

# Toward a Turkish-Russian Axis? Conflicts in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, and Cooperation over Nuclear Energy

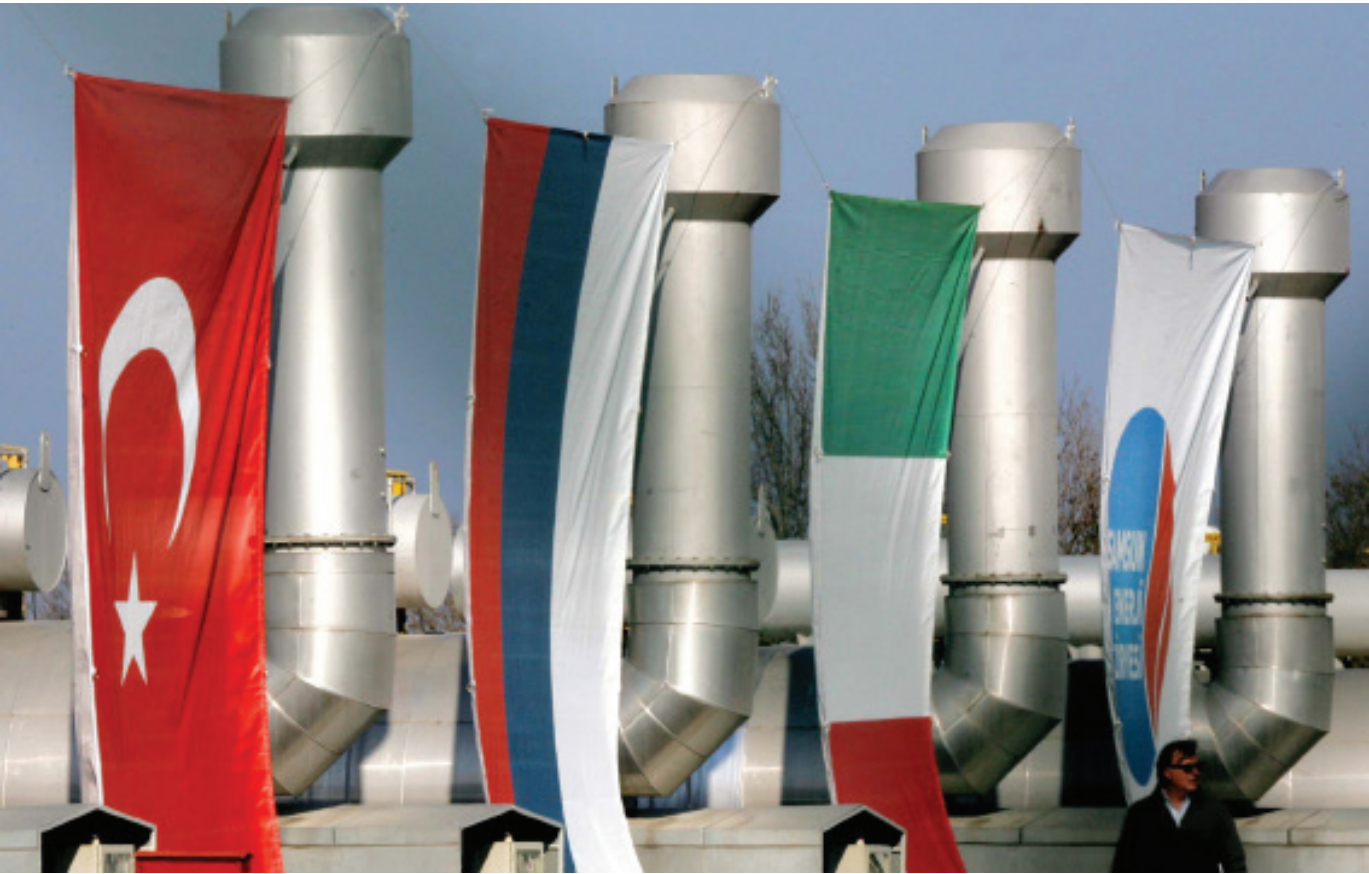
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**ABSTRACT** *This article analyzes Turkish-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War (1992-2014) from a neorealist perspective, while highlighting relevant analogies and major turning points. Georgia (2008), Syria (2011--), and Ukraine (2014--) crises have been detrimental for the two countries, mutual economic interests with strategic significance, such as the increasing importance of Turkey as a potential reseller of Russian natural gas, have sustained a high level of cooperation between the two countries.*

Russia is the most important and the most powerful state in Turkey's immediate neighborhood today, as it has been for several centuries. Turkey's "strategic significance" is mainly due to its role as one of the few critical states that can slow, obstruct, and stop the southern expansion of Russian influence. It is indisputable that for the previous three hundred years, from roughly 1700 until 1991, Russia (and subsequently the Soviet Union) was the most immediate security threat for and the archenemy of the Ottoman Empire and post-Ottoman Turkey. The most devastating defeats the Ottoman army ever suffered were almost all against the Russian Empire, culminating in the disastrous treaties

of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), Edirne (1829), San Stefano and Berlin (1878). Suffice it to remember that almost every Balkan state, including Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro, won its independence as a result of direct Russian military intervention against the Ottoman Empire in support of secessionist rebellions among some Christians in the Balkans. Even in World War I, Russia decisively defeated the Ottoman army, occupying most of Eastern Anatolia and the Black Sea region, as far as Tirebolu and Erzincan in the west, and Bitlis and Muş in the south. More than a dozen present-day Turkish provinces returned to Turkish control, thanks to the withdrawal of the

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Flags of Turkey, Russia and Italy hang on pipes at the Blue Stream gas pipeline in Samsun, northern Turkey, November 16, 2005, before tomorrow's meeting of leaders there.

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Russian army following the Bolshevik Revolution and the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. After a significant interlude of remarkably good Turkish-Soviet relations during the interwar years (1921-1936), relations began to deteriorate in the late 1930s and returned to the previous pattern of intense conflict and heightened insecurity during the Cold War. Given three centuries of almost uninterrupted enmity and conflict briefly summarized above, the high level of Russian-Turkish cooperation achieved as of 2014 becomes an even more significant puzzle and begs for a convincing “social-scientific” explanation.

Despite centuries of bitter conflict and enmity, what explains the unprecedented rise in Turkish-Russian cooperation in the last two decades? Analysis and diagnosis of the causes of Turkish-Russian cooperation will allow for predicting the future course of bilateral relations. Can one talk about the emergence of a Turkish-Russian “axis”? Although Turkish-Russian relations are incomparably better today than throughout most of history, and far better than one would expect given the many zones of Turkish-Russian competition and conflict, it would be premature and misleading to suggest that

the two countries are headed for a strategic alliance or a Russian-Turkish “axis.”

### **The Causes of Increasing Turkish-Russian Cooperation: A Neorealist Perspective**

The unprecedented rise in Turkish-Russian cooperation can be explained primarily by the tremendous change in the balance of power between the two states, following the

**By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia and Turkey both harbored skepticism towards American unilateralism**

collapse of the Soviet Union and the significant decline of the Russian threat to Turkey that accompanied this change.<sup>1</sup> This essentially Neorealist logic still explains the fluctuations in Turkish-Russian relations until the present day. In short, although Russia was the most significant and immediate security threat for Turkey in the previous three centuries, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia, and Turkey did not even share a border, and Russia ceased to be Turkey’s most important and immediate national security threat. Diminution of the Russian threat opened up the *possibility* of increasing Turkish-Russian cooperation, but did not *necessi-*

*tate* it. In other words, the reduction of the Russian threat was a necessary but not a sufficient cause for increasing bilateral cooperation, let alone a strategic partnership or a Turkish-Russian “axis.”

The two countries’ relations, in the first few years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, were not necessarily amicable but rather prone to conflict. In the early 1990s, Turkey pursued an unusually self-confident and assertive policy with an explicitly Pan-Turkic discourse, encapsulated in the then-famous phrase officially describing the new “Turkish world” as expanding “from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China.” This new assertiveness was certainly noted by Western observers.<sup>2</sup> Turkish and Russian interests clashed across Central Asia but especially in the Caucasus. This was manifest, for example, in Turkish support and Russian hostility toward Azerbaijan’s first popularly elected and brazenly pro-Turkish, pro-Western president, Ebulfez Elçibey, who was overthrown by a military coup in June 1993. Russia’s hard and soft power, including tremendous Russian military, economic, and cultural influence in these regions, was one that Turkey could not rival. Turkey gradually realized its relative weakness vis-à-vis Russia in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and abandoned its Pan-Turkic discourse and initiatives by the late 1990s.

However, the Russian economy, population, and military continued to decline relative to the Turkish economy, population, and military though-

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out the 1990s and until at least 2001. From a neorealist perspective, one can argue that the relative decline of Russia’s latent and actual power allowed for Turkey to feel even more secure and less threatened by Russia. Moreover, the 1990s witnessed the peak of domestic secessionist threats to the territorial integrity of both states, including PKK terrorism in Turkey and the Chechen insurgency in the Russian Federation. In other words, there was a major reorientation of the threat perception away from external threats toward internal threats in both countries in the 1990s, which also helped to desecuritize bilateral relations.

**Mutual Respect for Territorial Integrity, the Iraq War, Anti-Westernism, and Military Cooperation**

November 1998 was one of the turning points in Turkish-Russian relations, because it is in that year that Abdullah Ocalan, the fugitive leader of the PKK, fled from Syria to Russia, and applied for political asylum in

that country, supported by the lower house of the Russian parliament, the Duma.<sup>3</sup> However, his request for asylum was refused by the Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. Consequently, Ocalan was forced out of Russia,<sup>4</sup> eventually being captured in Kenya in February 1999. This was both a concrete and symbolic step by Russia, which has been supportive of Kurdish separatism throughout the Cold War and even during the Tsarist Russian Empire. This new Russian policy gave a strong signal that it would not support the most significant secessionist movement that Turkey faced. Russia demonstrated that it would respect Turkey’s territorial integrity. As if to reciprocate, Turkey also signalled that it would respect Russia’s territorial integrity and would not support any kind of anti-Russian secessionism by declaring that it was ready to help catch Movladi Udugov, the former Chechen foreign minister who was rumored to be hiding in Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

More importantly, both Russia and Turkey were opposed to the U.S.-led Iraq War in 2003. Although a traditional ally of the United States, Turkey feared that the U.S. invasion would lead to the disintegration of Iraq and destabilization of the Middle East; predictions that unfortunately came true in the following decade. Both Russia and Turkey favored Iraq’s territorial integrity. While the Soviet Union’s collapse removed one great power from Turkey’s borders, U.S. occupation of Iraq brought another great power to Turkey’s doorstep.

American occupation of Iraq fueled the phenomenal rise of anti-Americanism in Turkey in the first decade of the 21st century. Further, the disagreement between Turkey and the United States over Iraq is often credited for the intensification of cooperation between Russia and Turkey.<sup>6</sup> There were and still are, however, other reasons for the increase in Turkish-Russian cooperation, the most fundamental and decisive factor being the diminution of the Russian threat previously emphasized. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia and Turkey both harbored skepticism towards American unilateralism, most obviously manifest in their shared opposition to the Iraq War but also latent in various other issues. For example, the two countries spearheaded the formation of a naval force, Black Sea Force (BLACKSEAFOR), in April 2001, predating the Iraq War by two years.

In March 2002, Secretary General of Turkey's powerful National Security Council, Tuncer Kılınç, publicly called for forming an alliance with Russia and Iran against the European Union.<sup>7</sup> Although this statement came as a shock to those who have not been following the seismic shifts in the Eurasian geopolitical landscape, Turkey has also been pursuing military cooperation, including military technology transfers from Russia in order to develop an indigenous Turkish defense industry. This was in part due to Turkey's Western allies unwillingness to allow for military technology transfers to Turkey. Furthermore, in a highly publicized controversy, Germany, a NATO ally,

even attempted to prevent the Leopard tanks it exported to Turkey from being used in Turkey's fight against the Kurdish separatist PKK.

Finally, one has to bear in mind that Turkey and Russia, remaining on "Europe's fringes,"<sup>8</sup> both had a very ambivalent and often adversarial relationship with Europe, serving as the constitutive "Other" of European identity.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, they also shared certain grievances vis-à-vis the construction of an exclusionary European identity, which antagonized Turkish and Russian elites, and complicated the efforts at Westernization in these two countries. It is not without reason that Russia and Turkey are two of the three countries (the third being Mexico) that were described as "torn countries" between Western and non-Western civilizations by Samuel Huntington in his world famous article on the "Clash of Civilizations" in 1993.<sup>10</sup> The search for a new civilizational identity after the Cold War also led, perhaps for the first time in Turkish history, to the emergence of an openly pro-Russian political and intellectual movement, known as Eurasianism (*Avrasyacılık*).<sup>11</sup> The suspension of Turkey's EU membership negotiations in 2006, combined with the problems in Turkish-American relations since the Iraq War of 2003, pushed Turkey toward closer cooperation with Russia. To sum up thus far, the diminution of the Russian threat, combined with concrete areas of cooperation, and the problems in Turkish-American and Turkish-EU relations, facilitated the improvement of Turkish-Russian relations.

Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Crimean Tatar leader and Ukrainian legislator Mustafa Kirimoglu give a press conference in Ankara, on March 17, 2014.  
AFP / Adem Altan



### **Russia Ascendant and Western Credibility Damaged, 2008-2014: the Five Day War in Georgia, the Syrian Civil War, the Ukrainian Crisis and the Annexation of Crimea**

The three hot conflicts that took place in the Caucasus, the Black Sea region, and the Middle East, between 2008 and 2014, led to the relative deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations. First, it was the “Five Day War” between Russia and Georgia. Given the neorealist argument that I developed to explain Turkish-Russian cooperation earlier, the significance of Georgia’s independence for Turkey cannot be understated. Georgia is the sole country, the only “buffer state,” between Russia and Turkey. The occupation of Georgia by Russia (or by Turkey) would eliminate this buffer zone and would likely revive the dynamic of hostile rivalry that

characterized the three centuries of Turkish-Russian relations until the end of the Cold War. Given this dynamic, the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, the so-called “Five Day War,” was particularly alarming for Turkey. Not only was the war the most impressive and threatening demonstration of strength by the Russian army south of the Caucasus mountains since the end of the Cold War, the undeniably defeated side in the war, Georgia, was a staunch Turkish ally and the linchpin of Turkey’s strategy in the Caucasus. Without a friendly Georgia on its side, it is impossible for Turkey to link up with Azerbaijan, whose critical oil and gas resources energize the booming Turkish economy and offer an alternative to dependence on Russian energy for European markets. In sum, the Russian victory over Georgia in 2008 was the first straw in Russian military assertiveness in Turkey’s immediate neighborhood.

The second, and arguably the most painful, reassertion of Russian power in Turkey's neighborhood came with the Syrian civil war that started in 2011. In fact, the Syrian civil war appears to be a textbook definition of a "proxy war" between Russia and Turkey. Russia is the key great power and UN permanent Security Council member that unabashedly supported the Assad regime since the beginning of the war, whereas Turkey is arguably the key regional (but not global) power that supported the Syrian opposition. Moreover, this support was not just at the level of rhetoric or diplomacy but rather both Russia and Turkey helped the respective sides of the war logistically and militarily. Syria can be said to be Russia's most important military strategic asset in the Mediterranean basin, since the only Russian military (naval) base, or rather "material technical support point," is located in the Syrian port city of Tartus. Despite Turkey's overly optimistic, but clearly miscalculated, predictions of the Syrian regime's rapid demise within a matter of months, the civil war has not only lasted three years, as of this writing, but the pro-Russian Syrian government's forces have been prevailing over the pro-Turkish opposition forces. In sum, the Syrian government's victory, or at least unexpected resilience, against the opposition forces was the second straw in Russia's assertiveness in Turkey's immediate neighborhood.

The third, and globally most sensational, reassertion of Russian power in Turkey's neighborhood came with the Russian annexation of the

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Crimean peninsula in 2014; the most critical and strategic territory for the control of the Black Sea basin. This was followed by the overt Russian support for separatism in the Eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, led by two pro-Russian entities, the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic. Prior to 2014, Ukraine had the longest coastline in the Black Sea, followed by Turkey, and although Russia was a littoral state, the Black Sea region did not have a clear hegemon. However, with the annexation of Crimea, Russia clearly (re-)asserted itself as the indisputable hegemon of the Black Sea basin, which significantly increases the potential naval threat to Turkey, including Istanbul. Moreover, Crimea is of immense symbolic and cultural significance for Turkey. The Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of Crimea, are a Turkic and Muslim ethnic group with very tangible, strong ties to Turkey. It is estimated that there are many more Turkish citizens of Crimean Tatar descent than there are Crimean Tatars in Crimea today (quarter million). Crimean Tatars were the single

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most important constituency opposing and resisting the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, but the annexation went through nonetheless. In sum, the Russian annexation of Crimea was the third, and so far, the last straw in Russia's assertiveness in Turkey's immediate neighborhood.

Following the Realist framework outlined earlier, I would emphasize that Russian assertiveness in these three conflicts was very much accompanied by the significant growth in Russia's latent (economic) and actual (military) power vis-à-vis Turkey between 2008 and 2014. Given Russian assertiveness in Georgia, Syria, and the Ukraine, which directly contradicts and conflicts with Turkey's positions, it is somewhat surprising that the bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia are still considerably positive, as attested by the generally sanguine and cooperative messages given during President Putin's most recent visit to Turkey in December 2014. I would argue that in addition to the favorable conditions that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union discussed earlier, Turkey and Russia developed an economic interdependence with strategic significance, especially in the cases of Russian commitment to

building Turkey's first nuclear power plant and the potential importance of Turkey not just as a main consumer of but also transit route for Russian natural gas.

### Strategic Significance of Turkish-Russian Interdependence in the Energy Sector: Natural Gas and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant

There are mainly two sectors where Russia is still competitive and significant in the global market: energy and the military industry. However, natural gas dwarfs weapons sales as the primary source of export revenue for Russia, which means that Russia is also somewhat dependent on being able to sell its natural gas. European countries are the main customers of Russian natural gas, and Turkey is the second largest customer of Russian natural gas in Europe after Germany. Undoubtedly, Turkey is dependent on Russian natural gas but Russia is also dependent on the Turkish payments for the rather highly priced natural gas it has been receiving for decades.

As Putin shocked the world by announcing Russia's withdrawal from the South Stream Pipeline project, Turkey stood to recoup the profits from this unexpected turn of events. Turkey can now become a major transit hub for the reselling of Russian natural gas, especially if the flow of Russian natural gas through Ukraine is interrupted, which is a growing risk given the continuation of the Ukrainian civil war. Therefore, Turkey was described as the biggest



winner of Russian withdrawal from the South Stream Project.<sup>12</sup>

Russia's commitment to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu by the Turkish Mediterranean coast arguably constitutes the most strategic cooperation between the two countries. A second nuclear power plant will be built in Sinop by a Japanese led consortium. Each power plant project is worth approximately \$20 billion. Although a French company is part of the Japanese-led consortium building the Sinop nuclear power plant, it is noteworthy that Turkey's key NATO allies are not in charge of building either one of these two nuclear power plants. On the other hand, it must be noted that it is somewhat anomalous for Turkey not to have a nuclear power plant so far, given that two of its immediate neighbors, Armenia and Bulgaria, have had nuclear power plants since the Cold War. In Turkey's immediate neighborhood, Russia is a long-standing nuclear super power, and Israel is known to possess nuclear weapons for a long time, but also Iran might soon develop nuclear weapons. The building of Turkey's first nuclear power plant by Russia is likely to continue facilitating the strategic partnership between the two countries throughout the next decade.

### **Turkey and Russia: Friends in Weakness, Foes in Strength?**

Analyzing Turkish-Russian relations from a Realist perspective, in the long term, while focusing on the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I would argue that Turkey and

Russia have been "friends in times of weakness, while foes in times of strength." The longest period of Turkish-Russian (Soviet) "alliance" began in 1921 and lasted until 1936, because in the early 1920s the new Turkish Republic and the new Soviet regime were both struggling to survive against Western aggression. At least throughout the 1920s and in the early 1930s, both states were struggling with domestic challenges and had little latent or actual hard power to pose an immediate military threat to each other. However, by the 1940s the situation had certainly changed, since the Soviet Union emerged as one of the two super powers of the Cold War, and developed a military-economic capacity that could easily overwhelm Turkey, forcing Turkey to seek shelter under the umbrella of NATO.

The end of the Cold War initially created a situation that somewhat resembled the 1920s for Russia and Turkey. Both countries were more occupied with domestic threats (political, economic, ethnic separatist, etc.) to their survival and a significant segment of the Russian *and* Turkish elites perceived Western powers as aggressive, expansionist, revisionist states in the international system. It is very telling that even in 2014, according to the Pew Research Center, the Turkish public and the Russian public both have an overwhelmingly unfavorable opinion of the United States, 73% and 71% respectively. Only Egyptian and Jordanian public opinion are more unfavorable vis-à-vis the United States.<sup>13</sup> In particular, I emphasized the role of an independent Georgia as a buf-

fer state between Turkey and Russia, which helped dampen Turkish fears of a Russian threat. However, Russian victories and assertiveness in Georgia (2008), Syria (2011--), and Ukraine (2014-- ) are likely to trigger Turkish insecurity and fears about Russian intentions. On the other hand, the strategic significance of Turkish-Russian cooperation in building Turkey's first nuclear power plant, as well as the increasing significance of Turkish-Russian interdependence in the field of natural gas in the wake of Russia's withdrawal from the South Stream Project, seems to have moderated and dampened the conflicts the two countries apparently have in Syria, Ukraine, and the Caucasus, among other places. Given the large number of potential and active conflicts where the two countries are positioned against each other, it would be premature and misleading to suggest that Turkey and Russia are headed towards an "alliance" or that a Turkish-Russian "axis" is in the making; it is not. Despite these potential and actual conflicts of interest between the two countries, especially the last fifteen years (1999-2014) can be described as the longest period of peaceful and cooperative Turkish-Russian relations in the last three centuries of Turkish-Russian relations, indeed resembling a "strategic partnership," rivaled only by the fifteen years of very friendly Turkish-Soviet relations (1921-1936) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. ■

## Endnotes

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