

## THE EVOLUTION OF TURKISH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY: THE POTENTIAL FOR PRAGMATISM

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The article presents an overview of the Turkish foreign policy strategy and its implications for the development of Turkish-Russian relations. The bilateral relationship is viewed in the context of the Turkish-Russian summit of 2021 which became an important landmark gave an impetus to the future growth of the Turkish-Russian relationship. The influence of the international context on the Turkish-Russian rapprochement is also addressed.

**Keywords:** Turkey; Russia; USA; EU; intentions; capabilities; economic projects; president V. Putin; president R. Erdogan; summit; Turkish-Russian relations; US-Turkish relations; Syria; Libya; South Caucasus; Black Sea; security.

## НЮАНСЫ ТУРЕЦКО-РОССИЙСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ В НАЧАЛЕ XXI В.: ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ ПРАГМАТИЧНОГО ПОДХОДА

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Рассматривается внешнеполитическая стратегия Турции и ее влияние на развитие турецко-российских отношений. Содержание двустороннего взаимодействия анализируется на основе рассмотрения итогов турецко-российского саммита 2021 г., который стал важным индикатором достигнутого уровня сотрудничества и придал новый импульс его дальнейшему развитию. Значительное внимание уделено влиянию международного контекста на турецко-российское сближение.

**Ключевые слова:** Турция; Россия; США; Европейский союз; намерения; потенциалы; экономические проекты; президент В. Путин; президент Р. Эрдоган; саммит; турецко-российские отношения; американско-турецкие отношения; Сирия; Ливия; Южный Кавказ; Черное море; безопасность.

### Introduction

The founder of the modern Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk terminated the Ottoman Empire and built the 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkey on the republi-

can traditions. For him social peace was essential for conducting an efficient foreign policy, and conversely, foreign policy was an essential component of the socio-

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political consensus of the Turkish people. Until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Turkey had been trying to implement the *acquis communautaire* of the European Union in its domestic legal framework and fulfil the role of junior partner of Washington and NATO. Under the constitution, the Turkish army was tasked with safeguarding Turkey against Islamic extremism and the empire's revival.

The situation changed when the Justice and development party of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in 2002. A junior partner in the past, Turkey took a firm stance on many issues like never before. It refused to allow the NATO troops to transit its territory to Iraq in 2003. It also became less willing to join the EU at any cost (responding to the escalation of demands from Brussels for Turkey's admission). The Turkish army which for years had a final say on most matters of domestic and foreign policy, lost its dominant political position, especially after the aborted coup d'état in July 2016 masterminded by the Fetullah Terrorist Organisation network, allegedly with support from the US. The consequent revision of the principles of Turkey's foreign policy gave rise to concerns – shared by some Western and Russian experts – that Turkey might be going back to neo-Ottomanism and its ambitions for the Great Turan.

The conceptual framework for a new foreign policy for Turkey reemerging from the shadow of Washington, the EU and NATO was credited to professor Ahmet Davutoğlu who later became the Turkish foreign minister. In 2008 he put forward his famous *zero problems with neighbours strategy* that governed Turkish foreign policy for at least a decade. As the Russian expert on the Turkish foreign policy, V. Dergachev, observed, the strategy envisaged the conduct of peaceful policies towards Turkey's neighbours and non-interference in their internal affairs [1].

Ahmet Davutoğlu's zero problems strategy reflected Turkey's growing global role throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Turkey has strengthened its positions in the Middle East, NATO, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the United Nations. In Ahmet Davutoğlu's description, his foreign policy framework had three distinctive features: promotion of just world order, peaceful resolution of conflicts and avoidance of aggressive responses and a systemic approach to the conduct of policy, i. e. addressing political, economic and humanitarian goals simultaneously [2].

Mentioned scientist also takes credit for the strategic vision of Turkey's foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his article "Principles of Turkish foreign policy and regional political structuring" he argues that Turkey's holistic approach, solid rational judgment and use of its historical geopolitical advantages put it in a good position to be a force for peace and stability, pursue proactive foreign policies, promote reintegration with its neighbours, maximising its assets this turbulent era [3]. These three principles apply to foreign policy in its neighbourhood, but also the USA, EU and other

countries. This includes the Russian Federation, where Turkish policy is grounded in rational choice and pragmatism. Turkey uses all its capabilities to strengthen diplomatic channels and build a dialogue with the Russian Federation, basing itself on Ahmet Davutoğlu's principles of rhythmic diplomacy, multidimensionalism, zero problems with neighbours, order instituting actor, international partnership, and pro-activity [3].

Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu's intellectual input in Turkish foreign policy is universally recognised, and the significance of his zero problems strategy cannot be overestimated. His policies, however, have come under strong criticism. It has been contended that Ahmet Davutoğlu's Syrian policy caused extreme tensions between Turkey and Russia, and also triggered a massive exodus of refugees to Turkey that damaged Turkey's economy. Contradictions in aims were not successfully addressed, and Turkey's position on the Arab spring, especially in Syria, was not communicated effectively to the Arab world. The Sochi agreement and the launch of the Astana process as an alternative platform for Syria were seen as setbacks for Turkey. Conceptually, critics have attacked the imposition by Turkey of sanctions against Syria. For example, according to professor Ali Balcı, the sanctions strengthened the PYD and increased terrorist attacks while complicating Turkey's relations with Iran and Russia [4, p. 338–339]. Professor Muharrem Ekşi lamented the absence of a strategy to engage with Russia and Iran and the Astana process to advance the struggle against PYD and Yekîneyên Parastina Gel [5, p. 87].

On balance, the zero problems policy was a necessary response to the end of the Cold War. As a NATO member, Turkey inevitably took the side of the West during the Cold War, frequently at the expense of its relations with its neighbours and the Arab world. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century a new chapter in Turkey's foreign policy began. It was, in essence, a reincarnation of ideas from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – Kemal Atatürk's peace at home and peace in the world and an emphasis on "keeping balance" in its orientation towards the West. The latter implied balancing the Western track of Turkish foreign policy with pursuing relations with the adversaries of the West, by relying on Turkey's geostrategic location [6, p. 19–20]. It also meant keeping balance in the relationship with different components of the West [6, p. 19–20]. The relations between Turkey, its neighbours and the Arab world evolved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in keeping with these ideas.

Relationships with the Arab world and making Turkey a key player in world affairs are prominent strategic objectives of Turkish foreign policy in recent years. Ankara's involvement in the Azerbaijanian-Armenian war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 illustrated its tactic. O. Glazunov and Yu. Davydova, political scientists from the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics stated that "Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh was evidence of growing Turkish influence in the region

and Islamic world, making Turkey a key player in the South Caucasus. Russia should keep this in mind in the conduct of its policies in the region”<sup>1</sup> [7]. Building an effective relationship with Ankara could make Russia more successful in the pursuit of its policies in the Middle East, North Africa and the Caucasus.

The rest of our analysis is based on the following *hypothesis*. The presidential summits of recent years and the pursuit of mutually beneficial commercial projects were instrumental in strengthening the political and economic ties between Russia and Turkey, despite their membership in different security and economic systems.

### Overview of the Turkish-Russian relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Extensive bilateral ties between Turkey and the Russian Federation from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were a function of increasing threats and mounting pressures from the Middle East and South Caucasus and tensions resulting from some aspects of the US foreign policy. Vested economic interests also played a part. The Turkish-Russian rapprochement was not without problems, as evidenced by the assassination in December 2016 of the Russian ambassador A. Karlov, and Turkey’s downing of a Russian warplane on 24 November 2015. These events put the relationship to a halt for some time, but diplomacy ultimately prevailed by building on mutual interest in bilateral economic ties. Bilateral summits served to expand the areas of cooperation and gave rise to new initiatives instrumental for peace, security and stability in the region.

Bilateral ties between Turkey and Russia have given rise to multiple infrastructure projects with spinoffs for the entire region. Tourism, the gas pipeline “Turk stream”, Akkuyu nuclear power plant construction in Turkey, purchasing of Russian S-400 missile complexes, the presence of Turkish construction companies in Russia, and Turkey’s tomato export are visible examples indicative of the depth, breadth and dynamism of these ties. Russia’s present relations with Turkey are more varied, profound and diverse than they were decades ago. The summit in Sochi of presidents V. Putin and R. Erdoğan on 29 September 2021, showcased their accomplishments and scale.

Turkish and Russian media and scholars commented extensively on this event. The commentators took note of V. Putin’s emphasis on the need for both sides to keep the dialogue going and remain pragmatic under all circumstances. Acknowledging the existence of multiple differences between Turkey and Russia, V. Putin exhibited confidence in the ability of diplomacy to produce the desired outcomes.

President V. Putin underlined the impressive increase in the bilateral flow of capital investments, with Turkish investments in Russia reaching 1.5 bln US dollars and Russian investments in Turkey topping

6.5 bln US dollars<sup>2</sup>. At the time of the summit the imbalance in bilateral trade came under criticism from Turkish media and experts. V. Putin was responding to them indirectly, by stressing the impressive amount of Russian investments in Turkey. He also underlined that the infrastructure projects were proceeding as planned, referring in particular to the gas pipeline to Turkey, gas transit to Southern Europe, and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. The Russian president also welcomed the successful cooperation between Russia and Turkey on the international stage, including in Syria and Libya. He referred to the example of the joint Russian-Turkish centre in Agdam for the monitoring of the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia as a step toward stability and reconciliation<sup>3</sup>. In conclusion, he remarked that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted the tourist industry throughout the world, including the number of Russian tourists to Turkey, which decreased from 6.8 in 2019 to only 1.5 mln people in 2021. However, the situation began to improve in 2021, when 2.5 million of Russians travelled to Turkey as tourists<sup>4</sup>.

In turn, the Turkish president said: “It is beyond dispute that the Turkish-Russian relations – including in the political, economic, trade, military, defence and industrial fields are advancing”<sup>5</sup>. R. Erdoğan acknowledged collaboration with Russia in the tourist sphere and commented on his visit to the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, where he expected the first reactor to be launched in 2022. 13,000 people were working at the site, including 10,000 Turkish citizens and 3,000 citizens of Russia<sup>6</sup>. He added that Russia had trained nearly every member of the plant’s personnel, as an illustration of the depth of the relationship. Defence cooperation was firmly underway, and the sides had no intention of backtracking on their intentions. According to R. Erdoğan, peace in the Middle East was highly dependent on both countries’ joint moves on the Syrian problem and the quality of the Turkish-Russian relations<sup>7</sup>. Overall, president R. Erdoğan sent an optimistic message on the ability of bilateral cooperation to

<sup>1</sup>Hereinafter translated by A. B.

<sup>2</sup>Experts react: the key takeaways from the Erdogan-Putin meeting [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/experts-react-the-key-takeaways-from-the-erdogan-putin-meeting> (date of access: 29.11.2021).

<sup>3</sup>Putin meets face to face with Erdogan in Sochi [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmIwHCBUWqE> (date of access: 29.11.2021).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.



advance political, economic, trade, military, defence and industrial ties between Russia and Turkey.

At almost every meeting, the presidents underlined the significance of Turk stream, Akkuyu nuclear power plant and the delivery of the S-400 missile complexes for the future of the bilateral relations. For example, Turk Stream is more than just an economic partnership but a project that strengthens Turkey's geopolitical importance as a reliable supplier of gas. Furthermore, the successful completion of all these projects would testify to the effectiveness and depth of Turkish-Russian relations. Despite multiple differences over Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, both parties remain cooperative and are doing their best to avoid direct opposition.

Tourist arrivals from Russia are important for Turkey's tourism industry and the economy in general. Russia is the single largest supplier of tourists to Turkey, putting Moscow in a position to influence Turkey by regulating the flow of its tourists. During periods

of political disagreements, Russia threatens to block the visits of its tourists. For example, when R. Erdoğan met the Ukrainian president V. Zelenskii on 10 April 2021, in Istanbul and supported Ukraine's position on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the Crimea, the Russian side blocked the flow of Russian tourists to Turkey citing anti-COVID measures as a reason. It responded similarly to the downing of its warplane by Turkey on 1 December 2015.

Another source of potential tension is R. Erdoğan's decision to build the Istanbul channel parallel to the Bosphorus channel. International agreements now in place (e. g. the Montreux convention) restrict third party military activity in the Black Sea basin. The proposed channel (which began to be built in 2021) could give Ankara the power to allow or disallow the passage of battleships from third countries at will. Moscow is still considering the implications of this move for Russia's security.

### Political commentaries on recent developments in the Turkish-Russian relations

The future of Turkish-Russian relations in light of the Sochi summit has been the subject of numerous commentaries. M. N. Katz, nonresident senior fellow with the Middle East programme of Atlantic Council and professor of government and politics at Schar school of policy and government of George of Mason University, contends: "The Putin-Erdoğan meeting in Sochi did not resolve Russian-Turkish differences over Syria, but did seem to prevent them from getting any worse; for Putin, relations with Erdoğan have long amounted to a balancing act between opposing Turkish moves that threaten Russian interests in Syria, Libya, the Armenia-Azerbaijan arena, and Ukraine on the one hand and inducing Erdoğan not to reverse his hostility toward America and Europe (which Putin wants to encourage) on the other"<sup>8</sup>. James F. Jeffrey, chair of the Middle East programme of the Wilson Centre and former US ambassador to Turkey and US special representative for Syria engagement, observes: "...the two sides' bland post-meeting comments do not document anything so dramatic, but what was new in this meeting is the role of the United States and the Idlib ceasefire resulted from US diplomacy supporting Turkey's and Israel's military actions in Syria, and keeping US troops there, to pressure Russia and Assad for a comprehensive compromise settlement of the conflict"<sup>9</sup>.

A nonresident senior fellow at Turkey programme of Atlantic Council, former US ambassador to Azerbaijan and former deputy assistant secretary of state for Euro-

pe and Eurasia M. J. Bryza made this elaborate comment. Noting the significant tension at the summit over the deployment of Turkish combat drones and Turkish artillery strikes in Syria's Idlib province and later in Libya<sup>10</sup>, and Moscow's dismay with Ankara's growing military cooperation with Ukraine, M. Bryza remarked that V. Putin and R. Erdoğan were both silent on these differences in Sochi, underlining economic cooperation instead<sup>11</sup>. In his view, emphasis on economic cooperation reflected V. Putin's desire to drive a strategic wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies, especially the United States. Still, Moscow's sale of S-400 missile complexes to Ankara could not outweigh the fact that Turkey relies heavily on NATO to deter aggression by the country against which it had fought more wars than with any other dating back to the Ottoman Empire<sup>12</sup>. Still, the announcement in Sochi that Russia and Turkey would collaborate in developing submarine and jet-engine technologies could have serious consequences for the Black Sea security. M. J. Bryza concludes that whether R. Erdoğan views this new area of military-technological cooperation with Russia as a counterweight to its collaboration with Ukraine or whether it marked a more significant shift in Ankara's strategic calculus remained to be seen<sup>13</sup>.

Professor Burhanettin Duran, general coordinator of the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research notes the breadth of the meeting's agenda (i. e. Syria, Idlib, PKK-YPG, Manbij, Afghanistan,

<sup>8</sup>Experts react: the key takeaways from the Erdogan-Putin meeting [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/experts-react-the-key-takeaways-from-the-erdogan-putin-meeting> (date of access: 29.11.2021).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

Libya, the Zangezur corridor, the six-nation Caucasus platform, the S-400s, jet engines, space cooperation, natural gas, nuclear reactors, trade and tourism), contending that the balance of power was far from being its only theme. Admittedly, Turkey and Russia compete to fill the power vacuum created by US partial withdrawal or repositioning from the region. On occasions, this competition intensified, as evidenced by Russia's displeasure with Turkey's defence cooperation with Ukraine, Libya and Eastern Europe. However, the bilateral meetings between R. Erdoğan and V. Putin will go down in the history of diplomacy as striking examples of leader-to-leader diplomacy that transformed the relationship between the two states and added a multi-dimensional character to them [8].

Talha Köse, associate professor of political science at Ibn Haldun University, observes that while Idlib (and the implications of the developments there for the agreement reached between Ankara and Moscow

in 2018) were at the centre of the discussion [9], the two leaders decided to keep the status quo in Idlib, agreed to deepen cooperation in the defence and security sectors, and promised to improve their economic relations. Thus, as argued by Talha Köse, the discord between Ankara and Washington created a new opportunity for cooperation between Ankara and Moscow [9].

As follows from the political commentaries, the pragmatic stance taken by presidents R. Erdoğan and V. Putin, was a key prerequisite to avoiding confrontation on a range of divisive issues, such as Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine. It also enriched the Turkish-Russian relationship with new dimensions and opportunities for interaction in the economic, political, military, and humanitarian fields. Furthermore, intense criticism of R. Erdoğan's policies from Washington and Brussels (e. g. on human rights, Turkish involvement in Libya, oil exploration business near Cyprus) appears to facilitate the Turkish-Russian rapprochement.

## Conclusion

Historically, Turkey and Russia have competed in the Black Sea region. The countries fought more wars with each other than any others. However, the Black Sea region is also the location of the Turk stream project which takes a prominent place in Turkish-Russian relations. Projects such as these are a good example of pragmatism in pursuit of peace and economic stability in the interest of both parties. The construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant is another example of such pragmatism. It will allow Turkey to guarantee reliable supplies of electricity for its expanding national economy. The supply of the Russian S-400 missile system is another example of a pragmatic choice in response to Washington's refusal to sell Turkey its system "Patriot".

Turk stream, Akkuyu nuclear power plant, supply of S-400, Turkish construction companies' business in Russia and Russian tourists showcase the extensive and deepening relationship between Russia and Turkey at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The big question is why Turkey, a NATO member-state, turns to Russia for assistance even in some of the most sensitive issues from a regional and international perspective. The first reason is the obvious need for cooperation between Russia and Turkey to resolve the security crises in Syria, South Caucasus and Libya. The second is Washington's growing reluctance to cooperate with president R. Erdoğan, and its unwillingness to propose and pursue mutually beneficial projects with Turkey. For Ankara, collaboration with Russia is a new creative strategy for securing its national interest.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Turkish-Russian relations have improved noticeably. It may even be said that now is one of the best times in history to develop these relations further and faster. However, this is easier to say than do. At present Russia and Tur-

key are cooperating at three levels: strategic, economic and political. Examples of strategic cooperation are the gas pipeline Turk stream project, Akkuyu nuclear power plant and the procurement of the S-400. Economic cooperation is mainly represented by tourism, the activity of Turkish construction companies in the Russian market and Turkey's tomato exports. Political cooperation is extremely important for de-escalating conflicts in Syria, Libya and South Caucasus, despite the existence of multiple differences between the parties. Both parties believe in the power of diplomacy and dialogue. The pursuit of mutually beneficial projects for the economy and security has played a key role in avoiding direct confrontation.

Adherence to pragmatic principles has been prominent in the advancement of bilateral relations. The typical approach of Ankara and Moscow has been to freeze the most controversial issues and isolate them from the bilateral agenda. The presence of a pipeline of essential bilateral projects strengthens the pragmatic trend in the relationship.

Admittedly, there has been strong historical competition between Turkey and Russia, especially in the Black Sea, Caucasus, Eastern and Central Europe, a legacy that complicates the relationship and creates difficulty in finding solutions to the satisfaction of both parties. Still, we may expect the partnership between both countries to expand to new fields, and its extent and volume to increase. Both presidents shared this vision at the Sochi summit. However, Turkey and Russia have very different foreign policy perspectives and objectives for regions like Crimea, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Turkish-Russian relations contribute to stability and peace in the region and the world. Direct confrontation

or a proxy war would be destructive for both parties and should be avoided at all costs.

Ankara still views its relations with the US as strategically important, and this stance influences its position on regional issues (Syria, Libya, Israel, Palestine). In many respects, the Turkish-Russian and Turkish-American relations are correlated. Ankara would like to see Turkey in the role of an emerging balancing power that countervails the US or Russian policies when they become too expansionist or dominant. Turkey has multiple policy instruments to choose from, including NATO mechanisms, economic ties with the EU, In-

ternational Organisation of Turkic Culture, Turkish-African partnership summits, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, its ties with the Muslim world, and increasing cooperation with the newly independent states.

Ankara and Moscow have international ambitions, and both are striving to become global powers, not just regional ones. Nevertheless, Turkey and Russia have been able to strengthen their political and economic ties in recent decades. Presidential summits and the pursuit of mutually beneficial commercial projects have been instrumental in this accomplishment.

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