

Between Appeasement and Rivalry: Turkey and Russia and their Neighborhoods

Adam Balcer*

STIFTUNG
MERCATOR

 **IAI**
Istituto Affari Internazionali

IPC | ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER
SABANCI UNIVERSITY
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

Turkey is often perceived as a country that, like several EU members, assumes that engaging rather than deterring Russia serves its interests best. Analysts also suggest that “ties between Russia and Turkey are driven by pragmatism – or even naked opportunism.”¹ We can hear, repeated like a mantra, opinions about Turkey’s drift from the West towards Russia. Turkey is also presented as a “shy guy” in the security field, meekly accepting Russian predominance. Indeed, during the Ukrainian crisis Turkey, though it is a key NATO member and a candidate to the EU, has refused to join the US and EU sanctions against Russia. Generally, Turkey avoids an open geopolitical confrontation with Russia in the post-Soviet space, though it promotes, without publicity, security cooperation with Georgia or Azerbaijan. More importantly, Turkey is substantially more eager to engage in a geopolitical competition with Russia in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara possesses larger assets in these regions, and they occupy the top place in its security agenda. However, Turkey’s leverage in this region has decreased in recent years, while Russia’s has increased. In consequence, Russia has become a more powerful player in the Middle East than Turkey. Turkey’s main problem is an insufficient recognition that the Middle East and the Black Sea are strongly intertwined in Russian foreign policy and should be treated as “communicating vessels” (see the next paragraph). Moreover, taking into consideration Russia’s ascendance in the Middle East, Turkey needs a leverage to counterbalance that process. It

could be achieved *inter alia* through a stronger alignment of Turkish foreign policy with the EU’s and NATO’s policy towards Russia.

Zero-sum Game: Russia’s Worldview

Certainly, Russia perceives the post-Soviet space as the most important region in its foreign policy agenda and its natural and exclusive sphere of influence. Nevertheless, the Middle East occupies an important, second place in the Russian agenda because it is the main geopolitical global playground. Certainly, the Russian engagement in the Middle East should be explained also by its fears concerning possible negative spillovers from the region into Russia (for instance, the return of jihad fighters originating from the current Northern Caucasus fighting in Syria and Iraq). Moscow wants to confirm its aspirations to be a global power by playing the role of the indispensable stakeholder in the region. Indeed, besides the post-Soviet space and post-communist Europe, Russia does not possess such leverage as it has in the Middle East. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia has lost almost all of its military bases located outside the Soviet Union. The Syrian base in Tartus in President Assad’s stronghold (Latakia) is the only exception, which explains why Syria is so important when considering Russian geopolitics. The Russian Navy’s radar operating from this base has coverage that ranges thousands of miles, including the entire Turkish territory. In Syria Russia also maintains electronic surveillance facilities in Latakia and airbase facilities in Tadmur.

¹ Dimitar Bechev, “Russia and Turkey: What does their partnership mean for the EU?”, in EPC Policy Briefs, 15 February 2015, p. 1, http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=3&pub_id=5304.

* Adam Balcer is Programme Director of the annual conference “Polish Eastern Policy”, hosted by the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe, Wrocław.

Moscow tries to use its influence in the Middle East as a bargaining chip in the continental geopolitical game with the West. Currently, the essence of the Russian proposal to the West can be described as: "You give us Ukraine, we will give you a hand on Iran or Syria." However, Russia's influence in the Middle East, though substantial, is overestimated. Certainly, Russia can be a serious troublemaker in the region, or can substantially contribute to its stability. Nevertheless, Moscow does not possess the capacity to stop the US from possible military intervention in Syria and Iran or to provide Teheran and Damascus with military equipment capable of deterring the US from intervention. On the other hand Russia cannot by itself enforce both countries to accept a deal with the West above Iranian and Syrian heads. In fact, Iran is not a junior brother of Russia but an independent player that possesses a larger influence in the region than Moscow. Moreover, Iran is not interested in Russian mediation in its dealings with the West. In consequence, Russia played a secondary role in achieving the most recent breakthrough in the P 5+1 negotiations with Iran. The Russian Foreign Minister was not even present during the crucial last day of the talks.

The Geopolitical Competition in Syria

Moscow plays the role of the key military ally for the main regional enemies of Turkey (Syria, Iran, Cyprus, Armenia). It can be said that Turkey is surrounded by the friends of Russia (plus Greece). The bloody conflict in Syria is definitely the most important arena of geopolitical rivalry between Turkey and Russia. Ankara supports logistically the opposition forces in northern Syria, informally supplying them with weapons and providing them with intelligence data and medical treatment. It is also an open secret that Ankara assured safe haven for the Syrian fighters on its territory, where they underwent military training. Aleppo would probably already be reconquered by the Assad forces if was not located in the proximity of the Turkish border. The most recent success of the Anti-Assad offensive in North-Western Syria (March-April 2015) is also an result of Turkey's intensified support for the fighters and its improved cooperation with Saudi Arabia.

Ankara also showed it had the courage to directly counter Russia's engagement in Syria. In 2012 Turkey twice forced Syrian and Armenian airplanes carrying Russian military equipment for Syria to land. The Turkish army has retaliated many times for the bombardment of its territory by Syrian forces and has shot down a Syrian fighter and helicopter, losing its own fighter.² However, Russia remains a steadfast supporter of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Russia is the key arms



People walk past a banner with a picture of Russian President Vladimir Putin with Arabic that reads, "welcome," along a bridge in Cairo, 9 February 2015. (Photo AP/Mosa'ab Elshamy)

conduit for the Syrian regime. It provided Syria with Mi-25 helicopter gunships, the Buk air defense system and the Bastion coastal defense missile system. Russia has also assisted Assad with shipments of fuel, and Russian military advisers have been teaching Syrians how to use purchased weapons. Since the beginning of the Syrian war, officers and air defense personnel have also been trained regularly in Russia. In October 2014, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) captured a secret Russian spy facility in southern Syria. Videos and documents released by the FSA demonstrated that the base had been run by the Russian military's foreign intelligence unit (GRU) and that a number of senior Russian military and Defense Ministry officials had visited the facility many times.³

The Eastern Mediterranean, due to the discovery of huge gas deposits, is becoming a new arena of Turkish-Russian geopolitical confrontation, with a security dimension. Russia is the main military ally of Cyprus, which perceives Turkey as the key threat to its security. At the end of October 2014, Russia conducted naval exercises with the Cypriot and Israel navies for three days in waters east of Cyprus. The Russian anti-submarine vessel, which is the flagship of Russia's Mediterranean fleet, and a landing vessel of Russia's Black Sea fleet participated in these drills. At the same time, Turkey sent its seismic research vessel into Cypriot offshore blocks. The Turkish ship was escorted by two frigates of the Turkish navy.

The Lessons for Turkey

Turkey believes that it cannot confront Russia in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean simultaneously. Ankara focuses mostly on the Middle East, keeping a low profile in the post-Soviet space in order to appease the Bear. In fact, Turkey underestimates the importance for the global order of Russian aggression against Ukraine by treating

² Meriç Tafolar, "Türk uçağını Suriye düşürdü" (Syria shot down Turkish plane), in *Milliyet*, 23 June 2012, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/d/t.aspx?ID=1557511>.

³ Josh Cohen, "Russia's Vested Interests in Supporting Assad", in *The Moscow Times*, 23 October 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/509979.html>

it as just a regional conflict. On the other hand, President Putin is very clear in his *Urbi et Orbi*. In his interview with Egypt's *Al-Ahram*, Putin said that the military conflict in Ukraine "emerged in response to the attempts of the USA and its western allies [...] to impose their will everywhere."⁴ Turkey does not sufficiently recognize that a strong and direct linkage exists between Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its interference in the Middle East.

In contrast to Turkish expectations, Russia's "preoccupation" in Ukraine did not result in the decrease of its involvement in the Middle East. To the contrary, the relatively moderate reaction of the West opposing Russia's aggression against Ukraine (i.e. lack of supply of lethal military equipment for Kiev) encourages Russia to engage even more aggressively in the Middle East. Since the beginning of 2014 Russia has considerably increased its supply of military equipment to Syria (armed vehicles, drones and precision-guided bombs). In January 2015, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Iran, making him the most senior Russian military official to visit Tehran since 2002. He signed a military cooperation deal with Iran that provides for joint exercises and military training, as well as "cooperation in peacekeeping, maintaining regional and international security and stability, and fighting against separatism and extremism."⁵

Then, at the beginning of February, Putin visited Egypt. It was his first trip in a decade to the most populous Arab country. It was also very symptomatic that the visit took place the day before the resumption of Ukrainian peace talks. At the end of February 2015, during an official visit to Moscow by the President of Cyprus, two agreements were signed: the intergovernmental agreement on military cooperation and a memorandum on cooperation between the defense ministries in the naval sphere. The military cooperation agreement established a quasi-alliance relationship between Russia and Cyprus, as highlighted by the point requiring the parties not to share with third countries any information about the nature of their cooperation. The President of Cyprus announced that the two countries are also discussing the possibility of Russia using an air base on Cyprus for humanitarian relief missions.

The resilient activism seen in Russia is also reaching Turkey. At the beginning of March 2015 a Chechen political activist was killed in Istanbul. He was the seventh Chechen victim killed most probably by the FSB in Turkey in recent years. Even the deputy prime minister of Turkey, Bulent Arinc, was forced to admit that "we know that the hand of a well-known organization in Russia killed five Chechens in Istanbul by now."⁶ The takeaway for Turkish policymakers should be the opinion of Lilia Shevtsova, an excellent expert on contemporary Russia: "As the West has showed more and more signs of acquiescence, the Kremlin has become more and more of a loose cannon. [...] For the West, restraint, compromise, and keeping promises are all attributes one can expect to find in a rational actor; the Russian political elite, however, interpret these attributes as signs of weakness."⁷ Turkey should accompany the West in this postulation. Ankara calls for more engagement from the West and particularly from the US on its side in Syria. Most probably, the possibility of convincing the West of its point of view would be greater if Ankara aligned its foreign policy towards Russia more closely with Washington and Brussels in the Black Sea region.

4 "Putin to Al-Ahram daily: Discussions to exclude US dollar in bilateral trade with Egypt", in *Ahram Online*, 9 February 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/122569.aspx>; see also Joanna Paraszczuk, "Putin Blames U.S. 'Interference, Double Standards' for Rise of IS, Ukraine Conflict", in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 9 February 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/26837571.html>.

5 "Russia and Iran sign military cooperation pact", in *Defense & Security Systems International*, 22 January 2015, <http://www.defence-and-security.com/news/newsrussia-and-iran-sign-military-cooperation-pact-4495157>.

6 "Спецслужбы РФ в Турции до настоящего времени убили пятерых чеченских лидеров: вице-премьер Турции" (Five Chechens have been killed in Turkey by Russian special services: Turkish Deputy Prime Minister), in *1in.am*, 11 January 2015, <http://ru.1in.am/1077158.html>.

7 Lilia Shevtsova, "The Kremlin Is Winning", in *The American Interest*, 12 February 2015, <http://wp.me/p4ja0Z-s3F>.