

Turkey's tightrope act: Staying in Nato while warming towards Russia

President Putin is using Turkey's wounded national pride and President Erdoğan's mistrust of the West to make inroads in the republic. A new partnership is emerging between the old rivals on the Black Sea. Although Ankara values its membership of Nato, it is frustrated by its Western allies. Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 air defence system is therefore a geopolitical signalling to the West. Further ties with Moscow cannot be excluded.

Never underestimate psychology in geopolitics. Unlike Western leaders, Russia's President Vladimir Putin understands the psyche of his Turkish counterpart, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Putin knows that an anti-Western posture resonates well in the presidential palace in Ankara and among many layers of Turkish society. Pro-Russian lobbying is increasing among the security establishment in Ankara. This comes as a result of US support for the Kurdish forces in northern Syria, its withholding of technology for Turkey's armed forces and previous US sanctions after a two year detention of an American pastor, Andrew Brunson.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the stand-off between Russia and Turkey in Syria in 2015, a Turkish rapprochement with Moscow seemed inconceivable, but Putin changed the geopolitical balance at a key moment. After the failed coup in Turkey on 15 July 2016, Putin was one of the first world leaders to call Turkey's president to express his support. He read the mind of Erdoğan when he stated in a TV interview that if the US-based, Islamic-Turkish leader, Fethullah Gülen, was involved in the fatal coup attempt, it is difficult to conceive that US intelligence agencies "were not aware of what was happening". This is what many in pro-government circles believe in Turkey, and it is another reason why the divide between Washington and Ankara has been mounting. In addition, defence experts in Ankara underline that the West has not grasped how the Turkish strategic community sees the Kurdish issue.

Since the coup attempt, Russia has made many inroads



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan at the opening of the Natural Gas Pipeline, 19 November 2018, in Istanbul. Photo: Shutterstock.

in Turkey – through military sales, by opening up the Astana process on de-escalation in Syria for Turkey and by softening visa restrictions for Turkish travellers to Russia. Turkish experts, who claim to be staunch supporters of Turkey's membership of Nato, usually speak favourably of this rapprochement. According to one insider, while still acknowledging that Ankara must never trust Russia's intentions, "unlike Brussels and Washington, Russia treats us as equals". To underline his doubts about the Kremlin's geostrategic interests, he quotes an old Turkish saying which translates as "you can't make a fur coat out of a bear and you can't make a friend out of a Russian".

HISTORY SHADOWS RELATIONS

Czarist Russia had been Turkey's traditional enemy since the 17th century. Trapped by the Black Sea throughout centuries of empire, the Czars wanted access to warm waters further south, but the Ottoman Empire, via the Turkish Straits in Bosphorus and Dardanelles, stood in its way. "Czarist Russia started 12 wars against the Ottoman Empire, and we lost them all", a Turkish specialist notes, highlighting territorial losses.

Lenin came to Turkey's rescue after the Russian Revolution in 1917. He withdrew from "the Great War", which helped the Young Turks in their efforts. During

Turkey's war of independence of 1919–1923, when Atatürk fought to save Anatolia from being dismembered, the emerging Turkish republic could not have won without the help of Lenin.

Stalin, however, adopted traditional Russian instincts over the Turkish Straits. “Stalin wanted Turkey's eastern provinces back and control of the Bosphorus”, says retired ambassador Alev Kılıç, director of AVİM, a Eurasianist think-tank in Ankara. Stalin's quest for territory, including the Straits, terrified Turkey. According to experts, it is the reason why Turkey joined Nato in 1952. To prove that Turkey was a reliable Nato ally, it sent troops to Korea in the early 1950s.

AN APOLOGY ENDS DEEP-FROZEN RELATIONS

In modern times, the war in Syria led to a new nadir in Turkish-Russian relations. In November 2015, a Turkish air force pilot shot down a Russian attack-jet in the airspace between Syria and Turkey. One of the pilots was killed as he tried to eject. President Putin called the incident a stab in the back. The crisis that followed led to a trade war from which the Turkish economy suffered the most. Agricultural exports to Russia were blocked, while Turkish construction projects and other company operations in Russia were halted. Moscow banned Russian charter flights, which are essential to the Turkish economy.

President Erdoğan does not easily back down, but on 27 June 2016 he apologized to Russia and the pilot's family, stating that Turkey never had the desire nor the intention to shoot down the SU-24 plane. This immediately paid off as Putin ordered relations to be restored. This is how Turkey's “pivot to Russia” began. Little more than two weeks after the apology, Turkish air force pilots created shock and havoc by blocking bridges over the Bosphorus in Istanbul and bombing the parliament in Ankara while other plotters unsuccessfully went after Erdoğan. Being out of reach of the putschists, he called on Turkish citizens to resist in a FaceTime interview from his hiding place. While Putin expressed support for Erdoğan, the reactions from Western leaders were considered lukewarm.

The thaw between Ankara and Moscow that followed led some observers to suggest that the Kremlin had tipped off Erdoğan beforehand. Ankara today blames the downing of the SU-24, as well as the December 2016 assassination of Russia's Ambassador Andrei Karlov, on the Gülenist movement, an explanation that Russia chooses to accept. Turkey officially labels the movement “FETÖ”, a short form of “Fethullah Gülen's terrorist organization”. Ironically, Gülen's movement used to be a close ally of Erdoğan and his AKP party, until a first rift appeared in 2013, amid the Gezi protests and corruption charges against Erdoğan and his entourage.

PARTNERS IN THE ASTANA PROCESS

In contrast to earlier times, president Erdoğan now holds frequent meetings with his Russian counterpart, outnumbering his encounters with any Nato ally. Putin also invited Turkey to participate in the Astana process, as the third party in a troika together with Iran. The Kremlin does not always bring Iran to the table, and this was the case when Moscow and Ankara made an agreement for the Idlib province in Syria's north-west. The salafi-jihadist Tahrir al-Sham dominates Idlib, in breach of this arrangement, which is an embarrassment for Erdoğan. Putin, for his part, uses the jihadists in Idlib as a political asset, pushing Turkey to further concessions, with the ultimate goal of persuading Ankara to resume its relations with Damascus.

This was the underlying message when, at his meeting with Erdoğan on 23 January 2019, Putin put the 1998 Adana protocol to the fore. The 21-year-old agreement between Syria and Turkey forced Damascus close PKK's bases on its territory, imprison PKK fighters and expel PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan, which resulted in Öcalan being imprisoned for life in Turkey since 1999. For the Turkish nationalist camp, to which Erdoğan now belongs, a new Damascene suffocation of the PKK/YPG would be more than welcome.

RUSSIA PUSHING TURKEY BACK TO DAMASCUS

In the final analysis, Erdoğan is likely to swallow his pride and restore his ties with Bashar al-Assad, just as Russia wants. After all, Erdoğan should be considered a tactician rather than a strategist. Since he came to power in 2003, he has made many U-turns. A reorientation to Damascus seems to be in the offing. In early February 2019, the president admitted that there are contacts, albeit low-level, between the Syrian and Turkish intelligence services. For those in Turkey who have lambasted the president's failed policies on Syria, a volte-face towards Assad would be seen as a necessary correction – and an ultimate acknowledgement that Erdoğan failed in his previous goals in the war in Syria.

Ankara's long-held aim was to help Syrian insurgents and defectors topple Assad. Today, Turkey's primary aim in Syria has shifted to finding the means to crush the Kurdish PYD/YPG, a Syrian branch of the larger PKK family. Nonetheless, a Turkish military initiative in north-eastern Syria, including a buffer zone, would not resolve a pressing domestic issue: the Kurdish problem within Turkey's borders. Turkish nationalists, regardless of whether they rally behind Erdoğan, wish to see Syria restored as a centralized state in control of its borders, refusing federalism or autonomy for the Kurds, which otherwise would encourage Kurds in Turkey to strive for the same.

A resumption of Turkish relations with Damascus, encouraged by Russia, could resolve another of Ankara's problems: a repatriation of the more than 3.5 million

Syrians in Turkey who are lacking a refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention. Turkish citizens' solidarity with Syrian refugees has waned over time. The presence of millions of Syrians is a burden for Turkish schools and health system, as well as for the labour market, depressing wages for the economically vulnerable and increasing rents in crowded neighbourhoods.

SURGE IN BILATERAL TRADE AND TOURISM

Another sign of the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey is a significant increase in bilateral trade over the last three years. The next goal is to reach an annual trade volume of over USD 100 billion. This compares with the level in 2016, when bilateral trade amounted to just USD 11.2 billion.

Tourism is flourishing, more so than ever. In 2018, Turkey became Russia's top destination, with nearly 6 million visitors. The stated goal is to increase the number even further in 2019.

RUSSIA AS TURKEY'S MAIN ENERGY PROVIDER

Turkey is rich in many resources, except energy. This has given the Kremlin an opportunity to work with Ankara on major projects. Turkey's imports of natural gas from Russia, via the Black Sea, constitute around 52 per cent of the republic's gas import. Natural gas from Iran is second at 16.7 per cent and Azerbaijan third at 11.8 per cent. Even though Turkey was granted a temporary waiver from US President Donald Trump's sanctions on Iran, insiders claim that Turkey cut its oil import from its eastern neighbour to zero in November 2018. Gas from Iran runs unabated through pipelines, but unlike Russian gas, they only have conduits to Turkey's East.

Russia is on track to complete TurkStream, two underwater gas pipelines via the Black Sea. Putin has previously announced that the pipelines will be fully operational by mid-2020. Turkey is now Russia's second largest market for natural gas exports. In addition, to reduce Turkey's dependence on energy imports, Russia is building Akkuyu, the republic's first nuclear power plant. Construction has faced delays, linked to Russia's state-owned Rosatom finding it difficult to attract Turkish partners. Nonetheless, president Putin is adamant that the plant will be operational in good time for the Turkish republic's centennial in 2023.

PURCHASE OF RUSSIAN S-400 FUELLED FEARS IN NATO CAPITALS

Last but not least, in a multibillion-dollar weapon sale, Russia is to provide Turkey with an S-400 missile system. Members of the US Congress have expressed concern that Russia could build back doors to the S-400, which would potentially allow Moscow to obtain classified information

from Nato systems. Turkey hosts Nato's Land command, the X-band radar (which is part of the ABM system), and the Incirlik air base in the southeast, which is used by US Air Force. It is generally believed that the airbase still hosts stockpiled US nuclear weapons.

Turkey is also a partner in Lockheed's multi-nation F-35 programme for a stealth multi-role fighter. F-35 engines, for delivery to Nato member states in Europe, are assembled in Eskişehir in Western Anatolia. Turkey is the sole manufacturer of some components. If the US were to remove Turkey from the joint F-35 programme, this would cause delays. The first Turkish F-35 pilots are currently trained in Arizona. One of 100 aircrafts has been delivered to Turkey, albeit that it is still on US soil. From the US point of view, however, the S-400 cannot be deployed anywhere near the F-35.

Since the post-2016 purges in the Turkish air force, it has a low pilot-to-cockpit ratio. Turkish defence experts who favour of the S-400 deal, argue that turning to Moscow was Ankara's best option when the US put restrictions on Turkey's earlier bid for the Patriot surface-to-air missile system. Ankara saw the limitations as discriminatory against a country that has been a member of Nato for over 65 years.

An often-repeated view in Turkey is that Erdoğan successfully made use of his bazaar-technique. Following the S-400 negotiation with Russia, he obtained a new and better deal on Patriots. The new offer from President Trump expires in March 2019. According to one Turkish expert, "Trump got the message and is now willing to sell Patriots to us at a price which is 15 per cent lower than the original offer and including non-essential technology". It is not just the price that matters to Turkey, but the sharing of military technology. Washington, however, signals that it will withdraw its new offer for the Patriots, if Turkey proceeds with the purchase of S-400. Yet, an influential Turkish MP, Volkan Bozkir, claims that the bulk of the price for the S-400 has already been paid. Delivery is expected in November 2019.

Turks repeatedly states that Greece, a Nato member, has Russian S-300 without Washington raising any concerns about it, but this argument is easily brushed aside. Greece got an earlier variant of the Russian air defence for a different reason. Originally destined for Cyprus, it was Turkey that asked for the S-300 to end up in Greece.

Erdoğan's bargaining, however, had another successful side-effect. An earlier bid to buy a Chinese air defence system, resulted in setting up a French-Italian-Turkish consortium to build the Eurosam anti-air missiles. An agreement was signed in early 2018 on an 18-month study to determine the needs and priorities for a proposed joint production.



THE TURKISH-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP SEEMS HERE TO STAY

Many Turkish analysts, including Kemalists or nationalist-minded Islamists who not necessarily support President Erdoğan on every issue, see the S-400 deal as a matter of national pride. They insist that Turkey must be treated on equal terms with other Nato members. The sense of being treated unfavourably by the EU, Nato and Washington, runs deep in Turkey. Putin is playing on these sentiments.

In Turkey, President Putin is both feared and admired for his cold-bloodedness. According to a Turkish scholar, Selim Koru, much of the Russian-Turkish diplomacy today is “an exercise in cleansing the relationship of Western influence”. Erdoğan’s friendship with Venezuela’s president Maduro, supported by Putin, is part of this anti-Western and anti-liberal axis.

Turkish critics of the S-400 deal do not always express their concerns openly, reflecting the climate of fear that has followed the purges and arbitrary arrests since the failed coup in 2016. Opponents view the deployment of the S-400 as “a very costly investment for little purpose”. According to one line of thought “the S-400 are useless since they can’t be combined with the Nato infrastructure”. Nato’s air defence requires a ground environment, which Turkey already has. If a signal that an aircraft is entering the Turkish air space is received, the air defence system needs to be operational within the whole of Turkey, which the Nato system is. Critics also remark that “AWACS are necessary for the infrastructure. The S-400 does not have these assets, it covers only itself.”

Where the Russian air defence system shall be deployed is a state secret. One defence analyst comments that the Aegean Army area, close to Greece and far away from Incirlik, could be a plausible location. Some seasoned observers half-jokingly suggest that President Erdoğan wants the Russian air defence system close to his palace to protect him from another attempted coup by air force pilots.

Ankara’s mistrust of the US, already apparent after Washington’s tepid response to the 15 July putsch, increased further after the sanctions that followed the incarceration of the American pastor Andrew Brunson. The Turkish government’s hope that the United States would extradite Fethullah Gülen in exchange for Brunson, brought the retort that the Turkish president “obviously does not understand the US division of power”, that a US president does not have the same power over the judiciary as Erdoğan has.

TURKEY NEEDS NATO – YET WANTS ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE

Turkey today is encircled by Russian military installations: In Syria with Russia’s naval and air force bases in Tartous and Khmeimim, and influence over the Assad regime; in Armenia where Russia has troops on the border with Turkey; in the Black Sea, following the annexation of Crimea.

Turkish analysts underline that the republic “meticulously applies” the Montreux agreement from 1936 which gives Turkey control over on the Straits and regulates the transit of warships between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, which is essential for Russia’s supplies to its bases in Syria. Turkey can only block the Russian Navy from passing through the Straits if it is in war with Russia or considers herself to be threatened with imminent danger of war.

An often heard assessment is that Turkey needs Nato, but wants room for manoeuvre. Turkey has an interest in remaining in the alliance, as a shield against Russia. The Turkish ministry of defence in December 2018 started the construction of a new military base in Trabzon, which will be the Turkish Navy’s ninth naval base, and its second on the Black Sea. Turkey maintains strong relations with Ukraine, including military cooperation, opposes Russia’s annexation of Crimea and supports Mustafa Dzhemilev, the leader of the Crimean Tatars. President Erdoğan stated in 2017 that: “We neither did, nor we will, recognise the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia”. Nonetheless, Turkey is not part of the EU’s sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea, something Turkish commentators explain as a general antipathy against sanction systems.

While Turkey has reasons to remain in Nato, it views its rapprochement with Moscow as the product of a shared resentment against the West. Russia’s greater power in the near abroad is also important. If the US were to apply another round of tough sanctions against Turkey for the S-400 deal, Ankara’s forthcoming F-35 fleet and its existing F-16 fleet is jeopardised. If, at the same time, Turkish-US relations would hit an historic low in northern Syria, Turkey’s slide towards Moscow may continue even further, even though Ankara wishes to stay in Nato.

*Bitte Hammargren
Analyst*