

# The Turkey–Russia–Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics

Complex and often contradictory interactions among Turkey, Russia, and Iran are shaping regional dynamics in the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia. The nexus of the three pairs of relations are influencing each country's dealings with the other two, as well as with the United States, and are whipsawed by events on the ground that continue to surprise leaders of these three historic rivals. Starkly differing policies toward the Syrian civil war and the Arab Awakening have strained Ankara's previously cooperative relations with Moscow and Tehran.

Understanding these dynamics is essential to avoiding a wider war in the Middle East, renewed conflict in the Caucasus, and instability in Central Asia following the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. Moreover, with the proxy war in Syria deepening and the prospect of Israeli military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, the Middle East is reaching a tipping point unless the United States and the international community are able to work with these three powers to broker a political transition in Syria and a resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis, which would otherwise have devastating consequences for regional stability and the global economy.

## Historical Roots and Driving Forces

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Relations among modern Turkey, Russia, and Iran have deep cultural, historical, and religious roots that have shaped geopolitics in Eurasia and the Middle East

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Stephen J. Flanagan is Henry A. Kissinger Chair in Diplomacy and National Security at CSIS. This article reflects the initial findings of a collaborative CSIS research project. He may be reached at [Sflanagan@csis.org](mailto:Sflanagan@csis.org)

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for centuries. The expansionist policies of the Ottoman and Russian empires led to intense rivalries and dozens of wars across the Black Sea between the 16th and 20th centuries. The Ottomans supported the political aspirations of the Turkic and Islamic peoples in the Caucasus, and Russia assisted Turkey's Slavic and Christian minorities in revolt against Ottoman rule. Vladimir Lenin assisted Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Turkish revolutionary movement following the collapse of Ottoman rule after World War I, and early relations between the modern Republic of Turkey and the USSR were somewhat cooperative.

Relations grew more distant during the Cold War as Turkey formed NATO's southern bulwark against Communist expansion following renewed Soviet designs against the Black Sea Straits under Stalin. There were some lingering tensions in the 1990's related to Russian assertiveness in the Caucasus, Ankara's pan-Turkic policies in the former Soviet space, and support that both governments lent to separatist groups operating in the other country.<sup>1</sup> Security priorities gradually shifted inward, with Russia focused on countering extremist Islamist and separatist movements in the North Caucasus, and Turkey focused on Kurdish terrorism, and both agreed on ending support to the separatists. This shift, coupled with deepening economic and energy ties which began in the late Soviet period, as well as with mutual disappointment in their respective relations with the West, paved the way for practical cooperation and a historic rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow that has deepened over the past decade.

Ottoman/Turkish–Persian/Iranian relations have had a long history of competition and periodic conflicts going back to the sixteenth century. Iran's adoption of Shi'ism was originally part of an effort by the Safavid state in Persia to distinguish it from the Sunni Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans' key interests were in Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus, while the Iranians focused on Iraq, the locus of the holiest sites of Shia Islam. Elements of this struggle persisted until the end of the First World War.<sup>2</sup>

Post-imperial Turkey existed uneasily with Iran, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution exacerbated differences between pro-U.S. Turkey and anti-U.S. Iran. While many of the weaker parties in the region, such as the Kurds, sought to balance relations between the two, their efforts did little to resolve the deep-seated antagonism.<sup>3</sup> Both remained hostile to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but their common cause did not give them a sufficient platform for cooperation. Iran's quest for closer ties with neighbors and Turkey's strategy of 'zero problems on its borders' facilitated a *détente* over the past decade. Still, historical rivalries, the contrast between Turkish secularism and Iranian religiosity, and a lingering view that Turkey continues to front for U.S. interests all prevent the Iranians from becoming too attached to their newfound bilateral relationship. Iranian policymakers have sought to strengthen relations in limited areas,

particularly trade and tourism, where Turkey has been more than willing to cooperate.

Interactions between Iran and Russia since the late sixteenth century have included elements of both confrontation and collaboration, yet their mutual ambitions for regional hegemony more often yielded confrontation. Because Moscow generally predominated in various territorial disputes and often intervened in Iranian internal affairs during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Iranians historically dealt with Russia in a defensive mode as a potential threat.<sup>4</sup> Iran’s alignment with the West during the Cold War restricted relations, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution heightened the ideological divide in a new way. However, trade in metals and industrial goods gradually developed between Russia and Iran, becoming an important feature of their relationship since. Iran decided to improve relations with Moscow—“the lesser Satan”—during its 1980–88 war with Iraq (aided by the United States) and signed an economic protocol in 1986, seeking to discourage Moscow from aiding Baghdad. During the last decade, the Kremlin has seen Iran as a growing market (especially for conventional arms) and a potential partner in balancing U.S. and Turkish interests in Central Asia as well as the Caucasus.<sup>5</sup>

Cooperation and competition in economic and energy affairs have been major drivers of all three relationships over the past decade, and particular attention is paid to these aspects of their interactions in the discussion that follows. These longtime rivals have been using bilateral dialogue, economic cooperation, and energy ties to manage divergent interests and enduring mutual suspicions, even as they engage in competition of varying intensities for markets as well as influence and pursue very different regional political agendas.

**Economic and energy affairs have been major drivers of all three relationships over the past decade.**

Internal political developments and growing polarization in the Muslim world also influence this nexus. While the vestiges of empire provide Moscow with certain advantages and liabilities, it lacks the resources to dominate Eurasia to the extent that imperial Russia and the Soviet Union did. Turkey and Iran have become more capable competitors, and China is an increasingly important actor in Central Asia. As the Syrian crisis and tensions between Sunni and Shia communities in the Middle East continue to unfold, the wary partnership between Turkey and Iran has been strained. A more intense struggle for regional influence is developing as those two governments pursue starkly different policies toward the Arab Awakening and the uprising in Syria. Kremlin leaders, apprehensive about the political turmoil in the Middle East

**The Syrian crisis has strained the wary partnership between Turkey and Iran.**

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and what they perceive to be a building wave of Islamization that could ripple through Eurasia, have sought to reassert a role in the region. But in backing old allies and facilitating the continuation of Assad's brutal repression, Moscow has aligned itself against the forces of political change in the Middle East and subsequently damaged relations with Turkey, the United States, and Europe.

Just a few years ago, there had been talk of growing potential for trilateral cooperation and a nascent regional alignment that might enhance stability and balance U.S. power. The most prominent manifestation of this came on June 8, 2010, when leaders of the three countries met in Istanbul the day before a UN Security Council vote on U.S. and EU-backed sanctions on Iran relating to its nuclear program. This display of solidarity—during the third summit of the 21-member Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia since 2002, hosted by Turkey to discuss regional cooperation and security issues—was calculated to temper Western efforts to isolate Iran. However, fundamental political and cultural differences make it unlikely that the three will align today. Indeed, early post-Cold War assessments that said regional cooperation would be “subordinated to the continuing rivalry among the major players for influence in southern Eurasia, especially if a more assertive and nationalist regime gains ascendancy in the Kremlin” is proving all too prescient.<sup>6</sup>

### **Russia–Turkey: Testing the Limits of Strategic Partnership**

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The current Turkish government has made improving relations with Russia a priority since it took office in 2002. Trade with Russia began to grow in the last decade of the Soviet period, and Ankara has sought to use deepening economic and energy ties to pave the way for cooperation on political and security issues. Many Russian and Turkish constituencies benefit from bilateral economic ties, and the Kremlin has sought to leverage those ties to encourage Ankara's recent inclination to pursue a more independent stance in international politics, periodically challenging U.S. and European policies. The two governments launched with considerable fanfare a “strategic partnership” in 2010, including a High-Level Cooperation Council, annual summits, and a Joint Strategic Planning Group charged with advancing economic, political, cultural, and security cooperation.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the relationship remains more tactical than strategic,

as the two countries lack a common political agenda and have more divergent than convergent interests.

Trade, investment, and tourism between the two countries have grown enormously over the past decade. Russia has been Turkey's leading trade partner (after the EU as a bloc) since 2008. Total bilateral trade topped \$30 billion in 2011, although Turkish energy imports from Russia accounted for about 80 percent of this volume.<sup>8</sup> Still, Russia is Turkey's third biggest export market, leading with sales of produce, textiles, and some consumer products. Turkish businesses have invested more than \$7 billion in Russia, and Turkish contractors have completed projects in the country worth over \$33.8 billion. The two governments have set in motion a number of deals designed to more than triple trade to over \$100 billion a year by 2015 (although most independent economists feel this goal is a bit unrealistic).<sup>9</sup> Shuttle (suitcase) trade and tourism between the two countries have also expanded over the last two decades, and have grown further with the initiation of visa-free travel after April 2011.

Bilateral energy relations reflect some mutual interests, but are also competitive. Turkey's energy strategy seeks to balance its needs for secure supplies from Russia with its ambition to become a vital energy bridge to Europe and the West. Turkey seeks to reduce its heavy dependency on Russian natural gas (55 percent of imports in 2011) and oil (which dropped from 40 to 12 percent of imports between 2009 and 2011) through diversification.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Russian efforts to control the flow of energy from the Black Sea and Caspian Basin regions threaten Turkey's ambition to play a key role in expanding the East–West energy transit corridor—even as it further develops its own North–South energy axis with Russia. Ankara supports development of the Southern Gas Corridor (including the Nabucco project) to bring Azeri and perhaps eventually Turkmen and, more controversially, Iranian gas to Europe via Turkey. Moscow meanwhile has pushed development of the rival South Stream pipeline, a subsea route running from its Black Sea coast to Bulgaria. Turkey procrastinated for several years before reaching agreement with Russia in late 2011 on the route South Stream could take through its maritime Exclusive Economic Zone in the Black Sea in an effort to gain concessions on the price of imported gas. While President Putin directed the energy company Gazprom to begin work in December 2012 with completion by 2015, South Stream still faces significant financial and technical hurdles. Turkey continues to work on expanding gas transit from Azerbaijan, but the Nabucco project has little

**The relationship between Moscow and Ankara remains more tactical than strategic.**

chance of succeeding without additional monetary support and upstream gas supplies.

Plans to build the Samsun–Ceyhan oil pipeline project, designed to connect Kazakhstan (via Russia, the Black Sea, and overland in Turkey) to the Mediterranean have also stalled in the face of negotiations between Turkey and Russia. Turkey favors the Samsun–Ceyhan pipeline to reduce tanker traffic through the Bosphorus and enhance Ceyhan’s role as an energy hub. However, the economic viability of the project has been in question from the outset.

Turkish leaders have been able to work effectively with Russia to promote economic cooperation and security in the Black Sea region and have resisted expanded NATO operations there. Ankara also believes its deepening economic, energy, and security cooperation with Russia gives it leverage in advancing its interests in that region. However, the Black Sea cooperation has produced little concrete benefit economically to other littoral states and did not serve as an effective mechanism for regional crisis management during the 2008 Russia–Georgia War. Moscow has been cool to both Turkey’s post-Georgia War proposal for a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform and efforts to play a larger role in the OSCE Minsk Group, which is seeking to resolve the conflict in and around Nagorno–Karabakh involving Armenia and Azerbaijan. The two countries have advanced their cooperation on combating terrorism as part of their rapprochement and movement to visa-free travel.

Despite deepening economic and energy ties, high-level political contacts, tourism, and close personal ties between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin, officials in Ankara are reassessing the relationship in light of sharp differences over Syria, the Arab Awakening, and concern that Putin’s return to the presidency will bring more assertive Russian policies in the Caucasus and Central Asia to the detriment of Turkish interests and Muslim communities.

Official Russian assessments of relations with Turkey seem similarly mixed. Bilateral economic and energy ties have paid clear financial dividends and supported political dialogue. Over the past two years, Moscow has no doubt been disappointed with Ankara’s close alignment with U.S. and Western stances in the Middle East and North Africa and support for NATO missile defense. Some Russian officials and analysts see the potential for more intense competition for influence with Turkey in the Caucasus. They expect that Turkey’s bid to become a leading player in the Middle East will fail, and that the Turks will redirect their considerable energies and resources back to the Caucasus. They also assess that Turkey is becoming more Islamist under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, and that the Turkish General Staff is no longer an effective defender of secularism or check on Erdoğan’s power. Some Russians also fear that Turkish cultural, religious, and educational activities in the Caucasus, Crimea,

and Central Asia with Circassian and other Muslim communities could, over time, foster radical Islamist movements in Russia and neighboring states.<sup>11</sup>

Turkey–Russia relations have reached a difficult turning point. Both governments are seeking to insulate mutually beneficial economic and energy ties from mounting political tensions, but this is becoming increasingly difficult.<sup>12</sup> A crisis was contained in October 2012 when Turkish authorities forced a Syrian civilian airliner, flying from Moscow to Damascus with seventeen Russian citizens onboard, to land in Turkey and confiscated what they said were military radar components.<sup>13</sup>

Unless Moscow elects to work with the international community to foster a political transition in Syria and play a more constructive role in the region, Middle East neighbors are likely to see Turkey and Russia engaged in a deepening competition for influence, where Turkey has the stronger hand. Turkey and Russia seem likely to manage their differences in the Caucasus and Caspian Basin in the near-term, but divergent energy and political interests, as well as enduring cultural and religious suspicions, seem likely to rekindle historical rivalries—also involving Iran—over the long-term.

**T**urkey–Russia and Turkey–Iran relations have reached a difficult, and volatile, turning point.

### **Iran–Turkey: A Wary Partnership Under Strain**

Turkey’s relations with Iran have had their ups and downs. There are, however, fundamental limitations on what many Turkish analysts characterize as a wary partnership, given enduring rivalry, suspicion, and deep sectarian and cultural differences. Both governments have a strategy of using mutually beneficial economic and energy ties as a way to avoid confrontations. Under Prime Minister Erdoğan’s AKP government, Turkey has pursued a policy of “zero problems” with neighbors, a strategy shaped by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan’s longtime advisor and current Foreign Minister. Davutoğlu’s vision seeks to leverage Turkey’s geostrategic location in the center of Eurasia, as well as its historical Ottoman ties and Muslim affinities, to give Turkey “strategic depth” and wider influence. A key element of this strategy is expanding trade and economic cooperation with all Turkey’s neighbors. This approach does not reflect naiveté or illusions about the nature of the Iranian state. Rather, it is a strategy to keep competition with Iran peaceful while also advancing Turkey’s economic growth and role as an energy hub. The Iranian government has sought to leverage Turkey’s need for energy and expanded markets to prevent further political isolation and unfavorable military developments in Turkey.

The Turks have been repeatedly disappointed in a number of trade and investment deals with Iran over the past decade. Tehran has failed to fulfill deals with Turkey on supply and exploitation of gas and oil resources, and has canceled major contracts with Turkish firms for high-profile projects such as modernization of the Tehran airport and development of the Iranian mobile telephone network. Still, Iran has become Turkey's fifth-largest trading partner. Total bilateral trade volume rose from about \$1.05 billion in 2000 to \$16 billion in 2011. Iranian exports to Turkey, particularly energy, account for over \$12 billion of that total.<sup>14</sup> In 2010, the two governments pledged to reach a further expansion of trade to \$30 billion, including through opening more border crossings.<sup>15</sup> However, independent analysts and business leaders feel this goal is unrealistic. Turkish executives continue to express great frustration in navigating the complex, opaque, and corrupt business environment in Iran.<sup>16</sup> Commerce with Turkey accounts for less than six percent of Iran's total trade volume, and some voices in Iran argue their big emerging markets for goods and energy are to their East and North.

Two significant growth areas in economic relations have been Iranian travel to and investment in Turkey. Iranians have constituted the fourth-largest group of foreign tourists in Turkey thanks to visa-free travel, with nearly 2 million visitors in 2010 and 2011. This fell off significantly in the first five months of 2012 in the face of growing bilateral political differences and sharply reduced Iranian purchasing power.<sup>17</sup> On the investment side, due to sanctions and a subsequently more restrictive business climate in Dubai and other Gulf states, Iranian firms are increasingly operating in Turkey as a way to access international markets. More than 1,470 Iranian firms were operating in Turkey at the end of 2010, up from only 319 firms in 2002.<sup>18</sup> Turkish banks have also positioned themselves as an acceptable international intermediary for financial transactions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and states such as India that do not want to infringe on U.S. sanctions or incur U.S. condemnation for such conduct. The U.S. government has been concerned about Iran using these commercial links to evade sanctions.<sup>19</sup>

Iran and Turkey have sought to expand natural gas trade since 1996, when they concluded a 25-year agreement whereby Iran pledged to supply Turkey 10 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually. Iran, citing domestic requirements, has never met this commitment. In 2002, the two countries completed a pipeline connecting the gas fields of Tabriz to Ankara, which provides the current supply. Iran has become Turkey's second largest supplier (21 percent) of natural gas, after Russia. Exports rose over the last two years, reaching 8.3 bcm in 2011. The Turks have sought to increase this supply further (to 16 bcm annually); however, our research and interviews suggest that Turkish energy executives have given up on securing more Iranian gas due to its high price, quality concerns, uncertain

supplies, and the frustrations of doing business in Iran. In addition, Turkey has taken Iran to arbitration over gas prices. Turkish energy planners have thus decided to focus their efforts on attaining more Azeri gas in the near-term and Iraqi as well as Turkmen gas over the longer-term.<sup>20</sup>

Iran has also been a major supplier of oil to Turkey, accounting for 30–32 percent of Turkish imports for several years. Iran has extended price concessions to Turkey on oil, which led to Iran accounting for 51 percent of Turkish oil imports in 2011. Turkey came under considerable pressure from the United States and the European Union to reduce imports of Iranian oil or risk financial sanctions directed at Tehran over its nuclear program. Sanctions run counter to Ankara's strategy of using deepening commercial ties to foster both cooperative relations with Tehran and various efforts to broker a resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis.<sup>21</sup> Turkey agreed to abide by UN sanctions but not the additional U.S. and EU financial measures. When Turkey was not among a group of eleven countries granted exemptions from the financial sanctions because it had not reduced Iranian oil imports, Ankara relented and was granted a 180-day waiver in June 2012. On the issue of gas transit and Caspian Basin development, Turkish and Iranian interests diverge. Turkish planners hope to serve as a transit corridor for expanded Iranian and Central Asian gas supplies that might one day head to Europe. Iran favors other routes through Middle East countries to reach European markets, and opposes the trans-Caspian pipeline to transfer Central Asian gas to Europe via Turkey.<sup>22</sup>

Political and security cooperation between the two governments has also been mixed. Turkey and Iran have convergent policies on the Palestinian issue, but sharp differences on the Arab Awakening, particularly with respect to developments in Syria. Turkish officials remain greatly alarmed by Iran's fanning of Shia–Sunni tensions in Bahrain, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, and support for radical Shia groups in Azerbaijan, which they characterize as an ideological struggle for influence. These differences could lead to a major rupture in bilateral relations, or even conflict.

Tehran and Ankara agreed to undertake limited counterterrorism cooperation in 2008 that included both sharing intelligence and coordinating national operations against the affiliated Kurdish terrorist groups, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Despite this earlier tactical cooperation, there have been recent allegations of Iranian and Syrian support for the PKK to pressure Turkey to ease off its efforts against the Assad regime.<sup>23</sup> Turkey has also intercepted on its territory illegal shipments of weapons from Iran to Syria on several occasions over the past year.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this mixed record, the Turkish government still holds hope that its enduring diplomatic and economic engagement will encourage Tehran to take a more pragmatic and less ideological stance that would allow a political transition

in Syria, mitigate what both sides have called a deepening Sunni–Shia “Cold War” in the Middle East, and bring a peaceful resolution of the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program. Turkey’s effort to balance growing security concerns and cooperation with Iran is reflected in decisions on missile defense. While it endorsed development of NATO’s missile defenses at the 2010 Lisbon Summit, and a year later agreed to deployment of U.S. missile defense radars on Turkish territory, it insisted that no country be cited as the threat rationale for either action. Tehran denounced the deployment as a U.S. effort to spur tensions in the region and urged Ankara to reconsider, asserting that the two friendly nations can provide for their own security without foreign interference.

Turkey–Iran relations have entered a volatile phase, despite the efforts of both governments to suggest an enduring partnership. All elements of bilateral relations are now clouded by differences over Syria and political change in the Middle East, as well as the internal power struggle in Tehran among the Supreme Leader, President, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The conflict in Syria is poised to be a crucible for Turkey’s relations with Iran—and Russia—and is already fostering an intensifying struggle for regional influence. With Syria lost as its closest Arab partner, Turkey is seeking to bolster ties with Egypt, including expanded trade, a \$2 billion aid package, and joint naval exercises.

### **Iran–Russia Relations: Limited Cooperation**

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Russia–Iran relations are the least developed side of this triangle. During the last decade, the Kremlin viewed Iran as a growing market (including for conventional arms) and a potential partner in balancing U.S. and Turkish influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Kremlin has never shared the West’s view of Iran as an urgent or even looming security threat. Russian leaders find Tehran’s anti-Americanism useful as a way to balance U.S. political influence, and have used their policies on Iran’s nuclear program as a bargaining chip with Washington to gain other concessions. Iran has developed its cooperation with Russia—despite abiding historical suspicions about Moscow’s intentions and its policies toward Muslim communities—in support of its larger strategic goal of counterbalancing U.S. dominance and promoting a multipolar world.

Bilateral relations soured after 2010 due to Russia’s support of further UN sanctions on Iran, “technical” delays in finishing construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant, and cancellation of the sale of the S-300 air defense missile system. President Putin does not get on well with President Ahmadinejad, apparently having been scarred several years ago by a failed effort to advance fairly constructive proposals over disposition of spent Iranian nuclear fuel.

The downturn in relations with Iran also angered an influential, pro-Iranian lobby in Moscow, including defense industries that lost sizable arms sales. But as differences with Washington on arms control, missile defense, Syria, and other developments in the Middle East have grown over the past year, Moscow has found new scope for cooperation with Tehran.

Total annual bilateral trade between Iran and Russia is estimated to have tripled over the past decade, but volume remains quite small—about \$3.5 billion in 2010. Russia accounts for about 2.5 percent of Iranian foreign trade volume, and Iran represents only 0.6 percent of Russia's.<sup>25</sup> The two governments have expressed a desire to expand volume to \$10 billion annually, but this does not seem like a priority for either side, and potential for dramatic growth seems unlikely as the economies are not complementary.

There is little quantifiable energy trade between Russia and Iran. Both have worked together in exploiting gas reserves in the Caspian and signed a treaty in 2008 agreeing to cooperate on development of Iran's gas and oil reserves. There are reports of some Gazprom executives in Iran, working on Gazprom projects, but there is no sign of any commercial production. Russian enterprises perhaps can provide extraction or other energy technologies that the Iranians lack and want, but it is unlikely that Iran is really open to foreign participation to develop its energy sector. Despite delays in the completion of the Bushehr-1 plant, Iran has approached state-controlled Rosatom about construction of additional nuclear reactors at Bushehr. (A 1992 Russian–Iranian intergovernmental agreement originally envisaged the construction of four nuclear reactors in Iran.)

The two governments also hold divergent positions on demarcation of the Caspian Sea. The Russian support for a median-line solution would severely limit Iran's share of Caspian energy resources. Despite that difference, both governments oppose development of the trans-Caspian pipeline. While united in opposing these alternative routes for Caspian energy, the two countries appear to see themselves as long-term competitors in the European market. Iran and Russia are founding members and promoters of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum and together hold about 40 percent of global natural gas reserves, but the extent of policy coordination seems quite limited.

While both Russia and Iran have an interest in challenging Western dominance, many political issues divide the two. The first is Moscow's treatment of Muslim populations in Russia. A second is what seems to be a general Russian unease—despite their sponsorship—with the Iranian nuclear power program. Russia also has a complicated set of political relationships with

**O**ver the past year, Moscow has found new scope for cooperation with Tehran.

the West and the Asia–Pacific region to manage, while Iran’s generalized hostility to a wide range of countries creates a different attitude toward diplomacy. On the other hand, Russian authorities have found Iranian counternarcotics operations in Central Asia quite effective in disrupting the drug trade from that region, which is a serious threat to law, order, and public health in both countries.

In the aftermath of the 2008 Georgia War, Iran did become more active diplomatically in the Caucasus to offset Russian influence and protect its own interests in developing economic ties and energy routes there. Tehran has announced a number of investments in bilateral economic projects in the region, taken steps to facilitate travel to Iran, and offered to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno–Karabakh dispute. While tensions with Azerbaijan have deepened, many Russian and international analysts believe that Tehran has made a conscious decision to avoid causing problems for Moscow in the Caucasus.<sup>26</sup> In part, this restraint seeks to induce Moscow to oppose further sanctions on Iran. The insurgents and foreign fighters operating in the North Caucasus are Sunni Salafists not aligned with or supported by Iran. There is also evidence that key elements of the regime in Tehran view the Caucasus as a sideshow, and want to focus on the unfolding struggle for influence in the Middle East and North Africa, where they see much higher stakes.

While both Tehran and Moscow stand to benefit from continued tensions in the Middle East over the short term, their support of the Assad regime and slowness to engage new governments have been detrimental to the long-term standing of both countries in the region. Russia and Iran have tacitly agreed to avoid confrontations in the Caucasus and to support mutual goals with respect to Caspian energy routes. Nevertheless, this alignment is likely to have limited durability in light of enduring mutual suspicions and largely competing commercial and political interests.

### **Navigating U.S. Interests Through the Nexus**

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Understanding the shifting dynamics of the Turkey–Russia–Iran nexus is essential to advancing critical U.S. interests in the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia and for calibrating and balancing relations with each of these three countries. The policies that each of the three countries pursue toward the others are often designed to impact relations with the United States and can be influenced—positively or negatively—by U.S. policies.

Given their continuing support to the Assad regime and fears about the political forces behind the Arab Awakening, Russia and Iran now find themselves aligned against Turkey, the United States, and much of the rest of the international community. Iran sees its ties to Syria, and through its links to

Hezbollah in Lebanon, as the central pillar in maintaining its “axis of resistance” to Israel and its allies.<sup>27</sup> As the civil and proxy wars in Syria grind on and more radical elements gain traction, the potential for wider conflict is growing, particularly given the influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey and repeated incidents of cross-border shelling. Turkey could be drawn inadvertently into war with the Assad regime and possibly Iran, which would trigger collective defense obligations for the United States and other NATO allies.

**The potential for wider conflict is growing.**

To avoid this outcome, the United States should work with Turkey and other governments to establish a limited no-fly zone and safe havens in northern Syria for those fleeing regime persecution. This could be coupled with further military assistance to the Syrian opposition, as well as a new diplomatic effort engaging Turkey, the European Union, Russia, and Iran to end the fighting and outline the terms of a political transition in Syria that would provide the context for Moscow and Tehran to facilitate Assad’s abdication.

The Syrian civil war is the most volatile element of a building powder keg in the Middle East that could see a number of regional conflicts and disputes erupt into a wider conflagration. The Sunni–Shia Cold War in the region is already heating up. Iran is engaged in a proxy struggle with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in Bahrain and supporting terrorist activities in Lebanon and Turkey.<sup>28</sup> Adding to this hypergolic mix are escalating tensions between Israel and Hamas and the well-known risks of military strikes against Iran’s nuclear program. An attack on its nuclear facilities would unleash broad Iranian retaliation in the region and against U.S. and Israeli interests around the world, leading to disruption of energy flows and further global economic instability. This underscores the urgency that the United States and other members of the international community find pathways to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis. Ankara’s continuing dialogue with Tehran could yet prove helpful in advancing that goal.

The interests of Turkey, Russia, and Iran clash quite pointedly in the Caucasus. The Soviet legacy still shapes the strategic landscape and Russia retains a dominant role. Ankara seeks to promote interdependence among the three South Caucasus states in order to strengthen their sovereignty and to expand commercial and energy links to Turkey, though following the rejection of its 2009 effort to normalize relations and open the Turkish–Armenian border, Turkey has moved more firmly behind Baku. Iran’s engagement in the region includes deepened ties to Armenia and efforts to intimidate Azerbaijan, but caution with respect to Nagorno–Karabakh. Iran does not want Russia heavily involved in the South Caucasus, but has avoided confronting Moscow, and has

benefitted from a mistrust of Turkey in the region. Washington's interests of stability, enhanced sovereignty, democratization, and diversification of commercial relations are closely aligned with Turkey's. Washington and Ankara will, however, need to engage both Moscow and Tehran in efforts to resolve lingering regional disputes.

The three governments and the United States have largely diverging but some common interests in Central Asia—including concerns about instability following the withdrawal of NATO and partner forces from Afghanistan after 2014. Longstanding ties and infrastructure links tip the regional balance of influence in Moscow's direction. While Turkey has commercial interests and wants to prevent Russia from retaining a controlling position over energy flows from the region, it has limited capacity and commitment. Iran remains concerned about the Taliban and the problems of drug trafficking in the region, and seeks to have more Central Asian energy flow through Iran. It is likely to pursue these interests with greater or lesser intensity depending on the overall direction of relations with the United States and the West and developments in the Middle East.

All this underscores that careful navigation of the Turkey–Russia–Iran nexus will be essential to achieving U.S. goals in the Middle East and Eurasia, as well as on a number of global issues. The fault lines with Russia and Iran are deepening. U.S. and Turkish interests are in closer alignment, but will require close consultations to manage certain policy differences. Interactions among the four will undoubtedly continue to shape the region and likely have important global consequences.

## Notes

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6. See "Conclusion," in Rubenstein and Smolansky, pp. 271–77.

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