



Despite handshakes, disagreement over Syria lingers

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Washington

Following angry exchanges with its Western allies, Turkey signalled an eagerness to repair ties with Russia but the continuing clash of interests over Syria is likely to slow moves towards a closer alliance between Ankara and Moscow.

After a, August 9th meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in St Petersburg, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he wanted to heal ties with Turkey. Nine months ago, relations plunged into crisis when a Turkish fighter jet downed a Russian warplane along the Syrian border.

Russian economic sanctions against Turkey will be lifted and Putin said both countries were determined to find a solution in Syria, where the leaders support opposing sides.

Erdogan said both sides were "extremely determined" to work for a full restoration of ties, including an increase in bilateral trade from \$30 billion annually to \$100 billion. The two leaders agreed to pursue the Turkish Stream pipeline project, which would deliver Russian natural gas to Europe. Turkey and Russia also agreed to create a joint investment fund and to cooperate in defence matters.

All of this sparks concerns in Europe and the United States that Turkey, an EU aspirant and the only predominantly Muslim NATO member, could move from its Western moorings. Ahead of his meeting with Putin, Erdogan bitterly complained about what Turkey sees as the West's failure to support his regime following the unsuccessful coup attempt in July.

The pro-government media in

Turkey suggested that Europeans and Americans want to weaken Turkey and that it is time for Ankara to look for support elsewhere.

"There are no more common values left between Turkey and the EU," wrote Ibrahim Karagul, editor of the pro-Erdogan Yeni Safak newspaper. The newspaper Daily Sabah said in an editorial that "it is natural to doubt the reliability of allies and alliances that fail to stand by Turkey in its hour of need".

Soner Cagaptay, a Turkey analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said Russia is using the mood in Turkey to its advantage. "Russia sees this as a major strategic opportunity," Cagaptay told CNN. He said Putin's aim was to "bring Turkey into Russia's fold".



Putin was the first major world leader to meet Erdogan since the coup attempt and, unlike the European Union and the United States, Russia has not criticised the Turkish leader over his crackdown following the coup. After meeting Erdogan, Putin said Russia was "against all types of coup attempts".

By reconciling with Putin, Erdogan may be warning the West. Ankara is "flirting [with Russia] to make [the] West nervous", Howard Eissenstat, a Turkey specialist at St Lawrence University in New York, wrote on Twitter. Moscow's Pravda newspaper said a Turkish-

Russian alliance was the "EU's nightmare".

Turkish officials stressed that a normalisation in trade and tourism did not mean that Ankara was abandoning its Western partners. "Our relations with Russia are not an alternative to other relations," Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Simsek told the Hurriyet Daily News. "We have multi-dimensional relationships. We are a member of NATO. We are an EU accession candidate."

Ultimately, the conflict in Syria will determine how far the Russo-Turkish thaw can go, observers said. Beyond expressing a will to work together in Syria, the St Petersburg meeting did not produce specific policy proposals beyond an announcement to improve communication.

Following the warplane incident, Ankara accused Russia of bombing Syrian rebel positions to help Syrian President Bashar Assad and Moscow accused Ankara of supporting radical Islamic groups in Syria. Now Erdogan says it is time to work with Russia. "I think we have to solve this thing by Russia and Turkey taking steps together," he told Turkish state broadcaster TRT.

After the visit, Turkey sent diplomats, military officials and intelligence representatives to Moscow to explore Syria options with their Russian counterparts.

Members of Erdogan's government concede it will be difficult to find common ground over Syria. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said after the St Petersburg visit that Turkey and Russia had "different thoughts" about how a Syrian ceasefire could be secured and noted that Turkey was not happy with Russian warplanes targeting "the moderate opposition".

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text of poor Russian relations with the West and deteriorating Turkish relations with Western capitals provide an added impetus to Russian-Turkish rapprochement.

Turkey could drop its bid for EU membership altogether and even decide to leave NATO. Both scenarios would draw Turkey closer to Russia and Moscow would actively facilitate such posturing through deepening strategic cooperation with Ankara at the economic, political and military levels.

When bilateral relations have been attended to with greater care they have shown promise, and Putin and Erdogan may finally now be able to give the attention Russia-Turkey ties actually need.

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A mutually convenient 'new page'

Viewpoint



Yavuz Baydar

Never failing to surprise, even in the most difficult of times, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made headlines once more with a visit to Russia.

The meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin carried much symbolic and diplomatic weight. That the Russian capital was Erdogan's first foreign destination after the botched coup was significant in terms of Turkey's ever-fading relations with the West.

Since the coup attempt, Erdogan's prime targets, apart from his demonised foe, US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, have been the administration of US President Barack Obama and European leaders.

Their support for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government was far too delayed and timid, Erdogan kept saying, while some of his ministers openly accused the Ameri-

cans of being behind the putschists.

Praise was meanwhile directed at Putin, whom Erdogan once more thanked while shaking hands, after seven months of name-calling between Turkey and Russia after Turkish jets shot down a Russian warplane in November 2015. In Erdogan's eyes, Putin was the swiftest to express his solidarity.

Although much more restrained than Erdogan, Putin was happy with the ways things turned out. The Turkish delegation's visit had followed Erdogan's apology for the incident that cost a Russian pilot's life and told the world that Putin was not only able to define the future of Syria but also capable of unsettling Turkey's decades-long membership of the NATO alliance and its traditional ties with the West.

Erdogan emerged as the obvious winner of the arm wrestling that lasted for months, causing the Turkish economy considerable damage through trade sanctions and the suspension of Russian tourist flights to Turkey. The trade volume between the two countries was about \$35 billion when the Russian jet was hit and, according to Putin, has decreased by 43% since.

Now Erdogan hopes to target \$100 billion in trade as soon as possible. He seemed in a mood for maximum appeasement towards

Putin, declaring that the jointly planned but frozen Akkuyu nuclear plant in Turkey be raised to "strategic project" status. He was also ready to reset economic relations by having Russian trade sanctions and visa restrictions lifted and charter flights beginning to fly to Turkish holiday resorts.

Nobody believed that the acrimonious stalemate would be sustainable. That is the reason why both sides' media unanimously welcomed the rapprochement, as eyebrows were raised in NATO and European capitals. "Turkey is a valued ally, making substantial contributions to NATO's joint efforts... Turkey's NATO membership is not in question," the military alliance said in a rapidly issued statement.

It is the military dimension of the bilateral talks that will lend the most significance to the Turkish-Russian thaw. During the meetings, Russian Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov was present – a strong gesture. In addition, the two leaders agreed that direct hotline communications be established between the army chiefs of staff, and delegations consisting of diplomats, military officers and intelligence staff will visit each other regularly.

This side of the talks bears a distinguished symbolism over how both leaders may be intending to challenge the West from

Erdogan hopes this tango in Russia will be useful to break his isolation.

their own vantage points.

For Erdogan, this tango in Russia, he hopes, will be useful to break his isolation. In this, the Turkish leader, who emerged even more powerful at home after the coup attempt, is staging a delicate balancing act between global power blocs. Whether Erdogan is willing to dig deeper for a new Eurasian strategic alliance as a replacement for NATO seems premature.

For Putin, it may be seen as another efficient tool in his neo-expansionist moves to twist loose the unity of Europe and weaken whatever remains of its leadership.

Syria remains a divisive issue, although both agree, from different perspectives, that its territorial unity should be protected.

Ankara is determined to battle against any Kurdish advance that may end in a self-rule along its border and Putin is equally decided to continue to disagree with Erdogan that Assad must go.

Yet, as Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said: "It is a new page." Both sides will be careful not to rock the boat. They will battle their chosen enemies while debating Syria's future: Ankara against the Kurds, Moscow against the jihadist forces that threaten the Syrian Ba'athists in Damascus.

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The fact that Russia was Erdogan's first foreign destination after the botched coup was significant in terms of relations with the West.