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# Russia and Turkey

## Strategic Partners and Rivals

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Pavel BAEV

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# ***Russie.Nei.Reports***

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# Abstract

The extraordinarily troublesome year 2020 tested many international institutions and bilateral ties, but few experienced sharper challenges than the complex and troubled relations between Russia and Turkey, which have a strong impact on crisis developments in Europe's immediate neighborhood.

Moscow can be content that Ankara is now perceived in Paris, Berlin and Washington DC as a major troublemaker, but it finds itself rather too often on the receiving end of Turkish attempts at projecting power. It was the unreserved and forceful support granted by Turkey to Azerbaijan in the war against Armenia in autumn 2020 that forced many Russian analysts to re-evaluate the status and prospects of relations with this important and difficult neighbor. There is a degree of compatibility between the autocratic political systems maturing in Russia and Turkey, but the latter state is a NATO member, while the former perceives the Atlantic Alliance as the inexorable adversary. Many drivers shaping Russian-Turkish relations, from deepening domestic discontent with corrupt authoritarian rule to the shifts in the European energy market, are outside the control of their ambitious autocrats.

This analysis will focus on the most recent and ongoing shifts in the character of this troubled relationship and on particular manifestations of this evolution. The aim is to examine the possible impacts of Russian-Turkish joint and disjoint actions on the security developments in the EU Southern and Eastern neighborhoods and NATO's Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean theatres. Evaluation of the key dimensions of bilateral interactions, from historical and economic to personal, is followed by an investigation of the dynamics of interplay in four key intersections: the Syrian warzone, the Black Sea area, the Libyan conflict, and the Caucasus, shaken by the new spasm of war around Nagorno Karabakh.

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# Introduction: What Partnership?

The extraordinarily troublesome year 2020 tested many international institutions and bilateral ties, but few experienced sharper challenges than the complex and troubled relations between Russia and Turkey, which have a strong impact on crisis developments in Europe's immediate neighbourhood. Both states were hit badly by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and even more severely by the second wave, which has only just subsided as of the time of writing. The economic crises caused by the pandemic have also heavily affected both countries, and, even if President Vladimir Putin tried to argue at the traditional end-of-year press conference that the Russian economy performed not that badly – gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by only 3.1% – Russia's external behavior has become notably more restrained and cautious.<sup>1</sup> President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on the contrary, sought to cover his blunders in economic management with proactive and even reckless foreign policy enterprises stretching from Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean to the Caucasus. The European Union (EU) had to address these troubles, so the Turkish issue was added to the already heavy agenda of the December 2020 Brussels summit, where only provisional measures were drafted.<sup>2</sup> As for EU relations with Russia, they reached such a low point that Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggested terminating dialogue completely.<sup>3</sup>

Moscow can be content that Ankara is now perceived in Paris, Berlin and Washington DC as a major troublemaker, but it finds itself rather too often on the receiving end of Turkish attempts at projecting power. It was the unreserved and forceful support granted by Turkey to Azerbaijan in the war against Armenia in autumn 2020 that forced many Russian analysts to re-evaluate the status and prospects of relations with this important and difficult neighbor.<sup>4</sup> Answering

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1. "Vladimir Putin's annual news conference", Kremlin.ru, 17 December 2020, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru>. The official estimate of the GDP decline is produced by Rosstat, "Rosstat predstavliaet pervuiu otsenku VVP za 2020 god" [Rosstat presents the first estimate of GDP for 2020], Rosstat, 1 February 2021, available at: <https://rosstat.gov.ru>.

2. The enforcement of sanctions was postponed; see D. Gardner, "Turkey is Europe's Other Major Headache", *Financial Times*, 10 December 2020, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

3. P. Baev, "Russia Blackmails and Courts Europe", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 15 February 2021, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

4. A. Mardasov and K. Semionov, "Best Frenemies: Russia and Turkey", *Riddle*, 26 November 2020, available at: [www.ridl.io](http://www.ridl.io); A. Kortunov, "Recep Erdogan in a Russian Minefield", *Analytics and Comments*, Russian International Affairs Council, 2 October

questions at the traditional meeting of the Valdai club in October 2020, Putin downplayed the tensions and emphasized mutual interest in cooperation, stressing that “No matter how tough President Erdogan’s stance may look, I know that he is a flexible person, and finding a common language with him is possible”.<sup>5</sup> This elliptic description confirms the key role of the high-level interactions in maintaining the complicated relationship but gives little clue about its true status and the foreseeable prospects.

It is certainly not up to the two leaders to decide how and whether to upgrade the complex bilateral interactions that are typically described as a “strategic partnership”, a term that implies a far higher level of cooperation than what may be observed in, for instance, the tense deconfliction between the Russian and Turkish military operations in the Syrian Idlib province.<sup>6</sup> There is a degree of compatibility between the autocratic political systems maturing in Russia and Turkey, but the latter state is a NATO member, while the former perceives the Atlantic Alliance as the inexorable adversary. Many drivers shaping Russian-Turkish relations, from deepening domestic discontent with corrupt authoritarian rule to the shifts in the European energy market, are outside the control of their ambitious autocrats, so that the ups and downs in the partnership-building follow a pattern aptly described as a “serpentine trajectory”.<sup>7</sup>

This analysis cannot explore the whole depth and range of this evolving relationship. It will focus on the most recent and ongoing shifts in its character, and particular manifestations. The aim is to examine the possible impacts of Russian-Turkish joint and disjoint actions on the security developments in the EU Southern and Eastern neighborhoods and NATO’s Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean theatres. Evaluation of the key dimensions of bilateral interactions, from historical and economic to personal, is followed by an investigation of the dynamics of interplay in four key intersections: the Syrian warzone, the Black Sea area, the Libyan conflict, and the Caucasus, shaken by the new spasm of war around Nagorno Karabakh. The conclusions are inevitably blurred by the fog of the still-deepening crisis of the global governance triggered by the

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2020, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>; K. Krivosheev, “Tretij kondominium. Kak Karabakh izmenit otnosheniia Rossii i Turtsii” [The third condominium: How Karabakh will change Russian-Turkish relations], *Commentary*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 9 October 2020, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>.

5. “Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club”, Kremlin.ru, 22 October 2020, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

6. E. Ersen and S. Kostem, *Turkey’s Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order*. London: Routledge, 2019.

7. P. Baev and K. Kirisci, “An Ambiguous Partnership: The Serpentine Trajectory of Turkish-Russian Relations in the Era of Erdogan and Putin”, *Brookings Report*, September 2017, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu>.

pandemic but caused by a multiplicity of contradictions, from inequality to information overload, beyond the grasp of conventional political wisdom.



# Deconstructing the Complex Pattern of Interactions

The current twists in the geopolitical intrigues directed by the Russian and Turkish leaders are typically loaded with heavy historical contexts and resonate across various social connections, from shuttle trade to tourism. Even such a straightforward, even if highly controversial, matter as the acquisition by Turkey of four batteries of the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system (for \$US 2.5 billion, partly covered by Russian credit) invites reflections on the supply of arms from the newly born Soviet Russia to the struggling government of Kemal Ataturk in 1920-1922.<sup>8</sup> Examining the key dimensions in the present-day interactions always involves simplification and bracketing out these contexts, but it also helps to identify the main stakeholders in the partnership and measure the relative value of their stakes.

## The economic foundation and the energy flows

The impression of a solid economic foundation under the construct of the Russian-Turkish “strategic partnership” is often taken for a fact in strategic assessments, but it can hardly withstand closer examination. Declaring their commitment to expanding ties, the two leaders usually provide the target figure of \$US 100 billion for the volume of bilateral trade, but this goal, while rather modest in the picture of global trade flows, actually remains entirely unfeasible. According to Russian statistics, exports to Turkey in 2019 were worth \$US 17.75 billion and imports \$US 3.45 billion, so that the sum total increased by a mere 2.5% from 2018 and remained far lower than the peak of \$US 31.1 billion reached in 2014, before the sharp quarrel the following year caused by the air clash over Syria.<sup>9</sup> The only sector that showed real growth was tourism, so that Russia supplying 7.1 million tourists was at the top of Turkey’s 2019 list of visitors, before a

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8. One such reflection in official Russian media is I. Gashkov, “Soiuz Rossii i Turtsii: Kak Lenin prishel na pomoshch’ Atatiurku” [The alliance between Russia and Turkey: How Lenin helped Ataturk], *TASS*, 3 June 2020, available at: <https://tass.ru>.

9. “Soiuz Rossii i Turtsii” [Economic ties between Russia and Turkey], *Kommersant*, 4 March 2020, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

contraction to just 1.6 million in 2020, with unclear prospects for a rebound in 2021.<sup>10</sup>

It is too early to assess the full impact of the damage caused by the COVID-19 crisis, but it is remarkable that Putin has opted for a very cautious and even stringent macro-economic policy, while Erdogan resorted to willful dirigisme, resulting in serious aggravation of the negative impacts, and even in some family troubles.<sup>11</sup> The contraction of the Turkish economy has accelerated the trend that has been building for several years: a reduction in import of natural gas from Russia.<sup>12</sup> Gazprom supplied 52% of Turkey's gas import in 2017 and planned for further expansion with the construction of the TurkStream pipeline, but in 2019 its share decreased to 33% as Azerbaijan became the main supplier, followed by a further decline in 2020.<sup>13</sup> This pipeline project enjoyed plenty of attention from Putin, who took it for a breakthrough in his European gas geopolitics, but the costs of construction have slim chances of being covered.<sup>14</sup> For such Kremlin-connected oligarchs as Arkady Rotenberg and Gennady Timchenko, it was the construction of pipelines that generated high profits, and the losses from the underperformance of overpriced infrastructure are of no concern to them.<sup>15</sup> The discovery of promising offshore gasfields in the Turkish waters of the Black Sea brings the as yet uncertain prospect of a complete elimination of Turkey's dependency on gas deliveries from Russia.<sup>16</sup>

This shift in energy flows is seriously diminishing the political significance of extensive but low-profile bilateral economic ties. There are certainly many Turkish investors in the Russian retail and construction sectors, with Tatarstan enjoying priority attention, but they have no political clout in Ankara, much the same way as Russian tourism operators cannot hope that their voices could reach over the

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10. "Turkey Dominates Russia's Outbound Tourist Market", *Daily Sabah*, 24 December 2020, available at: [www.dailysabah.com](http://www.dailysabah.com).

11. L. Pitel, "Scale of Turkey's Economic Crisis Triggered Erdogan Family Implosion", *Financial Times*, 13 November 2020, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

12. "The State of Turkey's Gas Market and Reducing Foreign Dependency", *TRT World*, 21 August 2020, available at: [www.trtworld.com](http://www.trtworld.com).

13. Gazprom's miscalculations are detailed in Iu. Barsukov and D. Kozlov, "Turetskij istek. Kak i pochemu 'Gazprom' teriaet odin iz krupnejshchikh rynkov" [Turkish closure: How and why Gazprom is losing one of its major markets], *Kommersant*, 4 September 2020, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

14. One critical Russian expert opinion is that of M. Krutikhin, "'Gazprom'? Podozhdite v koridore" [Gazprom? Wait in the corridor], *Kompaniia*, 18 December 2020, available at: <https://ko.ru>.

15. On this particular type of corruption, see "Mikhail Krutihin: 'Iuzhnyj potok' i 'Turetskij potok' stali bessmyslennoj tratoj deneg" [Mikhail Krutikhin: South Stream and Turkish Stream became a senseless waste of money], *Novye Izvestiia*, 25 August 2020, available at: <https://newizv.ru>.

16. See "There's a Catch! Turkey's Hooked Tuna Gas Discovery Could Save It up to \$21 Billion in Import Costs", *Rystad Energy*, 9 September 2020, available at: [www.rystadenergy.com](http://www.rystadenergy.com).

Kremlin walls.<sup>17</sup> The only major policy-relevant economic project is the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant, Akkuyu, by Rosatom, which hopes to recover the loan-covered production costs estimated at \$US 20 billion by selling electricity after 2023, but the cost-efficiency calculations remain weak.<sup>18</sup> The sum total of economic interests, which in Russia – perhaps to a larger degree than in Turkey – means the profitable stakes of oligarchs with personal connections to Putin, is fast approaching insignificant value, which removes business-related constraints in the fast-evolving diplomatic intrigues and security contestations.

## Escalating soft- and hard-power encounters

Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia and Turkey are not neighbors in the strictly geographic sense, but the rich heritage of historic interactions (even if mostly reflected as wars) and the multiplicity of current ties, including tourism, produce a uniquely intense mutual exposure. Political efforts at building a “strategic partnership” have resonated strongly in both societies, and it is highly significant that the most recent shifts in public opinion indicate growing disillusionment in this rapprochement. In Russia, up to 75% of responders expressed a positive attitude to Turkey in the mid-2000s, but the clash in Syria resulted in a big change, so that 64% of responders held a negative (of which 22% strongly negative) attitude in 2016, and, at the end of 2020, the recovery of the positive attitude reached only 48%.<sup>19</sup> In Turkey, only 17.5% of responders believed in strategic cooperation with Russia in the mid-2020s (a drop from 26.1% in 2019), and 18.9% confirmed that there were problems (up from 6.5% in 2019), while most held mixed feelings.<sup>20</sup> One common feature of these perceptions is that they are changeable; the reservoir of mutual sympathy is not deep – and is growing shallower.

Counter-intuitive as it may seem, Turkey has greater resources of “soft power” available for applications in Russia than Moscow can draw upon for its policies of engagement and containment of Ankara's

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17. On Turkey's ties with this Russian region, see D. Zengin, “Turkey, Tatarstan Can Reach \$1B Trade: Turkish Minister”, *Anadolgy Agency*, 4 December 2019, available at: [www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr).

18. See Mustafa Sonmez, “Critics Say Turkey's Unfinished Nuclear Plant Already Redundant”, *Al-Monitor*, 15 December 2020, available at: [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com).

19. The Levada opinion poll was taken after the termination of hostilities around Nagorno Karabakh; see “Kak rossiiane otnosiatsia k Armenii, Azerbajdzhanu i Turtsii na fone Karabakhskogo konflikta” [How do the Russians relate to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey in the background of the Karabakh conflict?], Levada Center, 3 December 2020, available at: [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

20. The results of the opinion polls conducted by Kadir Has University can be found at [www.khas.edu.tr](http://www.khas.edu.tr).

ambitions. Millions of Russian tourists go not only to the beaches of Antalya but also to the bazaars of Istanbul; thousands of Russian students, particularly from Tatarstan, take courses at Turkish universities; diaspora ties connect the peoples of North Caucasus with distant relatives in Turkey. President Erdogan attended the opening of a renovated mosque in Moscow, but President Putin abstained from any comments when the Hagia Sophia museum in Istanbul was converted into a mosque, even if Patriarch Kirill tried to protest.<sup>21</sup> Moscow is upset and irritated by the Turkish support for the persecuted Crimean Tatars, expressed strongly by Erdogan during the February 2020 visit to Ukraine, but refrains from any official protestations.<sup>22</sup> Russia has developed multiple “hybrid” subversive capabilities but remains reluctant to deploy them against Erdogan, and refrains from trying to build usable connections with his many opponents, from the liberal intelligentsia to the Kurdish nationalists.

In the realm of “hard power”, the fundamental fact that Turkey is a NATO member state is interpreted rather differently by the Russian high command and foreign-policymakers. The military planners have to work on the assumption that, in a crisis situation, Turkey will close the Bosphorus for the Russian navy with the support of its allies, no matter the Montreux Convention, interrupting the crucial line of communications to the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>23</sup> For the policy planners, serious disagreements between Turkey and its NATO allies, particularly France, open interesting opportunities for inflicting damage on Atlantic solidarity.<sup>24</sup> The deal on selling the S-400 surface-to-air missiles system and its very demonstrative deployment is seen as a master-stroke in this intrigue, which can cause discord for years to come, because the US Defense Department has the final, and firmly negative, say on the political attempts to reach a face-saving compromise.<sup>25</sup> More difficult issues in Turkey-US relations could develop as the democracy-upholding agenda of the Biden administration progresses, but, in the prevalent Russian perspective,

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21. A. Soldatov, “Sofia pala. Pochemu RPTs i rossijskoe gosudarstvo ne smogli predotvratit’ prevrashchenie sobora v Stambule v mechet’?” [Sophia went down. Why the Russian state was unable to prevent the conversion of the cathedral in Istanbul into a mosque], *Novaia gazeta*, 11 July 2020, available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru>.

22. See on that T. Kuzio, “Turkey Forges a New Geo-Strategic Axis From Azerbaijan to Ukraine”, *RUSI Commentary*, 18 November 2020, available at: <https://rusi.org>.

23. This scenario was debated by Russian analysts in the course of a sharp crisis in late 2015, and re-emerged in the context of the 2020 war around Nagorno Karabakh. See G. Makarenko and A. Temkin, “Morskaia boiazn’: smozhet li Turtsiia zakryt’ dlia Rossii proliv Bosfor” [Sea fear: Can Turkey close the Bosphorus for Russia], *RBK*, 25 November 2015, available at: [www.rbc.ru](http://www.rbc.ru).

24. On the escalation of these disagreements, see H. Pope and N. Goksel, “Turkey Does Its Own Thing”, *The World Today*, 1 December 2020, available at: [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org).

25. See on this A. Uzumcu, M. F. Ceylan, U. Pamir, “Turkey and NATO: Resolving the S-400 Spat”, *Commentary*, European Leadership Network, 16 December 2020, available at: [www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org](http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org).

geopolitics always comes first, so Moscow braces for a forthcoming trans-Atlantic reconsolidation, which will most probably include Turkey.<sup>26</sup> It might still be the case that strengthening Turkey's ties with NATO would proceed in parallel with a further rise of tensions in its relations with the EU, but, for Russia, it is the military content of convoluted interactions (as well as the ties with the USA) that matters most.

## Authoritarian politics is personal

Russian and Turkish foreign policies are similar in the high degree of personal involvement of their willful leaders in making not only key but often also routine decisions, but even on this background the intensity of high-level control over the bilateral relations stands out. Putin and Erdogan arrived at their positions of supreme power three years apart (in 2000 and 2003, respectively) and have had dozens of face-to-face encounters over the last 15 years. In the pandemic-distorted year of 2020, they had only three meetings, but talked 18 times on the phone, according to official Kremlin records (compared, for instance, with just four telephone conversations Putin had with China's President Xi Jinping). This unique intensity of interactions has ensured that the two autocrats have a good measure of each other's character and aspirations, but has generated little mutual sympathy, scant trust and not a great deal of respect.<sup>27</sup>

Putin had tried to cultivate a particular "chemistry" in personal ties with Erdogan up until the crisis in late November 2015 caused by the Turkish downing of a Russian Su-24M bomber in northern Syria. Opting to escalate the confrontation, the Russian leader held his Turkish counterpart personally responsible for that "stab in the back", and Russian propaganda made a case of Erdogan's family involvement in funding ISIS.<sup>28</sup> The outrage was probably exaggerated, and the spat was mended, *pro forma*, when Putin instantly expressed support for Erdogan after the coup attempt in July 2016 and uttered not a word of concern about the repressions unleashed in its aftermath.<sup>29</sup> Capitalizing on that momentum, Putin

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26. A. Makovsky, "Problematic Prospects for the US-Turkish Ties in the Biden Era", *SWP Comment*, December 2020, available at: [www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org). S. Karaganov, "Voennyj faktor kak osnova geopolitiki" [The military factor as the foundation of geopolitics], *Russia in Global Affairs*, 17 December 2020, available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru>.

27. Ragip Soyulu, "How Erdogan and Putin Spectacularly Fell Out", *Middle East Eye*, 5 October 2020, [www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net). An example of the Russian mainstream view is Gennady Petrov, "Erdogan provel pered Putinym krasnuiu chertu" [Erdogan has drawn a red line for Putin], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 28 October 2020, available at: [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

28. "Syria conflict: Russia Accuses Erdogan of Trading Oil with IS", *BBC World News*, 2 December 2015, available at: [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

29. One sharp reflection is A. Borshchevskaya, "How the Failed Turkish Coup Helped Putin", *The Hill*, 19 July 2016, available at: <https://thehill.com>.

managed to persuade Erdogan to purchase the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system, offering generous credit and hoping to harvest dividends in the form of setbacks in Turkish-US military cooperation.<sup>30</sup> That calculation has clearly paid off, but nothing resembling the demonstrative warmth of their previous relationship has emerged.

The undisguised and strengthening autocratic nature of the political regimes in Russia and Turkey doesn't necessarily generate the incentives and propensity for cooperation, particularly as both rulers find many particular features of each other's grasp on power odd and incomprehensible.<sup>31</sup> For Putin, it is not so much that Erdogan's poor control over elections undercuts his respect for his fellow autocrat (who inexplicably lost elections in Istanbul twice in 2019); the more fundamental driver of mistrust and suspicion is Erdogan's manifest commitment to the cause of "political Islam". From the early days of his presidency, Putin has learned to confront the threat of Islamic extremism forcefully, and Erdogan's embrace of such organizations as the Muslim Brotherhood (banned in Russia), which underpins his ambitions for leadership in the Islamic world, is as alien to him as it is to many European politicians.<sup>32</sup> Erdogan may find it politically expedient to unleash rude criticism against French President Emmanuel Macron, but Putin persistently seeks to build some common cause with Europe in the struggle against Islamic terrorism.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the Russian leader has to trade carefully by avoiding trouble with the domestic Muslim communities, even when his own religious feelings are offended; thus he refrained from any criticism of Erdogan's decision to convert the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque.<sup>34</sup> And the Kremlin found it difficult to call to order Ramzan Kadyrov, the brutal and maverick ruler of Chechnya, who openly sided with Erdogan in the altercation with Macron.<sup>35</sup>

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30. The US administration underestimated Erdogan's commitment to that deal; see P. Stewart, "US Official Wonder: Did Turkish Leader's Coup Memories Drive Russia Arms Deal?", *Reuters*, 18 July 2019, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

31. One useful examination of these features is D. Bechev and S. Kiniklioglu, "Turkey and Russia: No Birds of the Same Feather", *SWP Comment*, May 2020, available at: [www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org).

32. F. Ghitis, "Europe Is Losing Patience with Erdogan's Islamist Rhetoric", *World Politics Review*, 5 November 2020, available at: [www.worldpoliticsreview.com](http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com).

33. A. Kortunov, "Oskorbliiaia Makrona, Erdogan stremitsia vystupit' kak zashchitnik vsekh musul'man" [By insulting Macron, Erdogan tries to act as a defender of all Muslims], *Analytics & Comments*, Russian International Affairs Council, 25 October 2020, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

34. A. Malashenko, "Erdoganu plevat' na vozmushchenie khristianskogo mira" [Erdogan doesn't give a fig about the outrage in the Christian world], *Rosbalt*, 2 July 2020, available at: [www.rosbalt.ru](http://www.rosbalt.ru).

35. A. Baunov, "Plody prosvetitelej. Chem Erdogan poleznee Makrona dlia bor'by s radikal'nym islamom" [Fruits of Enlighteners: Why Erdogan Does More in the Fight

Personal connections still have much value in mitigating tensions in the ongoing as well as probable future crises, but it is characteristic that the first telephone conversation between Putin and Erdogan took place more than two weeks after the eruption of hostilities around Nagorno Karabakh in late September 2020. There was no information about contacts through other channels (for instance between the chiefs of general staffs), and the Kremlin emphasized that the Turkish side had initiated the call. Considerations about causing distress to the long-familiar counterpart will hardly bring any restraint in decision-making on new crisis situations; perhaps to the contrary – every opportunity to push him deeper into trouble is seen as a chance not to be missed.



# The Main Theatres: Interconnected Drivers and Fluid Interplays

High-level geo-strategic and geo-economic interactions between Russia and Turkey are increasingly affected and deformed by their encounters in regional conflicts and war zones, each with its particular combination of external influencers. What is notable in the dynamics of these encounters is that not only the specific ambitions of the two leaders tend to clash but also that the basic interests of Russia and Turkey increasingly diverge. For instance, in the globally significant Iranian crisis, Moscow, whatever its pledges on good-neighborly ties, is fundamentally interested in preventing an outflow of Iranian oil to the world market, which is certain to depress the benchmark price.<sup>36</sup> Ankara, on the contrary, is interested in an expansion of Iranian oil and gas exports, which fits perfectly with its long-cherished idea of establishing an “energy hub”.<sup>37</sup> Four key theatres of the current Russia-Turkey carefully but barely managed contentions are Syria, the Black Sea area, Libya and, most recently, the South Caucasus.

## The volatile Syrian deadlock

The first and still the most impactful conflict where Russia and Turkey experienced a high-risk clash of policies, and then managed to establish a pattern of cooperation before entering into a new stage of unstable deconflicting, is Syria. Erdogan was firmly set (and still is) against the Bashar al-Assad regime; the Russian military intervention in September 2015 destroyed his designs – and brought the bilateral relations to a dangerous nadir by the end of that year as the clash caused by the destruction of a Russian Su-24M bomber spiraled very nearly into a full-blown confrontation.<sup>38</sup> The new rapprochement

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36. A typical assessment is O. Soloveva, “Neftianye dokhody Rossii podeliat Iran i Saudovskaia Araviia” [Iran and Saudi Arabia will divide Russia’s oil revenues], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 20 December 2020, available at: [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

37. One informed opinion is O. Sh. Kalehsar, “Future of Iran’s Natural Gas Exports to Turkey After Black Sea Discovery”, *Daily Sabah*, 29 August 2020, available at: [www.dailysabah.com](http://www.dailysabah.com).

38. Some new details on this crisis were uncovered by the Nordic Research and Monitoring Network; see A. Bozkurt, “Turkey’s President, Defense Minister Ignored Warnings of Military Experts About Risks of Downing Russian Jet”, *Nordic Monitor*, 28 August 2020, available at: <https://nordicmonitor.com>.



in 2016 was thus all the more remarkable, when Putin succeeded in engaging Erdogan in the “Astana format” (Iran being the third party), which secured effective extinguishing of most hotspots in the Syrian civil war by evacuating armed rebels to Idlib province. By the end of 2019, however, the usefulness of this format had been exhausted (as the attempt to hold a new meeting in February 2021 confirmed), and a new deadlock in the transformation of the war took shape.<sup>39</sup>

What set the Russian and Turkish military interventions in northern Syria against one another was the abrupt (and never fully executed) decision of US President Donald Trump to withdraw US forces from eastern Syria, which amounted to abandoning the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in grave peril.<sup>40</sup> Turkey wasted no time in taking advantage of that US retreat and launched an invasion in order to occupy a 30km-deep “security zone” along its border with Syria, pushing Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) further south. Moscow managed to negotiate a compromise that granted Turkey control over the central part of this “security zone” but left such key cities as Kobani, Manbij and Qamishli under joint control of the SDF and the al-Assad army.<sup>41</sup> There is no need to recount here all the minor setbacks in implementing this compromise, which still essentially holds as of spring 2021, despite being unsatisfactory for all concerned parties and key external stakeholders.

What is essential in examining Russia-Turkey relations is the strong probability that the two parties acted on a different interpretation of the October 2019 deal. Putin assumed that granting Erdogan half of his wish would secure his consent for the “liberation” of Idlib province by the Syrian army and pro-Iranian militia, in exchange for the other half, but Erdogan rejected that implicit bargain. The incremental offensive started in February 2020, but Turkey sent reinforcements into Idlib despite the rising casualties, and delivered a series of heavy hits on the Syrian troops, recapturing some of the lost ground.<sup>42</sup> Erdogan travelled to Moscow to make his

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39. One useful analysis of this format is C. Thepaut, “The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia”, *Brief Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 April 2020, available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org). On the meeting in Sochi, see M. Belenkaia, “V Sochi ozhivliaiut Konstitutsionnyj komitet” [Constitutional committee is revived in Sochi], *Kommersant*, 18 February 2021, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

40. A sample of sound criticism of that decision is D. L. Byman, “Implications of the New Order in Syria”, *Order from Chaos*, Brookings, 24 October 2019, available at: [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu).

41. Russian experts tended to present that compromise as a success story; see R. Mamedov, “Sirijskaia sdelka: kak Rossiia prevratilas’ v kliuchevogo igroka na Blizhnem Vostoke” [The Syrian deal: Russia became a key player in the Middle East], *TASS*, 21 October 2019, available at: <https://tass.ru>.

42. The initial Russian assessments are reflected in A. Lavrov, “Erdogan na rasput’e: nastuplenie Sirii proveriaet reshimost’ Turtsii” [Erdogan at the crossroads: Syrian offensive tests Turkish determination], *Izvestiia*, 8 February 2020, available at: <https://iz.ru>. Revised assessments can be seen in F. Lukianov, “Idlib as the Culmination of

position clear, and Putin had to accept a ceasefire, not bothering to ask about any of al-Assad's opinions but acknowledging the reality of an indefinite delay in achieving the final victory in the ever-changing Syrian war.<sup>43</sup>

It is not so much the fact that rebels of various persuasions (including some al-Qaeda offsprings) are entrenched in Idlib and protected by Turkey that is the main problem for Moscow, but rather that the elusiveness of victory exacerbates the irreducible instability of the al-Assad regime.<sup>44</sup> Russia cannot provide resources for the post-war reconstruction that is necessary for consolidating the dictatorial grasp on power and cannot count on the severely economically weakened Iran to take the lead in this task. Moscow tried in late 2020 to stage an international conference on the refugee return in Damascus, but this attempt to take control over the humanitarian agenda failed due to the unequivocal EU refusal to take part, and due to Turkey's better organized efforts to play the refugee issue to its own advantage.<sup>45</sup> Russia is stuck in a no-win situation where it cannot effectively oppose a possible new Turkish operation aimed at incorporating more border areas into its "security zone" and cannot overcome Turkish protection of the Idlib "safe haven" for the rebels.<sup>46</sup> This deadlock might further shift – and hardly in Russia's favor – if the Biden administration seeks to compensate for some of the recent blunders in US policy, for instance by undoing Trump's "betrayal" of the Kurdish allies or by firmly denying the al-Assad regime control of the territories to the east of the Euphrates, which will benefit from receiving international aid for reconstruction.

## The troubled waters of the Black Sea area

In the absence of a land border, the Black Sea constitutes the most direct interface in Russia-Turkey relations, and the two gas pipelines (the Blue Stream, 2005, and the TurkStream, 2020) crossing its width and length provide a material connection. The strategic configuration

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the Syrian War", *Analytics and Comments*, Russian International Affairs Council, 28 February 2020, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

43. Further escalations of tensions around Idlib are described in I. Subbotin, "Rossiia i Turtsiia v polushage ot novoj ssory v Sirii" [Russia and Turkey are Half a Step Away from the New Quarrel in Syria], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 21 September 2020.

44. These concerns are reflected in I. Matveev, "Syrian Idlib: What's Next?" *Analytics and Comments*, Russian International Affairs Council, 17 November 2020, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

45. A fair description is M. Belenkaia, "Spasti riadovogo bezhentsa" [Rescuing the "ordinary" refugee], *Kommersant*, 12 November 2020, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

46. Turkish position is outlined in K. Khaddour, "The Stakes in the Syrian-Turkish Border Zone", *Peripheral Vision*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 8 June 2020, available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org>.

of this theatre has been profoundly altered by Russian annexation of Crimea in spring 2015 and the heavy militarization of this peninsula, so that the radar, surface-to-air and anti-ship missile systems deployed there generate an “anti-access/area denial” (A2/AD) “bubble” covering the whole central part of this sea.<sup>47</sup> NATO is compelled to expand its activities in and attention to this theatre, and Russian fighters are eagerly engaging in air intercepts and harassment of visiting US navy destroyers, while large parts of the sea are often closed for Russian exercises.

Russia has a long track record of projecting power in this area, from Moldova in 1992 to Georgia in 2008 and Donbass in 2015; for NATO, the challenge of effectively containing further Russian aggressions against such key partners as Georgia and Ukraine can only be met through advanced military cooperation with Turkey.<sup>48</sup> Moscow is perfectly aware of this variable in the balance of military capabilities, and seeks to exploit every opportunity for damaging Turkey’s ties with NATO, fueling the controversies produced by the deployment of the S-400 missile system.<sup>49</sup> Russia counts on further opportunities emerging from the focusing of the Turkish navy on the tensions with Greece in the Aegean Sea, and from the preoccupation in the USA with the geopolitical confrontation with China, which is absent in this theatre.<sup>50</sup> Russia also seeks to play on the tensions between Turkey and some Arab states by, for instance, staging joint naval exercises with Egypt in the Black Sea.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey remains committed to the guidelines of NATO’s recalibrated strategy for this region and takes part in the increasing exercises, making no special efforts at alleviating Russian concerns.<sup>52</sup>

One difficult proposition in Russian strategic planning is the possibility of Turkey closing the Bosphorus for the Black Sea fleet, an

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47. Informed doubts about the effectiveness of these capabilities are presented in D. Barrie, “Anti-Access/Area Denial: Bursting the ‘No-Go’ Bubble?” *Military Balance Blog*, IISS, 29 March 2019, available at: [www.iiss.org](http://www.iiss.org). See also M. Kofman, “Russian A2/AD: It Is Not Overrated, Just Poorly Understood”, *Russia Military Analysis*, 25 January 2020, available at: <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com>.

48. Some scenarios for such crises are examined and game-played in S. J. Flanagan, A. Binnendijk, et al, “Russia, NATO and Black Sea Security”, *RAND Research Report*, 2020, available at: [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

49. M. Peck, “Russia’s Best Strategy for Controlling the Black Sea: Divide and Conquer”, *Forbes*, 8 December 2020, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).

50. “Turkish Navy to Conduct Massive Military Drills in Aegean Sea”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 23 February 2021, available at: [www.hurriyetdailynews.com](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com). An example of the latter is P. Breedlove and M. E. O’Hanlon, “The Black Sea: How America Can Avoid a Great-Power Conflict”, *Order from Chaos*, Brookings, 15 December 2020, available at: [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu).

51. A typical propaganda spin on these exercises is V. Mukhin, “Rossiia i Egipet posylaiut Turtsii signal voennymi manevrami” [Russia and Egypt send a signal to Turkey with military exercises], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 15 November 2020, available at: [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

52. G. Tol, Y. k Isik, “Turkey-NATO Ties Are Problematic, but There Is One Bright Spot”, *Policy Analysis*, Middle East Institute, 16 February 2021, available at: [www.mei.edu](http://www.mei.edu).

option that is left open for acute international crises by the Montreux Convention (1936).<sup>53</sup> Russian commentators speculate that Turkey could resort to such drastic measures only with firm NATO support, so that the crucial supply line to the Russian grouping in Syria would be cut and the deployment of a US naval squadron beyond the period of 21 days (as stipulated by Montreux rules) would change the military balance in the theatre.<sup>54</sup> What makes such speculations plausible is the Turkish position in the currently half-frozen confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. Ankara's support for the cause of the Crimean Tatars is only a minor irritant for Moscow.<sup>55</sup> Military cooperation with Ukraine, and particularly the export of Turkish weapon systems, including strike drones, is a matter of greater concern.<sup>56</sup> Turkish companies are eager to make use of the military cooperation agreement signed during President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Istanbul in October 2020 for establishing joint ventures with the fast-modernizing Ukrainian military-industrial complex.<sup>57</sup> Russian experts are worried that drone attacks could be a decisive factor in a possible new eruption of hostilities in the Donbass war zone, where a stable ceasefire has never been established and the balance of forces is gradually shifting in favor of the reformed and re-equipped Ukrainian army.<sup>58</sup>

The Turkish leadership tends to prioritize political and military maneuvers in the eastern Mediterranean over the Black Sea theatre, but in the former it often has to play against heavy odds, while in the latter it has some unique advantages and can grant, or deny, NATO crucial assets in the developing confrontation with Russia. Turkey's military cooperation with Ukraine could, if advanced as planned, thwart Russian assumptions of sustained conflict dominance.

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53. This possibility is constantly discussed in the Russian media; see for instance, "Ugroza zakrytiia Turtsiej Bosfora i Dardanell dlia rossijskikh voennykh korablej vpolne real'na [The threat of Turkey closing the Bosphorus and Dardanelles for Russian combat ships is quite real], *Interfax-AVN*, 28 February 2020, available at: [www.militarynews.ru](http://www.militarynews.ru).

54. Vladimir Mukhin, "Zakroet li Turtsia dlia voennykh korablej Rossii Bosfor i Dardanelly" [Will Turkey close the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles for Russian combat ships?], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 20 December 2020, available at: [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

55. "Turkish Foreign Minister Confirms Support for the Crimean Platform", UNIAN, 18 December 2020, available at: [www.unian.info](http://www.unian.info); "Turkish Top Diplomat, Defense Chief in Kiev for Talks With Top Ukrainian Officials", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 18 December 2020, available at: [www.hurriyetcailynews.com](http://www.hurriyetcailynews.com).

56. V. Mukhin, "Ukraina gotovit dlia Donbassa 'karabakhsnij scenarij'" [Ukraine's strike power is strengthened by Turkish weapons], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 15 December 2020, available at: [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

57. C. Kasparoglu, "Turkey and Ukraine Boost Mutual Defense Ties", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 16 November 2020, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

58. See, for instance, F. Danilchenko, "Ukraina gotovit dlia Donbassa 'karabakhsnij stszenarij'" [Ukraine Prepares a "Karabakh scenario" for Donbass], *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, 10 October 2020, available at: [www.mk.ru](http://www.mk.ru).

## The contested violent chaos in Libya

The protracted civil war in Libya is remarkable not only in the fluid fragmentation of domestic belligerents but also in the diversity of external parties, for the majority of whom the stakes in this contestation are rather low, and the priority they attach to achieving a victory is secondary at best. Russia and Turkey approach this messy conflict from strikingly different points of departure and pursue rather incompatible goals. For Putin, the horrible death of Muammar el-Qadhafi is a reminder of the fate of dictators facing “color revolutions” sponsored by the West; while for Erdogan the oscillating fighting symbolizes the persistence of his dream that the “Arab Spring” would propel him to the position of leadership in the Muslim world.<sup>59</sup> Both states had observed the war course with indifference up until the start of 2019, and it was Russia that made the first move, assuming that the moment was ripe for making a big difference with a small and cost-free effort.

The Russian military cultivated ties with the self-appointed “field-marshal” Khalifa Haftar for a couple of years, and the option of granting his motley forces a decisive advantage by deploying some 1,000 “Wagner” mercenaries appeared feasible. Moscow was able to maintain the stance of “neutrality” because the intervention was conveniently deniable, and the costs were covered by the UAE.<sup>60</sup> The offensive launched in April 2019 was initially successful but came to a grinding halt in the suburbs of Tripoli – and that granted Turkey an opportunity to make a difference with a direct intervention. Erdogan was not at all interested in deniability and his main goal was to force the embattled Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli to sign a maritime border delimitation agreement that was dubious by any international standards.<sup>61</sup> The deployment of Turkish instructors, strike drones and mercenaries from Syria turned the course of hostilities and pushed the Haftar forces into a disorderly retreat, checked only by the arrival of new bands of “Wagners” and forceful interference by Egypt.

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59. J. Ioffe, “What Putin Really Wants”, *The Atlantic*, February 2018, available at: [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com). One sharp comment on the latter is “Turkey’s Strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Takes to the World Stage”, *The Economist*, 8 September 2020, available at: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com).

60. The deniability was diminished by a UN report detailing the deployment of mercenaries; see M. Nickols, “Up to 1,200 Deployed In Libya by Russian Military Group: U.N. Report”, Reuters, 6 May 2020, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com). The UAE role was revealed by a Pentagon report; see “US Accuses UAE of Funding Russian Mercenaries in Libya”, *Middle East Eye*, 1 December 2020, available at: [www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net).

61. See on that B. Stanisek, “Turkey: Remodelling the Eastern Mediterranean”, *Briefing*, European Parliament, September 2020, available at: [www.europarl.europa.eu](http://www.europarl.europa.eu).

The ensuing deadlock remains highly unstable, but it sufficed for averting a direct clash between Russian not-so-clandestine forces, which now include a squadron of combat aircraft, and Turkish troops, the deployment of whom is legitimized by the parliament resolution.<sup>62</sup> The pause generally suits Turkey's interests centered on making an impact on the international projects focused on the development and export of natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>63</sup> As for Russia, it is interested neither in the advancement of these projects, which could undercut Gazprom's positions in the European gas market, nor in the resumption of oil export from Libya, which could depress further the benchmark price.<sup>64</sup> The old contract for building the Benghazi-Sirte railway has no funding, and the proposition to acquire a naval base in Benghazi, going back to the Soviet era, is entirely unfeasible.<sup>65</sup> Moscow sought to strengthen its influence in the Middle East, particularly the ties with Egypt and the UAE, but its reliance on the exposed and disgraced "Wagners" has become a liability for prestige-seeking foreign policy. It also wanted to show Beijing, which had to execute a difficult operation in evacuating some 35,000 workers from Libya in 2011, that Russia could perform overseas interventions that China would not dare to plan – but that demonstration revealed the limits of Russian power-projecting capabilities and political outreach.<sup>66</sup>

Turkey is generally content with the status quo and only needs to ensure that the UN-facilitated peace talks in various formats do not cancel the maritime delimitation agreement, disputable as it is. Russia has little to contribute to the negotiations and can claim a role in the fluid balance of external parties' interests only as long as the hostilities continue. Moscow might try to gain an edge over Turkey-backed groupings barely controlled by the GNA, but such power play would require the commitment of efforts and resources that the Russian command is less and less ready to make.

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62. "Turkish Parliament Extends Troop Deployment in Libya", *Al-Monitor*, 23 December 2020, available at: [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com). On the Russian assets, see J. S. Bermudez and B. Katz, "Moscow's Next Front: Russia's Expanding Military Footprint in Libya", *CSIS Commentary*, 17 June 2020, available: [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org).

63. See on that A. Cohen, "Turkey-Libya Maritime Deal Upsets Mediterranean Energy Plan", *Forbes*, 8 January 2020, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).

64. G. Ibragimova, "Eta strana mozhet obrushit' mirovoj rynek nefti" [This Country Can Crash The World Oil Market], *RIA-Novosti*, 28 September 2020, available at: <https://ria.ru>.

65. An Indian perspective on these interests is Saurabh Kumar Shahi, "Understanding the Russian Roulette in Libya", *National Herald*, 25 June 2020, available at: [www.nationalheraldindia.com](http://www.nationalheraldindia.com).

66. S. H. Zerba, "China's Libya Evacuation Operation: A New Diplomatic Imperative—Overseas Citizen Protection", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, April 2014, pp. 1093-1112, available at: [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com).



## The new intensity of the old conflict in the Caucasus

A new spasm of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict around Nagorno Karabakh, which started as the Soviet Union was breaking apart and reached a culmination followed by a ceasefire in 1994, was predictable, since the loss of vast territories was unacceptable for the increasingly assertive Azerbaijan, which staged a trial offensive in April 2016.<sup>67</sup> The Russian high command was aware of the well-funded preparations in Azerbaijan for attempting a politically proclaimed “military solution”, but its extensive contacts with the Armenian military produced assessments pointing to a limited offensive that would bring some tactical success and exhaust its capacity against the long-prepared defensive positions in a couple of weeks.<sup>68</sup> What proved those assessments wrong and came as a difficult surprise for the Kremlin was the strong political and material support for Azerbaijan from Turkey, which marked a departure from Ankara’s previous readiness to acknowledge Russia’s dominant influence over the Caucasus.<sup>69</sup>

Turkish direct interference in the course of full-blown war included not only technical assistance with conducting drone attacks and transportation of mercenaries from Syria to the front line, but also deployment of a squadron of F-16 fighters to the base in Azerbaijan.<sup>70</sup> Moscow tried to stick to its traditional stance of a fair and forceful arbiter, but this “neutrality” amounted to denying Armenia any support in the situation where Azerbaijan was receiving all necessary backing from Turkey.<sup>71</sup> Putin’s early attempts to negotiate a ceasefire assumed that hostilities were proceeding to a usual stalemate, and failed to foresee the inevitable collapse of Armenian defenses.<sup>72</sup> That desperate situation granted him an opportunity to orchestrate a cessation of fighting, but the

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67. “Digging out of Deadlock in Nagorno Karabakh”, *Report* No. 255, International Crisis Group, 20 December 2019, available at: [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org).

68. R. Pukhov, “Dazhe takticheskie uspekhi pozvoliat Baku uluchshit’ polozhenie azerbajdzhanskih vojsk na linii soprikosnoveniia” [Even tactical successes would help Baku to improve the position of the Azeri troops on the line of confrontation], *Analytics and Comments*, Russian International Affairs Council, 29 September 2020, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

69. K. Krivosheev, “Tretij kondominium. Kak Karabakh izmenit otnosheniia Rossii i Turtsii” [The third condominium: How Karabakh Will Change Russian-Turkish Relations], *Commentary*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 9 October 2020, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>.

70. J. Trevithick, “Turkey’s Forward Deployed F-16s in Azerbaijan Have Moved to a New Base”, *The Drive*, 26 October 2020, available at: [www.thedrive.com](http://www.thedrive.com).

71. I. Preobrazhensky, “Nagorno Karabakh: What to Expect from Russia?” *Riddle*, 30 September 2020, available at: [www.ridl.io](http://www.ridl.io).

72. The post-factum examination is A. Ramm, “How and Why the Defense of Nagorno Karabakh Broke Down”, *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 26 November 2020, available at: <https://nvo.ng.ru>.

reconstitution of Russia's peace-enforcement role is far from solid and its capacity to dominate the region of South Caucasus is seriously compromised.

The swiftly deployed, lightly armed peace-keeping force of about 2,000 troops can monitor the observation of the ceasefire but cannot prevent violations – and certainly cannot ensure a Russian “protectorate” over the rump Nagorno Karabakh, as depicted in some analyses.<sup>73</sup> The fragility of the time-limited arrangement for managing the conflict is too obvious for the Armenians, who have no other hope or ally to rely upon.<sup>74</sup> What appeared to the Kremlin to be the main achievement in this swift high-level maneuver was the exclusion of Turkey from the implementation of the peace operation.<sup>75</sup> Moscow still had to accept the deployment of 60 Turkish personnel at the joint monitoring center near Agdam, which ensures observation of ceasefire by flying drones.<sup>76</sup> This Russian initiative, even backed by the new troops deployment, cannot diminish the strength of the newly forged Turkish-Azeri alliance, the symbolic power of which was on display at the victory parade in Baku, attended by Erdogan.<sup>77</sup> Symbolism aside, the real power of this alliance is in the depth of economic and energy ties, which are going to receive a further boost from the opening of the rail connection between Nakhichevan and Baku, as stipulated by the agreement and secured by instant investment.<sup>78</sup> The fact that Russia's dominance over the South Caucasus is compromised and effectively cancelled – and not by NATO enlargement or the EU advanced partnership, but by Turkish interference – is hard to internalize for Moscow, where many mainstream experts keep arguing about Erdogan's arrogance and Turkey's overstretch.<sup>79</sup> These arguments are not without merit, but

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73. See, for instance, V. Socor, “Russia's “Peacekeeping” Operation in Nagorno Karabakh: Foundation of a Russian Protectorate”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10 December 2020, available at: <https://jamestown.org>. The real situation on the ground is presented in K. Krivosheev “We Live with the Hope to See Our Land: Reporting From the Agdam Region, Which Is to Become the Base for Peacekeepers in Karabakh”, *The Insider*, 7 December 2020, available at: <https://theins.ru>.

74. A. Iskandaryan, “Myth-Building Operation: What Russia Has Lost in the Second Karabakh War”, *Commentary*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 18 November 2020, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>.

75. J. Sherr, “Russia and Karabakh: A Diplomatic Triumph and Dubious Victory”, *ICDS Blog*, 16 November 2020, available at: <https://icds.ee>.

76. P. Goble, “Joint Russian-Turkish Karabakh Monitoring Center Opens Amidst Fresh Controversy”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, 4 February 2021, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

77. Coverage of this pompous event can be found at “One Nation, Two States on Display as Erdogan Visits Azerbaijan for Karabakh Victory Parade”, *France 24*, 10 December 2020, available at: [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com).

78. Russian control over this corridor will hardly diminish its geopolitical significance; see F. Tastekin, “How Realistic Are Turkey's Ambitions Over Strategic Corridor With Azerbaijan”, *Al-Monitor*, 4 December 2020, available at: [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com).

79. An editorial in moderately independent *Nezavisimaia gazeta* provides a sample of such arguments; see “Turtsia vybrala put' razobshcheniia s ostal'nym mirom” [Turkey has



they imply a recognition of a new quality of accumulated tensions in the Russia-Turkey partnership and betray concerns about Russia's own overstretch.

# Conclusion: Capricious Bridge-Building over Deepening Divides

The tumultuous year 2020 tested and significantly degraded the always ambiguous Russian-Turkish partnership, which has become transactional at best and certainly not “strategic”. The foundation of economic ties, and first of all the export of Russian natural gas to Turkey, has seriously weakened. Even if both states experience an economic recovery in the coming months, which is by no means certain, the trade and investment flows would hardly recover. In the temporarily and disagreeably suspended Syrian and Libyan wars, Russia and Turkey are not only backing opposite factions but also manipulating the risks of a direct military confrontation.<sup>80</sup> Turkish forceful interference in the Nagorno Karabakh war was decisive in securing the victory for Azerbaijan and devalued Russian security guarantees for Armenia. This breakthrough was far more disturbing for Moscow than the official discourse reveals, and the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force cannot restore the capacity to dominate security developments in the Caucasus. Personal ties between the two ambitious leaders suffice for finding a mode of deconflicting in these war zones, but their mutual irritation and mistrust are accumulating.

These hidden tensions and managed discord create incentives for some European politicians and experts to explore opportunities for deepening the divide between Russia and Turkey, somewhat similar to the propositions for playing Russia against China advanced by some pundits in Washington DC.<sup>81</sup> Italian experts in particular tend to favor such opportunities, arguing that Libya presents the most promising conflict area for “peeling” Turkey away from Russia.<sup>82</sup> The problem with such ideas is not only that the EU finds it extremely difficult to forge a common position on Libyan conflict management, while having next to nothing in terms of leverage in the Caucasus and being exposed to serious problems regarding the refugee problems in Syria.

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80. Russian investigative journalism uncovered many particular twists but hardly much in terms of rationalization of this pattern; see for instance, Y. Sokriianskaia, “Brannyj mir” [Quarrelsome peace], *Novaia gazeta*, 7 November 2020, available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru>.

81. M. Kroening, “The United States Should Not Align With Russia Against China”, *Foreign Policy*, 13 May 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

82. See N. Tocci, “Peeling Turkey Away From Russia’s Embrace: A Transatlantic Interest”, *IAI Commentary*, 14 December 2020, available at: [www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it).

A more serious issue is the progressively escalating discord in EU relations with the emphatically anti-liberal and assertively nationalistic Turkey.<sup>83</sup> Erdogan managed to compensate for the erosion of his domestic support base in 2020 by scoring points in external endeavors, but the effects from “victories” in Libya or in the Caucasus are inevitably short-lived. In the coming months, he will need to either launch further and increasingly costly interventions or press harder on political opposition at home. The former would be certain to clash with some Western interests, while the latter would invite not only criticism but also sanctions from the EU and the new US leadership.<sup>84</sup>

A yet graver issue with the propositions to pull Turkey away from Russia is the high probability of a militarized confrontation resulting from a collapse of their quasi-alliance. The EU is unprepared to deal with the risks of such a forceful quarrel, and should thus avoid any steps that could make it politically imperative to provide effective support to Turkey. A crisis between the two aggressive autocracies may happen in any case, quite probably a more serious one than the emotional fracas in the late 2015. One possible trigger for it could be Turkey’s involvement in the modernization of Ukraine’s army and navy. The closure of the Bosphorus for Russian combat ships is certain to provoke threats from Moscow, underpinned by forceful demonstrations, and Turkey as a NATO member state would then request protection. The allies may find it necessary to ensure the security of Turkish territory, including control over the Straits, but they would have greater flexibility in this response than in a situation where the crisis arose as a result of their policies.

The maturing of autocratic regimes in Russia and Turkey does not facilitate their rapprochement in the security domain, as each ambitious ruler is more interested in exploiting the opportunities emerging from the conflict the other one is facing in relations with the West than in extending a helping hand to the fellow dictator-in-distress. The EU is developing a useful combination of engagement and containment in dealing with its two difficult neighbors, and it will need to constantly finetune this policy for mitigating the risk of their confrontation.

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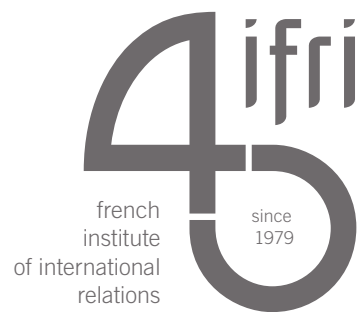
83. M. Leonard, “The Other Putin on Europe’s Doorstep”, *Commentary*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 4 August 2020, available at: <https://ecfr.eu>.

84. On the latter, see R. Gramer, K. Livingstone, J. Detsch, “Biden Gives Turkey the Silent Treatment”, *Foreign Policy*, 3 March 2021, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

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