



## Tilting towards Russia, but anchored in NATO. Turkey's foreign policy activism and its implications

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### Takeaways

- Turkey's tilt towards Russia is mainly related to the Syrian civil war, and to Erdoğan's domestic power consolidation. In the longer term, geopolitical realities suggest that a strategic alignment between Turkey and Russia will be difficult to sustain.
- The Turkish-Russian partnership also reflects Turkey's quest for greater strategic autonomy.
- Turkey is however firmly anchored in NATO for reasons of national prestige, international influence and security, but risks marginalisation within the alliance.

**Turkey strengthened ties with Russia after the military coup attempt on July 15, 2016, triggering widespread concerns that Ankara is 'drifting away' from NATO. In this article, we argue that although a rapprochement has taken place, there is no Turkish realignment with Russia. Furthermore, an exit from NATO is regarded as unlikely. However, with its pursuit of greater strategic autonomy, Ankara risks marginalisation within NATO and could become a second-tier member of the alliance**

## RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN TURKEY AND RUSSIA

Relations between Turkey and Russia have warmed considerably after the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016 military coup attempt in Turkey when President Putin gave Erdogan and the Turkish government his unconditional support. The two leaders have since seemed on excellent terms, and Ankara's diplomatic tone towards Moscow has been markedly more hushed and positive than the one used towards many of Turkey's Western allies. Bilateral cooperation between the two countries is back to its high levels prior to Turkey's downing of a Russian military jet in November 2015, and relations have recently expanded into the fields of security and defence with strategic cooperation in Syria and Ankara's decision to purchase the Russian S-400 missile defence system.

Even if these developments can be perceived as heralding a further expansion and deepening of relations with Russia – including in military cooperation – we argue that there is no comprehensive turn towards realignment Russia. The current tilt is mainly a consequence of the civil war in Syria and the domestic power consolidation around president Erdogan under Turkey's new “strong” presidential system.

The first factor that caused Turkey to tilt towards Russia after 2016 was developments in the civil war in Syria. This is quite a paradox since Ankara and Moscow for a long time stood on opposite sides regarding Syria. Turkey was foremost among the countries demanding the departure of Bashar al-Assad's regime, while Russia became its most important international supporter.

The Arab Spring and the eruption of the Syrian civil war in late 2011/early 2012 transformed Turkey's time-honoured non-interventionist foreign policy into an ambitious regime change strategy aimed at overthrowing the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Turkey no longer stayed out of the internal affairs of its Middle Eastern neighbours, but instead engaged itself in the Syrian civil war, first through militant proxy groups and later by direct intervention.

From the beginning of the civil war, Syria constituted a battleground between foreign powers for regional influence. By the fall of 2015, the Syrian opposition experienced a momentum against Syrian President Assad. It looked as though Erdogan's proxy war against Assad in cooperation with several states, including the US and Saudi Arabia, was finally about to pay off. Yet, Turkey's cooperation with the US in Syria suffered from a major liability: Washington never intended to fully commit to regime change in Syria but instead focused on combating the Islamic State (IS) in cooperation with the Kurdish YPG militia. Turkey's perception of IS as a major threat was limited to the risk of terror attacks inside Turkey. Ankara saw the YPG as a *greater* threat due to this organisation's ties to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey. Consequently, Turkish and American strategic priorities were on a collision course in Syria, leading to a ‘divorce of inconvenience’. In the eyes of Turkey, the US had resigned from its leadership role in the Middle East.

Russia's entry into the civil war in September 2015 changed the power balance in Syria in favour of Assad. This put a major strain on Turkey-Russia relations, reaching a crisis with Turkey's downing of a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 fighter jet in November 2015. Russia subsequently imposed major sanctions on Turkey that hampered the Turkish economy by impacting trade and tourism. Russia also seized control over Syrian airspace by deploying its S-400 air system, essentially shutting off Syrian territory to any potential Turkish or US intervention. Consequently, Turkey sought a rapprochement with Russia. The overarching concern was the damage done to the Turkish economy by Russian sanctions.

Turkey also needed Russian approval to conduct military operations against the YPG. In 2016, a rapprochement between the two countries took place, restoring and expanding bilateral ties. In the military-strategic field, Turkey established an alliance with Russia and Iran within the Astana peace-process. This alliance made it possible

for Turkey to conduct military operations against the YPG and IS inside Syria. The great paradox is that, while Turkey has blamed the Americans for supporting the YPG, Russia has been one of the YPG's strongest supporters, and even allowed it to re-open an office in Moscow in February 2016 after the fighter jet incident.

In addition to the Syrian civil war, Erdogan's domestic power consolidation has played a key role in tilting Turkey toward Russia. Under Turkey's new "strong" presidential system, the president makes major foreign policy decisions, advised by a narrow circle of loyalists. The cabinet, the bureaucracy and the armed forces have become largely sidelined in the policy-making process. In practice, this means that there are few checks and balances to the will of the President in foreign policy making. This development has affected relations with Russia. After the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan and Putin established a close personal relationship that served to promote bilateral cooperation between the two countries, including in the military-strategic field. For example, it has been suggested that Turkey's decision to buy the S-400 missile defence system from Russia was made by Erdogan himself after being offered the system during a meeting with Putin in the autumn of 2016. The existence of such a direct, high-level agreement between the two presidents could partly explain why Turkey insists on going through with the S-400 deal, even at the risk of derailing its own participation in the F-35 fighter-jet programme.

### **THE BROADER PICTURE: ANKARA'S QUEST FOR GREATER STRATEGIC AUTONOMY**

Turkey's warming relations with Russia must also be seen in a broader geopolitical context. An important question is what long-term goals Turkey seeks to achieve. Since the 1970s, Turkey has attempted to pursue greater strategic autonomy from the US and NATO by reducing arms imports and modernizing its military. Since the end of the Cold

War, there has also been growing disenchantment in Turkey with many of its NATO-allies, and an increasing concern that Western and Turkish security interests are diverging. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which led to a protracted armed conflict and the establishment of a Kurdish self-rule area bordering Turkey heightened these concerns. Ankara was also alarmed by the US decision to back the Kurdish YPG militia in the fight against IS in Syria, fearing the establishment of yet another autonomous Kurdish enclave along its southern border governed by an organisation with links to the PKK. Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy is grounded in a double fear of abandonment and entanglement by its Western allies. On the one hand Ankara fears that Turkish security interests will be deprioritized by NATO in a major crisis or armed conflict, and on the other hand that Turkey, through NATO's actions, could get involved in regional conflicts that run counter to or would harm Turkish national interests.

Under Erdogan, Turkey's main strategy to achieve greater autonomy has been to forge flexible alliances with various states on different issues to achieve specific foreign-policy goals. The alliance with Russia and Iran on Syria through the Astana-process is the most obvious example, but there are other partnerships and security mechanisms that fall into the same category. For example, Turkey has established a security agreement with Azerbaijan, a trilateral meeting mechanism with Azerbaijan and Georgia, and a strategic partnership with the Ukraine. By means of these alliances, Turkey has been able to pursue its own national agenda in the regional neighbourhood and a balancing role in regional conflicts. Quite obviously, Turkey could not have effectively pursued such goals by means of its alliance with the United States and other Western powers alone. The lack of US leadership in Syria, for example, drove Turkey to try new solutions and find a more useful partner than the Americans. After 2015, that partner turned out to be Russia.

However, Turkey did not fully accommodate Russia on Syria. The Moscow Declaration of December 20, 2016, signed

by Turkey, Iran and, Russia, vowed to keep the Syrian government intact and therefore de facto forced Erdogan to abolish his regime change agenda in Syria. The signatory countries then launched the Astana Peace Talks, later known as the Sochi process, which proved more effective than previous UN peace initiatives. On the other hand, the agreement helped solidify Assad's regime and eradicate opposition groups. The most important effect of the Astana peace talks was symbolic because they demonstrated Russia's growing political clout in the region compared to that of the United States. Russia also showed it could bring a NATO member under its wings, and make Turkey adapt to the new regional power dynamics.

If Syria is taken out of the equation, continued strategic cooperation between Turkey and Russia appears unsustainable in the longer term. The two countries remain regional rivals due to geographical proximity and diverging strategic interests. Ankara and Moscow support opposing sides in 'frozen conflicts' in the South Caucasus, different regimes in the Middle East, and compete for cultural and political influence in the Balkans and Central Asia. Russia also increasingly challenges Turkey's naval capabilities in the Black Sea by modernizing its own Black Sea fleet. While the countries' navies hold sporadic joint exercises, Turkey increasingly supports NATO activities in the Black Sea, particularly after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the November 2015 fighter jet incident. Turkey has also agreed to take on an enhanced leadership role in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region on behalf of NATO countries, and supports the strengthening of Ukraine's and Georgia's military capabilities under NATO's partnership programme. Turkey pursues such policies in the recognition that despite closer bilateral relations with Moscow, it still needs NATO to balance Russia in its regional neighbourhood.

## TURKEY'S FUTURE IN NATO

There has been a marked deterioration in Turkey's relations with the United States and other NATO-allies since the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016 coup attempt. The tense diplomatic climate has also negatively affected Turkey's relations with NATO. Particularly, Ankara's strategic alliance with Moscow on Syria and the Turkish decision to buy the S-400 system, has upset the United States and other alliance members. One must therefore ask the unthinkable: Although Turkey has very few incentives to leave NATO, could Ankara nevertheless decide to leave the alliance? We argue that a Turkish exit from NATO is an unlikely scenario. Turkey has at least three compelling motives for remaining in the alliance.

The first is national prestige and historical ambitions. Through NATO, Turkey is part of the transatlantic community, or on a more abstract level "the West". Modernisation and Westernisation has been a central goal since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, and a withdrawal from NATO – the most important link between Turkey and the West – would mean a major step back from this long-term ambition. Second, the NATO-membership gives Turkey influence in international politics that the country would not otherwise have. The alliance is the only international organisation of importance that gives Turkey a voice and veto rights on par with the United States and Europe, and this is a position that Ankara is not likely to forego. The third and most important reason is security. Despite many changes in the international and regional environment since the end of the Cold War, Turkish and NATO interests converge when it comes to deterring Russia, countering international terrorism and preventing regional instability.

Neither Turkey nor NATO wants to see a bolstered Russian military presence in the Black Sea region and the Middle East with major anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Russia's military adventures in Ukraine and Syria constitute part of a Russian quest for 'great power status', reflecting growing rivalry with the West since

2014. Strategically, Russia's naval base at Sevastopol became a logistics hub for its military operations in Syria, in addition to supporting a growing presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. While Russia may still be a relatively small naval power in this part of the world, it will likely use connections with states in the region to increase its military advantage. This would challenge Turkey both on its northern and southern borders. Therefore, a Turkish security re-alignment with Russia or some form of non-aligned status outside NATO makes little sense for Turkey from a geopolitical perspective.

There is in other words solid ground for Turkey's continued membership in NATO. Nevertheless, Turkey could be increasingly marginalised within the alliance because of its pursuit of strategic autonomy. Ankara's insistence on purchasing the Russian S-400 system has already resulted in US measures to halt Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter-jet programme. Further sanctions on military cooperation with Turkey is likely if the deal with Russia goes through. The Turkish government has signalled that it

might buy Russian fighter jets, too, if deliveries of the F-35 is blocked.

The S-400 controversy could therefore set off a negative dynamic by which Turkey is excluded from certain parts of military cooperation in NATO and gradually reduced to a second-tier member of the alliance. Such a development would not only impact negatively on Turkey, but serve to weaken NATO along its south eastern flank. This is a vulnerability that Russia is likely to exploit. Another major risk is that Turkey's deepening asymmetrical dependence on Russia may reduce its room of manoeuvre and instead lead to entrapment by Moscow.

To prevent this 'marginalization scenario' from materializing, Turkey must demonstrate its commitment to the Alliance by keeping strategic cooperation with non-NATO countries within acceptable limits for its NATO-partners. To maintain cohesion, the United States and other NATO members must acknowledge Turkish security interests and demonstrate to Ankara that Turkey is a fully accepted member of the transatlantic community.

**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> The article is based on Simen G. Aamodt(2018): *Away from NATO toward Russia? Turkey's Quest for Security, Autonomy and Regional Power Status*, Master's dissertation in Political Science, University of Oslo, 2018; and Lars Haugom (2019): "Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan – A change in international orientation?", *Comparative Strategy* 38 (3).



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