



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Turkey's Tactical Bear Hug with Russia

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** In theory, Turkey's relations with Russia have never been brighter. However, behind the nice façade lie a deep ideological divide, mutual mistrust, and diverging regional interests. Eight decades after Atatürk's "transactional" Soviet initiative, Turkey's Islamist leaders are ironically following a similar line. For Erdoğan, Russia is not just a strong trading partner and the top supplier of Turkey's energy. It is also the eastern ground of his political acrobatics with the Western world.

Turkey's Cold War history featured a staunch alliance with the Western bloc coupled with constant fears of a Russian invasion or of the export of Soviet communism. The past few years, by contrast, have been marked by more complex dynamics between Ankara and Moscow that are often blurred by Turkish zigzagging between its Russian and Western interests.

After the normalization of ties following the Turkish downing of a Russian Su-24 over Syrian skies, Ankara has committed itself to buying the Russian-made S-400 air and anti-missile defense systems and has opened talks for the acquisition of other air defense equipment from Moscow. Trade and tourism have flourished, and Russia has signed a \$22 billion deal to build and operate Turkey's first nuclear power plant. The Russian military allowed Turkish troops to cross the border into northwest Syria in an incursion that would bring domestic political gains to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (a popularity boost, particularly among nationalist voters, ahead of the June 24 presidential and parliamentary elections) rather than attain fluid foreign policy goals (cutting an emerging Kurdish belt stretching from northern Iraq to Turkey's southwest border with Syria). In theory, Turkey's relations with Russia have never been brighter. But behind the nice façade lie a deep ideological divide, mutual mistrust, and diverging regional interests.

Few Turks know that a statue in the heart of Istanbul (Taksim Square) that depicts Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey, together with his War of Independence commanders, İsmet İnönü and Fevzi Çakmak, also features Soviet military generals Mikhail Frunze and Kliment Voroshilov. They commemorate Soviet help (in the form of gold and weapons) during Turkey's War of Independence (1919-23). During the war, Atatürk employed an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, pro-Soviet rhetoric and cultivated strong economic ties with Moscow. He chose to develop transactional relations with the Soviets, but saw the West as Turkey's strategic partner.

Eight decades later, Turkey's Islamist leaders are ironically following in the footsteps of the man they loathe when it comes to Turkey's relations with its historical enemy, Russia. For Erdoğan, Russia is not just a strong trading partner and the top supplier of Turkey's energy. It is the eastern ground of his political acrobatics with the Western world.

All the same, ideology, often the main motive behind Erdoğan's foreign policy calculus, is potentially a detriment to mutual pragmatism. A brief glance at the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Turkish political Islam might be helpful in understanding the major fault lines between Moscow and Ankara.

In April 1946, the military warship USS Missouri arrived in the Strait of Dardanelles in a symbolic gesture against potential Soviet aggression over the Turkish straits. Three Turkish military vessels, the Yavuz, the Sultanhisar, and the Demirhisar, greeted the Missouri and escorted it to the Bosphorus, where it anchored. In support of the symbolic American military presence (and against a potential Russian one), a mosque on the shores of the Bosphorus, Bezm-i Alem Valide Sultan, hoisted a big banner between two of its minarets welcoming the USS Missouri. This was the first political banner ever hoisted by a mosque, and it indicated Turkish Muslim sympathy for America and hatred of Soviet Russia.

In February 1969 the US 6<sup>th</sup> fleet arrived in Istanbul despite days of protests by left-wing Turkish students. Again siding with the Americans and against the "infidel communists," Turkish Islamists organized in armed teams and attacked leftwing, anti-American protesters, killing two students and severely injuring several others. (One member of a committee that prepared the Islamist attackers was Abdullah Gül, Erdoğan's one-time staunch political ally, with whom he formed his Justice and Development Party in 2001. In 2007, Erdoğan had Gül elected president of the republic, but their relations soured after Erdoğan succeeded Gül in 2014. Both Erdoğan and Gül come from the youth ranks of "Milli Görüş" ["National View"], Turkey's main Islamist ideology.)

Russia is no longer the land of infidel communists, but its state ideology has been fighting various shades of Sunni political Islam in the Middle East, especially in Syria. Sectarian Sunni supremacy is an indivisible part of Erdoğan's Islamism.

Erdoğan's Turkey, in theory, is in cooperation with Russia over Syria – but it took the Turkish leader several years to understand that cooperation was possible only if Ankara aligned with Moscow, not the other way around. In July 2012, Erdoğan said: "We have consensus with Russia over Syria." Thirty-eight months later, Russia militarily intervened in Syria, and not in a way to make the Turks happy.

Also in July 2012, Erdoğan said Russia was positive about a transitional government without Syrian President Bashar Assad, Erdoğan's regional nemesis since 2011. In December 2014, Erdoğan said: "Generally speaking, we have consensus [with Russia] for a solution [in Syria]." In July 2015, he said: "Russia's attitude over Syria is much more positive than before ... I believe that [Russia] can give up on Assad."

Three months later, Assad received red-carpet treatment in Moscow.

In November 2015, then Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş said: "I can see that Russia is coming closer to [a Syria without Assad]." About a week later, Turkey's top diplomat and then interim foreign minister, Feridun Sinirlioğlu, said: "I cannot say that the Russians have agreed to Assad's departure, but they do not resist that either ... It is out of the question that Assad runs in future Syrian [presidential] elections." A week after that, Russian President Vladimir Putin, accompanied by his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, was in Tehran, where Russia and Iran jointly declared that they were united in opposing "external attempts to dictate scenarios of political settlement [in Syria]", and that "only Syria's people could decide to reject Assad in elections following a ceasefire."

Erdoğan was always cut off from the regional realities when it came to Russia. In 2015, he said: "Russia does not border Syria. Why is it so interested in Syria? I want to understand this. I will ask them [the Russians] to review this." The Russians never conducted this "review." Instead they augmented their military and political presence in Syria. Turkish air strikes over Syrian skies as part of Operation Olive Branch this year were only possible with a Russian blessing.

Diverging Turkish and Russian interests over Syria and, in the background, over Iran will tend to keep Turkish-Russian bilateral relations hostage to sectarian realities in this part of the world. Globally speaking, Erdoğan

tirelessly advocates, in his famous “the world is greater than five” dictum, that the UN’s permanent Security Council should be restructured on a rotating basis (Erdogan wants Muslim representation as a permanent member). Putin cannot take proposal that seriously.

There is also the problem of mistrust. For Turkish policymakers, Moscow remains a potential adversary that has proven to use a heavy hand if necessary (see, for example, the punishing economic sanctions in the aftermath of the Su-24 affair). And for the Russians, Turkey is not an ally but a tactical partner as long as it keeps aligning its regional and broader policy with Russian interests.

One indication of mistrust is hidden in the terms of Turkey’s S-400 and European air defense efforts. In one deal, Turkey’s defense industry is working on a program for the co-production of a future long-range architecture (with the Franco-Italian Eurosam). The other is an off-the-shelf sale to a customer with whom the Russians refuse to share even tiny bits of missile technology.

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