



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 17/2017

The Russian option: Can Turkey forge an alliance with Russia?

by *Kaan Sahin*

After the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian fighter aircraft over the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015 (the first such incident between a NATO member and Russia since the 1950s), relations between the two countries seemed irreparable in the medium term. Moscow imposed economic sanctions on Turkey and threatened military consequences against Turkish forces in Syria if such an incident happened again. However, the summer of 2016 saw a rapprochement between the two countries. This culminated in a “High-Level Cooperation Council” meeting on 9 and 10 March this year, attended by presidents Erdoğan and Putin. There has even been speculation of a Turkish-Russian alliance. But would such an alliance be worthwhile for Ankara?

Given its partly problematic relations with certain western states, Turkey is generally thought to be on the lookout for new allies, seeing Russia as an obvious choice. Proponents of this view stress Ankara’s willingness to work more closely with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), of which Russia is an influential member.¹ Also based on this view is the prediction that the outcome of the Turkish constitutional referendum, and the sweeping changes it will bring, will encourage President Erdoğan to turn his back completely on an already disappointed West. Russia has plenty to gain from having Turkey on its side: the latter has the second largest army in NATO and bears strategic geographical importance.

However, the question is whether, from Ankara’s perspective, a partnership between Turkey and Russia would be a viable strategic alternative to its relationship with the West, and whether the interests of both countries are compatible. This question can be answered by looking at the political areas which are of most importance to the two countries.

Conflicting aims in Syria

Towards the end of 2016, it looked as if Turkey and Russia would be able to cooperate over the crisis in Syria, both militarily and politically. The two countries (together with Iran) initiated the Astana talks, which were held for the first time in January 2017. A key aim of these talks in the Kazakh capital is to bring about a cease-fire in Syria. Another is to support the Geneva peace talks in negotiating a solution to the Syrian conflict.

Militarily, too, Turkey and Russia have agreed better coordination of their Syrian operations to avoid a repeat of the aircraft incident in November 2015. From the end of 2016, their cooperation even extended to Russian military aircraft supporting Turkish forces with air strikes during the siege of the northern Syrian town of al-Bab, which was under occupation by ISIL. However, the fragility of this cooperation was under-

¹ See [Security Policy Working Paper No. 6/2017](#) by the Federal Academy for Security Policy.

scored in February, when three Turkish soldiers lost their lives in an attack by the Russian Air Force targeting ISIL in al-Bab. Moscow expressed regret over the incident, but accused the Turkish military of having sent the wrong coordinates to the Russian forces. Ankara denied this. Although the disagreement escalated no further, this incident shows how easily the situation in Syria can spark fresh conflict.

There is also serious disagreement between the two countries over how to deal with Kurdish fighters of the so-called People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria and their political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). From 2012, in the power vacuum created by the war, the PYD established a series of autonomous cantons on the border with Turkey, declaring a "Democratic Federation" in March 2017. Owing to the PYD's close ideological and organisational ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – which is considered a terrorist organisation by the EU, Turkey, and the United States – Ankara aims to thwart the party's ambitions for autonomy, and has so far managed to prevent it from taking part in the talks in Astana and Geneva. Furthermore the Turkish military and the YPG have engaged in combat in Syria.

However, the YPG receives military support from the United States and Russia, both of which view YPG fighters as key 'foot soldiers' in the fight against ISIL.² Russia currently has special forces deployed in the PYD canton of Afrin to train Kurdish fighters and work with them to combat the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra). Some of these special forces personnel have even worn the YPG insignia on their uniform. The Russian presence prevents Turkey from attacking YPG-controlled areas, which considerably reduces Turkey's options. Small wonder, then, that the Turkish government is so keen to persuade Russia to give up its support for the PYD.

But whereas the United States, out of respect for its Turkish ally, shows restraint in its political support of the PYD, Russia has increased its backing for PYD policies since the start of the year. On 27 January 2017, the Russian foreign ministry invited representatives of the Syrian opposition to come to Moscow, along with many PYD members, and presented them with a draft proposal for a new Syrian constitution. The draft describes a decentralised system and (without providing any detail) a Kurdish autonomous administration. This is much to Turkey's chagrin. Furthermore, Moscow has repeatedly called for PYD representatives to be included in the talks in Geneva and Astana, and is already mediating in talks between the Kurdish parties and the Assad regime. Early in 2016, the Kremlin allowed the PYD to open a diplomatic mission in Moscow. And unlike the United States and EU countries, Moscow does not even list the PYD's sister party, the PKK, as a terrorist organisation.

Turkish-Russian relations were further strained by a poison gas attack on the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun, on 4 April 2017 – which was presumably the work of the Assad regime. For years, Ankara had called for Assad's ouster, but since spring 2016 – with the international community focused on the fight against ISIL, and Russia's role in Syria growing – the Turkish government had toned down its rhetoric on the overthrow of Assad. Presumably, this was largely because Turkey's top priority is to prevent Kurdish autonomy in the north of the country.

After the chemical attack, and the US retaliatory strike against a Syrian Air Force base, there were renewed calls, internationally, for a future Syria without Assad. The Turkish government jumped at the chance to renew its plea for a security zone in Syria, and for the overthrow of Assad. The Turkish foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, even called on Russia to end its support for Assad. Depending on what position the Trump administration adopts towards Assad, this issue could become a source of tension between Turkey and the US, on the one hand, and Russia and Iran on the other.

² Officially both sides support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are made up of Kurdish and Arab fighters. However, the YPG provides the most fighters to the SDF, and leads the group as a whole. This paper refers only to the YPG, as its role is the most contentious point among the other actors involved.

Economics and energy: cooperation, dependence, or competition?

On the whole, economic interests are said to be the main driver of the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. Yet economic convergence has been slow. The Turkish tourist industry, which accounts for over ten percent of Turkey's gross domestic product, was hit hard by a slump in Russian visitors in 2016. Turkey hopes that the softening of bilateral relations will lead to an influx of Russian tourists this summer. However, after the downing of the Russian warplane, sanctions were also imposed on the Turkish food industry. These sanctions on food imports have gradually been lifted – except for the one on tomatoes. It remains to be seen how the trade relations between the two countries will develop in the near future.

When it comes to energy policy, the two countries are bound by a complex relationship of interdependency, cooperation and competition. The Russian state corporation Rosatom is building a nuclear power plant at Akkuyu in Turkey, which will help meet soaring Turkish demand for electricity. However, this presents the risk of long-term dependency for Turkey, which would have to rely on Russia for safety and maintenance of the plant for decades to come. Relations are on a more equal footing when it comes to the planned Turkish Stream gas pipeline, which will pump Russian gas across the Black Sea via Turkey to Greece. The Russian energy company Gazprom plans to finish work on the pipeline by the end of 2019. The project serves Russian interests in allowing its gas to bypass Ukraine, while Turkey hopes to cement its position as a commercial energy hub.

However, the relationship between the two countries over energy policy is complicated by their geostrategic ambitions: both aim to be the central axis in Europe's energy supply, and this inevitably puts them in competition with one another. Some in the Kremlin have questioned the wisdom of this project, which would help make Turkey a regional hub for Russian gas. For its part, Turkey is trying to reduce its dependency on Russia, with plans to obtain gas from Azerbaijan – via the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) – and then send it on to Europe. And if the Cyprus conflict were resolved, Ankara could attempt to deliver Israeli gas to Europe via Cyprus and Turkey. Clearly, then, Ankara's ambition to become a key supplier of gas to Europe conflicts with Moscow's own interests.

Departure from NATO?

Turkey's long search for an adequate missile defence system became more urgent in 2016, when ISIL repeatedly launched Katyusha rockets at Turkish border towns. Beforehand, US, German and Dutch Patriot missiles had temporarily been stationed in the south of the country as a means against missiles launched from Syria. The procurement of a missile defence system by Turkey has always been a sensitive issue for other NATO allies. In November 2015, Western partners breathed a sigh of relief when Ankara scrapped plans to buy a Chinese air defence system. Their concern is that integrating non-allied equipment into NATO systems would lead to considerable complications and might give non-allied countries access to sensitive information. Such fears seemed more than justified earlier this year, when the Turkish defence minister announced plans to acquire the Russian S-400 air defence system. Turkey has tried to allay NATO fears, saying the system would not be part of NATO's missile defence, and pointing out that another member, Greece, had previously acquired the S-300 (an earlier version) from Russia.

It would be premature to claim that NATO has lost its strategic relevance for Turkey, or vice-versa. On the contrary: Putin's ambitions in the Black Sea clearly demonstrate that Turkey and NATO have interests in common; while differences between Ankara and Moscow over defence and security matters are not just limited to Syria. Since its illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia has been gradually modernising its Black Sea fleet and setting up land-based systems to support its navy in the region. In response, NATO defence ministers, at a meeting in February 2017, agreed to increase maritime measures in the Black Sea.

Although rapprochement has led Turkey to engage in joint exercises with the Russian fleet, Ankara has no long-term interest in Moscow gaining the upper hand on Turkey's northern sea border. Prior to the rapprochement, Erdoğan's warning that the Black Sea was becoming a "Russian sea" came as no surprise. He even insisted on increasing NATO's Black Sea presence – something Ankara had never requested in previous years. For Turkey, adherence to the Montreux Convention of 1936, which gives it control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, is a matter of huge political importance. But Turkey's role as guardian, restricting access to these straits, has been problematic for Russia since the Cold War, while at the same time, an aggressive expansionist policy pursued by Russia in the Black Sea would be counter to Ankara's interests.

No alternative for Turkey

The analysis of policy areas presented here shows that there is considerable ambivalence in Turkish-Russian relations. The two main objectives of Turkey with regard to Syria – the containment of the PYD/YPG and the overthrow of Assad – run directly counter to Russian interests. Since the war in Syria seems likely to continue for years to come, no resolution to this conflict of interests is in sight. The situation in the Black Sea is also one of contrasting geostrategic interests. Although there will be economic cooperation between the two countries, even this will likely lead to friction, especially in the competition to control gas supplies to Europe. And we should bear in mind that there are other issues of conflicting interest beside those mentioned here – such as the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and the status of Crimea.

The prospect of a future Turkish-Russian alliance, then, seems uncertain to say the least. A comprehensive partnership with Russia, as an alternative to NATO and Europe, is not in Turkey's political interest. Strategic reorientation towards Russia would not benefit Turkey far beyond the medium-term.

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