

How important is Turkey to the Russians after all?

Sabahat Khan

Dubai

Turkish-Russian relations look to be back on track following Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Both leaders are somewhat unpredictable but respected for their political guile. That has come to the fore as they sweep recent disagreements under the carpet.

The November 2015 downing of a Russian warplane deployed to Syria by Turkish aircraft threatened to undo years of progress and efforts by Moscow and Ankara to court one another.

Russia punished Turkey with economic sanctions because of the incident and deploying the highly capable S-400 air defence system in Syria – putting the country's airspace effectively beyond the reach of the Turkish Air Force.

The Russian response was measured: The Turks could not be let off the hook but any punishment needed to avoid the possibility of dangerously escalating military tensions with NATO, of which Turkey is a member. The other motive for Moscow's measured response was to leave a door open for Ankara.

Turkey is viewed by the Russians

as a country of special significance. There is much Russia can gain from courting and deepening ties with Turkey. Alternatively, shutting the door on Turkey could complicate the geostrategic environment for Russia and reinvigorate historical rivalries at a time when there is great need for collaboration on both sides.

Differing Russian and Turkish policy towards Syria has, of course, been the epicentre of recent tensions but both will recognise that their long-term interests in Syria remain threatened unless they can narrow their differences. Ironically, Syria could represent the ideal opportunity for Russian and Turkish collaboration to move to new levels.

Russia has bolstered the authority of the Assad regime but it remains delegitimised for far too many Syrians and the wider Arab citizenry to have strong long-term survival prospects. Kurdish separatism is a deep concern for Turkey and, as the United States nurtures Kurdish political autonomy and activism, Ankara cannot afford to lose Russia as an ally.

Geography also makes Turkey and Russia strategic partners in the Transcaucasian region. Turkey is a dialogue partner in the Sino-Russian Shanghai Cooperation Organisation project, and, despite its NATO membership, it is a prospective member as publicly declared by Erdogan.

Since their spat, Turkey has in-



President Vladimir Putin (R) meets with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in St Petersburg, Russia, on August 9th.

tensified military engagement with Georgia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine. Turkey is deepening defence industrial cooperation with Ukraine and the countries have conducted a series of joint naval exercises in the Black Sea in recent months to enhance their ability to operate together "in accordance with NATO standards". Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan have also expanded joint military drills over the past year, largely driven by concerns related to Russia.

As such, Russia prefers engagement and its lucrative benefits over the risks of confrontation and hostile rivalry with Turkey. Turkey is the second largest buyer of Russian gas after Germany, and the Turk-Stream pipeline will cement their energy-security relationship to truly strategic dimensions. Russia is the fourth largest supplier of oil and related by-products to Turkey, which is also planning a Russian-built nuclear power plant.

Together with Egypt, Turkey is

the largest buyer of Russian wheat and the Turkish economy is also hungry for Russian steel and machinery. Even in defence trade and collaboration, Turkey has shown openness to Russia beyond what its EU and NATO partners may feel comfortable with.

For lack of options, cooperation in Syria and ending the civil war is in the mutual interest of Russia and Turkey and both seem to have the flexibility required to work more closely together. The political con-

The Iran factor in the Russian-Turkish rapprochement

Viewpoint



Mark N. Katz

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been busy: He met with Iranian President Hassan Rohani along with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku on August 8th and with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in St Petersburg the next day.

Russian-Iranian relations have been strong for some time, especially since last year when Russian forces joined the Iranians in Syria to defend the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Russian-Turkish relations had been close, then deteriorated dramatically but are recovering.

Moscow and Ankara cooperated closely for years, especially on trade, except over Syria, on which they "agreed to disagree", even though they were supporting opposing sides in that country's war.

The Russian military intervention in Syria last September, however, changed the balance of the conflict against Turkey's Syrian allies and tensions between

Moscow and Ankara grew, peaking with the November 2015 incident in which Turkish forces shot down a Russian warplane that Ankara claimed and Moscow denied had crossed into Turkish airspace.

Moscow punished Turkey by dramatically cutting trade ties. In the wake of deteriorating Turkish-Western relations over numerous issues, including Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian policies, Russian-Turkish relations dramatically improved in June. This came after Erdogan expressed regret for the death of the Russian pilot involved in the November incident and Putin announced that Russian-Turkish trade ties would be restored.

Relations improved further when Putin acted much more quickly than Western leaders to condemn the coup attempt against Erdogan in July. Indeed, after the coup attempt, Turkey's relations with the West have soured while its ties to Russia have improved, almost ostentatiously.

Erdogan undoubtedly appreciates Putin, who, unlike Western leaders, approves of his crack-down on his internal opponents by less than democratic means – methods that Putin has not hesitated to employ.

With many Turkish officials suggesting that the United States was behind the coup attempt – something Washington has categorically denied – and reports about how Turkey might withdraw from NATO, Putin clearly has

reasons to be pleased with how his decision to "forgive" Erdogan in June removed the element of hostility in Russian-Turkish relations. Left to stand the tension might have discouraged Erdogan from voicing his displeasure with the United States and the West quite so strongly.

There are still important differences between Moscow and Ankara, especially over Syria. In an interview with the Russian news agency TASS, Erdogan again called for Assad's departure and claimed that Syrian unity cannot be preserved unless that occurs.

Erdogan also said: "Considering that... al-Nusra Front is also fighting against the Islamic State, it should not be considered a terrorist organisation."

Moscow firmly disagrees with both of these positions. Even if he wanted to, Putin could not accommodate Erdogan on these issues without causing severe problems in Russian-Iranian relations. Shia Iran emphatically supports the Alawite-dominated Assad regime and opposes his Sunni jihadist enemies, including al-Nusra Front. Despite al-Nusra's recent rebranding and claim to have broken ties with al-Qaeda, Tehran still views the group as anti-Shia and anti-Iranian.

Even if Putin wanted to accommodate Erdogan on Syria, any improvement in Russian-Turkish relations that might result would be vastly outweighed by deterioration in Russian-Iranian relations.

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Moscow and Tehran have together propped up the Assad regime though have not defeated his internal opponents. Moscow and Ankara working together might not be able to establish a stable post-Assad government – especially in the face of a determined Iranian effort to maintain the Assad regime, an effort that would be bolstered by Hezbollah and the other Shia militias fighting in Syria.

Now that it has good relations with both Tehran and Ankara, some might see an opportunity for Moscow to bridge the differences between these two regional powers over Syria. While Turkish-Iranian relations are actually fairly positive otherwise, it will not be easy to bridge their differences over Syria. If it were, they would have managed it on their own already.

The improvement in Russian-Turkish relations then is not so much the beginning of an alliance between them as it is a reversion to the previous *status quo* in which their overall relations were good but they differed on Syria. This is due to Moscow's need to maintain good relations with Iran, which will not "agree to disagree" with Moscow if it sought to accommodate Erdogan on Syria.

Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University in the United States. Links to his recent articles can be found at www.marknkatz.com.

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