

Peeling Turkey Away from Russia's Embrace: A Transatlantic Interest

by Nathalie Tocci

From a European and transatlantic standpoint, it is as troubling as it is counter-intuitive: a de facto partnership has developed between Russia and Turkey, surrounding Europe. Paradoxical as it may be, the trend is now clear and represents a thorn in the side of European and transatlantic interests.

The paradox lies in the fact that Turkey and Russia are historic rivals. From the Ottoman-Russian wars to Turkey's NATO membership as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism, the Turkish-Russian relationship has never been easy. The post-Cold War period is no exception, nearing outright military confrontation only five years ago, when a Turkish F-16 jet shot down a Russian aircraft near the Turkish-Syrian border.

Taken together, there is no region in and around Europe where Turkey and Russia see eye to eye. Be it in Central Asia where Moscow has stymied Ankara's pan-Turkic dreams; in the Balkans

where the two have taken different sides during war and peacetime alike; be it in North Africa and the Middle East where they have stood at loggerheads in the clash over political Islam; or in the Caucasus where Turkey's support for Azerbaijan has mirrored Russia's religious affinity and security bond with Armenia, Ankara and Moscow are rarely, if ever, on the same page.

Yet the pattern is clear: in every open conflict, Turkey and Russia have managed to find an entente that is as uneasy as it is real. In Syria, the clash could have tipped into outright confrontation, but after the near miss in 2015, Moscow and Ankara walked back from the brink, notably with the launch of the Astana process in which both have been deeply involved. Tensions have heated up again from time to time. With the prospect of Bashar al-Assad's onslaught on Idlib in 2019, Turkey called Russia's foul, but eventually the Turkish-Russian understanding held. In northeastern Syria too, where

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Turkey intervened militarily against the Syrian Kurds in 2016 and again in 2019, Moscow could have prevented Turkey's offensive given its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) footprint on the Syrian airspace, but chose not to.

In Libya, Turkey and Russia have rallied for opposite sides of the civil war. Notably, Russia, with its Wagner mercenaries, provided crucial backing to Khalifa Haftar's military offensive against the Government of National Accord in Tripoli. Weighing in alongside the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and France, the Wagner group's stepping into the Libyan quagmire almost tipped the scales, with Haftar's advance towards Tripoli becoming ever closer in early 2020.

When the GNA risked falling, Ankara stepped in, providing military backing to a government the international community had spared no words in backing while doing precious little in practice. Turkey's military intervention flipped military fortunes and created that mutually hurting stalemate that brought the parties to an uneasy ceasefire in the summer of 2020. Turkey remains deeply involved militarily in Libya, and Russia's military presence in the east, from being a "nice but not necessary" tool to deploy, is now entrenched. Notwithstanding the ongoing political dialogue process, Libya risks partitioning militarily along the Sirte-Jufra line, with both Turkish and Russian presence consolidating in the country.

The resumption of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan after twenty-six years of unstable ceasefire around

Nagorno Karabakh and its adjacent regions became the third potential Turkish-Russian flashpoint that never was. When Azerbaijan kick-started the war to recapture the territories lost to Armenia in the 1992-94 war, much of the international media spotlight turned to Ankara.

Turkey, in fact, was the only external power that did not call for a ceasefire, but rather egged Baku on in its military campaign. There was much talk of Turkey's drones and Syrian jihadis, the role of which was likely overplayed, but nonetheless significant. For its part, Russia activated itself to broker a ceasefire. While repeatedly stepping in to mediate humanitarian ceasefires, it implicitly allowed the war to rage on for six long weeks, in which Azerbaijan gradually recaptured much of the seven regions surrounding Nagorno Karabakh. It was only when Azerbaijani forces made inroads into Karabakh itself, that Moscow blew the whistle.

The peace deal brokered by Moscow was an all-out win for Russia, as well as Azerbaijan. Along the line of contact in Nagorno Karabakh and the Lachin corridor, a contingent of almost 2000 Russian troops are being deployed for the first time since the end of the Cold War. This gives Russia not only unprecedented leverage over the constitutional fate of Nagorno Karabakh, but also over domestic politics in Azerbaijan and above all Armenia. However, to a lesser extent Turkey gained too. Ankara for the first time won the possibility of sending observers to the region, and, most significantly, with the reopening of a direct connection between Azerbaijan

and its exclave Nakhichevan, Turkey obtained direct access to Azerbaijan proper and the Caspian Sea.

In each of these conflicts, Turkey, a NATO ally and, at least theoretically, an EU candidate country, has pursued incontrovertibly its national and often nationalistic interests. It has done so in ways that have certainly not coincided with those of the European Union or of the United States. However, it would be mistaken to argue that Turkey's interests have been diametrically opposed to those of the West.

In Syria, Turkey's assault on the Syrian Kurds generated a Western outcry – in words rather than deeds – while its ambiguity towards and support for different incarnations of the Islamist opposition to the Syrian regime sowed mistrust, notably at the height of the ISIS threat in the Middle East, Europe and the world. However, Turkey, unlike Russia and Iran, and alongside the West, has been a sworn enemy of the Syrian regime, ever since the protests degenerated into civil war in late 2011. In the reconstruction and refugee return phase of the Syrian conflict, the EU and Turkey will grapple with similar policy challenges.

In Libya too, Turkey has clearly pursued its interests and is now consolidating its military, political and economic presence in the country. In Libya, Turkey is there to stay. Yet there too, Western and Turkish interests are not totally incompatible. Ankara stepped into the war to prevent the fall of Sarraj's GNA that Europe and the US also backed in theory. Both Turkey and the EU have an interest in the stabilization

of Libya and the prevention of its de facto partition into two blocks.

Finally, in Nagorno Karabakh, Turkey has certainly sung from a different hymn sheet from the Western cry for an immediate ceasefire. However, no European country nor the US has ever objected to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Furthermore, Turkey's inclusion amongst the observers in Nagorno Karabakh should be looked upon with favour by Europeans in a context in which the OSCE Minsk Group has been sadly outmaneuvered and Russia would otherwise monopolize the show.

Notwithstanding the fact that divisions between Turkey and Russia are infinitely more tangible and acute than those between Turkey and the West, relations between Turkey and Russia are consolidating into a de facto partnership, while those between Turkey and the West are edging towards sanctions. Why?

The easy part of the answer lies in domestic politics in Russia and Turkey. Vladimir Putin's Russia has long abandoned even the narrative of democracy, heralding itself as one of the leaders of a post-liberal world. The Russian President has used foreign policy to gain strategic edge over the West, and stoke nationalism at home, distracting public attention from domestic woes. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has taken Putin's cue, and over the last year, has regained some domestic political traction after the Justice and Development Party's electoral annus horribilis in 2019.

By intervening militarily in Libya, escalating tensions in the East Mediterranean and reentering the Caucasus, Erdoğan has done what many, if not most, Turks would read as a welcome reassertion of national interests redressing past wrongs. In doing so, Erdoğan has distracted public opinion from his ailing domestic economy. In other words, Russia and Turkey's leaders pursue similar tactics: they "get each other" and that understanding instils a degree of reciprocal respect even when interests diverge.

There is certainly truth in this explanation, which is the one most commonly heard in the West. However, it is also a convenient truth for the West to put forth, leaving in the shadow another, complementary, but far more uncomfortable reality.

Another explanation is that Russia and Turkey have found pragmatic ententes because they have had to do so. They are both deeply engaged in each of these conflicts in a way in which Europeans and Americans are just not. Turkey and Russia are far more prone to intervene militarily in conflicts than Europeans always were and Americans are becoming.

More broadly, be it in Syria, Libya or the Caucasus, the US and the EU have abdicated much of their responsibilities and shied away from risk. In the vacuum, Russia, Turkey and other regional players, have stepped in, learning to come to terms with one another. The US, for its part, can retort with good reason that this is not the part of the world where it will do the

heavy lifting. We should expect that in different forms and manners, this will continue to be the tune played by the Biden administration.

Europeans instead have only themselves to blame. It is may well be too late for Syria and probably also for the Caucasus. However, when it comes to Libya, Europeans should do much more. Germany has invested significantly in the Berlin process, and diplomacy is certainly a key piece of the peacebuilding puzzle. But unless Europeans take greater risks to consolidate peace on the ground in Libya – and not simply at sea – they will continue to be passive by-standers of the de facto external control of the country by Turkey and Russia. As Libya's political dialogue unfolds, Europeans should engage far more actively in peacebuilding, with greater readiness to be present on the ground.

While taking greater risk and responsibility, Europeans should think through a strategy that makes due distinction between Turkey and Russia, avoiding further entrenchment of the unnatural partnership between the two, from which Europeans and Americans can only lose. In particular, we should not be blinded by the commonalities we see between Putin's Russia and Erdoğan's Turkey domestically, and become better able to distinguish between their foreign policy behaviour.

On foreign policy, Russian and Turkish positions and ambitions differ in important ways. Beyond annexing Crimea and upending the European security architecture, Putin's Russia vies for leadership of a sovereignist

world. In no way does it see itself as part of the West, and is often scathing of the alleged ineffectiveness, cowardice, arrogance and moral bankruptcy of Western liberal democracies. Russia has acted to the direct detriment of Western democracies by interfering in electoral processes, spreading disinformation and allegedly engaging in cyber-attacks. We should of course "selectively engage" with Russia, but with eyes wide open as to the context in which our engagement takes place.

Turkey, for all its faults, not only is and remains a NATO ally, but continues to express an interest in closer relations with the European Union, beginning with a modernized customs union. Ankara's sincerity would need to be verified, but to do so it is the Union that must make the first move. Likewise, the EU and the US should actively seek opportunities to work with Turkey on foreign policy questions on which interests do not fundamentally diverge. With Syria and Nagorno Karabakh further away from Western reach, Libya would be the place to start. The space for manoeuvre, here too, is shrinking fast. As Libya's political dialogue unfolds, time will be of the essence.

All this does not imply that the EU and the US should stay put and refrain from using the stick with Turkey as the case may warrant. Be it over the S400 debacle with NATO or Turkey's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean, the threat of restrictive measures will remain on the table. Less still does it mean that the EU and the US should drop the ball on Turkey's democratic backsliding. With an administration in Washington that will once again take genuine interest in

democracy, human rights, rule of law, a renewed transatlantic focus on Turkey's domestic dynamics is imperative.

However, in addressing whether, when and how to react to Turkey's foreign policy moves, Europe and the US should factor in the broader strategic context in which we operate. The purpose of our actions should be to peel Ankara away from Moscow, rather than push it deeper in its embrace.

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