategic vocation within the West. Indeed, Erdogan’s alliance with Turkey’s “Eurasianist” faction, which eschews the West and prioritizes relations with Russia and other non-Western powers, has helped fuel Ankara’s alignment with Moscow. For Putin, Russia’s “Eurasianist” thinkers have provided useful political cover for his authoritarian and kleptocratic regime.

In Washington, both political parties have come to recognize that America and its allies face growing threats from authoritarian powers that seek to undermine the interests and values of free societies. This report is among the best works that show how such autocratic regimes are able to cooperate effectively despite their unresolved differences.

For the United States and its allies, successfully navigating the Turkey-Russia relationship will require an accurate picture of today’s Turkey. Thankfully, the analysis here reflects a deep understanding of Turkish politics and the subtle ways in which ideology, strategy, and economic interests blend together to shape foreign policy.

As the authors note, Ankara’s drift from the West reflects a fundamental shift in Turkish foreign policy: Although Erdogan does not seek to exit NATO, he seeks to balance between East and West, making Erdogan’s Turkey unlikely to reprise its former role as a stalwart transatlantic ally. The foreign policies of both Moscow and Ankara have deep domestic roots, and both Washington and its allies will need to develop a coordinated strategy to deal with the consequences of the Turkish-Russian entente. This monograph offers a nuanced set of policy recommendations to inform that effort. They deserve careful consideration by policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Ambassador Eric S. Edelman
Former U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
Former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey
Chairman, FDD’s Turkey Program; Senior Advisor, FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power
Introduction

When Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber over the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015, it was the first downing of a Russian military aircraft by a NATO member since 1952. When Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan insisted Ankara’s actions were “fully in line with Turkey’s rules of engagement.” Erdogan proceeded to demand that Russia “respect the right of Turkey to defend its borders.”

Yet by August 2016 — less than a month after an abortive coup d’état by a faction within the Turkish military — the two leaders would meet in St. Petersburg to usher in a new era of rapprochement. A year later, an increasingly anti-Western Erdogan stunned Turkey’s NATO allies by announcing his plans to purchase Russia’s S-400 surface-to-air missile system.

Russian and Turkish interests still collide — sometimes violently — from the Middle East and North Africa to the Black Sea, from the Caucasus to Caspian energy supplies to Europe. Mutual suspicion runs deep, informed by centuries of war and mistrust. Russian-Turkish competition has intensified in recent years amid increased adventurism by both Moscow and Ankara. Nevertheless, the two powers have achieved close, if transactional, cooperation in the economic, diplomatic, and even security spheres. Both Putin and Erdogan have learned to manage their differences.

Economic cooperation, particularly in the energy sector, constitutes both the main historical driver of Turkish-Russian relations as well as a buffer against geopolitical tensions. In January 2020, Russia and Turkey inaugurated the TurkStream natural gas pipeline. Earlier this year, Putin and Erdogan began construction on the third unit of Turkey’s Russian-built $20 billion Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant project.

Shared antipathy toward the West is another driver of the Russian-Turkish relationship. For Erdogan, ties with Russia facilitate independence from the West. For Putin, Turkey’s willingness to break with Washington and other NATO allies fits well with Moscow’s campaign to erode U.S. influence and undermine the transatlantic alliance. Ankara received two S-400 batteries in 2019 and conducted a firing test in 2020, becoming the first and only NATO member to earn U.S. sanctions for buying Russian arms. Earlier this year, Russia reiterated its readiness to sell advanced fighter jets to Turkey following Ankara’s ejection from the U.S.-led Joint Strike Fighter program. Moscow and Ankara also cooperate in various non-Western international organizations.

Putin and Erdogan have a close working relationship; since 2016, they have spoken by phone more times

---

than with any other world leader. Neither criticizes the other’s autocratic behavior, while both face frequent opprobrium from the West. Both are populist, nationalistic strongmen who champion conservative values and contrast themselves with a decadent West. Russia and Turkey’s various geopolitical disputes have continually tested this relationship, requiring the two leaders to take “manual” control, as the Russians say, to hammer out a deal. “No matter how tough President Erdogan’s stance may look, I know that … finding a common language with him is possible,” Putin said in October 2020, even as Russian-Turkish tensions mounted over Ankara’s involvement in last year’s Armenia-Azerbaijan war. Putin then praised Erdogan for sticking with TurkStream and the S-400 purchase despite Western pressure, contrasting Erdogan’s reliability with Europe’s inability “to show enough basic independence or sovereignty to implement” Russia’s Nord Stream 2 pipeline. “Working with such a partner is not only pleasant but also safe.”

However, while Putin and Erdogan’s outsized roles enhance predictability and flexibility in bilateral negotiations, they may also inhibit a deeper and more durable partnership. Some institutional ties do exist, including frequent contacts at the intergovernmental, military-to-military, special services, inter-parliamentary, corporate, people-to-people, and expert levels. The relative popularity of pro-Russia propaganda outlets in Turkey provides Moscow another lever to influence Russian-Turkish relations. Ultimately, though, the trajectory of Russian-Turkish relations still hinges on direct negotiations between the two strongmen, particularly during crises.

In Washington, some still believe Ankara remains a bulwark against Russian expansionism on NATO’s southeastern flank. While areas of fruitful cooperation with Turkey do still exist, this report demonstrates that under Erdogan, Turkey’s drift from the West and tilt toward Russia reflect a fundamental transformation of Ankara’s foreign and security policy. Just as Moscow and Ankara will not soon become stalwart allies, Erdogan’s Turkey is equally unlikely to be a steadfast member of the Western alliance. Rather, Ankara likely will aim to leverage the two camps against one another.

Washington and its transatlantic allies therefore must take urgent and coordinated action to clarify their strategy toward Turkey. The West should pursue cooperation with Turkey where interests align, such as countering Russia in the Black Sea region and promoting alternatives to Russian energy supplies. But the West should also seek to contain challenges from Turkey by imposing firm consequences for further aligning with Russia or otherwise undermining NATO, while providing incentives if Ankara does the right thing.

Given that Erdogan is unlikely to fundamentally change course, the West should also mitigate against risks such as the loss of access to Turkish military bases and further Turkish destabilization in the Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, Washington and its allies should lay the groundwork to bring Turkey back into the Western fold in a post-Erdogan era, by engaging with the Turkish people and supporting democratic institutions in Turkey.

---


Part I: Turkey’s Drift
From the Western World

Centuries of Rivalry

Turkey and Russia have a centuries-old relationship defined mostly by strategic competition and war. Between the 16th and early 20th centuries, the Ottoman Empire lost territory spanning from Crimea to Circassia after fighting 12 major wars against Russian armies, almost all of which Russia instigated and won. This legacy of mutual enmity and distrust always lingers. Russia remains the only neighboring country Turkey truly fears.

Periods of cooperation between Russia and Turkey were typically short-lived and geared toward countering a common foe. In the aftermath of World War I, the ascendant Turkish nationalists and Russia’s communist government shared perceived enemies in the West. The two powers signed treaties settling their territorial disputes. The Bolsheviks were the first to formally recognize the new administration in Ankara and provided aid that the Kemalists used to consolidate power. This relative harmony evaporated in the 1930s and 1940s, however, as Joseph Stalin pursued greater control over Turkey and particularly the Turkish Straits.

From World War II until Stalin’s death in 1953, Ankara lived in constant fear of Soviet invasion, leading Turkey to join NATO in 1952. In return for significant U.S. military investments in Turkey, Ankara hosted a variety of U.S. military and intelligence assets, including Jupiter nuclear-armed medium-range ballistic missiles, B61 nuclear gravity bombs, and nuclear artillery. Moscow continued the tsarist-era practice of using the Kurds to weaken and gain leverage over Turkey, including by supporting the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a militant Kurdish group established in the 1970s.

Despite Turkey’s NATO membership, diplomatic crises with Washington throughout the 1960s and 1970s led Turkish leaders to question the arrangement. The U.S. withdrawal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis worried Ankara. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson warned that America might not defend Turkey from a potential Soviet attack if Ankara invaded Cyprus. When Turkey did intervene in 1974, the United States imposed a crippling arms embargo, which Washington lifted in 1978 to arrest Turkey’s tilt toward Moscow. Thereafter, Ankara chose to remain in the Western alliance.

---


15. Alvin Z. Rubinstein, Soviet Policy Toward Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan (New York: Praeger, 1982), pages 1–55.


From the End of the Cold War to the Arab Spring

Despite expectations that Turkey would draw closer to the West, the breakdown of Ankara’s bid for EU membership, as well as U.S.-Turkish tensions over the two wars in Iraq, spurred a new turn to Moscow. Shared resentment toward the West has helped fuel Russian-Turkish rapprochement, forming what some analysts have termed an “Axis of the Excluded.”

The First Gulf War strained U.S.-Turkish relations. Baghdad’s loss of control over northern Iraq allowed the outlawed PKK, which had fought Ankara since the 1980s, to train militants and stage operations against Turkey. Ankara also felt frustrated with Washington’s support for the Iraqi Kurds and perceived insensitivity to Turkish interests. These concerns helped drive Ankara’s failure to let the U.S. military use Turkish bases and airspace during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. That rift undermined U.S.-Turkish trust.

Ankara’s opposition to the U.S. invasion also provided a point of consensus with Moscow, which applauded Turkey’s break with the United States.

The gradual breakdown of Turkey’s EU accession process exacerbated Turkish dissatisfaction with the West. So did increasing EU criticism of Turkey’s democratic deficiencies, particularly relating to Ankara’s treatment of the Kurds. Turkey resented the European Union’s perceived double-standard in excluding Turkey while including the former Warsaw Pact states, whose democratic credentials Ankara saw as no better than its own.

In 2004, pushed by Turkey’s rival Greece, Brussels granted membership to the Republic of Cyprus even after Greek Cypriots rejected a UN-sponsored effort to reconcile Nicosia with the island’s self-declared Turkish Cypriot state. This not only provoked an anti-EU nationalist backlash in Turkey, but also gave Nicosia a veto over Turkish accession. Accession talks launched in 2005 quickly stalled as Berlin and Paris began suggesting a “privileged partnership” with Turkey rather than full membership.

With Turkey’s EU membership process all but dead, most Turks today see EU accession as unrealistic or even undesirable. Although Erdogan was more interested in exploiting the accession process to undermine Turkey’s secular establishment and consolidate his own power, he has leveraged the deadlock to foment anti-Western sentiment. In a 2017 survey, 68 percent of Turkish respondents said their country’s relationship with the West was “breaking,” while almost 72 percent

believed Turkey should forge “a political, economic, and security alliance with Russia.”

This anti-Western trend helped fuel the rise of Turkish Eurasianism, a contradictory blend of Kemalism, Turkish nationalism, socialism, and radical secularism. Although Turkey’s Eurasianist camp comprises a variety of strains, there are three core elements: an anti-imperialist aversion to the West and globalization; a conspiratorial belief that Western powers threaten Turkey’s unity and borders; and the notion that Turkey’s future lies with the Eastern bloc, especially as the West’s relative global influence declines. Despite traditionally constituting a marginal force in Turkish politics, the Eurasianist camp has gained sway in Turkish domestic and foreign policy, helping drive Ankara’s pivot toward Russia.

In 2002, the then-secretary-general of Turkey’s National Security Committee, General Tuncer Kilinc, argued Turkey should abandon the European Union in favor of Russia and Iran. Although few observers at the time paid serious heed, like-minded officers gained a more prominent position within the Turkish military following the failed coup d’état of July 2016. An ensuing purge eliminated many pro-Western officers, creating a vacuum quickly filled by Eurasianists. Purges in universities, bureaucracy, and judiciary have similarly enabled the Eurasianists to consolidate power and shape state policies.

Turkey’s souring relations with the West helped fuel rapprochement with Russia. Turkey and Russia expanded economic ties, with energy as their cornerstone, even though Ankara also championed the Western-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, an alternative to Russian export routes. Turkey became the first NATO member to import Russian arms. From 1992 to 1996, Moscow provided Turkey with transport helicopters and armored personnel carriers, among other armaments. The two concluded an agreement in 1994 on military-technical and defense-industrial cooperation. In 1998, they signed a memorandum of understanding on boosting military

---

cooperation. Ankara invited Russia into Turkish-initiated economic and security institutions focused on the Black Sea region.

To be sure, Russia and Turkey’s rivalry and mutual suspicion persisted. Ankara’s pan-Turkic aspirations and (largely unsuccessful) efforts to exploit Russia’s post-Soviet retreat in the Caucasus and Central Asia worried Moscow. In response to Turkey’s covert support for the Chechen rebels during Russia’s humiliating First Chechen War, Moscow increased ties with the PKK. Ankara also backed Azerbaijan against Armenia during their war in the early 1990s, while Moscow leaned toward Yerevan. The two powers also differed over the Bosnia and Kosovo wars. Russian plans to provide S-300s to Cyprus triggered a crisis ultimately defused by a U.S.-brokered compromise.

Nevertheless, Russian-Turkish relations continued to deepen, thanks to mutual efforts to mitigate conflict, coupled with Ankara’s comparatively limited influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia and a focus on domestic woes in both countries. Moscow and Ankara eventually found common ground on a range of divisive issues. Most notably, Ankara agreed not to sell arms to the Chechens or allow volunteers to fight in Chechnya, while Moscow promised not to allow any Kurdish activities in Russia directed at Turkey. Although Moscow continued to complain that Turkey harbored Chechens, Turkey did clamp down on Chechen émigré networks. In 1999, during Russia’s more successful Second Chechen War, then-Prime Minister Putin signed a joint counterterrorism declaration with his Turkish counterpart, who told Turkish media that Chechnya was Russia’s internal affair. Moscow, for its part, scaled back support for the PKK.

"Following the turbulence of the 1990s, Russo-Turkish relations blossomed in the 2000s thanks both to burgeoning economic ties and to each country’s deteriorating relations with the West."

Following the turbulence of the 1990s, Russian-Turkish relations blossomed in the 2000s thanks both to burgeoning economic ties and to each country’s deteriorating relations with the West. Bilateral trade boomed. Russia became Turkey’s top trading partner, while Turkey became a key market for Russian gas exports. In 2001, they signed a Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Eurasia and established a bilateral commission on military-technical cooperation. The Blue Stream natural gas pipeline came online in 2003, establishing Russia’s first direct route to Turkey.

---

40. Ibid.
Putin visited Turkey in 2004, the first bilateral visit by a Russian leader in over 30 years. The two powers signed six agreements, covering energy, finance, and security, and pledged to boost relations comprehensively, including through counterterrorism (anti-separatist) cooperation. Erdogan reciprocated with visits to Moscow in 2005 and 2010. The two leaders signed a deal for South Stream (TurkStream’s predecessor) in 2009. A 2010 visit by Putin’s presidential placeholder, Dmitry Medvedev, yielded agreements on visa-free tourism, the $20 billion Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, and the establishment of a High-Level Cooperation Council, among other things. Russia sold Turkey anti-tank missile systems from 2008 to 2010, and Russian and Turkish companies jointly developed the PMADS-IGLA short-range air defense system.

Russia, Turkey, and the War in Syria

U.S.-Turkey ties once again deteriorated following the 2011 Arab uprisings. Above all, Ankara severely overestimated Washington’s commitment to overthrowing the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Toppling Assad suited Erdogan’s Islamist agenda, with the goal of installing a regime aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Turkey’s Syria policy pitted it against Assad’s Russian and Iranian backers. Ankara’s support for Islamists during the Arab Spring caused concern in Moscow, which feared the uprisings would erode Russian influence and empower extremists, potentially spilling over into Central Asia and even Russia’s own restive Muslim regions. More broadly, the Kremlin saw the Arab Spring as part of a longstanding

---

50. For a full list of the agreements signed, see: Russian Federation Presidential Executive Office, “Список документов, подписанных по итогам переговоров Президента России Д.Медведева с Премьер-министром Турецкой Республики Р.Т.Эрдоганом [List of documents signed following the talks between President of Russia D. Medvedev and Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey R. T. Erdogan],” May 12, 2010. (http://kremlin.ru/supplement/554); Russian Federation Presidential Executive Office, “Список документов, подписанных по итогам переговоров Президента России Д.Медведева с Президентом Турецкой Республики А.Гюлем [List of documents signed following the talks between the President of Russia D. Medvedev and the President of the Republic of Turkey A. Gull],” May 12, 2010. (http://kremlin.ru/supplement/553)
Western campaign to foment regime change, fueling Kremlin suspicions that a “Russian spring” might be next.\textsuperscript{55} Russian and Turkish interests clashed most violently in Syria. Moscow sought to prevent “another Libya,” where Russia had acquiesced to a limited NATO intervention in 2011 — only for it to lead to the overthrow and killing of dictator Muammar Gaddafi.\textsuperscript{56}

“The Kremlin saw the Arab Spring as part of a longstanding Western campaign to foment regime change, fueling Kremlin suspicions that a ‘Russian spring’ might be next.”

In September 2015, Russia shocked the West by launching an air campaign to rescue the Assad regime from collapse. Though Moscow and Ankara had thus far managed to compartmentalize their differences over Syria, Russian-Turkish relations grew increasingly tense following Russia’s intervention, particularly as Russia intensified its air campaign against Ankara-backed Turkmen rebels.\textsuperscript{57} Tensions peaked on November 24, 2015, when Turkish forces shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber. One of the Russian pilots and another Russian servicemember sent to rescue them were then killed by Ankara-backed Turkmen rebels, marking Russia’s first combat casualties of the war.\textsuperscript{58}

Couching the shoot-down in personal terms, Putin demanded an apology for the “stab in the back delivered by terrorists’ accomplices.” He accused Turkey of aiding the Islamic State through illicit hydrocarbon purchases,\textsuperscript{59} later charging that the shoot-down was rooted in Ankara’s “domestic policy of quite conscious Islamicisation.”\textsuperscript{60} Moscow broke off military contacts with Turkey and deployed S-400 batteries and other military assets to Syria, effectively closing Syrian airspace to Turkey.\textsuperscript{61} Russia intensified its air campaign against Turkey-backed Syrian rebel groups, reportedly even striking a Turkish aid convoy.\textsuperscript{62} A multi-language Russian propaganda campaign amplified criticism of Turkey.\textsuperscript{63} Surveys conducted the following May by Russia’s leading independent polling agency showed Turkey as

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. See also: Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, \textit{The Red Web: The Kremlin’s War on the Internet} (NYC: Hachette Book Group, 2015), pages 123–147.

\textsuperscript{56} Mitat Celikpala, “Russia’s Policies in the Middle East and the Pendulum of Turkish Russian Relations,” \textit{The Jamestown Foundation}, October 5, 2017. (https://jamestown.org/program/russias-policies-middle-east-pendulum-turkish-russian-relations/)


Russia’s third-biggest enemy, behind only America and Ukraine, up dramatically from 2015.\[^{64}\] Until the shootdown, the two sides had managed to insulate economics from their geopolitical disagreements. But afterward, Moscow suspended the TurkStream and Akkuyu projects and imposed harsh sanctions against Turkey,\[^{65}\] while Russia’s Federal Security Service harassed Turkish banks and businesspeople in Russia.\[^{66}\] Ankara, for its part, blocked dozens of Russian ships from transiting the Turkish Straits after accusing Moscow of detaining Turkish vessels at Russian ports.\[^{67}\] In his December 2015 address to Russia’s Federal Assembly, Putin declared that Russia’s retaliation would go beyond sanctions, vowing to make Ankara rue its “heinous war crime.”\[^{68}\] Days later, a Russian soldier drew Turkish outrage when he brandished a shoulder-mounted anti-aircraft launcher while transiting the Bosphorus Strait.\[^{69}\] Russian warships harassed Turkish civilian vessels the following week.\[^{70}\] Shortly thereafter, Turkey suffered cyberattacks suspected to be the work of Russian hackers.\[^{71}\] Moscow also increased political and military support for the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Forces (YPG),\[^{72}\] which Ankara views as an affiliate of the outlawed PKK.

In downing the Su-24, Erdogan had sought to demonstrate not only that Turkey was a major power in the region, but also that it could invoke NATO’s support if Russia retaliated. Immediately after the incident, a panicked Erdogan called an emergency meeting of the alliance. To his surprise and dismay, however, Washington and other Western capitals issued a tepid, equivocal response, reflecting their reluctance to risk conflict with Moscow.\[^{73}\] Likewise, Washington and Berlin rejected Ankara’s request to cancel a planned withdrawal of Patriot surface-to-air


Washington's backing of the YPG as the primary Syrian ground force against the Islamic State also alarmed Erdogan, who argued America had chosen to partner with one terrorist organization to defeat another. While Washington prioritized defeating the Islamic State, Ankara's priority was overthrowing Assad.

Seeing the West as unreliable, Erdogan concluded he could not afford to alienate Russia. In June 2016, seeking to break his diplomatic isolation and secure Moscow's blessing for operations against the YPG, which Ankara had come to see as a higher priority than toppling Assad, Erdogan sent Putin an ambiguously worded letter expressing regret over the Su-24 incident and stressing his desire to improve relations. The letter followed months of public and private Turkish diplomatic efforts to ease tensions, largely rebuffed by Moscow. Likely seeing Erdogan's overture as an opportunity to negotiate from strength, Putin accepted Erdogan's letter as an apology and agreed to restore relations.

A Turkish military faction's attempted coup d'état in July 2016 cemented Erdogan's turn Eastward. Following the failed putsch, the Turkish leader complained about delayed and lukewarm Western pledges of support. While also infuriated by Washington's refusal to extradite his former ally-turned-archnemesis, Fethullah Gulen, a Pennsylvania-based Turkish cleric who many Turks believe orchestrated the coup, Western criticism of Erdogan's subsequent domestic crackdown fueled further tensions.

Putin seized the opportunity to bolster ties with Turkey and sow division within the Western alliance. He was among the first world leaders to call Erdogan and condemn the coup. Unnamed Turkish sources reportedly said Putin even offered the assistance of nearby Russian military forces. Two weeks later, Erdogan traveled to St. Petersburg for his first post-coup meeting with his Russian counterpart. Asli Aydintasbas, "With Friends Like These: Turkey, Russia, and the End of an Unlikely Alliance," The Wilson Center, September 2017.

78. Russian Federation Presidential Executive Office, “Vladimir Putin received a letter from President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” June 27, 2016. (http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52282)
81. Putin’s alacrity in calling Erdogan echoed the support that the Russian leader provided to his Turkish counterpart following Turkey's 2014 Gezi protests. At the time, Putin was the first head of state to visit Erdogan's controversial new presidential palace, which Western leaders refused to visit for another year. See: Asli Aydintasbas, “With Friends Like These: Turkey, Russia, and the End of an Unlikely Alliance,” European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2016, page 7. (https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/WITH_FRIENDSLIKE_THES_.ECFR178.pdf)
foreign visit, during which he and Putin agreed to normalize relations. Erdogan expressed gratitude for Putin’s “psychological support.”

Russian media fanned the flames of Turkish anti-Western sentiments while encouraging Russian-Turkish reconciliation, running conspiratorial articles alleging U.S. involvement in the coup. The two sides moved quickly to restore their partnership, agreeing to work together in Syria, resurrect the TurkStream and Akkuyu projects, expand trade and investment, and cooperate in the defense industry. Even when a Turkish gunman assassinated the Russian ambassador in December 2016, Putin kept Russian-Turkish ties on track by deflecting blame away from Ankara.

Part II: Enduring Geopolitical Competition With Russia

Despite Russia and Turkey’s rapprochement, their interests and ambitions diverge or clash in many arenas, from Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean to the Balkans, Black Sea, Caucasus, and Central Asia. Turkey’s desire to remain in NATO, though useful for Moscow as a divisive force within the alliance, also limits the long-term potential for Russian-Turkish relations.

Nevertheless, Putin and Erdogan have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to navigate disagreements and crises and negotiate pragmatic understandings, often at the West’s expense. The worse Ankara’s tensions with Washington and Brussels, the stronger Moscow’s leverage to coerce or induce Turkey to advance Russian interests.

At the same time, Turkey’s increasing geopolitical adventurism has led to greater competition with Russia in recent years. This trend looks likely to continue, potentially offering opportunities for Washington and its Western allies to exploit the additional strain on Russian-Turkish relations.

---

Syria

Syria remains a pivotal theater in Russian-Turkish relations. Despite continuing disagreements, Moscow and Ankara have cooperated to expand their diplomatic and military footprints at the West’s expense. They have established an alternative to the Western-led peace process and struck deals over thorny issues, such as the fate of northeastern Syria and Idlib province. As prominent pro-Kremlin analyst Fyodor Lukyanov explains, Russia and Turkey’s “partnership” in Syria is based not on common goals or trust, but on an “understanding that without interaction, neither party can achieve anything on its own.”

Critically, Erdogan’s initial plans to replace the Assad regime with a Muslim Brotherhood-led government under Ankara’s tutelage shifted to preventing the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish statelet on Turkey’s southern border. Moscow supported this effort by acquiescing to Turkish military operations against the YPG in 2016 and in 2018, for which Ankara needed Russian permission to use Syrian airspace. In return, Ankara leveraged its influence with Syria’s opposition to help broker a pair of December 2016 deals to clear rebels from Aleppo and establish a nationwide cease-fire. Peace talks backed by Russia, Turkey, and Iran began the next month in Astana (now called Nur-Sultan), sideling Washington. The talks yielded four so-called “de-escalation zones” across Syria that ultimately facilitated the return of regime control to rebel-held areas.

America’s inconstant Syria policy has empowered Russia, increasing Moscow’s importance for Turkey. This proved particularly true in October 2019, when then-President Donald Trump withdrew U.S. troops from northeastern Syria ahead of a Turkish military operation against the YPG. The withdrawal forced the Kurds to accept a Russian-brokered deal that returned regime control to several key Kurdish towns. Russian forces took over abandoned U.S. military bases and began patrolling the line of contact between Syrian and Turkish forces.

Moscow, however, worried the Turkish incursion could disrupt Russia’s peace process in Syria, allow a resurgence of the Islamic State, and lead to a permanent Turkish presence in Syria.\(^{100}\) Moscow’s warnings to Ankara, initially muted, intensified as Turkey’s operation against the YPG continued, culminating in a trip by Erdogan to Sochi later that month. Intense negotiations yielded an agreement that protected each side’s core interests, enforced by joint Russian-Turkish patrols. Ankara agreed to freeze its advances and not to permanently occupy captured territory. Turkey also committed to support the Astana process and Constitutional Committee and signaled potential openness to a Russian-facilitated reconciliation with Damascus. Moscow, meanwhile, pledged to remove YPG forces from the Turkish-Syrian border and facilitate the return of Syrian refugees from Turkey.\(^{101}\)

While still officially opposed to Assad, Ankara has come to tacitly accept his rule. Russia, for its part, is still keen to facilitate dialogue between Turkey and the Assad regime. Moscow has encouraged Turkey and Syria to resolve their disputes over border and Kurdish issues by reviving the 1998 Adana Agreement, under which Damascus and Ankara resolved bilateral tensions by cracking down on the PKK.\(^{102}\) In January 2020, Russia facilitated a Moscow meeting between the Syrian and Turkish intelligence chiefs, their first since the Syrian war began.\(^{103}\)

Still, the situation along the Syrian-Turkish border remains unstable. Idlib, in particular, is a flashpoint. Moscow wants eventually to return the Turkey-backed Islamist stronghold to regime control. But Ankara fears additional refugee flows into Turkey, which already hosts over 3.6 million displaced Syrians. Under a September 2018 deal Putin and Erdogan struck in Sochi, Turkey temporarily averted a Russia-backed regime offensive against Idlib. In return, Ankara promised to establish and jointly enforce a demilitarized buffer zone, clear the area of “radical” rebel fighters and heavy weaponry, and open two strategic highways.\(^{104}\)

Following Turkey’s perceived failure to implement the agreement, a renewed regime offensive against Idlib began in May 2019, backed by Russian air support. By January 2020, regime advances had sent almost a million refugees fleeing toward Turkey’s border, while threatening Turkish military observers in the area. Ankara deployed thousands of troops to prevent the fall of Idlib.\(^{105}\) Fearing a conflict with Russia, Ankara called for NATO support and requested a U.S. Patriot deployment. Washington declined to provide more than rhetorical support.\(^{106}\)

---


104. Joyce Karam, “Full text of Turkey-Russia memorandum on Idlib revealed,” The National (UAE), September 19, 2018. (https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/full-text-of-turkey-russia-memorandum-on-idlib-revealed-1.771953). The M5 highway, which links Syria’s four largest cities, is vital for the military control and economic recovery of Syria. The M4 highway connects Aleppo to the pro-Assad Alawite stronghold of Latakia, home to Russia’s Khmeimim air base, which has come under continual attack from militants based in Idlib.


The crisis climaxed when Russian-Syrian airstrikes killed dozens of Turkish soldiers. Ankara requested an emergency NATO meeting, while Russia deployed two Kalibr-armed frigates and several amphibious assault ships to the region. Choosing to publicly blame the strikes on the Assad regime rather than Russia, Ankara launched a massive counteroffensive that decimated pro-regime forces. Russia stepped aside for Turkey’s face-saving counteroffensive, likely reflecting both a recognition of Turkey’s local military advantage and Putin’s reluctance to risk broader Russian-Turkish relations. After Russia-backed pro-regime forces reversed Turkey’s territorial gains, Putin and Erdogan again took “manual” control with face-to-face talks in Moscow on March 5, 2020. Tough negotiations produced an additional protocol to the 2018 Sochi deal, stipulating a cease-fire, a “security corridor” around the strategic M4 highway, and joint Russian-Turkish patrols.

While that deal averted a larger crisis, the Idlib problem persists. Both sides continue to accuse the other of not implementing their agreements on Idlib, and Assad is eager to retake the province. Turkey, however, has deployed reinforcements to prevent further regime advances, including south of the still-closed M4 highway, whose opening would likely be the objective of a renewed Russian-Syrian offensive. A September 2021 Erdogan-Putin meeting in Sochi, held amid intensifying Russian and Assad regime strikes in and around Idlib, produced no apparent breakthroughs. Russian-Syrian attacks have continued as part of an apparent effort to pressure Ankara. The Idlib problem will thus continue to test the Russian-Turkish relationship, while giving Moscow leverage through the threat of renewed refugee flows into Turkey.

Meanwhile, Ankara is beating the drums of war in northern and northeastern Syria. Turkey complains...
that Russia has failed to clear out YPG fighters, whom Ankara frequently accuses of attacking Turkey and Turkish-controlled areas in Syria. After a pair of alleged Kurdish attacks in mid-October, Erdogan declared he has “no patience left.”116 Turkish officials later explicitly threatened another offensive against Kurdish strongholds in northern and northeastern Syria.117 Ankara has since poured reinforcements into Turkish-controlled parts of Syria, mobilized its Syrian proxy fighters, and stepped up artillery and drone attacks against YPG positions.118

In response, Russia and the Assad regime have bolstered their military posture in northern119 and northeastern Syria120 and conducted continual military exercises there.121 Meanwhile, Russian diplomats reportedly are working to contain the escalation.122 Some reports claim Ankara hopes to secure Moscow’s blessing for the offensive by trading territory near the M4 highway in Idlib,123 though the prospects for such a deal remain unclear.124 In an interview published on November 9, the commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said Moscow had assured them that it “had told the Turks that [Russia] would not accept an attack.”125 The Russian and Turkish defense ministers discussed Syria via phone on November 15 but offered no details on their conversation.126

---

120. See, for example: “US holds onto ‘Deconfliction Channel’ with Russia in Northeastern Syria,” Asharq Al-Awsat (UK), November 3, 2021. (https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3282926/us-holds-%E2%80%98deconfliction-channel%E2%80%99-russia-northeastern-syria);
125. “Russian, Turkish defense ministers discuss Syria — Turkish Defense Ministry,” TASS (Russia), November 15, 2021. (https://tass.com/defense/1361615)
Libya

Erdogan and Putin have extended their pattern of competition and transactional cooperation to Libya. Despite having divergent — though not irreconcilable — interests, Moscow and Ankara facilitated a recent peace agreement in Libya that has cooled tensions. But if the deal falls apart, as Libya’s previous agreements have, Russian-Turkish competition could heat up again.

For Turkey, which seeks to restore its Ottoman-era influence across the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya is a battleground for competition not only with Russia but also with the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which bitterly oppose Ankara’s support for political Islam. Ankara also seeks to preserve a maritime delimitation agreement with Libya’s erstwhile UN-recognized government, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), designed to bolster Turkey’s efforts to expand its maritime borders.127 Both Turkey and Russia also hope to secure lucrative energy and construction contracts in a restabilized Libya, having lost billions of dollars’ worth of deals following the 2011 NATO-backed toppling of Muammar Qaddafi. For Russia, Libya also offers inroads for regional influence, potential port access in the Eastern Mediterranean, and diplomatic leverage in Europe thanks to Libya’s role in migrant and hydrocarbon flows.

Working with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, Moscow provided diplomatic, political,128 financial,129 military, and military-technical support to Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA),130 the main adversary of the GNA. Haftar’s forces controlled most of Libya, including its major energy assets. Yet backing Haftar was always a tactical bet for Russia, which also cultivated ties with the GNA131 and other power brokers,132 including Qaddafi’s son Saif al-Qaddafi133 and the speaker of Libya’s Tobruk-based

House of Representatives. This multi-vector strategy, coupled with Russia’s lower stakes in Libya relative to Turkey, has afforded Moscow a greater degree of flexibility.

In April 2019, Haftar launched a campaign to overthrow the Tripoli-based GNA. Seeing an opportunity to increase its influence, Russia deployed Wagner Group contractors who numbered as many as 1,400 by late 2019, providing what UN monitors called “an effective force multiplier for” Haftar. Turkey, meanwhile, supplied arms to shore up the GNA and allied militias. When LNA forces began a decisive battle to take Tripoli in December 2019, Erdogan doubled down, sending Turkish military advisors, armed drones, heavy weapons, and thousands of Turkey’s Syrian proxy forces. Russia responded by deploying additional Wagner as well as Syrian contractors.

Ankara, wary of slipping into a proxy war with Moscow, reportedly also reached out to Moscow “to avoid a confrontation.” While inaugurating the TurkStream pipeline in January 2020, Putin and Erdogan released a joint statement calling for a cease-fire and political settlement in Libya. Days later, the warring parties, under Russian and Turkish pressure, forged a shaky truce before peace talks began in Moscow and Berlin, where Turkey and Russia pushed for a lasting cease-fire, but to no avail.

In May 2020, following a Putin-Erdogan phone call in which they called for a truce and renewed peace efforts, Russia responded by deploying additional Wagner Group contractors.

---


“Libya peace talks in Moscow fall short of ceasefire deal,” Al-Arabiya (UAE), January 14, 2020. (https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/north-africa/2020/01/14/Libya-peace-talks-in-Moscow-fall-short-of-ceasefire-deal.html). Russia and Turkey reportedly would have jointly enforced the cease-fire, and the deal would preserve Turkey’s maritime delimitation agreement. An unnamed Turkish official said the deal would have allowed Russia and Turkey to cooperate on energy exploration.
Russia abandoned Haftar’s failing offensive, and Ankara and Tripoli allowed Wagner and Russian-backed Syrian forces to redeploy safely. With the LNA on the run, Turkish-backed forces began retaking territory, marching toward strategically important Sirte and Al-Jufra Airbase. To prevent their fall, which would undercut Moscow’s diplomatic leverage, Russia deployed over a dozen unmarked Mig-29s and Su-24s (likely Wagner-flown) along with additional Wagner and Syrian contractors, forcing a stalemate. With Russian and Turkish support, an October 2020 cease-fire led to a February 2021 agreement to establish an interim executive authority before elections in December 2021.

Yet although the cease-fire agreement called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces within three months, Russia and Turkey continued to fly contractors into Libya even after the cease-fire. Ankara demands that any withdrawal deal must exclude Turkish military advisors, while Moscow insists it must cover all foreign forces and not alter Libya’s current military balance.

In mid-September, following talks aimed at normalizing relations with Egypt, Turkey reportedly withdrew an unspecified number of Syrian contractors from Watya airbase southwest of Tripoli. In return, Ankara reportedly asked Cairo to help ensure Wagner forces also leave Libya. Later that month, Wagner


152. Foreign Minister Sergiy Lavrov, Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s news conference to sum up the high-level meetings week at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 25, 2021,” September 26, 2021. (https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4867149)

153. “Источник: Турция после договоренностей с Египтом выводит наемников с авиабазы в Ливии [Source: Turkey, after an agreement with Egypt, withdraws mercenaries from an airbase in Libya],” TASS (Russia), September 14, 2021. (https://tass.ru/mezdunarodnaya-panorama/12383641)

operatives reportedly began redeploying from the Jufra and Ghardabiya airbases toward eastern Libya.\textsuperscript{155}

On October 8, Libya’s Joint Military Commission announced an action plan for a UN-monitored “withdrawal of all mercenaries, foreign fighters and foreign forces … in a phased, balanced and synchronized manner,” but offered no further details or timeline.\textsuperscript{156} A commission member said the plan consists of two stages: The first, hopefully begun before the elections, would involve the gradual removal of Wagner, Sudanese, and Syrian fighters on the front lines, while the second would involve Russian, Turkish, Gulf Arab, and European military forces.\textsuperscript{157} The commission is now seeking domestic and international buy-in.\textsuperscript{158} Ankara, however, wants to retain its military presence in Libya,\textsuperscript{159} and Turkey’s Syrian proxy force there reportedly remains largely intact.\textsuperscript{160}

Meanwhile, Libya’s fragile peace looks increasingly precarious as the country heads toward presidential elections on December 24.\textsuperscript{161} Fundamental issues such as the unification of Libya’s armed forces and the regional allocation of the national budget remain unresolved. Haftar is running despite protests by his opponents, including Ankara,\textsuperscript{162} thanks to a controversial new law rammed through Libya’s eastern-based parliament in September.\textsuperscript{163} Moscow, for its part, argues Libya’s political settlement should incorporate “all forces of Libyan society,” including Haftar and Saif al-Qaddafi, another presidential

\textsuperscript{155} “Wagner Reportedly Withdraws From Jufra and al-Ghardabiya Air Bases,” 


\textsuperscript{157} “JMC member: Action Plan will take place in two stages,” 
\textit{The Libya Observer} (Libya), October 10, 2021. (https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/jmc-member-action-plan-will-take-place-two-stages). Later, Libyan media reported that the plan would involve four phases: 1) mutual withdrawal to predetermined points in two cities to establish goodwill; 2) introduction of international observers; 3) an accounting of all foreign forces and mercenaries; and 4) withdrawal in successive stages. See: Sami Zaptia, “The 5+5 Joint Military Committee four-stage Action Plan for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Libya leaked: Libya’s 218TV,” 

\textsuperscript{158} Libyan 5+5 Joint Military Commission, Press Statement, “13th round of the 5+5 JMC talks,” October 8, 2021. (https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/jmcs_statement_geneva_meeting_6-8_oct_2021_20211008_english.pdf); “Libya’s 5+5 JMC to meet with Turkish, Russian officials,” 

\textsuperscript{159} “Egypt wants Turkey ‘to freeze not cancel’ military agreement with Libya,” 

\textsuperscript{160} Fehim Tastekin, “Turkey sends mixed signals over Syrian mercenaries in Libya,” 

\textsuperscript{161} Angus McDowall, “Libya’s proposed election is a moment of danger in push for peace,” 

\textsuperscript{162} See, for example: “Libya’s Dbeibah says election law flawed,” 

\textsuperscript{163} “Controversy over voting law overshadows Libya election,” 
candidate.\textsuperscript{164} Haftar’s opponents are allegedly angling to postpone the presidential election,\textsuperscript{165} fearing a loss of power,\textsuperscript{166} and the Turkey-friendly interim prime minister will likely run despite his caretaker role.\textsuperscript{167} Even if the elections are held, the losers likely will not accept defeat. Libya’s cease-fire and peace process could soon collapse, potentially reigniting military competition between Turkey, Russia, and other external actors.

**South Caucasus**

The Russian-brokered conclusion to the fall 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict again demonstrated Erdogan and Putin’s ability to cut deals to strengthen their respective influence while sideling the West. Yet Ankara’s larger role in the conflict also signaled a growing assertiveness in a region Moscow sees as within its sphere of influence. While the conflict’s conclusion may have strengthened Russia’s hand, the episode could augur increased Turkish assertiveness and Russian-Turkish competition in the Caucasus.

The Soviet collapse led Turkey to seek to expand its influence in the Caucasus, including through closer relations with Georgia as well as Azerbaijan, a country with which Turkey shares strong ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties.\textsuperscript{168} Ankara’s ambitions perturbed Moscow, which is a treaty ally of Armenia but also seeks to maintain close ties to Baku and fears interference in Russia’s near abroad.

“The Soviet collapse led Turkey to seek to expand its influence in the Caucasus, including through closer relations with Georgia as well as Azerbaijan, a country with which Turkey shares strong ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties.”

Mindful of such concerns, Ankara proceeded cautiously, declining to intervene in the first Armenia-Azerbaijan war in the early 1990s. By the 2000s, Russian-Turkish competition in the Caucasus had subsided significantly.\textsuperscript{169} Despite being one of Tbilisi’s top sources of arms and a vocal proponent of Georgian NATO membership, Erdogan was muted during the 2008 Russian-Georgian War. Subsequent Armenia-Azerbaijan clashes occasionally raised Russian-Turkish tensions, but Ankara never actively intervened in the conflict, with Turkish officials telling Baku that war would be a “nightmare.”\textsuperscript{170}


\textsuperscript{166} “Tripoli ‘stabilisation’ summit paves the way for postponing elections,” Africa Intelligence (France), October 6, 2021. (https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa_diplomacy/2021/10/06/tipoli--stabilisation--summit-paves-the-way-for-postponing-elections,10969586-eve)


\textsuperscript{169} Fiona Hill and Omer Taspinar, “Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus: Moving Together to Preserve the Status Quo?” Institut Francais de Relations Internationales, January 2006. (https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/hilltaspinaranglais.pdf)

Turkey’s avoidance of direct military involvement shifted dramatically by 2020, however. Beginning in September 2020, the three-decades-long frozen conflict turned hot, leading to a bloody six-week war.\textsuperscript{171} In late July 2020, Turkey deployed several F-16s to Azerbaijan for joint exercises, then left them there, presumably to deter Armenia during the impending Azerbaijani offensive, which Ankara encouraged and supported.\textsuperscript{172} Turkish exports of drones and other materiel to Azerbaijan had spiked six-fold in 2020, most of it in the month before fighting began.\textsuperscript{173} Azerbaijan employed Turkish drones to deadly effect, routing the Russian-equipped Armenians. Erdogan also supplied over 2,500 Syrian contractors as well as — according to Yerevan — Turkish military advisors,\textsuperscript{174} drawing protests from Moscow. As Azerbaijani forces rolled ahead, Ankara and Baku pushed for a greater Turkish role in the OSCE Minsk Group, the conflict’s negotiation mechanism, chaired by Russia, France, and the United States but dominated by Moscow. The Kremlin resisted Ankara and Baku’s effort.\textsuperscript{175}

By November 9, with Azerbaijani forces on the verge of taking Stepanakert, the de facto capital of the self-proclaimed Armenian Republic of Artsakh in Nagorno-Karabakh, Putin brokered a last-minute cease-fire,\textsuperscript{176} in part through behind-the-scenes negotiations with Erdogan.\textsuperscript{177} Under the deal, which notably excludes Turkey as a formal party, Azerbaijan regained control over a third of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the surrounding territories. Fulfilling a decades-old goal, Russia deployed nearly 2,000 peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin Corridor. Ankara and Baku secured a commitment for transport links — to be overseen by Russia — between Azerbaijan’s newly reclaimed territory and its Nakhchivan enclave,\textsuperscript{178} which borders Turkey. These links can help Turkey strengthen economic ties with both Azerbaijan and Turkic-speaking Central Asia.\textsuperscript{179} Ankara managed to secure involvement in a joint monitoring center,\textsuperscript{180} but Moscow rejected a Turkish peacekeeping role.\textsuperscript{181} As a result, while Turkey further boosted its influence with Azerbaijan, Putin outmaneuvered Erdogan to solidify Russia’s role as the conflict’s key arbiter, increasing Russia’s leverage with both Baku and Yerevan.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{174} “Death toll of mercenaries in Azerbaijan is higher than that in Libya, while Syrian fighters given varying payments,” \textit{Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (UK)}, December 3, 2020. (https://www.syriahr.com/en/194516); “Armenian PM says Turkish high-ranking army officers are in Azerbaijan,” \textit{TASS} (Russia), September 29, 2020. (https://tass.com/world/1206609)
\item \textsuperscript{175} See, for example: “Azerbaijan wants Turkey to co-chair Minsk Group,” \textit{TRT World} (Turkey), October 12, 2020. (https://www.trtworld.com/asia/azerbaijan-wants-turkey-to-co-chair-minsk-group-40516)
\item \textsuperscript{181} “No Turkish peacekeepers to be sent to Nagorno-Karabakh,” \textit{TASS} (Russia), November 12, 2020. (https://tass.com/politics/1222931)
\end{itemize}
Still, Turkey's assertive approach constituted a clear challenge to Russia, portending greater Russian-Turkish competition in the South Caucasus. In June 2021, after signing a declaration affirming the Turkey-Azerbaijan alliance, Erdogan said he does not rule out a Turkish military base in Azerbaijan. The Kremlin quickly shot back that it pays “special attention” to the potential “deployment of [NATO] military infrastructure ... near our borders” and is prepared “to ensure our security and interests.” In September, Turkey announced the appointment of senior military officers to a number of Azerbaijan-related positions, including a previously undisclosed unit called the “Azerbaijan Operational Group,” reportedly intended to signal readiness to send a Turkish military contingent to Azerbaijan if the need arises. Subsequent Turkish-Azerbaijani military exercises in the Caspian Sea, near the Russian-monitored Lachin Corridor, and in Nakhchivan also caused concern in Moscow.

Meanwhile, Armenian-Azerbaijani tensions remain high. Nagorno-Karabakh’s final status remains unresolved, and Baku has grown increasingly frustrated with Moscow and the Russian peacekeepers. Azerbaijani analysts predict these Russian-Azerbaijani tensions may escalate by 2025, when Baku could veto an extension of the Russian peacekeeping mandate — potentially offering Turkey an opportunity to maneuver for greater influence.

Paradoxically, Ankara’s increased influence may lead to closer Russian-Turkish interaction. Turkey needs Russian cooperation to realize the regional economic and transport connections envisioned in the November 2020 cease-fire deal and a January

---

187. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of Iran Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Moscow, October 6, 2021,” October 6, 2021. (https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/Minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/70vQR5JWVmR/content/id/4881252);
192. For example, Moscow has expressed support for the “3+3” format (comprising the three Caucasus states plus Russia, Turkey, and Iran) proposed by Ankara and Baku, though Tbilisi has unsurprisingly been cold to the idea. See: “Russian, Turkish diplomats discuss launch of 3+3 talks on Southern Caucasus,” TASS (Russia), November 15, 2021. (https://tass.com/world/1361611)
Black Sea Region

Russia’s presence in the Black Sea is vital for defense of its southwestern flank and for power projection into the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Mediterranean. Historically, the Black Sea and its littoral regions were ground zero in Russian-Turkish competition. Today, the region is a key locus of Russian-Western competition and a rare bright spot in Turkish-Western relations, with opportunities for further cooperation.

Russia and Turkey have long sought to limit outside influence in the region. The 1936 Montreux Convention gives Ankara control over the Turkish Straits and restricts the passage of warships, limiting the presence of non-littoral NATO vessels in the Black Sea. Moscow supports the convention as a check on NATO’s Black Sea presence but has at times violated the convention’s letter or spirit to facilitate submarine deployments to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Following the Soviet collapse, Ankara, enjoying newfound naval supremacy in the region, sought to promote its influence through regional security and economic frameworks. In 2001, Russia accepted Ankara’s invitation to join the Black Sea Naval Force and its Operation Black Sea Harmony, which exclude the United States. (Ankara refused to participate in a similar NATO operation.) When Washington applied for observer status in the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation in 2005, Ankara abstained, and Moscow opposed it.

Following Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia, Erdogan sought to avoid confrontation with Moscow, including by denying two U.S. Navy hospital ships passage through the Turkish Straits. Ankara modified its strategy after Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

Russia also has an interest in establishing these links. Likewise, as Russian analysts have advocated, the Kremlin may calculate that closer engagement with Turkey can help avoid further Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, manage Russian-Turkish competition in the region, and neutralize the threat of NATO influence in the South Caucasus.

2021 follow-on agreement. Russia also has an interest in establishing these links. Likewise, as Russian analysts have advocated, the Kremlin may calculate that closer engagement with Turkey can help avoid further Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, manage Russian-Turkish competition in the region, and neutralize the threat of NATO influence in the South Caucasus.

of Crimea and military build-up in the Black Sea, which shifted the balance of power in Russia's favor. Warning that the Black Sea had "nearly become a Russian lake," Erdogan sought a greater NATO presence. That push softened following the Russian-Turkish reconciliation in 2016 but did not disappear. In 2016, Turkey agreed to establish a NATO "tailored Forward Presence" in the Black Sea despite vocal Russian opposition.

Ankara has since resisted a further expansion of NATO's Black Sea presence, careful to balance between Russia and the West. Turkey conducted Black Sea naval exercises with Russia in 2017 and 2019, a tangible demonstration of Ankara's continuing balancing act. This year, Ankara has assured Moscow that Erdogan's controversial Canal Istanbul project, which Moscow feared could allow NATO to circumvent the Montreux Convention, will not lead to an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea.

Erdogan has similarly walked a fine line vis-à-vis Ukraine. Ankara made little noise at the time of the annexation, fearful of angering Moscow, and opposes the Ukraine-related Western sanctions against Russia. Turkey undermined Ukraine's strategic and economic interests by supporting Russia's TurkStream pipeline, which bypasses Ukraine. Still, Turkey refuses to recognize the Crimea annexation and criticizes Russia's mistreatment of the peninsula's Turkic-speaking Tatar

---


208. “Turkey says it is against EU sanctions on Russia,” Hurriyet Daily News (Turkey), August 11, 2017. (https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-says-it-is-against-eu-sanctions-on-russia---116601)
population. 209 Turkey and Ukraine are negotiating a free-trade agreement 210 and discussing Ukrainian observer status in the Turkic Council. 211

Most importantly, the two countries have increased their military-technical and naval cooperation, 212 drawing Moscow’s ire. 213 Turkey and Ukraine seek to further expand defense ties, signing military and military-technical cooperation agreements in October 2020. 214 During an April 2021 visit by Erdogan to Ukraine, he and his Ukrainian counterpart touted plans to share technology to co-produce drones and naval corvettes. 215

This earned a sharp rebuke from Moscow, 216 which expressed further dismay over Ukraine’s deployment of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones to Donbas. 217 Nevertheless, Turkey delivered a TB2 batch to the Ukrainian navy in July, 218 following a previous delivery to the Ukrainian army. Kyiv plans to purchase 24 more TB2s in 2021–2022. 219 On September 29, the same day Erdogan and Putin met in Sochi, Kyiv and Turkish drone maker Baykar signed a memorandum for joint training and maintenance centers for Turkish drones, 220 prompting another Kremlin protest. 221 They reportedly

---


216. “Press review: Russia warns not to embolden Kiev and restricts flights to Turkey,” TASS (Russia), April 13, 2021. (https://tass.com/pressreview/1277091)

217. “‘Hardly anything to rejoice about’: Moscow dismayed over Turkish drones in Donbas,” TASS (Russia), April 13, 2021. (https://tass.com/politics/1277251)


221. “Kremlin calls talks between Putin and Erdogan useful and timely,” TASS (Russia), September 30, 2021. (https://tass.ru/politika/12543763)
are also considering drone production in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{222} A month later, Ukraine conducted its first TB2 strike against Russia-led forces in Donbas,\textsuperscript{223} leading the Kremlin to warn that Turkey’s drone deliveries risk destabilizing the situation in eastern Ukraine.\textsuperscript{224}

**Part III: A New Partnership?**

**Military-Technical Cooperation: Turkey’s Quest for the S-400**

Erdogan’s anti-Western convictions have strained relations with NATO, leading him to pursue security cooperation with Russia and, to a lesser extent, with China. Washington’s main point of contention with Ankara concerns Erdogan’s decision to buy Russia’s S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system. For Moscow, that move offered an opportunity to strengthen Russian-Turkish relations while undermining NATO unity and military interoperability, demonstrating Russia’s ability to defy the West,\textsuperscript{225} and boosting Russia’s defense industry and potentially Russian intelligence collection.\textsuperscript{226}

Since Ankara first asked NATO to deploy Patriot batteries on Turkish soil during the First Gulf War, Turkey has placed a premium on securing its airspace. Believing that NATO did not fully appreciate Turkey’s vulnerability, Ankara resolved to acquire an air defense system of its own.\textsuperscript{227} For several years, Turkey haggled with Washington over acquiring the Patriot system. Ankara has cited several reasons for walking away, including U.S. refusals to meet Turkish demands on co-production and technology sharing and even an outright U.S. refusal to sell the system. U.S. officials believe Ankara has consistently looked for excuses not to follow through — even rejecting favorable U.S. terms on pricing and co-production — as part of Turkey’s attempts to assert strategic autonomy from NATO.\textsuperscript{228}

In 2013, Ankara demonstrated readiness to break with the West by announcing its intention to buy the Chinese-made HQ-9 from a U.S.-sanctioned company.\textsuperscript{229} Congress responded by barring Turkey from using American funds to purchase the HQ-9, citing the Chinese manufacturer’s missile sales to Iran.\textsuperscript{230} Turkey abandoned the deal two years later.

\textsuperscript{222} Illia Ponomarenko, “Turkish-supplied drones enter the battlefield against Russia,” Kyiv Post (Ukraine), October 31, 2021. (https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/turkish-supplied-drones-enter-the-battlefield-against-russia.html)


During the 2016 coup attempt, rogue pilots used U.S.-made F-16s to target both the Turkish parliament building and Erdogan's private plane. This personal threat on his life may have prompted Erdogan to pursue the S-400 as a hedge against future coups involving F-16s. He likely also saw the S-400 as a means of currying favor with Russia and demonstrating independence from the West. In July 2017, Erdogan announced Turkey would procure the system. After signing the contract and making an advance payment, Turkey in December 2017 announced a $2.5 billion agreement to purchase up to four batteries from Russia, with over half the financing provided by a Russian loan.

Vigorous U.S. efforts to reverse Erdogan's decision, including sanctions warnings and a renewed offer of Patriot missiles, went nowhere. Ankara withdrew from the Patriot negotiations in March 2019, citing a lack of agreement regarding loans and technology sharing. Turkey began receiving S-400 deliveries that July, with Ankara saying it would fully deploy the system in April 2020. Calling the purchase "the most important deal in modern [Turkish] history," Erdogan said 100 Turkish specialists were in Russia training to operate the system, and that this number might be "increased tenfold." Turkish media personalities and analysts hailed the delivery as Turkey's "liberation from the West."

Concerned that co-location of the S-400 and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter could allow Russia to develop countermeasures against the F-35, Washington expelled Turkey from the Joint Strike Fighter program, costing Turkey's economy an estimated $9 billion. The Pentagon completed the expulsion in September and expects to remove Turkish manufacturers from the F-35 supply chain by 2022. Despite U.S. sanctions

threats, Turkey publicly tested the S-400 against U.S.-
made F-16s in November 2019. In October 2020, Ankara conducted a live-fire S-400 test following unconfirmed reports that Turkey had used the system’s radar to track a Greek F-16. Washington banned U.S. export licenses for Turkey’s defense procurement agency in December 2020.

“Turkey’s purchases of Russian weapon systems may go beyond its initial two S-400 batteries. In January 2021, Erdogan confirmed that talks with Russia on procurement of a second S-400 batch would continue. Moscow has indicated openness to limited co-production.”

Despite Erdogan’s break with Washington, Russia reportedly rejected Turkey’s request for technology transfer and joint production, at least for the first two batteries. Moscow also refused to allow Turkey access to the S-400’s electronic codes and internal data and insisted on installing the system’s friend-or-foe identification system itself, meaning Turkey’s S-400s likely will register all non-Turkish aircraft as “unknown.” Ultimately, Erdogan prioritized personal over national interests, depriving Turkey of the F-35 and subjecting the struggling Turkish economy to the risk of U.S. sanctions.

As the Biden administration gave Ankara the cold shoulder in early 2021, Turkey’s defense minister hinted that Turkey was open to a compromise if Washington reevaluates its support for the YPG. “We can find a solution for the S-400s in our negotiations with the U.S. but we expect them to see the facts about the YPG,” he said.

Turkey’s purchases of Russian weapon systems may go beyond its initial two S-400 batteries. In January 2021, Erdogan confirmed that talks with Russia on procurement of a second S-400 batch would continue. Moscow has indicated openness to limited co-production. In August, the head of Russia’s Rosoboronexport said that an additional S-400 contract “is expected … this year,” and that Moscow and Ankara were discussing potential Turkish purchases of Russian Su-35s as well as anti-aircraft systems to protect Turkey’s S-400s. An unnamed Turkish security official, however, told the BBC that a deal for a second S-400 batch was not on the immediate agenda, speculating that Moscow was


250. “Rosoboronexport expects another contract on S-400 shipment to Turkey to be inked this year,” TASS (Russia), August 25, 2021. (https://tass.com/defense/1329881)

251. “Russia ready to expand cooperation with Turkey for aircraft deliveries — Rosoboronexport,” TASS (Russia), August 18, 2021. (https://tass.com/economy/1327409)
Erdogan later vowed that U.S. sanctions would not deter him from buying additional S-400s, but offered no specifics about the deal’s terms or timeline.253 Following his September meeting with Putin in Sochi, Erdogan said he and the Russian leader had discussed the S-400 as well as further defense cooperation, including on fighter jets, plane engine production, and building ships and submarines.254 He also said their teams would develop a roadmap for potential Russian-Turkish space cooperation, claiming Putin had offered to help Turkey build rocket launch facilities.255 As Russia-based Turkish analyst Kerim Has conjectured, these statements may reflect Erdogan’s efforts to ensure his “personal survival” by buying Putin’s agreement to delay an offensive in Idlib.256

An October 7 Defense News article quoted an unnamed senior Turkish procurement official as saying that talks for the second S-400 batch “are progressing” but are still at the “strategic and political” level and “have not yet reached technicalities, financing and pricing.” The official added that Russian engine technology for Turkey’s indigenous fifth-generation stealth fighter, dubbed TF-X, would be the priority for technological cooperation, saying the next level of talks will be “exploratory.” The official also said Turkey “may soon start talks to acquire Russian fighters as a stopgap solution before” the TF-X is ready for mass production, which likely will take until at least the mid-2030s.257

Despite its S-400 purchase, Ankara remains heavily dependent on the United States and other NATO allies to support Turkey’s indigenous defense industry. While the industry has made strides in recent years,258 it continues to suffer from brain drain, political interference, the need for new markets and investment, dependence on foreign components, and depreciation of the local currency.259 While Erdogan may prefer to decouple the Turkish defense industry from the alliance, it will be possible only over the long term.

Indeed, the day after the Erdogan-Putin meeting, Ankara sent Washington a formal request for 40 new Block 70 F-16s and nearly 80 modernization kits for Turkey’s existing F-16s. Procuring Russian warplanes would be impractical given the high costs of adapting to the Russian systems — a fact reportedly underscored in analyses by Turkey’s Defense Ministry and state procurement agency. As the head of that agency and Turkey’s foreign minister recently indicated, Ankara may hope to leverage a potential purchase of Russian Su-35s or even Su-57s to convince Washington to help Turkey sustain its aging F-16 fleet. That gambit is likely doomed: Congress has effectively banned any arms sales to Turkey until the S-400 issue is resolved. On the other hand, Turkey’s S-400 purchases also made little practical sense. Erdogan may simply use the F-16 deal’s likely failure to justify further defense-industrial cooperation with Russia.

Economic Cooperation

Following the Soviet collapse, Turkey and Russia built their uneasy rapprochement on burgeoning economic cooperation, including in the fields of tourism, trade, investment, construction, and energy. Deals subsequently brokered by Putin and Erdogan have added multibillion-dollar projects in the natural gas and nuclear fields. The leaders frequently tout their ambitious (albeit unrealistic) target of $100 billion in bilateral trade by 2023. Economic interdependence and joint energy infrastructure projects provide powerful incentives for Moscow and Ankara to manage their geopolitical differences.

This interdependence is asymmetric, however. Russia enjoys greater leverage. This advantage stems not only from a trade imbalance in Russia’s favor, but also from the nature of the goods and services involved. While Moscow can restrict Russian tourism in Turkey or the activity of Turkish construction companies in Russia with relative ease, Ankara cannot simply turn off gas imports from Russia. Moscow has exploited this asymmetry, including during the 2008 Georgia War and, most notably, the 2015 Su-24 crisis.

Dependence on Russia gives Ankara a powerful incentive to accommodate Moscow. As Erdogan said in September 2008, shortly after the Russo-Georgian War, “The United States is our ally. But Russia is our strategic neighbor. We buy two-thirds of the energy we need from Russia. That country is Turkey’s number one partner in trade... Our allies must adopt an understanding approach.”

Zafer Sonmez, then-CEO of the Turkey Wealth Fund, and Russian Direct Investment Fund CEO Kirill Dmitriev sign joint documents at a ceremony attended by Erdogan and Putin following Russian-Turkish talks at the Kremlin on April 8, 2019. (Photo by Mikhail Metzel/TASS via Getty Images)

---


Turkey’s increased role as a transit country for Russian gas, coupled with Ankara’s efforts to reduce dependence on Russian supplies, could level the playing field to some degree. Turkey’s diversification efforts could also diminish the ability of economic ties to serve as ballast in Russian-Turkish relations, potentially making the relationship more brittle.

Tourism

Tourism accounts for almost 4 percent of Turkey’s GDP and over half its services exports, which are crucial for Turkey’s overall economic health. Turkey has become the favorite destination of Russian tourists, bolstered by a 2010 visa-free travel agreement. This dependence on Russian tourists offers Moscow a low-cost, high-impact tool for economic coercion.

“Turkey has become the favorite destination of Russian tourists, bolstered by a 2010 visa-free travel agreement. This dependence on Russian tourists offers Moscow a low-cost, high-impact tool for economic coercion.”

In 2014, 4.5 million Russian tourists visited Turkey, accounting for almost 13 percent of Turkey’s total number of foreign visitors that year. Following the November 2015 Su-24 shootdown, Moscow banned the sale of tourism packages and charter flights to Turkey and discouraged Russians from traveling there, causing Russian tourism in Turkey to plummet by 95 percent. Tourist flows quickly recovered after Moscow lifted its restrictions, rising to 4.7 million in 2017. By 2019, this figure had reached almost 7 million, accounting for 15.6 percent of all foreign visitors to Turkey, more than any other country. Although COVID-19 caused tourism to drop, long-term prospects look good as Moscow and Ankara work to expand acceptance of Russian MIR cards and the Russian ruble in Turkey.

Trade

Russian-Turkish bilateral trade peaked at $37.9 billion in 2008, then fell because of that year’s financial crisis. Also in 2008, Russia became Turkey’s second-largest trade partner, behind only Germany. Turkey runs an overall trade deficit with Russia given that Russia is Turkey’s top gas supplier. Russia remains a top destination for Turkish agricultural exports, especially citrus fruit and tomatoes. This trade received a boost from Russian countersanctions against EU agricultural exports, imposed in retaliation for the bloc’s 2014 sanctions against Russia, which Turkey notably declined to join. Turkey consistently ranks among the largest importers of Russian wheat.
on which Turkey depends as the world’s top flour exporter and one of the world’s biggest consumers of bread.²⁷⁴

Russian sanctions against Turkey over the November 2015 Su-24 incident led to a sharp downturn in bilateral trade. Total two-way trade stood at $31.2 billion in 2014 but plummeted to $16.9 billion in 2016, with Turkish exports to Russia dropping almost 61 percent year-over-year during the first half of 2016.²⁷⁵ Even after restoring relations, Russia retained a quota on imports of Turkish tomatoes, using it to support Russian producers but also as a bargaining chip with Ankara,²⁷⁶ including during the 2020 Idlib crisis.²⁷⁷

Russian-Turkish trade has recovered somewhat since Erdogan led a 2016 delegation to St. Petersburg to meet with Putin and the heads of various Russian ministries and major companies. Yet as of 2019, total two-way trade still amounted to only $26.3 billion.²⁷⁸ The imbalance remains substantial: Russia sent $22.45 billion worth of exports to Turkey, dwarfing Turkey’s $3.85 billion in exports to Russia.²⁷⁹

### Russia–Turkey Economic Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GDP, 2019</th>
<th>Turkey, Trade in goods with Russia, US$ billion</th>
<th>Russian tourists in Turkey, millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Investment and Construction

Russia has become an important destination for Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI). According to the Russian co-chair of the Russian-Turkish trade and economic cooperation commission, more than 3,000 Turkish companies are active in Russia. A number of leading Turkish firms and businesspeople with business interests in or with Russia have advocated stronger Turkish-Russian relations. Some of those businesspeople hold positions on Turkey’s influential Foreign Economic Relations Board, which has also supported closer ties with Moscow.

According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Turkish contractors have completed almost $76 billion worth of construction in Russia, which is the top foreign market for Turkish contractors. The construction sector has fueled Turkey’s economic growth and Erdogan’s electoral success over the last decade and a half.

Likewise, Russian firms have expanded their presence in Turkey over the last decade, concentrating on the energy, metallurgy, banking, and automotive sectors. For example, a plant opened by Russia’s MMK in 2011 became Turkey’s largest industrial enterprise. MMK also operates Turkey’s biggest privately owned port. That same year, Turkey became the first non-Russian-speaking market entered by Yandex, Russia’s most popular search engine. In 2012, Russia’s state-owned Sberbank acquired Turkey’s Deniz Bank for $3.6 billion, marking Russia’s largest overseas acquisition, although Sberbank later sold it due to Western sanctions. GAZ Group, Russia’s largest commercial motor vehicles producer, has been producing vans in Turkey since 2014, while Russia’s Lukoil has invested over $1 billion there. In December 2017, Turkey

---

281. “Over 3,000 Turkish companies working now in Russia — official,” TASS (Russia), July 30, 2021. (https://tass.com/economy/1321193)
launched a hydroelectric power plant built by Russia's PJSC Power Machines.290

Following the Su-24 incident, Moscow suspended work initiated earlier that year on Russian-Turkish joint investment and imposed restrictions on Turkish firms and workers in Russia, causing many Turkish companies to leave the Russian construction sector. Investment talks did not resume until August 2016, at which point the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and Turkey's Ronesans Holding announced an agreement for up to $400 million in joint investment projects.291 Ronesans and an Italian partner later announced a €1.3 billion contract to build Russia's largest gas processing plant.292 In 2019, RDIF and the Turkish Wealth Fund launched an up to €900 million joint investment fund.293

Russia and Turkey have each invested around $10 billion in the other's economy, according to the Turkish Foreign Ministry. However, Russian investment is more important for Turkey than vice versa.294 Between 2007 and 2016, Russian investments accounted for almost 3 percent of total FDI inflow into Turkey, while Turkish investments accounted for only 0.3 percent of total FDI into Russia.295 As of January 2021, Turkish FDI stocks in Russia amounted to $2 billion, compared to $6.4 billion in Russian FDI stocks in Turkey, according to official Russian data.296 Moreover, the $20 billion Akkuyu nuclear power plant (discussed below), for which Russia is providing over half the financing, will dramatically increase the value of Russian FDI in Turkey, exacerbating the asymmetry in the Russian-Turkish economic relationship.297

**Energy Cooperation**

Energy represents the cornerstone of the Russian-Turkish economic relationship, providing the basis for their rapprochement since the waning years of the Cold War. Turkey's growing demand for and reliance on imports made the country a natural — and valuable — partner for Russia, a leading energy exporter.298

**Natural Gas**

The Blue Stream pipeline, inaugurated in 2003, established a direct supply route for 16 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Russian gas to Turkey per year.299 The pipeline's inauguration marked a key step forward in Russian-Turkish relations and helped Russia reduce transit through Ukraine and the Balkans.
while preempting the proposed Trans-Caspian Pipeline, which would have supplied Turkey and the European Union from Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan.\(^ {300} \)

After Germany and Italy, Turkey was the third-largest purchaser of Russian natural gas in 2019,\(^ {301} \) accounting for almost 8 percent of Russia’s total pipeline gas exports to countries outside the former Soviet Union.\(^ {302} \) Turkey, which currently produces almost no natural gas, remains reliant on imports from Russia, although this dependence has decreased significantly in recent years, thanks largely to increased Turkish purchases of Azerbaijani gas and imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG).\(^ {303} \) Turkish gas imports from Russia fell by 47 percent from 2017 to 2019. Russia accounted for 33 percent of Turkey’s gas supply in 2019, down from 52 percent in 2017 and 58 percent a decade ago.\(^ {304} \) Russian gas exports to Turkey increased slightly in 2020 but soared by almost 140 percent in January–September 2021, according to Gazprom, as drought has led Turkey to boost gas imports to replace lower hydropower production.\(^ {305} \)

In January 2020, Putin, Erdogan, and their Bulgarian and Serbian counterparts inaugurated the TurkStream pipeline, intended to help Russia bypass transit through Ukraine and defend its market share in Turkey and Europe.\(^ {306} \) The new pipeline is designed to supply 15.75 bcm directly to Turkey and another 15.75 bcm to Europe. TurkStream is the successor to South Stream, which would have brought Russian gas directly to the Balkans before EU regulations led Russia to abandon the project in 2014 amid heightened tensions over Ukraine.\(^ {307} \) During a December 2014 visit to Turkey, Putin announced that Russia would instead build TurkStream.\(^ {308} \) By routing gas through Turkey, whose customs union with the European Union does not include gas, TurkStream helps Russia circumvent EU rules designed to improve gas market competition and reduce dependence on Russia.

The November 2015 Su-24 incident led Moscow to suspend talks on TurkStream,\(^ {309} \) which were already

---


307. “Россия решила остановить строительство 'Южного потока' [Russia decided to stop the construction of 'South Stream'],” *Interfax* (Russia), December 1, 2014. ([https://www.interfax.ru/business/410431](https://www.interfax.ru/business/410431))


stalling as Erdogan threatened to buy gas elsewhere following Russia's intervention in Syria.310 In early December 2015, Russian state energy behemoth Gazprom, a key Kremlin foreign-policy tool, abruptly demanded a higher price from Turkey's private gas companies and later reduced export volumes.311 The two sides reached a settlement the following year. Though well short of a full-blown gas war, Gazprom likely intended the move as a shot across Turkey's economic bow.312

Russia and Turkey revived TurkStream in October 2016 after normalizing bilateral relations. Russia agreed to provide Turkey with a price discount, while Turkey consented to TurkStream's second line.313 Gazprom accelerated work on the project,314 eventually completing construction in record time.315

Nevertheless, the Su-24 incident marked a turning point for Turkey, which has since sought to diversify its gas supply while positioning itself as a regional gas hub for supplies from the Caspian Basin, Central Asia, and the Eastern Mediterranean.316 Ongoing investments in import and storage infrastructure have enabled LNG deliveries to Turkey more than double since 2013, accounting for more than 33 percent of Turkey's natural gas imports in 2020.317 Following the TurkStream suspension, Turkey accelerated work on the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP),318 the longest leg of the Western-backed $40 billion Southern Gas Corridor, which began supplying Azerbaijani gas to Turkey in June 2018.319 TANAP can currently supply 6 bcm to Turkey and another 10 bcm to Europe, but the pipeline's capacity could be expanded to 31 bcm with additional investment.320 Turkey also hopes to develop newly discovered Black Sea reserves.321

Turkish gas importers had sought to use their increased market leverage to secure concessions from Gazprom as long-term gas contracts covering 8 bcm are set to

---


expire by the end of 2021. However, higher domestic demand (up 29 percent from Turkey's post-2010 average) and record global gas prices have strengthened Gazprom's hand. In addition, a handful of private Turkish companies owe Gazprom around $2 billion in unpaid debts for failing to take contracted volumes, providing Gazprom with further leverage over those firms. On November 4, Turkey's energy minister said the sides had largely reached a deal to renew Turkey's expiring contracts but with an increased amount from the beginning of 2022.

Nuclear

Ankara has looked to the nuclear industry to meet Turkey's growing energy needs and reduce dependence on imports. Turkey granted the contract for the Akkuyu nuclear power plant (NPP), its first, to Russian state-owned Rosatom. In 2010, Rosatom signed an agreement to build, own, and operate (BOO) the $20 billion Akkuyu NPP, with four Russian-designed reactors. Rosatom halted construction following the Su-24 incident, by which point the company had already invested $3.5 billion. Rosatom did not terminate the contract, however, reportedly out of concern over the deal's heavy compensation clauses. Following Erdogan's apology, Rosatom returned to the project, which the Turkish leader agreed to grant billions of dollars' worth of tax breaks and other benefits. Construction of the first reactor formally resumed in December 2017. The last reactor is projected to come online in 2026. Once completed, the plant is expected to fulfill roughly 10 percent of Turkey's energy needs. During September 2021 talks with Putin in Sochi, Erdogan proposed working with Russia to build two additional NPPs.

In addition to deepening Turkey's reliance on Russian technology and energy, the project's terms allowed Rosatom to assist the Turkish Atomic Energy Authority, which has never supervised a project of this size, in writing Turkey's updated regulatory framework. This

risks “regulatory capture,” whereby a regulator serves the interests of the regulated entity rather than those of the public. This dynamic can undermine safety, as shown in the Fukushima nuclear accident. Meanwhile, Akkuyu’s BOO model, which has never been used for reactor financing and construction, incentivizes Rosatom to cut corners.333

Turkey’s Pursuit of Alternative International Institutions

In recent years, Ankara has sought greater involvement in several non-Western international institutions in which Russia is a leading member. This trend reflects Ankara’s frustration with the EU accession process and general antipathy toward the West. It also reflects the rise of Turkey’s Eurasianist camp and Ankara’s desire for greater engagement with what it sees as increasingly important alternative power centers that can help Turkey balance reliance on the West.334

Moscow has encouraged talk of Turkey’s “Eurasian vocation”335 and has engaged Turkey through various Eurasian institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; the Eurasian Economic Union; the Istanbul-based Dialogue Eurasia Platform;336 and multiple annual inter-parliamentary conferences focused on regional connectivity and counterterrorism,337 one of which Turkey hosted in 2018.338

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a Eurasian organization designed to facilitate cooperation, primarily in the security sphere, between its member states: Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, which unanimously accepted Iran’s bid to join in September 2021.339 Moscow has supported greater Turkish-SCO cooperation but remains skeptical about full Turkish accession, viewing it as incompatible with Turkey’s NATO membership.340 Nevertheless, Ankara continues to seek stronger ties with the organization. Turkey first applied for SCO membership in 2007, following the European Union’s suspension of Turkey’s accession negotiations.341 Turkey became an SCO “dialogue partner” in 2013 and is pursuing the

335. Angela Stent, Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest (NYC: Hachette Book Group, 2019), page 278.
next level of association, observer status.\textsuperscript{342} In 2013, Erdogan even said he told Putin, “[T]ake us into [the SCO] and we will forget the EU.”\textsuperscript{343} Erdogan has since reiterated those sentiments,\textsuperscript{344} and in 2017 Turkey became the first non-SCO member to chair the SCO Energy Club, the organization’s forum for promoting energy cooperation among members and observers.\textsuperscript{345} In 2018, SCO election monitors certified the results of Turkey’s June 2018 parliamentary elections, providing Erdogan with international support amid a critical election monitoring report from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe\textsuperscript{346} and other Western criticism of Turkey’s democratic backslide.\textsuperscript{347}

**Eurasian Economic Union**

Ankara has also expressed interest in boosting ties with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Putin’s signature regional integration project. In 2013, Kazakhstan’s president said Erdogan had expressed interest in joining the EAEU Customs Union and proposed allowing Turkey to join.\textsuperscript{348} Erdogan later clarified that Ankara “support[s] the idea of concluding a free trade agreement with the Eurasian countries” rather than seeking full membership.\textsuperscript{349}

*“Ankara has also expressed interest in boosting ties with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Putin’s signature regional integration project.”*

In December 2014, Putin said the parties were pursuing a Turkey-EAEU free-trade agreement (FTA),\textsuperscript{350} although talks halted following the November 2015 Su-24 incident. But following Erdogan’s apology and August 2016 visit to Russia, Turkey’s economy minister said FTA negotiations had resumed and would initially cover services and investments but could later include industrial and agricultural goods.\textsuperscript{351}


\textsuperscript{348} “Назарбаев предлагает принять Турцию в члены Таможенного союза [Nazarbayev proposes to admit Turkey to the Customs Union],” *RIA Novosti* (Russia), October 24, 2013. (https://ria.ru/20131024/972393944.html)


\textsuperscript{351} Ali Unal, “Following July 15, Turkey will transform into one of the most developed democracies in the world,” *Daily Sabah* (Turkey), August 22, 2016. (https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2016/08/22/following-july-15-turkey-will-transform-into-one-of-the-most-developed-democracies-in-the-world)
Still, such an agreement remains unlikely — not least because Armenia, which, in addition to being an EAEU member and a formal Russian ally, is a bitter enemy of Turkey and categorically rejects Turkish involvement in the organization. Moscow has indicated sensitivity to Armenia’s concerns and may be wary of facilitating pan-Turkic ambitions in Central Asia.

**BRICS**

Turkey has expressed interest in joining BRICS, an international grouping of emerging economies — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — designed to promote economic development and challenge the West’s dominant role in global economic governance. In April 2017, then-Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Simsek said Turkey was “seriously considering” joining the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB).

In 2018, Erdogan attended the 10th annual BRICS summit in his capacity as term chairman of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, marking Turkey’s first high-level official contact with BRICS. At the summit, Erdogan called on the BRICS countries to admit Turkey, pointing to the potential for joint economic projects and cooperation in the BRICS NDB and Business Council. He also expressed hope that negotiations for Turkish NDB membership would be completed soon, calling on the BRICS countries and Turkey to establish a more “impartial” international credit rating agency. For years, Erdogan has lashed out at the major Western-based agencies for downgrading Turkey’s rating amid the country’s democratic backslide and economic difficulties.

“Russia and its BRICS partners are generally receptive to Turkey’s desire for cooperation, and while Russia at present is not ready to expand BRICS, Moscow likely sees Turkish membership as an eventual possibility.”

Russia and its BRICS partners are generally receptive to Turkey’s desire for cooperation, and while Russia at present is not ready to expand BRICS, Moscow likely sees Turkish membership as an eventual possibility.

---

352. The EAEU’s founding Astana Treaty requires that decisions in the Supreme Eurasian Council, the bloc’s governing body, be made by consensus, thus giving Armenia veto authority over any Turkey-EAEU deal.


**Countering U.S. Sanctions**

Putin and Erdogan both loathe U.S. sanctions. The Russian leader has decried American “impudence” in targeting Russia, while his Turkish counterpart has accused Washington of behaving like “wild wolves.” This antipathy is not surprising: U.S. sanctions have exacerbated Russia’s and Turkey’s economic woes in recent years, undermining the strongmen’s domestic political positions.

As a result, Russia and Turkey have worked to insulate themselves from this threat, including by pursuing de-dollarization to reduce the reach of U.S. sanctions. This assumed particular importance for Moscow following the imposition of U.S. sanctions over Russia’s 2014 aggression in Ukraine. Turkey has likewise sought insulation from U.S. sanctions amid clashes with Washington over issues such as Turkey’s S-400 purchase, facilitation of Iranian and Venezuelan sanctions evasion, and 2016 imprisonment of American pastor Andrew Brunson.

Toward that end, Russia and Turkey signed an agreement in October 2019 aimed at conducting mutual payments in the ruble or lira instead of the dollar; connecting Turkish banks and companies to SPFS, Russia’s alternative to the SWIFT financial messaging system; and expanding access for MIR cards, Russia’s alternative to VISA and MasterCard. That agreement followed urgent talks the previous July as Turkey scrambled to protect itself amid the intensifying U.S.-Turkey dispute over Ankara’s S-400 purchase. The threat of additional U.S. sanctions over Turkey’s possible receipt of a second S-400 batch may fuel further Russian-Turkish cooperation on de-dollarization.

In addition, Ankara and Moscow both actively facilitate evasion of U.S. sanctions. Turkey has long been a permissive jurisdiction for sanctions evasion and other forms of illicit finance, often with the involvement of senior Turkish officials. Likewise, the Putin regime is a major purveyor of illicit finance,

---


from ill-gotten gains laundered overseas to funds moved covertly to evade sanctions, support rogue regimes, pilfer Western technology, or facilitate Russian influence and “active measures” abroad.

In recent years, Russia and Turkey have worked in parallel to help the regime of Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro evade U.S. sanctions. Russian state oil company Rosneft, a longtime player in the Latin American country, facilitated sanctions-busting Venezuelan oil exports to Asia, helping the regime stay afloat. After Treasury sanctioned two Rosneft subsidiaries involved in the scheme, Moscow shifted gears, buying Rosneft’s Venezuela operations in March 2020 to protect the company from sanctions. Reuters later revealed that almost two dozen phantom companies, mostly based in Russia, were chartering vessels to covertly ship Venezuelan oil to Asia. Amid increased U.S. sanctions pressure, those companies were virtually the only customers left on the export schedule of Venezuela’s state-owned oil company.

The websites for 15 of the companies were reportedly registered by a Moscow-based company founded in March 2020 by a Russian man who shares business interests with Betsy Desirée Mata Pereda, a Venezuelan woman implicated in a notorious Turkish-Venezuelan sanctions-evasion scheme that supported the Maduro regime.

### Russian Information Operations in Turkey: Complicity and Conflict

Turkey ranks among the countries most exposed to disinformation and most vulnerable to it. This is partly because the Erdogan government is the world’s leading jailer of journalists; independent and credible media outlets are increasingly scarce. Russia’s Turkish-language propaganda outlets, such as Sputnik Türkiye and RSFM Radio, are among the few remaining media organizations outside of Erdogan’s control. This

---


makes them popular among Turks seeking something other than Turkish government propaganda.\textsuperscript{376}

Russia’s Turkey-related information operations generally aim to cultivate support for Russia’s foreign policy agenda, undermine NATO, and divide Turkey from its Western allies.\textsuperscript{377} With rare exceptions, pro-Russia propagandists in Turkey do not disseminate “fake news,” instead providing factually accurate information with a pro-Russia spin.\textsuperscript{378} This allows pro-Russia propaganda to achieve greater impact in a Turkish information space already saturated with falsehoods.\textsuperscript{379}

Russia also maximizes its propaganda’s reach by playing both sides of the Turkish information space. Russia influences mainstream pro-government networks through its ties to the Turkish government, including cooperation between Russian and Turkish state media, while Sputnik Türkiye and RSFM Radio often support pro-opposition narratives. This strategy allows Russia to pivot quickly to whatever narrative is most useful, especially during crises.\textsuperscript{380} State-directed social media accounts and bots amplify this content among the Turkish public.\textsuperscript{381} Pro-Russia Turkish outlets, such as the Patriotic Party’s Aydinlik and Ulusal Kanal, further add to this mix.\textsuperscript{382}

Russia’s information activities have had a direct impact on Russian-Turkish relations, and vice versa. For example, Russia’s efforts to delegitimize Turkey by connecting it to the Islamic State not only distracted both Turkey and NATO from Russia’s brazen violation of Turkish airspace, but also helped fuel Turkey-NATO friction over Ankara’s policy toward the terror group.\textsuperscript{383} In response, Turkey banned Sputnik Türkiye in April 2016 and revoked its branch chief’s work visa. However, following Erdogan’s August 2016 meeting with Putin in St. Petersburg, Ankara lifted the ban and worked to restore the outlet’s image.\textsuperscript{384}

\textsuperscript{376} For comparison, Sputnik Türkiye has over 1 million Twitter followers as of December 2021, while Turkey’s state-run Anadolu Agency has almost 3.3 million. Sputnik’s global service, by contrast, has roughly 325,000 followers. DW Türkiye has just over 847,000 Twitter followers, although some other Western outlets, such as BBC News Turke (4 million), have far more.


further display of goodwill, Russia’s state TASS News Agency and Anadolu Agency, its Turkish counterpart, signed a content-sharing agreement during a March 2017 Putin-Erdogan meeting. Sputnik Türkiye’s reinstatement and the subsequent TASS-Anadolu cooperation deal suggest Ankara and Moscow have developed at least a tacit understanding regarding propaganda. Indeed, after Erdogan’s August 2016 meeting with Putin, Russian propaganda regarding Turkish-ISIS oil trade disappeared from Russian Turkish-language media, while Turkish pro-government media assumed a pro-Russian stance.

Moscow has also shown willingness to respect Turkey’s concerns. In June 2018, Sputnik announced it was shuttering its Kurdish-language branch, Sputnik Kurdî, reportedly at Ankara’s request. Yet tensions linger. As Russian-Turkish tensions spiked during the 2020 crisis over Idlib, Turkish law enforcement raided Sputnik Türkiye’s office, briefly detaining its editor-in-chief and three of its journalists.

In cases where Russian and Turkish interests align, their information operations can work synergistically. For example, both regimes have waged campaigns against Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch and Archbishop of Constantinople, for various reasons.

In August 2016, Erdogan mouthpiece Aksam published an article accusing Bartholomew I, the CIA, and U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gulen of plotting the coup to thwart Ankara’s rapprochement with Moscow. As evidence, Aksam cited an article published by Oriental Review, a disinformation site controlled by Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service.

While Turkish media historically have not tried to exert influence in Russia, this looks to be changing. In March 2020, Turkey’s state-run broadcaster TRT announced a new digital platform to reach Russian-speakers. TRT said the new platform and its social media presence will “play a key role in battling disinformation and manipulation,” suggesting Ankara seeks to shape how Russians and other Russian speakers view Turkey.

---

Policy Recommendations

Erdogan’s rapprochement with Russia reflects a fundamental shift in Turkish foreign policy. Ankara seeks to balance between East and West in pursuit of greater strategic independence and influence on the world stage. Although Ankara does not want to exit NATO, the alliance should not expect Turkey to be a reliable ally while Erdogan remains in power.

With that reality in mind, Washington and its allies must develop a long-term, unified strategy for relations with Turkey. This strategy should aim to make the most of the current situation by pursuing cooperation where Western and Turkish interests align, such as countering Russia in the Black Sea region and promoting alternatives to Russian energy. At the same time, the strategy should employ a combination of carrots and sticks to discourage Turkey from further aligning with Russia or otherwise undermining NATO, while mitigating against risks of further deterioration in Western-Turkish relations. Finally, the strategy should lay the groundwork to improve relations with Turkey in the post-Erdogan era.

Making the Most of the Current Situation

The United States and its allies should make the most of the present state of Turkish-Western relations by pursuing cooperation with Ankara where their interests align.

- **Work with Turkey to compete with Russia in the Black Sea region.** The region is a critical theater in the strategic competition with Russia, and no NATO strategy in the region can succeed without Turkey. Ankara wants to do more to support NATO interests in the Black Sea but fears NATO will abandon Turkey in a conflict with Russia. Washington and its allies should try to assuage these fears and work with Turkey toward a stronger NATO presence in the region.\(^{393}\) In addition to improving coastal and air defense assets in Romania and Bulgaria,\(^ {394}\) Washington and its NATO allies should pursue opportunities to support Turkish security cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia, for example through combined exercises and multilateral weapons-development programs. NATO should also work toward a Turkey-led Black Sea maritime patrol operation modeled on the alliance’s Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean.\(^ {395}\)

In the event Russian-Turkish military tensions flare up again, the Western allies should firmly and tangibly support Turkey — including Ankara’s control over the Turkish Straits, a likely focal point of any major military conflict between Russia and Turkey or between NATO and Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean.\(^ {396}\) Washington could also encourage European allies to explore Turkish (as well as Ukrainian, Georgian, and Moldovan) membership in the Three Seas Initiative, a political platform designed to promote European cohesion, transatlantic ties, and infrastructure, energy, and digital interconnectivity among countries bordering the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas.\(^ {397}\)

- **Promote alternatives to Russian energy.** Turkey and the West share the goal of reducing dependence on Russian gas and have achieved tangible results

---

395. Gonul Tol and Yoruk Isik, “Turkey-NATO ties are problematic, but there is one bright spot,” *Middle East Institute*, February 16, 2021. (https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-nato-ties-are-problematic-there-one-bright-spot)
through the recently completed Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), whose largest leg runs through Turkey. Washington and its transatlantic allies should look to sustain this progress by working with Ankara to provide political, technical, and financial assistance for further projects. Washington should support U.S. LNG exports, including by easing burdensome permit requirements and facilitating the construction of pipeline infrastructure in the United States. Likewise, the allies should support expansion of the SGC as well as the construction of a Trans-Caucasus Pipeline and associated interconnector pipelines to bring Turkmen (and potentially Kazakh) gas to the SGC. Washington and the European Union should also encourage Western companies to help Turkey exploit its new Black Sea natural gas reserves.

Furthermore, Washington should join the European Union in supporting Turkey's renewable energy and energy efficiency, which remain limited. The European Union should also encourage Ankara to liberalize Turkey's gas market by fully implementing its Natural Gas Market Law of 2001, which would align the Turkish market to EU standards and allow Turkey to join the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Gas and the Energy Community. In the nuclear realm, the European Union should engage Turkey through Euratom to pursue nuclear cooperation, align Turkey's regulatory framework with EU standards, and promote nuclear safety and security.

Carrots and Sticks

While fundamental improvement in Turkish behavior is unlikely in the near term, Washington and its allies should work to manage relations with Erdogan’s Turkey to discourage Ankara from further aligning with Russia or otherwise undermining the NATO alliance.

- **Washington should make clear that Turkey will face additional sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act if Ankara deploys the S-400 or purchases additional Russian weapon systems.** Possible incentives, preconditioned on Ankara's return or mothballing of its batteries, could include favorable financing for Patriot sales and support for bailout packages from international financial institutions. If Ankara starts unwinding its commitment to the S-400, NATO countries should work to rebuild military-to-military ties with Turkey. When appropriate, NATO should also renew and strengthen support for Turkish counterinsurgency efforts against the PKK while encouraging Ankara to resume the Kurdish peace process. A key carrot in this effort could be the resumption of the military intelligence cooperation that Washington suspended following Turkey’s October 2019 incursion into northeast Syria. Another could be Turkish participation in the European Union’s Permanent Structured Cooperation framework.

- **Washington and its allies should warn that Turkey will face further diplomatic, economic, and other costs if it continues to disrupt NATO unity and destabilize the Eastern Mediterranean.** Ankara should pay a price for watering down NATO’s

---


May 2021 condemnation of Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko’s forced diversion of a Ryanair flight to arrest journalist Roman Protasevich. Likewise, the allies should impose further sanctions if Turkey continues its gunboat diplomacy to derail energy projects in the Eastern Mediterranean.

**Mitigating Risks**

Turkish-NATO relations are likely to deteriorate further in the near term. Given that NATO lacks an expulsion mechanism, the allies must limit the damage Turkey can do to allied security.

- **Prepare for Ankara to terminate U.S. access to one or more bases in Turkey.** Erdogan threatened to do so most recently in December 2019. The departments of Defense and State should maintain up-to-date contingency plans presenting options for the U.S. response — bilaterally and within NATO — at the political and military levels. These plans should include measures to mitigate the immediate fallout; alternative basing options; and an analysis of the impact on NATO military activities, along with options to address resultant gaps.

- **Deepen military cooperation with partners in the Eastern Mediterranean to hedge against Turkish aggression and Russia’s increased military presence.** The bipartisan U.S.-Greece Defense and Interparliamentary Partnership Act of 2021, passed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in June, would take positive steps toward this goal. The act would authorize U.S. funding to provide Greece with International Military Education and Training assistance and to help Greece meet its defense needs and transition away from Russian equipment. The legislation would also authorize expedited F-35 deliveries to Greece and establish an inter-parliamentary group comprising the United States, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel. The renewed and expanded defense protocol the United States and Greece signed in October carried these efforts further by offering Washington greater access to Greek military bases, thereby facilitating deterrence of Ankara and Moscow.

**Preparing for a Post-Erdogan Era**

As they pursue these short-term objectives, the Western allies should keep an eye toward the future. Erdogan’s tenure will not last forever. His eventual departure could present an opportunity to bring Turkey back into the transatlantic fold. The West should lay the groundwork now to seize that opportunity when it presents itself. This should include a broad, coordinated effort to reengage the Turkish people and support Turkey’s democratic institutions and media environment.

- **Do not give up on the EU accession process.** Growing anti-Western sentiment among Turks stems partly from purposeful manipulation by Erdogan, but also from Western mistakes, including the European Union’s poor handling of Turkey’s accession process. Accession will prove impossible so long as Erdogan remains in power. But demonstrating continued EU willingness to accept Turkey should it meet the requisite criteria could help mitigate anti-Western sentiment in Turkey and facilitate improved EU-Turkish relations once Erdogan leaves office. The European Union should outline tangible steps to move the process forward. This roadmap should

---


include a plan to modernize and improve the EU-Turkey Customs Union agreement or replace it with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, conditioned on structural reforms for ensuring transparency and institutionalizing anti-corruption measures.406

• Address Erdogan’s democratic backslide. To help limit the damage done by Erdogan, the West should invest in initiatives to restore the rule of law, checks and balances, and academic and media freedoms and to monitor human rights violations. Re-engagement should include initiatives at the nongovernmental level, where Washington and its allies should invest in civic associations and initiatives to promote liberal ideals and norms to counter Turkey’s Islamist and Eurasianist bent. Sanctions targeting human rights violations and corruption under the Magnitsky Act and its European equivalents can help hold the Erdogan regime accountable and communicate to ordinary Turks that the West cares about their future. The Western allies should likewise support investigative journalism reporting on corruption involving Turkey.

• Washington should cooperate with European governments and media to counter Russia’s propaganda efforts in Turkey, including by pushing Ankara to increase access for Western media. Washington should create a Radio Free Europe outlet dedicated to Turkey and insist that Ankara allow it access. Washington should also make Russia’s Turkey-focused propaganda and disinformation a priority for the Global Engagement Center, and the European Union should do the same with its East StratCom Task Force.

• Reconsider U.S. withdrawals from the Middle East. Such withdrawals lead Turkey and other actors to hedge by pursuing closer ties with Russia. In Syria, while continuing its ongoing security cooperation with the SDF, the United States should also look for ways to promote cordial relations between the SDF and the governments of Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan. The Biden administration, in its willingness to rely on Turkish troops for guarding and running the Kabul International Airport following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, should avoid giving the Erdogan government the impression that it can enjoy impunity for its transgressions at home and abroad in exchange for transactional deals.

**Conclusion**

Although Erdogan and Putin have found ways of cooperating, often at the expense of the United States and its allies and partners, Turkey’s and Russia’s respective interests and ambitions conflict or diverge on multiple fronts. Washington should seek to leverage these tensions to undermine Erdogan’s collusion with Putin and contain Moscow in the short run, while laying the groundwork to bring Ankara back into the NATO fold in the post-Erdogan era.

---

Collusion or Collision? Turkey-Russia Relations Under Erdogan and Putin

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank FDD’s Ambassador Eric S. Edelman, Jonathan Schanzer, David Adesnik, and Tzvi Kahn and FDD Action’s Maseh Zarif for their feedback and edits, both substantive and stylistic. We also wish to thank our external readers, Anna Borschchevskaya and Boris Zilberman, for taking time out of their busy schedules to provide crucial feedback on our work. We are also grateful to our Turkey Program interns Zeynep Sude Akgundogdu, Umut Can Fidan, Luc Sasseville, and John A. Lechner for their research assistance, and to FDD’s Daniel Ackerman, Allie Shisgal, and Erin Blumenthal for the graphics, design, and production of this report. This report and the issues discussed within it have benefited greatly from the tremendous thought leadership of the advisors to FDD’s Turkey Program. Any errors are ours alone.

About the Foundation for Defense of Democracies

FDD is a Washington, DC-based, nonpartisan policy institute focusing on foreign policy and national security. For more information, please visit www.fdd.org.

FDD’s Turkey Program

Since the rise of the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power and Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s subsequent consolidation of one-man rule, Turkey has transformed from a trusted NATO ally with a commitment to secular governance and rule of law to a far more difficult actor. FDD’s Turkey Program seeks to inform policymakers and the public about the AKP’s dangerous and anti-American policies that threaten Turkish and Western security.

FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power

FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power promotes understanding of the defense strategies, policies, and capabilities necessary to deter and defeat threats to the freedom, security, and prosperity of Americans and our allies, by providing rigorous, timely, and relevant research and analysis.

The views of the authors do not necessarily reflect the views of FDD, its staff, or its advisors.

Cover Illustration by Daniel Ackerman / FDD

Cover Photos: Mikhail Klimentyev / AFP via Getty Images; Mikhail Svetlov / Getty Images; Adem Altan / AFP via Getty Images; Ludovic Marin / AFP via Getty Images; Mikhail Svetlov / Getty Images; aviation-images.com / Universal Images Group via Getty Images; Sefa Karacan / Anadolu Agency / Getty Images; Getty Images; Maxim Shipenkov / AFP via Getty Images; Muhammed Enes Yildirim / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images; Alexei Druzhinin\TASS via Getty Images
About the Authors

**Dr. Aykan Erdemir**, senior director of FDD’s Turkey Program, is a former member of the Turkish Parliament (2011 to 2015) who served on the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, the EU Harmonization Committee, and the Ad Hoc Parliamentary Committee on the IT Sector and the Internet. As an outspoken defender of pluralism, minority rights, and religious freedom in Turkey and the Middle East, he has been at the forefront of the struggle against violent extremism, religious persecution, hate crimes, and hate speech. Dr. Erdemir is a frequent contributor to debates in global media outlets on radical Islam, terrorism, hostage diplomacy, illicit finance, sanctions evasion, and corruption. He is a founding and steering committee member of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief and serves on the Anti-Defamation League’s Task Force on Middle East Minorities.

Dr. Erdemir received a B.A. in international relations from Bilkent University and an M.A. in Middle Eastern studies and Ph.D. in anthropology and Middle Eastern studies from Harvard University. He was a doctoral fellow at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and worked as a faculty member at Middle East Technical University and Bilkent University, Ankara. He has edited seven books and is co-author of *Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites and Spaces* (Routledge, 2016), *Erdogan’s Hostage Diplomacy: Western Nationals in Turkish Prisons* (FDD Press, 2018), and *Brothers in Arms: The Consolidation of the Turkey-Qatar Axis* (FDD Press, 2019).

Dr. Erdemir was awarded the Stefanus Prize for Religious Freedom (2016) and the Hellenic American Leadership Council’s First Freedom Award (2019) in recognition of his advocacy for minority rights and religious freedom.

**Dr. Sinan Ciddi** is an associate professor of national security studies at the Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University (MCU). Born in Turkey and educated in the United Kingdom, he obtained his Ph.D. in political science from the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies in 2007. Dr. Ciddi has authored numerous scholarly articles, opinion pieces, and book chapters on contemporary Turkish politics and foreign policy. Prior to joining MCU, he was the executive director of the Institute of Turkish Studies, based at Georgetown University (2011 to 2020). Between 2008 and 2011, he established the Turkish Studies program at the University of Florida’s Center for European Studies. Dr. Ciddi continues to serve as an adjunct associate professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service.

**John Hardie** is research manager and a Russia research associate at FDD. His research focuses on Russian foreign and security policy, U.S. policy toward Russia and the post-Soviet space, and transatlantic relations. His byline has appeared in publications including *Foreign Policy*, *Defense News*, *Defense One*, *The National Interest*, and *C4ISRNET*. Mr. Hardie is currently pursuing an M.A. in security studies from Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service and holds bachelor’s degrees in international relations, political science, and psychology from the University of Georgia.