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HOW INFLUENTIAL IS THE BLACK SEA IN RUSSO-TURKISH RELATIONS?

Master Dissertation

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Yet the desire to defend Pericles is not enough to explain the Tucydidean interpretation (...) The purpose of the work is made very clear quite early. It is intended for those “who wish to see clearly the things that have happened and those things that, in accordance with human nature, will happen in the same or a similar way again in the future”. His work is not intended only for the present but as a “possession forever”.

-Donald Kagan. May you profoundly rest in peace.

Abstract

Over recent years, the Republic of Turkey has increasingly resorted to the use of force in the pursuit of its national interest regarding international affairs. Accordingly, Ankara's interaction with the Russian Federation in several strategic scenarios has been noticeable as both countries have grown closer and closer. Given Turkey's role as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization however, deeper Russo-Turkish ties have been a topic of great concern for European and North American leaders.

Simultaneously, the Black Sea - where Turkey and Russia meet - has been a scenario of increasing militarization efforts despite the relatively short attention it has received, ever since the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

This dissertation aims to not only understand what is at stake at the Black Sea in geopolitical and geostrategic fashion, but also clarify how the Russo-Turkish relationship has got to its current state.

Accordingly, the research question present in the title aims to to understand the relation between the dynamics of the Black Sea and ties between Moscow and Ankara. Essentially, an argument is made that the Black Sea region represents a fundamental key in understanding the relationship at hand as the the Sea's strategic value has a deep effect in the geopolitical mindset of both countries.

Keywords: Russia; Turkey; Black Sea; Geopolitics; Geostrategy.

Word Count: 36101 words.

Resumo

Nos últimos anos, a República da Turquia tem recorrido cada vez mais ao uso da força na prossecução dos seus interesses nacionais no palco internacional. Neste contexto, a interação de Ancara com a Federação Russa em vários cenários estratégicos tem sido perceptível à medida que os dois países se têm vindo a aproximar. Sendo a Turquia um membro da Organização do Tratado do Atlântico Norte, no entanto, laços russo-turcos mais profundos têm sido um tema de grande preocupação para os líderes europeus e norte-americanos.

Simultaneamente, o Mar Negro - onde a Turquia e a Rússia se encontram - tem sido um cenário de crescentes esforços de militarização, apesar da atenção relativamente baixa que tem recebido desde a integração russa da Península da Crimeia em 2014.

Neste contexto, esta dissertação visa não só compreender o que está em jogo no Mar Negro de forma geopolítica e geoestratégica, mas também esclarecer como a relação russo-turca evoluiu ao seu estado atual.

Nesse sentido, a questão de pesquisa presente no título visa compreender a relação entre a dinâmica do Mar Negro e os laços entre Moscovo e Ancara. Essencialmente, argumenta-se que a região do Mar Negro representa uma chave fundamental para a compreensão da relação em questão, uma vez que o valor estratégico do Mar tem um efeito profundo na mentalidade geopolítica de ambos os países.

Palavras-Chave: Rússia; Turquia; Mar Negro; Geopolítica; Geoestratégia

Número de Palavras: 36101 palavras.

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Introduction

Over recent years, the Republic of Turkey has increasingly resorted to the use of force in the pursuit of its national interest regarding international affairs. Accordingly, Ankara's interaction with the Russian Federation in several strategic scenarios has been noticeable as both countries have grown closer and closer. Given Turkey's role as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization however, deeper Russo-Turkish ties have been a topic of great concern for European and North American leaders.

Simultaneously, the Black Sea - where Turkey and Russia meet - has been a scenario of increasing militarization efforts despite the relatively short attention it has received, ever since the Russian integration of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

Motivation to the development of the topic at hand results mainly from the notion that it has become increasingly harder to understand both Russia and Turkey's perspectives on geopolitical issues in Western academic life. Plus, the subscription to the observation that the Black Sea has been somewhat marginalised in European strategic debates is a curious cause for concern that is to be tackled. Accordingly this dissertation aims to bring clearance to the situation, by discussing the relevance of the Black Sea and placing it in the context of Russo-Turkish relations. As such, the necessity and natural curiosity of better understanding Moscow and Ankara's views, as well as the strategic importance of the Black Sea, are topics to be undertaken simultaneously.

Therefore, it is imperative to resort to the geopolitical and geostrategic analysis of the Black Sea, while it has also become necessary to diachronically outline the evolution of Russian and Turkish geopolitical mindsets in order to examine how both powers interact with each other. Hence, the qualitative scientific method has been the appointed course of research, mainly through several think tanks such as the Center for Strategic & International

Studies, or the Middle East Institute for example, with the occasional addition of news outlets.

Essentially, the main idea is to grasp the strategic reach of both the Black Sea and the relationship that Russia and Turkey have been developing over recent years. A contribution to the academic community is made in a way that builds on the discussions regarding each topic, by fusing both subjects into one, ultimately analysing to what degree are Russo-Turkish ties and the Black Sea central to each other.

On that note, the first chapter will focus on analysing the various dynamics of the Black Sea, ultimately drawing a geopolitical profile of the waterway that should also somewhat serve as necessary background information for the coming chapters, while holding its own weight content-wise.

The following chapter will solely focus on the relationship at hand. For that, a reading of the geopolitical mindset of both Moscow and Ankara is to be expected, only to be followed by similarities and differences that shape how they interact with each other according to the potential mutual benefit both powers gain from interacting.

Naturally, the third chapter will focus on said interaction in practical terms, by analysing each other's roles in the main common strategic scenarios they find themselves in, such as Syria and Libya for example. Thus, this chapter will culminate on the importance of the Black Sea amidst such context, keeping in mind all the geopolitical and diplomatic considerations that were made throughout the dissertation.

Lastly, a final chapter will consist of concluding thoughts and personal reflections.

Whom the Bell Tolls: The Black Sea in the World

A Shared Strategic Hotspot

When analysing the Black Sea's place in the world of contemporary international relations, it is important to look at what surrounds it.

Focussing on the bigger picture, the Black Sea is an inland, not landlocked, body of water that sits as a crossroads between Europe and Asia and the Middle East. Several definitions regarding the limits of the Black Sea Region can be found, depending on how one looks at it. To what extent is the Caucasus to be considered part of the region? What does that mean for the limits of the Caspian Sea Region? And to what extent do the Balkans belong to the Black Sea Region? These are key questions to be answered when attempting to outline the general area. Nevertheless, despite the interchangeability of possible definitions, the core idea remains the same in the sense that what is of utmost importance is what immediately surrounds the Black Sea itself.

In its western flank, at the borders of the Black Sea are the countries of Romania and Bulgaria. These countries already represent regional entities such as the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), that sit at the opposite side of the geopolitical chessboard with regards to Russia, while Ukraine stands in the middle, both literally and figuratively.

In its southern flank, one can find the country that politically holds most of the sea's margins - Turkey. A volatile NATO member and a seemingly EU aspiring country that, much like the Sea itself, represents a bridge between Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East.

In the East, besides Russia, lies the Southern Caucasus in between the Russian Federation and the Turkish Republic. Despite Georgia being the only Black Sea littoral state

in the Southern Caucasus, the neighbouring states of Armenia and Azerbaijan are also extremely important for the region in various aspects.

Given the geostrategic meaning of the Black Sea to the Russian Federation, as will be further discussed, one can argue that a fitting delineation of the Black Sea Region is what takes place in and around the Black Sea, along with what lies beyond the easternmost areas of the Carpathian Mountains, all the way into the South Caucasus where it gradually blends with the dynamics of the Caspian Sea Region as one moves further east. Thus, despite not being littoral states, countries such as Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan must also be kept in mind.

The history of the Black Sea is largely due to the strategic assets it showcases, that are important for several surrounding states. All the coastal nations, including neighbouring landlocked countries, have relied on open access to the Sea for a meaningful volume of their trade, as it has connected such societies to the global community. To this day, trade is the main activity of the Sea. In that sense, the most strategic assets are:

- The Marmara Sea, along with the Turkish Straits (the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus) which are controlled exclusively by the Republic of Turkey in Istanbul, allowing it to oversee the flux between the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea, thus into the Mediterranean Sea, on the way to the global market. In essence, who controls the Turkish Straits manages the Black Sea in itself to a certain extent, meaning that Turkey holds the ultimate trump cards in the region. Legally, this strategic asset is institutionalized by the Montreux Convention of 1936 that, as explained by Boris Toucas (2017):

“established Turkish control over the straits and guaranteed free passage of warships belonging to Black Sea states not at war with Turkey. Non-Black Sea powers were restricted in sending their military vessels to the Black Sea (they must be under 15,000 tons per vessel, 45,000 in aggregate, and could only stay in the Black Sea for 21 days.

The United States was not a party to the Montreux Convention” ;

- The Don and Kuban Rivers connect Russia's core to the Black Sea as they flow into the Sea of Azov that sits in between the Crimean Peninsula and Russia, while being connected to the Black Sea via the Kerch Strait. Moreover, given the Volga-Don Canal the Don River is instrumental in connecting the Black and Caspian Seas in Russian territory, not only allowing it to control trade between both bodies of water, but also moving warships between them. (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020) Taken together, the Don and Kuban Rivers, the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait represent the soft underbelly of the Russian Federation. Besides, due to Russia's lack of geographic barriers to its heartland, maintaining control over these assets sit at the top of Russian security priorities;

- Crimea has been at the centre of several news outlets in recent years given the Russian annexation in 2014 from Ukraine. Looking at the map and keeping in mind the (referred) naturally Russian assets in the region, one can understand that Crimea holds the key to all of the Federation's properties, making it the most important Russian asset in the Black Sea at the moment. From Moscow's perspective, as Crimea sits in the middle of the Sea, allowing crucial access to Ukrainian and Russian plains, no other power must be able to hold the Peninsula as Russia would have to devote significantly more resources to safeguard its security concerns, as well as foreign policy objectives such as power projection - such is the strategic importance of the base-city of Sevastopol. (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2008)

- Other significant assets are the Dnieper, Dniester and Danube Rivers that represent historic trading routes. The first splits Ukraine in two and marks one of the few

geographic obstacles of the flat European Plain. Meanwhile, the second is the longest river in Ukrainian territory and is also the “main water artery of Moldova” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017). Additionally, it is a natural demarcation line between slavic-speaking and latin-based nations. Lastly, the Danube flows from the Swiss Alps all the way to the Romanian Port of Constanța, where NATO has established an air base that signifies American presence in the region without relying on Turkey, albeit limited;

- Nowadays, it is believed that the region holds substantial reserves of hydrocarbons and it is perceived as a gateway for gas pipelines connecting Asian producers and European consumers. (Gagaridis, 2019)



Figure 1: Map of rivers flowing into the Black Sea.

Source: Güven & Çoban, 2012

These assets have motivated both cooperation and competition in such a way that kept the Black Sea Region from being deserving of its name as there is no ‘regional image’ for it

to be associated with. Instead, the region is a set of different territories under the authority of different countries. (Lyrtatzopouooua & Zarotiadisb, 2014)

There has historically been a great deal of conflicts in the region, especially between the Ottoman and Russian Empires as both would struggle for supremacy over the benefits the region could bring to the respective entities, both economically and security wise. After the collapse of both empires, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne would set the base for the Republic of Turkey and the 1936 Montreux Convention would generate a fragile balance in the region. Such delicate harmony would be put to the test following the end of World War II in the 1946 Turkish Straits crisis in which the Soviet Union would press Turkey in order to renegotiate the Montreux Convention¹. Following the end of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 the region did not have the same importance in Western eyes but the contrary was experienced in Russia - the years of 2008, 2014 and 2020 clearly demonstrate it, given Russia's activities in Georgia, Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh respectively. (Toucas, 2017) Thus, it can be argued that the Black Sea has been the main field of operations to showcase Russia's resurgence into the geopolitical big picture in defiance of Western momentum towards its borders. And it is now, once again, a critical area in the international stage

Essentially, the Black Sea has been an area where different spheres of influence interact as it sits between regions, instead of presenting itself as a region on its own. Despite recent efforts such as the creation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) under Turkish leadership in 1992, the contrasting presence of both Western and Russian instruments of soft and hard power showcase that, to this day, the Black Sea region is a divided space instead of a singular area. An area empires have competed for, just as their successors follow suit for geopolitical competition, resembling a civilisational clash. By connecting regions, it is an area of a “twofold character, as the historical socioeconomic and ethnic / cultural

¹ Not only did the incident prompt Turkey towards better relations with the United States, but it was also a motivating factor in the 1947 Truman Doctrine that ultimately encouraged Turkey and Greece in joining NATO in 1952. (Toucas, 2017)

bounds, which form the region's character and create opportunities, are at the same time a cause for conflicts" as priorities from differing entities have continuously clashed. (Lyratzopouooua & Zarotiadisb, 2014) For example, the system of fortresses on the northern coast of the Black Sea was a major flashpoint in the Russian-Ottomans conflicts of the eighteenth century, meaning that Crimean Tatars and the Ottoman Empire were mutually important for each others' long-term security, as not only were they both speakers of a Turkic language but also Muslims in the same cultural universe. (Keçeci, 2019). Nowadays there are deep cultural, social and economic ties between Turkey and Ukraine that placed the Republic in a difficult situation in the wake of Russian military activity in eastern Ukraine and in Crimea in 2014.

It can be argued that the region has no regional image due to its importance for the regions around it. However, it can also be argued that such importance signifies its regional image already. Nevertheless the fact remains that the Black Sea represents an area of immense geopolitical and geostrategic meaning, due to its political, security and economic dynamics and what they mean in the grand scheme of things - a true strategic scenario in between regions - that represents, nowadays, a "flashpoint for Russia and the West" (Binnendijk, 2020)

Diverse Politics

Around the Black Sea there are several countries that, altogether, represent great political diversity. Be that as it may, political dynamics in the region are majorly influenced by relations with Moscow and the West, meaning that, besides Russia, states in the region have presented themselves according to the situation at hand

While Romania and Bulgaria are two neighbouring countries that represent NATO and the EU simultaneously, they show different levels of commitment to the mentioned institutions.

On the one hand, Romania is a “key promoter of Western institutions in the Black Sea” as it has been following a policy that would “portray itself as a stability factor in the region and, at the same time, put the Black Sea on the Western agenda”. (Joja, 2019) It took the initiative to lead the Black Sea Forum for Partnership and Cooperation (BSF) aiming to establish regular dialogue amongst countries in the region (excluding the EU and Russia), as well the forum of Black Sea Synergy within the EU, in order for the Union to develop a strategy in the region. However, given that the BSF is yet to assemble and the EU is yet to present a security strategy for the region, Romanian results may be considered ‘uninspiring’. (Joja, 2019) Nevertheless, it has the United States as its main security partner as it hosts American ballistic missile defences, an American Black Sea naval base, and has promoted, since 2016, the establishment of a NATO Black Sea fleet. While Russia gradually expands its Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)² in the area since the integration of Crimea in 2014, Romania represents an ever important site of Western presence in the region. Nevertheless, its Black Sea security strategy has been somewhat limited, consisting on NATO promotion by cooperating with the US, as well as “passive cooperation in regional formats”. (Joja, 2019) Not only are relations with Ukraine a difficult topic due to language law disagreements, but a failure to decrease its neighbours’ dependence on Russian gas has been noticeable considering its ‘Westernizer’ role. (Joja, 2019)

On the other hand, Bulgaria has been a difficult NATO ally. It has maintained strong historical relations with the Soviet Union (USSR) and Russia, threatened to contradict sanctions on the Federation amidst the events in Crimea in 2014 and has increased overall

² As defined by Dan Dungaciu (2020), A2/AD is “a complex defence system used in several spaces (air, land, sea and cybernetic) to prevent the enemy occupying or infiltrating an area considered to be strategic”.

economic dependence on Moscow (contributing to European dependence on Russian gas). In essence, as argued by Iulia Joja, 2019:

“This combination of Bulgarian dependence and Russophilia enables Moscow to pressure the Sofia government to support Russia’s interests within the EU and NATO. Russia’s ‘Trojan horse’ in NATO, Bulgaria is restrained from inflicting real damage on Western institutions because of its weak economy. Yet, in the Black Sea, where Bulgaria has adopted a strategy of playing the West and Russia off one another, it often succeeds in obstructing NATO efforts.”

Joja also argues, for example, that the referred Romanian Black Sea fleet initiative has ultimately failed due to Bulgaria’s “change of heart” as Sofia initially supported Bucharest’s actions and later retreated due to strong ties to Russia. Sofia’s strategy consists of reaching a balance between close collaboration with NATO and strong relations with Moscow. (Flanagan, 2020) Nevertheless, Bulgaria represents an extension of Russian influence into Europe, ultimately contributing to the lack of consensus within Western institutions with regards to the Black Sea, rendering it considerably unimportant as a regional player. (Joja, 2019)

At the opposite, eastern, margins of the Sea, the countries of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan display important flashpoints in the region especially given the fact that, since gaining independence as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, they “have experienced considerable internal political challenges and interstate and ethnic conflicts” (Flanagan, 2020)

Georgia has been showcasing a positive substantial evolution in democratic terms despite Russian aggression and assistance, in 2008, to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ultimately engineering their independence (Flanagan, 2020). It is widely interpreted that Russia’s actions in Georgia aimed at preventing the country from joining

NATO or the European Union. However, educated by the events of 2008, cooperation and the deepening of political and military ties with the United States as well as NATO has remained a constant in Georgian international affairs. It has launched a modernization program of its military in order to reach NATO standards and has worked with the institution to foster interoperability and defense support, adding to regional cooperation with NATO allies Romania and Turkey. Besides, its public opinion displays great support and willingness to institutionalise a membership role in NATO. (Joja, 2019) With regards to the EU ties, Brussels and Tbilisi signed in 2016 a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement, that includes provisions supportive of trade expansion between both parties. Conversely, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Georgia is a stark supporter of Western institutions in the South Caucasus due to very present and hard-hitting grievances with Russia. It is therefore one of Washington's closest partners in the Black Sea, if not the main one.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have, on the other hand, much better ties with the Russian Federation, despite being the two conflicting parties in the identity-based conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan is politically in line with Russia in the sense that it exercises an authoritarian regime. Nonetheless, as explained by Stephen Flanagan (2020), it has:

“pursued a pragmatic approach to Russia's military, political and economic influence in the South Caucasus. Although Russia is allied with Armenia, Moscow is also Baku's primary military supplier, which has made for cordial but wary bilateral relations. The Azerbaijani government at one time hoped that Turkey and other NATO allies might take steps to balance Russian power in the South Caucasus; however, the limited Western response to Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and the warming of Turkish-Russian relations have led Baku to enhance its own ties with Moscow.”

Be that as it may, despite its political regime, political and military cooperation with NATO is in line with the strategic objective of “integration into Euro-Atlantic structures”, especially considering Baku’s great abundance of energy assets and Europe’s consumer-heavy market. Vulnerability levels in ties with Russia are, thus, not as prevalent when compared to Armenia. (Flanagan, 2020) Plus, it is also important to mention the strong Turkey-Azerbaijan relations as both countries, not only contribute to each other’s economic and military interests when possible, but also because of a shared social and cultural Turkic universe in which the shared slogan of “One nation, two States” is recurrently used to demonstrate a deep sense of brotherhood from one country to another.

Meanwhile, Armenia’s relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan are a strong source of negative national feelings while it is located in between both of them. From a genocide on its people by the hands of the Ottoman Empire during World War I that is denied by Turkey, to an economic and transport blockade and, more recently, decisive assistance to Baku in the fight for Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, there are several factors that justify an alliance with Russia - military via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and economically via the Eurasian Economic Union. (Flanagan, 2020) Given the political fallout of the dramatic defeat in 2020, which mainly awarded Turkey and Azerbaijan with strategic concessions in the region to the detriment of Yerevan, a bleak future is expected for the progressively democratic government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Yet, the recent win at the ‘snap’ parliamentary elections in June 2021 is indicative of public opinion’s negative stance at the idea of a return to authoritarianism (Demourian, 2021). As Armenia has participated over the years in NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme and NATO exercises, while also contributing to peacekeeping missions, a balancing act between the West and Russia is once again noticeable, albeit with a stronger emphasis and commitment to relations with Moscow.

Up north, Moldova and Ukraine can be described as very important players in the Black Sea as, together, they have “become a de facto buffer zone between Russian and many NATO and EU members, but this geostrategic situation has become increasingly perilous”. (Flanagan, 2020). Both countries demonstrate strong internal division due to the fact that the Russian language is native to parts of the population that feel deep cultural and political connections to Moscow. Nevertheless, they both seek robust ties with Western entities, especially since Russia’s aggression in 2014 and the resulting downturn in economic ties. (Flanagan, 2020)

In the ethnically Russian dominated area of Transnistria in Moldova, in 1992, ethnic tensions had turned into violent conflict that led to a cease fire given the (ongoing) presence of Russia’s 14th Army. Consequently, by the cause of Russian pressure and internal political division, Moldova’s relations with Western entities stem from a “cautious approach” from which one might expect shifts from a pro-Europe stance to a pro-Russia stance, with the main objective of “underscoring the country’s neutrality”. (Flanagan, 2020)

Next in order, Ukraine is a vital country in Russia - West competition. Inclination towards Russia from a social perspective has diminished ever since the events in 2014, but deep historical ties such as a shared military industrial complex during the years of the Soviet Union, in addition to the fact that it is Russia’s second largest trading partner, make the Borderland³ a central political issue in Moscow. (Flanagan, 2020) Be that as it may, Kiev aims to exercise a strategy of constant fostering of Western support against Russia that places NATO at a difficult position due to Russia’s willingness to use its hard power. (Joja, 2019) Even so, Ukraine has taken efforts to develop its navy while encouraging regional cooperation that undermines Russian influence in its neighbourhood - the strategic economic

³ The name *Ukraina* originates from the notion that its location is synonymous to the border of the Russian Empire, effectively translating into ‘Borderland’ or ‘on the edge’. (Reid, 1997)

and military partnership that was established in 2017 with Georgia certainly serves as an example, while defence cooperation with Turkey since 2018 is also noteworthy.

Nonetheless, the key to understanding the (geo)political dynamics of the Black Sea and its place in the World, is the relationship between Turkey and Russia. Ankara holds the single most strategic asset in the Sea (the Turkish Straits) while Russia has been growing its influence ever since the integration of Crimea. But Turkey's difficult relationship with the EU and with the United States makes it, as argued by Alessandro Gagaridis (2018):

“the power to monitor in the Black Sea region. If Ankara were to turn westward once again, then the geopolitics of the Black Sea will not see any other change apart from the increased military presence from both NATO and Russia; but if it were to intensify partnership with Moscow, then the scenario may become even more tense and have consequences that stretch far beyond the Black Sea region”.

While counter arguments might be presented, especially given the willingness of both Presidents Putin and Erdoğan to coordinate amidst moments of great tension as will be further analysed, Gagaridis' statement strikes at the heart of Black Sea politics due to the overarching framework of Russia - West competition. The mindsets of both Ankara and Moscow, as well as relations between the two, will be further analysed in the following chapter. Nevertheless it is essential to understand that given such a background, Turkey's strategic economic and military importance to both Europe and Moscow, along with its positive relations with the Federation make it the main key pivotal player of the region.

Security

As expected from such an important region whose main military power - Russia - is willing to make use of its hard power resources, the security dynamics in the Black Sea region are filled with different strategic scenarios that, not only have already been somewhat

mentioned, but also involve a diverse cast of political entities (figure 2). However, scenarios such as Crimea and the Donbass region in Ukraine, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan are only indicative of the security status of the Black Sea.

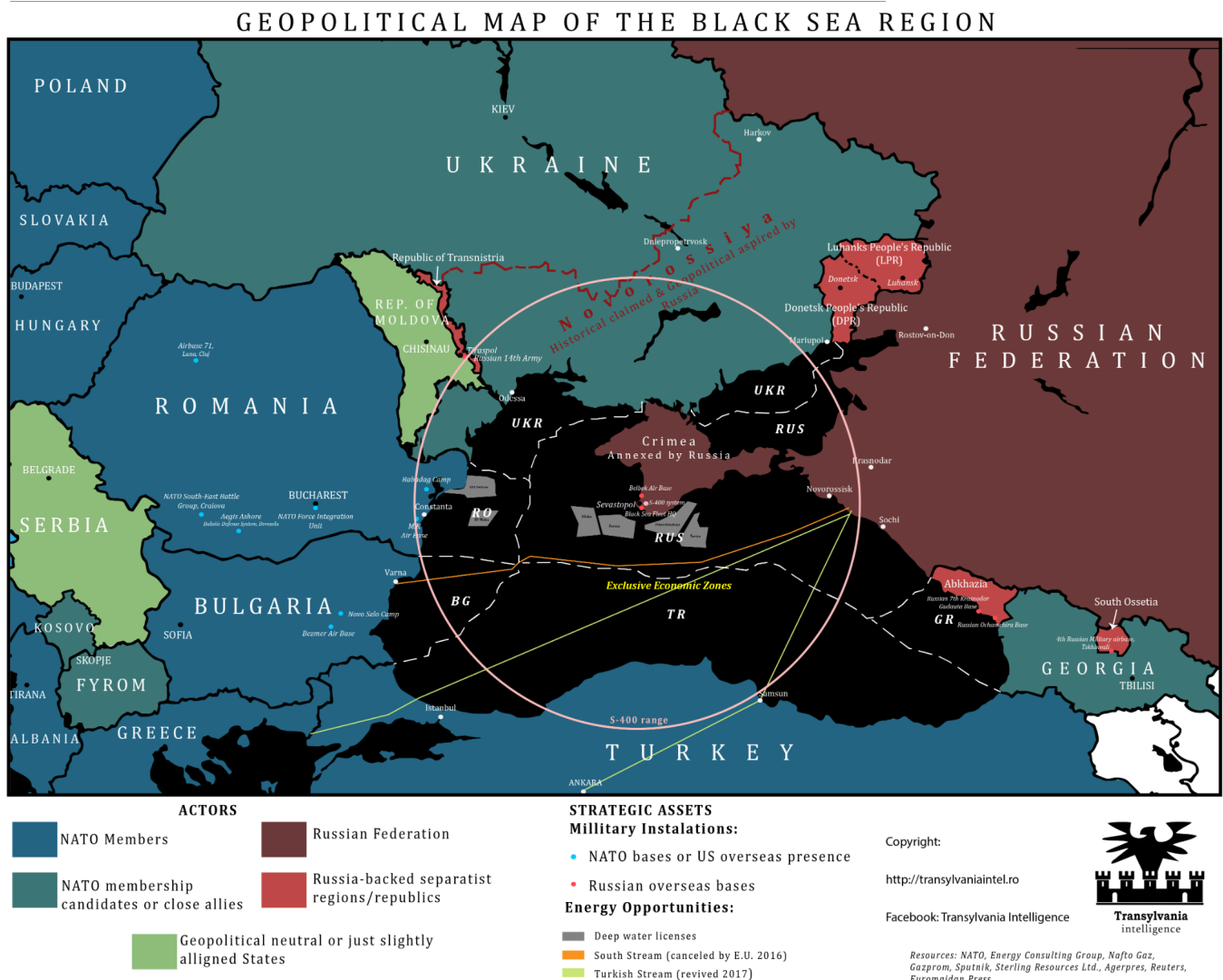


Figure 2: The Geopolitical Map of the Black Sea Region.

Source: T-Intelligence, 2017

Today, the Black Sea is one of Europe's most militarily active regions (especially through maritime means) as both Russia and NATO (in response) have increased their presence over recent years. (Binnendijk, 2020) But the overarching legal context of maritime

Black Sea security, and its military balance in general, has been consistently set under the Montreux Convention of 1936.

The signing of the Convention set conditions of passage through the straits to military vessels, focusing on tonnage, duration and status of the warship, at a time of growing tensions across Europe. Keeping in mind that the Black Sea was considered at the time a *de facto* Soviet lake, the Convention meant that, according to Igor Delanoë (2019):

“Turkey’s aspiration to regain sovereignty over the Straits was satisfied whereas Moscow saw the text as the best guarantee to create a buffer against a greater Western influence in the Black Sea basin. The text of Montreux makes a clear distinction between Black Sea countries and non-Black countries, peace time and war time, Turkey being neutral and Turkey being at war, merchant vessels and warships. According to the article 14, the overall tonnage of non-Black Sea countries’ war vessels transiting the Turkish Straits cannot exceed 15 000 tons at any given time. The maximum tonnage of nonBlack Sea warships in the Black Sea cannot exceed 30.000 tons whereas they are not allowed to spend more than 21 days in the Black Sea basin (article 18).”

From the author’s perspective, the Convention is a major stabilizing factor in the region as it moved Turkey and the Soviet Union closer by bringing security guarantees to each other because sovereignty over the Straits was no longer a geopolitical issue, while it also set rules of engagement “in the absence of any Black Sea regional security architecture”, that have been consistently respected to this day regardless of the occasion. Even during episodes of heightened regional tensions such Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014, the Russo-Turkish fighter jet crisis of 2015 or the Kerch incident in 2018 - all relevant issues that pressure NATO to significantly build up its presence in the area, thus challenging the spirit of the Convention - Turkey has consistently enforced the Montreux agreement in a way that sets the stage for the development of said episodes.

Be that as it may, Russia's military growth in the Black Sea ever since its decision to incorporate Crimea is a fact that altered the military balance of power in the region to its favor.

Since 2014, Russia has undergone an expansion and modernization of its Black Sea fleet in order to introduce new sets of "cruise-missile-capable diesel submarines and frigates, deployments of air and coastal defense assets to Crimea and deployment of additional ground troops to the Southern Military District". Meanwhile, despite allied assertive responses such as NATO's tailored forward presence, recurrent visits by American vessels and region-wide exercises, "any major effort to further enhance defense and deterrence activities in the Black Sea would require the consent - ideally participation - of regional allies and partners". (Binnendijk, 2020)

Expansion of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, 2010-2018

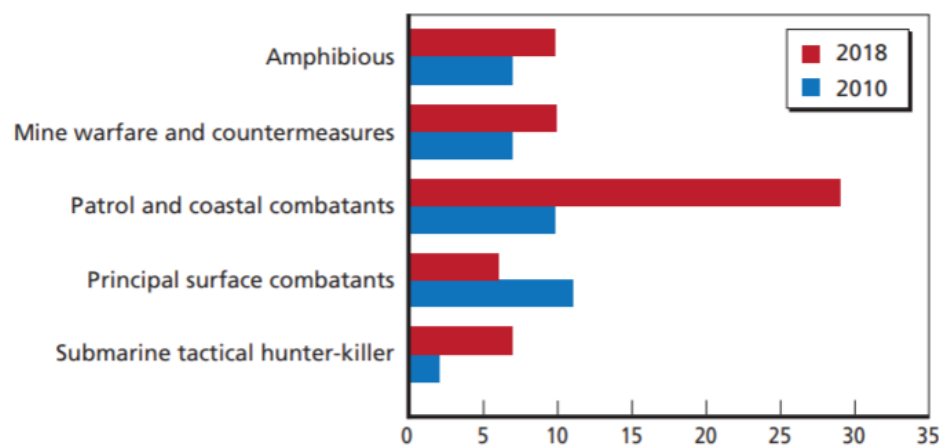


Figure 3: Expansion of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, 2010-2018.

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2010/2018, via RAND, 2020

Russia has invested deeply in the Black Sea Fleet whose central point is the Sevastopol Bay in Crimea, meaning that "together with the new base in Novorossiysk, Russia can fully control the Bosphorus, the military infrastructure in Bulgaria and can neutralize the threat posed by the U.S. missile defense base in Romania", according to Russian Chief of

General staff Valery Gerasimov in 2016. Since then, not only has Moscow further invested in submarine stealth technology, but also in other naval assets⁴ (figure 3).

But there is also a geographical aspect to Moscow's build up in the region. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union an understanding was needed with regards to the future of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. Ultimately, both countries agreed that the fleet would be divided between them while the Kremlin would be receiving more ships in exchange for monetary compensation. Plus, Kyiv would allow Russia the usage of Crimean naval infrastructure (most notably the facilities in Sevastopol) for an annual fee of \$97 million. (Kimball, 2014) As expected, despite being renewed in 2010, such an agreement was terminated in 2014, meaning that Russia was now able to make the most of the peninsula's geostrategic potential.

Effectively, the Kremlin doubled down its presence in Crimea and has used it "as a base to project maritime power into the Mediterranean and to improve its degree of geographic control over the Black Sea" - the 2018 Kerch Strait crisis demonstrates it, given Moscow's capability to impact Ukrainian trading routes that flow through the Sea of Azov. (Binnendijk, 2020) In Crimea, Russia's maritime power was greatly developed by implementing recognition infrastructure allowing the Kremlin to monitor both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, translating into stronger A2/AD capabilities. (Binnendijk, 2020) An increase of air security assets is also noticeable as Ukrainian airfields have been rehabilitated and the naval aviation unit has been expanded, especially in response to NATO's installment of missiles both in Poland and in Romania. (Binnendijk, 2020) Additionally, in order to complement air and sea-launched missile systems, similar but land-based capabilities have also been developed, covering 40-50 percent of the Black Sea. More than that, ground forces in the region have been expanded. (Binnendijk, 2020)

⁴ More specifically, Russia has "yielded additional vessels with new capabilities, including six new corvettes and six new Kilo-class submarines, all equipped with the Kalibr family of missiles, which includes the 3M-54 (SS-N-27) antiship cruise missile and the 3M-14 (SS-N-30) land attack cruise missile. The fleet's three new Admiral Grigorovich-class missile frigates can also mount Kalibrs along with Shtil air defense missiles, as well as antisubmarine torpedoes and rocket launchers", discloses Anika Binnendijk (2020).

Key Russian Missile Systems and Reported Ranges in the Black Sea

Missile	Class	Reported Range	Peacetime Location
9K720 <i>Iskander</i> (SS-26 STONE)	SRBM	400–500 km	Krasnodar, Rostov-on-the-Don
S-400 <i>Triumf</i> (SA-21 GROWLER)	SAM	150–400 km	Crimea, Abkhazia
P-800 <i>Oniks</i> (SS-N-26 STROBILE)	Ship-launched ASCM	300 km	Crimea
3K55 <i>Bastion-P</i> (SSC-5 STOOGE)	Ground-launched ASCM		
3M-14 <i>Kalibr</i> (SS-N-30A)	LACM	1,500–2,500 km	Corvettes; submarines
3M-54 <i>Kalibr</i> (SS-N-27 SIZZLER)	ASCM	220 km (3M54) 300 km (3M54M1)	<i>Admiral Grigorovich</i> -class frigate
9K317 <i>Buk-M2</i> (SA-17 GRIZZLY)	Ground-launched SAM	50 km	Crimea, <i>Admiral Grigorovich</i> -class frigate
3S90M <i>Shtil-1</i> (SA-N-7 GOLLUM)	Ship-launched SAM		
3K60 <i>Bal</i> (SSC-6 SENNIGHT)	Ground-launched ASCM	120 km	Crimea

NOTES: Data as of June 2019. ASCM = antiship cruise missile; LACM = land attack cruise missile; SAM = surface-to-air missile; SRBM = short-range ballistic missile.

Figure 4: Key Russian Missile Systems and Reported Ranges in the Black Sea, 2019

Source: RAND, 2020

It is also worth pointing out the Kremlin's incursion beyond Crimea and into Ukraine's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). As explained on a report by Bertelsmann Stiftung (2020):

“With the international community taking little notice, Russia occupied the Ukrainian gas platforms between the coast of Crimea and the coast off Odesa in early 2014. These platforms lie in Ukraine's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Some, such as the Odesa gas fields, are even closer to the Odesa coast than to the Crimea coast (Klymenko 2020). This creates the precondition for the extension of Russian control into the northwestern part of the Black Sea. Therefore, in this case, we can speak of a de facto expansion of the occupation into Ukraine's EEZ.”

By controlling most of the Ukrainian coast west of Crimea, as well as the Kerch Strait, it is therefore noticeable that Russia has been solidifying its actions in 2014 by choking Ukraine's economic outlets into the world market - further keeping the Borderline under check in multifaceted ways.

In essence, despite most of the Black Sea Coast being composed of NATO allies and partners, one can argue that it has indeed become, by the words of President Erdoğan in 2016 - when fostering NATO support amidst the fighter jet crisis - a *de facto* "Russian lake". Consequently, Moscow's defense spending has urged littoral countries to follow suit by previously mentioned initiatives that, more than anything, have showcased political intent. Despite all efforts, security in the Black is currently set within the stage of Russia-West competition, ultimately translating into a "Russia-NATO/US-Turkey triangle." (Gagaridis, 2018)

Accordingly, a western response to such developments has also been put to practice since the events of 2014, in contrast to the events of 2008 in Georgia. Since the 2016 Warsaw Summit, allied presence in the region (in Romania and Bulgaria) has taken shape through a Tailored Forward Presence "in the south-eastern part of Alliance territory on land, at sea and in the air" in a way that "contributes to the Alliance's strengthened deterrence and defence posture, to Allies' situational awareness, interoperability and responsiveness." (NATO, 2021) However, NATO's initiative has been deemed as somewhat lackluster by governments in the region as allied forces have not received "combat forces training or staff units, and NATO's regional combat force presence remained noncontinuous." (Binnendijk, 2020)

In different circumstances, Turkey presents itself as the second most significant military power in the region. As made apparent by Anika Binnendijk (2020), Turkey can make the most of:

"18 frigates, 53 patrol and coastal combatants (including six corvettes and 19 fast attack craft, 15 mine warfare and mine countermeasures vessels, and 12 hunterkiller

submarines). The Turkish navy also operates three naval aviation squadrons with antisubmarine warfare capabilities, and Turkey's air force includes 333 combat-capable aircraft. These capabilities are stretched across the Black Sea, the Aegean, and the Mediterranean. Although the total number of Turkish warships has remained generally steady over the past decade, the Turkish navy has benefited from a national military modernization program to strengthen Turkey's defense industry. Between 2016 and 2018, the Turkish navy received six indigenously produced naval vessels, including two corvettes, a landing ship, two logistics support ships, and a rescue ship (...) In the Black Sea context, Turkish analysts have claimed Turkish superiority in operational submarines, noting that they could theoretically prevent the Russian fleet from reaching the Turkish Straits during conflict."

Ultimately, the Black Sea region is one in which regional security cooperation is not expected to come to fruition in a way that would alter the *status quo*. Western presence is limited while the Kremlin holds several keys to the region's future and, in volatile fashion, Turkey sits in the middle as NATO's fourth largest military power (Global Firepower, 2021) - certainly the most influential ally in the region - that holds control over the maritime flux in and out of the Sea. The Sea is surrounded by frozen conflicts unfolded by the collapse of the Soviet Union, originating several issues such as land disputes, weak institutions that are linked with corruption practices, uncontrolled illegal immigration related to minority issues and weakened governments. Additionally, regarding geopolitical aspects, it is a region of strong interplay of contrasting and complementary interests of both regional and great powers, including non-state actors. (Kayser, 2020)

Amidst strategic military calculations of influential powers in the Black Sea, energy resources such as oil and gas are taken into account, bringing additional complexity to the economic aspect of the region.

Economy

The economic side of the Black Sea is a mixed one in the sense that there is more to it than meets the eye. In this context, both maritime trade and the energy market are the main economic drivers of the sea.

Regarding the first, by being a shared region among neighbouring ones - Balkans, Eastern Europe, Anatolia and the Caucasus - there are several commercial ports capable of hosting large commercial vessels that are able to carry raw materials, grain, cargo containers and petroleum. (Karabiyik, 2019) Ports such as the ones in Trabzon, Samsun and Istanbul in Turkey, Varna in Bulgaria, Constanta in Romania, Odessa in Ukraine, Novorossiysk and Sochi in Russia and Batumi in Georgia constitute the main trading routes which are highly concentrated in the Turkish Straits (figure 5), as one should expect given the fact that it is the only natural passage to the Mediterranean Sea and global maritime trade.

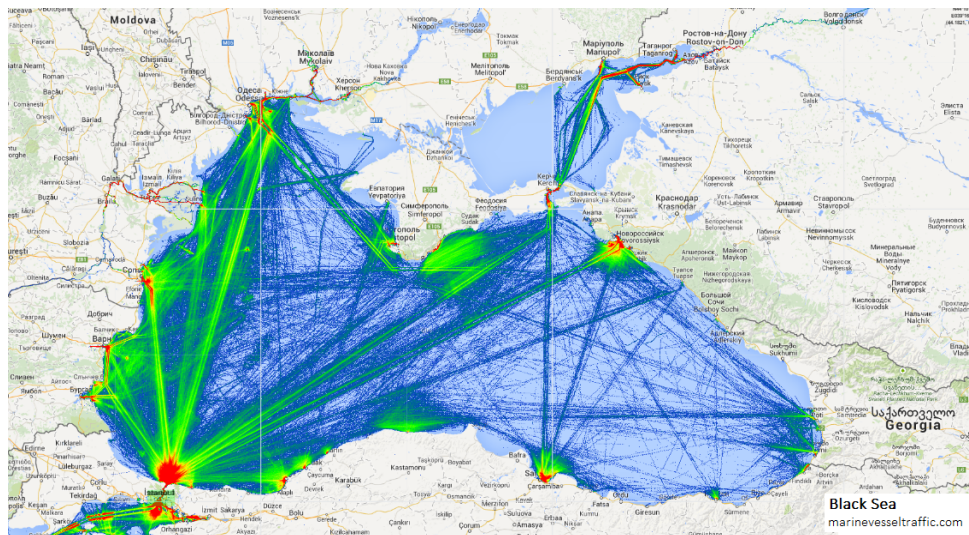


Figure 5: Maritime traffic density in the Black Sea, 2021

Source: MarineVesselTraffic, 2021

Nevertheless, it is the latter that has been the main focus on the geostrategic meaning of the economy of the Black Sea in recent years, and probably for years to come. Representing an energy crossroads, the Black Sea is critical for those involved, consequently generating incentives for cooperation. However, it is also a place for conflicting interests.

The Black Sea region is, as argued by Prof. Burak Şakir Şeker (2019):

“a poker table in which new dimensions of European energy security are emerging, with transition countries, producing countries and leading stakeholders. More specifically, the Black Sea is one of the main energy transit routes from the Caspian Sea and Russia to the EU markets. Despite this apparent interdependency, harmonized cooperation is not a guarantee. Energy has become a controversial issue in the region rather than unifying. Whether they like it or not, all countries in the region have to participate in energy policies. Oil and gas production and transport in the wider Black Sea region have a direct impact on the formation of regional energy alliances, but are subject to regional and international geopolitical developments.”

In other words, while energy cooperation is necessary, it does not naturally translate into a unifying regional force in which all actors will feel inclined to work together.

The author also highlights two long-term trends that have characterised the Black Sea, such as: “increased dependence of EU countries on hydrocarbons imports from non-EU countries, and increased oil and gas export capacity on the supply side of the RF [Russian Federation] and Caspian countries”. Therefore, European energy security (that goes hand in hand with an ever increasing consumer demand) is one of, if not the main driver for the importance of the region, along with the willingness and readiness of non-EU actors such as Russia, Turkey and Caspian countries for example, to make the most of the situation. For that reason, “many actors such as China, have turned to the goal of building strategic partnerships in the Black Sea region due to increasing energy demand”. (Şeker, 2019)

The dissolution of the Soviet Union signifies the beginning of the different energy policies as both Georgia and Azerbaijan would follow their independent energy-supply plans that sparked the development of regional transport infrastructure. Meanwhile, a western interest in Caspian energy resources began to take shape. (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020) At the same time, Russia and Ukraine inherited a shared energy infrastructure from the Soviet days that placed Moscow at its centre in a way that would allow energy to be used as a “key instrument of control with which to assert its own economic and political interests among its fellow post-Soviet states”. (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020) Concurrently, the Turkish leadership would interpret the recent independence of former Soviet Central Asian States as an opportunity to make the most of its strategic location, as a way to develop opportunities for the Turkish economy. Armenia’s actions were limited due to difficult relations with its neighbours (except Russia), making Azerbaijan the key regional actor in this context- the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC), established in 2005, serves as a testament of such regional development. On the European side of things, the EU would pursue its goal of improving energy security by aiming to diversify its sources and supply routes.

Nowadays, projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) and TurkStream are indicative of the different energy alliances in the Black Sea (figure 6) as currently, in 2021, both projects have been completed.

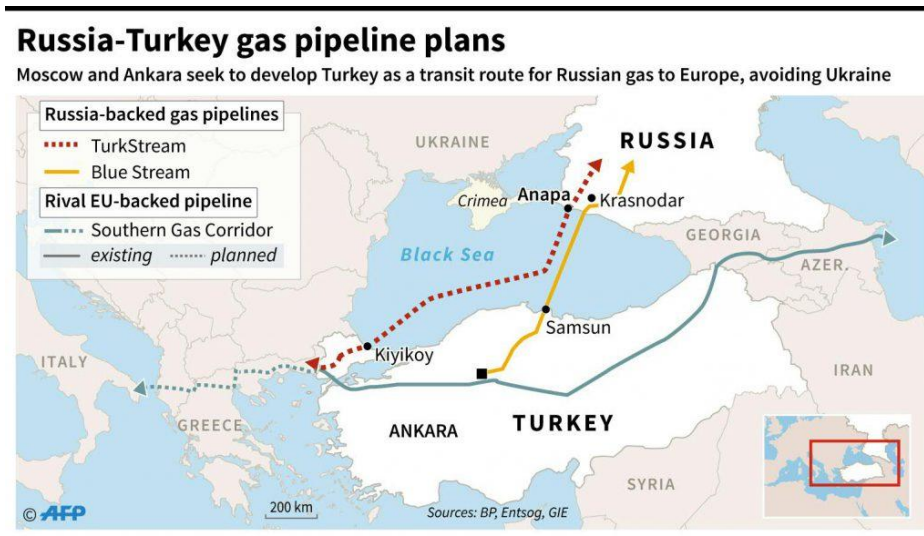


Figure 6: Russia-Turkey gas pipeline plans.

Source: Agence France-Presse via European Data News Hub, 2018

On the one hand, the SGC is an achievement in European eyes as it contributes to the EU's energy security by being able to bypass Russia, of which it is highly dependent of via pipelines that mainly flow through Ukraine (figures 7 and 8). The SGC focuses on the transportation of Azeri gas to be delivered in Italy, further cementing Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey as important players to Europe's economy, and vice-versa.

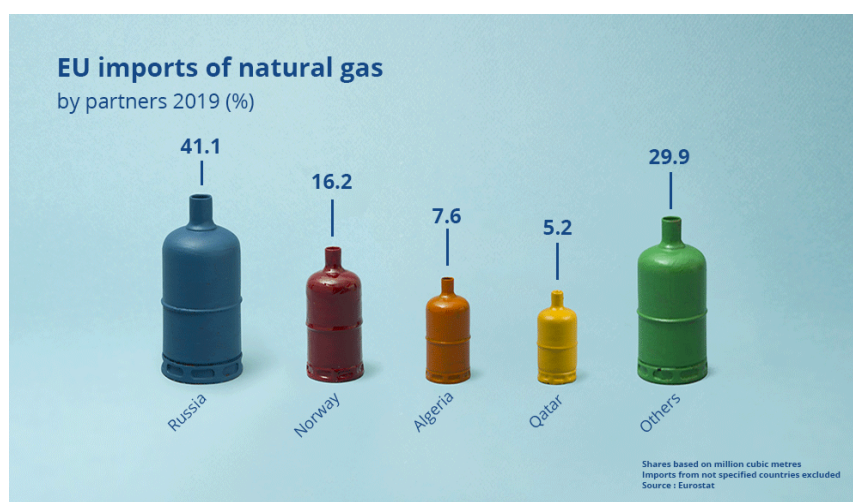


Figure 7: Sources of EU imports of natural gas

Source: Eurostat, 2019

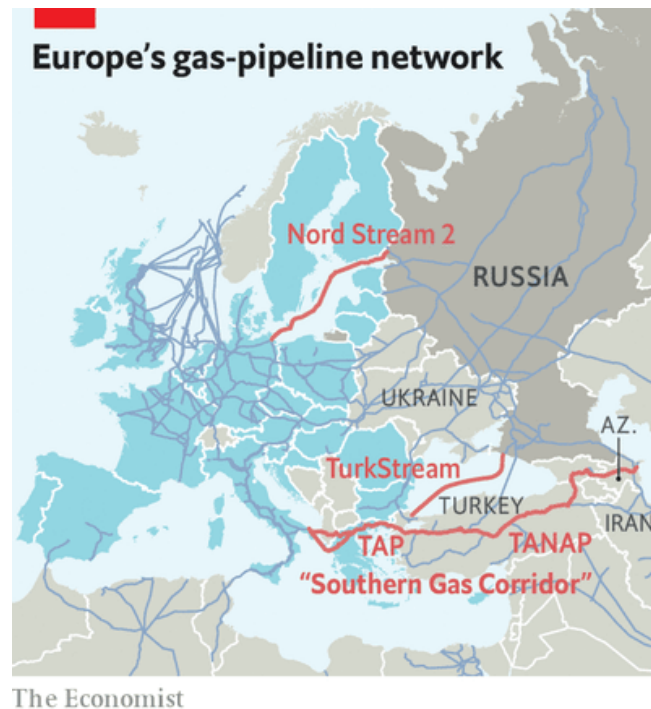


Figure 8: Europe's gas-pipeline network

Source: The Economist, 2019

On the other hand, the TurkStream pipeline holds immense political weight emanating from Russia-Turkey relations. The Russian investment on the project is not expected to pay off for about half a century but its strategic value makes it a long-term investment from the Kremlin (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020). It established Turkey as a transit country for Russia towards European markets and allows Moscow to bypass Ukraine, adding to the geopolitical leverages it has over Kyiv (especially since 2014).

Therefore, much like with regards to the security aspects of the region, Turkey is the wild card of the economy of the Black Sea. As noted by Şeker (2019):

“When all analyses are taken into consideration, it is a fact recognized by all parties that Turkey is arguably the most important player in the regional energy landscape. Although Turkey is involved in various energy-related initiatives in the Black Sea basin, it is currently also very careful for betting only specific gas transit projects those not hampering the relations with others. (...) Turkey, as being located at the crossroad between major

hydrocarbon exporting countries and importing actors, is to have a strategic advantage by its geographical location. In this case, this reality provides Turkey, not only for the East-West energy projects but also for NorthSouth initiatives, to be an interesting partner position.(...) Turkey's geopolitical position makes it the most important energy partner in the Black Sea''

As will be further discussed, Turkey aims to make the most of its strategic location, not only in economic terms, but also geopolitically, making it a fundamental actor in West-Russia competition - the economic dynamics of the Black Sea are another example of it, further contributing to its importance in the world.

For the abundance of strategic assets, the historic and current importance in security terms, as well as in economic terms, one can argue that the Black Sea is a body of water that sits at the top of the world's most significant hotspots such as the South China Sea or the Horn of Africa, for example. Consequently, it is expected that extra regional actors would have their share of interests in the region.

Implications Beyond the Region

In order to properly grasp the place of the Black Sea in the international stage, it is important to look at it through the scope of the big extra regional picture. Therefore, powers such as the United States of America and the People's Republic of China must be kept in mind, given the vast reach of their capabilities and the general consensus that both powers find themselves in a period of great-power competition against one another.

The Black Sea in itself is a secondary concern for American policymakers, possibly due to a general 'Pivot to Asia' ever since the Obama Administration despite the high focus on Russia's incursion into Ukraine in 2014. (Coffey, 2020) Nevertheless the region is critical to NATO, ultimately meaning that American interests in the region go hand in hand with

those of NATO in general - the stability of the European continent in the, mainly in the context of Russian actions.

As it has already been hinted and will be further discussed in greater detail, Moscow aims, on a tactical level, to turn the Black Sea in to a *de facto* Russian lake and, on a strategic level, to use a militarized Crimea as a platform for power projection in order to challenge american interests elsewhere such as Syria in the Middle East. (Coffey, 2020) For this reason one can argue that, beyond NATO's considerations, it is in America's interest to strategically meet Russia in the Black Sea in order to pursue policy objectives in other regions. Accordingly, Romania, Georgia and Ukraine have been important partners.

Romania has showcased political and practical willingness to advance western interests in the region by bolstering transatlantic presence in the Sea.

Georgia meanwhile, is a very important partner for the United States and NATO as it has served as a logistical checkpoint for operations in other areas such Iraq and Afghanistan; naturally due to its location of “geographical and cultural crossroads”; and also due to a significant journey towards democracy that conveys political proximity. (Coffey, 2020)

Ukraine, rather unsurprisingly, holds significant weight regarding stability in the region due to historical, geographic and geopolitical reasons. Due to scarring grievances with Russia, it has become a natural pro-NATO and pro-USA actor American policymakers can count on, despite clear limitations stemming from Moscow's presence.

Thus, American interests in the Black Sea are a result of how influential the dominant power in the waterway can be to the surrounding regions. As Russia, through Crimea, is increasingly capable of projecting its influence in other regions that also involve other American interests, there is a natural need for the USA to establish itself as a Black Sea power. However, there is another competitor to American influence across the globe that,

given its grand strategy, is also interested in the future of the Black Sea in such a way that may alter American calculations.

While inside the Black Sea there is a strategic triangle composed of USA/NATO-Turkey-Russia, great power dynamics between the United States and China - along with Russia's anti-west convictions and goals of power projection - suggest that the Black Sea is a strategic scenario indicative of a USA-Russia-China triangle in the grand scheme of things, with special focus on Sino-Russian relations.

Chinese interests in the Black Sea stem mainly from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that aims to connect several regions in such a way that facilitates international trading by building several projects of infrastructure in both land and sea. On that note, analogies can be drawn by comparing China to Rome in the sense that all projects would lead to the Middle Kingdom in the same way that all roads built by the Roman Empire lead to Rome, bringing an entire new level to China's globalisation rise in recent decades.

Since the announcement of the BRI in 2013, China has expanded its presence in the region in multifaceted ways - mainly economically but also politically, scientifically and even culturally. It has, nevertheless, been a region of relatively few projects in comparison to other regions. Richard Weitz (2020), writing for the Middle East Institute justifies this low rate of Chinese accomplishments by stating that:

“One reason for this lagging PRC [People's Republic of China] presence is that some of these countries have less to offer Chinese investors or exporters. Another is that the Black Sea has become a major region of East-West competition and the Trump Administration has increasingly discouraged littoral countries from developing close economic and security ties with both Russia and China”.

But Weitz also argues that:

“Countries in the Black Sea region seek partnerships with China for several reasons. First, these states want to attract Chinese trade, investment, loans, and technology. Second, China is a world power with substantial influence in many regions of the world. For example, its permanent membership on the UN Security Council grants Beijing influence over many issues of interest to Black Sea states. Third, except for a few core issues—like Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong—Chinese representatives are indifferent to their economic partners’ domestic policies. Fourth, China is a potential balancer to Russia and source of leverage regarding other European countries and the United States”.

Therefore, as expected from countries in the Black Sea, given what has been discussed up until this point, there are both incentives and deterrents to bring forth Chinese influence in the region. Accordingly, a point present in both excerpts is the geopolitical dynamic of West and Russia.

The Black Sea is a particular case in Sino-Russian relations. Beyond, as partially due to the economic interests of the BRI, China’s posture in the Black Sea is mainly characterised by relations with Russia that are exacerbated with enmity towards the West.

It is commonly understood that Russia and China have been brought together by global instability accompanied by the decline of American unilateralism. Both countries converge globally in the sense that they both believe in a multipolar order of international affairs as showcased by common international organisations that exclude the US such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or the 1997 ‘Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order’. Nevertheless, under Putin, relations with China have been a consistent foreign policy cornerstone while relations with the West have been through ups and downs in a way that ultimately concerns the Chinese elite. As explained by Ivan Safranchuk and Igor Denisov (2020):

“When Russia’s relations with the West were improving, China worried that Russia might side with the U.S.’s anti-Chinese policies. However, when Russia’s relationship with the West was deteriorating, China became concerned that tensions might boil over. China, as the main beneficiary of economic globalization, feared the possible fallout from international turbulence”.

There is a lot more to Sino-Russian relations than the distaste for American globalism that has been the main driver in cooperative ties in recent years. Ultimately, Safranchuk and Denisov argue that while there are incentives to global convergence, there are incentives to regional divergence that cannot be ignored - and the Black Sea is particularly important in this context. The BRI and Russian international concerns already cause tensions regarding the dominance of post-Soviet Central Asia and a similar dynamic can be experienced in the Black Sea.

Historically, Russia has comprehended the geostrategic importance of the Sea and has consequently grown skeptical of the presence of non-regional powers due to a possible readjustment of the region’s balance of power, to the detriment of Russian interests, including foreign-led economic projects.

Plus, both powers interpret globalisation differently in the sense that while China supports the economic aspect of the phenomenon, “Moscow judged globalisation to be in decline in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and focused its hopes and efforts on regional integration in both economic and security matters”. (Safranchuk & Denisov, 2020)

Therefore, China did not interpret the post-Cold War Russian decline in the Black Sea as a negative and has preferred to approach the region through bilateral ties, while also disapproving NATO’s eastward expansion. However, Russian military activity, such as in Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014, challenged China’s presence in the region as the importance of free flow of goods would impede a direct confrontation with the United States on the

matter, while relations with Russia need to be preserved, along with constructive relations with Ukraine and Georgia due to the region's status as a gateway into European markets. In general, China has opted to "steer clear of regional geopolitical tension". (Safranchuk & Denisov, 2020)

For these reasons, the crisis in Crimea in 2014 signifies a dilemma for Chinese diplomats that ultimately managed to abstain from explicitly helping either side - as their reaction stemmed from the principle of 'friend neutrality' rather than as a reaction to Russia's behaviour. As such, the Chinese leadership managed to maintain cooperation with Russia in the region. (Safranchuk & Denisov, 2020)

Be that as it may, China's inclination towards Russian interests in the region has been demonstrated through, albeit limited, military and energy cooperation. The 2015 joint naval exercises in the Black Sea and the participation in the construction of the Kerch Railway Bridge, that further cements Russian presence in Crimea by transporting energy resources and linking the Peninsula to the Russian mainland, are indicative of Chinese subtle support for Russian concerns.

The fact that the Black Sea is a geopolitical battleground for West-Russian competition has led a globalisation-reliant great power like China into difficult positions. However, as American presence declines further, Chinese means of pursuing its interests in the region become more explicit as convergence with Russia becomes more feasible. In that sense, there is an extra regional level to Black Sea dynamics that could be added, depending, of course, on regional developments.

The Black Sea is a strategic scenario not only for Europe and Russia, but also for the world itself as its evolution can affect, and is indicative of great power politics. It is, for all these reasons, a strategic hotspot deserving of great attention.

The Turkey - Russia Link: A Partnership of Hybrid Nature

Attempting to speak diachronically among geopolitical aspects, the analysis of Turko-Russian relations in recent years must be observed not only within the context of historic development between both countries, but also within what constitutes their strategic mindsets. Unsurprisingly, several other aspects must also be analysed in order to paint the full picture. Therefore, a look into the countries' economic ties, common geostrategic settings and the relationship between respective leading political figures is to be expected.

Understanding Turkey

The Newfound Republic

Its location (figure 9) is very important in the sense that its geographic characteristics are some of the most influential in history given the possession of the Turkish straits, the fact that it sits between the Black and Mediterranean Seas, as well as between Europe and the Middle East and Central Asia. Moreover, geopolitically it also sits between Europe and Russia in transitional fashion, as it can be argued that its foreign policy has been pivoting away from western influence and towards a focus on the Eurasian continent. (Erşen & Köstem, 2019)

A geographic transition is also felt within its territory as the country can find its capital core in the Sea of Marmara region in the western side of the country, of which a lowland topography allows for a centralised control, while a more rugged and mountainous region of Anatolia is found as one moves further east. This difficult terrain has made central power harder to establish, while industrial and infrastructure development would also face difficulties. (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2010)

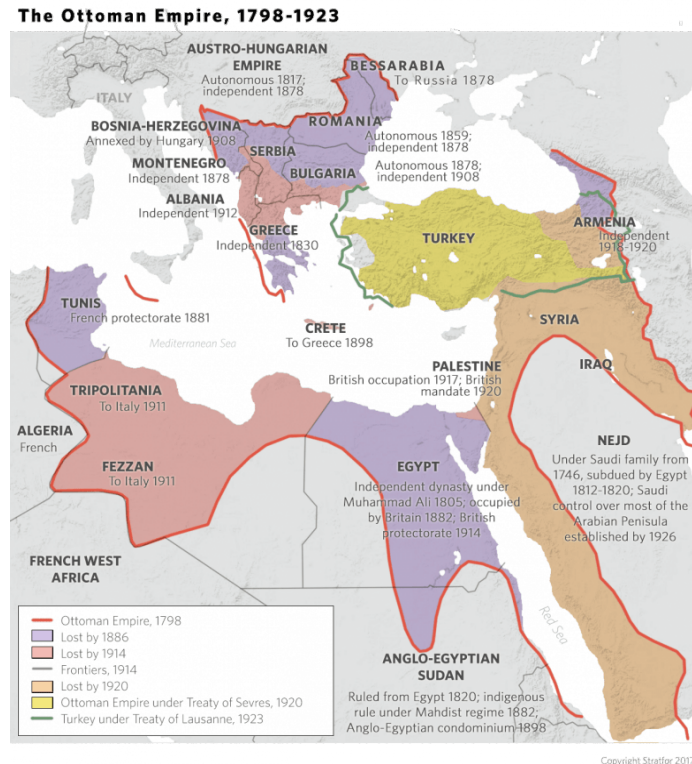


Figure 9: Turkey and the Former Ottoman Empire, 1798-1923.

Source: Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2010

Modern Turkey, founded on September 9th 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, would face this challenge of developing the entirety of the country with revenue generated only from the core cosmopolitan, capital-rich Marmara region.(Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2010)

Ataturk's vision ultimately consisted of breaking away from Ottoman tradition and developing a new way forward, as expressed by "The Six Arrows of Atatürk" that would represent the pillars of his ideology, generally known as Kemalism. Those ideas were (Ciftci 2013):

- Republicanism (rule of law);
- Statism (regulated economy);
- Revolutionism (social reform);

- Populism (civic virtue);
- Nationalism (national unity);
- Secularism (state and religion).

Under the guidance of these arrows, as explained by Kemal Ciftci (2013):

“The main goals of the leaders of the Republic - drawn from the lessons of the past - were to remove the causes of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and to construct a national state based on stable foundations, constantly vigilant against internal and external enemies. National unity and integrity had to be ensured in order to achieve these goals. Consequently, the latest has been taken up by Kemalism - the protection of national unity and integrity, order and security, and thus, independence. (...) The ‘ideal’ nation structure to aim for, according to them, [Atatürk and his associates] was a national society which does not grant rights to those who live for contradictions, conflicts and social fights, dissolution and disintegration. The nation he aimed to create was not only going to be equal internationally, but also was not going to tolerate internal opposition.”

Kemalism, represented by the Republican People’s Party (CHP), would then become the portal through which foreign peoples would look into in order to understand Turkey at the time. In other words, as Ciftci argues, it would be the “ideology of Turkish political identity, (...) the reality and reflection of Turkish society/state”. Additionally, the inclusion of the six arrows in the constitutional amendment of February 5th 1937 meant that such guidelines would be more than the pillars of Kemalist ideology but, most importantly, institutionalised as state doctrine.(Ciftci 2013)

Part of this doctrine revolves around the idea that, as indicated by Ciftci, those who were alien to it would be living “for contradictions, conflicts and social fights, dissolution and disintegration”. Consequently, in order to safeguard order under kemalist ideas, Atatürk

would task the army with the responsibility to “protect the glory and honour of Turkey and the Turkish community against all kinds of internal and external threats”.(Ciftci 2013)

Therefore, an argument can be made that there was little to no room for opposition in Turkish politics as such political entities would fall into the category of kemalism’s ‘Others’ - most notably: Reactionaries/Islamists; Kurdish Separatists; and other ‘Aberrant’ Ideologies such as Facism, Communism, Nazism or Socialism. (Ciftci 2013) In other words, Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) have become intrinsically bounded to the political dynamics of the country by being initially established as “guardians of the (democratic) Turks" (André Pereira Matos, 2013) - suggesting the idea that the recorrent coups⁵, as well as failed attempts, should be analysed not only as moments of significant change, but also as an expected instrument in order to legitimise such moments, should they be deemed as successful or not.

Additionally, in an effort to break the Ottoman past and consolidate the Republic, Atatürk moved to dissociate the newly independent country from Islam. First, in 1924, the Ottoman Caliphate, which served as the political and religious focal point in the Sunni muslim world, was abolished - an enormous step towards secularism. However, the goal was to change Turkey’s cultural identity and, towards that design, the leader instituted the use of the Gregorian calendar, european numerals and the latin alphabet. Meanwhile, the office of the Shaykh al-Islām, which had presided over religious affairs, was abolished. The same fate awaited sufi orders, religious schools and charities, as well as clothing items such as the Fez. At long last, in 1928, Islam was removed from the constitution as the religion of the State. (Itzkowitz, 2021) However, despite aiming for secularism, Muslimness was at the centre of Turkish nationalism, meaning that the secular status of the Republic was not a deep one (Kösebalaban, 2011), further contributing to the idea that resistance from islamist ‘others’ was not only possible but also maintainable due to protracted support.

⁵ For more information with regards to the coups - of May 27th 1960, March 12th 1971, Septembre 12th 1980 and February 28th 1997 - check: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/7/16/timeline-a-history-of-turkish-coups>.

As previously stated, Turkey is composed of the merging of the regions of Marmara and Anatolia, resulting in challenges for the development of Modern day Turkey ever since its foundation in 1923.

The Marmara region was highly influential in the organisation of the Ottoman Empire as it would serve as a source of revenue due to the fact that trade between the Black and Mediterranean Seas, as well as between Europe and Asia itself would, undoubtedly flow through it - an essential regional trading route. Ultimately, such geographic characteristics would lead to the development of an outward-oriented, maritime and expansionist way of life based on a trading culture that would characterise Turkish peoples in the region. (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2010) Meanwhile, the Anatolian Peninsula is composed of a harder and more precipitous terrain that would ultimately “encourage the development and independence of local cultures, thus complicating the matter of central control. Taken together, Anatolia is as capital-poor, parochial and introspective as the Sea of Marmara region is capital-rich, worldly and extroverted”. (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2010)

As Atatürk overhauled the country and formed a secular society, capital generated in the Sea of Marmara region was largely invested in Anatolia's infrastructure and education. This fastidious process took several generations and gradually urbanised the country's eastern provinces. Accordingly, as Anatolian towns and cities developed, the population from eastern provinces would be increasingly integrated in Turkey's economy, as Istanbul's ever growing population would indicate (figure 10). Large communities from Anatolia would move to the city which would nearly triple its size up to 2.8 million people by the 1980's.

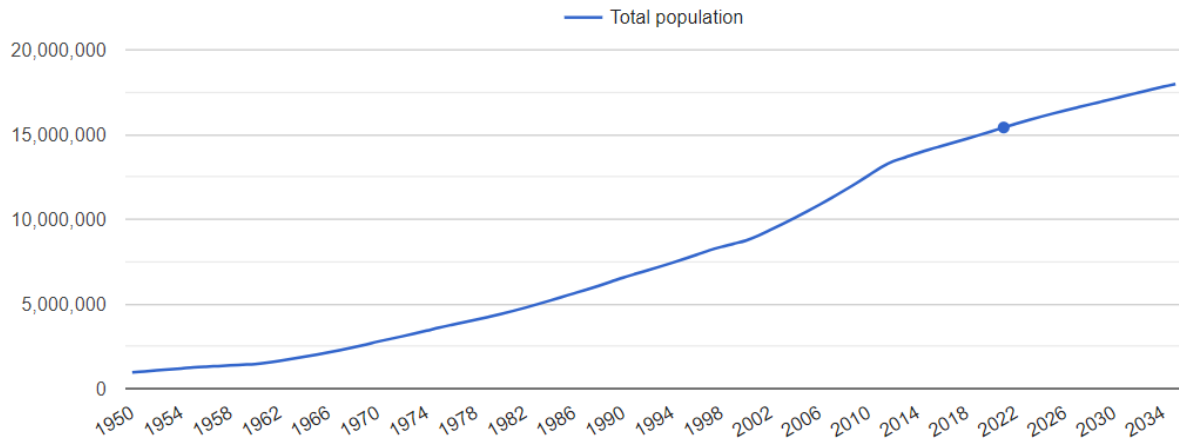


Figure 10: Population of Istanbul.

Source: PopulationStat.com

Meanwhile in the east, the economic growth and urbanisation was impressive enough that cities such as Denizli, Gaziantep, Kayseri, Barsa, Konya, Trabzan and others would be labelled as Anatolian Tigers.⁶ (World Bank, 2015). However, such a period of economic growth was set in motion within a context of a deep internal split in Turkish society “between the ‘secular’ faction of the Sea of Marmara region which sees the country’s future in association with Europe and the ‘religious’ faction of the Anatolia which wants to pursue relationships with the Islamic world”, despite the fact that both factions, though polarizing, are by no means absolute. (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2010)

Even though the Marmara Group has been the most influential in Turkey’s economic development and its merchant activity, NATO’s alliance and inclination towards the European Union would imply too strong a break from the spiritual aspects of the country’s imperial legacy. While the Anatolian Group increasingly shapes Turkey’s political stance, its closer sentimental connection to the Turkish people is to be kept in mind. In other words, “where the secularists embrace the military and Occidental aspects of Turkey’s Ottoman Past, the Anatolians embrace the religious and the Oriental characteristics (...) And so, Turkey rages

⁶ A term used to refer to and to explain the phenomenon of a number of cities in Turkey which have displayed impressive growth since the 1980’s.

with a power struggle between two different groups of different geographies”. (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2010)

Unsurprisingly, such duality is also present in Turkey’s foreign policy in recent years, as the Republic’s ambiguous stances in several matters, such as participation in NATO’s security industry and the purchase of Russian military equipment are indicative of, on the grounds that, as it will be further explained, much of Turkey’s international mindset must be interpreted (to a certain degree) within the context of a spectrum between amity and enmity with regards to western institutions.

Enter Erdoğan

Looking at Turkey nowadays, labelling the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) lead by current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as an ‘other’ would be an uncomplicated exercise for the untrained eye due to its pro-islam stance. Accordingly, in order to properly understand the current internal dynamics of Turkish politics and its repercussions in foreign policy, it is of utmost importance to understand the rise and the development of the AKP, keeping in mind the previously exposed duality in Turkish society.

At the turn of the XX century, Turkey’s secular and pro-west political leadership would find itself within a legitimacy crisis for the following reasons (Ciftci, 2013):

- Powerful and significant reforms towards democratization were set in motion, from 1999 until the AKP’s rise to leadership, due to the fact that Turkey would officially aspire to become a member of the EU⁷;

⁷ As summed up by Ciftci the reforms were: the rewriting of one-third of the Turkish constitution, the enactment of international human rights legislation, the end of capital punishment, the expansion of women’s rights, measures to discourage torture and to improve prison conditions, and new laws curtailing restrictions on freedom of expression, civil society, and the media.

- The occurrence of two large earthquakes, in 1999, in densely populated and industrialized zones, during the third coalition government of the year⁸;
- Heavy economic crises were suffered in 1999 and 2001, in which the economic structure and the financial environment were gravely impacted, ultimately resulting in administrative intervention from the World Bank.

These conditions signified, from the perspective of the Turkish people, the need and the welcoming of new key figures in Turkey's political chessboard - a situation of which Erdoğan would seek to make the most of, having established the AKP in August 14th 2001 as a party contributing to Turkey's traditionally conservative right-inclined population stemming mainly from Anatolia's urbanisation. (Ciftci, 2013)

It is also worth keeping in mind that, as several islamist entities that would present themselves as opposers to Kemalism would seek to abandon an anti-western rethoric as a way to "adopt a business-friendly, globalist, and integrationist perspective" (Kösebalaban, 2011), the United States would simultaneously tolerate islamist movements that would oppose radical Islam. Hence, by establishing the AKP as a 'moderate islamist' political party under the banner of a "Muslim Democracy", and by not declaring any contradiction to american interests, (Ciftci, 2013) Erdoğan was able to both foster western support that would be necessary to Turkey's economic dynamism , while appealing to religious hearts throughout the population.

The AKP's ascendance to power in the November 3rd 2002 elections signified a moment in which a counter-kemalist political entity took control over Turkey. As the AKP would consolidate its power, other centre-right parties would virtually dissolve by "losing significance in terms of political power", ultimately allowing for the AKP to move freely without an alternative to itself - a continuous process of legitimation. (Ciftci, 2013)

⁸ A coalition between the Democratic Left Party (DSP), Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Motherland Party (ANAP).

Additionally, another important aspect with regards to the party's continuous rise is the fact that Turkey experienced exponential economic growth over the first years of Erdoğan's leadership. As described by Jarosiewicz (2013), while making the most out of its geographic location due to the proximity to European markets, Turkey's leadership also resorted to the privatization of several unlucrative state-owned enterprises, consequently attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) at unprecedented levels. The AKP "also carried out a successful reform of the banking system, which protected it against the fallout from the global financial crisis. In addition, Turkey adopted a floating exchange rate system, lifted restrictions on foreign capital inflows, tightened fiscal discipline, increased the independence of the Central Bank, and stabilised inflation".(Jarosiewicz, 2013) An impressive growth in its GDP, as well as in its population's purchasing power has contributed to the AKP's popularity both internally and externally - ultimately motivating an ambitious foreign policy. (Jarosiewicz, 2013) Erdoğan and his allies greatly reformed the economy.

In the meantime, as stated by Ciftci (2013):

"While the AKP has 'democratized' Turkey by means of 'reforms' with the support of the EU, and the USA in particular, they have gained some influence against the institutions of the Kemalist state and have started to target TSK members, who could possibly be the most important obstacle for them".

It can therefore be argued that the AKP's process of legitimation ever since 2002 has been coupled by an effort to keep Atatürk's Guardians of the Turks from interfering (despite the referred coups).

In accordance with the ruling party's rise as the 'king of the hill' of Turkish politics (showcased by the consecutive victories in the polls, the decline of alternative parties and the backing of western powers) Turkey's foreign policy has been synonymous to what the party has deemed as the best course for the Republic.

An inclination towards the west was naturally exercised by Turkey as there was no other viable option in an immediate post-Cold War setting, especially in economic terms. Despite recurring military operations, for example, against Kurdish entities (mainly the Kurdistan Workers' Party - PKK), as well as episodes full of enmity with regards to Greece and Cyprus, Syria and Iran, trade became the main focus regarding foreign affairs ever since Erdoğan's ascendancy - transition from a "post-Cold War warrior" to "soft power" outlined Turkey's objectives based on diplomacy, economic ties and cultural proximity. (Tol & Baskan, 2018)

Ankara would aim to establish friendly relations with the international actors that surround it, in a neighbourhood filled with historical grievances fueled by geopolitical flashpoints and hotspots. Carried by such an approach to its Foreign Policy, Turkey would, as argued by Fuller (1992), "evolve into a centre of its own emerging world in the immediate post-Cold War era. Moreover, under the AKP, such grand strategy⁹ would be defined as the 'Policy of Zero Problems with Neighbours' (Ekinci, 2017).

Under such context, it is also important to keep in mind that, in practical terms, an important aspect of the 'Zero Problem Policy' is that, due to its location, such a strategy would simultaneously aim to feed Turkey's energy security needs, as most of its oil and gas supplies are imported in the context of a growing energy demand. As explained by Ipek (2017):

"Turkey's Energy Policy defined the country as a 'natural bridge' between energy importing and exporting countries, and an important country due to its potential to provide energy security by allowing diversification of resources and transportations routes for Europe's energy imports (...) the role of energy security has been facilitated both as a goal and as instrument in Ankara's foreign policy".

⁹ The fluid concept of 'Grand Strategy' has been defined by several authors in various ways but a broad way explaining it is that, according to Barry Posen (2014) Grand Strategy is "a state's theory about how it can best 'cause' security for itself". For more information: https://tnsr.org/2018/11/what-is-grand-strategy-sweeping-a-conceptual-minefield/#_ftn11.

While the objective of accession talks with the EU was to ultimately align Turkey's economic and political institutions with European ones, (Stratfor Worldview, 2018) the rise of the AKP brought a new era to Turkey's Foreign Policy, as they marked a political shift. Since 2002, Turkish elites started looking east for partnerships more inclined towards social and religious themes, while a surge of nationalism in Europe would turn Western institutions more wary of integrating socially and politically different states such as Turkey. (Stratfor Worldview, 2018) Nevertheless, the 'Policy of Zero Problems' was quite compatible with Atatürk's pro-Western alignment. That being said however, the year of 2011 is to be considered a turning point for Turkey's Western inclinations, as the AKP declared an ideological shift from a 'Muslim Democracy' to 'Political Islam'.

Domestically, the decision was motivated by the fact that the party had consolidated enough strength to make Turkish liberals virtually ineffective to the country's political balance of power. Additionally, the death of the influential political Islamist, Necmettin Erbakan, could be interpreted as a symbol that the once challenging Saadet Party would no longer pose a threat to the AKP. (Colakoglu, 2019) Internationally, disappointment with the EU as a source of economic dynamism due to the recent Eurozone financial crisis, and the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood movements of the Arab Spring would view the AKP as a model worth following, must be equally kept in mind. (Colakoglu, 2019)

It can be argued that such ideological shift first signalled a gradual shift, both domestically and internationally, towards Eurasianism - a change that would steer Turkey further from Western institutions and towards powers such as the Russian Federation.

Moreover, it is also worth keeping in mind that, as noticed by Colakoglu (2019):

"After its ideology shift in 2011, the AKP decided to use hard power instruments particularly in Syria instead of soft power-only policy, there is a start of lessening ground for Turkey. Besides, the use of military power has rekindled bitter historical memories in the Middle East. As almost all Arab countries had become a part of the Ottoman Empire, the use

of the Turkish military feeds suspicions in the Arab world that Turkey has an expansionist agenda in the region”.

Colakoğlu therefore suggests that a practical foreign policy implication of this moment of change towards political islam might be an inclination towards a sprouting usage of instruments synonymus to ‘hard power’. This further feeds the argument that the rise of the AKP might mirror the beginning of a new era of Turkish Foreign Policy. In other words, as the AKP further consolidates itself domestically, the more incompatible is its foreign policy to Kemalist views.

That being said, as Colakoğlu further (and coincidentally) explains:

“Yet, although Turkey’s pro-Western Kemalist foreign policy has attenuated in recent years, it nonetheless remains in effect. In fact, since 2011 Turkey has pursued a “hybrid foreign policy” that has both pro-Western and anti-Western features (...) Turkey’s Eurasianist foreign policy lacks a full-fledged strategy that can realistically be expected to yield positive outcomes for the country, especially when compared to its Kemalist pro-Western counterpart. Despite its rhetorical allure, the anti-Western stance has not translated into a sustainable and prosperous economic model for Turkey. Indeed, Turkey is structurally dependent on a free market economy and deeply-rooted integration with Western institutions such as NATO, the EU, and the Council of Europe”.

Strong relations with the EU as well as the United States and NATO are still vital for Turkey’s future both economically and security-wise, meaning that the Republic’s duality between pro-west secularists and eurasia-prone islamists is to be found not only in Turkey’s internally political dynamics but also in its foreign policy.

Looking the Other Way: A Pivot to Eurasia

Although limited, Eurasianism has been presenting itself as a growing force within Turkish Foreign Policy. According to Erşen and Köstem in their book, *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order, 2019*, what they deem as 'Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia' is translated by the country's growing proximity to Eurasian actors to the detriment of the traditional western inclination, and can be explained through a series of interrelated global, regional and domestic factors.

Globally, the main factor is the idea that American hegemony is no longer being exercised. The authors argue that in a post-Cold War environment, Ankara has never ceased to search for strategic autonomy from the west but was always limited to do so, due to a damaging financial situation, the threat of terrorism associated with the PKK, and a general climate of political instability. Such conditions pushed Turkey towards a western sphere of influence, as a way to unify the divided elite (while building economic muscle in the meantime), when it actually aimed for the opposite as a long term strategy. Therefore, under the impression that America's legitimacy and leadership has been seriously questioned due to the occupation of Iraq and the subsequent instability in the Middle East throughout the 2000's, Turkey's leadership has interpreted that the USA is no longer the hegemonic power it once was, and that an "emerging multipolar structure of the international system" has been taking place instead - resulting in the rise of new centres of powers (especially in Asia).

Additionally, the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, the following Eurozone crisis, the development of Brexit, former President Donald Trump's economic nationalism and 'America First' doctrine, and the rise of populist and anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe have seriously damaged western soft-power and fostered skepticism in the eyes of the Turkish elite, that has been progressively pro-Islam.

Turkey has, according to the authors, interpreted these recent global dynamics as the west's relative decline and that the outcome has been the "desire to refocus their diplomatic, economic and political activity in non-western regions to prevent overreliance on the US, NATO or EU", as well as the decision to "move closer to the rising powers in its foreign relations", such as the People's Republic of China. In other words, Turkey's pivot to Eurasia has been greatly influenced by transformations in the international stage, expressed by the decline of the liberal world order.

Closer to home, Erşen and Köstem (2019) also focus their attention to Turkey's regional context as another important factor - most importantly, the Syrian Civil War. While Washington and Ankara once took coordinated measures against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, views and priorities between the NATO allies had started to diverge due to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) in the conflict. In order to deal with the unexpected threat, a change in american strategy saw Washington support Kurdish militias in the area, most notably the People's Protection Units (YPG) that are considered to be part of the PKK that, in itself, is not only labelled as a terrorist organisation by both Turkey and the US, but is also, unsurprisingly, a vital security threat in turkish security culture. Over this issue, relations between Ankara and Washington have remarkably soured.

By the same token, developments in the field of operations have pushed Turkey towards military cooperation with Russia. As Moscow would become the major decisive actor in the conflict, in support of the Assad regime, Turkey "would gradually accept Russia's rules on the Syrian battleground". In such a context, the downing of the Russian fighter jet Sukhoi Su-24 by Turkish forces in 2015 would deeply impact Turkey's economy as Moscow imposed harsh sanctions in retaliation. In the summer of 2016, President Erdoğan would publicly apologise for the incident and relations between both states have been increasingly positive

and constructive ever since, as signified by the “Astana Talks” along with Iran in an effort to achieve a solution to the conflict.

The authors also bring attention to another regional factor that is the allure of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially through the Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative (SREB). Focussing on the Turkish point of view, the BRI should be interpreted among consolidation of the Russia-China strategic partnership in Eurasia ever since the second half of the 2000’s, of which Turkey has been notably enthusiastic about, as developing links with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) can demonstrate.

Moreover, due to the lack of support from the P5+1 Group¹⁰ in Turkey’s failed efforts to reach a deal with Brazil in 2010 that would foresee the transfer of Iran’s low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for fuel for Theran’s research reactor (amidst Iran’s nuclear crisis), seeds of mistrust between Ankara and Washington were further planted.

Additionally, Erşen and Köstem also argue that geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean along with the stalling of accession talks with the EU, further emphasised Turkey’s need to prevent dependency from the west. As Ankara’s priorities in the region and in the wider Middle East would diverge from the Union’s priorities, Turkey’s deteriorating ties with Israel and tensions over the discovery of hydrocarbons have led to a “quasi-alliance” between Greece, Cyprus and Israel. For these reasons Ankara has moved closer to Eurasian politics as an alternative.

Focusing on domestic political dynamics, the Eurozone crisis had, as mentioned, an immense negative effect on the European Union’s soft power, damaging the attractiveness of the liberal world order, ultimately contributing to China’s flair among the Turkish leaders’ perception. However, it can be argued that the major internal shift of posture towards the west

¹⁰ A group of nations composed of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (USA, China, Russia, the UK and France) with the addition of Germany, whose sole objective is to work together on the Iran nuclear deal. The agreement reached is formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which the USA withdrew in 2018 under the leadership of former President Donald Trump. For more information: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/p51.asp>

lies in the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, mainly due to the Gülen question. The authors state that “The fact that Gülen continued to reside in the U.S., where he allegedly masterminded the activities of the clandestine network, which was officially labelled the Gülenist Terrorist Organization (FETO) by the Turkish authorities, seems to have strengthened the view in the Turkish public that the July 15 coup attempt was actually a plot of the U.S. to weaken Turkey”. That same public understanding of the situation was decisive in the 2017 referendum that constitutionally allowed the President to have groundbreaking control over the Armed Forces.

There is also an ideological aspect behind Turkey’s disillusion with regards to the West. It can be argued that non-western societies with a background of imperial legacy (such as Russia, Iran and China) might tend towards the understanding that the State owns power over society itself. With Turkey belonging to this category, as the Ottoman Empire is greatly remembered, the State’s national interest and security policies are shared and practiced across the population. Therefore, “ruling elites in these countries tend to interpret strong Western support for further liberalization and democratization in their neighbourhood as part of larger geopolitical designs concocted in Western capitals to contain their growing geopolitical influence”. (Oguzlu, 2019)

Diversity and Volatility

In order to understand Turkey’s current mindset in the international stage it is crucial to keep in mind characteristics regarding its location and territory. The Republic is located in a geopolitical and geostrategic hotspot which, in itself, demonstrates its importance. It has developed important relations with all regions around it as it belongs to all of them not only geographically but also in a securitization manner. Its foreign policy is tremendously important to Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa.

It can be argued that such diversity in Turkish priorities has historically translated to a volatile position in the international stage. Looking at the contrast between Kemal Atatürk's policies towards a secular western Turkey and President Erdoğan's more traditional and assertive posture, one can see how susceptible Turkey's foreign policy is, keeping in mind the fact that both leaders respond to what they interpret as the country's domestic needs and to the international and regional context.

Regional disparities between the Marmara heartland and the Anatolia region have been at the heart of the Turkish geopolitical mindset. While the first is more prone to opportunities and foreign investment following the referred westernization process that naturally placed the city of Istanbul at its centre of gravity (leading the western areas to a more wealthy, innovative and extrovert lifestyle), the latter presents itself as a more traditional, conservative and traditionally underdeveloped region. Such characteristics of Turkish political dynamics are important in order to understand President Erdoğan's mindset. The strong presence of the PKK and its natural (even if only apparent) links to kurdishterrorism in the region (the main security threat) was not be taken lightly by the AKP.

When becoming a NATO member in 1952, Turkey intended to face the soviet threat, develop its security apparatus and foster foreign investment. It wished and needed to present itself as a more western-like State. Concurrently, NATO found in Turkey a middle eastern State whose cooperation would be highly beneficial due to its strategic location - being the encirclement of Russia and an entry to the region of the Middle East its main characteristics at the time. The opportunity cost of its geostrategic importance rested on the benefits of the Marshall Plan in order to develop Turkey's economic muscle, and the Turkey-US-NATO link was understood as an important and stable partnership despite different cultural and political values and priorities. At the turn of the century, however, it can be argued that Turkey has been pivoting towards the Eurasian side of the international stage due to several interrelated

matters, such as the transformation in the global order, the dynamic regional context and domestic political unrest.

An argument can be made that Turkey's growing proximity towards Eurasia might be the result of a natural sedimentation of its culture due to the increasing urbanisation of Anatolia, along with the region's incorporation and consolidation into the country's political elite - represented by the AKP. The question of whether the recent decline of western political entities have been a coincidental driving force towards such tendency is also worth asking, as the line that establishes to what point would the 'pivot to Eurasia' not be exercised were it not for Turkish views on the health of the liberal world order is a very thin one.

Regardless, the main conclusion is that the Turkish geopolitical mindset as well as its foreign policy have been greatly shaped by the geographic duality that has been present ever since the founding of the Republic, along with the international context that surrounds it. In other words, the natural cultural proximity towards Eurasia and the growing strategic importance of such landmass that stems from the disillusionment of relations with the west, have been the cornerstone of Turkey's strategic mindset in recent years. Accordingly, the main preoccupation of the 'Zero Problems Policy' of using the country's strategic location to its benefit is still present - that being said, such preoccupation can be solved in a very volatile way that inserts Turkey in the geopolitical chessboard.

Understanding Russia

Old roots

The famous notion in the realm of International Relations that 'Geography determines Destiny' is, to a certain extent, usually exemplified by Russia's case.

The very core of the Russian Federation, the Moscow region, is geographically indefensible as it presents itself within the North European Plain (figure 11), all the way to

the Ural Mountains. From the west there are no mountain ranges, no rivers or oceans, no swamps or deserts, and only the Moscow forests and a naturally inhospitable climate can be perceived as geographic obstacles. In the event of a foreign invasion, Russia's only option seems to be a costly defensive strategy of attrition that would eventually overwork the enemy. As a result, Russia's strategic thinking has developed a spatial element that is structurally engrained.



Figure 11: The North European Plain.

Source: Harvest.com, 2017

Therefore, as explained by Rumer and Sokolsky (2020), “Throughout the history of the modern Russian state - since the middle of the sixteenth century - its has pursued territorial expansion to the west in Europe, to the East in Siberia, and to the south and southeast in the Caucasus and Central Asia”.

Moreover, the authors also explain that, despite usually being the more powerful belligerent in the subsequent confrontations in most geographic settings, “This was not the case in Europe” as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 17th century, Napoleon's France and Hitler's Germany would signify dramatic episodes in Russian history. Thus,

Russia has, historically, majorly prioritized its affairs within the old continent, in contrast with its attention to other strategic scenarios. For this reason, it can be argued that Russian strategic culture has been, and is still today, filled by security concerns naturally placed above other kinds of affairs. From the Russian Empire all the way to the current Russian Federation, strategic depth has been a major concern for Russian leaders, especially in the wake of a long history of conflict with other European entities. As such, Rumer and Sokolsky argue that Russia is, in strategic terms, in Europe.

However, they add to their argument that while Russia is *in* Europe, it is not *with* Europe. As stated:

“Aside from the historic differences between the Russian Orthodox and Catholic churches, and despite its active participation in European power politics since the rule of Peter the Great, Russia has struggled to establish its legitimate place among the great European powers and gain acceptance of its rightful place among them. (...) Despite its critical role in defeating Napoleon, whose conquest of nearly all of continental Europe no other power was able to stop, Russia’s acceptance by the major European powers - Austria, Prussia, France, Great Britain - as one of them proved elusive. As most of the rest of Europe was being consumed by revolutionary fervor and democratic movements, Russia remained firmly autocratic and committed to extinguishing popular uprisings within its own empire and rescuing wobbly monarchies elsewhere, especially when trouble broke near its borders, as was the case in 1848 with the Austrian Empire”.

On the other side of the coin, there was also a developing security dilemma stemming from the European worrying perception that the defender of autocratic values had been significantly expanding its military capability. Such concern would result in the collective European support for the (even more religiously distant) Ottoman Empire in the Crimean War in 1853-56, that would be “interpreted by Russian nationalist and Slavophiles as proof of Europe’s duplicity and inherent, incorrigible Russophobia”. (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2020)

Therefore, fueled by historic experience from geopolitical and diplomatic grievances, a certain aspect of what it means to be Russian dwells on the idea of long adverse relations with the western world.

The nature of Russian strategic thinking and, by association, its geopolitical mindset is essentially linked to a matter of the identity of the Russian people - a matter that is further questioned due to its transitional location, exacerbating “both a geographical and cultural challenge”. In addition, “contrary to Western Europe where the notion of national identity is mainly an individual perception, in Russia it is one with that of the State ”. (Perrier, 2014) Beyond geostrategic concerns, in the 16th century, Russia would also compose its strategic thinking through the Orthodox legacy of the Byzantine Empire. In practice, there has developed the conviction that Moscow was the “true” centre of Christianity and that part of the Empires’s vocation would be to fulfill a spiritual mission for Moscow to be “the third and last Rome”. Implied in such a mission, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, is a duty to liberate and protect Christians, most notably through the expulsion of Ottoman influence from Europe. (Perrier, 2014) - This is part of the Russian perspective towards the numerous Russo-Turkish Wars.¹¹

Without disregarding geopolitical considerations, as stated by Perrier (2014):

“The Orthodox element therefore played an important role in constructing the concept of Russia’s role within the transnational cultural and linguistic configuration that is the Slav world. Though the ambitious plans of Russian monarchs for the Balkans did not always succeed - namely due to the intervention of other Western powers, in particular England, seeing their influence threatened - the matter of protection for the Slav world continued to be cited within Russian diplomatic discourse throughout the Tsarist era”.

¹¹ For more information regarding such stream of conflictual episodes visit: https://www.realclearhistory.com/articles/2018/06/14/10_most_important_russo-turkish_wars_323.html It is important to keep in mind that, as the Russian leadership would also be geopolitically motivated to commit to such confrontations, the geopolitical mindset of the Ottoman Empire at the time was one in which expansion would be deemed as necessary as control over the region where both empires meet - especially the Black Sea - would safeguard vital security concerns - a strong example of how imperial powers at the time naturally risked falling into the spiral of the Security Dilemma of International Relations Theory.

Being an Orthodox people, the religious establishment of another 'Rome' due to the fall of Constantinople, along with ever more pressing security concerns, would not only legitimize imperialist convictions but would also shape a distinguished Russian identity as the Empire grew, due to the referred lack of geographical boundaries between Western Europe and Asia - there is a historical sense of Russian 'otherness'. While such a sense would be mainly fostered by the contrast between the Orthodox and the Latin world, the contrast regarding the Turkish/Ottoman civilization must also be included into the equation, further explaining the ever significant "complex of being surrounded by potentially hostile powers". (Perrier, 2014). Plus, Perrier also argues that there is an ontological aspect to Russian 'otherness' that underlined the orientalisation of the Empire in the 19th century as a "civilisation mission in the east creating a bridge between Europe and Asia", which further contributes to the singularity of Russian identity and its place in the old continent.

The effect of the referred defeat at the Crimean War of 1853-56 must also be analysed within this context as it signified a hallmark in Russian strategic thinking under a strong sense of disillusionment with the west and cement Russia in a different Slavophile¹² setting of international affairs ever since, while modernization would require Western technology. Russia would politically reject Western Europe and follow its own path that would be "characterized by the dominant role of the authoritarian central state and a continually growing gap between economic progress and a fossilized system, a context that would reappear during the soviet era". (Perrier, 2014)

There were geopolitical and cultural motivators to Russia's strategic mindset that were highlighted by episodes resulting in great historic grievances. In other words, a blend of cultural, religious and geopolitical factors have greatly composed the ideological backbone of

¹² Slavophiles are naturally determined to defend Russia's unique traditions and culture, in a way that places collectivism above individualism, ultimately resulting in a traditional rift with regards to western rationalism. (Richmond 2003)

Imperial Russia - the spatial awareness perceived through the importance of a vast territory is exacerbated by the need for strategic depth, as well as the need for strategic autonomy from Europe, and a messianic mission triggered by a religious legacy. Such expansion would, over time, generate changes and ultimately shape a complex and peculiar Russian identity.

A Different Messianic Mission

A popular sentiment, following the revolution and regime change of 1917, expressed through a Slavophile ideology, would subscribe to the Eurasianist view that Russia is neither a country at the periphery of Europe, nor an Asian one, but a third distinguished alternative. Meanwhile, the messianic mission would be rethought. The Soviet regime would be characterised by a state-controlled economy, a bureaucratic system, and most importantly, by the replacement of Tsarist absolutism and Orthodoxy by a Marxist dogma under a political environment that would be centralised by the absolutism of a single-party system. (Perrier, 2014)

While this moment certainly signified a shift in Russia's perception of its international vocation due to the disillusionment of the establishment of a "third Rome", it is also important to keep in mind that the year in question also signified a clash against Capitalism in the name of the universality of Communism economically, socially and politically. While the Tsarist regime would be defined by the Christian Orthodox faith, the Socialist regime would bring a new society with the ultimate goal of establishing the Communist ideology on a global level - a third alternative to Europe and Asia. Thus, an argument can be made that the ideological shift from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union would have the replacement of one messianic mission to another, with communist (and not religious) characteristics. Accordingly, while the ideological motivation has transformed, geostrategic and security considerations would virtually remain the same, most notably the notion of territorial vastness

as a means for strategic depth, as well as the perception of encirclement by other powers and the necessity for Russia to follow its own path. due to historic grievances.

Throughout the 1920's and the 1930's, Soviet strategic thinking would focus on an "imminent global revolution". However, as Joseph Stalin would rise to power, "messianic elements within Soviet strategic reasoning grew stronger: capitalism was 'condemned by history' and regeneration would come from the first 'socialist state' ". Moreover, the victory in the Second World War would further motivate Soviet leaders as it was perceived as the demonstration that the USSR was on its righteous path on all economic, political and moral levels. (Perrier, 2014)

As the geopolitical landscape would transform in 1945, what became known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War has left a legacy in its identity in international affairs. As explained by Rumer and Sokolsky (2020):

"Along with the thesis of the West's enduring hostility toward Russia, the Kremlin's national narrative devotes special attention to the legacy of World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, as the cornerstone upon which rests Russian claims to recognition as a great power and to a special voice in the affairs of Europe. (...) In the Kremlin's narrative, Russia, as a "country-victor" in World War II, which gave rise to the international system that exists today, as a founding member of the United Nations, and as a major nuclear power, bears special responsibility for the legacy of the war. This includes ensuring the correct historical record of the war and defending it against attempts at falsification, upholding the postwar international system, and building a stable world order.

The Second World War solidified Russia's claim to great power status, advancing the historic perception, ever since its Imperial days, that it should be recognised as such by the European powers. With or without Europe, the old continent has always been the key strategic scenario for generations of Russian elites, whether it is due to its geography, historical experience, security concerns or ideological narrative. (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2020)

Besides, the Great Patriotic War would also result in the expansion of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence in a way that ultimately included the traditional Pan-Slavic area (all the way to Poland), further crystallizing the communist messianistic rhetoric as a driver for strategic interests. Such a narrative would, in Soviet eyes, legitimize the intervention from the USSR abroad by aiming to expand its sphere of influence to a global level. (Perrier, 2014)

However, as the Soviet Union grew, so did another Western great power whose influence in the outcome of the Patriotic War was undoubtedly determinant.

The Perpetual Enemy

The environment of the Cold War would coincide with a gradual shift to the Soviet people as, even though communist messianism would remain as a key factor of Russian strategic thinking, other ideologies would complement the base of Soviet self-identification in a way that would influence the cornerstone of strategic doctrine. The opposition to the United States and the bipolar division of the world between the USSR and the rest, underlined by the defense of socialist values, would exacerbate the historic rejection of the European West. (Perrier, 2014)

The transatlantic community in all of its aspects - politically, economically and militarily - would be perceived as the perpetual enemy, against whom a confrontational stance would be part of Soviet identity and strategic culture. Consequently, this confrontational model of foreign policy had emphasized the prioritization of the development of the military-industrial complex for the economic development of the USSR. (Perrier, 2014)

In summary, up until this point in time, one can argue that Russia's geopolitical mindset is deeply intertwined with its identity and security concerns. What does it mean to be Russian and how must the motherland be sustainably protected, are some of the main questions to be addressed by its leaders. Both Orthodoxy and a Slavophile ideology that is

related to the belief in the global establishment of a Communist setting have been significant in the cultural sedimentation in the back bone of Russian identity. More than that, such cultural sedimentation is also influenced by the far-reaching expansion of the territory (connecting the country to several cultures across the globe) with the ultimate goal of fostering strategic depth - as a result, Russia's vast location would create a base for a Eurasianist identity that is further solidified by historical grievances with the West.

For this reason, it can also be argued that the autocratic dynamism of Soviet politics, centred in Russia, would guide Foreign Policy in accordance with such ideas, ultimately serving the narrative of the distinguished identity of the Russian people. This idea seems to be somewhat confirmed, as the collapse of the Soviet Union would see Russia fall into an identity crisis that would be utterly linked to its modern-day strategic thinking. (Perrier, 2014).

The Loss of Identity

As referenced, the Soviet economy was centrally planned - a command economy. Moreover, the impressive growth it showcased initially would be experienced thanks to the adoption of knowledge and technology from developed (mainly western) economies. However, as Johnston (2021) explains, within the context of a command economy it is likely that such adoption would signify a long-term problem as it "could come at the expense of fostering an innovative domestic economy". Analysing the case at hand, the author argues that as the country "began to catch up with the West, its ability to borrow ever-newer technologies, and the productivity effects that came with it, soon diminished". In other words, despite a period of impressive economic growth, the command economy of the Soviet Union did not show signs of a sustainable foundation. In addition, it was a heavily militarised economy. As a security-heavy geopolitical mindset would increasingly have its practical effects on the

economic dynamism of the Soviet Union, heavy industry would be prioritized over the light industry that is ultimately more impactful in the quality of life of the people. Industry sectors such as energy, mining, metallurgy, mechanical construction, chemicals and building material would represent 74.4% of the economy, in contrast to 61.2% in 1940 and 40% in 1928. (Perrier, 2014)

In this context, efforts by Nikita Krushchev, such as the *Sovnarkhoz* in the 1950's, to reform the economy by gradually establishing a decentralised second economy in order to tackle inefficiencies stemming from the political anatomy of a command economy, would be politically trumped and eventually lead to an effort to re-reform back to a centralised coordination in the 1960's. (Johnston, 2021) Such an episode must serve as an example that showcases the prevalence of political considerations over economic affairs in Russian political culture.

The Gross National Product (GNP) of the USSR began slowing down around the decade of the 1970's and by the following decade it became clear to Soviet leaders that reform was needed. Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, such reforms would be more radical by also addressing social and political aspects of Soviet life. (Johnston, 2021) Reforms under the banners *Perestroika* (restructuring) and *Glasnost* (transparency) would, throughout the 1980's, be established.

Regarding the first, as Johnston (2021) explains:

“While attempting to maintain socialist ideals and central control over primary societal goals, Gorbachev aimed to decentralize economic activity and open the economy up to foreign trade (...) *Perestroika* was in direct opposition to the previously hierarchical nature of the command economy. But having greater access to information helped foster critiques of Soviet control, not just of the economy, but also of social life. When the Soviet leadership relaxed control in order to save the faltering economic system, they helped create conditions that would lead to the country's dissolution (...) Soviet leaders no longer had power to intervene amidst the growing economic chaos. Newly-empowered local leaders demanded

greater autonomy from central authority, shaking the foundations of the command economy, while more localized cultural identities and priorities took precedence over national concerns.”

Regarding the effects of the latter, it is important to keep in mind its resulting political context as, at the end of the decade of 1980, Soviet society would reopen the debate regarding Russia’s place in the world, for it had smelled the coffee of the widening negative gap between the quality of life resulting from its economic development, to that of usual western economies. (Perrier, 2014). In essence, Soviet society would be divided between a ‘liberal’ camp and a ‘patriotic’ camp, due to the allure of western economic power.

On the one hand, ‘liberals’ would, as the name suggests, defend closer connections to the west, adhering to certain values such as a free market economy, protection of human rights, political pluralism and civic freedom. On the other hand, the ‘patriotic’ camp would defend a much more conservative stance. As Perrier (2014) explains they would range from:

“ (...) pure Marxists to nationalist and even anti-Semitic Slavophiles, who hoped to preserve the Soviet system and believed Western democracy would weaken Russia by weakening its uniqueness. The conservatives rejected the ideas of the perestroika (reconstruction) either because they truly believed in the potential of socialism or due to a personal interest in maintaining the Soviet system as it was. In the institutions, this branch was represented by the technocrats within the Party machinery and the Soviets, the military-industrial complex, business executives and senior military dignitaries.”

Changes within Russian social life were thus already visible and such shifts, as minor as they may have seemed at the time, would not suggest a strong degree of constancy with regards to the country’s cultural historical process. This notion of a break in continuity would be further solidified by the effects of the dissolution of the USSR on the identity of Russian society.

The fall of the USSR in 1991 was received by the liberal camp with enthusiasm and would give rise to a new elite that shared such feelings, believing not only that a free market economy would be central to solving Russia's economic problems but also that a common European home was Russia's to rejoin - in this context, immediate post-USSR Russia would move away from its cultural history and aim for a rapprochement with western entities.

After the historic establishment of the Russian Federation, the Yeltsin-Kozyrev (President and Minister of Foreign Affairs respectively) strategic doctrine would only somewhat recognize the loss of great power status, and focus primarily in aligning Russia's redefined position to those of western entities, demonstrated, for example, by the lack of Russian reactions to the rise of American influence in Central and Western Europe. (Perrier, 2014)

However, strategic interests were not clearly defined and the Kremlin would naturally exercise a reactive approach to developments beyond its borders. (Lo, 2003) After the fostering of feelings of animosity towards the west throughout the Cold War, as Bobo Lo (2003) argues, "it would have been unrealistic to expect that such an accumulation of negative sentiment could have evaporated quickly".

During this time of jubilation towards western actors, Russian Foreign Policy under the Yeltsin administration would still place security and geopolitical concerns at its center, in such a way that would not go hand in hand with the warming of relations with Western Europe and the United States, meaning that, as desired as a closer relationship with the west may have seemed, Russia is structurally prone not to trust West Europe on a level that would be required in practical terms.

In his book titled *Vladimir Putin and the evolution of Russian foreign policy (2003)*, Bobo Lo explains that, during the Cold War and Yeltsin periods, Russian geopolitical mindset

was based around three base concepts: a zero-sum mindset; the notion of balance of power; and the notion of spheres of influence.

Firstly, regarding the zero-sum mindset, soviet leadership was convinced that the more one superpower grew, the more the other would lose, with regards to all aspects that would contribute to international power and influence. During the Yeltsin years, due to the strategic misfortune of the fall of the Soviet Union, a “national humiliation” complex would be added into the equation. As the author puts it:

“For the Yeltsin administration and most of the political class, a series of landmark developments - NATO enlargement, Washington’s plans to develop strategic missile defence, the military interventions of the Western powers in Iraq and, most spectacularly, over Kosovo - pointed to one conclusion: the success of the West implied if not the defeat of Russia as such, then certainly the frustration of many of its foreign and security policy objectives.”

Secondly, relative to the notion of balance of power, the Soviet interpretation was that, due to the longevity of the Cold War as well as the overwhelming gap between the nuclear capability of the rest of the world and of the superpowers, the international balance of power was mainly indicated by the, essentially nuclear, relations with the United States. However, the fall of the USSR led to the emergence of new notions of balance of power, such as “strategic and conventional, global and regional, multilateral and bilateral”. A myriad of new factors would influence Russian calculations in international affairs ever since, meaning that the Yeltsin administration would need to choose between the continuing of transitional soviet balance of power thinking, or commit to a new mindset that would respond to the new circumstances. The Kremlin’s response would be inconsistent while it aimed to place balance of power at the centre of its geopolitically oriented foreign policy, in a way that would compensate for the country’s declining military capabilities and strategic options.

In the centre of such a strategic decision it is important to keep in mind Russia's natural geostrategic insecurities that have shaped its mindset throughout history. Given these vital security concerns, coupled with Russia's declining military capabilities in addition to a historic compilation of grievances and the referred sense of national humiliation, it is not realistic for one to expect a degree of confidence from Russia to the West that would be solid enough for the sense of an even balance of power - the rising multitude of Russia's strategic insecurities stemming from its strategic decline in a moment in which the United States could make the most of its unipolarity.

Lastly, the idea of spheres of influence, including the former soviet republics as well as the former Warsaw Pact nations along Central and Eastern Europe, would be somewhat ambiguous since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Bobo Lo (2003) explains that "The Yeltsin regime was apt to insist that the international community should take Russia's interests in these regions into account, but there was no precise sense of what that meant in practice (...) The Yeltsin administration succeeded only in looking at once imperialistic and feeble." Russia would develop a negative reputation marked by an imperialist label, while efforts to secure geopolitical interests in Eastern Europe and in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) would not come to fruition. The author argues that by lacking a "consistent desire and energy to make good claims on its 'zones of special interest', it restricted itself to occasional bursts of activity in response to allegedly hostile Western actions" (actions such as NATO exercises with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, NATO enlargement or the intervention in Kosovo, for example).

Regarding geostrategic and security concerns, a certain degree of continuity from the Soviet era to the Yeltsin era is noticeable, demonstrating a reason why an initial warm approach towards the west was short lived. On the other side of the coin, as Perrier (2014) explains:

“While Russia 'watched powerlessly as it grew weaker', the attitude of its western partners only worsened its sensation of humiliation. Though 'the expansion of democracy' in Eastern Europe gave rise to solid economic assistance programmes, Russia was only marginally concerned by western aid. The expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe was seen by the Russian strategic establishment as a betrayal to the promises made by Mikhail Gorbachev during the unification of Germany¹³ and as 'western arrogance', merely 'the reflection of Russian humiliation, the result of American unilateralism'. The failure of the 'common european home' was the source of disillusion and frustration among the population, and turned Russian strategy in a more realist direction and a clearer definition of its interests”.

Moving back to Grow Closer to Home

Entering the decade of 1990, there was a great deal of excitement towards the West. However, what should have been a period of closer relations with Europe did not turn out to be the case and, in 1996 Andrei Kozyrev would be replaced by Yevgeny Primakov as the New Minister for Foreign Affairs due to the unpopularity of his doctrine.

In essence, Primakov's appointment signified the disgruntlement of the allure of the West and, in practical terms, saw the revival of historic ideologies and geopolitical orientation that has been shaping the identity of the Russian people (Eurasianism and Slavophilism being key concepts).

The Primakov Doctrine was based on three principles (Perrier, 2014):

- Partnerships with Westerns entities would be chosen selectively, overturning the notion that Europe and Russia are 'natural allies';
- Development of ties throughout Asia and the Middle East in an effort to counterbalance American dominance;

¹³ This complex vocally made promise has been the source of great debate in Russia's relations with the West, given that its central point is in the calculations and perceptions of both NATO and Russia with regards to each other. For more information visit: <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-expansion-russia-mislead/31263602.html>.

- Set the former USSR border to the West of the country as a ‘red line’ to western interference, that would define Russia’s main interest area. In this context, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) would be key.

Primakov signified a “less ideological and more rational” eurasianist strategic doctrine that aimed to counter American hegemony by supporting the idea of a multipolar world. In the meantime, “an alternative ideology of the national identity was being constructed” based, once again, on Russian unique ‘otherness’ that would be “in line with slavophile ideas”. (Perrier, 2014) It was a step back towards ideas that have been gradually carved in into russian strategic thinking, further suggesting that the first half of the decade can be described as uncharacteristic in the big picture - a failed western experiment that is important to understand the lack of direction and of identity that the fall of the Soviet Union resulted into. Westernism was, nevertheless, an alternative worth giving a try, especially given the fact that the *Glasnost* policy allowed for the public surge of a liberal camp in the country. That being said, the strategic imperatives remained virtually the same and a natural sense of enmity towards the west was palpable once again.

Kosovo, 1999

The broad sense of calculated interaction of the Primakov Doctrine with regards to western entities allowed enough space for the establishment of a NATO-Russia partnership, especially under the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security in 1997. However, as previously hinted, the war in Kosovo in 1999 can be considered a landmark development with regards to how Russia can perceive the west and especially the United States.

From a Russian perspective, Operation Allied Force (OAF) is a demonstration of western disregard for Russian interests as it was a unilateral air campaign that would violate international regulations, in a region where the Slavic “Serb Brothers” needed protection, correspondingly provoking ideas of Slavic union and Anti-americanism. (Perrier, 2014) Moreover, given the marginalisation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the conflict, Russia interpreted the situation as “an attack on its position as a permanent member of the Council and its right to veto. Not only did this crisis significantly modify the vision of the international relations system and the perception of immediate threat, but it reinforced the refusal of the Russian elite and society towards NATO expansion ”. (Perrier, 2014)

The following Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, drafted in 1999 and approved in 2000, would recognise external threat as a reality, reaffirm Russia’s right, not only to use nuclear weapons for the security of the country, but also to resort to external deployment of troops, highlight the destabilizing effect of the West (including circumvention of international institutions), and denounce foreign interference under the banner of a mission based on humanitarian concerns without the approval of the UNSC, where it can exercise its right to veto. (Sokov, 1999)

In essence, up until this point in the Yeltsin Years, security and geopolitics are at the top of the table in Russian Foreign Policy, as historically expected. However, this decade was a traumatic experience for the Russian people due to the fall of the USSR, and Yeltsin’s leadership (or the lack thereof) was ultimately not enough to bring a long lasting sense of stability for the future of the Federation. Additionally, a pragmatic approach to international affairs under the Primakov Doctrine did not equate to a sense of direction, and suggests a reactive stance to foreign affairs. Keeping in mind the historic link between foreign policy and the identity of the people, it should not come as a surprise that “prior to Putin's third term Russia was, arguably, an ideological vacuum, especially under Boris Yeltsin”. (Roberts, 2017)

Enter Putin

In order to understand Russia today it is important to understand what Putin signifies to the Russian people, as well as the context in which he, as a political figure, was brought up in.

The Yeltsin Years are generally described as a period of uncertainty, lack of direction and lack of identity in Russian Foreign Policy - a traumatic experience for the majority of Russians that lived through the Soviet Union that would make the most of its great power status in a politically romantic Cold War environment against the western opposition under the banner of the universality of the marxist dogma.

Putin signifies the return to normalcy and stability in orderly fashion. As explained by Bobo Lo (2003):

“To most Russians, tired of the turbulence of the post-Soviet decade, he represents the promise of a return to an idealized world of order and stability (...) for the first time in years there is hope that Russian foreign policy is moving out of the vicious cycle of stagnation and unpredictability that characterised its conduct under Yeltsin (...) Putin has sought to use power not just for its own sake, but to promote an ambitious domestic and foreign policy agenda”.

Under Putin, Russian international conduct still pays special attention to security concerns over most affairs. However, the strategic pillars of zero-sum mindset, balance of power and spheres of influence have been subjects of evolution.

Regarding the first, continuing the argument presented by Bobo Lo in 2003, while Yeltsin's approach was mostly reactive, Putin's stance is more complex and exhibits two courses of action. On the one hand, he showcases a positive approach to Russia's international affairs in the sense that the Federation only seeks what is best for the country, disregarding any sort of competition with the West for the sake of it. On the other hand, there is still an

underlying sense that competition remains possible, suggesting that it is a scenario to be considered throughout calculations of strategy. In other words, the zero-sum mindset is no longer as prominent as it used to be under the Soviet Union and the Yeltsin Years, but it is an influential factor nevertheless - it has become more ambiguous.

In relation to the notion of balance of power, the Yeltsin Administration struggled in an environment of a changing geopolitical landscape, ultimately settling for the motivation to counterbalance the United States under the Primakov Doctrine. In contrast, in order to avoid marginalisation in the international stage in the context of American political and strategic dominance, Putin refrained from the usage of balance of power concepts and “moved instead to embrace ideas of cooperative balance similar to those embodied in the Concert of great powers”. The Putin Administration would aim to diplomatically de-politicise its ways of conduct in the international stage and further emphasise wide reaching concerns such as international terrorism. As Bobo Lo argues:

“Such a makeover of security priorities, reflecting the switch from a principally adversarial to a cooperative mindset, has effectively invalidated the key premise underpinning the zero-sum mindset and traditional balance-of-power ideas - the existence of an enemy or enemies”

It is, nevertheless, important to keep in mind that themes such as the nuclear balance have remained a critical flashpoint in relations with the west, and that such a change in the geopolitical environment does not necessarily lead to a sense of acceptance and approval between the Federation and Western entities.

Regarding the topic of spheres of influence, Bobo Lo argues that the Kremlin has recognised that imperialist connotations have been fostered by Western eyes and has, just like in the case of the notion of balance of power, refrained from mentioning any directly related concept, characterising it as a “cold-blooded pragmatism”. By revising strategic expectations,

Putin set realistic and achievable goals, and adjusted Russia's influence by making the most of its strategic levers such as its role as an energy supplier in Eastern Europe and the FSU. In other words, Putin "reworked" Russia's perceived spheres of influence by making the most of its geostrategic capabilities.

Nationalism and Pragmatism

Contrary to popular belief among several pundits and commentators of international relations, Putin's restoration of order and orientation does not lead to the complete technicalization of Russian foreign policy and mindset. Realistically, a setting in which orientation in international affairs would be completely de-romanticised in a political way would be very unlikely to last the entirety of Putin's long lasting protagonism in Russian politics until today. The Russian mindset, as explored throughout this chapter, has always been partially motivated by identitarian - thus political - motivations. It would therefore be naively risky to subscribe to the popular idea that Russian Foreign Policy nowadays completely makes an instrument out of identitarian factors beyond its borders. While the protection of the Russian diaspora may be used for geopolitical motives, as events in Ukraine in 2014 would suggest, it would be somewhat shortsighted to assume that there is nothing more to be added into the equation. As globalisation has historically brought attention to international social connections and a growing relevance to politics of identity in the international stage, Putin's rhetoric with regards to the identity of the Russian people in international affairs, including Russian diaspora, must be analysed beyond the intuitive suspicion of the likelihood of its instrumentalisation for the protection of geopolitical interests.

Following a rise under the label of a pragmatic leader that Russia was in need of, as explained by Kari Roberts (2017):

“With Putin’s third term, the reconstruction of Russia’s past and its imagined destiny have surfaced in foreign policy thinking.

Putin’s ideational narrative - the story of Russian culture and experience that Putin, and Russian themselves, appear to have internalized, and that is now increasingly reflected in foreign policy - has evolved in tandem with the decline of Russia’s relations with the US, and what might be labelled a ‘heightened siege mentality’ among the Russian leadership. *Putinism*, if there is such a thing, is becoming more nationalistic in nature and reflects the feeling that Russia is under threat from a hostile West bent on undermining Russian interests.”

Thus, nationalism under Putin has been developing around the idea that Russian morals and cultural values should not only be protected, but also surge as an alternative to Western dominance. It is also important to understand that Putin recognises his ‘coservative’ label, even stating that: “the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state”. (Putin, 2014) For this reason, the influential figure in Russian strategic thinking, Alexander Dugin labels Putin as a “conservative who values statism”. (Roberts, 2017)

Accordingly, an argument can be made that Putin may signify an ideological return (albeit limited) to Russia prior to 1917, suggesting “continuity between the old and the new”, with a negative feeling towards the West as a consistent factor as NATO’s expansion seems to have contributed to Putin’s narrative and style of government, that are based on the Federation’s vulnerability. (Roberts, 2017) Such conservative nationalism is important because it has an effect on the Russian security principle of ‘defence of territorial integrity’. Bobo Lo (2003) argues that, in instances in which Russian interests were secondary in the situation at hand (such as the War in Kosovo in 1999), “the principle of territorial integrity was more rhetorical than real, something to be reiterated on appropriate occasions for its

perceived legitimizing effect”. By combining pragmatism and nationalism, territorial integrity under Putin remains important but it is not a priority, with the exception of domestic events such as the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). Focussing of foreign affairs, the author states that “the ‘threat’ is not so much to Russia’s territorial integrity as to its self-esteem” - territorial integrity is such a core principle that it has a real effect on social concepts of Russian culture.

In essence, looking at Russia’s historic internal discourse over its role on the international stage that is filled by recurring geopolitical grievances with the West in such a way that has been fundamental to the development of the Russian identity, along with the context of the fall of the USSR and the failed experiment of a rapprochement to Europe, it should not come as a surprise that Putin has been synonymous to, as argued by Roberts (2017):

“an emerging narrative that situates Russia as an alternative to Western dominance of the international system (...) if the West may interpret international law selectively to justify its interventions⁽¹⁴⁾; so can Russia. When Putin defends his actions in Ukraine or argues in favour of the need to protect eastern brethren from Western encroachment or a need to protect Russia’s neighbours from the presumption of Western hegemony or the dominance of Western values, he does so because this reflects his own constructions of Russia’s spheres of historical and cultural connection - a discourse that he has interpreted and disseminated. (...) Putin has artfully capitalized on the extant discontent felt towards the US, enabling him to resist the West’s liberal narrative”.

Under a combination of both conservatism and nationalism, Putin has restored a sense of direction in Russia, both inwards and outwards. Along such a train of thought Russian strategic culture can, today, be summarised in three different factors according to Rumer and Sokolsky (2020):

¹⁴ As referenced earlier, this notion is exacerbated by the Russian interpretation of the Kosovo War in 1999.

- “a long history of wars and adversarial relations with other European powers;
- an open geographic landscape that puts a premium on strategic depth; and
- an elite given to embracing a narrative of implacable western hostility toward Russia”

Contextualizing the mindset of Russian strategic thinkers, the authors argue that their policy has deep roots within the country’s experiences with “expansionism and insecurity”, and that it is also important to understand that Russia, the US and its NATO allies “have a shared interest in avoiding worst-case scenarios”. In contrast to the USSR, Russia’s strategic depth is more limited as the dissolution of the Union and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact has been geopolitically accompanied by NATO enlargement that has deployed troops in the Baltic states - despite heavy investment in its security apparatus, part of the Russian industrial core is still very vulnerable to NATO’s presence.

Be that as it may, as stated by Rumer and Sokolsky (2020):

“Within the context of its strategic culture, Russia today is worse off than it was during the Cold War. For its national security establishment, the expansion of NATO, the transformation of its periphery into a belt of states that are hostile to or threatened by it, the EU and U.S. sanction intended to choke off its economic development and technological progress, and the constant criticism of its domestic political arrangements amount to the return of its Cold War predicament, but only worse. The thirty years since the Cold War have seen Russia’s gains as a result of World War II almost completely reversed.

Such analysis suggests that even though Putin is synonymous to the return of order and stability in Russia, progress is hard to measure. The decrease of its GDP ever since western sanctions due to the events in Ukraine in 2014 further fuel the notion that geopolitical considerations are strongly placed at the top of the ladder of priorities in such a way that may come at the expense of the country’s quality of life. Keeping in mind that Russia is,

geographically, the largest country on earth and that its easternmost cities serve a fundamental strategic purpose, great infrastructural challenges have been taken upon by the State in order to maintain authority over the vast territory. This begs the question as to whether the country's security-heavy mindset is best adequate to broad development within the territory. However, Putin has signalled that he has made his decision with regards to keeping Russian strategic thinking under the primacy of security concerns when intervening in the Georgian War of 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014.

Russian Foreign Policy is now set within the three factors presented by Rumer and Sokolsky, as the fostering of relations with Eurasian entities that go beyond the FSU as well as beyond a western sphere of influence, such as the People's Republic of China and Iran certainly serve as an example. Meanwhile, Russia (under Putin) cooperates with the West when it has to in an effort to avoid worst-case scenarios, meaning that, albeit politically distant, Putin understands that a complete break with Western entities is not feasible in the foreseeable future (and it may not be desirable to the Russian population for economic reasons). Confrontation with the United States has been renewed, in essence, as a sentiment and a Eurasianist view of the Russian identity is ever present in its Foreign Policy. (Perrier, 2014)

A degree of continuity from the Soviet era is visible in Russian strategic thinking, as core strategic concerns remain virtually the same: while the perpetual protection of the territory calls for strategic depth, enmity towards the West results into an identitarian orientation. When questioning whether Russia is prepared to the 21st century, Perrier stated that:

“Despite its supposed rationality, strategic thinking continues to be dominated by the legacy of the past, which means a return to the Soviet beliefs in the confrontation of the two civilizations, the hunt for the enemies and the anti-American rhetoric that guaranteed the internal stability of the regime. Even if so-called liberal opinions are starting to be heard,

Russian strategy is dominated by conservatism, the Eurasian concept and idea that reclaiming former glory is essential.”

Similarities and Differences

From Resemblance...

After tracing the formation of both countries’ general geopolitical mindsets, a clearer image of their relationship can begin to surface as one intends to understand its complexity. Furthermore, several conclusions can be made with regards to how Ankara and Moscow compare to each other. As expected from two countries whose locations result in longstanding interaction, and that not only carry imperial legacies but are also sharing historic episodes, Russia and Turkey can find both similarities and differences from one another.

On the one hand, as explained by Stanislav Secriberu, Dimitar Bechev and Sinikukka Saari in their recent paper for the European Union for Security Studies (EUISS), namely *Fire and Ice: The Russian-Turkish Partnership* (2021), they resemble each other with regards to their political systems, the methods of economic governance, their foreign policy narratives and their geopolitical (self)perceptions.

Regarding the first, decision-making authority can only be exercised by a selected handful of rulers. Both regimes make the most of loyalty-based informal networks, setting institutional channels aside. Moreover, civil society and the media have been weakened or made irrelevant in the political sphere.

Economically, the authors argue that resources such as subsidies or public contracts are “allocated on the basis of proximity to the leader and the party in power, rather than in an open bidding system”, making way for corruption and clientelism.

Focussing on foreign policy, both countries’ usage of an anti-western nationalistic narrative will ultimately serve the domestic purpose of cultivating support. Both Putin and Erdoğan have, by the means of state propaganda and e media control, have developed an

image of “father figures” that can safeguard aspirations of a better quality of life and a more deserving international status.

Regarding the latter, and related to the previous argument, both Ankara and Moscow perceive themselves as “sovereign centres of gravity in international affairs”. Additionally, such discourse is directly related to their positions regarding the West in the sense that a quest for greater strategic autonomy has become the ultimate grand strategy goal, consequently placing western entities as a threat. For this reason, warmer relations to other eurasian powers are welcomed, much like the lights of China.

Moreover, both countries see the value in presenting themselves as bridges from Europe to Asia as a “desire to wield influence in multiple regional theatres” is undeniable. Thereupon “both seek a privileged role in the post-imperial space and in parallel pursue an activist foreign policy in more distant regions too”. On that note, infrastructure projects along the Europe-Asia axis are to be advertised and supported, in a way that will sustain a thriving trade network.

Plus, Russia and Turkey also view themselves as rising powers in the international stage and “see their increasing status as an affirmation of an emerging multipolar world in which the west is declining while ‘the rest’ are rising”.

Further fueling their claims to great power status, both countries affirm to be civilisational poles of singular history and culture, ultimately blending history and religion in their foreign policy behaviour. Complementing such conduct, the usage of coercive tools is to be expected from Ankara and Moscow as both have been expanding geographically through military bases and deployment of armed forces, as well as through participation in local proxies and hiring militant groups. Moreover, both countries resorted to digital resources such as cyber warriors.

It is also important to keep in mind that foreign policy decisions are deeply personalised in both countries, demonstrating how prevalent is the relationship between President Putin and President Erdoğan. Besides, as argued by the authors, “successes abroad help sustain the charismatic legitimacy of both leaders at home” - such an argument must be kept in mind when interpreting events in Georgia 2008 or Ukraine 2014 by Russia, or the fact that Turkey’s decisions in Syria place the fight against the PKK as a main concern. On that note, coincidentally or not, elites in both Ankara and Moscow subscribe to the notion of *realpolitik*¹⁵ and balance of power as a pillar in the international stage, meaning that an assertive diplomacy is to be expected, as well as “tit-for-tat” tactics¹⁶ and divide and rule strategies.

...To Dissimilarity

On the other hand, the authors also clarify that their differences share equal weight as the similarities exposed above. Differences regarding political dynamics (both domestic and international), the economic realm, national ideologies, foreign policies and relations to the West and China are just as influential as what makes both countries resemble each other in such a way that demonstrates the complex nature of Russo-Turkish relations.

It is noticeable that the democratic camp in Turkey has a bigger presence in comparison to their Russian counterparts. The democratic experience in Russia lasted, at most, for about a decade from reforms such as *perestroika* and *glasnost* and were ultimately reversed by a feeling of resentment due to its failure. Meanwhile, Turkey’s democratic legacy lives on despite the rise of the AKP and influences internal political dynamics.

¹⁵ In simple terms, as defined by Merriam-Webster (2021), *realpolitik* revolves around the idea of “politics based on practical and material factors rather than on theoretical or ethical objectives”.

Source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/realpolitik>.

¹⁶ Tit-for-tat is a common synonym for ‘equivalent retaliation’.

Another difference stems from “the role of the executive and the balance between it and other branches of power”. The authors explain that Putin rose from a model in which the Kremlin would mediate different power lobbies by being able to remove competition such as other oligarchs. As such, Russian politics have been dominated by the authority of the President ever since the 1990’s. On the Turkish side of things, such a transition to a personality dominated style of governance was only put to practice in the mid-2010’s as Erdoğan would leave his Prime-Minister office in order to become the President and later alter the constitution. Turkey’s current authoritarian political framework under Erdoğan is not as set in stone as it is in Russia under Putin. For this reason, as stated by the authors, “Turkey is therefore a competitive authoritarian regime, while Russia can be described as a consolidated autocracy”.

Ankara and Moscow also differ in the economic realm. While Turkey’s economy is largely focused on exporting industrial goods and services while fostering domestic consumption and public investment, Russia’s economy is more directed towards exporting natural resources. Additionally, as State companies make the most of the Russian economy, small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) is the main agent behind Turkey’s economic muscle. It is therefore important to understand that, on the one hand, Turkey is more vulnerable to external shock and oscillation from foreign investment due to the fact that it is closer to experiencing a free market economy. On the other hand, Russia presents a more closed and stable economy.

Regarding the countries’ national ideologies it is important to clarify that Russian nationalism is highly focused on the State, due to the large presence of both traditionally non-Russian communities and followers of Islam, to the detriment of an ethnonational Russian identity. By contrast, Turkishness is highly defined by ethnolinguistic and

identitarian terms, as the Republic was “conceived and constructed as an insular national state, surrounded by hostile neighbours”.

In relation to foreign policy, while both countries share a feeling of mistrust from western entities, there are structural differences pointed out by the authors. As argued:

“In the foreign policy realm, Ankara and Moscow regard themselves as sovereign centres of gravity in international affairs but for different reasons. Russia’s claims to such status are underpinned by the vastness of the territory it controls, the extensive natural resources it contains, the size of its population, veto power in the UN Security Council, and nuclear arsenal. For Turkey the status derives from the country’s geostrategic position between Europe and Asia, growing population, economic and military prowess as well as membership in exclusive international forums (G20). Thus, Russia’s self-perception and ambitions are much more global in nature than those of Turkey”.

While resentment towards the West may serve as a unifying factor, these elemental foreign policy differences suggest that it is so circumstantially, as both countries are still expected to work to achieve their own, sometimes divergent, foreign policy objectives as their main priority.

What Moscow and Ankara gain from their alliances is a difference of great importance as they differ in nature while maintaining significant importance in their respective diplomatic toolkits. From the Kremlin’s perspective, alliances should serve Russian interests and its great power status. In other words, the Federation’s alliances have been asymmetric in its favour in a way that allows for a regional expansion of its influence and ultimately avoiding diplomatic isolation. Under other conditions, Turkey depends on Atlantic security assurances despite its strong influence within NATO and the EU presents itself, by some distance, as its biggest trading partner. (European Commission, 2021) As such, the authors argue that Turkey finds itself in a situation in which it struggles to find a balance between its great power aspirations of strategic autonomy and crucial linkages to its Western allies.

Another difference can be found in the domestic influence of western entities. Turkey has interacted more closely with the United States through its role in NATO, in addition to its connection to the European Union via the Customs Union of 1995. Reforms were practiced in the context of aspiration talks into a role in the EU meaning that, despite the stalemate in such dialogue, the Union plays a significant role with regards to trade and foreign investment in the Turkish economy, ultimately exercising some influence, as indirect as it may be, over the country's politics. Diversely, Russian eyes perceive NATO as a vital enemy while a trading relationship with the EU can be objectified as "less sophisticated" in comparison to Turkey. While the Russian economy is not as vulnerable to European market volatility as the Turkish economy, a constructive military relation to the West via NATO is not on the table - any sort of Western geopolitical leverage over Russia is much more limited than in Turkey.

Moreover, given that both countries perceive themselves as representatives of eurasian politics on the international stage, differences in relations with the People's Republic of China are also worth being looked into. Putting it simply, the authors clarify that, given the long sino-russian border, relations between both powers are more advanced in comparison to the sino-turkish axis despite a recent ever growing trade boom between Ankara and Beijing.

Russia and Turkey: commonalities and differences

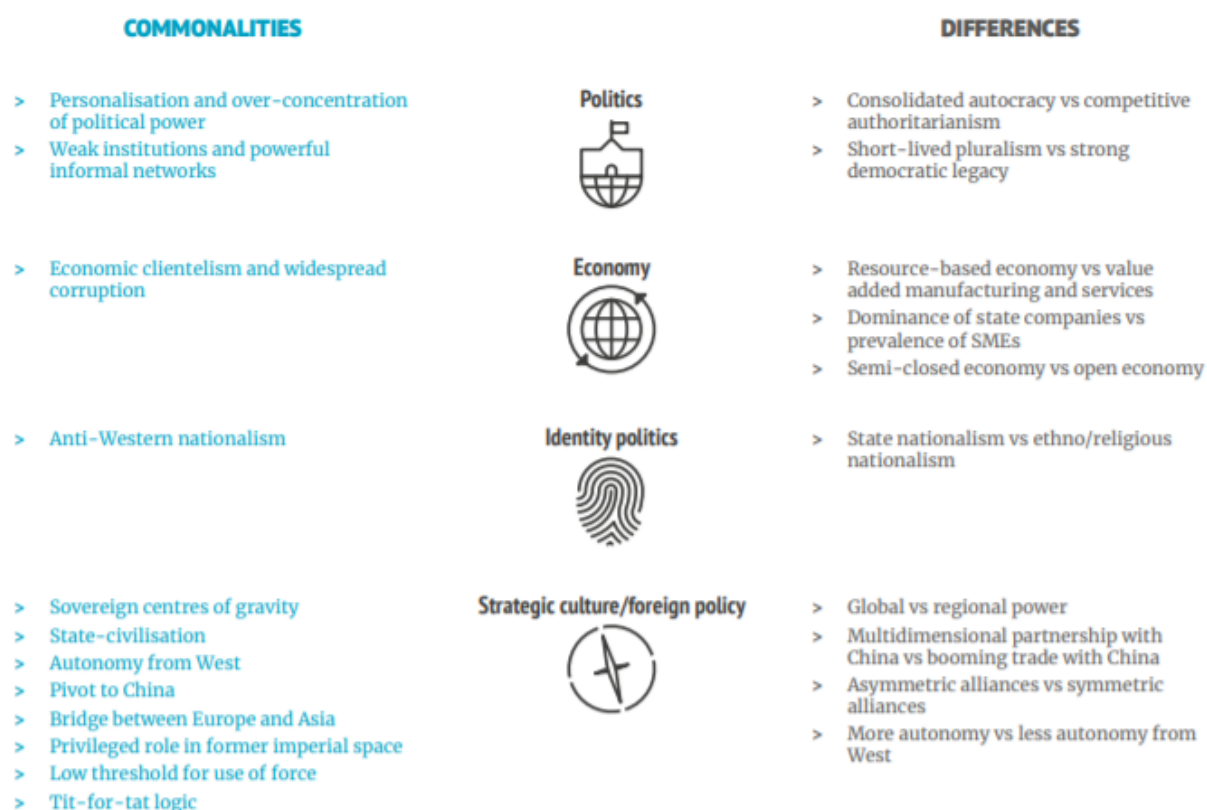


Figure 12: Russia and Turkey: commonalities and differences.

Source: EUISS, 2021

As clarified by Figure 12, Russia and Turkey present several shared elements and several points of divergence in their own profile. From their political lives, the structure of their economies, their identities and their strategic culture and mindsets, such characteristics can both foster cooperation and competition, being therefore the key to understanding their complex relation as well as their actions with regards to one another.

Between Cooperation and Conflict

Having analysed the differences and similarities between Ankara and Moscow, the authors further reflect on how those points of convergence and divergence generate incentives for both collaboration and competition.

Pulling Closer...

They note that, unsurprisingly, some of the exposed similarities ultimately contribute to cooperation between both countries. Given that both powers' leaderships are, domestically, not as constrained as their liberal counterparts in their pursuit of foreign policy objectives, bilateral agreements are easier to negotiate due to an enhanced sense of credibility from one another. Additionally, such concentration of decision-making actors also result in faster decision-making at home in such a way that fosters cooperation, as both powers "have been playing 'speed chess' (acting before several other powers) in the Middle East and North Africa and the South Caucasus (...) despite divergent regional interests".

Another incentive to cooperation stems from the common appointment of external enemies as a method to foster domestic legitimacy. The authors claim that:

"Because the target of such scapegoating is often the West, their messaging reinforces each other's narratives (e.g., accusations of Western interference in domestic affairs). More than that, the perception that the West represents a danger for the respective domestic regimes fosters a climate of 'authoritarian concord' between Moscow and Ankara, which not only ensures certain similarities in discourse but also reinforces solidarity in action".

For this reason, one can therefore argue that a natural motivating factor for deeper Russo-Turkish relations has been not only the resurgence of several outer-western

international agents, but mainly the end of American unipolarity and the international consensus of the geopolitical decline of the West.

Moreover, the fact that both countries have been pursuing foreign policy objectives by militarized means, “accompanied by a transactional approach” has also fostered collaboration in several common strategic scenarios. In other words, given the similarity of tactics used (such as the use of force and tit-for-tat tactics), an underlying sense of mutual understanding has allowed for a framework of cooperation in regional flashpoints like the Middle East, North Africa and the South Caucasus.

Nevertheless, cooperation can also be fostered by differences. For example, while Putin’s domestic position is a strong example of political security, Erdoğan’s domestic environment is a much more competitive one. With an eye for opportunity, such a difference has contributed to better bilateral relations, given Putin’s assistance to the Turkish leader in the events of the military coup d’etat of 2016, for example. As such an event took place in the aftermath of the fighter jet crisis of 2015, Russian assistance was decisive in Turkey’s perception of its neighbours and allies, mainly its American counterparts.

Likewise, the contrasting characteristics of each other's economies have also contributed to deeper ties. The authors explain that:

“This disparity has meant that they are not locked in a competitive relationship in the economic arena and has driven expansion of trade exchanges. Russia provides wheat and energy resources to Turkey, while Turkey in return exports fruit, vegetables, industrial goods and services to Russia. Trade with Turkey has been favourable for Russian state-owned companies, which dominate economic activities in Russia. Trade with Russia has been beneficial for big enterprises in Turkey, but also SMEs (e.g. the hospitality industry)”.

Thus, given their divergence, Moscow and Ankara complement each other’s economic needs, becoming mutually important trading partners over the years.

In traditional geopolitical terms, while Russia and Turkey perceive themselves as deserving of great power status, a certain degree of asymmetry is noticeable between the two as Ankara is not leveled to Moscow in various aspects. Such disparity is, nevertheless, favourable to cooperation as, on the one hand, it falls into what Russia has deemed as necessary for an alliance, ultimately feeling more comfortable when dealing with its Turkish counterpart as the Republic is not perceived as threatening as the West. On the other hand, the authors also argue that cooperation with Russia in such terms, from a Turkish point of view, is a positive one by serving as a stepping stone towards great power status, and as proof that Turkey is a “power center in itself”.

Additionally, Turkey’s role in NATO also fosters cooperation, as counter intuitive as it may sound. In this context, Russia understands Turkey’s volatility and that it has been gradually pivoting towards Eurasia under Erdoğan’s leadership. Moscow understands Ankara’s pursuit of strategic autonomy and has acted accordingly in order to damage the Atlantic Alliance. Meanwhile, the authors also state that Turkey has been building a specific role within NATO that stems from its ability to dialogue with Moscow in constructive fashion while it may also manage Russian advances in common strategic regions (such as the Black Sea) “where allies were reluctant to commit or have been dislodged by Moscow”.

...And Falling Apart

Likewise, both similarities and differences can also be at the root of competition. In this case the authors rightfully highlight a dual dynamic in the sense that several of these conflict-binding commonalities and discrepancies are the same that foster cooperation.

With regards to their fast decision-making, despite being able to outmanoeuvre other powers, such ability has occasionally led to the incitement of tensions as both Moscow and Ankara aim to be one step ahead of each other. An example can be presented by the events in

2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Turkey's decisive participation ultimately led to a Russian attack on Ankara's allies in Syria. (TRT World, 2020)

By placing the West as an external enemy for several reasons, the Russo-Turkish relationship has certainly gotten warmer over the years. However, the usage of such a narrative makes it possible for both countries to apply it against one another, as part of the Kremlin's response to the fighter jet crisis in 2015 focussed on building a narrative presenting Turkey as a public enemy, for example.

Both eurasian powers seek to represent a bridge from Europe to Asia and, on that note, while one can argue that there are incentives for cooperation, one can also argue that any sort of confrontation may also take place. Both countries compete in the field of transportation industry, especially in order to benefit from the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moreover, in the energy field both countries are able to serve each other's interests, yet their motives are not only divergent but ultimately contrasting. TurkStream allows Russia to bypass Ukraine when transporting resources to the European market while it contributes to Turkey's economy and its energy security, generating a geopolitical leverage over the Republic. However, Ankara's ultimate goal is to become an energy hub in the region, meaning that it is also willing to build projects that weaken Russia's dominant position in the energy sector, such as the Southern Gas Corridor that delivers Caspian gas to Europe, bypassing Russia (figure 13).

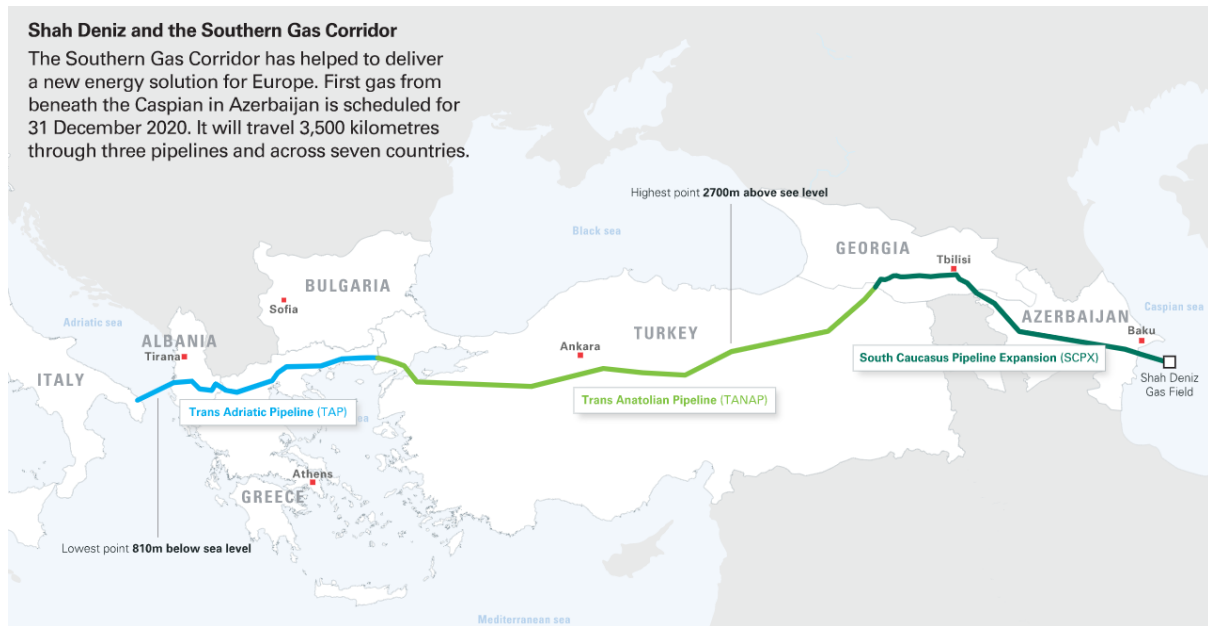


Figure 13: The Southern Gas Corridor.

Source: The British Petroleum Company (BP), 2020

Therefore, as the authors argue, “this bridge-like logic only reconfirms the hybrid nature of the Russian-Turkish partnership, where both sides work together but also engage in acute competition”.

Another incentive to bilateral competition takes place in the foreign policy realm as both powers claim their civilisational dimensions. The authors note that civilisational borders are anything but static and often overlap. In this case, such overlay takes place in common neighbourhoods, raising a sense of mutual suspicion that may be strong enough to strain relations as both civilisational poles aim to advance regional ambitions. The coordination between each other’s leaderships (the Putin-Erdoğan axis) has been the main factor in avoiding escalation in this context, raising several questions for the long term future of Russia-Turkey relations.

Differences that motivate competition are also visible and should not be unexplored.

Erdoğan’s political vulnerability when compared to Putin’s domestic security has certainly contributed to disagreements as different interpretations and motivations are more

likely. The authors demonstrate that internal Turkish dynamics can influence how Erdoğan interprets certain Russian regional moves such as the advancement into Idlib, Syria. An anti-refugee sentiment and the practical need to avoid a new wave of refugees signify that such a region is a lot more impactful in Turkey than in Russia, ultimately becoming more than a foreign policy issue for the Republic - one that can weaken Erdoğan's position at home.

An additional conflict-motivating difference comes from the economic side of things. As stated:

“Turkey is represented on the Russian market by a variety of commercial actors, big businesses as well as SMEs, while it is mostly big state-run Russian companies that operate in Turkey. Moreover, Turkey cannot quickly replace the main items it imports from Russia (pipeline gas), while Russia can dispense with or relatively swiftly replace Turkish imports (foodstuffs, electrical appliances, tourism services). This economic algorithm has strengthened the power asymmetry between the two, placing Russia in a stronger position”.

Needless to say that such a situation can be significantly detrimental to Turkey's long term objective of strategic autonomy. As such, not only are Turkey's economic linkages with the European Union evermore important but Turkey is also expected to “seek a way out of economic warfare” - another context in which the Southern Gas Corridor must be interpreted into.

Last but certainly not least, it is important to understand that the different versions of nationalism have not been a good example of coexistence, fostering tensions and lack of trust. In the immediate post-Cold War period Russia would see Turkey advance its pan-Turkish narrative along Central Asia while grabbing the attention of muslim communities in the North Caucasus and Volga regions. Despite the fact that, at the end of the 1990's, Turkey's international efforts would not be satisfied as intended, the re-emergence of political islam in Turkey is a motive for the Russian leadership to keep its eyes peeled.

Political Economy

Throughout this chapter there has been a great deal of references to the economic dynamics between Russia and Turkey in the grand scheme of things. Nevertheless, such an area deserves its own focus due to how influential and revealing it is to the topic at hand.

As pointed out by Evren Balta (2019):

“In the 1990s, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, trade once again increased as the Russian economy experienced liberalization and capitalist restructuring. Turkey too went through a substantial economic restructuring in the 1990s, which liberalized the economy and increased overall trade figures. The percentage of trade with Russia doubled from 4.1% in 1990 to 8.3% in 1994, even though there were occasional fluctuations.(...)”

The major increase in trade began in the early 2000s, parallel to the political developments. (...) Trade volumes increased six-fold in just five years from \$5 billion in 2002 to \$37.7 billion in 2007. By 2015, Russia became Turkey’s third largest trading partner in imports (the first two being China and Germany) and eleventh largest in exports (the first two being Germany and the UK). Growing trade and deepening economic relations led to the mutual lifting of visa requirements in 2011, consideration of the use of national currencies in bilateral trade, and the formation of a joint investment bank to boost economic cooperation. These developments, however, took place in the context of a huge trade imbalance in favor of Russia, making Turkey’s economy asymmetrically dependent on Russia. The trade deficit was also a consequence of the nature of the bilateral trade relations, in which Turkey’s gas and oil imports constituted a major portion of overall volume”.

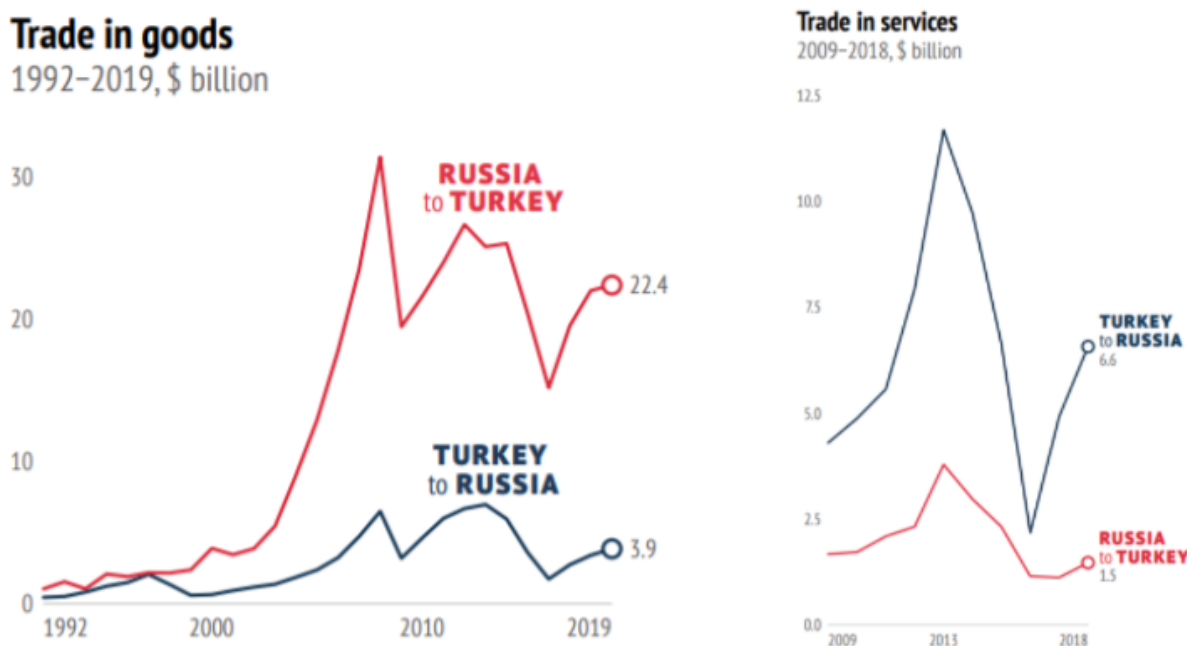


Figure 14: Russia-Turkey trade in goods (1992-2019) and services (2009-2018).

Source: World Bank, via EUISS, 2021.

Thus, generally speaking, economic relations between Russia and Turkey have been increasingly consolidated ever since the end of the Cold War and especially throughout the decade of 2000. However, despite their interdependence (previously explained through how reciprocal both economies are to each other), this is an asymmetric relation. As they are complementary, both economies are not equal and, despite the historic intensification of trade, the fighter jet crisis in 2015 has demonstrated how dependent Turkey's economy is to Russia, as "Turkey lost at least \$10 billion, amounting to over 1 per cent of its gross domestic product" due to Russian sanctions. (International Crisis Group, 2018). Nevertheless, in 2019, as clarified by Martin Russell (2021):

"With bilateral trade totalling €23 billion, Russia was Turkey's second biggest trading partner after the EU, while for Russia, Turkey came in fifth place. Russia exports hydrocarbons and metals to Turkey, while for Turkey, Russia is an important export market for textiles, leather goods and agrifood products".

It is also important to understand Russo-Turkish energy ties. Most importantly, Russia stands as Turkey's main energy supplier despite the fact that its share has fallen in recent years, mainly due to the establishment of the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) that allows Turkey to import Caspian (mainly Azeri) energy resources. (Russell, 2021) On the other side of the coin, as previously referred, Turkey is a major export market for Russian oil and Gas, as well as an important transit country for said resources towards European markets. Nevertheless, fossil fuels do not equal the totality of energy ties between the two, as the Russian State nuclear company Rosatom labels the construction of a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, Turkey, as "the biggest project in the history of Russia-Turkey relations". (Rosatom, 2021)

Be that as it may, there is a lot more to be said about such an economic relationship, especially given the geopolitical context both countries, and their neighbours, find themselves in.

On that note, in order to help understand Russia-Turkey economic relations, Stanislav Secieru (2021) focuses on the interplay of three parallel economic processes such as: *thickening, empowering and leveraging*.

Regarding the first, the author brings our attention to the fact that economic agreements in several fields such as energy, arms trade and services, has intensified and persisted despite being "disrupted at intervals by economic and political crises - as well as by the Covid-19 epidemic of 2020 - 2021". Such process is due to the following reasons:

- The perception both countries had of one another as security actors has changed to a more amicable one;

- Several infrastructure projects have been completed¹⁷ and encouraged both countries to invest further in new deals;
- A positive performance from both economies in the 1990s has excited demand for goods and services;
- The referred complementarity of both economies as, “while Russia is by far the side which benefits the most from bilateral trade in goods, Turkey is able to partially compensate by a larger volume of exports of services to Russia”.

In essence, the author claims that a winning formula was achieved for those involved following the post-Cold War period. Consequently, the economic partnership became “an issue of high politics”, especially as the leading elites have increasingly pushed for an “economic multipolar order”.

Building on the increase in numbers from the process of *thickening*, Secrieru moves onto the process of *empowering* which is demonstrated by the power and influence both partners have gained from these economic ties, given the “multidomain empowerment, which transcends the economic field and spreads into the political, military and diplomatic realms”.

On the one hand, Turkey’s gains follow as such according to the author:

- Russia has fueled the growth of the Turkish economy through its extensive export of energy resources, simultaneously contributing to Turkey’s energy security (despite solidifying Russia’s energy role);
- The Russian market has been the main destination for Turkish agricultural products, becoming a great source of revenue for Turkey in recent years, accommodating the Turkish government with more economic resources. Meanwhile, Russian wheat has

¹⁷ Several construction projects in Russia, for example, from Turkish companies are an important source of revenue for the Turkish economy. For more information: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/2019/02/06/russia-top-market-again-for-turkeys-overseas-contracting-services>.

been instrumental to the production and export of Turkish wheat-based products. In other words, “Trade in agro products has been a chief source of profits”;

- The export of construction services as well as tourism to Russia have also been great sources of revenue for Turkey;
- Cooperation in the energy field has kept afloat the boat of Turkish ambitions to use energy as a geopolitical lever, especially given that its location allows the Republic to present itself as a regional transit country not only for Russia, but for all its neighbours as well;
- Certain benefits also stem from interstate arms deals. Acquiring Russian weapons helps Turkey cover capability gaps, preserve its own arms export deals and invigorate relations with allies by diplomatically demonstrating that an alternative supplier is a constant option;
- Cooperation can also be translated into domestic benefits for Erdoğan as major bilateral projects have been defined as successful achievements in his foreign policy, therefore boosting legitimacy. Moreover, through cooperation with Russia, benefits for Erdoğan spread from the top down into Turkish stakeholders, from the President’s entourage into society itself via tourism and employment given the major projects.

On the other hand, Russia has also benefited greatly as:

- While economic engagement has resulted into several sources of revenue for Turkey, the same effect is noticeable in Moscow due to its multifaceted increase in exports, including agricultural products¹⁸ and minerals, for example;
- Gas trade between the two has provided Russia with a major geopolitical advantage over Turkey as the gas market is still majorly dictated by the usage of pipelines and

¹⁸ It is noticeable that, in 2020, Turkey was the main market for Russian agricultural products after China and the European Union. (Wegren, 2021)

long-term contracts. On that note, cooperation with Turkey allows Russia to avoid over reliance on Ukraine to reach European markets via the Turkstream pipeline, which also makes it possible for an entry point into the Balkans. Additionally, Rosatom's presence in Turkey also showcases Russian technology abroad and increases its nuclear position in the export market;

- Engagement in the military-technical field is accompanied by a blend of commercial and geopolitical motives. Despite not being at the top of the list of Russia's biggest arms clients, Turkey is still a welcomed addition given the fact that weapons trade is an important source of revenue for the Russian defense industry. Meanwhile, regarding the geopolitical side of things, arms trade between the two countries places Russia in direct competition against Turkey's NATO allies. Russia, in essence, has been filling the voids resulting from difficult internal negotiations in the alliance's defense industry, ultimately damaging internal cohesion¹⁹. On top of that, deals regarding weapons exchange naturally contribute to long-term producer and client relations, thus contributing to Russia's geopolitical advantages over Turkey.

The author then claims that "Focusing on the 'thickening' and 'empowering' dimension may paint an over-idyllic picture of Russian-Turkish economic relations however. These, in actual fact, have been far from rosy". The process of '*leveraging*' follows from the notion that there are downsides to '*empowering*' as, due to the dynamics of the relationship at hand, Russia is less incentivised to conduct reforms and diversify its economy, while Ankara grows evermore dependent on Moscow. As such, through episodes of economic warfare, *leveraging* focuses on the economic competition between the two and its impact in overall relations.

¹⁹ Not only was a deal reached for Russia to sell the S-400 missile system to Turkey in the aftermath of the failed coup d'état in 2016 that signifies the deterioration of USA-Turkey relations, but Russia also offered SU-35 and SU-57 fighter jets as an alternative to the American F-35 fighter jet programme. (Secieru, 2021)

In the wake of the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, exports delivered by Turkish trucks were being deliberately delayed at Russian customs posts, ultimately reaching the potential cost of \$3 billion to Ankara. On that note, Ankara “perceived that Moscow was exerting pressure on them to suspend the access of US ships heading to Georgia from passing through the (Turkish) straits”, Secrieru notes. Turkey responded by the same token as it introduced extensive customs checks for products imported from Russia. Despite the fast diplomatic resolution to the issue as Erdoğan would visit Moscow and accommodate Russian interests, the author states that the incident demonstrates the ever-present reality of geopolitical issues between the two.

Another incident, and a more recent one, to take into account is originated by the downing of the Russian Su-24 fighter jet by the Turkish air force around the Syrian Turkish border in 2015 - this episode endures as a more “disruptive, protracted, and costly than in 2008”. In retaliation, Moscow would impose hard hitting economic sanctions on Turkey as well as restrictive measures such as “intimidation tactics” to make any operation of Turkish business in Russia more challenging. As one might expect, Russian sanctions targeted important products in Turkey’s exports (mainly the agricultural industry), in addition to the price and the delivery of its natural gas, as well as construction projects. Fundamentally, the incident showcases that “Turkey had fewer tools than Russia at its disposal to conduct a tit-for-tat response”. Anyhow, Turkey would still attempt to even the score by detaining Russian ships, suspend ferry traffic with Crimea and file tax claims against selected Russian banks in Turkey.

As economic warfare drastically reduced economic exchanges between the two, Erdoğan (being by far the most affected) would publicly apologise and take the initiative to solve the situation resulting in both countries lifting the majority of restrictions. Be that as it may, economic relations are yet to be fully restored and economic disputes still take place,

such as the Turkish removal of Russian wheat from the tax-free imports list as Russia would not immediately lift the ban on Turkish tomatoes. Additionally, not only have Russian banks sold their assets in Turkey and retreated from the Turkish market, but energy ties have also been affected. Turkey's efforts to diversify its energy security have intensified ever since, demonstrated by the increasing investment in Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) import infrastructure and increasing imports from Azerbaijani gas (figure 15).

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Algeria	8%	9%	8%	9%	13%	12%
Azerbaijan	13%	14%	12%	15%	21%	25%
Iran	16%	17%	17%	16%	17%	11%
Nigeria	3%	3%	4%	4%	5%	4%
Other	1%	2%	3%	2%	2%	3%
Qatar	4%	2%	3%	6%	5%	8%
Russia	55%	53%	52%	47%	34%	32%
USA	0%	1%	1%	1%	3%	6%

** 2020 covers 11 months*

Figure 15: Shares of Turkey's gas import source.

Source: Energy Exchange Istanbul (EXIST/EPIAS), 2021

The episodes presented by the author demonstrate the link between economic affairs and geopolitical ones - a dynamic that goes hand in hand with the personalised foreign policy rule of two nations whose strategic cultures are filled by geostrategic aspirations. In this context, Secieru (2021) adds that:

“Economic statecraft has been one of the factors which impeded the thickening of Russian-Turkish economic relations in the 2010s. Looking forward, it has the potential to have long-term repercussions for relations in the coming decade”.

Substantially, as further argued by Secieru, there are lessons to be learnt from these episodes. Firstly, it is important to notice that despite declaring (in the wake of the integration of Crimea in 2014) that economic sanctions are inefficient, Russia applied strong sanctions to

Turkey that showcase the contrary. Secondly, the effect of the sanctions is proportional to their intensity as well as efforts of the sender state to damage its affected counterpart. Last but not least, a third lesson is the idea that “Russia perceives interdependence not as a tool to mitigate political or military conflicts, but as a means allowing it to prevail in such conflicts and thus dictate its terms”.

Accordingly, Secrieru’s argument suggests that modern Turkey currently fits the required elements of Russia’s allies. As showcased earlier, Moscow feels the need to have the upper hand over its allies for every scenario possible. Therefore, one can argue that the asymmetric economic interdependence in Russia-Turkey relations is a necessary factor for the constructive dialogue between the two. However, Turkey is not a common Russian ally due to its location, history and aspirations. The same way Ankara is able to use Russia as an alternative to the West, it can also use the West as an alternative to Russia - its location, history and domestic competition allows Erdoğan to shift directions accordingly to the circumstance. Russia is an important trading partner for Turkey, but the EU is an ever bigger one. Also, while Turkey is important to Russia’s vital security concerns given the Montreux Convention in 1936, it is also important for Europe’s future, especially due to humanitarian concerns over refugees and migrants.

There are several layers to this relationship, meaning that high diplomatic coordination is necessary for stability in the region.

The Putin-Erdoğan axis

Throughout the entirety of this chapter a significantly relevant factor that has been underlying the various dynamics presented has been the relationship between the leaders in both Moscow and Ankara. A look into said relationship must be presented when discussing Russo-Turkish ties as cooperation between both countries require a delicate diplomatic

balance given its pendulum swing between amity and enmity, especially as one considers the personalized culture of both countries' foreign policies.

The Economist (2021) describes the personal relationship between both leaders as a “brotherhood of hard power”. Moreover, Robert Hamilton and Ana Mikulska (2021) argue that:

“In the diplomatic and political sphere, there is a high level of congruence and personal trust between Putin and Erdogan, both of whom are authoritarian populists who see Western promotion of liberal democracy as a major threat to their hold on power. Both men lead political regimes focused on security and the preservation of their nations’ sovereignty, which they see as permanently under threat from the West. (...) Whether the convergence at the levels of individual leader and political regime can create enough stability to allow Russia and Turkey to successfully manage their differences at the geopolitical level remains to be seen. So far, they have managed to do so, and the personal trust between similar men who lead similar regimes has been a major reason”.

How Putin sees Turkey, how Erdoğan sees Russia, and what can both expect from each other is at the centre of such brotherhood. Their connection suggests that both understand each other’s aspirations and where they fit in each other’s plans. While Putin sees the value in Turkey in several geopolitical contexts (especially competition with NATO) and describes Erdoğan as a “someone he could do business with”, the Turkish President recognises the lack of risk in the followthrough of a deal with Russia, in comparison to its american counterparts as a deal must be agreed upon by the Senate. Moreover, in the context of declining relations with the West, Erdoğan has increasingly realized how valuable hard power can be, as a lesson learnt from Crimea 2014 would be that “aggression is not always punished”. (The Economist, 2021) Both autocrats share imperialistic reminiscence and have been ostracized from Europe.

Cooperation between the two is, at this point in time, a historical fact ever since the fighter jet crisis that is key to understanding how both powers have behaved in recent years, not only with each other, but in the bigger picture. The fact that both leaders get along in their way of conducting affairs has been the main enabling factor to blossoming Russian-Turkish ties, despite every geopolitically structural challenge between them.

In Syria, despite Russia's dominant position, cooperation has been a decisive factor but both leaders do not see eye to eye for the best outcome for President Assad. In Nagorno-Karabakh, despite the recent cease-fire that placed Turkey, in practical terms, as a victor on the negotiating table in 2020 Russia only managed to make the best out of an undesirable and unexpected situation that was decisively motivated by Ankara. The point is that, among others, these are strategic scenarios that could have resulted in very troublesome flashpoints and the Putin-Erdoğan axis has been a major factor in the management of such situations.

Consequently, such a personal link has major effects on the military interaction between the two countries, meaning that the dynamics in their common strategic scenarios (militarily or not) have been greatly influenced by diplomatic coordination (or not) between the two leaders.

The Black Sea and Other Common Strategic Scenarios

After analysing both the Turkish and Russian mindsets, as well as the relationship of the respective powers and, how their similarities and differences influence their interaction by not only bringing them closer together and further apart, it is fitting to keep all the referred topics in mind and naturally transition into the main strategic scenarios involving Moscow and Ankara.

On that note, a look into what Russia and Turkey signify in the Western Balkans is to be expected. After that, a necessary dive into the dynamics of Post-Soviet Central Asia is to be put to practice, followed by a turn into the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, focussing on Syria and Libya. From there on, the Black Sea is to be approached, including the dynamics in the South Caucasus as Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been considered as states within the Black Sea region, due to the resulting influence of their strategic value.

A look into each of these scenarios constitutes a blend of political, economic and military considerations that demonstrate the reach and importance of Russia-Turkey relations for all involved.

Into Europe: The Western Balkans

It is important to keep in mind that the Western Balkans - considering the countries of Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia - is a region where the practical characterisation of a country as a democracy, or not, is anything but as clear cut as it may seem for some. It is a region of “democratic backsliding” over the past decade as illiberal politics take shape, despite being mainly influenced by a EU and NATO-centric order. (Kapidžić, 2020)

As a consequence, Russia and Turkey are perceived as one of the same among states in the region, not only due to a shared posture of alienated relations with the West, but also because of steady authoritarian leaders that represent Moscow and Ankara. There is a noticeable “allure of a strongman model in the region” that is filled by nationalistic fervor in its roots that places China, Russia and Turkey as attractive alternatives in case the western democratic experience proves itself a failure - an alternative that would fill the gap. (Bechev, 2021)

It is a region inclined towards an authoritarian political culture for local conditions as not only has it been firmly established both recently and historically, but also due to ethnically societal divisions that have prevented the emergence of a constructive civic culture. (Bechev, 2021) In relation to it, the referred ‘iliberals’ can be interpreted as a symptom. As there is still an important democratic tradition to be firmly developed, its survival tends to be endangered by dynamics resulting in deficient checks and balances. In essence, “the region faces structural impediments which make the current situation more of an ‘illiberal equilibrium’.” (Maliqi, 2020)

However, given Turkey’s volatility and its role in the transatlantic alliance and the Union’s economic importance, convergence between the two in the region is limited.

Moscow and Ankara coincide by posing a natural challenge to western entities as an alternative model to liberal democracy, as the absence of checks and balances fits the common political practice of the region’s leaderships. Both have showcased over the years, in contrast to most Balkan states, an attractive and robust economic growth that generated the improvement of public infrastructure and a substantial expansion to domestic middle classes. Coupled with the political culture of a natural authoritarian posture, one can begin to understand the formation of a narrative focussed on an alternative to the West, signaling that democracy is not essential to progress and growth - such a message strikes directly into any

state awaiting for integration into the EU, making the region a “fertile ground for external authoritarian powers to exert influence” (Bechev, 2021)

There is a strong social appeal for authoritarian figures as the fact that both Putin and Erdoğan receive relatively high approval rates from non-EU European countries in comparison to several other regions might suggest, surpassing other international political personalities. (Gallup International, 2018).

Nevertheless, identity politics in the region are, also, a must-consider dynamic in the Western Balkans. Domestically, and to different levels, Russia and Turkey have promoted identity politics among religious and ethnic lines in a way that contrasts with the universalistic view of European and American values that aim to prevail over said divides by building inclusive civic structures that tackle historic grievances. (Bechev, 2021)

Regarding Russia in this aspect, Dimitar Bechev (2021) argues that:

“Russia has built alliances with parties and civic associations of a nationalist bent, opposed to NATO and sceptical of the EU. In doing so, it has been keen to play the cultural/religious card. The Russian Orthodox Church benefits from robust ties with local faith communities, e.g., the Serbian Orthodox Church. (...) All in all, Russia is reinforcing the notion that Orthodox South Slavs should seek its protection and steer clear of Western clubs. While Russian policy in the Balkans is shaped by multiple drivers and cannot be reduced to notions of civilisational belonging, the latter figure strongly in its narrative projection, not unlike in the post-Soviet space.”

Meanwhile, the author also presents his view with regards to Turkey, stating that it somewhat mirrors Russia’s image as former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014) Ahmet Davutoğlu interpreted the region as a sphere of influence belonging to Turkey due to a common historical legacy, along with cultural ties. Therefore, Bechev argues that “Imperial legacy is now central to Ankara’s policy in the Balkans, overshadowing the country’s bond to the West, e.g, its long-standing membership of NATO and association with the EU.”

One can therefore argue that, in practical terms, Moscow and Ankara find themselves in a position where they can fill the same shoes due to a common narrative focused on protecting external communities within divided countries.

Even so, cooperation is not as recurrent as it may be in other scenarios. Nevertheless, when Moscow and Ankara do cooperate, they tend to harm European objectives. Given the fact that the TurkStream pipeline project aims to significantly supply Hungary and the Balkans and consequently consolidate Russia's influence in the region's natural gas market while being a hallmark of Russia-Turkey cooperation, it might serve as an example. (Bechev, 2021)

Be that as it may, Turkey and Russia preserve different considerations in the Balkans stemming from Ankara's circumstantial inclination towards Western interests.

On the one hand, the Kremlin sees the Balkans as a vulnerable area in Europe's sphere of influence that has generated opportunities for Russia to establish itself (such as the Kosovo war for example). Moreover, the region fits the Kremlin's preference of bilateral diplomatic ties and represents an arena that allows for Russian presence in the informational space that would be added into the cultural links of slavic nature. In essence, Moscow sees the Balkans as a region where to respond to European encroachment by the same token, through soft-power instruments as it still lies beyond its sphere of influence. (Bechev, 2021)

On the other hand, due to historic and geographic conditions, Turkey may be considered a regional player, contrasting to Russia's external position, as a significant diaspora would demonstrate (Buyuk, Clapp & Haxhiaj, 2019)

In the region, Turkey aims to extend its influence in such a way that does not place the Republic at odds with the West, occasionally preferring the presence of the EU and NATO in the name of stability. (Bechev, 2021) Economically, despite the TurkStream project, Turkey's contribution to European interests is demonstrated by the Southern Gas Corridor,

especially as the region is a significant export market for Turkish goods in comparison to Russia (figure 16). Additionally, security-wise, Turkey has supported NATO expansion into the region and has not presented any alternative to the alliance.

Western Balkans trade in goods with Russia and Turkey

Share of total trade, %, 2019

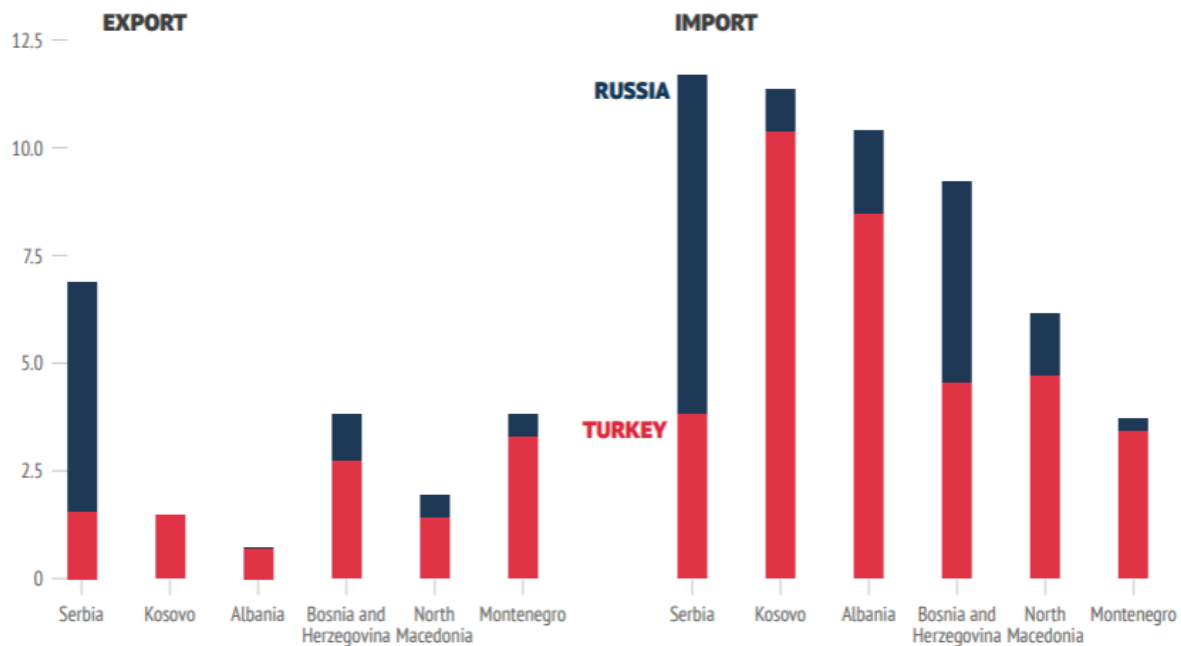


Figure 16: Western Balkans trade in goods with Russia and Turkey, 2019

Source: World Bank, via EUISS, 2021

Summing up, the Western Balkans is a region where Turkey and Russia represent similar political cultures to the detriment of Western soft-power due to historic and local motives, both from the region and from Moscow and Ankara. It is a region, nonetheless, that does not necessarily translate into practical Russo-Turkish cooperation efforts but rather on an occasional basis. Where major moments of regional tension occur in the region, it would be highly unlikely for either one of the countries at hand to act militarily to safeguard interests, as they have done in other more pressing scenarios.

Eurasian Roads: Post-Soviet Central Asia

Central Asia is sometimes placed under the same umbrella as the Black Sea region due to a shared Soviet Past, but it is important to also note that the region is of high representation of the Turkic culture mainly expressed through languages and ethnic groups, as well as Islamic beliefs - apart from Tajikistan (figure 17).

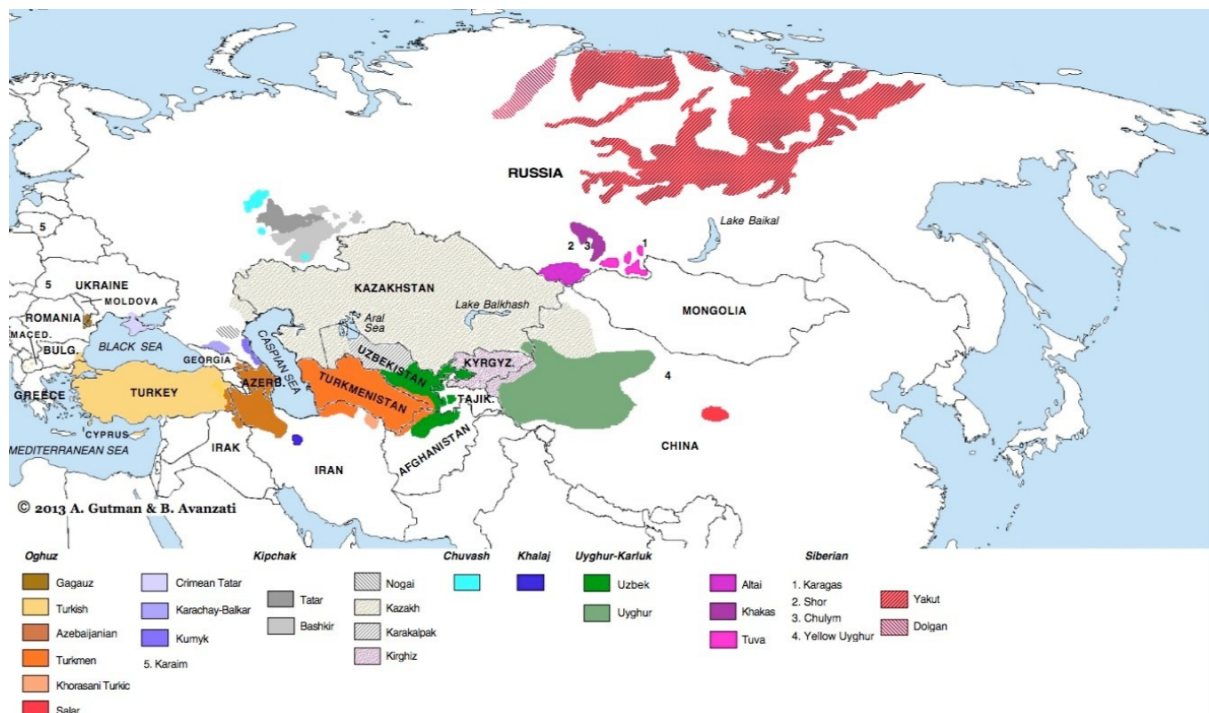


Figure 17: Geographic Scope of Turkic Languages

Source: Kalpak Travel, 2018

It is a region where geography and geopolitics make for difficult economic growth, making Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and historic ties very influential - for this reason, exports and imports make for substantial shares of Central Asian states' GDP. Security risks such as the difficult situation in Afghanistan over recent decades, separatist movements in Xinjiang, India-Pakistan tensions in Kashmir and conflicts in the South Caucasus are detrimental to Central Asian ties to the rest of the world, ultimately resulting in the fact that

foreign powers such as Russia and China exert the most influence in the region, followed other by countries, in more limited fashion, such as Iran, Turkey and the US. (Batsaikhan & Dabrowski, 2017)

Essentially Russia has been able to somewhat maintain political influence in the region from the Soviet times, while China has gradually expanded its presence through energy and infrastructure projects in the pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative, surpassing Russia's total trade volume by 2015 (figure 18).

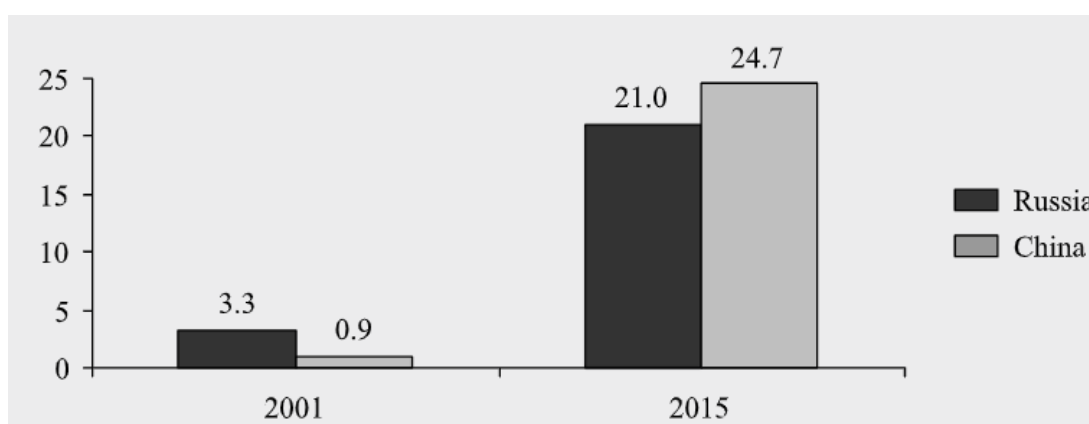


Figure 18: Central Asia's total trade with China and Russia (\$ billion)

Source: Trade Map of the International Trade Centre, via Batsaikhan & Dabrowski, 2017

Despite Turkish failure to fill the Soviet void in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR, the Republic has managed to maintain its ties to the region at a realistic level by fostering “infrastructure projects and economic interests, developing bilateral relations on the basis of respect for the *status quo*, as well as an array of soft power initiatives.” Nevertheless, a Russia-Turkey-China competitive scenario is nowhere to be established. Instead, the three seem to respect each other's interests (Saari, 2021) and the region has increasingly become an area in which Sino-Russian relations play a fundamental part, as the closest foreign powers on a political, economic and geographic level.

Therefore, one can argue that the region's importance in the context of Russia-Turkey relations stems from the strategic value of the Caspian Sea.

Such strategic importance lies in its abundance of energy resources, mainly oil and natural gas, with an estimated 48 billion barrels of oil and 8.7 trillion cubic meters of gas. (Stratfor, 2014) There are therefore numerous projects in the region in order to make the most of such a large volume of resources, that Caspian littoral states have become energy producers of global reach. However, as shown throughout history time and time again, geopolitical tension is to be expected regarding the splitting of region-wide resources, as well as their destination. As referred in previous chapters, Europe has been profoundly interested in the Sea's energy supplies, particularly from Azerbaijan and also from Turkmenistan as a way to loosen Russia's energy grip in the old continent - a scenario in which Russo-Turkish ties fit significantly.

This makes Central Asia a very important scenario in Russia-Turkey relations not only due to historic and cultural links from both countries that are cherished by all involved but also economically and, thus, geopolitically. The region is important from Moscow's perspective as it is necessary for a return to great power status and, from Ankara's perspective, to establish itself as a regional geopolitical hub. As such, the region fits into both powers' interests, but it does so indirectly through the importance of the Caspian Sea - that shines as an instrument in the light of Russia-West competition.

An environment of competition is not to be cultivated and, likewise, one might suggest that an antagonistic aura around the region might only be established, should Sino-Russian relations turn sour. Moreover, should Russo-Turkish relations turn sour as well, there are few motives to believe that enmity in Central Asia would be the focal point of such stress, given the recurrent effort of both Moscow and Ankara to resolve their differences on a diplomatic level in scenarios associated with more pressing security concerns.

Fundamentally, as argued by Sinikukka Saari (2021):

“Despite their different logics and competitive dynamics, the goals of preserving the status quo, and ensuring security and stability in Central Asia unite Moscow, Ankara and Beijing. Accordingly, all three have shown both the willingness and ability to accommodate each other’s interests in Central Asia in recent years (...) the three external powers are interested in stability and growing prosperity in the region and their policies are based on cooperation and engagement with Central Asian governments rather than coercion. All Central Asian governments, on the other hand, are interested in balancing their dependencies by developing cooperation with multiple actors, and finally also overcoming long-standing rivalries with their immediate neighbours. Hence, Turkish-Russian relations as well as their relations with the EU in Central Asia seem the least problematic in this neighbourhood.”

It is one of the main scenarios in the context of Russia-Turkey relations but mainly due its importance on other, more pressing, ones.

The voids of Spring: Syria and Libya

In December 2010 the desperate actions of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia led to a democratic movement that institutionalized a new democratic regime. Inspired by such events, populations of other Arab countries followed suit and attempted to oust autocratic governments in their countries across the region in what became known as the Arab Spring - a revolutionary moment to an unprecedented scale. In summary, the Tunisian President at the time, Zine El Abidine, was in power for 23 years and was driven out after a month of protests; in Egypt it took little over a fortnight for ex-President Hosni Mubarak to be forced to end his 30 year rule to be followed by the democratically elected Mohamed Morsi that has lost his grip on power as the government was overthrown by the military, lead until this day by Abdul Fatah Khalil Al-Sisi; in Libya, the 42 year-long rule of Muammar Gaddafi was put to an end, creating a power vacuum and generating an ongoing civil war; in Yemen, former

President Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to end his 33 year-long rule and, since then, fighting between Rebel Houthis and the Saudi-led Coalition has followed; last but not least, in Syria, the government of Bashar al-Assad is yet to fall (making Syria a relatively exceptional case) in a conflict that, much like the case in Libya and Yemen, is not only ongoing but also includes foreign presence. Other countries such as Bahrein also experienced protests but not to the same scale and impact to the ones mentioned. (Al Jazeera, 2020)

In essence, given the fact that the Arab Spring was dubbed as such, following a narrative that was enthusiastic about a possible democratic wave across the Middle East and North Africa, its denomination brings a great deal of irony as renewed authoritarianism and higher levels of oppression are noticeable in several cases over the last ten years. (Al Jazeera, 2020)

Be that as it may, in the context of relations between Russia and Turkey, the main flashpoints are certainly the cases in Syria and in Libya as both powers engage militarily and diplomatically in opposing sides and also in the pursuit of different interests. For that reason, Syria and Libya are the most striking examples of how delicate is the balance of Russia-Turkey relations as both cases present a consistent trend of both cooperation and competition between Moscow and Ankara.

There are fundamental characteristics that differentiate Moscow and Ankara. While Turkey will always be a power that affects developments in the region by simply being part of it, especially since the rise of the AKP, Russia is an extra regional power that has the capability to project its influence over Middle Eastern affairs, consequently taking lower risks.

Additionally, there is an underlying struggle in the post-Arab Spring Middle East and North Africa, between two broad but distinct models of power - one largely based on political islam and the other on militarist nationalism. (DW News, 2020). In that sense, the

Arab Spring represents, in Turkey's eyes, an opportune moment of change that might lead to a better saying in the region both ideologically and geopolitically, by generally supporting popular uprisings (such as the Muslim Brotherhood for example) - a revisionist power in favour of the region-wide establishment of political islam. Meanwhile, Russia supports the pre-Arab Spring *status quo* bringing closer to states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt or the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that it sees as partners, sometimes against Turkey. Those differences allow Turkey to show its Western counterparts that it is the best suited NATO member to counterweight Moscow in the region, once again making the most of its own strategic importance. Nevertheless, despite such a "balancing act" it is still a regional power that acts on its own, in the pursuit of global aspirations. (Bechev, 2021)

About Syria

The Arab Spring eventually led to a rift between Washington and Ankara given the Kurdish issue and incentivised Turkey towards better ties with Russia. Hence, it is important to understand Russia's position in the region throughout the years. As explained by Bechev (2021):

"Putin exploited Western passivity in the face of the upheavals of the 2010s. He presided over a light-touch intervention in Syria, reaping extensive political benefits without taking excessive risks. Indeed, Russia teamed up with Iran to save the Assad regime teetering on the verge of collapse in 2015. Top-tier regional players such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel engaged with the Kremlin. In effect, Moscow asserted itself as a powerbroker in a strategically important part of the world, rivalling the US without incurring a comparable price in blood and treasure. Turkey certainly helped the Kremlin in that endeavour. Together with Iran, it joined Russia in the so-called Astana Forum on Syria which, unlike the UN-sponsored talks in Geneva, excluded the Americans. Similar to Moscow, Ankara remained supportive of the Iran nuclear deal, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and took exception to Trump's policy of exerting 'maximum pressure' on Tehran. Thus, Russia and Turkey

seemed to embrace a vision of the Middle East and North Africa in radical opposition to the one traditionally upheld by the West.

While Putin became the powerful powerbroker, Erdoğan's stance would shift in order to safeguard Turkey against the Kurdish threat in northern Syria, moving away from the idea of regime change in 2015 due to the rise of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (YPD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Forces (YPG). Consequently, especially since the fighter-jet crisis, cooperation between Russia and Turkey in Syria would become the reality as Turkish forces have been mainly concerned with securing the 900km border with Syria and restraining US-backed militant groups.

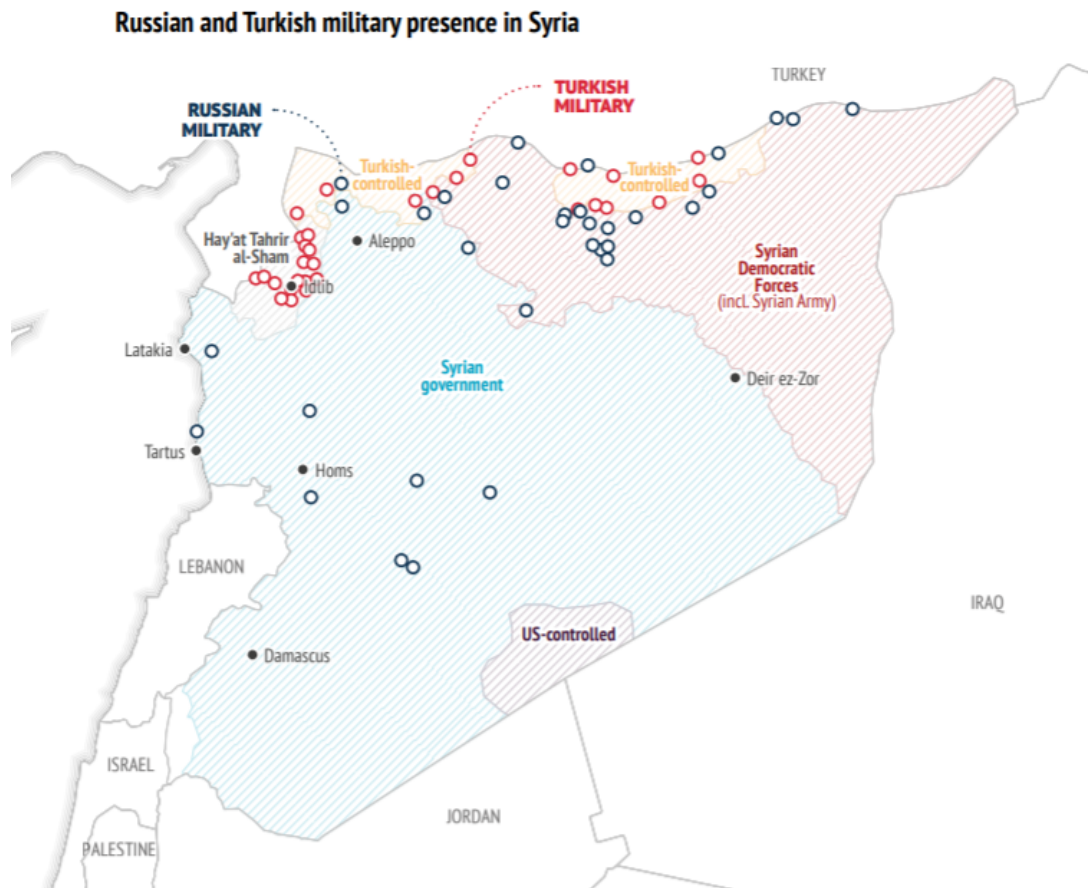


Figure 19: Russian and Turkish military presence in Syria.

Source: European Commission, via EUISS, 2021.

Restraining the YPG is also part of the Kremlin's interests, meaning that Moscow and Ankara would coordinate military operations accordingly. In practical terms, Assad and Putin's regime reconquest was assisted by Turkey, including coordination over the status of the strategic city of Aleppo and the establishment of 'de-escalation zones' throughout the country - it is in this context that the Astana Forum between Russia, Turkey and Iran must be interpreted into, where the future of Syria is the focal point of discussion (notably, no Western powers are present).

Deprived of American support, Kurdish forces have turned to Russian forces deployed along the border with Turkey. Therefore, while Putin and Erdoğan would agree on a

Turkish controlled ‘safety zone’, Moscow would emerge as the sole moderator²⁰ between Assad, the Kurds and Turkey in northeast Syria, accompanied by the reduction of American presence in the region. In essence, argued by Dimitar Bechev (2021):

“De facto if not explicitly, Turkey accepted that Assad was there to stay and joined the Russian-led effort to find a political settlement beneficial to the regime. It furthermore became a go-between for rebel factions ranging from the FSA to the powerful Salafi militias such as Ahrar al-Sham. (...) In a nutshell, Turkish actions – including the threat of using force unilaterally against the Kurds and putting American, French and British servicemen in harm’s way – handed Russia a bloodless victory, allowing it to spread out to a part of Syria from which it hitherto had been excluded.”

Moscow and Ankara started by supporting opposing sides for different reasons that, at the end of the day, have been manageable in a way that has not contributed to a complete stalemate in Syria. Ankara’s focus has shifted towards more pressing security concerns and Russia has been carving its own place in the region through an effective management of the military situation.

Nevertheless, there still are reasons for both powers to compete as both sides’ interests, despite being manageable, do not lead to the same end-plan.

The city of Idlib, the last rebel stronghold in the country has tested Russo-Turkish relations. In 2018 Putin and Erdoğan agreed on a demilitarized zone under Turkish observation as Ankara aimed to demobilize the heir to the Al-Nusra Front - the country’s once dominant islamist militia also known as al-Qaeda in Syria (David Ignatius, 2012) - Hayat as-Sham, while Russia accepted keeping the city off-limits despite contestation from Assad and Iran that aimed to reassert control. However, in late 2019 the Russian air force

²⁰ It is important to understand however, that Assad is not completely bound to Putin’s will as his links to Iran should not go unnoticed. “For all its influence over the security apparatus in Damascus, Russia has limited sway over decisions made in Tehran. Thus, Assad and the Iranians have some freedom of manoeuvre to undermine deals struck between the Russians and the Turks.” (Bechev, 2021)

participated in a push by regime forces that led to an increase of Turkish military deployment. The situation would gradually escalate further until a ceasefire was agreed between Putin and Erdoğan on March 5th 2020. Until then, both powers applied force against each others' proxies while signaling each others' armed forces as potential targets, in order to gain bilateral leverage, one can argue, eventually reaching a point to which de-escalation from the hard power brotherhood was needed once again. (Bechev, 2021)

The recent events in Idlib are indicative of the versatility of the relationship at hand. Despite consistent willingness to cooperate towards common interests in a realistic way that is adequate to the military situation, there are questions yet to be answered by the persistent dialogue between Moscow and Ankara. Since Turkey entered Syria in order to support regime change, what is to be the future of the likely scenario of Syria under Assad that has needed Moscow as a constant lifeline? And what will that mean for the future of the Kurdish factions in the region? These are questions that demonstrate the importance of the Astana Forum that, by itself, is an example of the peculiarity of the relationship between Russia and Turkey.

About Libya

Libya's long coastline spans at 1770 km right at the doorstep of Europe in the Mediterranean Sea, making it a major stepping stone for refugees and illegal migrants, especially into the EU members of Italy and Greece. In addition to that, the fact it also holds one the largest oil reserves in the world make for the country's high strategic value for those sitting at the negotiating table once the conflict has come to an end. Not only is it attractive to Turkey as Ankara searches for drilling rights and the possible establishment of political islam, but it is also attractive for other countryies such as Russia that aims to futher consolidate its presence in the Mediterranean Sea and gain geopolitical leverage over Europe.

Following Muammar Gaddafi's death in 2011, Libya has turned into a leadership and legitimacy vacuum. Two rival administrations have emerged in a way that splits the country between East and West and also represent the different models of power previously mentioned.

To the East lies the House of Representatives based in Tobruk that is fundamentally supported by the National Liberation Army (NLA) built by Khalifa Haftar with help from Egypt and the UAE, later joined by Russian mercenaries under the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group. Under Haftar one can argue that the NLA and the House of Representatives represent a model of power based on militarist nationalism. (DW News, 2020) Meanwhile, to the West lies the Government of National Accord (GNA) that is based in Tripoli and is recognized by the United Nations. Its forces mainly rely on what is left of Libya's former military and other militias but its main military supporter is Turkey given the GNA's link to political islam and drilling rights agreements. (Al Jazeera, 2020)

The situation in Libya is another demonstration of how resilient ties between Moscow and Ankara can be. Quite similarly to Assad in Syria, despite support from the UAE and Egypt, Haftar has grown dependent on Russia in response to Turkish political and military aid to the GNA that has proved effective in preventing Haftar from taking the capital. Nevertheless, much like the case in Syria, the multitude of actors in Libya is still a scenario where Putin and Erdoğan have engaged in constant diplomatic dialogue, despite not reaching the same cooperation levels as the ones in Syria.

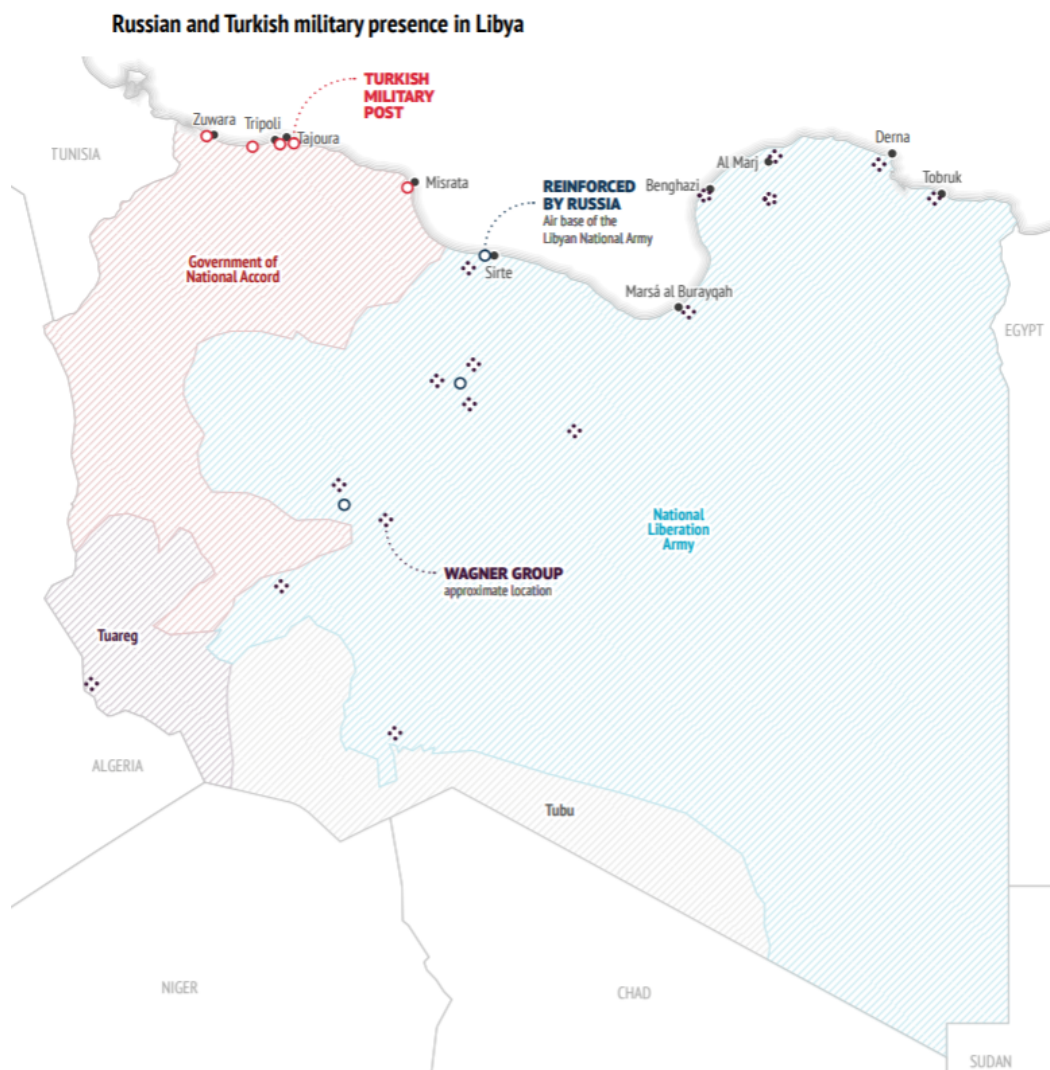


Figure 20: Russian and Turkish military presence in Libya

Source: European Commission, via EUISS, 2021.

As Bechev (2021) explains:

“Russian-Turkish cooperation in Libya has proven less effective than in Syria. In January 2020, Putin’s and Erdoğan’s joint call for a ceasefire failed to halt Haftar’s bid to capture Tripoli. Talks in Moscow between the general and the head of the GNA, Faye al-Sarraj, in the presence of Russia and Turkey’s foreign and defence ministers did not bear fruit either. The reason for that was Haftar’s assessment at that juncture that he was on the cusp of winning. When the tide changed and GNA forces pushed the LNA away from Tripoli in

May 2020, with the critical support of Turkey, Russia and Turkey engaged anew. On 22 July, they announced the launch of a working group, which Ankara touted as a step towards an Astana-like mechanism for Libya. But the group failed to score success. The Turkish demand that LNA forces and Russian private military contractors (PMCs) from the Wagner Group withdraw from the key city of Sirte, for instance, remains unresolved.”

Haftar’s unpredictability makes him a wild card in Libya, as showcased by his actions in 2020, making it difficult for Turkey and Russia to bring both local parties to the negotiating table and bring them together into an agreement. Local dynamics in the country with regards to political divisions, competition over oil facilities and the effect of foreign parties make Russian-Turkish partnership more “elusive” when compared to events in the Middle East - especially as Turkey believes it is currently on an upwards trajectory regarding the situation on the ground and Moscow is not yet prepared to accommodate Ankara’s interests and make concessions. (Bechev, 2021) Libya is yet to show itself as a cooperative scenario between Moscow and Ankara as Syria has proved itself to be.

Regardless, the trend of compartmentalization of differences on a high diplomatic level is noticeable once again. In both GNA’s military resurgence and Haftar’s operation towards Tripoli, neither Turkish nor Russian troops were supposedly found on the frontlines. In summary, Ankara had decisively invested more resources in the GNA than the Kremlin on the NLA. However, the bottom line is the same. As stated by Ian Lynch (2020):

“The Turkish and Russian interventions in Libya have protracted and enflamed the fighting, but both have an interest in a de-escalation of the hostilities that would allow them to reap the economic benefits of their involvement, primarily in the oil industry. As such, Ankara and Moscow have made several joint calls this year for a ceasefire and support for the U.N. peace process, only to see Haftar spoil their efforts.”

They have both been managing the conflict while playing opposite sides, treating each other as potential partners rather than adversaries, without joining one another. Turkish drones never aimed at Wagner troops in the fight for Tripoli and, ever since, the Kremlin has stepped up its investment in Haftar - a balancing act in the context of delicate Russian-Turkish relations.

Hot Proxis without a Cold War

Unlike the United States and the Soviet Union throughout the latter half of the 20th century, and Saudi Arabia and Iran over recent decades, relations between Russia and Turkey in the Middle East and North Africa sit on a delicate balance by fighting proxy wars without the broad background of a Cold War between them. The MENA region demonstrates how subtle this cooperative rivalry can be. These conflicts demonstrate how Turkey has been growing more assertive in the pursuit of its geopolitical ambitions ever since the rise of nationalistic thoughts resulting from the coup of 2016 and the President's legal authoritarian growth - all in the context of a strong Russian presence both in Syria and in Libya.

For example, in Idlib, both powers tested each other as well as the limits of such a delicate balance that they, ultimately, were not willing to upset as the maintenance of lines of communication demonstrates. That has been the recurrent theme. Both powers have global aspirations that lead to various encounters throughout different regions, sometimes militarily. Even though a strong relationship with Russia has its benefits, Turkey still aims to achieve strategic autonomy, meaning that it cannot grow overly reliant on Moscow, and the same goes for Russia as well. It is for that reason that the militarization of the Black Sea, a favourable trade balance and the TurkStream pipeline are geopolitical leverages to be maintained as they have an effect on how both powers interact in other regions. Cooperation is needed between them due to what they represent to each other's international affairs.

It can therefore be argued that for such a balance to be upset, what they represent to each other must be a fundamental changing factor. Therefore, the most likely common scenario to structurally shake such Russia-Turkey relations to its core must be the one where both powers have primary security, economic and geopolitical interests at stake as it would ultimately be the most important one.

Syria and Libya have been examples of Turkey's growth in regional hard power stature in a way usually considered neo-ottoman by many. Nevertheless, the scenario that carries the most stakes for both Moscow and Ankara seems to be the Black Sea region.

The Maze Latchkey

Russo-Turkish interaction in the Black Sea region is composed of affairs related to the security of the Black Sea itself as well as the situation in the South Caucasus because, as previously argued, dynamics involving the states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan greatly influence matters regarding not only littoral states but the surrounding regions as well. For that reason, countries in the South Caucasus are part of both the Black Sea region and the Caspian Sea region.

Be that as it may, geopolitics in the South Caucasus partly result from what the geographic setting of the Black Sea leads to - Russo-Turkish interaction .

Identities and Interests

Despite the fact that Turkey is, in Syria, mainly concerned with its biggest security threat - the Kurdish issue - the South Caucasus might be the scenario that hits closer to home for both powers in the context of Russo-Turkish interaction. Seeing how instrumentally important are regional energy affairs for both Moscow and Ankara, the countries of the South

Caucasus are filled with strategic value that stems from the importance of the Caspian Sea to Western energy markets that are targeted by both Russia and Turkey. Adding that to the fact that both powers border the region, projection of influence is not only necessary but also natural from these regional powers that already carry imperial legacies that left their marks on the cultural landscape of this shared region.

The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted into an immediate Russian struggle to maintain its influence and keep stability on either side of the Caucasus Mountains, resulting in the need to establish friendly ties with the former soviet republics. Being the most powerful country amidst the South Caucasian states both militarily and economically, Azerbaijan is key to Russia's influence in the region, but relations with Armenia must also be fostered as it ultimately cements the Kremlin's regional foothold. On that note, Moscow's strategy has been to maintain a delicate balance in its ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan - two countries that greatly shape the region due to identitarian tensions that are observed in the recurrent conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. As such, despite the formal military alliance with Armenia, Moscow balances such interaction through intense trade and arms sales with Azerbaijan. Consequently, Moscow also limits Azerbaijan's relations with NATO and Turkey. (Tack, 2020)

Turkey's hostile relations with Armenia and brotherly relations with Azerbaijan ultimately turn Russia's struggles into Turkish opportunities as they both aim to extend their influence abroad - the events in and around Nagorno-Karabakh in the latter half of 2020 are indicative of it. By decisively supporting Baku through substantial military aid (figure 21), Ankara has ultimately challenged "the effectiveness of Russia's management strategy in the Southern Caucasus and by extension to challenge the geopolitical status quo along Moscow's vulnerable southern periphery". (Tack, 2020) Much like the cases of Syria and Libya, the South Caucasus represents an area where Turkey's growth, in a way that may challenge

Russian interests should there be any need for it, has become noticeable. Especially since the Russo-Armenian alliance is not applicable to Nagorno-Karabakh, Ankara has challenged broader Russian interests in a way that still preserves its ties with Moscow.

Turkey's arms exports to Azerbaijan surge

Baku's defence imports from Ankara rocketed in Q3, as tensions rose in Nagorno-Karabakh

● 2019 ● 2020

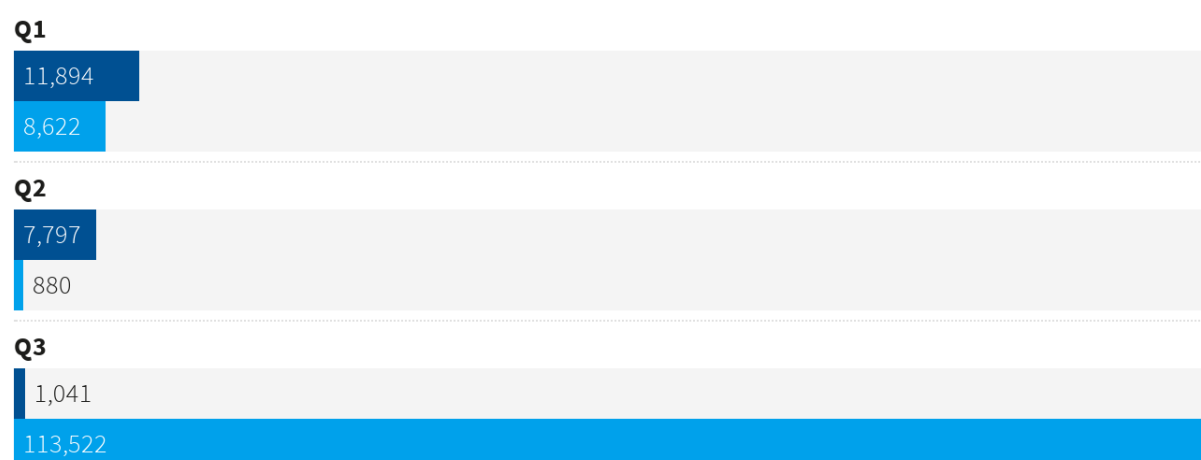


Figure 21: Turkey's arms exports to Azerbaijan

Source: Reuters, 2020

In practical terms, the cease-fire agreement of November 9th 2020, brokered by Russia, means that Azerbaijan has properly conquered the territories it gained throughout the conflict, as well the recovery of territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh that were considered to be occupied by Armenia in 1994. The areas that are still under control of ethnic Armenians will see the deployment of Russian peacekeeping troops, while Turkey, despite not sitting at the negotiating table, is also expected to take part in the peacekeeping process by deploying its share of peacekeepers to the Azerbaijan-controlled areas - certainly a case of

backdoor diplomacy. Additionally, a road connecting Turkey to Azerbaijan proper is to be built, creating a supply line from the Nakhchivan enclave to the mainland.

Turkey grows in the region while safeguarding its energy interests that keep alive the possibility of diversifying sources of income and reducing reliance on Russia. Meanwhile, Turkey also demonstrates to Azerbaijan how mutually important their relationship can be, in addition to its friendly aspect, as both countries are important for each other's energy markets and are mutually important for security and military operations close to their borders. By being decisive in changing the *status quo* in favor of Azerbaijan, it managed to take a step towards equal competition in the grand scheme of things with regards to its Russian counterpart.

Moscow keeps the final say in the resolution of the conflict in its latest edition as "With Russian peacekeeping forces on the ground (...) any final resolution will depend on Russian approval." (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2020) Russia still enhanced its standing in the region as, along with its military presence in Armenia, it also established such a presence in Azerbaijani territory - the Kremlin can still maintain and strengthen its position on the other side of the Caucasus Mountains.

All things considered, it is a region where "post-soviet and neo-ottoman interests collide" but the consistent compartmentalisation of interests in order to create space for mutually beneficial cooperation has ultimately led to an established agreement. (Tack, 2020)

It must be acknowledged that Russian and Turkish interests are also fundamental to how the situation, and the region, develops over time. Both countries have fundamental geopolitical considerations in the Black Sea region that make it imperative to have a saying in the outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While a ceasefire has been reached, the conflict remains frozen as no peace deal was signed and no historic grievances were resolved, meaning that the conflict was not concluded - it evolved. And, one might argue, the one

decisive factor for such evolution is Ankara's concrete military involvement in support for its brother state. Simultaneously, it may also be argued that the Russo-Armenian military alliance is fundamental in deterring any foreign power from marching into Yerevan.

Beyond Armenia and Azerbaijan, however, developments in Georgia must not be set aside as an argument can be made that Turko-Georgian ties might be indicative of why it is in Moscow's interests to be at the negotiating table with Armenia and Azerbaijan while balancing relations between them.

Given the Russian militarization of Crimea and southern Ukraine, a pro-Kremlin Georgia would not serve Turkish interests ever so slightly as it could further bring the notion of the Black Sea being a 'Russian lake' into reality. Hence, Ankara has not only been a long time provider of military assistance to Tbilisi while sponsoring the possibility of it becoming a NATO member, but has also invested in energy facilities and infrastructure more broadly. Without upsetting Moscow over the years, it can be said that Turkey has developed a "pragmatic and multilayered relationship with Georgia" that can be somewhat represented by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, that includes its closest ally in the region, as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline (figure 22). (Saari, 2021)

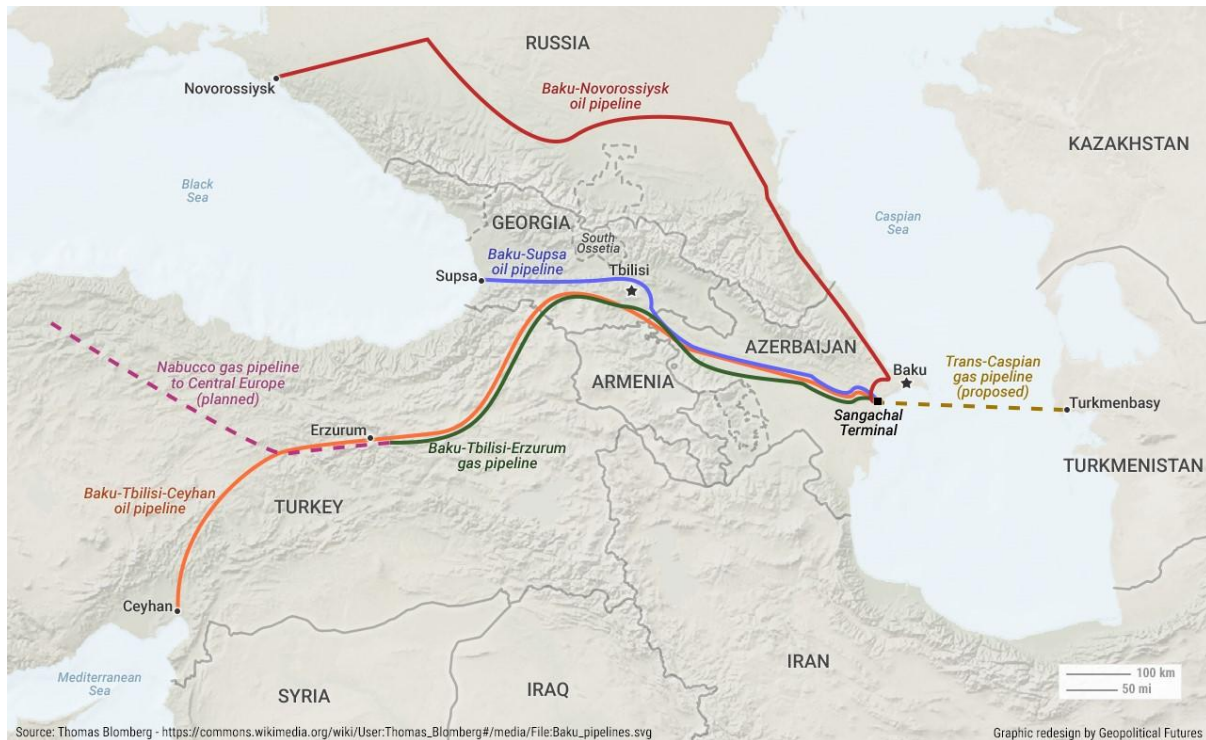


Figure 22: Caucasus pipelines

Source: Geopolitical Futures, 2017

Nonetheless, Georgia still enjoys strong economic relations with Russia despite the events in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, adding to the nuanced complexity of the region.

As Saari argues:

“On a range of issues, Russia’s interests and allies are diametrically opposite to Turkey’s in the South Caucasus: as a close ally of Armenia and patron of separatist South Ossetia and Abkhazia (all three host Russian military bases), it is naturally opposed to Turkey’s plans to expand its regional role and against evolving military cooperation between NATO and Georgia, or Turkey and Georgia. Yet, in reality the picture is not quite so black and white. Turkey’s ally Azerbaijan has close relations with Russia, and even Georgia (...) has significant economic ties with Russia. Although Turkey has not recognised Abkhazia’s independence, it has close links with the breakaway region.”

Ultimately, both Moscow and Ankara have managed to preserve connections to the region in a way that may be reminiscent of their imperial days in the sense that the South Caucasus has once again become a scenario of Russo-Turkish economic and military interaction - the difference being that, nowadays, it is done so under the terms of a cooperative rivalry. It can be argued that the importance of such maintenance of ties mirrors the importance of the Black Sea region in general for Moscow and Ankara due to the potential and strategic value that the South Caucasus states deliver to both powers. Nevertheless, the raw geographic importance of the Black Sea is ever present in how Russia and Turkey's assessments of themselves in fundamentally divergent ways.

Natural Collision

Russia views the Black Sea in the context of Russia-West competition. Such a body of water has the potential to safeguard the Russian European heartland (the industrial core) by serving as a buffer, while safeguarding economic interests both internally and regionally and also safeguarding geopolitical interests away from the near-abroad. In other words, the Black Sea is important for Moscow as it allows the Kremlin to protect and project Russian interests both in and out of its sphere of influence as it is also “an important trade and transportation artery for Russia.” (Stronski, 2021) From exporting economic and military influence into the Mediterranean Sea, connecting economic interests from the Caspian region via the Volga-Don Canal and maintaining stability in the North Caucasus, to projecting power in the name of great power status and protecting the heartland, the Black Sea is of extreme importance for Russia in a way that justifies why much of the Kremlin's strategic thinking has got to its current state. The wars in Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014 and the military buildup ever since, stem from the necessity to control affairs in the Sea and also from the natural strategic culture that has a long history of resorting to military resources in order to

safeguard multifaceted interests. Additionally, the protection of Russian's in the near-abroad must also be kept in mind as, regardless of how geopolitical in nature such assessment of interests might be, it is still part of Putin's view on Moscow's grand strategy. Russian strategy in the Black Sea region, therefore, focuses heavily on limiting NATO's capabilities while maintaining the region free from foreign influence, and also on the protection of national territory, economy and identity.

Be that as it may, geography pushes Russia and Turkey towards competition, given the significance of the Turkish Straits despite the current constructive diplomatic environment that Putin and Erdoğan have built over recent years.

Turkey's location generates difficult questions of equally difficult answers with serious consequences. As Boris Toucas explains (2018):

“In the Black Sea, Turkey remains caught between its desire to pursue regional ambitions, its NATO commitments, and the necessity to accommodate to Russia. Yet any tactical gain Ankara might obtain from playing Moscow against Washington for the sake of advancing its interests in Syria would weaken its moderate influence in the Black Sea. Ankara's long-term interest in the Black Sea region is to continue to balance Russia's growing military posture in the Black Sea and to promote multilateral cooperation in the region.”

The signing of the Montreux Convention in 1936 and the consistent enforcement of its rules ever since show that Russia and Turkey share the notion that foreign presence in the region should not prevail over that of littoral states. Beyond that, consensus with Russia is noticeable on several occasions as one can argue that, to this day, the feeling regarding foreign presence is maintained, especially given Ankara's disillusionment with the EU and strained relations with the US. This is positive for Russia as it is difficult for NATO's cohesion but it is also symptomatic of Turkey's interests and needs in the Black Sea.

Essentially, as explained by Dan Dungaciu (2020):

“The consensus with the Russian Federation in this regard is periodically tested by Turkey's need to comply with its key NATO membership obligations, by crises in the region (annexation of Crimea by Russia, Russian-Georgian conflict, Syrian civil war, Kurdish issue etc.), as well as by developments resulting from frozen conflicts, notably Turkey's interest in protecting minorities of Turkish origin or promoting the interests of Turkish people (Azerbaijan), in addition to its own geopolitical ambitions of regional leader (...) Harmonizing its own strategic interests with those of NATO, respectively with the strategic interests of the various riparian states in the more general context of harmonizing relations with Russia makes Turkey's Black Sea Strategy a very complex diplomatic endeavour.”

Thus, on the one hand one might argue that, were Russia to be cut from access to the Sea, the already deep sense of Russian geopolitical vulnerability would reach an even deeper level that might also affect its national identity in a way similar to the geopolitical losses of the fall of the USSR. The idea of power projection towards the south would no longer be exercised in a way that aims to build an external sphere of influence that shields the Russian heartland, but might instead focus on making sure that a path to Moscow would be a very difficult one should any foreign power think of marching into the capital. However, deterrents are not as secure as geographic barriers, further showing how fundamental the Black Sea is to the Russian Federation we know today.

On the other hand, by being a commercial trading hub that is only accessible through very narrow passages, the strategic location of the Black Sea is synonymous to the strategic importance of Turkey not only to every littoral state but to the continents around it. Both the ‘Policy of Zero Problems’ designed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, and the growing nationalistic geopolitical ambitions towards strategic autonomy that, ultimately, justify recent Turkish military actions in both Libya and Syria, as well as its ties to Russia, Central Asia, the

Mediterranean and Europe, have placed the Montreux Convention and the city of Istanbul at the centre of calculations of national interest.

The Black Sea itself and developments within the region are fundamental not only to the development of both powers' strategic cultures and ambitions, but also to their grand strategies, calculations and interaction with other states. For that reason, Russia-Turkey competition in the Black Sea is not only natural but also expected to be a long-term topic, as history has shown time and time again. It is a region where both countries deal with primary structural concerns without seeing eye to eye in organic fashion. Regardless of how positive ties between Moscow and Ankara seem to be, their historical processes show how geography-motivated competition is ever present in their relations - such a competition is further demonstrated by the events in the South Caucasus in 2020 as well as Turkey's cultural ties and military links to both Ukraine and Georgia under NATO's umbrella.

A Scenario Unlike the Others

What sets the Black Sea region apart from other common scenarios is the fact that Russo-Turkish interaction in places like the Western Balkans, Syria, Libya and Central Asia must take Black Sea dynamics as a background framework for decision-making.

Russian projection of power is greatly dependent on the militarization of the Black Sea, mainly due to the strategic importance of the city of Sevastopol and Crimea in general. Without the Peninsula, the costs of operations in Syria and Libya would most likely multiply. In addition, an argument can be made that energy ties with Turkey would not be as urgent as the Kremlin would likely not feel as compelled to gain further geopolitical leverage over Ukraine's important energy role. Following such a train of thought, it is likely that Russia's dominant position in Syria would not be the same, possibly resulting in a different Turkish interpretation of the situation.

In other words, without riskily engaging further into an alternate timeline, it becomes clear that the situation in the Black Sea, beyond dealing with core issues for both countries, greatly affects how Russia and Turkey interact with each other beyond the region. Turkey's assessment of the Kurdish issue in Syria and what can be done in its power is, undoubtedly, influenced by who dominates the conflict, for example - an argument can thus be made that the Black Sea is one of, if not the most influential scenario in the context of Russia-Turkey relations.

If there is one thing that ties between Moscow and Ankara demonstrates is that broad political understanding among the leading elite and consistent diplomatic dialogue, along with natural drivers for competition, may lead to the constant management of lines that should not be crossed. In other words, the constant compartmentalisation of interests that has become synonymous with the Putin-Erdoğan brotherhood. However, it is possible to argue that should the situation in the Black Sea reach seriously high levels of enmity between the powers at hand, it would most likely signify an unprecedented test in the authoritarian bond that may have repercussions in the other common strategic scenarios.

Concluding Thoughts and Reflections

The Black Sea is a waterway in between regions in a way that makes it a strategic hotspot, not only for the littoral states but also for the surrounding regions.

Its strategic value, coupled with the assets found in the Caspian Sea contribute to international attention from diverse actors. Nevertheless, events within the region such as the integration of Crimea in 2014 naturally showcase the intrinsic importance of the region by itself, especially under the context of Russian and Turkish strategic cultures and the historic reach of Western European powers. The Sea's assets reach deep into the European landmass while historically allowing for multifaceted communication between various people's. The Sea has grown fundamental to the littoral countries' construction of identity from Kiev to Baku for example, as one might expect when sitting at a crossroads between once dominant empires might result in. It is a body of water that ultimately served as a shared border synonymous with diverging political, economic and security interests.

For these reasons, an argument can be made that it is one of the most significant strategic scenarios among others that, together, constitute a constellation of geostrategic international affairs.

The two main historic powers to fight for domination of the Black Sea region were the Russian Empire and its Ottoman counterpart. Nowadays those who carry their heavy legacies - Russia and Turkey - find themselves in a similar yet different situation.

It is sometimes easy to forget the major effect that the Russian and Ottoman Empires have had on European history. Dominated by wars with far reaching consequences that mainly concerned peoples distant from Eastern Europe, several decisions made by European leaders have taken into account the objectives and possible reactions from entities to the East and to the South. The legacy carried by Russia and Turkey is one that has always been part of Europe, even if it has been so indirectly. Nowadays, what Russia and Turkey represent to the

dominant European powers such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany for example, is a challenge to their immediate neighbourhood at a time in which the European community needs to answer questions about its own identity - at a time, therefore, where the importance of ideas in the world of political leadership is gradually returning. Beyond aiming to understand the increasing military and diplomatic interaction, this is also one of the reasons why analysing such a relationship is so important for Europe and the rest of the world. For instance, Moscow and Ankara's international affairs can reach deep into several regions as demonstrated by Russian ties with Egypt and Turkey's ties with Ethiopia - two countries of elevated importance in the world's geostrategic puzzle, that have struggled to agree on vital issues over recent years.

Russo-Turkish relations are a complex topic that deserves being the subject of numerous studies due to the sheer reach that characterises both powers from a cultural, economic and geopolitical point of view to say the least. Not only is it a relationship filled by similarities and contradictions that have been managed by their current top political figures, but it is also a relationship with a high geopolitical meaning as Turkey allows for NATO's potential presence in the regions surrounding Ankara - most notably the eastern Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East.

Russia and Turkey are both similar and different in structural ways. Both have preserved an authoritarian political culture (although to different degrees) and perceive themselves as bridges between Europe and Asia, sponsoring an Eurasian identity. Meanwhile, despite being neighbours, their geographic locations result in divergent and sometimes colliding interests regarding the formation of grand strategies and vital security concerns - a natural insecurity dilemma. Plus, relations with countries to the West are a fundamental converging point even though Ankara's case is a lot more complex than what first meets the

eye due to both internal and international volatility. There is a lot that can be said regarding how Russia-Turkey ties have evolved and how influential such a relationship can be.

Demonstrating the reach of Russo-Turkish ties are the main common strategic scenarios they find themselves in such as the Balkans, Central Asia, the wars in Syria and Libya and, finally, the Black Sea region. The situation in one scenario can surely influence events in another. However, the latter has shown itself to be one of, if not the major starting point of how Russia and Turkey will interact in Syria for example, as the Kremlin's projection of power is mainly conditioned by the militarisation of Crimea and stability in the Black Sea.

Besides being a far-reaching relationship, it is also one with a lot of food for thought. The way that Presidents Putin and Erdoğan manage their differences by focussing on their similarities has not only been exemplary but also effective, to say the least, as both countries have been realistically able to pursue their interests in competing scenarios, without escalating into large-scale conflict - an uncommon historic trend given the capabilities of both powers. For that, the management of circumstances has been fundamental as events across various regions are connected.

In essence, the Russo-Turkish relationship is one to be monitored as both countries showcased their civilisational, economic and military reach throughout history, in a way that certainly has its effects today and for the foreseeable future. Should Moscow and Ankara's ties fallout or become more robust, there are reasons to believe that the result of such evolution is likely to have a ripple effect into common strategic scenarios, only to be followed by other less pressing affairs. Should that be the case, the situation in the Black Sea region will most likely be a key to understanding the *status quo* between Russia and Turkey as it is central to their interaction. For this reason, the Black Sea is extremely influential in Russo-Turkish ties.

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