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Regional Competition and the Future of Russia-Turkey Relations

A World Safe for Empire?

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Jeffrey Mankoff

A Report of the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program

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Executive Summary

Western observers are increasingly worried and puzzled by the apparent rapprochement between Vladimir Putin's Russia and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey, which is taking place despite an escalating Russo-Turkish competition for influence extending from North Africa through southeastern Europe and the Caucasus to Central Asia. A shared aspiration to legitimate the idea of regional powers policing their respective neighborhoods and building regional orders outside the framework of Western-led multilateral institutions and based on hierarchy, limited sovereignty, and the disruption of smaller states' territorial integrity provides a basis for Russo-Turkish cooperation. Yet by inserting themselves more directly into their neighbors' disputes and conflicts, Russia and Turkey have multiplied the number of friction points between them. Throughout the regions where their ambitions collide, Ankara and Moscow increasingly pursue a kind of condominium approach, aiming to minimize the influence of Western states and institutions.

While backing opposing sides—and occasionally attacking one another's forces—in Syria, Russia and Turkey have developed a managed bargaining process centered on personal diplomacy between Putin and Erdoğan. Turkey has effectively acknowledged that the Russian- and Iranian-backed Bashar al-Assad will remain in power for the foreseeable future, while Russia has allowed Turkey to maintain a series of occupation zones along the Syrian-Turkish border to limit the presence of Kurdish fighters. In Libya, Russia and Turkey both seek access to resources and oppose U.S. efforts to exclude them from new pipeline networks in the eastern Mediterranean. Yet both sides' lack of vital interests in Libya means that Turkey has been less restrained in using force against Russian assets, raising the dangers of both miscalculation and horizontal escalation on Moscow's part. In addition, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020) saw the South Caucasus become a new front in Russo-Turkish regional competition. Despite Ankara's unwelcome intrusion into a region Russia has long regarded

as its own backyard, the two countries were able to impose a ceasefire that largely sidelined outside actors (including the United States), affirming Turkey's role as an important regional player while maintaining Russia's standing as the principal mediator between Baku and Yerevan.

The return to this quasi-imperial model of regional politics is a product of the altered geopolitical circumstances produced by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the failure of both Russia and Turkey to achieve political and institutional integration with the West. This model is therefore likely to persist regardless of domestic political developments in either country. Yet this combination of deepening political-economic relations alongside escalating confrontation throughout their shared periphery rests on unstable foundations. Which of these tendencies wins out—a shared interest in moving toward a less Western-centric global order based on post-imperial spheres of influence, or competition over defining the nature and extent of those spheres—will be a critical determinant of the future course of Russo-Turkish relations.

Introduction

Few contemporary bilateral relationships appear as convoluted and contradictory as that between Russia and Turkey—countries whose leaders speak warmly of one another and affirm their intention to deepen relations even in the face of armed clashes between their troops. In November 2015, the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft that had crossed into Turkey’s airspace from Syria, touching off a critical situation and talk of war. Just nine months later, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued an apology that paved the way for re-normalizing ties.¹ Erdoğan then turned to Russia for support in the wake of the Turkish military’s abortive July 2016 coup attempt, which he blamed on the followers of the U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen. The most visible symbol of this newfound alignment was Turkey’s decision to purchase the Russian-made S-400 air defense system in defiance of warnings by its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies (especially the United States)—and its eventual expulsion from NATO’s F-35 fighter program in response.

However, this apparent rapprochement was taking place against the backdrop of an escalating competition for influence extending from North Africa through southeastern Europe and the Caucasus to Central Asia. Clashes in Syria continued despite the resolution of the crisis over the downed jet. Russian and Turkish forces then intervened on opposite sides of the Libyan civil war, with Turkish support contributing to the defeat of Russian-backed warlord Khalifa Haftar. Turkey’s involvement was likewise instrumental in Azerbaijan’s 2020 offensive to regain Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh, upending a status quo Russia had long manipulated for its own ends. In Ukraine, where Russian forces occupied Crimea and remain bogged down in a grinding conflict in the eastern Donbas region, Turkey positioned itself as a patron of the Crimean Tatar minority and sold arms (including the drones that had proven so effective against Russian equipment in Libya and the Caucasus) to Kyiv.²

Moscow and Ankara similarly championed rival actors in the Western Balkans, Central Asia, and other regions throughout their shared periphery.³

Despite their conflicting objectives, Russia and Turkey embrace a kind of parallel logic. Both maintain a long-standing entanglement with neighboring states and regions with which they share a common history and ties of language, culture, and ethnicity—where, as Erdoğan put it, “Our physical boundaries are different from the boundaries of our heart.”⁴ Jealous of their own sovereignty, they establish zones of contested sovereignty in places such as Donbas or northern Syria. They also appeal to citizens of other states to identify, in some amorphous way, Russia or Turkey as a kind of historical homeland, promoting trans-boundary identification with Russian *sootchestvenniki* (“compatriots”) or what former Turkish foreign minister and prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu termed *tarihdaş milletler* (“peoples united by a common history”).⁵

Throughout the regions where their ambitions collide, Ankara and Moscow increasingly pursue a kind of condominium approach, aiming to minimize the influence of Western states and institutions.⁶ Yet this combination of deepening political-economic relations and escalating confrontation throughout their shared periphery is historically anomalous and rests on unstable foundations. Their interactions reflect a shared perception that the era of Western dominance is coming to an end and that future geopolitics will be dominated by the self-interested interactions of large regional powers.⁷ Which of these tendencies wins out—a shared interest in moving toward a less Western-centric global order based on post-imperial spheres of influence, or competition over defining the nature and extent of those spheres—will be a critical determinant of the future course of Russo-Turkish relations.

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Empire and Everything After

Since both emerged as major powers in the early modern era, relations between the Russian/Soviet and Ottoman/Turkish polities have centered on a contest for power and influence in shifting, inter-imperial “shatter zones” between their respective cores.⁸ Periods of calm in the relationship have coincided with reduced competition in these regions, while eras of intensified rivalry have been both cause and consequence of a struggle for mastery across these peripheries.

On numerous occasions, this inter-imperial competition redrew the map of Eurasia: Russian expansion rolled back Ottoman influence from southeastern Europe, the Black Sea littoral, and the Caucasus. Moreover, Russia’s military superiority in this contest was instrumental in driving Ottoman/Turkish statesmen to seek security through alignment with Western powers—Britain and France during the Crimean War and Imperial Germany during World War I.

Similarly, the Truman Doctrine (1947) and Turkey’s admission to NATO (1952) cemented Ankara’s identification with the West throughout the Cold War, allowing Ankara to reengage with Moscow from a position of relative strength. Just as West Germany pursued a distinct *Ostpolitik*, Cold War-era Turkey thus adopted what Soli Özel and Gökçe Uçar term its own *Nordpolitik*, which aimed to secure both technology and skills from the Soviet Union that would not only advance economic development, but also enhance Turkey’s self-sufficiency and strategic autonomy.⁹ Ankara likewise played the card of its relationship with Moscow at moments of tension with its NATO allies, especially during the crisis over its occupation of northern Cyprus in 1974.

The retreat of Russian power from Turkey’s borders after the collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated Turkey’s effort to position itself as an autonomous regional power, restoring connections to its post-Ottoman periphery and reopening the competition for influence across much of central and eastern

Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. With the Soviet Union crumbling, Turkish leaders such as Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel called for reconnecting with a wider region that includes both the long-subsumed “post-Ottoman space” in the Balkans, the Black Sea littoral, and the post-Ottoman Middle East, as well as what Demirel termed *Büyük Türk Dünyası* (“the Greater Turkic World”)—much of it in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and other regions of the former Soviet Union.¹⁰

Ankara openly supported Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan against Armenia during the 1992–94 war for Nagorno-Karabakh and was instrumental in the development of oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Basin that allowed transit states Azerbaijan and Georgia to wean themselves from Russian economic and political influence. It also expanded economic, cultural, and political ties with the Turkic states of Central Asia (often in tandem with the followers of Gülen, who were instrumental in bringing Turkish investment to the region and established a network of schools to train aspiring members of a post-Soviet elite).

Moscow regarded Turkey’s growing activism warily, fearing it would bolster the influence of Islamism, pan-Turkic nationalism, and NATO. In April 1992, Marshal Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, commander-in-chief of the Commonwealth of Independent States’ armed forces, warned of a “Third World War” should Ankara follow through on threats to deploy forces to secure Azerbaijan’s Nakhichevan exclave.¹¹ Yet Turkey’s expanding strategic ambitions were not always a source of discord with Russia, particularly when they entailed deviating from the Western orientation Ankara had maintained during the Cold War. One salient example was Ankara’s push for a regional approach to security in the Black Sea, which produced initiatives such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) forum, the Black Sea Naval Force, and the Black Sea Harmony joint exercises, all of which emphasized the principle of regional ownership (including Russia’s) and operated outside the framework of NATO.¹²

Turkey’s pursuit of strategic autonomy and regional influence then received new emphasis and a deliberately Islamist coloring with the post-2002 rise of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP). Both Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, the primary intellectual framer of AKP foreign policy, portrayed Turkey as a civilizational state that, by re-embracing what they see as its Islamic essence, can regain the Ottoman Empire’s role as the pivot of a regional order encompassing the Balkans, the Caucasus, North Africa, and the Levant.¹³ This shift to a more imperial mode of geopolitics—including efforts to reshape territorial, political, and economic conditions in neighboring states—contributed to Ankara’s growing alienation from the West. It also aligned with Moscow’s emphasis on leveraging historical and cultural ties to reshape regional order in the wake of its 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine.¹⁴

Indeed, encouraging Turkey’s regional ambitions in ways that complicated its relationship with Western allies had long been an important component of Russian policy. Russian support for Turkey’s effort to consolidate control over east–west energy transit by becoming a “bridge” or “hub” is perhaps the clearest example. Russia’s pursuit of bilateral energy deals with Turkey—notably the Blue Stream and Turkish Stream pipelines and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant—bolstered Turkey’s leverage with the European Union while simultaneously leaving it more dependent on Russian gas, nuclear fuel, and technical expertise.¹⁵ The more recent S-400 missile-system deal fulfills a similar function, simultaneously enhancing Turkey’s pursuit of strategic autonomy from NATO while complicating its relationship with the United States and other allies.¹⁶ Moscow’s toleration of Turkey’s regional ambitions, even where they conflict with its own objectives on the ground, rests on a similar calculation that Russia benefits from a strategically isolated, if unpredictable, Turkey.

Indeed, encouraging Turkey’s regional ambitions in ways that complicated its relationship with Western allies had long been an important component of Russian policy.

On the one hand, the aspiration to legitimate the idea of regional powers policing their respective neighborhoods provides a basis for Russo-Turkish cooperation outside the framework of Western-led multilateral institutions. On the other hand, by inserting Russia and Turkey more directly into neighbors’ disputes and conflicts, it has multiplied the number of friction points between the two.

The starkest examples of this competition for influence—and the effort to manage it—lie in the conflict zones of Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus. Russia and Turkey have intervened on opposite sides of these conflicts with a mix of conventional military power, irregular forces, and local proxies—even as less militarized competitions for influence play out in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Central Asia. Ankara and Moscow seek to manage their disputes in these regions bilaterally or through a condominium of regional powers, including through mechanisms like the Astana Process for Syria. This approach sidelines multilateral institutions such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in the Caucasus and the UN-sponsored Geneva Process for Syria.

Though Russia remains the larger, stronger power by a considerable margin, the competition is far from one-sided. Moscow has taken advantage of Turkey’s dependence on Russian energy, markets for its produce, and tourists to impose costs for what it perceives as Ankara’s reckless behavior and has carried out—or at least tolerated—attacks on Turkish forces in Syria. Yet Turkey has a risk-acceptant leadership and benefits from the security guarantee it continues to enjoy as a member of NATO. Its development of highly effective unmanned aerial vehicles, which it has begun selling to other states worried about Russian intervention, has also allowed it to tip the balance to some degree.¹⁷

Particularly following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in summer 2021, the idea of a condominium of regional powers appeals to other ambitious states such as Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia—not to mention China. The Russo-Turkish dyad remains particularly salient, however, because of the overlapping arenas in which they are engaged and the ensuing implications for European security. Their militarized interactions in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus provide a model for what a post-Western order in Eurasia could look like, with regional powers contending to reshape the political and economic geography around their borders. In the process, they seek to exclude outside actors, bargaining among themselves over the fates of the peoples and states they target.

Syria

The conflict in Syria remains the most serious test of whether a Russo-Turkish (and Iranian) condominium can be an alternative to conflict resolution by the U.S.-supported “international community.” Throughout the conflict, Moscow has backed the secular, Alawite-dominated government of Bashar al-Assad, while Turkey has supported an assortment of rebel forces, including Sunni Islamists and ethnic Turkmen. As in other countries affected by the Arab Spring, the AKP perceived the uprising

against Assad as an embodiment of the same grassroots Islamist sentiment that had propelled its own rise—and which it hoped would bring about a new regional order that is more democratic, more Islamist, and more pro-Turkish.¹⁸ Turkey’s perception that the United States did not provide sufficient backing during the crisis over its downing of the Russian jet and Washington’s ongoing support for the Syrian Democratic Forces, whose main component is the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), precipitated a conscious calculation that Ankara could secure more of its topline interests in Syria by attempting to cut deals with Moscow.¹⁹

Russia, conversely, worried about the erosion of its own influence should secular autocrats like Assad fall and warned presciently that the upheaval could touch off a surge of radicalization and violence that would not remain confined to the region.²⁰ It also sought to preserve its long-standing relationships with the Assad government and with Kurdish forces that had historically given it a source of leverage over Turkey. Moscow thus maintains ties with the YPG and has pressed for the inclusion of its parent Democratic Union Party (PYD) in the Astana talks—challenging one of Turkey’s main red lines.²¹ And despite its ambivalent view of the U.S. decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, Moscow continues to encourage the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, which would leave Turkey isolated as the only foreign power maintaining troops in Syria without Damascus’s consent.²²

With both countries’ troops on the ground, the Syrian theater has witnessed the most significant clashes between Russian and Turkish forces, including the downing of the Russian jet and the Russian airstrikes that killed dozens of Turkish soldiers south of Idlib in early 2020. As much as Ankara and Moscow’s political objectives in Syria diverge, since the resolution of the jet crisis they have worked out a *modus vivendi* that has become a template for their interactions elsewhere. This arrangement gave Turkey what a former U.S. official termed “running room” for its efforts to check the Kurdish threat and secure its own interests in Syria—but leaves it exposed to Russia’s predominant military power.²³

In December 2016, Russian and Turkish officials negotiated the first of many ceasefires on behalf of the Assad regime and rebel fighters in Aleppo, respectively.²⁴ The agreement was notable precisely for the two powers’ claim to speak on behalf of the combatants. In the course of the talks, Ankara and Moscow emphasized fighting terrorism as a key objective (while agreeing to disagree about the threat posed by the YPG, a Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party or PKK). They also established a framework for regular consultations, including a hotline between their military chiefs of staff.²⁵

Russia then proposed a roadmap for talks to be held in parallel to the UN-supervised peace process in Geneva. This Astana Process helped sideline the United States and European Union in favor of Iran, Russia, and Turkey, the states “willing to take significant risks and use military force to shape political outcomes.”²⁶ Within the Astana framework, Erdoğan, Putin, and the Iranian president (first Hassan Rouhani, now Ebrahim Raisi) typically consult multiple times per month.²⁷ This process has allowed Turkey to pursue many of its own interests in Syria, notably to “build peace and stability in [Turkey’s] border regions” by guarding against the presence of “terrorist organizations” (whether jihadi or Kurdish).²⁸ In exchange, Ankara effectively acknowledged that Assad would remain in power for the foreseeable future and that no resolution to the conflict would be possible without Russian (and Iranian) support; it also effectively accommodated itself to Russia’s military buildup inside Syria. The Kremlin, in turn, did not oppose Turkey’s Operation Euphrates Shield in northwestern Syria, the first of several cross-border military operations aiming to push Islamic State and YPG forces away from the Syrian-Turkish border.

In the wake of Euphrates Shield, Turkey assumed control over a broad expanse along the border west of the Euphrates River. Turkish troops were accompanied by allied militias—brought together under the umbrella of the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA)—who received training from the Turkish military and remained under Ankara’s overall operational command.²⁹ These Turkish-backed rebels included former Syrian officers as well as wide range of Sunni militants. While most were Arab Syrians, some were from other countries, including the Balkans or the Caucasus, and had crossed Turkish territory to reach Syria.

These forces targeted pockets controlled by the Islamic State but also conducted operations to push the YPG back from the border, preventing the consolidation of an autonomous statelet in Syrian Kurdistan. Ankara also brought much of occupied northwestern Syria under Turkish civil administration. Residents accused it of settling mostly Arab refugees in previously Kurdish-majority areas, possibly setting the stage for a long-term presence or even annexation—and certainly preparing for a future in which Damascus lacks full control over Syrian territory.³⁰

In October 2019, as part of Operation Peace Spring, Turkish troops similarly advanced across the border into northeastern Syria, aiming to push back Kurdish fighters and create a safe zone to resettle some of the refugees who had fled across the border and were increasingly destabilizing Turkish (and European) politics. Yet as YPG and other forces withdrew ahead of the assault, Russian and Syrian government troops moved into the vacuum. Their presence forced Ankara to negotiate not just with its Western allies over its presence in northeastern Syria, but with Moscow, too.

Putin and Erdoğan eventually hammered out a ceasefire, under which Russian troops would oversee the removal of Kurdish fighters while Russian and Turkish forces would conduct joint patrols. The agreement gave Turkey its safe zone (somewhat shrunken relative to Ankara’s initial ambitions) and ensured Moscow’s commitment to keeping Kurdish fighters away from the border. Since the other NATO allies opposed the Turkish incursion, the ceasefire also helped cement Turkey’s need to deal with Russia bilaterally and left the Syrian Kurds increasingly dependent on Russian protection.³¹

The initial Astana deal had also provided for the establishment of four “de-escalation zones” covering areas still under opposition control.³² Syrian troops were to suspend combat operations against these zones and allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance to besieged civilians. Meanwhile, Turkish forces were to oversee the dissociation of “moderate” opposition groups from “extremists” such as the al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—which had developed “wide-ranging cooperation” with Turkish forces and pro-Turkish militias in northern Syria.³³

However, Russia complained that Turkey was failing to enforce this separation and soon began negotiating bilateral deals with the armed opposition groups in the de-escalation zones, carrying out attacks (or tacitly approving Syrian government attacks) against them when rebel groups objected to Russian terms.³⁴ By early 2020, three of the four de-escalation zones had been recaptured by Syrian government forces; Idlib, which remains under opposition control, has been a focal point for clashes. Ankara remains eager to maintain the Idlib zone not only because it holds tens of thousands of displaced persons who would flee toward the border in the event of an offensive to recapture the town, but also because its motley collection of Sunni fighters means it remains an important bargaining chip with Moscow and Damascus. Yet, unable to follow through on its commitment to isolate HTS and its ilk (or to open the highways connecting Damascus to Aleppo and Latakia), Ankara has had little diplomatic leverage to forestall repeated Russian and Syrian government advances on the city.

Following the February 2020 Russian airstrikes, joint patrols in the vicinity of Idlib ceased, and Turkey surged thousands of additional troops into northern Syria.³⁵ This Turkish offensive inflicted serious losses on Syrian government forces and sparked fears of direct Russo-Turkish clashes. Putin and Erdoğan nonetheless reached a new ceasefire the following month that ratified the new dispensation on the ground, including Assad's control of the Damascus–Aleppo highway, but allowed Turkey to maintain the military presence securing its perimeter around Idlib.³⁶ Although Russia still aspires to reunite the country under Assad's authority, in the meantime it has accepted the reality of a Turkish presence in Idlib and along the northern border, while Turkey has in practice (if not principle) acknowledged that Assad, along with his Russian and Iranian patrons, will remain the dominant player across the rest of the country.

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Libya

Meanwhile, Russia and Turkey extended their proxy competition to new theaters, starting with Libya. To an even greater degree than in Syria, the power vacuum that emerged in Libya following the ouster of longtime dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi in 2011 drew in numerous outside powers, including Turkey and Russia. Though Ankara and Moscow have been on opposite sides of Libya's civil war, their larger objectives in Libya and the wider eastern Mediterranean overlap to some extent. With multiple other players involved and their respective interests limited compared to Syria or the South Caucasus, Russia and Turkey appear to have greater prospects for containing and managing their disputes in this theater. At the same time, both sides' lack of vital interests means that Turkey has been less restrained in using force against Russian assets, raising the dangers of both miscalculation and horizontal escalation on Moscow's part.

Turkey supported the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, to which it provided air defense systems, armed drones, and a small contingent of Turkish officers commanding a larger number of mostly Syrian mercenaries.³⁷ Russia backed a self-proclaimed rival government based in the eastern city of Tobruk and, from 2017, channeled much of its assistance to the rebel commander Khalifa Haftar (among other rebel forces and militias). This assistance included weapons, money, militia fighters from Syria, and mercenaries from the Wagner Group and other private military corporations.³⁸ Russia's mercenaries are largely employed in protecting access to

Libyan oil reserves, where the civil war imperiled contracts signed by companies such as Rosneft, Gazprom, and Tatneft.³⁹

Following Haftar's Russian-backed offensive against Tripoli in late 2019, Turkey intervened directly, deploying large numbers of mercenaries recruited in Syria, along with armed drones and other advanced weapons. These assets were instrumental in routing Haftar's forces from the outskirts of Tripoli in spring 2020. In the wake of this defeat, Russia withdrew its forces from western Libya, likely based on a non-public deal with Turkey for a de facto division of the country into spheres of influence.⁴⁰ It also began its own outreach to other opposition groups as well as the GNA.

These developments provided the background for Russo-Turkish efforts to adopt a Syria-style condominium approach. In September 2020, Turkish officials traveled to Moscow for the first round of interdepartmental talks on "the further coordination of approaches" to organizing a dialogue among the contending forces.⁴¹ Both Ankara and Moscow continued to prioritize reviving Libya's economy while maintaining the strategic foothold they had each established through military intervention. To the extent those interests were protected, both were willing to be flexible in terms of Libya's internal organization.⁴²

Russia and Turkey eventually endorsed the formation of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), established in March 2021 to administer Libya until it holds presidential elections (now delayed until late January 2022). Supporting the GNU and the transition process it seeks to supervise allows both Ankara and Moscow to secure economic assets while gaining a strategic toehold in the eastern Mediterranean. For Russia, reunification of the country under the GNU (or its elected successor) is the most attractive option for securing repayment of the billions of dollars in Qaddafi-era debt, securing new reconstruction and energy production contracts, and (conceivably) establishing a naval facility on Libya's Mediterranean shore.⁴³

Turkey, meanwhile, had signed a maritime delimitation agreement with the GNA that encompassed areas also claimed by Greece as part of its continental shelf.⁴⁴ Though swiftly rejected by the European Union and its member states, the demarcation agreement gave new life to maritime disputes in the eastern Mediterranean, notably Turkey's long-standing rivalry over drilling rights and territorial control with Cyprus and Greece. In the process, the agreement created new sources of discord between Ankara and several of its NATO allies (including France, which positioned itself as a strong opponent of the Turkey-GNA deal). Exacerbating such concerns were reports that Turkey was in talks with the GNA to establish naval bases on Libya's Mediterranean coast.⁴⁵ Maintaining these gains was instrumental in Ankara's decision to support the formation of the GNU, led by the generally pro-Turkish Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, and in its efforts to strike a deal with Moscow to maintain spheres of influence in Libya.

Significantly, Moscow has remained quiet about the demarcation agreement despite its close ties with both Athens and Nicosia. Like Turkey, Russia perceives the U.S.-backed Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF)—a coalition of Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority—as a challenge to its own regional interests.⁴⁶ With the United States promoting the EMGF as a vehicle for weaning Europe from its dependence on Russian energy, Moscow even raised the possibility of Russian companies partnering with Turkey to bring eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe.⁴⁷

Both sides nevertheless sought to keep their options open. Ankara remained noncommittal to Moscow's offer of cooperation, given long-standing concerns about Russia using energy as a source of

influence. It also continued pursuing alternatives, including increasing gas purchases from Azerbaijan and developing newly discovered gas fields in the Black Sea, even as it dispatched research and naval vessels to carry out exploration in contested regions of the eastern Mediterranean that sparked armed standoffs with NATO allies Greece and France.⁴⁸ Since Biden's inauguration, Ankara has made an effort to downplay these disputes, in part to patch up relations with its NATO allies in the face of mounting concerns about Russian activities, but continues promoting the demarcation agreement.⁴⁹

Moscow plays both sides as well. Notwithstanding its participation in the talks to set up the GNU, Russia maintained its ties to Haftar and other potential proxies (including Qaddafi's son Saif al-Islam), whom it could use to put pressure on the central government or to secure control in eastern Libya should central authority break down.⁵⁰ Moscow also agreed to participate in military drills to shore up its partnership with Cyprus, offering its services as an honest broker between Ankara and Nicosia, and agreeing to establish a naval base in Sudan to contest Turkey's growing influence in North Africa.⁵¹ As in Syria, the maneuvering for spheres of influence in Libya suggests that neither Ankara nor Moscow expects a permanent resolution of the conflict. Instead, both seek to secure access to resources and establish a larger foothold from which to project power into the eastern Mediterranean—while hedging against the possibility of Libya remaining a failed state and source of regional instability.

As in Syria, the maneuvering for spheres of influence in Libya suggests that neither Ankara nor Moscow expects a permanent resolution of the conflict. Instead, both seek to secure access to resources and establish a larger foothold from which to project power into the eastern Mediterranean—while hedging against the possibility of Libya remaining a failed state and source of regional instability.

The South Caucasus

Since late 2020, direct Russo-Turkish competition has expanded from the Middle East to the South Caucasus, where Turkey's open support of Azerbaijan's campaign to recover Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh posed the most direct challenge to Russia's status as the main post-Soviet power broker. Despite Ankara's unwelcome intrusion into a region Russia has long regarded as its own backyard, the two countries were able to impose a ceasefire that largely sidelined outside actors (notably the United States), affirming Turkey's role as an important regional player while maintaining Russia's standing as the principal mediator between Baku and Yerevan.

Turkish military assistance was instrumental in sustaining Azerbaijan's autumn 2020 offensive, which in a matter of weeks drove Armenian forces back along multiple fronts and threatened the highway

connecting the de facto Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) to Armenia. Azerbaijan's advance upended a status quo locked into place by the 1994 ceasefire ending the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, which Russia guaranteed—even as it provided Yerevan a security guarantee through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).⁵²

Although Turkey had supported Azerbaijan during the 1992–94 conflict (notably by closing its border and imposing an embargo on Armenia), it subsequently played a secondary role in the peace process overseen by the OSCE's Minsk Group, cochaired by France, Russia, and the United States. While expressing support for Azerbaijan—emphasizing the pronouncement by former Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev that Turks and Azerbaijanis comprise “one nation, two states”—Ankara's approach to the South Caucasus focused on deepening energy, trade, and (eventually) security cooperation with both Azerbaijan and Georgia.⁵³ This support for east–west connectivity—which came to encompass the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, a parallel gas pipeline, and the recently opened Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway—allowed Azerbaijan and Georgia to reduce their economic and strategic dependence on Russia and seek deeper integration with Europe. It also underpinned the growth of trilateral security cooperation among Ankara, Baku, and Tbilisi, including weapons sales and joint exercises.⁵⁴

In contrast, Russia cultivated ties with and sold weapons to both sides in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, notwithstanding Armenia's CSTO membership and the deployment of around 3,000 Russian soldiers in Armenia. Moscow also remained the principal mediator within the Minsk Group, pushing for the deployment of its peacekeepers along the line of contact between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan proper (opposition to which was one of the few items on which Baku and Yerevan could agree). When clashes escalated, notably during an April 2016 Azerbaijani offensive, Russian diplomacy with the leaders of both countries was instrumental in ending the fighting.⁵⁵ This comparatively balanced approach rested on deep economic ties with both countries inherited from the Soviet era.

At the same time, Russia and Turkey both maintained an interest in limiting the role of outside powers that, at times of crisis, could outweigh their strategic competition. Thus, although Ankara supported Tbilisi during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, it offered its services as a mediator and complied with Russian calls to limit the stay of U.S. hospital ships in the Black Sea in accordance with the Montreux Convention.⁵⁶ And while Turkey is strongly committed to Georgia's territorial integrity and is one of the few NATO members to actively promote Tbilisi's membership aspirations, it has also emerged as an important trade partner for the de facto Republic of Abkhazia.⁵⁷ At the conclusion of the 2008 war, then-Turkish foreign minister Ali Babacan proposed a Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Pact involving Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the three South Caucasus states that would effectively establish the principle of regional conflict management.⁵⁸ Moscow supported the idea; in October 2021, it put forward an analogous proposal for a regional 3+3 format, aiming to limit outside influence in managing the region's conflicts.⁵⁹

For most of the 2000s, Turkey's comparatively limited engagement in the region did not pose a serious challenge to Russian interests. However, amid mounting competition in Syria and Libya and needing to shore up its nationalist flank at home, Erdoğan's government adopted a more fulsome embrace of Azerbaijan in the late 2010s that helped upend the status quo. This renewed support was motivated, in part, by a perception that the balance of power in the South Caucasus was shifting against Turkey—since it had failed to normalize relations with Armenia in the early 2010s even as Russia increasingly

patched up bilateral relations and boosted arms sales to Azerbaijan—as well as by domestic considerations connected to the growing influence of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) within the AKP-led electoral alliance.⁶⁰ Turkish arms sales to Azerbaijan rose sixfold from 2019 to 2020, and the two countries’ militaries carried out joint exercises during the summer of 2020 following clashes along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.⁶¹

Once fighting between the Armenian and Azerbaijani militaries broke out in late September 2020, Erdoğan pledged that Turkey would “remain by the side of our friend and brother Azerbaijan.”⁶² Credible reports soon emerged of mercenaries, many from Turkey’s proxy forces in Syria, being dispatched to the front lines, and Turkish aircraft and advisers were also reportedly involved.⁶³ Turkish-produced unmanned aerial vehicles proved particularly effective against Armenia’s Russian-produced armor, radars, and ground-based artillery. With the fighting confined to Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding occupied territories of Azerbaijan, Russia downplayed its obligations to Armenia through the CSTO, emphasizing instead the need for both Armenia and Azerbaijan to de-escalate and for foreign powers to avoid, in the words of Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov, “pouring oil on the fire.”⁶⁴

The outbreak of fighting coincided with an uptick in high-level Russo-Turkish diplomatic contacts, touching on not only the fighting in the South Caucasus, but on Syria and Libya as well.⁶⁵ Russian efforts included mediation between Baku and Yerevan, which produced a short-lived ceasefire in mid-October. Moscow also criticized outside powers’ (including Turkey’s) role in exacerbating the crisis, even as Erdoğan and other Turkish officials called for Ankara to play a larger role in the settlement process.⁶⁶

Russian observers argued that Erdoğan was seeking to force Moscow to agree to something akin to the Astana Process, where the Russian and Turkish governments would negotiate a settlement over the heads of their respective clients.⁶⁷ Though Russia reluctantly accepted that Turkey would have to play a role in the settlement of the conflict, it refused to concede its position as the central mediator or to elevate Ankara to an equal position by acknowledging its claim to speak on behalf of Baku. Moscow also looked for other avenues to influence Turkish behavior—including attacking camps near Idlib, where Turkish forces were reportedly training mercenaries for deployment to the South Caucasus.⁶⁸

The Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal signed in November 2020 confirmed Russia’s status as the region’s principal power broker, with Russian peacekeepers and security forces deployed to enforce its terms (notably, to patrol the new line of contact and secure the corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh). While the text of the agreement said little about Turkey’s role, it provided for a “peacekeeping center to monitor the cessation of fighting,” which came to include Turkish personnel.⁶⁹ It also provided for a land corridor between Azerbaijan proper and the Nakhichevan exclave, which shares a border with Turkey (and Iran), thereby giving Ankara a direct link to Azerbaijan. The agreement effectively marginalized the Minsk Group, ratifying the new ad hoc Russo-Turkish condominium as the basis for ensuring the deal’s implementation and giving Ankara and Moscow a significant say in redrawing the postwar map of the South Caucasus. The end of the war also prompted renewed efforts to normalize Turkish-Armenian and Azerbaijani-Armenian relations, a process Russia has offered to facilitate.⁷⁰

Conclusion

While analysts were sharply divided on the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's implications for the Russo-Turkish balance, the war's combination of proxy battles, high-level diplomatic bargaining, and the bypassing of Western-led institutions provided perhaps the starkest example yet of what a new order dominated by regional powers could look like. To the extent that this shift is a product of both Russia's and Turkey's failure to achieve political and institutional integration with the West, it is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Even if a post-Putin or post-Erdoğan government re-embraces the idea of integration with the West, post-Cold War ambitions—defined by attempts to expand Western institutions and export the West's political model to Turkey and Russia—appear to have lost momentum.

More fundamentally, the return to this quasi-imperial model of regional politics is a product of the altered geopolitical circumstances brought about by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now lacking a common border—and with the direct threat posed by Soviet/Russian military superiority to Turkish interests significantly reduced—Ankara and Moscow have engaged in an initially quiet, but now much more open, competition for power and influence over the multiple “shatter zones” around their borders. In the process, both countries' elites have pursued the construction of regional orders based on hierarchy, limited sovereignty, and the disruption of smaller states' territorial integrity.

For Russia, which has long positioned itself as a strategic rival to the U.S.-led order in Eurasia and more generally, cultivating Turkey and other “pivot states” by appealing to their sense of grandeur and aspirations for regional influence appears, for now, to be worth the associated frictions in places such as Syria, Libya, the South Caucasus, and possibly Afghanistan. (Ukraine, where Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called Turkish support for Kyiv's ambitions to regain control of Crimea an “encroachment on Russia's territorial integrity,” could prove a different story.)⁷¹

For Turkey, Russia provides a hedge against increasingly fraught relationships with NATO allies (including the United States), legitimation for its pursuit of greater strategic autonomy, and unquestioning support for Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian rule. This political backing for Erdoğan has become particularly important since the failed 2016 coup—which Erdoğan blames the United States for tolerating (if not backing), much as Putin blames Washington for supporting opposition figures and encouraging a Ukrainian-style “color revolution” inside Russia.

However, the future direction of the Russo-Turkish relationship remains dependent on the ability of Putin and Erdoğan (or their respective successors) to manage the ever-lengthening list of crises and friction points between their two states. Since Russia intervened in Syria in 2015, Ankara and Moscow have developed a managed bargaining process that allows both to maneuver for advantage while limiting prospects for direct confrontation. Both acknowledge the legitimacy of the other's claims and maintain regular contact in pursuit of mutually acceptable political solutions, even while maneuvering for advantage in ways that risk new clashes.⁷² Their value-neutral engagement stands in sharp contrast to their interactions with U.S. and European states, in turn facilitating their ability to strike deals and follow through on them irrespective of prevailing political winds.

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To the extent that the Russo-Turkish partnership remains an “axis of the excluded” relative to the West, efforts by the United States and its allies to find a path back to normalization with one or both could at least contain the fallout from their closer cooperation.⁷³ Economic difficulties and popular dissatisfaction are growing in both Russia and Turkey, and the possibility of real political change cannot be ruled out, at least in the medium term; as one Russian scholar noted, both Erdoğan and Putin are more popular outside their respective countries than within them.⁷⁴ The centennial of the Turkish Republic in 2023, which Erdoğan has highlighted as a natural inflection point, and the end of Putin's current presidential term in 2024 could herald the emergence of very different leadership in Ankara, Moscow, or both. Even before then, economic difficulties—especially in Turkey, whose currency plummeted by around 20 percent versus the U.S. dollar in 2021 and continues to decline—could force leaders to rein in some of their more expansive ambitions.⁷⁵ Yet the larger shifts of the past two decades suggest that both Russia and Turkey will remain committed in principle to playing a leading role within their respective regions and to enhancing their strategic autonomy outside—or, in Turkey's case, on the margins of—Western institutions.⁷⁶

There is no guarantee that Ankara and Moscow will succeed in managing their ever-growing list of regional conflicts peacefully. For the time being, both see a utility in accommodating the other's ambitions because of a shared belief that their interests are better served by a world that accords

special privileges to large, powerful states. Yet, at some point, the very success of Russia and Turkey (not to mention China, Iran, and other regional powers in and around Eurasia) in midwifing a new, less Western-centric, more classically “imperial” international order may sow the seeds of greater confrontation. Thus, while the perception that the U.S.-led order is crumbling is accelerating the Russo-Turkish rapprochement by encouraging their pivot to a more imperial model of geopolitics, the final demise of that order could ironically reinforce the opposite trend—leaving Ankara and Moscow to play out their geopolitical rivalry in a more indifferent, Hobbesian world.

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