

The Turkey, Russia, Iran Nexus

*Evolving Power Dynamics in
the Middle East, the Caucasus,
and Central Asia*

PROJECT DIRECTOR & EDITOR
Samuel J. Brannen

FOREWORD
John J. Hamre

PRINCIPAL AUTHORS
Jon B. Alterman
Carolyn Barnett
Andrew C. Kuchins
Jeffrey Mankoff

PROJECT MANAGER
T.J. Cipoletti

NOVEMBER 2013

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ISBN: 978-1-4422-2489-6 (pb); 978-1-4422-2490-2 (eBook)

Center for Strategic & International Studies
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-887-0200 | www.csis.org

Rowman & Littlefield
4501 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, MD 20706
301-459-3366 | www.rowman.com

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Foreword

John J. Hamre

Three years ago the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery held a remarkable exhibit entitled "The Tributary Treasures from the Court of Muscovy." It was an astounding collection of beautiful gifts presented to the Russian czar in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Most of the gifts on display were presented by envoys from Istanbul and Persian centers such as Herat, Tabriz, and Esfahan. These three neighboring empires were competing with each other in a fascinating and dynamic geopolitical system, accenting their interactions with stunning artistic treasures.

Turkey, Russia, and Iran have had independent imperial traditions that shaped their worldviews. Their historic relationships have at times been tense and conflict-prone, and at other times cooperative. The power of the state was bent to promote the economic well-being of the country. The three countries traded with each other, manipulated one against the other, invested resources in partner ventures, fought proxy wars against each other in hapless small countries in the region, and occasionally fought each other directly.

Much of this regional geopolitical dynamic was submerged during the Cold War, which imposed an ideological veneer over regional and geopolitical power politics. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Turkey aligned itself with the West, both for domestic modernization and regional geopolitical reasons. The Iranian monarchy ruled uneasily with rising internal tensions, but was practically aligned with the West until the shah was overthrown. Since that time, the succession of Iranian governments has defined a rejectionist agenda against the West, but its radicalism alienated Russia.

In recent years a more historic pattern has emerged. Each country has returned to its imperial core to chart a way ahead. Each sees threats and opportunities in using each other. Each has seen a way to use the regional geopolitics to advance national interests in a global agenda. The historic pattern—conflict, manipulation, cooperation—has reemerged.

Perspectives in the American policy community remain grounded in the past. We continue to view the region through a Cold War lens, with the added complexity of Iran's implacable hostility to us, its destabilizing behavior in the region, and its development of nuclear technology. These perspectives capture only a small dimension of this new geopolitical dynamic, and in some cases distort our understanding of the region. This study is

an attempt to open the aperture of our perspective and free ourselves from outdated concepts for this region. We need to understand the changes under way in the geopolitical system.

My thanks to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which provided a grant that was responsible in part for making this effort possible. Of course, the statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the many U.S. and foreign officials and experts who shared their insights on the internal dynamics, bilateral relations, and regional and geopolitical interests and strategies of Turkey, Russia, and Iran. We are particularly grateful to the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), led by Dr. Guven Sak, and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IVRAN), directed by Vitaly Naumkin. These institutions organized workshops in Ankara and Moscow resulting in a rich dialogue that has enhanced our analysis and provided insight impossible to gain from Washington, D.C.

Within the CSIS family, we are especially grateful to John Hamre, president, chief executive officer (CEO), and Pritzker Chair, as well as to Craig Cohen, executive vice president, for their steadfast support for the project from its inception. We also benefited greatly from the first-rate research and administrative support provided by a talented group of young scholars including Craig Bonfield, Tom DeMaio, Andrew Haimen, Leigh Hendrix, Daniel Holodnik, Rob Keane, Peter Kiss, Deni Koenhems, Sung In Marshall, James Merz, Alex Palmer, Melinda Reyes, Martha Schmitz, Rebecka Shirazi, and Aigerim “Aika” Zikibayeva. We also thank Andrew Gossett, director of grants management, for his sound guidance on grant reporting and interest in our success. We are also grateful to James Dunton, director of publications, for his helpful editorial guidance and to Alison Bours, creative director, for her design work.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the intellectual vision of Dr. Stephen Flanagan, who skillfully guided this ambitious project up until his departure from CSIS earlier this year to rejoin government and tackle these tricky relationships head-on.

1 Introduction

Samuel J. Brannen

Turkey, Russia, and Iran are modern heirs to ancient empires. Throughout history these neighbors have fought and traded, but have never sustained political cooperation. The question this report seeks to answer is: Are these patterns on the verge of changing? In coming decades could these countries constitute a geopolitical subsystem?

Such a development, while not on the current horizon, would be a significant development, and almost certainly run contrary to U.S. interests. Even an enduring alignment between two of these three countries could create serious complications in the international system. In the March 2013 precursor to this report, *The Turkey, Russia, Iran Nexus: Driving Forces and Strategies*, CSIS scholars presented key findings on the forces and interests shaping relations among Turkey, Russia, and Iran. This was an original research effort grounded in questioning assumptions about how these countries interact today and how they might interact in the near future in light of shifting political, security, energy, and economic dynamics.

In this report, we present the interests and relations of Turkey, Russia, and Iran in the three regions of the world where their interests most intersect or compete: the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. We largely limit our analysis to the past two decades of history, and we prognosticate only into the near future. Finally, we assess the implications for the United States. There is a richness in each case worthy of further investigation, but this is a starting point for interested parties in the United States and abroad to understand the core motivations and intent of these three formative actors on the world stage.

In Chapter 2 Jon Alterman finds in the Middle East the most volatile intersection of relations between Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The region has been the focus of Turkish-Iranian competition for half a millennium, although there is also a deep history of trade and cooperation. By contrast, Russia has few enduring interests in the Middle East. Even so, all three powers are deeply involved in the Syrian conflict. Support for the Assad regime and opposition to U.S.-led intervention splits Russia and Iran from Turkey. Regarding Iran's suspected nuclear program, Alterman finds that Iran's reliance on ambiguity has made this less of a factor in relations with Turkey and Russia over the past several years. However, the potential is apparent for this to become again a reason for friction or alignment.

In Chapter 3 Andrew Kuchins and Jeffrey Mankoff demonstrate that the Caucasus remains an area of sustained friction in Turkish-Russian-Iranian interactions, in which each country feels it has an enduring strategic interest. For Turkey, the region is an essential corridor to Caspian and Central Asian hydrocarbons, though its attention to the region has decreased in line with its growing interest in the Middle East. Russia remains the most influential outside power in the region and seeks to keep others out and energy flowing to Europe through only the routes it controls. Its influence in the region is strongest felt through its military presence in Armenia and the disputed Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While Iranian involvement in the Caucasus has decreased in recent years in line with its overall isolation due to its nuclear program, Tehran has boosted cooperation with Armenia and increased support to Shi'a groups in Azerbaijan to push back against Baku's strategic alignment with Israel, Turkey, and the West.

In Chapter 4 Jeffrey Mankoff finds that Russia has sustained interests in Afghanistan and especially Central Asia that Iran and Turkey do not share. The focus by Iran and Turkey over the past decade on the region has been largely linked to U.S. activities during the Afghanistan war, and for Turkey to considerable business and cultural interests as well. Seeking to maintain its strategic leverage of energy supply and transit routes, Russia is concerned with Turkey's involvement in the region. To a lesser degree, Russia watches warily Iran's economic and cultural involvement in Tajikistan. Amid the continued drawdown of U.S. and Afghanistan International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces from Afghanistan, Russia has sought to enhance security cooperation in Central Asia at the bilateral level as well as through deeper economic and political integration. Perhaps most important for the region, and covered in greater detail in the final chapter, is the lack of a coherent U.S. policy or presence.

The Nexus

The direction Turkey, Russia, and Iran choose this century will largely guide the course of their less powerful neighbors, as has been the case for centuries. Deep understanding of these three countries is necessary: how they see themselves, their neighbors, each other and the United States in the world; what they value; where they are willing to negotiate. Turkey, Russia, and Iran have in common regional power and influence, sophistication of foreign engagement if not always strategy, and strong links between domestic politics and foreign policy.

During discussions of this project over the past two years with a range of foreign policy thinkers in Washington, Ankara, Moscow, and other capitals, the CSIS project team often received strong reactions. Some foreign policy analysts and practitioners dismissed outright the proposition to consider these countries as an emerging subsystem. Others expressed strong support for such an approach and the geopolitical insights and reflections on U.S. foreign policy it could yield.

The more the CSIS study team probed the growing connections between these countries, the more evidence we found of connectivity and subtle collusion. Yet, the more we assessed the stability and strategic significance of these connections and the likelihood they could progress into a bloc, the more skeptical we became of such an outcome. As soon as we would admit to the ephemeral nature of the connections, another headline would appear with another new link suggesting greater depth in relations, and the process would repeat itself. Perhaps more than anything, this was an exercise in quantum physics, in which relations have multiple simultaneous realities hinting at a possible end state we do not yet fully grasp. Most important, we agreed that there could be a reality in which continued U.S. missteps steadily increase the probability of an enduring alignment between Turkey, Russia, and Iran that could be detrimental to U.S. interests.

To some degree, similarities unite these three countries now more than ever—the challenge of rising middle class disaffection, aspirations for regional dominance, and resentment of U.S. hegemony—and threaten to create new, sustained alignment. On the other hand, the weight of the history of competition between them is tremendous. Perhaps for that reason, we found no evidence of an active strategy in Ankara, Moscow, or Tehran to forge a three-way bloc, but only its manifestation in tactical instances, such as ahead of the UN Security Council resolution vote on Iran’s nuclear program in June 2010. Turkey still looks to the West for its security and stability, and while it sees economic opportunity in Russia and Iran, it is supremely wary of both countries politically and chafes at its hydrocarbon dependency on them. Turkey may be conflicted about its future, but it is under no illusion that there is a reliable alternative to its Cold War inheritance of alliance with the West. While Moscow possesses a strategy to entangle the post-Soviet Central Asian and Caucasian states, there are no outward signs that such design exists for its interactions with Tehran and Ankara, which have vastly different historical trajectories and significantly more economic, political, and military power. Moscow is realistic in its assessment of the power of other states, and Turkey and Iran give it pause. While Iran seeks to reach out from its growing isolation and clearly sees certain advantages to having Russia and Turkey on its side, its complex internal politics and rivalries, and its enduring distrust of foreign powers, place stark limits on external engagement. Indeed, what most describes the strategy of each country toward the others is hypervigilance and self-imposed limits on cooperation. These are countries that have watched one another closely for centuries, assessing threat, vulnerability, or opportunity. There exists among these three a familiarity and worldview that is alien to Americans. Turkey, Russia, and Iran are neighbors who know each other all too well through a long history of trade, rivalry, and conflict.

2 | Turkey, Russia, and Iran in the Middle East

Jon B. Alterman with Carolyn Barnett

The strategic interests of Turkey and Iran intersect most often in the Middle East. Though cooperation occurs, each views the Middle East as a unique sphere of influence to which it is uniquely entitled. Arab states tend to view both Turkey and Iran warily, fearful of imperial ambitions and ideological overreach. Russia makes no pretext of being a Middle Eastern power, and it pursues a more transactional strategy in the region. Russia's legacy interests translate into arms sales, and it seeks to influence energy transit routes to minimize competition with its own downstream supplies and distribution to Europe. Russia also watches with concern the activity of jihadi groups for fear they will spread to its borders and influence its own Muslim population. Given strong U.S. and European interests in the Middle East, Russia also engages in the region as part of its broader strategy to pursue global influence.

Thus far, the region has been one in which two of these three countries often cooperate, but all three rarely do.

Syria Today

The starkest fault line in relations between Turkey on the one hand and Russia and Iran on the other today is over the conflict in Syria.

All three countries developed important relationships with Syria during the twentieth century. The former Soviet Union became close with Syria's Ba'athist regime during the Cold War, and the Soviets provided Syria financial and military support. A close Iranian-Syrian relationship emerged after the Iranian Revolution, built largely on shared opposition to Israel and the West.

Turkey long had more tumultuous relations with Syria as a result of border disputes and concerns about pan-Kurdish nationalism.¹ Relations improved significantly, however, beginning in the late 1990s. Following the use of coercive diplomacy by Turkey, including the threat of imminent invasion, Syria expelled Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader

1. Damla Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill," *Middle East Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 41–50.

Abdullah Ocalan in 1998. The rise of new leaderships in both countries—Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and Bashar al-Assad in Syria—inaugurated a period of warm cooperation. The two signed several dozen cooperation agreements in the 2000s, and by 2011 Turkey was Syria's largest trading partner. Due to Iraq's instability during this time Syria also became an important trade corridor for Turkey to the Gulf states and Egypt. Turkey viewed Syria as its foothold in the Arab world, and Prime Minister Erdoğan said in 2009 that the two neighbors shared a "common fate, history, and future."²

In 2007–2008 Turkey mediated indirect talks between Syria and Israel intended to resolve their conflict after 60 years. Following the Gaza War, talks broke off because of Turkish-Israeli tensions, not Turkish-Syrian tensions. As late as 2010 the Syrian foreign minister said at a Turkish-Syrian ministerial conference that close Turkish-Syrian ties "form the basis for stability in the Middle East," and were "an example to follow." He called for a resumption of Turkish mediation on Syria-Israel ties, and argued that only Turkey was an acceptable interlocutor for those talks.³

Since the uprising-turned-civil-war began in Syria in 2011, however, the warm Turkey-Syria relationship has fallen apart. For the first few months Turkey tried to use its close ties to Assad to affect the course of the uprising, though it turned to increasingly sharp rhetoric as time progressed. Erdoğan stated in March 2011 that he had spoken with Assad to try to convince him of the wisdom of responding to protests differently than other Arab autocrats had, by introducing genuine reforms and democratization.⁴ Turkish public statements drastically shifted a few months later after Assad ceded control of several northern areas to Syrian Kurdish groups (raising fears that the PKK would gain a base outside of Turkey from which it could launch attacks), after Erdoğan and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu endured what they believed were a series of personal affronts, and after they became personally convinced that Assad would not back down.⁵ Since then Turkey has been an outspoken opponent of the Assad government. It called for Assad to leave power, advocated for Western military intervention, and partnered with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states also opposing Assad. Turkey portrays itself as the protector of its Syrian "brothers and sisters," condemning a regime that it says has committed "ethnic cleansing" and "crimes against humanity"⁶ using policies that are "based on the suppression of the legitimate demands of the people through violence."⁷ It also makes more

2. David Schenker, "Turkey's shift on Syria gives West room to get tougher on Assad," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 9, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2011/0609/Turkey-s-shift-on-Syria-gives-West-room-to-get-tougher-on-Assad>.

3. AFP, "Syria says only Turkey can act as mediator with Israel," October 3, 2010, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gW4rtrf8GmevNNm1hvwRn1WWo1Sw?docId=CNG.649318c517e989a6cb277015a7fa72dd.c11>.

4. "Turkey anxious over protests in Syria," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 22, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=turkey-anxious-over-protests-in-syria-2011-03-22>.

5. Aras, "Turkish-Syrian Relations."

6. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Releases & Statements, No. 126, May 5, 2013, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-126_-5-may-2013_-press-release-regarding-the-latest-developments-in-syria.en.mfa.

7. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Releases & Statements, No. 113, April 19, 2013, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-113_-19-april-2013_-press-release-regarding-the-meeting-at-the-level-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-group-of-friends-of-the-syrian-people.en.mfa.

pedestrian appeals to its own security: Turkish officials state that Assad's actions threaten regional peace and stability⁸ and that Turkey must take "necessary measures" to protect its borders.⁹ In 2012 Turkey twice consulted the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), securing in December 2012 the deployment of Patriot missile batteries from the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States for its defense. In a move that has generated strong criticism from Tehran and Moscow, since 2011 Turkey hosts on its territory a radar as part of the NATO missile defense architecture (and largely aimed at the threat of Syrian and Iranian ballistic missiles).

Russia and Iran, meanwhile, have held firm in their support for Assad, though both portray their own support for the Syrian regime as a principled stance against foreign intervention and Salafi extremism—and in Iran's case, against a U.S.- and Israeli-led effort to undermine regional stability. Russia sees the Syrian conflict as an internal affair in which the government has at times used excessive force, albeit in response to a legitimate threat. President Vladimir Putin has admonished the United Nations and its members to see the situation "in its totality"¹⁰ and emphasized that "it is up to each people to decide their country's fate"¹¹ after Russia vetoed a UN resolution that would have sanctioned the Assad regime. More recently, Russian statements have condemned proposed UN language because it appears to criticize only one side, failing to note rebel groups' use of human shields.¹² In discussions with Western interlocutors, Russian experts have been coldly calculating about their national interests and Syria's ability to serve them, showing little regard for humanitarian interests at stake. In these discussions, Russians speak plainly about their fear that jihadi groups in Syria may spill over into supporting groups fighting in the Caucasus. They also worry aloud at the precedent that foreign intervention sets in the context of state sovereignty. In public, Russian officials have explicitly stated that Russia's opposition to UN resolutions sanctioning Assad is a response to the West's use of UN resolutions against Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya to eventually overthrow him.

Iran has maintained the closest ties with Syria, making statements similar to those of Russia with regard to the importance of sovereignty and protection from foreign interference. For Iran, the Syrian conflict is genuinely strategic: its leaders fear that a successful campaign against Assad would put them next in line for regime change, and they worry about losing a key ally and link to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran believes that the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states are deliberately fueling the conflict, in part to undermine

8. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Releases & Statements, No. 75, March 19, 2013, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_75_19-march-2013_press-release-regarding-the-air-strike-carried-out-by-syria-on-lebanon.en.mfa.

9. A. Tagiyeva, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Turkey has right to take any measures to protect its borders," *Trend*, July 24, 2013, <http://en.trend.az/news/politics/2173614.html>.

10. "Meeting with Security Council members," President of Russia, October 7, 2011, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/2906>.

11. Ibid.

12. "Comment of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia as regards the draft statement of the UN Security Council on the events in the Syrian city of Homs," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, July 8, 2013, http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/3f54e68bb89ea40244257ba5002fcb78!OpenDocument.

Iran. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei noted that “the hand of America and Israel is evident”¹³ in the uprising in Syria, and Iranian officials portray their stance in the conflict as “anti-Zionist resistance.”¹⁴ In addition to its rhetorical defense of the Assad regime in what it portrays as a fight against terrorists, Iran has provided financial and material support to the government in Damascus.

These dynamics place both Iran and Russia in opposition to Turkey, though shared interests have also kept both sides from bluntly criticizing the other most of the time. Turkey’s turn against Assad threatens its economic relationship with Iran, including its significant energy imports from Iran,¹⁵ and neither side is eager to damage this relationship. Thus, even as each has used strong rhetoric in support of its own position on Syria, they have generally avoided criticizing one another explicitly. Iran likely sees Turkey as party to what it views as a U.S.-Israeli-Saudi plot to harm Iranian interests. Iran implies that Turkey is complicit in this Zionist plot—which offends Turkish sensitivities about its relationship with Israel. Iran also accuses the United States, the European Union (EU), and the Gulf states of providing aid to takfiri extremist groups in Syria, again indirectly criticizing Turkish support of the same but assiduously avoiding direct accusations.¹⁶ Former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also lamented Turkey’s alignment with Western powers when he wondered aloud: “Just imagine that Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the rest of the regional countries would stand firm side by side of each other. What would happen then?”¹⁷

The Russia-Turkey relationship has also remained cordial on the surface, with both sides avoiding public criticism of one another, but with signs that point to Erdoğan being increasingly frustrated with Russia’s stance on the conflict and with Putin in particular. Russia and Turkey signed new bilateral agreements with one another in December 2012 and announced a goal of more than tripling bilateral trade by 2020.¹⁸ In the same month, however, Russia complained after an attack by Syrian rebels that responsibility for the deaths involved “must be shared by those, who directly or indirectly support the bet on the military solution and force overthrow of the current government in Syria.”¹⁹ Generally,

13. Geneive Abdo, “How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 25, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68230/geneive-abdo/how-iran-keeps-assad-in-power-in-syria>.

14. “Supreme Leader’s Speech at Inauguration of Islamic Awakening and Ulama Conference,” Office of the Supreme Leader, Sayyid Ali Khamenei, April 29, 2013, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=contentShow&id=10574>.

15. As of early 2012, 51 percent of Turkish oil imports came from Iran. Ami Dedghi, “Iran Oil Exports: Where do they go?” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/feb/06/iran-oil-exports-destination>.

16. “Iran Lambastes EU-PGCC Statement on Meddling in Syria,” Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 2, 2013, <http://www.mfa.ir/index.aspx?siteid=3&pageid=1997&newsview=1707>.

17. “President Ahmadinejad in an interview with Al-Jazeera news TV: No one can decide on behalf of Syrian nation,” Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, October 3, 2012, <http://www.president.ir/en/42424>.

18. Dorian Jones, “Russia, Turkey Resolve to Find a Solution on Syria,” *Voice of America*, December 3, 2012, <http://www.voanews.com/content/russia-turkey-resolve-to-find-solution-on-syria/1557820.html>.

19. “Comment of the Spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia A.K. Lukashevich in connection with the terrorist attacks in Syria,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 12, 2012, http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcb3/9c87e1d90434dd8f44257ada004f2a53!OpenDocument.

Russia accuses the West of having double standards on human rights abuses and counter-terrorism efforts in its dealing with Assad, and officials in Moscow warn against external powers taking sides in the conflict or intervening. Earlier in the conflict Russia also denied that countries like Turkey had a vital interest in the outcome in Syria, claiming that “the situation doesn’t present a threat to international peace and security.”²⁰

For Russia and Iran, the main effect of the Syrian conflict on their bilateral ties has been to strengthen a shared sense that they stand in principled opposition to an unjust international system dominated by an aggressive United States. Iran voted against the UN resolutions that Russia and China have vetoed, and both Iran and Russia have offered financial and material support to Assad.²¹ The existing close ties between the two may even have contributed to Russia’s strong stance against sanctions or intervention and support for Assad.²² Following a chemical weapons attack in eastern Damascus in August 2013, both Russia and Iran condemned the violence but asserted that rebels had most likely perpetrated the attacks to provoke international action against Assad. Newly appointed Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif stated, “if the use of chemical weapons is true, it has definitely been carried out by terrorist . . . groups, because they have proved in action that they refrain from no crime.”²³ A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman similarly responded to the incident by suggesting it must have been a “pre-planned provocation” on the part of the opposition.²⁴

The divide between Turkey on the one hand and Russia and Iran on the other over the Syrian conflict today does not significantly alter the three countries’ relations with other important countries in the region or around the globe, but it does amplify the alliances and divisions that already existed. This is particularly true in relation to the Gulf Arab countries that have worked to bring down Assad, deepening the rivalry between them and Iran. In addition to its intrinsic internal dynamics, the Syrian conflict is a proxy war between Iran and the Gulf states. Turkey, meanwhile, has been pulled in on the side of the Gulf states, especially Qatar, with whom it has coordinated most closely in giving aid to rebel groups. This partnership has domestic political effects in Turkey: those who criticize Erdoğan’s active involvement in the Syrian conflict sometimes portray their position as one of avoiding entanglement in the regional activism and machinations of the Gulf states. However, Turkey and Iran have demonstrated a strong will to compartmentalize the negative and positive aspects of relations. A split on Syria does not necessarily poison

20. Henry Meyer, Brad Cook, and Ilya Arkhipov, “Russia Warns U.S., EU Not to Aid Syria Protests After Libya,” Bloomberg News, June 2, 2011, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-06-02/russia-warns-u-s-eu-not-to-aid-syria-protests-after-libya.html>.

21. Andrew J. Tabler, “The Hard Truths about Post-War Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139838/andrew-j-tabler/the-day-after-assad-wins?page=2>.

22. Andrew C. Kuchins, “Russia’s Contrasting Relations with Turkey and Iran,” in *The Turkey, Russia, Iran Nexus: Driving Forces and Strategies*, ed. Stephen J. Flanagan (Washington, DC: CSIS, March 2013), 19, http://csis.org/files/publication/130318_Flanagan_TurkeyRussiaIran_web.pdf.

23. “Syrian rebels behind chemical attacks if true, Iran tells Turkey,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 22, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=517&nID=53018&NewsCatID=352>.

24. “Russia says rebels may have staged alleged Syria chemical attack,” Reuters, August 21, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/21/us-syria-crisis-chemicals-russia-idUSBRE97K0SB20130821>.

overall relations. Even as they compete in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, a largely isolated Iran prefers to maintain generally positive ties to Turkey, and Turkey prefers that Iran not actively identify it as an enemy and thereby activate its proxies, including possible support to Kurdish militants. Trade and energy ties also play a stabilizing or constraining role on the floor to the relationship.

Iran Case Study

Iran's widely assumed nuclear weapons program has been a source of friction and alignment between Turkey, Russia and Iran. Both Turkey and Russia have sought to mediate Iran's confrontation with Western powers, and they have also expressed exasperation at Iranian tactics and uncertainty as to Iranian strategy.

At first glance, Turkey and Russia are closely aligned on the Iranian nuclear issue. Both countries argue that Iran should be more transparent about its activities. They are opposed to Iran attaining nuclear weapons and firmly opposed to military action to prevent such an outcome. They appear unified in their belief that diplomacy and engagement are the only routes to satisfying Iran's legitimate ambitions to develop nuclear power. Of the two, however, Russia has more often seemed impatient with Iranian behavior, and Turkey has been more assertive putting itself forward as a mediator between Iran and the West.

On its face, Russia would seem to be the country with the closest interests to Iran. Russian engineers helped complete the Bushehr nuclear reactor in southern Iran, bringing in more than a billion dollars in fees. Russia is also supplying fuel for the plant, and Russian engineers are helping to operate it. It came as something of a surprise, then, when a Russian-Iranian rift emerged in 2009. In October, U.S., French, and Russian negotiators put forth a proposal that would have shipped tons of low-enriched uranium (LEU) out of Iran in exchange for more highly enriched uranium needed for the Tehran Research Reactor. The proposal was appealing to the negotiators because it would reduce the risk of Iran developing its own stockpiles of highly enriched uranium, which could be then diverted to a weapons program. As proposed, the uranium would be enriched in Russia and converted into fuel rods in France. Iranian negotiators seemed warm to the idea, but the reception in Tehran was much cooler, and the initiative languished.

Russia seemed especially stung by the initiative's failure, causing increased tension in Russian-Iranian relations. The discovery in September 2009 of an Iranian enrichment facility being constructed near Qom exacerbated tensions. In June 2010 Russia voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which barred many arms transfers to Iran (including the Russian-produced, advanced S-300 surface-to-air missile system that Russia had agreed to sell to Iran in 2007). Russian and Iranian officials traded insults, and relations drifted downward.

Turkey, however, viewed the failure of talks as an opportunity for creative diplomacy. Encouraged by the United States, Turkey continued to pursue the swap and joined forces

with Brazil when it became clear Brazilian diplomacy was pursuing a similar goal independently.²⁵ During the months the agreement was under negotiation, Turkish foreign minister Davutoğlu visited Iran seven times, his counterpart Manouchehr Mottaki visited Turkey five times, and the two shared more than 40 phone calls.²⁶

Somewhat strangely, the deal's success and its failure were intertwined. Shortly after American officials turned openly skeptical in May 2010, Turkey and Brazil announced an agreement.²⁷ One reason Iran accepted the deal, reportedly, was Iran's understanding that that Russia and China would back a new round of sanctions.²⁸ The agreement explicitly noted Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. It stated that Iran would ship 1,200 kilograms (kg) of low-enriched uranium (LEU) to Turkey within one month.²⁹ From the U.S. perspective, however, the shipment of LEU out of Iran was not as much of a prize in June as it had been the previous October, because Iran had been enriching uranium throughout the period. Rather than eliminating the threat of Iranian breakout capacity, the deal enshrined it.

Iran emerged for the worse from this round: it lost access to the S-300 air defense system it sought from Russia, and it faced a new round of tough sanctions and other restrictions that added to its economic difficulties. The damage done to the Turkey-Iran economic relationship hurt Iran more than it hurt Turkey, because Turkey is one of the only countries with which Iran can do business.³⁰

Russia benefited tremendously from the U.S. willingness to press Iran. After Russia voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 1929, for example, President Barack Obama backed down from former president George W. Bush's commitment to building a missile defense system in Eastern Europe. Even so, Russia has not truly turned on Iran. Within the Security Council, Russia worked with China to ensure that the new sanctions did not target Iran's oil and gas sector and generally included few mandatory restrictions. Russia opposes broad sanctions on Iran, in large part because broader sanctions hurt Russian businesses that trade with Iran.

Ultimately, tensions over the nuclear program have had a far less significant impact on relations among Turkey, Russia, and Iran over the past few years than the uprising and civil war in Syria has had. The Iranian nuclear program has been a long-running

25. Aylin Gurzel, "Turkey's Role in Defusing the Iranian Nuclear Issue," *Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2012): 146, <http://csis.org/files/publication/twq12SummerGurzel.pdf>.

26. Scott Peterson, "US answer to Iran nuclear swap: Overnight deal on sanctions," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 18, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2010/0518/US-answer-to-Iran-nuclear-swap-Overnight-deal-on-sanctions>.

27. Scott Peterson, "Iran nuclear fuel swap deal," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 17, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/0517/Iran-nuclear-fuel-swap-deal-What-it-involves-and-how-it-will-affect-US-push-for-sanctions>.

28. Gurzel, "Turkey's Role."

29. "Text of the Iran-Brazil-Turkey deal," Global Security Blog, *The Guardian*, May 17, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2010/may/17/iran-brazil-turkey-nuclear>.

30. Ibid.

game of chess, with each side seeing many moves ahead of it, and no blood flowing in the streets. Syria has forced many more difficult choices, and the consequences have been dire. Iran's objective appears to be to maintain as much ambiguity as possible on its nuclear program, to prevent precisely the types of choices Syria has posed to both its neighbors.

3 | Turkey, Russia, and Iran in the Caucasus

Andrew C. Kuchins and Jeffrey Mankoff

The Caucasus represents an area of sustained Turkish-Russian-Iranian strategic interactions and, for now, relatively benign competition.¹ Roughly, the region breaks down into a north-south axis of Russia, Armenia, and Iran and an east-west axis of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The region's political and sectarian divides are nearly as complex as those of the Middle East. This chapter examines two principal case studies to understand the dynamics between Turkey, Russia, and Iran in the region. First, we look back at the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, with implications for the future. Second, we look at Azerbaijan, an increasing point of friction between numerous countries in the context of the competition between Iran, Israel, the United States, and Russia.

Russia remains the most important external actor in the Caucasus, where it has significant Soviet legacy military deployments in Armenia and de facto control of the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (remaining from the 2008 war with Georgia). The Caucasus provides Turkey an important transit corridor to the Caspian and Central Asia both for overland shipping and as a route for east-west energy pipelines. For Tehran, relations with the states of the South Caucasus are largely instrumental in its interactions with Russia, Turkey, and the West. However, Iranian involvement in the Caucasus has diminished over the past decade as Iran has become more dependent on Russia as an intermediary with an outside world increasingly concerned by its nuclear program. With so few advocates in the international system, Tehran has calculated for now that it is not worthwhile to directly contest Russian interests in the Caucasus as this could diminish Russian enthusiasm to defend Iranian interests at the UN Security Council over its nuclear program.

For Russia, the South Caucasus is an important frontier zone where Moscow seeks to project power and limit threats to its own security—whether the presence of foreign military forces or of rebel groups crossing over from its own unstable North Caucasus. Armenia is Russia's main partner in the region, although Moscow would like to expand its ties with Azerbaijan, including by establishing itself as a mediator in the

1. The South Caucasus here refers to the independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (including the de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), while the North Caucasus encompasses the Russian-ruled regions of Adygea, Karachevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan.

Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, but these efforts are not meeting much success. The Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia continue to be a thorn in Moscow's side, even after its defeat of the Georgian military in 2008. As a patron of Azerbaijan and Georgia's efforts to forge ties with the West, Turkey has been an obstacle to efforts at consolidating Russian influence in the South Caucasus. Iranian and Russian approaches to the Caucasus have generally aligned, although Iran's capacity to foster instability in both the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus is a source of concern in Moscow dating back to the first Chechen conflict in the 1990s. Moscow is pleased that Iran has never supported any terrorist or opposition groups in the North Caucasus (Tehran never criticized either the Yeltsin or Putin governments for the two Chechen wars, for example), but is cognizant of its ability to do so and would not want to incite Iran to take such measures.

Much of Ankara's efforts have focused on energy, with Turkey providing diplomatic support as well as a market for Caspian oil and gas piped across Azerbaijan and Georgia. These pipelines have reduced Azerbaijan and Georgia's economic—and hence political—dependence on Russia, underpinning their pro-Western foreign policies and serving as a source of tension with Moscow, as well as a platform for deepening political and security cooperation between Baku, Tbilisi, and Ankara. Turkey's engagement with the South Caucasus focuses on supporting Azerbaijan in its long-standing conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and on establishing an east-west transit corridor between the Caspian Sea, the Middle East, and Europe. Turkey remains at loggerheads with Yerevan over its complicated history with the Ottoman-era Armenian population, and how this has played out in Turkey's relations with the modern-day Armenian diaspora.

Iran's overall engagement with the Caucasus has waned in recent years as Russia has increasingly reasserted its influence in the region, with Tehran largely deferring to Moscow as it focuses more on its regional competition in the Middle East. However, the Caucasus remains a point of friction between Iran and Turkey. Turkish support for Azerbaijan underpins the deepening confrontation between Azerbaijan and Iran, which has an ethnic Azeri population of around 16 percent. While it is true that there has been a distancing between the highly secular Azerbaijani government and the dominant Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP)—particularly due to Turkey's 2008–2009 effort to normalize relations with Armenia—Azerbaijan remains close to Turkey, symbolized in the strategic partnership agreement (which includes a mutual defense clause) signed in 2010. Azerbaijan is also the focus of limited sectarian confrontation with Tehran, which funnels support to Shi'a groups, particularly in rural areas, to push back against Baku's strategic alignment with the West, Israel, and Turkey. Given the confrontation between Iran and Azerbaijan, the consequences of military action against Iran's nuclear program could spill over into the Caucasus, and specifically into Azerbaijan.

Georgia 2008

The Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 grew out of Tbilisi's pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration and Moscow's efforts to limit the expansion of Western influence into the

Caucasus.² The war allowed Russia to check North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion in the region, but at high cost. It threatened to undermine Turkey's efforts to balance expanded influence in the Caucasus with a strategic rapprochement with Russia. In the midst of that conflict, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey lamented that he would not let his country be forced to choose between its "closest ally," the United States, and its important trade partner, Russia.³ The conflict was also unwelcome for Iran, which maintained a deliberately low profile throughout and sought to uphold cooperative relations with both Moscow and Tbilisi, even as it feared the consequences of a more aggressive Russian approach to the region.

In the years following the Soviet collapse, the separatist conflicts in Georgia provided Russia an opportunity to project power into the Caucasus, but at the expense of pushing Tbilisi into closer alignment with the West and with Turkey. Initially at the behest of local commanders, Russian troops stranded by the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) participated in the conflicts between Tbilisi and militia forces pursuing South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence in the early 1990s.⁴ Moscow ultimately imposed cease-fires that ended the conflicts and established Russian-dominated peacekeeping forces in both regions. Though ostensibly neutral, these peacekeepers provided security for the unrecognized Russian-backed regimes that exercised power over both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

As the price for supporting President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia against rebels loyal to the previous president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Moscow forced Tbilisi to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in October 1993 and to accept a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in February 1994 that provided for the deployment of Russian forces in Georgia proper. These deployments allowed Moscow to expand its military presence in the South Caucasus beyond Armenia that both served as a source of leverage against Turkey and excluded NATO from the region. Russia's interest in the South Caucasus also stemmed from the concern about the spread of instability in the North Caucasus. Russian incursions to drive militants from the remote Kodori Gorge nearly resulted in clashes with Georgian forces in 2001–2002, leading to Washington's decision to initiate the Train and Equip Program to enhance Georgian capacity to combat these militants on Georgian territory so there would be less need for Moscow to do the job.⁵

2. See Andrew C. Kuchins and Alexandros Peterson, "Turkey, Russia, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia," in *Turkey's Evolving Dynamics: Strategic Choices for U.S.-Turkey Relations*, ed. Stephen J. Flanagan (Washington, DC: CSIS, March 2009), http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/090408_flanagan_turkeyreport_web.pdf.

3. Bulent Aliriza, "Turkey and the Crisis in the Caucasus," *CSIS Commentary*, September 9, 2008, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/080909_aliriza_caucuses.pdf.

4. Charles King, "The Five Day War: Managing Moscow after the Georgia Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 6 (November/December 2008): 2–11. While these Russian forces were involved on both sides of these conflicts, as time went on they became more supportive of the separatists as the Georgian government pushed to limit the Russia's role, and especially after Georgian forces shot down two Russian helicopters over Abkhazia in late 1992 and Russian air force planes carried out bombing raids over the Georgian-held Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi.

5. Ketil Bochorishvili, "Georgia: Fear and Poverty in the Kodori Gorge," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, May 13, 2002, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/georgia-fear-and-poverty-kodori-gorge>. For background on the incident, see Jacob W. Kipp, "The War Scare in the Caucasus: Redefining the Threat," in *Russian Military Reform 1992–2002*, ed. Anne C. Aldis and Roger N. McDermott (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2003), 234–258. Moscow accused Tbilisi of deliberately sheltering the militants, and even transporting them to the Kodori Gorge (which crosses the border between Georgia proper and Abkhazia) to destabilize the Abkhaz separatist regime.

Relations with Shevardnadze were rarely good, and Moscow to some extent facilitated the Rose Revolution and the rise of Mikheil Saakashvili as the new Georgian president. Relations between Moscow and Tbilisi nevertheless deteriorated quickly after 2003 when Saakashvili not only sought to reassert Georgian sovereignty over the breakaway regions, but later demanded the departure of Russian troops. He portrayed Georgia as an aspiring outpost of the West, undermining the role of pro-Russian oligarchs in Georgian politics and pursuing a path to membership in NATO. Russia's decision not to intervene when Saakashvili reasserted control (with Turkish assent) over the restive Muslim-majority province of Adjara in early 2004 encouraged Saakashvili to pursue reintegration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well.⁶ Saakashvili simultaneously stepped up his campaign for Georgian NATO membership, which NATO formally endorsed at its April 2008 Bucharest summit.⁷

The conflict that subsequently broke out in August 2008 allowed Russia to achieve most of its strategic goals vis-à-vis Georgia.⁸ After inflicting a severe defeat on Georgia's Western-trained forces, Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, whose de facto regimes allowed Moscow to maintain troops on their territory.⁹ The war also sapped international support for Georgia's NATO ambitions and weakened Saakashvili, although international pressure compelled Russia to abandon its efforts to overthrow the Georgian leader. Russia's victory, however, was pyrrhic. Widely blamed for starting the war, Russia found itself subjected to significant international criticism. The war also accelerated the economic crisis that was already unfolding in Russia, leading to an outflow of foreign capital and a significant downturn in the Russian economy in 2008–2009.¹⁰

The 2008 war created a serious dilemma for Turkey, which was seeking to simultaneously strengthen its relationship with Russia and bolster Georgia's sovereignty by providing an alternative to dependence on Russia for its access to global markets. During the late 1990s Ankara sought to strengthen ties with Russia as its prospects for membership in the European Union appeared to be fading. As part of this rapprochement, Turkey deliberately scaled down its engagement with the states of the South Caucasus, and eschewed support for Chechen and other North Caucasus rebels in exchange for the withdrawal of Russian

6. Ekrem Dindarol, "Saakashvili: Turkey is Our Strong Back," *Today's Zaman*, May 21, 2004. Unlike South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Muslim-majority Adjara had not claimed independence or fought a war with Tbilisi in the early 1990s. Under local strongman Aslan Abashidze, it did demand recognition of its status as an autonomous region within the Republic of Georgia, a step that many in Tbilisi believed prefigured a campaign for independence. Abashidze also sought to control trade flows through his region, not sharing customs duties with Tbilisi.

7. NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," April 3, 2008, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

8. Jeffrey Mankoff, *The Big Caucasus: Between Fragmentation and Integration* (Washington, DC: CSIS, March 2012), http://csis.org/files/publication/120326_Mankoff_BigCaucasus_Web.pdf.

9. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are currently recognized by Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Tuvalu in addition to Russia. Vanuatu initially recognized Abkhazia's independence, but explicitly acknowledged Georgia's sovereignty over both regions when it established diplomatic relations with Tbilisi in July 2013.

10. Jeffrey Mankoff, "Internal and External Impacts of the Russian Economic Crisis," *IFRI Russie.Nei. Visions*, no. 48 (March 2010), http://www.ifri.org/downloads/ifriengeconomiccrisisinrussia_mankofffevrier2010.pdf.

backing for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).¹¹ This mutual understanding between Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to refrain from supporting respectively the PKK and Chechen rebels marked the beginning of an extraordinary strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara that gathered considerable momentum with the dramatic growth of economic ties during the first decade of this century before the financial crisis in 2008–2009.

But Turkey has hardly deferred to Russian interests in the Caucasus while the bilateral relationship strengthened. Principal disagreements have involved energy supply and routes. Both before and after the Rose Revolution, Turkey had backed the construction of new east-west transit infrastructure from the Caspian across Georgia, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline. This infrastructure created a platform for deeper political and military cooperation among Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey that insulated Georgia from Russian pressure and facilitated its cooperation with NATO. Under the auspices of NATO's Partnership for Peace, Turkey also provided training for Georgian forces and helped upgrade its military facilities. Deepening ties between Georgia and Turkey was being pressed during this time by Washington. Russia also applied pressure. During the 2008 war Moscow placed significant pressure on Ankara to back off its support, demanding under the Montreaux Convention that Turkey close the Straits to U.S. military ships, with Moscow refusing permission for thousands of Turkish trucks to cross the border until Ankara gave in. The war also highlighted the vulnerability of energy transit across the Caucasus. The BTC pipeline in Turkey was disrupted by an explosion the day before the conflict began, an attack Ankara blamed on the PKK, while Russian jets dropped bombs not far from the pipeline's Georgian segment.

In response to the conflict, Ankara sought to “develop stability, confidence and cooperation,” through a proposed Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact (CSCP).¹² This came at the height of the implementation of Turkish diplomatic engagement through its “zero problems with neighbors” policy. Bringing together the three South Caucasus states along with Russia and Turkey, the CSCP was designed as a platform for addressing the region's continued fragmentation and ensuring the security of energy transit to Turkey. Though included in the CSCP, Russia backed the proposal halfheartedly, since Moscow had little desire to see Turkey emerge as a mediator in a region where Russia believed it continued to have “privileged interests.”

Since the 2008 war Turkey has continued to balance its dependence on Russia with its interest in expanded transit through the Caucasus. Following the imposition of a Russian

11. Support for the Chechen cause was strong in Turkey, not only because of religious solidarity but more importantly because of the large Chechen (estimated at around 100,000 people) and other North Caucasus diaspora populations in Turkey. During the wars in Chechnya, many Chechen political and military figures found refuge in Turkey, where a number have since been assassinated. See Wasfi Kailani, “Chechens in the Middle East: Between Original and Host Cultures,” Harvard Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, September 18, 2002, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/12785/chechens_in_the_middle_east.html.

12. Ali Babacan, “Calming the Caucasus,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/23/opinion/23iht-edbabacan.1.16407371.html?_r=0.

embargo ahead of the war, Turkey became, and remains to this day, Georgia's largest country trading partner. At the same time, it has been the only NATO member to formally engage the separatist regimes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, including sponsoring official visits. Turkey is also Abkhazia's largest trade partner apart from Russia.¹³

Iran largely sought to remain neutral during the war in Georgia in order to maintain its relationships with both Russia and Georgia. Prior to 2008 Iran had pursued largely cooperative relations with both Moscow and Tbilisi. Tehran sought to avoid alienating either one, given its mounting international isolation. While Iran opposed Georgia's NATO ambitions (which threatened to give U.S./Western forces an outpost closer to Iranian borders), it also worried about the consequences of expanded Russian military power in the region.

Though Iran has looked to Russia as an arms supplier and counterweight to the U.S.-led push for sanctions on its nuclear program, it has also sought to cultivate ties with Georgia as a potential outlet to European markets. While Iran is concerned by Georgia's pro-Western orientation, Tehran calculates that by developing closer relations, it can help ensure Georgia does not become a jumping off point for U.S. military power. Deepening relations with Georgia also allows Iran to pursue its ambitions of resuming its traditional role as a major regional power and potentially to develop new transit routes to Europe.¹⁴ Despite pressure from Moscow, Iran continued to provide energy to Georgia during the winter of 2006 when Russia sought to impose an embargo. Tehran and Tbilisi have also signed a series of bilateral agreements to facilitate trade and investment, especially in new infrastructure.¹⁵

As Iran avoided taking sides during the 2008 conflict, its Foreign Ministry remarked that the conflict was unfavorable to regional security, and offered Iran's services as a mediator.¹⁶ On the one hand, Tehran emphasized its commitment to territorial integrity and sovereignty (refusing to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia). On the other hand, the Iranian ambassador in Moscow voiced support for Russia's decision to go to war and to recognize the two breakaway republics.¹⁷ Since the war Iranian-Georgian relations have improved as Tbilisi has come to recognize it cannot rely solely on the United States. Though Tehran welcomed the check on NATO expansion in the Caucasus, it also worried that a more assertive Russia would constrain its own ambitions in the region and make Moscow a more difficult partner on the nuclear issue.

13. "Na doliu Rossii i Turtsii prikhoditsia sootvetstvenno 57% i 20% tovarooborota Abkhazii," *IA-Regnum*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/economy/1657114.html>.

14. Kornely K. Kakachia, "Iran and Georgia: Genuine Partnership or Marriage of Convenience?" PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 186 (September 2011), http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_186.pdf.

15. *Ibid.*

16. "Iran offers 'any help' in S. Ossetia crisis," Agence France-Presse (AFP), August 9, 2008.

17. "Iran not to recognize Abkhazia, S. Ossetia's independence soon," Fars News Agency, February 8, 2009.

Azerbaijan and the Caspian Basin Today

Like Georgia, energy-rich Azerbaijan has sought closer ties with the West to insulate it from dependence on Russia. Energy sales and ethnic solidarity have underpinned, at times, a close strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey that developed in the early 1990s during the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. This conflict remains among the most dangerous flashpoints in Eurasia as well as a topic of long-standing friction between Moscow and Ankara. Azerbaijan's relations with Turkey, and its recent deepening of ties with Israel and the West, have been a source of significant tension with Iran as well, which partially in consequence has developed close relations with Armenia. Russia too has leaned on Armenia as a strategic bridgehead in the Caucasus, facilitating a loose three-way alignment between Russia, Armenia, and Iran in opposition to the emerging Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey axis. The split between Russia and Azerbaijan was underscored by the termination of Russia's lease of the Gabala radar station in December 2012, Russia's sole remaining military presence in Azerbaijan. These competing axes rest in part on energy and transit infrastructure, which also facilitates communications across the Caspian, potentially expanding the strategic fragmentation of the Caucasus to Central Asia.

Russia supported local rebels and Armenian forces in their campaign to seize Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan in 1992–1993. Azerbaijan at the time was ruled by the radical nationalist Popular Front and the pan-Turkic president Abulfaz Elchibey, whom Moscow saw as a proxy for Turkish interests in the Caucasus. Moscow also imposed a settlement on the warring parties that left Nagorno-Karabakh under de facto Armenian administration and called for the deployment of Russian peacekeepers, though both Azerbaijan and the Karabakhis balked. Along with the United States and France, Russia is a cochair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group established to mediate the conflict in 1992.

Following the end of the fighting, Russia has remained Armenia's most important ally and military patron. Russia's role includes the deployment of roughly 5,000 soldiers at the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, as well as a security guarantee provided under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).¹⁸ Russia is also Armenia's most important economic partner (since Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey have remained closed since the 1992–1993 war), with the Russian state gas company Gazprom controlling the majority of Armenia's gas monopoly. Moreover, after months of pressure, Yerevan agreed in September 2013 to join the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Customs Union, despite its lack of a common border with any other member state and a general lack of enthusiasm among the Armenian elite.

Despite its patronage of Armenia and continued arms sales to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, Moscow views the continued confrontation between Yerevan and Baku as suboptimal, especially since it limits Russian influence over energy-rich Azerbaijan and provides a

18. Il'ia Karpiuk, "Baza v obmen na obeshchanie," Polit.ru, March 19, 2013, <http://polit.ru/article/2013/03/19/baza>.

rationale for Turkish—and potentially Western—influence in the region. Especially during Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency, Russia sought to mediate the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to secure its stature as the main regional broker. When Turkey was seeking in 2008–2009 to normalize its relationship with Armenia, Moscow sought to strengthen relations with Azerbaijan in response, offering to increase its purchases of Azeri gas and signing new weapons contracts with Baku.

Though the Turkish government was wary of involvement and the potential for confrontation with Russia, it faced enormous public pressure to support the Azerbaijanis during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Ankara closed its border with Armenia in the spring of 1993 following Armenian forces’ refusal to abandon the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan and has kept the border closed since. Turkey has subsequently acted as Azerbaijan’s key geopolitical patron, providing training and equipment for Azerbaijani forces, culminating in the adoption of a strategic partnership agreement in 2010. Turkey also regards Russian troop deployments in both the North and the South Caucasus as violating the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which limits signatories’ deployments in sensitive “flank” regions, though other signatories were reluctant to object and Russia in any case suspended its compliance with CFE in 2007.¹⁹

Though Turkey imports the vast majority of hydrocarbons to meet its energy needs, it seeks to use its geographical location and control of east-west pipelines as a source of leverage, including with the European Union, and provides the most important outlet for Azeri oil and gas to reach European markets.²⁰ These include the BTC oil pipeline, which opened in 2006, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline that started pumping in 2009. In 2012 Turkish energy companies Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) and Petroleum Pipeline Corporation (BOTAS) signed an agreement with Azerbaijan’s State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) to build the so-called Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP) from Azerbaijan’s Shah Deniz gas field in the Caspian as the backbone for the European Union’s planned southern gas corridor. These pipelines, which Turkey is also seeking to extend across the Caspian to Central Asia, have been a significant source of tension with Russia, which aims to maintain its dominant position in European energy markets, as well as with Iran.²¹ They have also provided a basis for deepening security cooperation among Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.²²

19. Richard Weitz, “The Potential Demise of the CFE Treaty: A Major Concern for Turkey,” *Turkey Analyst* 4, no. 8 (April 18, 2011), <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2011/110418B.html>.

20. Around 80 percent of Azerbaijan’s oil exports traverse the BTC pipeline to Turkey, along with the majority of Azerbaijan’s gas exports. See U.S. Energy Information Agency, “Azerbaijan Analysis Brief,” January 9, 2012, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=AJ>. Gas exports via Turkey are set to expand with the construction of the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline.

21. In 2011 Turkey imported 58 percent of its gas from Russia and 19 percent from Iran as compared to just 10 percent from Azerbaijan. See Şuhnaz Yılmaz and M. Tahir Kılavuz, “Restoring Brotherly Bonds: Turkish-Azerbaijani Energy Relations,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 240 (September 2012), http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm_240_Yilmaz_Sept2012.pdf.

22. “Turetskii gambit: ‘Patriot’ i ‘Samsun-Ceyhan’ v obmen na ‘Iuzhnyi Potok,’” *Azerros*, December 4, 2012, <http://azerros.ru/analytics/8153-tureckiy-gambit-patriot-i-samsun-dzheyhan-v-obmen-na-yuzhnyi-potok.html>.

The Russian invasion of Georgia highlighted the dangers of continued fragmentation in the Caucasus and encouraged Ankara to normalize its relationship with Yerevan. Opening the border would bolster Turkey's ambitions to become Europe's principal energy hub, facilitating shorter transit between Turkey and the Caspian and reducing Ankara's reliance on vulnerable lines of communication through Georgia.²³ In October 2009 Turkish and Armenian leaders signed a pair of protocols to normalize relations and open the border, but the process was ultimately derailed when Turkey balked under Azerbaijan's objections that normalization would deprive it of its most important lever for regaining Nagorno-Karabakh. When the deal unraveled in the spring of 2010, it appeared that both the Turks and the Obama administration, which strongly supported normalization, underestimated Azeri opposition to normalization that was delinked from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Despite the failure of normalization, Ankara continues its efforts to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan, both out of concern that renewed conflict could disrupt lines of communication through the Caucasus and from a desire to limit Russian and Iranian influence.

Turkey's efforts to normalize relations with Armenia by delinking the bilateral relationship from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict created considerable suspicion and distrust of Erdoğan in Baku. These suspicions only increased when Turkey took a strong position supporting opposition groups in Egypt and especially Syria at the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring. The Aliyev government in Azerbaijan is very sensitive on this topic, having no interest at all in seeing Muslim-inspired opposition groups gain more traction in Azerbaijan and possibly threatening the current secular authoritarian government. During the active phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (1988–1994), Iranian sympathies lay with Armenia largely because of fears that a stronger Azerbaijan could fuel irredentism among the roughly 12.8 million ethnic Azeris who live in Iran (around 16 percent of the Iranian population).²⁴ With the closure of Armenia's borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, Iran became an important corridor for Armenia's access to the outside world. An oil pipeline from Iran to Armenia opened in 2007 that helped ameliorate the consequences of the closed border with Turkey on Armenia's economy. Like Moscow, Tehran opposes the sale of Azeri energy through Turkish pipelines, preferring, when political conditions allow, to route Caspian gas through Iranian pipelines and opposing the development of new resources in the Caspian until territorial disputes among the five littoral states are resolved. This economic cooperation, coupled with Russia's generally productive relations with Iran, provides a foundation for north-south economic and political cooperation among the three countries.

Iranian-Turkish tensions in the Caucasus are also connected to their struggle for influence in the Middle East and the broader Muslim world.²⁵ As an ethnically Turkic, majority

23. D. Nigar Göksel and Sergey Markedonov, "Two views on the Caucasus . . ." *Turkish Review* 3, no. 3 (2013): 294–301.

24. The U.S. government estimates that Azeris comprise about 16 percent of Iran's population of 79.85 million. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *World Factbook*, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>. Other sources give higher figures, sometimes as much as 25 percent of the population. In comparison, the CIA's *World Factbook* estimates Azerbaijan's total population at 9.6 million, of whom 90.6 percent are Azeri.

25. See Mankoff, *The Big Caucasus*.

Shi'a but largely Soviet-legacy secular country, Azerbaijan sits at the crossroads of Turkish and Iranian regional policy approaches. Exacerbating tensions is Azerbaijan's security cooperation with the West as well as Israel, which fuels Iranian fears of Azerbaijan as a secular, pro-Western outpost that could act as a staging point for military operations (Western or Israeli) against Iran's nuclear program. Turkey's decision to host a missile defense radar in support of NATO in eastern Turkey in 2011 was sharply criticized by Tehran. Seeking to undermine Azerbaijan's secular, pro-Western government, Iran has also promoted hardline Shi'a ideology in Azerbaijan, funding preachers, beaming in Iranian television, and backing extremist organizations. Iranian agents have also been implicated in a series of foiled terrorist attacks on Azerbaijani, Western, and Israeli targets in Azerbaijan.²⁶

Looking to the near future, two events that could possibly significantly alter the regional dynamics described above are: (1) a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, and (2) a deepening Sunni/Shi'a divide in the Greater Middle East. In both scenarios, Azerbaijan, the most strategically significant country in the South Caucasus, would be most negatively affected. It is very hard to imagine that Azerbaijan would allow itself to be used as a platform for a military strike on Iran since the risk far outweighs the reward. It is similarly difficult to imagine Turkey, despite its status as a NATO ally, participating in a strike on Iran. However, in the event of an American and/or Israeli military strike, Tehran's likely response would be to destabilize perceived U.S. and Israeli regional partners, including most likely Azerbaijan. But such a response by Iran would likely run counter to Russia's interests unless the Azerbaijani government would feel compelled to strengthen security ties with Moscow. In fact, in the context of the Caucasus, this scenario would redound more broadly to the benefit of Moscow, possibly putting greater strain on Russo-Iranian ties.

Already the fallout of the uprising in Syria has sharply divided Russian and Iranian interests to support the status quo from Turkish interests, as defined by the Erdoğan government, to support political change. Political instability in Azerbaijan could possibly result in sharply opposed interests between Turkey and Russia, although Baku's emerging status as an energy hub could restrain the increasingly unpredictable Erdoğan. The response of Iran would likely depend to some extent on the nature of the opposition in Azerbaijan, but Tehran's strongest interest would be in preventing elements of empowered Azeri nationalism from crossing the border to Iran's Azeri population.

In sum, in reviewing events of the past five years or so, neither Iran, Russia, nor Turkey could be described as "winners" in Azerbaijan as the influence of all three states has decreased while the influence of the United States, the West, and Israel have increased. Energy cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan continues to develop as evidenced by the signing of the TANAP gas pipeline agreement, but in political and security terms, all

26. Ariel Cohen, "Between Iran and a Hard Place," *National Interest*, March 21, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/azerbaijan-between-iran-hard-place-6667>; Alakbar Raufoglu, "Iran-Azerbaijan: How a Close Relationship Disintegrated," *Foreign Policy Journal*, May 25, 2012, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/05/25/iran-azerbaijan-how-a-close-relationship-disintegrated/>.

three of the states under analysis in the study have lost ground. Another significant data point to support this was the failure of Moscow to renew the rental agreement for the Gabala radar station. Turkey's failure to normalize relations with Armenia backfired against Turkish influence in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, mainly to the benefit of Russia in Armenia and the United States and Israel in Azerbaijan. The outcome of the Georgia war also redounded to the benefit of Moscow as Georgia's aspirations for joining NATO were dealt a crushing blow and contributed ultimately to some extent to the downfall of Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) party in elections last year.

4 | Turkey, Russia, and Iran in Afghanistan and Central Asia

Jeffrey Mankoff

Russia has enduring strategic interests in Afghanistan and especially Central Asia. Moscow views Central Asia as both a source of potential threats to its own security and as an area where Russian interests predominate. Consequently, the involvement of outside powers—including Turkey and Iran—in Central Asia is often a source of tension with Russia. A particular source of competition with Turkey stems from Russia’s efforts to maintain control of oil and gas transit from the region to Europe. While Russia is relatively sanguine about Turkish business activities in Central Asia not related to energy, Russian officials are suspicious of Islamist organizations and institutions, including those tied to the Turkish-origin *Hizmet*, or Gülen, movement, which is often interwoven with Turkish business interests. Relations with Iran in the region are generally proper, in part because Russia does not view Iran as a major player, though it does regard Iran’s economic and cultural involvement in Tajikistan warily. Particularly with the looming departure of U.S. and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) combat forces from Afghanistan, Russia is seeking to ensure its continued primacy in Central Asia through enhanced security cooperation at the bilateral level as well as through deeper economic and political integration with the post-Soviet states of Central Asia.

After 2014 and the departure of the large U.S. and ISAF military presence, Turkey and Iran will largely disengage from Afghanistan, while continuing limited engagement in Central Asia. Ankara would like to play a larger role in promoting Afghanistan’s post-2014 transition, but, with growing challenges at home and in the Middle East, its ambitions are likely to be disappointed. Central Asia is unlikely to be the focus of the Turkish government, which will shift to an even more exclusive focus on internal dynamics, and managing relations with its immediate neighbors. Iran has nowhere near the presence and influence in Afghanistan that it does in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Its ability to affect sectarian dynamics in the region is limited by the comparatively small Shi’a population in Afghanistan and especially Central Asia. Tehran will, however, remain focused on its geopolitical rivalry with the United States and with its Arab and Turkish neighbors. Turkey has important economic and cultural links to Central Asia, but those do not translate to significant political influence given Russia’s predominance and Turkey’s own dependence on Russia as a provider of energy.

Out of purely national and financial self-interest, Russia has played a mostly helpful role in supporting U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Shared U.S. and Russian interests in limiting the spread of extremism and instability have ameliorated to some degree tensions over the deployment of U.S. forces to Central Asia. With the winding down of U.S. operations in Afghanistan in 2014, any future presence of U.S. forces in both Afghanistan and Central Asia will remain a source of tension with Moscow. Meanwhile, Russia faces growing competition with China for influence in Central Asia, as well as fears of further destabilization. Though it has done little to prevent a negative outcome in Afghanistan (something it regards as the responsibility of the United States and its allies), in Central Asia Russia has invested in several multilateral initiatives meant to build regional integration under its own leadership.

Central Asia: Overall Trends

During the war in Afghanistan, interactions among Turkey, Russia, and Iran in Central Asia have been mostly cooperative and focused on common objectives including a stable Afghanistan not under Taliban rule and stemming the outflow of narcotics. As a NATO member, Turkey has been supportive of these efforts, including contributions of troops to ISAF and its ability to act as an intermediary for the alliance in the Turkic states of Central Asia and Afghanistan.¹ Though opposed to the permanent deployment of U.S. troops in the region, Russia has mostly supported the Central Asian states' cooperation with NATO as a lesser evil compared with the spread of Taliban-style extremism to Central Asia. Despite its antagonistic relationship with the United States, Iran has not raised objections either, given its own opposition to a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and to Sunni extremism more broadly.

Within Central Asia, Russia's major objectives include remaining the principal economic and security actor, preventing the long-term deployment of U.S. forces to the region after the end of foreign combat operations in Afghanistan, securing Central Asia as a buffer against the spread of Sunni extremism and drugs from Afghanistan, and preventing Central Asia's oil and gas from competing with Russian energy supply and routes to European markets. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Russia supported efforts to oust the Taliban but opposed the deployment of U.S. forces to Central Asia, which Russia viewed as a threat to its regional influence. Once the leaders of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan made clear that they would approve U.S. deployments despite Moscow's concerns, President Vladimir Putin overrode the objections of many in the military and security services to eventually give Russia's blessing. Russia's attitude was based on a calculation that the temporary presence of U.S. forces in Central Asia posed less of a threat to Russian interests than did the consolidation of Taliban rule and the potential spread of Sunni extremism to Central Asia.²

1. The discussion of Turkey's role is based in part on interviews conducted by the author with a number of Turkish officials and think tank scholars on a not-for-attribution basis in Istanbul and Ankara in August 2012.

2. Leonid F. Riabikhin, "Rossiia i Zapad: Soderzhanie i perspektivy vzaimootnoshenii," in *Rossiia i Zapad posle 11 sentiabria* (Moscow: RAN-Institut Evropy, 2002), 68–69. Lena Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia: The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004).

As U.S. efforts shifted to Iraq in 2002–2003 and the political revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and, to a lesser extent, Kyrgyzstan, created a more conflictual U.S.-Russian dynamic, Moscow began pushing for U.S. forces to leave their bases in Central Asia.³ However, since the announcement of the U.S.-Russia reset in 2009, Russian aims have centered on ensuring stability and gaining acknowledgment of Moscow's priority interests in Central Asia and serving as the main conduit for Western interactions with the region. Moscow agreed in 2009 to halt its calls for an immediate end to the U.S. military presence at Manas air base, but with the announcement of the 2014 withdrawal, it successfully pushed Kyrgyzstan not to renew the lease. Russia also agreed to participate in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), facilitating the commercial transportation of personnel and non-lethal cargo on Russian railways, roads, and airspace. Participating in the NDN has been a financial boon for Russia, and has allowed it to strengthen trade and transit links to Central Asia. Not surprisingly, Moscow seeks a role in the “reverse transit” of cargo out of Afghanistan. Russia now argues that U.S. forces should stay in Central Asia and Afghanistan long enough to ensure that the threat of radicalism spreading from Afghanistan is contained, but should then depart.

The U.S. and ISAF withdrawal will leave Russia in a stronger position to consolidate its economic and political influence in Central Asia, both bilaterally and through multi-lateral integration projects such as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) Customs Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the planned Eurasian Union. During 2012 Russia signed agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to extend Russian military deployments in both countries⁴ and has promised significant amounts of military aid as well (\$1.1 billion and \$200 million, respectively).⁵ As Russian influence remains uneven across Central Asia, Moscow's integration efforts focus on Kazakhstan and the vulnerable states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. While these efforts at integration are not driven by any particular animus toward Turkey and Iran, they will have the effect of reinforcing the Central Asian states' tendency to look to Moscow as their partner of choice. Russian-led integration could also impact Turkey's economic interests by forcing the Central Asian states to raise external tariffs, to the detriment of Turkish companies.

3. U.S. forces left Uzbekistan at the end of 2005 amid the fallout of the unrest in Andijon that spring. Moscow also used various inducements to demand that Kyrgyzstan expel the U.S. troops stationed at Manas. See Jeffrey Mankoff, *The United States and Central Asia after 2014* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2013), http://csis.org/files/publication/130122_Mankoff_USCentralAsia_Web.pdf.

4. About 7,000 Russian troops are currently in Tajikistan and around 700 in Kyrgyzstan. The 201st Military Base in Tajikistan is a legacy of the 1992–1997 civil war there. It is based around three motorized rifle battalions (one each in Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa, and Kulob) and focuses on both securing the Tajik government and advancing Russian interests. The troops in Kyrgyzstan are mainly consolidated at the Kant air base, which is technically under the auspices of the CSTO. They were deployed in 2003 in response to the U.S. deployment at Manas. Their main mission is providing aerial support for CSTO missions, but they also guard Kyrgyzstan's airspace. Along with the Russian troops and specialists, Su-25 ground support aircraft, An-26 transport aircraft, and Mi-8 helicopters are stationed at Kant. Smaller numbers of Russian forces are also scattered about at three other installations in Kyrgyzstan and in Kazakhstan.

5. “Kirgiziiu i Tadjikistan vooruzhat rossiiskimi dengami,” *Kommersant*, November 6, 2012.

Moscow's calls for deeper integration are motivated by concerns for long-term stability in Central Asia. Russian officials express concern that, in the words of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the withdrawal from Afghanistan "creates serious risks for security in the region," including the potential for instability and extremism to spill into Central Asia.⁶ They portray Russian-led integration as the most effective tool for coping with the consequences. Efforts to upgrade the CSTO are especially important in this regard, as Russia seeks to create multilateral CSTO peacekeeping and rapid reaction forces (which will likely be commanded by Russian officers).⁷ Notionally, the CSTO's collective peacekeeping force (Kollektivnye Mirotvorchskie Sily, KMS) comprises 4,200 troops and the collective rapid reaction force (Kollektivnye Sily Operativnogo Reagirovaniya, KSOR) 19,000; personnel are to be drawn from member states' militaries, rather than forming standing contingents.⁸ Though there has been some discussion of deploying CSTO peacekeepers beyond the former Soviet Union (e.g., to Afghanistan), such a step would be unlikely to gain the consensus of member states. In addition to creating new forces within the CSTO, Russia has pushed to expand the CSTO's mandate to address internal security challenges in member states and to increase the tempo of CSTO exercises. Russia is keen for the U.S. and NATO to recognize the CSTO as a contributor to regional security and to establish official relations with it. At the same time, Moscow increasingly prioritizes the CSTO over the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) because the CSTO excludes China.

Russia also seeks to bolster its economic position in Central Asia, though its major rival here is China. The EurAsEC Customs Union, which currently includes Kazakhstan and is likely to take in Kyrgyzstan and perhaps Tajikistan in the future, will force Central Asian members to raise external tariffs while lowering barriers to trade among member states, particularly Russia.⁹ However, questions remain about the effectiveness of these organizations. Elites in Central Asia regard the EurAsEC Customs Union and the future Eurasian Union with some trepidation, though these organizations do offer them some capability to manage China's growing economic presence. Russia's main priority for economic integration is in any case Ukraine (whose historical-cultural ties to Russia, industrial base, and proximity to Europe Moscow sees as especially valuable), not Central Asia, which for Moscow is likely to be more of a burden than an opportunity.

As discussed in its official energy strategy report, Russia wants to remain the focal point for energy transit infrastructure between Central Asia and Europe.¹⁰ This requires

6. Sergey Lavrov, Remarks to the Kabul Regional Conference on Afghanistan, June 14, 2012, <http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-rasia.nsf/1083b7937ae580ae432569e7004199c2/c32577ca0017458644257a1d0036a364!OpenDocument>.

7. Richard Weitz, "Global Insights: Russia Banks on CSTO to Boost Security Role in Central Asia," *World Politics Review*, June 12, 2012, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12047/global-insights-russia-banks-on-csto-to-boost-security-role-in-central-asia>.

8. Sergei Blagov, "CSTO Seeks Stronger Security Arrangements," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 20, 2011.

9. Olga Shumylo-Tapiola, "The Eurasian Customs Union: Friend or Foe of the EU?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 3, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/10/03/eurasian-customs-union-friend-or-foe-of-eu/dyir>.

10. Russian Federation Ministry of Energy, "Energy Strategy of Russia for the Period up to 2030," 2010, http://www.energystrategy.ru/projects/docs/ES-2030_%28Eng%29.pdf.

preventing or limiting alternative pipelines such as the European Union–sponsored southern gas corridor. Rather than build a trans-Caspian pipeline to Turkey, Russia prefers that Central Asian countries either sell gas to Europe through Russian pipelines or send it to East and South Asia, for example, through the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. As long as Iran remains under international sanctions, energy cooperation between Iran and Central Asia is less of a concern for Russia because any Central Asian hydrocarbons going to Iran will not find their way to Europe.

Turkey will continue to view the region as an important market and potential source of natural resources, but, at the strategic level, will likely pull back its already limited engagement (mostly connected to the war in Afghanistan) to focus on more pressing challenges in its immediate neighborhood. It will, however, leave behind a strong economic and cultural presence, along with an interest in boosting its access to Caspian oil and gas. Broader Turkish interests in Central Asia center on maintaining the strategic autonomy of the Central Asian states (i.e., preventing them from falling completely under the domination of Russia or China, in part by securing the westward transit of Caspian energy), balancing political stability with support for eventual political liberalization, and deepening cultural and education cooperation across the region. Of course, Turkey also has an interest in limiting the spread of unrest, terrorism, or crime from Afghanistan into Central Asia, which could pose a threat to wider regional stability.

In contrast to the early 1990s when ethnic ties with the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and a U.S.-backed emphasis on countering Russian and Iranian influence provided a rationale for Ankara's engagement with the region, in recent years Turkey has approached Central Asia largely through the prism of the war in Afghanistan and as a target of opportunity for Turkish economic and cultural activity.¹¹ Engagement with Central Asia fits in with the vision of Turkey as a pivotal state between East and West articulated by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and others. Turkish ambitions are limited by resource constraints, tensions between the secular Central Asian regimes and Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party, and Ankara's prioritization of regions closer to home—especially the Middle East.

Turkey's relations with Russia represent an additional constraint. Most important is Turkey's continued dependence on Russian energy. Turkey imports about 66 percent of its gas from Russia, a figure that may rise in the short-term because of problems with imports from Turkey's second most important supplier, Iran.¹² At the same time, Ankara recognizes that it cannot match Moscow's influence in Central Asia, and it makes an effort to keep its security cooperation with the Central Asian governments within certain bounds to avoid

11. Bulent Aras, *The New Geopolitics of Eurasia and Turkey's Position* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 3, 96–98; Brent E. Sasley, "Turkey in Central Asia: Turkish Identity as Enabler or Impediment," in *The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors*, ed. Emilian Kavalski (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), 191–214; and Graham E. Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2008), 133–141.

12. BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy*, 2012, http://www.bp.com/liveassets/bp_internet/globalbp/globalbp_uk_english/reports_and_publications/statistical_energy_review_2011/STAGING/local_assets/pdf/natural_gas_section_2012.pdf.

causing problems with Moscow. Ankara also recognizes that with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the West will likely be less focused on Central Asia, increasing the importance of coordination with Russia. This consideration likely underpins Turkey's recent attainment of dialogue partner status in the SCO, which is dominated by Russia and China.

Turkey's primary interests in Central Asia will continue to be economic. Over the course of the past decade, Turkey has emerged as a major trade partner of all five Central Asian states. In 2011 Turkey was the number one destination for exports from Tajikistan, and number two for exports from both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.¹³ Private Turkish companies and business associations work closely with the government; delegations from the major business associations—the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (Türkiye İşadamları ve Sanayiciler Konfederasyonu [TUSKON]) and the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (Müstakil Sanayici ve İş Adamları Derneği, [MÜSIAD]) in particular—typically accompany Turkish officials on travel to Central Asia, and Ankara openly backs the activities of Turkish companies working in the region, including many that work in remote areas where few other foreign firms go.¹⁴ Turkish companies also provide support for the educational and cultural activities carried out by the followers of Fethullah Gülen, who run an extensive network of schools (including universities) in Central Asia that promote a common Turkish-Turkic culture and a Sufi-inspired version of Islam. The Gülen movement is a source of tension with some of the Central Asian governments (even those that officially support the movement's schools) as well as with Moscow, which sees it as a threat to continued Russian influence.

The activities of Turkish companies also give Ankara an interest in good governance and political stability in the region, which has sporadically translated into support for political reform, something that Russia and Iran do not emphasize. Especially since the onset of the Arab Spring, Turkish officials have stepped up their focus on democratization as part of their engagement with Central Asia, quietly criticizing their Russian and Iranian counterparts for embracing the region's authoritarian rulers.

Turkey's energy ambitions center on securing the westward transit of Caspian energy across Turkish territory. Turkey would like to reduce its dependence on oil and gas imports from Iran and Russia to enhance its own energy security. It aspires to play the role of an energy transit corridor or hub between Asia and Europe to strengthen its own influence and increase its leverage with the European Union.¹⁵ These aspirations were boosted by the 2012 agreement to build the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), but given the limited volumes available from Azerbaijan, long-term success will depend on extending this energy corridor across the Caspian to Central Asia. Turkey supports building a

13. European Commission Trade Statistics, 2013, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/statistics/regions/>.

14. TUSKON is an association of mostly small and medium-sized businesses, many with ties to the *Hizmet* (Gülen) movement. MÜSIAD is a religious-conservative business association connected to the *Milli Görüş* movement founded by former prime minister Necmettin Erbakan.

15. Einar Wigen, "Pipe Dreams or Dream Pipe? Turkey's Hopes of Becoming an Energy Hub," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2012): 598–612.

trans-Caspian gas pipeline to bring Turkmen—and potentially Kazakh and Uzbek—gas west, while Russia and Iran argue that Caspian infrastructure requires the assent of all five littoral states. To facilitate the trans-Caspian pipeline, Turkey has sought commitments from Turkmenistan to ship its gas to Europe, and it has attempted to mediate territorial disputes in the Caspian between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. At the same time, Turkey's energy bridge aspirations include in the longer-term serving as a transit state for Russian and Iranian gas sales to Europe. Turkey agreed in late 2011 to allow the Russian-backed South Stream pipeline to cross its exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea despite concerns about increased dependence.

Iran—unlike Turkey and Russia—shares a border with both Central Asia (Turkmenistan) and Afghanistan. Iran has focused its security efforts on preventing the spread of Sunni extremism and expanding commercial opportunities through Central Asia.¹⁶ Like Turkey, Iran does not consider Central Asia a first order priority. Though its engagement so far has been mostly opportunistic, Iran's global rivalry with the United States gives it an incentive to resist the expansion of U.S. influence in the region, particularly in the event that the crisis over Iran's nuclear program leads to a military confrontation. In particular, Iran opposes the long-term deployment of U.S. military forces to Central Asia, worrying that they could be used against it in the event of a conflict.

Iran serves as an important outlet for landlocked Central Asia's trade, giving Tehran a stake in Central Asia's stability and ability to resist subordination to Russia (or China). Iran imports oil from Kazakhstan and gas from Turkmenistan under a swap agreement. Gas imports from Turkmenistan are necessary because Iran lacks a pipeline between its major gas fields in the southern part of the country and population centers in the north and west. With the tightening of international sanctions on Iran's energy industry, dependence on Central Asian imports is likely to rise in coming years.

Relations with Russia and Turkey in the region are mostly correct. The sectarian element underpinning Iranian-Turkish confrontation in the Middle East and, to a lesser degree, the Caucasus is absent in Central Asia, which has only very small Shi'a populations. Iranian-supported extremist groups are practically nonexistent, though Central Asian governments, Russia, and Turkey are all wary of the potential for Iranian-backed radicalism. Iran and Russia worked together to impose a settlement ending the Tajik civil war in 1997 and continue to support the incumbent Rahmon government against various warlords and extremist factions. Iran maintains strong cultural relations with its fellow Persian-speakers in Tajikistan and has provided significant amounts of infrastructure investment, but these ties have had little impact on Russian or Turkish interests. Tehran could seek a larger role in Central Asia in response to U.S. efforts to establish a permanent presence in the region, but for now its interests are largely opportunistic and subordinate to its broader strategic aim of balancing U.S. global influence.

16. Discussion of Iran's role is based in part on unpublished work done for CSIS by Anthony Cordesman and Sam Khazai.

Central Asia: Afghanistan Today

While Turkey, Russia, and Iran would all like to see a stable and secure Afghanistan emerge following the withdrawal of ISAF forces in 2014, they lack the capability to ensure security and stability themselves. Russia is the most equipped to cope with instability through its connections to the ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen in northern Afghanistan, which Moscow—along with its Central Asian allies—will seek to leverage to limit the spread of Sunni radicalism and violence closer to their own borders. Though Ankara has said that Turkish forces will be the last to leave Afghanistan, Turkey has few tools apart from its ties to NATO to shape events on the ground. Ankara has engaged in a range of trilateral diplomatic activities with Islamabad and Kabul, yet this has yielded no discernible strategic outcome. Iran, which borders Afghanistan, faces the most immediate threats stemming from post-2014 instability. While Tehran too can do little to affect Afghan stability at the macro level, it is likely to press for a secure border and an extension of its political influence.

Moscow's support for ousting the Taliban and installing a moderate government in Kabul is largely connected to its concerns that extremism from Afghanistan could bleed over into Central Asia as well as into regions of Russia itself with large Muslim populations.¹⁷ A related concern is the expansion of opium production in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The opium industry has provided an economic foundation for Taliban rule, encouraged the breakdown of state authority in Central Asian transit states, and fueled a massive heroin epidemic in Russia itself. Moscow has charged the United States and ISAF with paying insufficient attention to the growth of opium production, and pressed for more aggressive counternarcotics operations. It has also facilitated quadrilateral counternarcotics and counterterrorism cooperation together with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.

Russia maintains ties to Afghanistan dating back to the 1979–1988 Soviet occupation. Moscow was instrumental in facilitating contacts between the non-Pashtun groups formerly comprising the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and the United States in the immediate aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks. At the same time, the fraught legacy of the Soviet war has made both Russians and Afghans wary of direct Russian participation in stability operations, including counternarcotics efforts.

The war in Afghanistan also bolstered Russia's efforts to gain support for its own military operations in Chechnya, which, it argued, were part of a single war on Islamist extremism. When U.S. focus shifted to Iraq in 2002–2003, Moscow contended that Washington's failure to finish the job in Afghanistan was creating a breeding ground for extremism even as it provided a pretext for the long-term deployment of U.S. forces. Russia continues to emphasize that U.S. forces must leave the region once combat operations in Afghanistan conclude; at the same time Russia claims that Washington has not done enough to ensure

17. Russia's Muslim population is variously estimated at between 15 million and 20 million people, mostly concentrated in the North Caucasus, the Volga region, and, increasingly, in Moscow and other large cities with significant Central Asian migrant populations.

long-term stability. In the event of renewed civil war, Moscow is likely to provide military and other forms of assistance to its traditional non-Pashtun allies in the north to keep the Taliban as far from the Afghan–Central Asia border as possible.

Given Turkey’s military role in ISAF, Afghanistan has been a higher priority than Central Asia for the Turkish government over the past decade. The private and nongovernmental organization (NGO) sectors have remained more focused on Central Asia. Ankara’s involvement in Afghanistan has been extensive. The decision to deploy troops allowed Turkey to focus on limiting Afghanistan’s role as a source of regional instability and obstacle to transit routes leading to South Asia, while boosting long-term access to Central Asia.¹⁸ Taking on a highly visible role in Afghanistan has also allowed Ankara to remind the West—including the United States, European Union, and NATO—of its political and military significance. Ankara has insisted on limiting these troops to non-combat roles, reflecting a desire to avoid alienating Afghan civilians as well as a lack of support for the war effort among the Turkish public that could become a serious political liability.

Turkish forces have played an important role in various regional commands around Afghanistan, including leadership of ISAF’s Regional Command Capital in Kabul in 2006–2008 (together with France and Italy) and again from 2009 through the present, with agreement to stay on at least until 2014 and with a potential residual presence thereafter. Turkey also leads the provincial reconstruction teams in Wardak and Jowzjan (which borders Turkmenistan and has a large non-Pashtun population) provinces. Apart from its military contributions, Turkey has been an active participant in Afghan reconstruction and development efforts, mainly through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). As with the activities of its military, Ankara has sought to use its support for reconstruction as a means of building goodwill in Afghanistan and highlighting its soft power, particularly in the Muslim world.

The multilateral negotiations on securing Afghanistan known as the Istanbul Process represent Turkey’s effort to create a regional framework for the transition. Though supported by the U.S. and its Western allies, the process has focused on getting buy-in from Afghanistan’s neighbors for a set of principles and commitments designed to ensure a sustainable post-2014 transition in Afghanistan.¹⁹ Though the Istanbul Process has managed to bring together a diverse collection of Western, Central Asian, Middle Eastern, East Asian, and South Asian state participants, it has had limited success in forging consensus among the key regional players or in securing real commitments for cooperation. It is a vivid example of Turkey attempting to leverage its ties to both the West and the Muslim world to carve out a distinct diplomatic role for itself; it also highlights the limitations

18. See F. Stephen Larrabee and Ian O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003), 103–104.

19. As agreed by the 2012 Kabul ministerial of the participating states, the Istanbul Process will focus on promoting confidence building measures in six sectors: counterterrorism; trade, commerce, and investment; education; counternarcotics; disaster management; and regional infrastructure (e.g., pipelines, roads, etc.). See U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Support for the Istanbul Process,” fact sheet, April 29, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/fs/2013/208560.htm>.

facing Turkish influence in the region. To the extent that Ankara's activity is driven by regional considerations, it has focused especially on the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a secular but culturally Muslim state, Turkey believes it enjoys a degree of influence and legitimacy that many of the other ISAF partners lack, especially vis-à-vis Pakistan.²⁰

Ankara continues to insist that it will stand by the Karzai government even after the end of ISAF combat operations. At the same time, like many of the regional players, Turkey is concerned about the Afghan government's ability to maintain its hold on power without a significant foreign military presence, and is consequently seeking to hedge its bets, including through cultivation of contacts with a wide range of Afghan power brokers, and through its relations with neighboring powers. Turkey's pessimism about the effectiveness of Karzai and the Afghan security forces is coupled with a deep aversion to the Taliban, whose return to power Ankara would view as a serious setback. Ankara wants to remain engaged in Afghanistan after 2014 to prevent a Taliban resurgence, but without the coordinating role currently being played by the United States and its NATO allies and partners, Turkish officials recognize that their capacity to unilaterally affect the outcome is limited.

Although Iran is the only one of the three powers to share a border with Afghanistan, its interests too are relatively narrow, as Iranian diplomacy remains focused on the Middle East and on a global stand-off with the United States. Tehran's major interests in Afghanistan center on limiting the impact of Afghanistan's insecurity on Iran itself, in particular the possibility for drugs, refugees, and violence to cross the Afghan-Iranian border. More broadly, Iran seeks to ensure Afghanistan is ruled by a stable and generally friendly government. For now, this means that Tehran is committed to working with Karzai to ensure stability, while at the same time maintaining ties to ethnic Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek factions as a hedge. The focus of Iranian engagement with Kabul is on boosting Iran's political and economic influence inside Afghanistan, enhancing cooperation on border security and counternarcotics, and preventing a long-term U.S. military presence. These interests generally coincide with those of Russia and, to a lesser degree, Turkey.

Iran's Shi'a clerical regime historically has had a confrontational relationship with the Sunni extremist Taliban, which massacred several Iranian diplomats in 1998, nearly leading to military retaliation. During the initial stages of the U.S.-led intervention, Tehran made cautious approaches to the Bush administration about sharing intelligence and cooperation in setting up non-Taliban security forces, suggestions the United States rejected.²¹ As U.S.-Iran relations deteriorated throughout the 2000s, Tehran was suspected of providing arms, money, and training to the Taliban as a means of gaining leverage against the United States and bolstering its retaliatory capability in the event of U.S. strikes against

20. Sedat Laciner, "Why do Turks Like Pakistan?" *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, July 16, 2008, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/columnist/2943/why-do-turks-like-pakistan.html>.

21. James Dobbins, testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, November 7, 2007.

its nuclear program, though Iranian involvement and influence in Afghanistan never reached the levels seen in Iraq.

Limiting the import of narcotics has become a higher Iranian priority in recent years. Tehran, which may have the highest rates of opiate use in the world, claims to have 50,000 personnel stationed along the Iran-Afghan border to interdict drug shipments. Counternarcotics efforts have also been a focus for Iranian cooperation with neighboring states as well as the United Nations. The shared border is also important as a crossing point for legitimate commerce, although this trade is much more important to Afghanistan than to Iran. Apart from the ability to use these trade ties as a source of leverage with Kabul, the most important economic connection for Iran is the ability to convert its currency to dollars in Afghanistan as a means of evading international sanctions on financial transactions.

Given its security and counternarcotics concerns, Iran is generally supportive of the international community's efforts to leave behind a stable Afghanistan after the 2014 withdrawal. Iran is a participant in the Turkish-sponsored Istanbul Process, even though it has taken some steps toward engagement with the Taliban. While it continues to have ties to the non-Pashtun factions in the north as well, Iran's preference for a stable, united Afghanistan means that it is likely to continue supporting the Karzai government as long as it appears capable of holding the country together. The most important variable for Iranian policy, however, is the broader state of U.S.-Iran relations, which will be shaped by events in the Middle East more directly than in Afghanistan itself.

5 | Squaring the Problem: U.S. Policy Considerations

Samuel J. Brannen

As evidenced in previous chapters, a durable Turkey-Russia-Iran bloc is unlikely given mutual suspicions and lack of strategic intent between the three former imperial rivals. And yet, there is a case to be made that the United States could through its own missteps create the conditions necessary for more regular alignment between these countries, contrary to U.S. regional and global interests. Absent effective U.S. bilateral and regional policies to manage relations (particularly in the Greater Middle East), Turkey, Russia, and Iran could be drawn closer together. Their occasional alignment has already begun to affect the politics of their less powerful neighbors. Should it continue, it will significantly complicate the exercise of U.S. influence in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia for years to come.

Syria currently divides Turkey from Iran and Russia. But beyond this single case, the basis for cooperation between Turkey, Russia, and Iran exists more than at any other time in history. Of greatest concern in the near future, a military strike by Israel or the United States on Iran could trigger a series of events in the region that could encourage active cooperation between Turkey, Russia, and Iran to further counter U.S. Middle East policy.¹ Likelier still are issue-based dyads, as already exist in the case of Russia and Iran standing together in their support for the Assad regime, or against NATO missile defense. There is no instance of alignment between these countries that does not complicate U.S. policy.

Mitigating these manifestations of sustained cooperation between Turkey, Russia, and Iran requires a more conscious U.S. approach than currently exists. Yet, there is no neat way to triangulate these countries or play them off one another like billiard balls. Even a straightforward approach of seeking to leverage Turkey's relations with Iran quickly runs into the complex aspects of their dynamics (in this case, Turkey's preference to entirely

The author is indebted to Andrew Kuchins, Jeffrey Mankoff, Bulent Aliriza, Jon Alterman, and T.J. Cipoletti for their review and comments on this chapter over a period of several months. The opinions expressed are the author's alone, but the analytic baseline and strategic perspective borrows liberally from the authors of the other chapters of this volume.

1. Turkey and Russia strongly oppose a nuclear Iran, but they also firmly reject the use of U.S. military power to resolve the impasse.

compartmentalize its relations with Iran from those with the United States). Rather than directly playing one against the other, the United States would be wise to seek leverage through its own bilateral relations with Turkey, Russia, or Iran, and with key strategic countries in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Deeper U.S. relations with each country and in each region would significantly decrease the potential for collusion between Turkey, Russia, and Iran to contravene U.S. policies. This requires an articulated strategy for engagement that moves beyond the current crisis-driven approach. The United States might emulate the approach it has used in Azerbaijan, where it took advantage of an opportunity presented by Russian and Iranian bullying and Turkish negligence to actively build its own deeper ties with Baku, which is now a point of strategic leverage for the United States in the region and with Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The opposite can be said for Syria. The United States' proclivity to avoid engaging with that country even as it spiraled into conflict led to greater involvement by Turkey, Russia, Iran, and others in the region contrary to U.S. interests, leaving the United States in a weakened strategic position.

Without a more proactive approach and a willingness to build influence and exercise it, the challenges facing U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Turkey, Russia, and Iran will grow. These countries already seek to balance U.S. power in the international system and their surrounding regions, and each perceives a decline in relative U.S. power over the last decade.

U.S.-Turkey Relations

Turkey views itself as a major regional power and arbiter more capable of managing instability around its borders than the United States. Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has called for the relationship with the United States to evolve beyond a “Cold War model” grounded in mutual defense, and in which Turkey always must choose the United States' side. Turkey has over the past year begun to better recognize the limits of its influence in the Middle East, but this has only compounded its frustration with perceived American missteps in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere.

Turkey is unique among these countries, of course, because it is a long-standing ally with which the United States maintains considerable—albeit frequently untapped—influence. Turkey does not actively seek to move to a “Eurasian option” for its future geopolitical alignment, but it has been increasingly drawn into relations with Russia and Iran through growing trade and overwhelming dependence on oil and especially gas supplies. While Turkey remains anchored in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its most important strategic relationship with the United States, it is significant that Ankara rarely criticizes Moscow and Tehran directly. In contrast, Turkey has often broken from the United States on policy over the past decade, seemingly preferring to deal with fallout in the U.S. relationship. There are many explanations why Turkey feels confident enough to act independently when it comes to the U.S. relationship, but the frequency with which Turkey exhibits this behavior despite core interests in its ties to the United States illuminates deep dysfunction between Ankara and Washington.

The Iraq war provided an essential explanation for problems in U.S.-Turkey ties under the Bush administration, as did Turkey's booming economy and sense of itself as a reemerging regional power willing to look to its Ottoman and Islamic heritage more positively. Frustratingly, Turkish officials today seem to view the Obama administration's frequent consultation with them—the very thing that they criticized as lacking from the Bush administration—as evidence of weakness and vulnerability that feeds Ankara's worldview of a declining West and rising East, with Turkey indispensable to the new order. Feeding the fire, senior U.S. officials observe as a tenet of faith that the United States might inadvertently “lose Turkey” if it is ever pressed too hard or its leaders disagreed with publicly.² In contrast, Turkish leaders—particularly Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—lash out routinely at the West. Though they are mostly careful to avoid directly impugning the United States, the language is not subtle. Turkish public views of the importance of the European Union, the U.S. relationship, and NATO continue to erode. While Turkey has been a perennial contributor to the Afghanistan International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and in 2011 agreed to host a NATO missile defense radar, there are no other major concrete outcomes from ties with Washington despite the remarkable level of high-level political engagement. Most notably, regarding the uprising in the Arab world, Turkey and the United States have repeatedly found themselves at odds on policy. And with both countries lacking a coherent strategy to respond to the upheaval, their agreement on ideal outcomes hardly matters.

Forging a more effective strategy for Turkey is difficult in this crucible moment of Middle Eastern instability. U.S. officials are likeliest to cling to the ineffective current approach rather than risk a new problem. But formulating effective policy for the overall region requires getting Turkey right. The instability sweeping the region is at least partly due to the collapse of the two previous iron triangles of U.S.-Turkey-Israel and U.S.-Egypt-Israel.³ Setting the challenge of Egypt aside, the United States is unlikely to repair collapsed relations between Turkey and Israel. Yet, Turkey remains an important stabilizing influence in the region. In that context, it deserves more committed consideration. Despite the considerable attention paid to Ankara by Washington by President Obama and other senior-most U.S. officials, the relationship has delivered few concrete outcomes that aid regional stability or advance mutual interests such as stability and democratization. Turkey also needs the United States' support—including for its defense—much more than it did even a year ago. This is unused leverage for the United States to press Turkey to play a more helpful—or less explicitly unhelpful—role.

U.S.-Russia Relations

Russia objects to the United States' penchant to unilaterally move goalposts and redraw the playing field of the international system through coercive means including the use of

2. This analysis draws on Samuel J. Brannen, “Troublesome Erdogan Feeding on U.S. Indulgence,” *National Interest*, August 21, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/troublesome-erdogan-feeding-us-indulgence-8926>.

3. Jon B. Alterman and Haim Malka, “Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Geography,” *Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 111–125.

military force. Contrary to popular U.S. domestic political and media assessment, Russia fully understands that the world has moved beyond the Cold War. The fundamental tension between it and the United States is a Russian view that the world has entered a multipolar era, having moved beyond the unipolar moment of the 1990s.⁴ Moscow views the world in essentially Westphalian terms, supporting states' sovereignty and inviolability as matters of principle as well as self-interest, and rejecting the right of the United States and its allies to intervene militarily in other countries. Having watched Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, Russia has become even more obstructionist to U.S. efforts to shape the international community's response to Iran and Syria. Russia also views the United States as fundamentally undermining Russian security through the expansion of NATO closer to Russian borders and efforts to give it global responsibilities. Moreover, it views Washington's prosecution of its foreign policy as inept.

While the Obama administration achieved greater consultation with Russia than the Bush administration, it continued to serve up a prescribed vision for response to global events that emphasized the inevitability of democratic transitions, above all in its response to the Arab Spring. This approach clashes with Russia's view of a multipolar world of sovereign states, in which the United States cannot dictate terms, and it came alongside initiatives that undermine what Russians consider core national interests, such as preventing a U.S. missile defense capability near their borders that creates what it perceives as nuclear strategic instability.

The United States could better manage relations with Russia through clearer recognition of Russian perspectives and core motivations, as well as realistic expectations of Russian cooperation. Washington should take seriously the reasons for differing Russian perspectives and deal with Moscow on the basis of national interests. Washington also should be strategic in seeking new areas for cooperation and new leverage that could change Moscow's calculus of overall U.S. strength. For example, the United States could consult more closely with Russia on post-2014 Afghanistan to identify a cooperative agenda, while also engaging more in Central Asia to balance Russian influence.

U.S.-Iran Relations

Apart from sporadic cooperation with Washington, as in the early stages of the Afghanistan war, Iran often seeks to defend itself with obstruction, countering through strength of conviction what it perceives as U.S. bullying. Iran is isolated in the international system as a result of its nuclear program and other actions against the United States and its partners, and this makes Iran feel uniquely vulnerable.⁵ Iran believes that the international system

4. For more on Russia's views of the evolving international system see Andrew C. Kuchins, "Reset Expectations: Russian Assessments of U.S. Power," in *Capacity and Resolve: Foreign Assessments of U.S. Power*, ed. Craig S. Cohen (Washington, DC: CSIS, June 2011), 114–123, http://csis.org/files/publication/110613_Cohen_CapacityResolve_Web.pdf.

5. See Jon B. Alterman, "Iran and the Turkey-Russia-Iran Triangle," in *The Turkey, Russia, Iran Nexus: Driving Forces and Strategies*, ed. Stephen J. Flanagan (Washington, DC: CSIS, March 2013), 21, http://csis.org/files/publication/130318_Flanagan_TurkeyRussiaIran_web.pdf.

is biased against it by design. Like Turkey, Iran also feels uniquely entitled to a great power status in its region because of its deep-felt nationalism and view of its historical power and potential. These factors compound to make Iranian competition with the United States unrealistic in the leverage it believes it has, and self-punishing, in that Iranian ends are unachievable. Its recourse is often to take actions that only compound its position of relative weakness and isolation. While Iran seeks to remake the international system and drive the United States from its region, it has no real power to do so.

The United States has imposed economically devastating sanctions on Iran, but the political objectives of those sanctions have not been met. In part, this is because many Iranians believe that U.S. hostility to the Islamic republic is a constant and not a variable. In this reading, any Iranian conduct is unlikely to halt a U.S. effort to bring down the present government—a perspective hardened by sanctions. In its discussions with foreign governments Tehran uses the perception of high-handed U.S. hostility to build sympathy. It further portrays that every day the government survives is a victory and a sign of Iranian strength. Unforced U.S. errors in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a seeming U.S. passivity toward Iranian actions in Syria (as before in Iraq), fuels an image of Iranian power and U.S. impotence that has consequences for both regional and international audiences, false as it may be in objective terms. Seen in this context, the allure of a game-changing capability such as nuclear weapons must seem tempting to Iran. With its belief that the system is fundamentally stacked against it, Iran does not wish to climb back to an unacceptable status quo ante.

If there is to be a political solution to Iran's nuclear program and a more positive orientation for it in the region, the United States will have to help Iran find a way out of this self-fulfilling logic and trap it has set for itself. Iranian politics contain multiple internal competing centers of decision and power, but major decisions require a certain consensus that rises to the supreme leader. Savvy diplomacy coupled with the right incentives could possibly leverage this dynamism in Iranian decisionmaking. Whether the United States can ever produce terms favorable enough to change the equation with Iran is another question, particularly under the constraints of a U.S. Congress that seems focused on punitive measures against the regime as a strategic end in and of itself.

Conclusion

Of greatest concern for the United States in the near term, there is a certain chilling thread that now runs between the leaders of Turkey, Russia, and Iran. Despite the outcome of the recent presidential election in Iran, illiberal democracy is ascendant among them; basic freedoms of speech and assembly are under attack. The judicial system is a weapon against the opposition. The increasingly authoritarian behavior of Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is cause for greatest concern from the perspective of the United States. His words if not always actions have pushed him closer to Russian president Vladimir Putin and to a lesser extent Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. A Turkish observer of the crackdown over the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in late May–June 2013 noted that

the protests were not a Tahrir-like moment, but an echo of the suppression of the Green Movement in Iran.⁶ During a congratulatory call from Turkish president Abdullah Gül, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani referenced “unacceptable” foreign influence in Turkey’s internal affairs, giving credence to the conspiracy view of the Gezi Park protests that Erdoğan has promoted, pinning the blame for unrest with outside powers.⁷ President Putin questioned the very right of the Gezi Park protestors to demonstrate as events unfolded, saying they should use a “legitimate format” and not street protests to express disagreement with the government.⁸ Those supportive words were a stark contrast to Washington and Europe, which insisted that the Turkish government uphold the fundamental democratic rights of its citizens.

Finally, the United States would be wise to look to history and its weight in contemporary experience for citizens of these countries. The modern identities of Turkey, Russia, and Iran are shaped by negative historical experience with the West very much central to the identity of the generation in power, and this has direct implications for their current policy choices, which extend beyond merely pursuing national interests. The United States, on the other hand, tends to have a forward-looking and positive view of itself, the world, and the role that American exceptionalism plays (as recently observed in not-so-subtle terms by Putin himself).⁹ Americans often fail to recognize the weight of a more pessimistic history on current-day policymaking in key countries—particularly those with painful histories or a sense of loss or injustice. U.S. policymakers often overlook citizens’ perception that the United States has played a role in humiliating or betraying them in the past.

In conclusion, the most likely catalyst for creating a durable geopolitical subsystem alignment between Turkey, Russia, and Iran would be a U.S. misstep. The United States must avoid that—particularly in the Middle East—and actively seek to improve to the maximum extent bilateral partnerships with each of these important countries while articulating and executing strategies for engagement in the regions most important to their interests.

6. Soli Özel, “The Protests in Turkey Won’t Be the Last,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-protests-in-turkey-wont-be-the-last/2013/06/14/dc7e7bfc-d46e-11e2-8cbe-1bcb06f8f8_story.html.

7. “Turkey calls for expansion of all-out ties with Iran,” *Today’s Zaman*, June 24, 2013, <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/06/24/310662/turkey-calls-for-stronger-ties-with-iran/>.

8. “Vladimir Putin Comments on Turkey protests,” APA, June 4, 2013, <http://en.apa.az/news/194077>.

9. Vladimir Putin, “A Plea for Caution from Russia,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html?pagewanted=all>.

About the Authors

Foreword

John J. Hamre was elected president and CEO of CSIS in January 2000 and named Pritzker Chair in December 2012. Before joining CSIS, he served as the 26th U.S. deputy secretary of defense. Prior to holding that position, he was under secretary of defense (comptroller) from 1993 to 1997. As comptroller, he was the principal assistant to the secretary of defense for the preparation, presentation, and execution of the defense budget and management improvement programs. Before serving in the Department of Defense, Dr. Hamre worked for 10 years as a professional staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. During that time, he was primarily responsible for the oversight and evaluation of procurement, research and development programs, defense budget issues, and relations with the Senate Appropriations Committee. From 1978 to 1984 he served in the Congressional Budget Office, where he became its deputy assistant director for national security and international affairs. In that position, he oversaw analysis and other support for committees in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Dr. Hamre received his Ph.D., with distinction, in 1978 from the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, where his studies focused on international politics and economics and U.S. foreign policy. In 1972 he received a B.A., with high distinction, from Augustana College, emphasizing political science and economics. The following year he studied as a Rockefeller fellow at Harvard Divinity School.

Project Director and Editor

Samuel J. Brannen is a senior fellow in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where his research focuses on U.S. defense and national security strategy and policy, Turkey, and Middle East security policy. Prior to rejoining CSIS in May 2013, Brannen served at the Pentagon as special assistant to the principal deputy under secretary of defense for policy. In that position, he advised and supported the second-ranking U.S. defense policy official on a range of defense and national security matters. From July 2010 to September 2012 Brannen was country director for Turkey, Cyprus, and Malta in the Office of Secretary of Defense. Prior to that, he was special assistant to the deputy under secretary of defense for strategy, plans, and forces and assisted in the process and drafting of the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review. Before rejoining government at the start of the Obama administration, Brannen held various

positions at CSIS from 2002 to 2009, including as a fellow and deputy director of the International Security Program and as assistant director of the Global Strategy Institute. Brannen holds a B.A. in political science from Trinity University (San Antonio, Texas) and an M.A. in international affairs from the George Washington University. He has been awarded the Office of the Secretary of Defense Medal for Exceptional Public Service four times and has received the Department of State Superior Service Award and Secretary of Defense Award for Excellence.

Principal Authors

Jon B. Alterman holds the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy and is the director of the CSIS Middle East Program. Prior to joining CSIS in 2002, he served as a member of the policy planning staff at the U.S. Department of State and as a special assistant to the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. He is a member of the Chief of Naval Operations Executive Panel and served as an expert adviser to the Iraq Study Group (also known as the Baker-Hamilton Commission). In addition to his policy work, he teaches Middle Eastern studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and at George Washington University. Before entering government, he was a scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace and at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 1993 to 1997 Alterman was an award-winning teacher at Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in history. He also worked as a legislative aide to Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-NY), responsible for foreign policy and defense. Alterman has lectured in more than 25 countries on subjects related to the Middle East and U.S. policy toward the region. He is the author or coauthor of four books on the Middle East and the editor of two more. His opinion pieces have appeared in numerous national and international publications.

Carolyn Barnett is a fellow with the Middle East Program at CSIS. Her primary research interests are in the politics and society of North Africa, particularly the region's ongoing changes in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. She also supports the Middle East Program's projects related to Gulf politics and economics and the changing relations between Asia and the Middle East. Prior to joining CSIS, Ms. Barnett earned an M.Sc. in Middle East politics and an M.A. in Islamic studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where she studied as a Marshall scholar. She also spent a year as a graduate fellow in the Center for Arabic Study Abroad program at the American University in Cairo on a Fulbright scholarship. Ms. Barnett holds a B.S.F.S. from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and is a former editor-in-chief of the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*.

Andrew C. Kuchins is a senior fellow and director of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program. From 2000 to 2006 he was a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; he was director of its Russian and Eurasian program in Washington, D.C., from 2000 to 2003 and again in 2006; and he served as director of the Carnegie Moscow Center in Russia from 2003 to 2005. He has also held senior management and research positions at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Stanford University, and the

University of California at Berkeley. Kuchins currently teaches at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and has also taught at Georgetown and Stanford universities. Recently published books, articles, and reports include “Perspective: What’s to Follow the Demise of the US-Russian ‘Reset’” (*Current History*, October 2012); “The End of the ‘Reset’” (*Foreign Affairs*, March 2012); “Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity in Change,” coauthored with Igor Zevelev (*Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2012); “Laying the Groundwork for Afghanistan’s New Silk Road” (*Foreign Affairs*, December 2011); “Putin’s Return and Washington’s Reset with Russia” (*Foreign Affairs*, September 2011); and *Russia after the Global Economic Crisis*, coedited with Anders Åslund and Sergei Guriev (Peterson Institute, 2010). He holds a B.A. from Amherst College and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the Johns Hopkins Schools of Advanced International Studies.

Jeffrey Mankoff is a fellow and deputy director of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program and a visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York City. He was a 2010–2011 Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow based in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. From 2008 to 2010 he was associate director of International Security Studies at Yale University and an adjunct fellow for Russia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Previously, he was a John M. Olin National Security Fellow at Harvard University, a Henry Chauncey Fellow in Grand Strategy at Yale University, and a fellow at Moscow State University. His areas of expertise include Russian/Eurasian affairs, great power relations, foreign policy decisionmaking, ethnic conflict, and energy security. Dr. Mankoff also teaches courses on international security, Russian and Central Asian affairs, and modern diplomatic and military history. He received his Ph.D. and M.Phil. in diplomatic history, as well as his M.A. in political science from Yale, and his B.A. in international studies and Russian from the University of Oklahoma.

Project Manager

T.J. Cipoletti is a research associate with the CSIS International Security Program, where he conducts research on a wide range of European and U.S. national security issues. Previously, he served in similar capacities with the Henry A. Kissinger Chair and the Europe Program at CSIS. Prior to joining CSIS, he completed internships on Capitol Hill and at the Intellibridge Corporation, where he authored open-source intelligence briefs on European political and security developments for a wide range of corporate clients. Mr. Cipoletti received his M.Sc. in European politics and governance from the London School of Economics and Political Science and graduated magna cum laude from Bethany College with a B.A. in political science and a minor in history.



1616 Rhode Island Avenue NW | Washington DC 20036
t. (202) 887-0200 | f. (202) 775-3199 | www.csis.org

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